

# HENHOUSE

By Muiread O'Hanlon

## Chapter One (excerpt)

As I pedal past the church at the top of the hill I tighten my headscarf round my face, hoping Father Boyle can't catch my eye. He raises his hand and I give a brief nod, but keep my hands on the handlebars clutching at the brakes that squeak and screech as I hurtle downhill. My bicycle is not in good shape. I do the basics, oil, brakes, but it needs more attention than it's had in a long wee while, and I just can't be bothered. I must get John to look at it. He'll know what to do.

The bike leans on its stand as I steady myself, insert the key, take a deep breath, turn, push. In the doorway, my chest tightens. The grandfather clock announces its dreary presence, tick tock, tick tock. Might today be different? *Catch yourself on, Mary, you've done nothing to deserve a special day.* I wish I could stride through the front door and own the place but every day the bike slows as I pass the fields behind the house and the feeling comes, airless and suffocating, when I see the garden. And the henhouse.

Apart from the clock whose pendulum swings its eternal rhythm beside the picture of the Sacred Heart, the house is silent. I bless myself and exhale, my sigh whining into the hall, swallowing the knot in my throat. You're a right eejit, they're all out, they won't be back for another hour or so. *Who have they met? Who are they talking to?* My head likes to bother me, niggling, poking, prodding with its what ifs and maybes. It drives them distracted, my children, especially when I open my mouth and ask them out loud. Usually, I don't notice until they say, for God's sake Ma, would you ever give over. Especially Emer, that one doesn't think about how other people feel. Not that they're children any more of course.

The clock chimes and I jump as I do every time. I open the glass door, take the small brass key and wind it up, then use my sleeve to wipe away the fingerprints smudged on the glass. It was Thomas's grandfather's clock and it stands in the hall, marking time. *Oh, the things it has seen, the things it must know.*

In the kitchen I reach into the press behind the back door and close my hand round the packet of Gallahers standing behind the custard powder. My fingers tremble as I get close to the first inhale. This time is just for me, something to do on my own, a bit of peace, my first cigarette since leaving for work in the morning. The back door creaks as I push it open to let in the light and I sit at the kitchen table, my chair angled so I can see the garden and the flower beds but avoiding the field beyond. I light the match and raise the cigarette to my mouth. As I suck in the smoke the itchiness inside me subsides. Closing my eyes, the first taste of sweet tobacco on my tongue, I enjoy the rich earthiness as the smoke drifts into my throat and its warmth releases some of the heaviness in my chest. My hand lifts, lowers, lifts, my fingers rich amber, my nails golden, two dark spots, almost black, just where the filter rests. This bothers me no end and every day I scrub my hands with carbolic soap and a steel wool pad, but there's little that works to remove the stain. When I look in the mirror, which I try not to do, my teeth have a similar tinge. Exhaling, I lean back in the chair and watch the white plume curl towards the yellow ceiling and drift towards the open door.

From the field beyond, the chickens squawk so I pick up the paper to distract myself. Every week I leaf through it to see what's going on, who's done what, who's married who, who's died, what's on at the pictures. Not as if I go any more, I haven't the time. *That's not it though is it, you have plenty of time, you just want to avoid people.* Go away. I go to Mass, go out for the messages, go to work. I light another cigarette and flick the pages, distracted now, smoke more quickly, listening for a sound at the door that tells me the others are home.

I fidget with the ashtray then stand and go outside into the yard and empty it into the

metal bin beside the woodshed. In the scullery beside the kitchen, I wash my hands then walk to the front door to look up and down the street. There's no sign of them.

Hello Mary, Damian Flynn nods as he passes the gate with his son. I clutch the door handle as they appear beyond the hedge, deep in conversation about blackcaps and blackbirds. Young Paul is making a noise in a singsong voice. Tech, tech, tech. They stroll past in happy chatter and Damian laughs and says he doesn't think any lady blackcap would be swayed. Then Paul stops and turns. He stares at me. My heart thumps. This is what a rabbit must feel like, caught in a snare. People look at me funny as if they can see inside me, see what I'm thinking. Ah stop it, I tell myself, the boy is just being friendly. I raise my hand a little, pull my face into a smile. He doesn't raise his. I turn and go back inside, shutting the door with a bang.