

# **Beara: Dark Legends**

Also by Brian O'Sullivan

***The Beara Trilogy:***

*Beara: Dark Legends*

*Beara: The Cry of the Banshee (forthcoming)*

***The Fionn mac Cumhal Series:***

*Defence of Ráth Bláthma*

***Short Story Collections***

*The Irish Muse and Other Stories*

# Beara: Dark Legends

The Beara Trilogy - Book One

**BRIAN O'SULLIVAN**



*IrishImbas Books*

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This book is dedicated to the memory of:

Emily Twomey

and

Peggy O'Sullivan



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Several more contemporary and analytical sources were also extremely helpful and include *Fionn Mac Cumhaill: Images of the Gaelic Hero* (Dáithí Ó hÓgáin), *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn* (Gerard Murphy and Eoin Mac Neill), *Fionn Mac Cumhaill: Celtic Myth in English Literature* (James MacKillop).

The laoidh recited by the character Diarmuid is based on the translation by Meyer, Kuno (*Four Old-Irish Songs of Summer and Winter*. London, 1903. reprinted from *Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry*. London, 1911).



## PROLOGUE

### West Cork, Early 1960s

By midnight, the boy's limbs had lost all sense of feeling. Crouched in the same excruciating position for several hours, the pain in his legs had finally blunted, the ache in the curve of his back dulled from nerve ends worn numb by tension.

Despite his physical distress, the boy was still too scared to move, too frightened to swallow the mucus lodged in his throat, for fear of the sound it would make. His terror was mingled with a primal instinct, an unconscious 'knowing' that the slightest noise would draw the *Púca* to him.

And he could still feel it out there.

Seeking him.

The *Púca* came when the boy's father was absent on one of his increasingly frequent visits to the O'Sheas. Two brothers in their late thirties, the O'Sheas scraped a meagre living from a patch of stony soil lodged in a cleft of the Caha Mountains. It was a precarious existence, one supplemented, by necessity, through the sale of *poitín*. The illicit still was hidden between two boulders at the back of the property. The clear, tongue-numbing liquid it produced was served from the *sibín*, a ramshackle lean-to located closer to the house. Here it was dished up to local farmers desperate for company and a few hours' respite from the rigours of working their unproductive lands.

Despite their isolation – or perhaps because of it – the brothers were renowned for their love of fresh gossip, often stalling the departure of their visitors with extended hospitality and fresh offers of drink or black tobacco. It was not unknown for people to extend their visit for many hours – or, in some cases, days.

The boy's first sense of the *Púca* was intuitive rather than perceptive, a sudden awareness of an astringent presence like a pungent stench inside his mind. Startled, he dropped the toy soldiers his father had made him – lifelike figures carved from the rough cuts of an abandoned building project – and stared uncomprehendingly around the room. Although there was nothing to be seen or to be heard, he could feel an aberrant presence closing in, clenching around him like a tightened fist.

A warm gush of urine streamed down the inside of his trousers and he whimpered in terror, huddling into a ball among the soldiers strewn useless as a defeated army on the floor around him.

As the boy sensed the physical source of the intrusion draw closer, some instinctual measure of self-preservation finally kicked in. Scrambling across to the corner of the room, he tore a small heap of dusty furniture aside and ripped up the tattered carpet. A ragged gap was revealed in the floor, overlain with three loose boards. Clawing the planks aside, the boy pushed himself into the darkness below.

The rocky niche in which he found himself was small, a narrow, natural fissure beneath the floor of the building that had been overlooked or simply ignored during its original construction. Approximately five yards in length, its deepest extremity was less than a yard and a half in height. From there, it sloped upwards at a thirty-degree angle, tapering to a narrow flat just below the opening.

Wheezing with fear, the boy crawled to the furthest end of the cavity where further progress was impeded by a flat section of rock. There, he clamped both eyes shut and pressed against the cold surface, desperately willing himself to be absorbed into its intractable solidity. Despite his frantic heartbeat, he attempted to slow his breathing, instinctively knowing that the *Púca* could close in on such giveaway physical traces, his own body's terror treacherously exposing him.

Little sound penetrated the rocky space from the room above. For a time nothing could be heard other than the distant rattle of a window shifted by the wind. Gradually, however, he thought to hear something new among the low cacophony of the house's habitual creaks and groans: a faint rustle in the passage, a slither on the floorboards overhead.

It went quiet again for several minutes but he could still feel the malignant presence, surveying the room, attempting to locate him, searching, honing in on any noise, any physical flicker of fear or panic.

Too terrified to do anything else, the boy simply faded away.

And ceased to exist.

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The boy did not know how much time had passed when he finally returned, for no daylight passed through the hole at the far end of the cavity. His first sensation confirmed the absence of hostility within the house: all trace of the entity had vanished as though it had never been. The sense of relief was so intense that for several seconds he could hardly breathe.

It took another two hours before he finally emerged from his hole in the ground, constrained by both an overwhelming caution and the pain raging through his cramped legs. Despite his conviction that the danger had passed, the child remained too scared to leave the room and spent the rest of the night beside his refuge in the floor.

His father discovered him there at noon the following day, shivering, covered in dirt and in obvious distress. Although reeking of alcohol, he had the wit to recognise that the boy was traumatised and used his most gentle persuasions to convince him to step away from the hole. After an hour of reassurances and several unsuccessful attempts to learn what had happened, his father resorted to hugging him.

'It's all right now. You're safe. You're a good boy. 'Twas just a dream. A bad old dream.'

Exhausted, and calmed by his father's embrace, the boy relaxed and was on the verge of sleep when a sudden realisation sent a shiver up his spine and he knew that he could never, ever, sleep soundly again.

He had been lucky. The cold breath of sunlight had cleansed his home and the *Púca* had departed.

But it was only a matter of time.

Before it returned again.

## Munich, 2008:

Volunteer Nina Hilleke first noticed the gentleman with the bouquet by the congested hospital entrance. A middle-aged man with blond hair, a tidy beard, and thick, old-fashioned spectacles, he was standing nervously to one side of the automatic doors, wielding a leather briefcase like an ineffective shield against the passing crowds. She stopped to stare for there was something in his bewildered manner that instantly appealed to her, some unthreatening, childlike quality that stirred a maternal instinct within her heart.

And she had a big heart.

A sentimental woman with a weakness for romantic novels and soap operas, Hilleke had often experienced disappointment at seeing the passionate accomplishments of fictional characters missing from her own existence. Over the years, the prolonged absence of physical and emotional intimacy had instilled her with a growing emptiness, one that she'd subconsciously countered through voracious overeating.

This, at least, was what her counsellor, Doctor Dreyer, had been telling her during their sessions together. Her unappeasable appetite, he insisted, was not a disorder but a symptom; a symptom of her loneliness and low self-esteem.

Hilleke sniffed in annoyance.

That was all very well and good of course. Nevertheless, knowledge of the reasons behind her craving had not provided much practical benefit in countering them.

She brushed such thoughts from her mind as she waddled towards the distressed visitor, determined to fulfil her role of 'Leader of Hospital Hospitality' to the best of her ability.

'Good evening, sir. Can I help you?'

The man peered at her, eyes dropping from her face to the hospital badge pinned on her left breast. The sight of the authoritative title apparently reassured him for his frowning expression instantly transformed to one of heartfelt relief.

'Oh! Oh dear me. Yes!' He removed a handkerchief from his coat pocket and paused to pad his brow. 'I'm afraid I'm a little lost. I haven't been to a hospital for several years. Ever since ... well since my wife died.' He stared out through heavy, pebble-glassed spectacles with all the vulnerability of a deserted puppy. 'It's all a little ... overwhelming.'

Hilleke's heart melted and she offered him a sympathetic pat on the arm.

'I understand,' she assured him. 'Hospitals don't usually bring back happy memories but everyone says this is one of the best in the country. It all looks a little higgledy-piggledy at first but there really are processes in place to take care of everyone. And the staff are very efficient. There's a method in our madness.'

She tittered at the worn joke but he just stood there blinking helplessly.

'Now, how can I help you, Mr ...?' Hilleke raised her eyebrows expectantly and he responded on cue.

'Guttman. Ernst Guttman. I'm here to visit my niece, Sara Guttman but I ...' his voice trailed off as he looked around the bustling reception area, his eyes finally settling on the crowded reception desk.

Hilleke, who'd been following his gaze, understood his trepidation. To the uninitiated, the reception area could appear chaotically disconcerting. On the far side of the counter, a small army of hospital administrative staff in white uniforms was hectically occupied fielding an array of beeping telephones or dealing with the frantic enquiries of concerned friends, lovers and family members. The noise and the commotion were, she conceded, somewhat off-putting.

'Please don't worry, Mr Guttman. I'll take care of this.'

Stirred by the challenge of a fresh humanitarian goal, Volunteer Hilleke plunged forward into the melee, brushing through the assembled crowd with an ease facilitated by a commanding air and her awe-inspiring bulk. When she reached the counter, she leaned forward and grasped a blue clipboard lying beside a neatly stacked pile of files. The wooden structure creaked

disconcertingly as it took her weight but slowly reassumed its former shape as she straightened up and returned to the anxious Mr Guttman.

Hilleke flipped through several sheets on the clipboard.

‘Guttman. Was that right?’

‘That’s right. Sara. Such a lovely girl. Happy-go-lucky.’ The frown reappeared, tightening his features. ‘So terrible to see her in such a place.’

Hilleke loosened her own smile in sympathetic support. ‘Yes, well at least you can be assured that if she’s in this hospital, she’s being properly taken care of. The doctors and staff here are just wonderful!’

She studied the clipboard again.

‘Do you know what department your niece would be in?’

‘I believe it’s the oncology department.’

Hilleke was unable to disguise her concern. ‘Oh dear, I’m so sorry. I’d assumed it was an accident or something like that.’

‘No, no, it’s all right,’ the gentleman assured her. ‘She’s in remission. All the family are allowed to visit her again.’

‘Oh!’ The relief was evident on her face. ‘Oh well, that’s excellent news. I’m very happy for you.’ She glanced at the clipboard again. ‘Ah, Guttman! Here it is.’

She pointed at the floor, directing his attention to a rainbow array of coloured circles embedded in the large, square tiles beneath their feet. A thin line of identical colour protruded from each circle and streaked across the shiny surface in a number of different directions. Two of them, the blue and the green, led directly to the lift shafts in the central foyer.

Hilleke calmly issued directions with the ease of practised repetition.

‘If you take the lift to the second floor and follow the blue line, you’ll find it leads you directly to the Oncology Ward. I think it’s a short stroll of about ... three to four minutes.’ She punctuated the latter statement with a nod as though concurring with her own calculation. ‘It’s certainly no more than that.’

She glanced down at the clipboard again.

‘According to my chart, your niece is currently in Room 274. If by some chance she’s not there, the ward nurses will be able to tell you where to find her. She won’t have gone far.’

She beamed with the satisfaction of a job well done. ‘Is there anything else I can help you with, Mr Guttman?’

‘No, please. You’ve been so kind already, Miss ...’ Mr Guttman peered again at the badge pinned to her blouse.

‘It’s Hilleke. Nina Hilleke. I work here as a volunteer supervisor on the weekends. You know, organising the volunteers, making tea for the patients, helping visitors and such.’

‘That’s very considerate of you.’

‘Oh, well! I do feel it’s important to give a little back to the community.’

‘You’re a very generous person.’

Volunteer Hilleke felt an unexpected blush flood her features. Unaccustomed to such compliments, she drew herself up decisively, struggling to regain her composure.

‘Enjoy your visit, Mr Guttman. If you need any more assistance please don’t hesitate to come back and find me.’

‘Thank you again, Miss Hilleke.’

With a grateful smile, Guttman turned and proceeded to the central foyer, stepping into the first vacant lift that became available. Emerging on the second floor, he followed the blue line as instructed, strolling at a leisurely pace as it led him through a labyrinthine system of white-walled corridors decorated with a recurring series of generic watercolour prints. Finally, as Volunteer Hilleke had indicated, he found himself before a pair of swinging doors with the words ‘ONCOLOGY WARD’ printed overhead in bright green letters.

Pushing through the double doors, he entered the ward. The office of the ward nurse, at the far end of a long corridor, appeared temporarily deserted but as the nearest door to his right had the number 268 inscribed on it, locating his destination proved little challenge.

Tutting quietly to himself, he continued down the corridor to Room 274. With a gentle knock, he opened the door and peeked inside.

As anticipated, the door opened into a private room. Clean, uncluttered, and minimally furnished, the sterile surfaces of its white walls were relieved only by pieces of medical equipment and a single window overlooking a small public park. A girl of about sixteen or seventeen lay on the large, metal-framed bed in the centre of the room. She was a pretty thing, blonde hair and delicate features, but her thin frame and pinched face were clear evidence of the invasive medical treatments she had endured.

Mr Guttman stepped inside and closed the door, then locked it firmly behind him. As he stood observing the room's single occupant, a strange transformation overtook him. The faint stoop eased from his shoulders and he straightened perceptibly, instantly increasing his height by almost half an inch. When he moved towards the bed his movements assumed new purpose, as though he'd shed some corporeal burden of indecision.

Placing the bouquet of flowers on a small bedside cabinet, he removed his overcoat and draped it over the back of a wooden visitor's chair. He opened the briefcase, removed a sketchpad and two pencils then pushed the chair closer to the bed. When he was sitting comfortably, he removed his thick spectacles, rubbed his eyes and silently studied the sleeping young woman before reaching out to stroke her hair.

Her eyes flickered open.

Startled, he drew back but she continued to observe him without expression, her gaze drowsy and dim from medication.

'You're awake!' Her visitor smiled. 'Sara, my name is Dr Casper. I'm sorry to come and disturb you.'

Sara Guttman stared at him without emotion.

Dr Casper bent forwards, cupping both hands around his left knee. 'You can't imagine how pleased everybody was to hear the positive prognosis. I saw your father earlier, Sara. He's like a new man! Excited, reinvigorated ...' He stopped and patted her tenderly on the cheek. 'Mind you, that's understandable. You're his golden girl. The apple of his eye.'

He chuckled softly.

'I think the poor man's suffered just as much as you throughout your treatment.'

The girl moaned softly and attempted to lift her hand.

'Shhh.' He stroked her forehead. 'You need to save your strength.'

They remained there for several minutes without speaking, the girl dozing in and out of consciousness, Dr Casper sitting quietly, sketching her likeness on the drawing pad with a series of deft pencil strokes. Finally, he leaned forward and shook her shoulder softly before holding up the pad and displaying his handiwork.

The results of his efforts were impressive. The girl's fragile likeness had been accurately and sensitively transferred onto the crisp white surface.

'What do you think?'

She blearily regarded the paper before her and Dr Casper was rewarded with a sleepy smile. Satisfied, he returned the pad and pencils to his briefcase. When he was finished, he addressed the girl once more.

'Sara, I know you have to rest, but first I have something to tell you, and it's very important that you concentrate.'

The girl's eyes opened again and settled on him. Her gaze was a little clearer and she appeared to be observing him with greater focus.

'Good girl. Now, Sara, I want to talk to you about your father.'

Dr Casper paused momentarily to remove his handkerchief from his pocket, and started to clean the lenses of his spectacles.

‘I’m sure you’re already aware what a unique man he is.’ He sat back in his chair and pensively formed the shape of a steeple with his fingers. ‘You see, most human beings are a self-centred lot. They only care about themselves. Your father, however, has that rare capacity to extend his compassion beyond his immediate circle to all of his fellow men. People like your father are special. They’re leaders of social justice, human rights activists, future engineers of social change.’

He stopped and replaced the handkerchief in his pocket. The girl’s eyelids were growing heavy again and he realised that she would not be able to remain awake for much longer.

‘Individuals like your Papa don’t go unnoticed. People like him often come into conflict with oppressive governments or commercial organisations fearful of any activities that might be detrimental to their business interests.’

He shrugged.

‘But that’s neither here nor there. At the end of the day there’s not a lot these entities can do about it. In civilised countries like ours, we have laws that constrain them and besides, such people are too conspicuous in the public eye to interfere with publicly.’

He shook his head decisively. ‘No. If they did want to stop him then they’d have to do so through other less obtrusive, less conspicuous means.’

He looked at her and smiled sadly.

‘And that, I guess, is where I come in.’

Leaning forward he stroked the girl’s face once more then stood up and removed one of the pillows from under her head. Taking it firmly in both hands, he placed it over her face and pressed downwards. At first, there was no reaction but then her body responded to its predicament, self-preservation instincts kicking in as she began to struggle. Over the next minute or two there was a sustained, albeit weakening, resistance. Under Dr Casper’s steel embrace, the outcome was inevitable. The girl’s body shuddered violently one last time and went limp.

Dr Casper continued to hold the pillow down for a full three minutes after all movement had ceased. Finally, removing it from the girl’s face, he put it aside and checked her wrist for a pulse.

Another minute passed before he was satisfied and let her hand drop back onto the bed.

Picking up his briefcase, he removed a thin membrane that had covered the external surface, instantly transforming it from a battered ‘hold-all’ to the prized accessory of a true business executive. He approached a small hand basin in the corner of the room and stared at himself in the mirror for several seconds before raising his hands to remove the blond wig loosely glued to a bald pate beneath. He deposited the wig in the briefcase, peeled the false beard from his chin and added this as well. Removing a striped silk tie from his other jacket pocket, he did up the collar button of his shirt, put on the tie and knotted it firmly. The coat he had laid on the chair turned inside out to reveal a suit jacket that matched his pants and, slipping it on, he brushed down the sleeves and removed a loose thread that he also placed in the case.

He studied his face in the mirror for the next minute or two, concentrating on relaxing his facial muscles. Soon his features lost their intensity, softened and became almost kindly. He practised several quick smiles and when he found one he was happy with, he held it there for over a minute.

Leaving the mirror, he did a rapid but efficient once-over of the room to make sure he had left no trace of his presence behind. Finally, he approached the door, opened it, stuck his head outside and quickly surveyed the corridor. There was nobody in sight.

With one final glance at the body on the bed, he stepped into the hall and closed the door firmly behind him.

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The well groomed businessman who strolled boldly through the main door of the hospital bore little resemblance to the mouse-like Mr Guttman who’d entered some thirty minutes

earlier. Casting a surreptitious glance towards the reception counter, he noted the presence of Volunteer Hilleke engaged in conversation with a white-coated member of staff. Prompted by some inexplicable intuition, the community volunteer suddenly raised her head and stared in his direction. He suppressed a quick smile of triumph as her eyes washed over him, empty of any recognition.

Exiting anonymously amongst the hordes of mid-day visitors, he paused only when he noticed a number of young women on the concourse in front of the building, collecting for a local cancer charity. Adjusting his course, he ambled towards them, drawing to a halt before an attractive young woman with blonde hair. Smiling politely, he pulled his wallet from his pocket, removed a fifty Euro note and slipped it into her collection box.

The girl's eyes widened as she realised the value of his donation and she positively beamed in gratitude. 'Thank you, sir!' she exclaimed. 'That's ... that's extremely generous of you.'

Dr Casper smiled gallantly.

'Have to do our bit,' he said.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Cork City, 2008

The rain had been falling for four days. It was a typical Cork downpour, a cold, grainy torrent that drove all activity from the streets and washed all colour from the world. An incessant, mean-spirited deluge, it trickled into every corner, seeped into every cranny and left nothing untouched by its damp and dreary fingers.

Late in the evening on the fourth day, a solitary figure in a herringbone overcoat and a flat cap pulled low over his forehead appeared at the junction of the Grand Parade and St Patrick's Bridge. Silhouetted against the swirling grey backdrop of mist and rain, he traversed the bridge, head bowed and shoulders hunched against the wind. Halfway across, he halted abruptly, leaned over the balustrade and peered down at the river below. The *Laoi*, roused to an unnatural frenzy by the sheer volume of water flushed in from its various tributaries, thundered beneath, a churning, frothing, cappuccino-coloured flood of eroded soil, diluted effluent and industrial contaminants.

The man remained where he was for almost a minute, apparently oblivious to the rain cascading upon him. With abrupt decisiveness, he straightened, crossed the remainder of the bridge with a brisk step and hurried up the ascending pavement to MacCurtain Street. Outside the grim exterior of McCarthy's Bar, he paused to catch his breath beneath a malfunctioning streetlamp. There, he appeared to hesitate for several moments, flickering in and out of darkness until, finally stepping across the threshold of the doorway, he disappeared inside.

Shaking the rain from his overcoat, Muiris O'Suilleabháin stepped in out of the night, shadows clinging to his flapping coattails as though reluctant to give him up. Brushing the more resistant drops from his sleeves, he removed the coat, folded it over one arm and passed into the lounge bar through a thick, loosely swinging door.

The interior of McCarthy's Bar was dim, bathed with a weak, musky yellow light thrown down from ancient light fittings that looked as though they'd congealed to the ceiling. Directly inside the door, a teak counter stretched for several metres through a fug of cigarette smoke, stale body odour and spilt whisky. It ended abruptly at a sharp corner, where the L-shaped room branched into a narrow area containing two tables and a raised platform used during the establishment's infrequent music sessions.

An elderly man with a chaotic mop of frizzy, grey hair stood behind the counter, wiping a beer glass with a tattered cloth. Nodding in greeting, he placed it on the shelf behind him with an array of similar glasses.

'Evening, Mos.'

'Michael.'

'Bad oul night.'

Mos grunted in response, divesting himself of the saturated overcoat by tossing it onto a nearby barstool.

Michael McCarthy, proprietor and barman, placed a glass tumbler on the bar, pulled a bottle of whiskey from beneath the counter and slowly unscrewed the cap. He took his time as he poured, observing with professional detachment the amber liquid slowly ascend to the lip of the glass. When it was level, he slid the glass effortlessly across the counter. Not a single drop was spilled.

'Get that down ye. It'll burn the chill off.'

Mos reached forward to take the glass and raised it to his lips. He relaxed perceptibly as the liquid burned down his throat, curling comfortably in the depths of his stomach.

'Weren't you supposed to be doing a site up in Mayo?'

Mos stared at the barman. 'Cancelled,' he said curtly.

McCarthy shrugged. Recognising when it was time to leave a customer to the pleasures of solitary drinking, he withdrew, losing himself in the routine of emptying, cleaning, wiping and filling glasses.

Mos, meanwhile, searching for his wallet, had discovered a folded sheet of paper in the pocket of his jacket. Curious, he flattened it on the counter then winced in recognition. It was the title page of a draft archeological report prepared for the Mayo site he'd been working on, the site where his contract had unexpectedly been terminated several days earlier.

Crumpling the paper into a little ball, he tossed it into a bin beside the door then proceeded to tap an irritable finger scale along the edge of the counter. He looked up as McCarthy returned to fill a fresh glass of whiskey.

'Are ye still in a foul mood, Mos?'

For a moment Mos glared at him, then his shoulders sagged and he slumped wearily on the barstool.

'I'm sorry, Michael. It's been a shit of a day. I shouldn't come in here crying at you like me Mammy.'

McCarthy shrugged.

'I'm not your Mammy, Mos. I'm your barman.' He leaned forward and refilled the glass with quiet precision. 'There, now! Swallow that drink and it'll make it all better.'

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If there was a single silver lining to be found in the folds of the inclement thunderclouds, it was probably that the pub was sufficiently deserted for Mos to withdraw to the comfort of the 'Cavern', a cave-like cubicle located to the left of the lounge entrance. Little more than a slab of unpolished oak bolted to a stone wall that curved out around it on either side, the resulting enclosure was large enough to hold seven or eight tightly packed individuals. Despite its odd shape and unattractive walls coated with yellowing newspapers reporting events of some thirty years earlier, the resulting niche appealed to his warped sense of decorum and his desire for privacy.

Dropping his cap and coat onto one of the chairs, Mos took a seat at the table and brooded in silence as he savoured the raw burn of whiskey on his tongue. Occasionally, his eyes would flicker over a discarded copy of the *Examiner* left behind by some previous occupant, and it was a measure of his own distraction that he absorbed the headlines of murders, strikes and a racial assault in Patrick's Street with little reaction or interest. He scowled.

He was tired.

Tired and cranky.

In a bastard of a mood.

*Nothing new there then!*

In retrospect, he realised, it had not been a particularly brilliant idea to venture out on such an evening. Then again, it had seemed like the right thing to do at the time. The stifling solitude of his house had done little to alleviate the anger eating away at him as a result of the Mayo contract's termination. His dark reflection had been further compounded by the fact that it was the anniversary of his father's death, a date that invariably provoked a degree of unwelcome soul searching.

Earlier that afternoon, he'd spent several hours alone in the dining room pretending to read a seven-page archaeological paper. Later, at four o'clock, when he realised that he had read the document several times and still had no idea what it was about, he knew he was only fooling himself.

As the evening drew in, the walls of the house had closed around him. His mood had deteriorated still further when he became aware of a subtle tension beneath the skin at the back

of his neck. This was a familiar symptom from a condition that had plagued him since childhood, but it had been two years since he'd last experienced it. To have it reappear so suddenly, at that specific time, added strongly to the impression that fate was going out of its way to challenge him.

Finally, he could take no more. Throwing on a coat, he'd stomped out into the plunging rain without any particular purpose or destination apart from a vague intention of walking the anger off, driving it out through his system and into the sodden earth beneath his feet. He had walked for over half an hour and if the deteriorating weather hadn't forced him into the shelter of McCarthy's Bar, he'd probably still be trudging along some isolated side road, half-way to Blarney.

A glacial blast rushed up the length of the bar and there was a flurry of laughter and voices as a merry band of revellers surged in through the door. Mos flinched as the draught brushed over him and tightened the woollen scarf that was wrapped about his throat. He watched from the shadows as the ebullient newcomers spread out, heralding their arrival with a bustle of flapping coats, dripping umbrellas and hearty exclamations at the severity of the weather outside.

McCarthy, face a mask of concentration, stepped forward to deal with the unaccustomed activity although it was evident he was struggling to cope with the orders barking at him from all sides. One of the newly arrived punters, a portly individual with silver hair, broke away from his comrades and stood in the centre of the room surveying his surroundings with ostentatious bonhomie.

Mos groaned.

*Desmond Hegarty. Ab, shite!*

The silvered-haired figure removed his sopping overcoat to reveal an expensive jacket, a bright red waistcoat and dickey-bow beneath. Casting the coat onto a barstool with a melodramatic flourish, he regarded the saturated garment with disdain and loudly declared in a theatrical voice, 'A curse on you, foul bloody weather!'

His companions laughed, clearly accustomed to this flamboyant behaviour. Buoyed by their appreciative response, he released a withering glance around the bar as though holding its occupants personally responsible for his sodden condition. His gaze slid up the length of the room, halting only when it fell on the cubicle where Mos was observing him coldly over the lip of a tilted pint glass.

'Muiris O'Súilleabháin!'

He bounded towards the cubicle with surprising alacrity, slid through the narrow entrance and planted himself on the bench opposite its occupant. He stared at Mos with undisguised satisfaction. 'Well,' he declared. 'This is a fortuitous occurrence.'

'Hello, Desmond.' Mos slowly placed the glass on the table and gestured across at the increasing clamour around the bar counter. 'What's all this? The *boi polloi* of Cork slumming it downtown tonight?'

'Just a little tippie after the show.' Hegarty's grandiose mood was not to be undone, although he did regard Mos with a slightly askew expression. 'The show at the Opera House. Given the subject matter, I'd assumed you'd know all about it.'

Mos raised his eyebrows.

'*Tóraitocht Dhiarmada agus Gráinne*,<sup>1</sup>' Hegarty clarified. 'They were performing a revisionist version.'

Mos shrugged. 'Yerra, I need to get out more.'

'Never mind that, Muiris! I'm just delighted to see you. I've been trying to contact you all week.' The alcove's new occupant laughed out loud in apparent amusement at the vagaries of fate. 'There I am, resigned to the fact that you've disappeared from the surface of the planet

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<sup>1</sup> The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne – a Fenian narrative from the 10<sup>th</sup> century

when, lo and behold, you turn up right before my very eyes.’ He frowned then and regarded Mos critically with both of those very eyes.

‘You know, you really ought to get yourself a mobile phone, Muiris. Or at least set up an answer phone so people can leave you a message.’

Mos considered Hegarty with a wry expression. It was not generally known, but his home phone was, in fact, a mobile, one which he’d paid to have his old landline number assigned. It just happened that he never actually bothered taking it out of the house with him.

‘Ah, but if I did that, Desmond, every annoying Tom, Dick and Penis would be ringing me up.’

The silver-haired man nodded sagely.

‘Of course. Of course.’

Mos watched without surprise as the sarcasm coursed off his companion, finding no grip on his slick, unblemished exterior. Previous association with Hegarty had adequately demonstrated his imperviousness to sarcasm or criticism. The man had a skin thicker than a rhinoceros encased in bubble wrap, a characteristic that had aided him substantially throughout his professional career.

‘Tell me, Muiris,’ Hegarty, all business, leaned forward and brushed the debris of small-talk aside. ‘Are you still working with Milo on that Ros na Rian site up in Mayo?’

‘No, Desmond. My input was terminated a few days ago.’

‘Really?’ Hegarty tapped the table top thoughtfully as he considered that. ‘That’s what I’d heard through the grapevine,’ he said at last. ‘Frankly, I didn’t believe it. Not really my area of expertise, of course, but word on the street suggests the findings have the potential to rival the Céide Fields.’

‘You’ve got a particularly good grapevine for something outside your field. But you’re right. It does have that potential.’

‘So why was your contract terminated? I’d have thought you’d be the obvious candidate to advise on the excavation.’ Hegarty glanced down and brushed an imaginary piece of fluff from the knee of his pants before continuing. ‘I assume you identified the site in the first place?’

Mos’ stare was cold.

‘Creative differences.’

Hegarty nodded sagely as he digested this response. ‘I see. Please don’t be offended, Muiris, but to be honest, I’d heard you were simply being difficult.’

He glanced across at Mos, who simply smiled back at him without responding.

‘That you were unwilling,’ he pressed, ‘to follow direct instructions.’

This time the response was a sarcastic guffaw. ‘Ah, Desmond. I don’t follow directives that don’t make any sense. Milo’s instructions would have contravened fundamental archaeological practice, not to mention the basic tenets of the Moron’s Guide to Archaeology.’

‘Hmmm. Yes.’ murmured Hegarty. ‘And yet I recently read an article stating that Milo is widely considered to be one of Irish archaeology’s best hopes for the future.’

‘Which would suggest Irish archaeology is pretty well fucked.’

Mos laughed at the expression on Hegarty’s face. ‘Come on, Desmond. He’s a competent archaeologist but you know as well as I do that he’s had no interest in archaeology since he started developing political aspirations. The only things on Milo’s mind these days are backroom deals and ballot boxes. He’s only involved with the Mayo excavation because he’s got such a hard-on for the county nomination in next year’s elections.’

‘What does the Mayo excavation possibly have to do with the election?’

Mos gave a tight smile. Hegarty was being deceptively naive, of course. Behind the masquerade of baffled academic was one of the most manipulative and self-interested minds he’d ever encountered. His one-time mentor, and long-time Professor of Philology and History at the Centre for Celtic Studies at University College Cork, Hegarty was one of the few academics who had thrived in the increasingly competitive and corporate environment of

modern-day tertiary institutions. Flamboyant but astute, what he lacked in ability he more than made up for in bravado and sheer political cunning. University Deans had come and gone, but after two decades, Hegarty remained, enduring and as permanent as the stones of Brú na Bóinne<sup>2</sup>.

Mos held Hegarty's gaze as the silence stretched on, neither man relenting or looking away. He understood that there was a game being played here: Hegarty's 'grapevine' was firmly rooted in Milo's garden. No one else was aware that his contract had been terminated and although their encounter here at McCarthy's had probably been coincidence, Mos did not doubt that Hegarty had been seeking him industriously for several days. For a moment, he considered telling the academic to stick his head up his ass but curiosity prevailed and he decided to play along.

'The site will help him because of its national importance. Once the initial findings have been processed, the media will be over it like flies on a fresh turd and he can use it as the launching platform for his political career. He'll set himself up to take all the credit associated with the discovery, then portray himself as the "saviour" of Irish heritage. That'll all go down a treat with Seán and Sheila Public and he'll be a shoe-in for the party nomination.

Mos pushed the empty pint glass away from him, replacing it with the whiskey.

'Milo's problem, unfortunately, is one of timing. He needs the results of the excavation to be made public in time to play his cards for next year's nominations. If the site management follows normal practice, those results won't be published for several months after the nominations have been allocated. That's why he's desperate to speed up the excavation. A little bit here, a little bit there. Just enough to make sure the results are released on time but more than enough to compromise the subsequent analysis of the findings.'

He raised his glass in a mocking salute.

'In the end, it all comes down to the age-old contest of doing what's right versus doing what's right for you. In that respect, working with him was a lot like working with you.'

Hegarty quickly dismissed such unpleasantness with a shrug of his shoulders. 'Really, Muiris! That's unfair. I understand you're upset with Milo but that's no reason to attack me. I've always felt our collaborations were a major success.'

Mos regarded his ex-colleague wearily.

'You have balls, Desmond. I'll give you that. Desiccated, reptilian testicles with all sorts of fucked-up, mucous-coated knobbly bits – but at least you have some.'

Hegarty glared at him in outrage but bit his tongue. Their one and only 'collaboration' had been when Hegarty was acting in his official capacity of academic overseer for Mos' Master's thesis. During the course of the final term, Hegarty had essentially published Mos' research and analysis under his own name. An embarrassing lawsuit had been avoided only because of Mos' refusal – to the consternation of his colleagues – to initiate legal proceedings. Quietly accepting the proffered degree, he had left academic life and ensured that he never worked with his ex-mentor again.

Mos rubbed his eyes, suddenly tiring of Hegarty and his small-minded machinations.

'What do you want, Desmond? What do I have that you'd risk crawling back to ask for?'

'Really, Muiris! I—'

'I mean', continued Mos, ignoring him, 'you know how little I think of you. Besides, we operate to incompatible value systems. Your sole interest is your constant need to bolster your professional reputation, whereas mine is working out historical truths. So tell me, Desmond. What is it?'

Hegarty was staring down at his hands. When he looked up again, his eyes expressed a depth of bitterness that Mos had not seen before.

'Ah yes! The great O'Súilleabháin obsession with the truth. Tell me, Muiris, do you never tire of being such a paragon of historical virtue? Do you never stop, just for one moment, and

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<sup>2</sup> New Grange

wonder whether there's any chance, any chance at all, that you might possibly be wrong or that there might be other needs involved?'

'No. Now, tell me what you want or fuck off.'

Hegarty blinked, his indignant composure undercut by the vehement gauntlet tossed down on the table before him. Mos watched him mentally working through his response, conscious that his ex-colleague was weighing up the minimum he could tell him while retaining any degree of credibility.

'An opportunity has arisen,' he said at last.

Mos gave a cynical laugh then stood up to leave.

'See you, Desmond.'

Hegarty stared panic-stricken but before he could support his pitch, several members of his group converged on the Tavern, invading the dim recess in a boisterous flurry of laughter and movement. Mos halted in momentary bemusement as the intruders swept in around him, staking their claim to the cubicle through the deposition of beer glasses, coats and umbrellas and the annexation of tables around its immediate entrance. With a shake of his head, he gathered up his belongings and was turning to leave when he felt a hand grip his arm. He glanced down to find Hegarty looking at him with uncharacteristic desperation.

'Please, Muiris. Don't go. This is serious. I really need to talk with you.' He glanced around the rapidly-filling cubicle. 'In private.'

From the corner of his eye, Mos noted the lounge door swing open as yet another drenched patron entered, wiping rain drops from his hair and face. Just before the door closed, he caught a glimpse of the bleak street-scene outside – streetlamps shuddering in the wind, horizontal rain. Despite his best instincts he found himself wavering at the thought of the long walk home.

'Please,' pleaded Hegarty.

Breathing deeply, Mos nodded reluctantly.

'Oh, fuck it! All right.'

For an instant, relief flooded Hegarty's face and he nodded with what looked like genuine gratitude. Mos noted the reaction dubiously and wondered if he had somehow been outmanoeuvred. He briefly reconsidered his decision but by then circumstances seemed to be conspiring against him. At that very moment, a fresh crowd of people poured in through the entrance of the pub, congregating in a tight mob outside the cubicle and effectively locking him in.

With a deep sigh of misgiving, he silently resumed his seat.

Newly energised by Mos' acquiescence, Hegarty reverted once more to his habitually expansive nature. As the assembled group and various hangers-on made themselves comfortable around the table, he cheerfully assumed the role of master of ceremonies and started to introduce his companions. At first glance, they appeared typical of the retinue with which Hegarty habitually surrounded himself on such social outings; a cocktail of local *intelligentsia*, artists and academics, supported by a fan base of drooling students in *de-rigueur* uniform of jeans and woolly jumpers.

'Muiris.' Hegarty gestured towards an attractive woman with brown hair set in an impish 1920s Louise Brooks-style bob who'd somehow managed to squeeze her slim frame onto the seat beside him. 'This is *Mademoiselle* Giselle Talibat from Bordeaux. She's the current writer-in-residence at the Karilee retreat.' He took her hand, raised it to his lips and kissed it with mock reverence. 'She's writing a brilliant new work which will have the Parisian critics salivating at her feet. Am I not right, Giselle?'

The Frenchwoman smiled, revealing a set of brilliant white teeth. Her eyes were bright and had a mischievous quality that made her look younger than she probably was.

'But of course, Desmond. I have always been a literary genius, unrecognised in my own country. But now I will make them pay.'

Her English was flawless and had it not been for the precise inflections that marked the diligent second language student, it would have been almost impossible to identify her as a non-native speaker. She reached across the table and shook hands with Mos. ‘Hello,’ she said.

‘Always a pleasure to meet a fellow genius.’

She gave him a startled look but said nothing.

‘Beside her,’ continued Hegarty, ‘we have Dr Connor Boyle from the English literature department and his wife Mary. Mary’s a painter.’

The Boyles, a heavy-set individual with a grey beard and his beautiful, matchstick-thin wife, nodded cordially but had no time to get a word in as Hegarty moved along the table.

The next person to be introduced, a stocky man in his thirties with a thin moustache and a matching goatee, was bent forwards over the table, nursing a double whiskey. He looked up in irritation as Hegarty leaned forwards to disrupt him but then shrugged and swallowed a mouthful of liquid from his glass.

‘This handsome devil is Dennis O’Donoghue. You might have heard of him. He writes a column for the *Irish Age* newspaper and I think he was runner-up in the latest media awards, eh, Dennis?’

O’Donoghue gave a desultory wave as Hegarty went on to introduce the remainder of the group around the table. The students, mere bystanders with insufficient social standing, were consigned both physically and metaphorically to the edge of the group, on the outer fringes of the cubicle and surrounding tables where they could, assumedly, hang on every word that was spoken.

Then, to his horror, it was Mos’ turn to be introduced.

‘This gentleman,’ Hegarty informed the table, ‘is Mr Muiris O’Súilleabháin – an old student of mine. As you can see –’ He patted his paunch. ‘– the years have been a lot kinder to him than to me. That simple lifestyle and all that clean living just doesn’t do it for me.’

Mos forced himself to tolerate the subsequent round of laughter. Moments later, Hegarty was called to the end of the table to resolve a dispute between two individuals on some element of the play which they had just been to see.

Madame Talibat leaned forwards, placed both elbows on the table and directed an inquisitive stare at Mos.

‘Are you a history lecturer too, then, Mr O’Súilleabháin?’

‘No.’ Mos shook his head. ‘I’m more of an antiquarian.’

‘Ah! You collect antiques.’

Mos made no attempt to correct the assumption.

‘Something like that. All enmeshed in the study of history and the practice of archaeology.’

The Frenchwoman smiled. You know, I’ve never completely understood the distinction between history and archaeology. Is there actually any difference?’

Mos stared at her, surprised by the question. With a sudden wince he realised that, trapped within the confines of the alcove, he was obliged to make small talk until Hegarty returned.

*Perhaps I should feign death.*

Resigned to the situation, he took a sip of whiskey before responding.

‘Yes, there is. The main difference is that historians tend to focus on written records to get information on the past. Archaeologists, on the other hand, study a wider range of historical materials such as physical remains, recovered artefacts and so on. That’s why they’re able to study prehistory, that grey area of historical science where written records don’t exist.’

Her full lips sipped from a long-stemmed cocktail glass and left a soft smudge of lipstick on the rim.

‘When you say “pre-history”, do you mean it in the sense of “before history”?’

‘That’s right. Irish history prior to the fifth century.’

Mlle Talibat tossed her head, flicking her fringe away from her eyes. It was, thought Mos, a particularly Gallic gesture. ‘I didn’t realise history had an official starting point.’

Several of the nearer students laughed dutifully. Curious, Mos glanced over and caught a glimpse of the main instigator – a gormless-looking youth with red hair who was enthusiastically nudging his friends on either side. He frowned and was about to respond when his attention was drawn to an exotic-looking young woman sitting behind the student. Slightly older than her scholarly companions – probably in her late twenties – she had thick black ringlets that cascaded down around her shoulders and onto the wide collars of a stylish, double-breasted red jacket. She was seated at an odd angle, facing slightly away from the others as though not fully committed to the group.

He returned his attention to Mlle Talibat.

‘Well, the generally accepted rule is that official history begins when you have enough information to work out if something’s true or not. The history of every nation’s different, but in Ireland the official records start after the fifth century – probably well after 431 AD – when the Christian Church arrived and started to introduce writing skills. There aren’t any remaining written records on Irish society prior to the sixth century, if any ever actually existed, and in terms of physical pre-fifth century materials – buildings, tools and so on – there’s bugger all apart from various burial sites and their contents.’

He shrugged.

‘That’s the beauty of pre-history, though. It’s a time that’s full of mystery: mythological heroes, vague classical references and, in some cases, complete fabrication. It’s exotic. It’s like a foreign country you’ve heard about but have never been to.’

‘I’m sorry, I don’t quite get that.’

Dr Boyle, who’d been listening to Mos’ explanation with interest, gave a slightly condescending smile.

‘If so little actually remains from before the fifth century, how can we possibly know anything about it?’

He seemed impressed with his own reasoning, as most idiots did when they stumbled upon this particular argument. Mos’ response was tinged with impatience.

‘There’s not much evidence in terms of hard archaeological artefacts but there’s plenty of evidence from other, more indirect, sources.’ He halted briefly and glanced up as one of the students appeared at his shoulder and replaced a round of drinks for those sitting at the table. A tall man, who’d been introduced earlier as a radio presenter, ostentatiously waved the student over and handed him several euro notes.

‘There were a number of writers from contemporary cultures,’ he continued. ‘Greece, Rome, and so on. Places where literacy existed before it came to Ireland. Occasionally individuals from these cultures took the time to comment on Ireland and although their comments weren’t particularly complimentary, they do give some indication of what life would have been like around that period.’

Apart from that, there’s also the descriptions passed down through the Christian scribes. From the early seventh century onwards, many of them wrote down oral accounts from the local communities that had probably been doing the rounds for hundreds of years. They mightn’t have been completely accurate but, again, if you compare them with the other evidence and snippets of information, you can actually make a tentative reconstruction of what life was like before the fifth century.’

He took a fresh sip of whiskey from the glass the student had deposited in front of him.

‘Then, of course, there’s Irish folklore.’

There was a snort of derision across the table.

All eyes turned to O’Donoghue, the journalist, who was slouched back in his seat. He regarded Mos with a cynical expression.

‘I hadn’t realised fairy tales were an exact science.’

‘Don’t be silly, Dennis,’ countered Hegarty, who had returned to join them. ‘He said folk tales, not fairy tales.’

O'Donoghue shrugged as though this only supported his point.

'No,' corrected Mos. 'The word I used was "folklore". And it is a science in that it's a systematic study not only of religious, spiritual and mythic systems, but the everyday traditions and rituals of Irish culture.'

O'Donoghue made a point of yawning. 'That's still a pretty broad brushstroke.'

Mos considered the journalist coolly. He'd come across O'Donoghue's column in the local newspaper on occasion and although the writing was certainly competent, he found the articles acerbic and too self-indulgent for his liking. The column seemed to serve more as a soapbox for individual grandstanding rather than as a conduit for insightful commentary on contemporary issues of note.

'So's life. You have to study a mish-mash of the esoteric and the mundane elements of ancient cultures in order to understand how they worked. Otherwise you can't even start to put historical findings into context or make sense of how different events affected people's behaviour.'

'So no fairy tales,' commented Mlle Talibat.

Mos glanced at her, uncertain if it was a genuine question or whether she was simply mocking him. He decided to assume it was the former.

'No,' he confirmed. 'No fucking fairy tales. At least, not in the conventional sense of the word.'

He sensed a slight discomfort at his easy use of the F-word in such a scholastic discussion. They were a sensitive bunch, he decided, but continued on regardless.

'Folk tales aren't fairy tales and folk tales can form part of folklore but it's a very small part. All the same, there's usually some identifiable kernel of historical fact in folktales if you look hard enough.'

'What about the annals?' asked Boyle. 'I thought they went back well before the first century.'

The Frenchwoman's eyes widened. 'I'm sorry. The annals?'

Boyle frowned.

'Well, as far as I understand, the annals were some kind of historical record initiated by the Western Church.' He turned to Hegarty. 'Have I got that right, Desmond?'

'Absolutely!' Hegarty was only too happy to provide confirmation. 'They were originally based on the Church's Paschal tables and used to work out the order of the liturgical feasts and religious festivals back in the Middle Ages.'

He offered a contented smile, enjoying the attention.

'Each annual date was separated from the next by a blank space and, after a while, the clerics started filling them in with notes about important events between the festivals. Over time, though, they developed into a rather useful chronological record.'

'So, wouldn't they be an excellent source of information?' Mlle Talibat redirected the question back to Mos.

'You'd think so,' Mos acknowledged. 'Unfortunately, in Ireland the Church didn't actually start that tradition until the end of the seventh century. Human nature being what it is, the compilers couldn't help themselves from filling in all those irritating gaps in the pre-Christian records. They gathered all the information on the pre-fifth century they could find, collated them with their own views of what might have happened, then set the finished product in a rough chronological order using the Christian church annals as their template. In that respect, the early Irish annals read as though the clerics had first-hand knowledge of the historical events whereas, in fact, they were rewriting them to align with their own religious prejudices and beliefs.'

There was a thoughtful silence around the table. Mrs Boyle, who hadn't said a word until then, was the first to renew the conversation. 'So does that mean the annals are incorrect?'

Mos shrugged. 'Well, the pre-fifth century material is dubious to say the least.'

‘I don’t understand.’ Her husband’s forehead creased into a series of deep furrows. ‘Keating<sup>3</sup> and many of the earlier historians believed the church annals were accurate.’

Mos put his glass on the table.

‘That’s a common problem with older works. Their age tends to give them an unfounded credibility in many people’s minds. That’s what happened with Keating and his peers. They made the assumption that everything in the older documents was fact just because it’d been written a long time ago. They accepted the content without critical analysis and didn’t take the historical circumstances or the social context into account. That was a big mistake as any writer, no matter who they are or what age they live in, suffers certain biases or prejudices.’

He leaned back in his chair and breathed deeply.

‘Unfortunately, the expression “don’t believe everything you read” holds just as well for ancient manuscripts as it does for the latest media release from some dubious weekly rag.’ He glanced meaningfully at O’Donoghue who responded with a petulant glare.

‘Good Lord!’ The Frenchwoman plonked her glass on the table with Gallic melodrama. ‘So how in God’s name did people ever find out?’

‘That’s easy,’ said Mos. ‘It’s because, as a race, we started becoming more cynical. And we finally started seeking the truth.’

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Mos studied his fifth whiskey with the clouded intellectual insight achieved only on the downhill slope of inebriation. Drunkenness, he concluded, was a goal sought only by the solitary drinker. For everybody else it somehow seemed to sneak up unawares, clobbering them mercilessly from behind while they were distracted by its more pleasing side-effects.

He considered the whiskey glass standing on the worn, wooden counter. The amber liquid flickered pleasantly in the subdued lighting.

An important milestone in the night’s activities had been attained, he realised. Wearying rapidly of the idiotic conversations undulating among Hegarty’s friends, he’d ended up consuming more alcohol than he’d intended as fresh rounds were ordered by various members around the table. During the course of the various discussions, Mlle Talibat had put her hand on his knee and he’d realised with belated insight that she was flirting with him.

O’Donoghue, conversely, grew colder and more antagonistic, and it was only as Mos was leaving and noticed the journalist sidle into the seat he’d occupied that he finally understood the reason. O’Donoghue had a crush on the Frenchwoman and had perceived Mos as a potential adversary for her affections.

Mos found this thoroughly amusing.

When he’d finally succeeded in extracting himself and left the Cavern, he’d felt Hegarty’s eyes burning into his back. Despite his earlier urgency, Hegarty hadn’t taken the opportunity to pull him aside and discuss what was troubling him. That, he felt, was Hegarty’s problem.

He stood by the bar, surprised to discover that his temper had softened. If nothing else, the conversation had been an effective diversion from the thoughts smouldering at the edges of his consciousness earlier that evening. Now, he felt sufficiently calmed to put his glass down, walk out the door and go home.

‘Mos.’

Mos looked up to find McCarthy standing opposite him on the other side of the counter.

‘You’ve been staring at that glass for over five minutes.’

‘I’m focusing, Michael. Drinking’s a serious matter.’

McCarthy laughed, a kind of hollow bark that passed for mirth. ‘Much as I respect your conscientiousness, Mos, I still think you’re one drink short of half-steamed.’

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<sup>3</sup> Seathrún Cétinn (Geoffrey Keating in English) – a 17<sup>th</sup> century Irish historian poet and priest.

‘Well spotted, Michael. Now, if you’d leave me feckin’ concentrate, I might be able to complete that particular fraction.’

McCarthy grinned and opened his mouth to respond when a sudden thunderclap shook the building, drowning out his witty riposte. The pub lights flickered briefly and the hum of conversation throughout the room faltered.

‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph!’ McCarthy blessed himself, the automatic response beaten in from years of a Catholic upbringing. ‘That’s some fierce weather!’ He shook his head unhappily. ‘You mark my word, Mos, it’s a night of portents. Something bad is coming.’

A brilliant burst of lightning flashed through the window as though underlining McCarthy’s melodramatic prediction. All colour was momentarily ripped away from the world and they blinked to rid themselves of the white afterimage. A moment later, the flash was followed by another, lengthy growl of thunder.

The punters’ conversations slowly stuttered back to life but the talk was muted and a few glanced at the window each time there was a new flash or crack of thunder. After several minutes, however, the intensity of the storm had noticeably diminished and the volume within the pub slowly returned to normal.

‘The storm’s moving on,’ said Mos.

‘They always do.’

‘But they leave desolation in their wake.’

‘Fuck, Mos. You’re veering dangerously close to philosophy.’

Mos laughed harshly.

‘Muiris.’

He straightened up and turned to find Hegarty standing at the counter beside him.

‘Hello, Desmond. What happened? Did you desert your friends?’

Hegarty grimaced and made a dismissive gesture with his hand.

‘Can we have a quick word?’

Mos shrugged listlessly, momentarily distracted by a flurry of hailstones against the window.

‘Do you recall me mentioning how fortuitous it was to run into you?’

‘No,’ Mos lied. ‘You mention a lot of things. Most of them not worth recalling.’

Once again, Hegarty’s massive egotism appeared to deflect the insult, reducing its impact to that of a bee sting on an armoured vehicle.

*No reaction from d’oul bollix. Must be losing me edge.*

‘I mentioned that an opportunity had arisen, Muiris.’ He hesitated for a second or two. ‘I’ve got a proposal for you.’

Hegarty looked around as though fearful of being overheard, then made a deliberate point of staring at McCarthy. The barman shook his head in disgust but took the hint and walked away to tend to a keg at the far end of the counter.

Reassured, the plump academic leaned forward with conspiratorial air.

‘Two weeks ago, I was contacted by an old colleague of mine, an historian by the name of David Coffey. I worked with him several years ago in Oxford. He’s a charming man. Very capable, and has an excellent reputation for his work in late medieval English manuscripts.’

Mos shuffled impatiently. ‘Is there a point to this?’

‘I’m coming to it,’ answered Hegarty, his voice slightly shrill. ‘Anyway, he’s based in London nowadays, where he works for a private American institution. Last week, he rang me out of the blue asking if I knew of anyone with the expertise to provide a detailed briefing on the Fenian Cycle. I hope you don’t mind, but I mentioned your name.’

Mos rolled his eyes. ‘Jesus, Desmond! If you’ve given my contact details to some coven of new-age witches I’ll ...’

‘No, Muiris. It’s nothing like that. These people are completely legitimate. They call themselves the Opus Foundation and they run a charitable institution that deals in the

acquisition and conservation of western antiquities. From what David tells me, they've got their hands on an artefact and need some help verifying its authenticity'

'I don't get it. Why would an American conservation organisation want a briefing on the Fenian Cycle?'

'Because the artefact's of Irish origin, Muiris. And ...' Hegarty looked meaningfully at him. 'David says that it has some association with the Fenian Cycle.'

Mos thought about that for a moment. 'So what is it?' he asked.

'I have no idea.'

Mos winced. 'Well, have they dated it?'

'They've had an initial analysis carried out but it's only a rough estimate at this stage. All I know is that it's pre-twelfth century.'

Mos was unable to conceal his surprise. Early medieval artefacts were by no means commonplace but to discover one with a potential link to the Fenian Cycle was ... well, that was a rarity indeed.

'They're sure it's of Irish origin?'

'David seems convinced that's the case.' Hegarty coughed delicately and cleared his throat, 'However, they're willing to pay a substantial sum to whoever can confirm that, authenticate the object and advise them on certain related aspects of mythology.'

'How much?'

Hegarty told him. Mos whistled in surprise.

'Naturally', continued Hegarty, 'I would be able to do an adequate job of assessing the content to help confirm its provenance and authenticity, but it seems an in-depth knowledge of Fenian lore would be helpful to assign an accurate time period.'

'Uh-huh.'

'I should add that they've explicitly indicated a preference for someone not directly associated with the universities or the national research institutions.'

Mos stared at him, eyes laden with curiosity. 'Why don't they want to involve the universities?'

'They said they weren't at liberty to tell me. Shit, who cares, Muiris! They're willing to make a four-figure payment just for turning up to talk with them for a few hours.'

Mos regarded his old colleague with suspicion. 'So what's your angle, Desmond? What are you getting out of this?'

Hegarty regarded him with a hurt expression. 'Do you think so little of me, Muiris?' he asked sadly. 'Do you really think me incapable of a single act without guile or profit?'

'Yes.'

Hegarty's face flushed through a remarkable variation of purples and reds.

'Very well,' he said tersely. 'If you must know, I'll be receiving a fee for the authentication. And there's a finder's commission for you, of course. A man has to cover his costs.'

That, apparently, was the sum of what he was willing to share. He fixed Mos with a stern eye. 'Are you in, Muiris?' he asked gravely.

Mos leaned back against the bar and pensively stroked the stubble on his chin. The money involved was impressive but the real carrot – as Hegarty was most certainly aware – was the artefact's purported connection to the Fenian Cycle. Any item that could shed new light on any context of the Cycle, or even confirm existing theory, was literally priceless from the perspective of a Fenian scholar. To someone like Mos it was intellectual gold.

He regarded the eager expression on the academic's face and his misgivings returned. The downside in this proposal was the fact that it was Hegarty dangling the carrot. Previous experience had adequately demonstrated that he could not be trusted. For that reason alone, the project was almost certain to be tainted in one form or another.

'Opportunity doesn't knock twice,' Hegarty urged.

'Sure. I just like to know who's on the other side before I open the door.'

Hegarty flung his hands in the air in exasperation. ‘For God’s sake, Muiris! Honestly, I just don’t understand you. Sometimes it’s as though you go out of your way to rub people up the wrong way!’

Mos shook his head doubtfully.

‘I’ll tell you what. Let me have an oul think about it and I’ll come back to you.’

‘Muiris, there isn’t much time. Haven’t you been listening to me? I’ve already said ...’

Mos ignored him. ‘The thing is, I’d planned to head west to the Gaeltacht for a week or two. It’s about time I brushed up on my Gaelic. *Tá sé in am uisce íor an tobair a bhlasfaidh.*’ It’s time to taste the pure water from the well.

Hegarty glowered, clearly furious but unwilling to push too far.

‘Honestly, you *gaelgoirs* are a pretentious lot.’

Mos sipped his drink and eyed him coldly.

‘Pretentious,’ he said. ‘*Mise?*’

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Hegarty apparently hadn’t appreciated the joke for he’d stalked off in a huff, muttering bitterly of missed opportunities. Although genuinely intrigued by the story of the Irish artefact, Mos was not particularly perturbed. He was sufficiently familiar with Hegarty’s *modus operandi* to know that if there was any substance to the story, Hegarty would not give in. If Mos’ particular expertise was required, Hegarty would be back to pester him.

He picked up the untouched whiskey glass. Swirling the contents, he raised it to his lips then paused as he noticed a young woman on the stool to his left, bent forwards over the counter as she helped herself to some ice cubes from the ice bucket. She had removed her red jacket but he immediately recognised her as the woman he’d seen with the students in the Cavern.

At a guess, he’d have said she was of Middle Eastern – or perhaps South American – descent. Whatever her origins, she was striking. As tall as Mos – about five foot nine – she had small breasts and the lean, powerful build of an athlete. Long, dark curls fell onto a purple, open-necked shirt and framed a face with smooth skin and high cheek bones. Her classically attractive features, nevertheless, had a stillness and austerity about them that bordered on the severe.

Retrieving the ice, she dropped it into the long glass she was holding then, sensing his attention, turned to look at him. He was struck by the solemnity of her scrutiny, the lack of any identifiable emotion behind that unruffled evaluation.

He nodded in acknowledgement. She offered him a cool smile.

‘Ah, the antiquarian!’

‘Ah,’ he countered. ‘The appreciative audience.’

‘The captive audience,’ she countered right back. ‘You must be the official pub philosopher. I’ve been told Irish pubs are crammed wall to wall with philosophers and poets.’

He looked at her in surprise, thrown by the accent, which seemed at odds with her looks. Her English was perfect but the inflection was slightly French or Spanish and had a trace of a brogue or something similar in there as well. The overall effect was further confused by a voice that was surprisingly husky – deep and almost masculine, but oddly appealing. He sat on a barstool and allowed it to wash over him.

‘Ah, that’d probably have been a *Bord Fáilte*<sup>4</sup> ad you saw when you were high on cocaine or something. They tend to ...’

He stopped, momentarily distracted by an unusual tattoo running down the side of her neck.

‘Samoan.’

‘What?’

‘The tattoo. A Samoan design. Or, if I’m being aberrantly candid, a design based on a Samoan tattoo.’

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<sup>4</sup> The Irish Tourist Board

She regarded him with an impatient expression and he realised, belatedly, that his reaction was probably one she'd encountered on a thousand earlier occasions.

'Are you Iranian?'

This time it was her turn to look surprised. For a moment he thought she wasn't going to respond but then, slowly, she raised her hands and, mockingly, clapped four times. 'Very good. No, I'm not Iranian. But my mother was.'

'I have an ear for accents,' he lied. 'And there was that, of course.' Mos pointed to the compact knapsack he'd just noticed on the floor beside her stool. A miniature of the Iranian tricolour with its conspicuous central emblem was sewn into the outer lining.

She gave a careless shrug. 'Picked that up in Teheran when I was visiting family a few years ago.'

Mos returned his glass on the counter. 'Are you in Cork for long?'

'Not for long. I'm pursuing the sun through Western Europe. Running towards the West. Ireland is as far as I can go.' She paused. 'Good enough?'

Mos shrugged.

'I've heard dumber reasons.' He pointed to the window. 'It went that way.'

Her laugh, although pleasantly at odds with her aloof disposition, was subdued and settled around them like the final chords of a melancholic piece of music. She held out her hand and a collection of copper bangles hidden under the sleeve of her shirt slid down to her wrist with a series of metallic clinks.

'You can call me Ailbhe.'

'Why. Isn't that your real name?'

She looked at him as though surprised by the question.

'No. But it will suffice.'

He accepted her hand and was surprised at the strength of her grip and the calluses on her palms. As they shook, the copper bangles encircling her wrists clinked noisily.

'Muiris O'Súilleabháin. Naturally, that's not my real name either. Just call me Mos.'

She gave a quizzical expression but said nothing. Either she'd missed the humour or simply did not find it amusing.

'When did you decide to become Cormac's better daughter?'

This time her left eyebrow arched in a puzzled manner.

'Ailbhe. It's the name of Cormac Mac Airt's other daughter. Aren't you familiar with the events of *Tóraíocht Dhiarmada agus Gráinne*?'

She shook her head and he stared at her, confused.

'But weren't you at the play with ...' he nodded in the direction of the Cavern where Hegarty's group were still firmly embedded.

'No. I came in through the door at the rear of that group. They left a single seat. I have been talking with some of them but I don't know them. And I know nothing of any play.'

'Oh. Well, in a nutshell, Fionn Mac Cumhail—' He stopped. 'You know who he is?'

'I know who he is.'

'Right then.' He paused and regarded her with curiosity before continuing. The lack of expression on her face made her difficult to read and he was unsure if he was simply boring her. 'According to tradition, a marriage was arranged between Fionn Mac Cumhail and Gráinne, the daughter of Cormac Mac Airt, the High King of Ireland. Unfortunately, as it turned out, Gráinne was an unwilling bride. On the night of the wedding reception, she drugged the entire company and placed one of Fionn's warriors – Diarmuid Ua Duibhne – under a magical prohibition that obliged him to elope with her.'

'When Fionn and his warriors woke up and came to their senses, they immediately gave pursuit. Diarmuid and Gráinne became lovers and there was a great chase, or *tóraíocht*, that lasted for several years before it all came to a drastically tragic end. As part of the subsequent peace

process between Cormac Mac Airt and Fionn, Cormac offered him the hand of another of his daughters. He chose Ailbhe.'

'Not the main character, then?'

'I wouldn't worry about it. According to tradition, Ailbhe was the smart one.'

'How nice. What the hell!'

The girl was thrust backwards as a tall figure roughly forced his way between them and grasped two pints of Guinness that had been placed on the counter. In the ensuing scuffle, the intruder's feet became entangled in the straps of the knapsack and he stumbled, spilling his drink over her.

Ailbhe stared down at the large stain growing on her shirt. When she looked up her expression was distinctly hostile.

Startled, Mos stared at the newcomer, astonished to recognise O'Donoghue. The journalist had apparently been drinking even more heavily since Mos' departure. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes glassy with repressed belligerence. He stared impassively at the stain on the girl's shirt.

'You oughta mind where you put that feckin' bag,' he growled at last, punctuating this conclusion with a kick to the offending article that sent it skidding under her stool.

Mos moved off his own barstool. Catching the movement from the corner of his eye, the journalist immediately jerked around to face him.

'You!' he snarled. 'What the fuck do you want?'

Mos said nothing but held up two conciliatory palms and carefully backed away. The journalist stared at him for two or three seconds then grunted, took his drinks and stumbled off in the direction of the cubicle.

Mos and the woman watched as he forced his way through the shifting crowd. When he had disappeared from sight between into the shuffle of bodies, they turned to consider one another.

'Thank you for all your help,' she said icily. She bent down to retrieve her knapsack from the floor.

'Ach, you were grand. He was drunk. You could have taken him easily.'

She gave him a long look then turned and walked away, ringlets bungy-jumping down behind her; a black curtain on her exit.

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He had stayed too long, of course.

Over the years he'd developed a relatively effective strategy for avoiding confrontation. This usually consisted of simply avoiding the locations or occasions where it was most likely to occur and, for the most part, it had been successful. He was sufficiently realistic to recognise that he could not have pre-empted the sequence of events leading up to the evening's somewhat abrupt conclusion. Nevertheless, the incident had effectively stirred up a vengeful stew of emotions that, on any other night, he would have dismissed and brushed aside.

*Feckin' journalist!*

He sighed and shook his head. The adrenalin rush following the encounter with O'Donoghue had, at least, served to drive the warm flush of alcohol from his bloodstream. The incident had also prompted him to leave his drink untouched on the counter when he'd walked away.

He stared down at the scuffed vinyl floor tiles, his view slowly moving up to absorb the stained white walls of the cubicle.

Sitting up straight on the toilet seat, he considered the rather poor depiction of an erect penis drawn in enormous scale on the back of the door. Beneath it, a rather shaky hand informed him that 'Seán O'Driscoll eats cock'. Worse still, he also, reportedly, 'likes it up the whole'.

Further down, an even more creatively challenged author, in a fit of overwhelming romanticism, had scribbled a short poem:

The moon is out tonight  
Your eyes are bright  
My love is forever  
I'll hold you so tight.

Look out, Séamus Heaney! Your days are numbered.

Mos chewed on a thumbnail and was seriously considering giving up and leaving when he heard the door to the Men's swing open and slam into the wall behind it. Stiffening, he listened carefully as some heavy-footed individual staggered inside, shoes slapping clumsily on the wet floor.

There was a loud fart, the sound of a zipper opening, then a happy tinkle of piss hitting the metal coating of the urinal wall with a satisfying splatter.

For the umpteenth time that night, Mos stood up on the toilet bowl and peered carefully over the cubicle wall. Standing in front of the urinal, back towards him, was O'Donoghue, sighing in satisfaction as the pressure drained from his bladder.

Stepping back down onto the floor, Mos silently opened the cubicle door. He pulled an empty beer bottle from his pocket, holding its base in the palm of his hand as he eased up behind the unsuspecting journalist.

O'Donoghue never stood a chance. It all happened faster than he could possibly have reacted to, particularly given the quantity of alcohol he'd obviously consumed. The first he knew of the assault was a diabolically sharp pain in the left kidney as something jabbed into him from behind. Before he could cry out in pain or surprise, a hand grabbed the back of his head and smashed it directly into the wall above the urinal.

Writhing in pain, he collapsed into a puddle of his own urine.

Mos returned the beer bottle to his pocket and regarded his handiwork quietly. O'Donoghue, lying on his side, shivered violently and threw up. With one final kick to the groaning journalist, Mos turned and calmly left.

## CHAPTER TWO

### West Cork, Early 1960s:

The sound of the motor vehicle was audible several minutes before it finally pulled into view. A big, fuck-off Mercedes designed for wide Continental roadways, it was having a hard time of it in the confines of the narrow breen. Struggling in low gear, the grunt of its engine reverberated through the surrounding countryside as it painfully negotiated the overgrown track, avoiding protruding fuchsia, holly branches, an old stone ditch and the deep rut of tractor tyres carved into the sodden earth.

Sitting on an old milking stool at the eastern gable of the house called Carraig Dubh, Diarmuid O'Súilleabháin rolled a cigarette, tapped it on his knee and lit it as he watched the Mercedes make its ponderous approach. He was shaking his head in disbelief when it finally pulled to a halt at the end of the lane, impeded by a rusted iron gate that hung between two solid wooden posts.

The driver's door cracked open and a plump man in the uniform of a *Garda Síochána* emerged from the vehicle. Straightening up, he threw a quick glance towards the house then reached back into the car to withdraw a uniform cap that he placed fussily on his head. When it was fixed to his satisfaction, he opened the rear door with a painful creak of hinges and bent down as though to help someone else out.

Diarmuid sighed.

*Lá binn, lá searbh!* he muttered under his breath. *'Mallacht ort a chinneachain!'* One day good, one day bitter. A curse on you, owl destiny!

Turning his head, he spat into a clump of nettles flowering up at the side of the house. Beside him, a mongrel hound with grey hair around its muzzle sat up stiffly from where it had been lying. It glanced over at its master as though seeking a lead on how to respond to the visitors. Receiving no guidance, it growled and released a half-hearted bark.

*'Ab, dúin do chlob, a mbadra!'* Shut your mouth, dog! 'You're bit feckin' late to be getting all fierce on me now.'

He looked up at the sky where stained, grey cumulus was blowing in from the sea, spawning across the heavens like some massive, airborne fungus. Portions of the cloudbank struck the summit of Cnoc Daod, the rocky edifice that dominated the landscape and squeezed the thin strip of farmland between its extensive base and the waters of Cuan Baoi.

Diarmuid turned on his stool and blew cigarette smoke out in the direction of An t-Oileán Mór. Focusing on the island's flat capped Roan Inis rock and the bracing tang of salt in the fresh breeze up from the sea, he ignored the approaching clomp of heavy feet and the splash of muddy puddles. It was only when their shadows darkened the earth around him that he turned to acknowledge his visitors. Standing before him were the Garda sergeant and a fair-haired young boy of about seven or eight years of age.

'Hello, Diarmuid.'

*'Dia duit, a Phádraig,'* he answered.

'Don't be talking to me in that dead tongue, Diarmuid. English will do fine and it's well you know my name is Patrick.' He smiled. It was not a particularly friendly smile. 'But you can call me Sergeant.'

Diarmuid shrugged.

The Garda took off his hat and wiped a band of sweat from his forehead. 'Lovely day. Might have a mild winter of it yet.'

'Yerra, 'tis grand.'

'Would you be wondering why I'm here at all, Diarmuid?'

‘Why would I be wondering why you were here, Pádraig? Are ye not here to visit me? I know there’s been no complaints.’

The Garda flinched, annoyed by the repeated gaelicisation of his name.

‘That’s true. There’s been no complaint this time.’ He pulled out a handkerchief, emptied a nostril full of wet snot into it and stuffed it back into his trouser pocket. ‘I’m here because of the we’an.’

He angled his head towards the child who was standing quietly with his head down, staring fixedly at his shoes. There was a long silence and although Diarmuid had the impression that the Garda was awaiting some reaction, he was unsure what was expected of him.

‘Say Hello to your nephew, Diarmuid.’

Diarmuid was surprised but loath to give the sergeant any satisfaction. He absorbed the statement beneath a veneer of indifference as he studied the boy with new interest. There was a lot of his brother Séamus in him all right, he realised. He had the same angular face and nose, the same fair-coloured hair. Apart from that he was like any other child of his age. A bit skinny and in need of a haircut, but his clothes were new and recently ironed.

‘Is that right?’ he said simply. ‘Séamus’ boy.’

‘That’s right,’

‘Will Séamus not be a bit put out with you bringing his boy out here?’

‘Ach, I wouldn’t think so.’ He paused. ‘You see, the thing is, Diarmuid, your brother Séamus is dead.’

This time Diarmuid was unable to hide his reaction for the news hit him like the kick from a horse’s hoof. For several seconds, he stared at the policeman. Then his head filled with cotton wool and he felt himself slump back against the wall of the house.

The Garda made no move to approach or help him. The boy observed him with curiosity before quietly moving aside to where the dog was whining. Crouching down on one knee, he patted it on the head.

‘When?’ Diarmuid managed at last but he could hear his voice creaking with the effort.

‘About a week ago. One of the neighbours called over to their place and found the door wide open. Séamus was lying at the bottom of the stairs with the bedroom cupboard on top of him. It was a big thing, thick bog oak that weighed a tonne. ’Twould have taken two or three strong men to lift but it’s obvious he was trying to slide it down the stairs by himself. When he lost his footing, it fell and crushed him.’

Diarmuid tried to listen to what the Garda was saying but none of it seemed to be making any sense. It was as though he was listening to some garbled, unidentifiable tongue.

‘I’m sorry for your troubles, Diarmuid.’

‘No you’re not,’ he spat back.

‘No, I’m not,’ the sergeant admitted.

‘You’re the cause of most of my troubles, Pádraig. You and the rest of your bully boys in the *Gardaí*. Besides, you never even liked Séamus. You made his life a misery when he was a young fella.’

Diarmuid took a deep breath and left it out slowly. He was embarrassed, angry at himself for exposing such weakness in front of his old adversary yet, at the same time, surprised by the extent of the bitterness pouring up out of him. Some untapped well of despair had been lurking quietly beneath the surface all these years, he realised, a dormant spring of resentment to which he had been completely oblivious prior to the policeman’s visit.

He continued to fume in silence as he pulled his thoughts together. The sergeant did not deign to respond, diverting his attention to the boy, who was down on his knees playing with the dog. Delighted with the attention, the dog had discarded any sense of loyalty and transferred all allegiance to the stranger. It rolled onto its back and wriggled happily as the boy tickled its stomach.

‘Was the boy there?’

‘He was. Never left his father. We think he was there alone with the body for three or four days. The neighbour said he was holding his father’s hand when he found him.’

‘Jesus Christ!’ Diarmuid closed his eyes, an image of the child bent down over the body of his father forming, unbidden, in his mind. He shook his head to rid himself of the morbid scene. ‘Did you ask him what happened?’

‘We did. Ach, but he’s soft in the head. Didn’t understand a word we said to him, did you, son?’

They both glanced down to where the boy was absorbed in his play with the dog. He gave no indication of having heard what had just been said. There was something wrong, Diarmuid thought to himself, something unnatural about the way he just sat there obliviously as the two men discussed his father’s death.

‘Is it that he’s deaf?’

‘No. No, he’s not deaf. He’s just simple.’

‘So why’d you bring him here?’

‘His father is dead, Diarmuid. The nearest neighbour told us the mother disappeared years ago. They’ve no idea where she’s got to or even where she came from in the first place. You’re the closest living relation, in fact you’re the only living relation that we’re aware of.’

Realisation hit Diarmuid.

‘God above! You want me to take the little fella in, is that it? That’s fucking bollocks, Pádraig. I don’t know how to take care of a child. And this one obviously needs care.’

‘That’s all well and good, Diarmuid, but if you don’t take him in then he goes into state care and up for adoption. The boy needs a legal guardian. That’s the law.’

‘The law, the law! I don’t give tuppence for the law!’

‘Don’t I know it well, Diarmuid.’

They stood in silence, their history of conflict and mutual dislike clouding the air between them.

‘What’s his name?’

‘We don’t know his name. He hasn’t been able to tell us.’

‘Well, what age is he?’

‘We were hoping you could tell us. We don’t know anything about him.’

‘Sure how would I know! I haven’t seen Séamus in years. I didn’t know he’d come back to Beara.’ He shook his head and turned away, staring out to sea to conceal his despair. ‘Jesus Christ, I didn’t even know he had a son.’

‘Well, he did. Although it’s feckin’ obvious he didn’t bother fulfilling any of his responsibilities in that regard. Father Harrington and old Doctor Casey don’t know anything about the child and we couldn’t find any paperwork on him – no birth certificate, nothing. Apparently, your brother didn’t feel it was necessary to bother registering the birth.’ He scowled at Diarmuid. ‘A serious offence.’

He grunted and shifted the waistline of his trousers to accommodate his girth more comfortably.

‘It’s fierce annoying. I’m doing me best to fill out the report but I keep finding all these great big gaping holes where the facts should be.’ He paused and studied the boy, thoughtfully sucking his teeth. ‘Well, from the look of him I’d put him at about seven years old. What do you think?’

‘Jesus, Pádraig. Does it actually matter?’

‘We have to report all the facts, Diarmuid. In a case like this every statement has to have a confirmed origin, every piece of evidence has to have its own file and a number. We’re not in the dark ages any more. It’s the modern world. Everything in black and white, that’s the future.’

Diarmuid rolled his eyes. ‘Well, the future can feck off!’

Ignoring this outburst, the policeman unbuttoned his tunic pocket and pulled out a small notebook and a pencil. Licking the tip of the pencil, he placed the dampened nib on the paper, speaking the words out aloud as he wrote:

*Age of unknown child found at the residence of Séamus O' Sullivan – seven years.*

Holding it up in the light to compensate for his myopic vision, the Garda admired his handiwork. He clicked his tongue in satisfaction as he replaced the notebook and pencil, then from his side pocket withdrew a bulky envelope bearing the official stamp of the Department of Welfare. He handed them to Diarmuid.

'There you go! Them's the adoption consent papers. I'll leave the young fella with you and see how you go. If you don't want to keep him just sign these and drop them back at the station in town and we'll take care of the rest.' His smile was grim. 'Sure, you know where we are.'

Diarmuid's face remained expressionless and after a moment the sergeant shuffled impatiently. 'Well, I can't stay around here all day.'

'You're right, Pádraig. You'd better go.'

The Garda glared at him then turned and started back in the direction of his vehicle.

'*Slán abhaile.*' Safe home.

The sergeant didn't bother turning. 'Sorry Diarmuid. Don't understand that old rubbish.'

'*Gread leat mar sin, a phblicadh.*'

The policeman stiffened in mid-stride, threw an angry glance behind him then turned on his heel and continued on his way.

'You understood that, ye fecker!' muttered Diarmuid.

He watched the sergeant's waddling progress down the lane with a mixture of powerlessness and frustration, achieving only minor satisfaction at the sight of the plump policeman struggling to climb the flimsy gate. For a second it looked as though it might collapse beneath his bulk and crash to the ground. Unfortunately, it held and any hopes of petty retribution were dashed as the policeman got into his car and started the engine.

It took the departing Mercedes several attempts to reverse back out the narrow track, navigating around the tight corner in a series of awkward, jerking movements.

'*Cén breall!*' Diarmuid thought to himself. What a moron! What in God's name was he trying to prove, bringing such a cumbersome feckin' beast of a car into such a tiny road? It was surely a place of overwhelming egotism, Pádraig's modern world.

When the vehicle had finally disappeared from view, he breathed deeply and returned to his stool. Up on Cnoc Daod, the sunlight was playing along the hill's flanks, creating a myriad of changing patterns on the gigantic stone slabs.

*You see, the thing is, Diarmuid, your brother Séamus is dead.*

He felt empty suddenly, as though all substance, all those things that held him together inside had somehow been siphoned away. The policeman's words rattled around in his head like a stone in a tin can but he was unable to make sense of them, to absorb their truth and make it real.

He stood up. It was getting late and there was work to be done.

And then, of course, there was the child to take care of.

He turned to watch the boy, who was now chasing the dog around *An Párc Mór* - the wide field that spread around the front of the house. The dog was enjoying itself, barking, rolling on the ground, waiting for the boy to catch up and then sprinting away again before he could reach him. He was struck by how silent the boy was in his play. There were the usual sounds of physical exertion, the grunts and the exclamations, but there was no laughter, no expression of the normal carefree elation of child's play.

Diarmuid cursed and turned to spit into the nettles again.

'*Lá binn, lá searbh.*'

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For the remainder of the afternoon Diarmuid attacked the farm chores with rigorous intensity, pushing himself beyond the point of fatigue to drive all thought of his brother from his mind. He didn't doubt that reality would sink in eventually. Deep down, he understood that he was simply putting off the inevitable, putting the death of his brother *ar an méar fhada* – on the long finger.

He paused and looked out to sea again.

He would face up to it eventually, of course. In the meantime, it was just enough to be able to put his head down and lose himself in his work. Later he could deal with the guilt, the recriminations.

He stood up and stretched. He was a tall man without an inch of fat and still remarkably sprightly for his sixty-plus years. Nevertheless, his back ached and he was sweating heavily from the effort of chopping the fallen ash trees into a suitable size for firewood. The boy and the dog, meanwhile, continued their games in the fields around the house. The dog had managed to find a small ball and there were plenty of rabbits to chase through the briars and the withered, rust-coloured fern.

Despite himself, Diarmuid found that he was growing irritated by the dog's behaviour. He scowled as he observed it running around and fetching the ball like some spoilt city pup instead of the hard-working old farm dog it was supposed to be. He knew he had no valid reason to feel betrayed by the animal's fickle acceptance of the youngster; nevertheless, he did.

*Madra amaidach! Stupid dog!*

When he'd cut and stacked the wood and milked the cows and completed everything else that needed completing, the sun was starting to sink behind the hills. Exhausted, he stopped to rest and pulled out the makings of another cigarette at a stone wall to the west of the house, one of the few spots still touched by the setting sun. Leaning against the wall, he rolled a fresh smoke and watched the sun begin its slow descent behind the girth of Cnoc Daod, momentarily losing himself in the deepening shadows of its rugged surface.

After a while, he stood up again, ground the cigarette butt into the soil with his boot and walked around the yard looking for another chore to occupy his attention. Unable to find anything suitable in the yard, he turned his attention to the house.

The white-washed stone building was typical of most homes along the peninsula. Small but compact, it had two storeys, a grey slate roof, three north-facing windows on the top floor and two on the ground floor. A rectangular porch protruded from the front door, an extension onto the original building.

Diarmuid had lived in the house all his life, although it had originally been constructed by his father. He remembered it as a family home but now there was no family. His mother had died in the 1920s, his father ten years later. Now Séamus too was gone.

Over time, with the departure of his family, the house had lost its warmth, that intangible but perceptible sense of love and closeness that could soak into the walls of a building and make it something more. The memories and emotions had long since evaporated from those walls. The building was no longer a home but served a more straightforward function as a habitat, an austere residence in which he ate and slept and sheltered from the rain.

His brother Séamus had left the farm under trying circumstances, a year before his father had passed away. In his absence, and as the elder brother, ownership of the farm and the house had transferred to Diarmuid on the proviso that it would be shared with his brother should he ever return.

He hadn't.

Over the years, Diarmuid had made several structural improvements, including the construction of the porch, some updated plumbing and numerous repairs and replacements of the slate roof tiles. He'd also built a hay barn, and a stone milking shed that had cost him next to nothing apart from the investment of labour. In Beara, at least, there was no shortage of free stone.

He'd maintained the house to such exacting standards, in fact, that it currently required no major attention, certainly nothing that he could implement in the little time remaining before sunset.

As always, when he contemplated his home, his thoughts turned to his father. A true perfectionist, his father had spent a lot of time learning the requisite skills from renowned builders in the locality and had made sure he had all the necessary materials before putting their advice into practical application. The precision of his measurements was evident, not only in the exact alignment of the wooden rafters overhead but in the smooth straight lines of the walls. The resulting structure, firm and completely leak-proof, was testament to his craftsmanship and planning.

His father had also sought advice from the local *bean feasa* – the wise woman – to ensure it would be a lucky house. According to his father's version of events, the *bean feasa* had instructed him to remove his cap and throw it up into the air at the location where he'd intended to lay the foundations. If the cap landed there, she'd told him, it'd be an indication that the house did not impinge on any Sidhe path and would be safe from otherworldly intrusion. If the wind took his cap, however, he was warned to avoid it and lay the foundations where it eventually came to rest.

The cap had fallen straight to the ground.

His father's joke was that he'd made sure to follow these instructions on a windless day, demonstrating the practical spirituality one acquired over many years of dealing with the competing values of evolution and tradition, of new ways and old ways. Knowing his father as he did, however, Diarmuid had no doubt that had some luckless squall taken the cap, he would also have changed his plans with respect to the location.

Such respect for traditional considerations had been typical of his father. He was a man whose upbringing had been steeped in the lore of older generations, of local knowledge garnered over hundreds of years through observation and subtle refinement. His father had also lived through some difficult times and the kind of hardships that people of his own generation knew of through the talk of the *Seandaoine*, the old people, but had never – thank God – experienced themselves. He had survived a childhood rife with disease and malnutrition and his own parents had survived *An Gorta Mór* – that great famine the old people still spoke of fearfully in whispers.

His father had done his best to pass on his language, his belief systems and his knowledge to his sons. In this regard, his efforts with Diarmuid had not been as successful as he might have hoped. Although they had spoken Gaelic effortlessly in the home and had enjoyed the stories and tales well enough, he'd never really placed much value in the instructions and learnings those tales contained. Although the younger Séamus had loved the stories, Diarmuid had always felt they were a little irrelevant, a little backward, but was too afraid of hurting his father's feelings by saying so outright. During a visit to the hospital in Cork as a child when he'd received treatment for tuberculosis, Diarmuid had been enchanted by the bright lights of the city and ever since they'd had a hold on him. From that time on, nothing at home had ever been as good as the city. Not the language, the stories or the traditions.

Over the years, Diarmuid had come to re-evaluate and recognise the value of his father's teachings but by then, of course, the world had moved on. He'd often wondered how far Séamus would have been influenced by those instructions, for he'd taken to them with a lot more enthusiasm than Diarmuid. Now, of course, it was too late, and he would never have the chance to ask him. The last time he'd seen his brother had been at his father's funeral and even then they had barely spoken. Séamus had prepared the small gravestones that now marked both parents' graves. He'd selected a suitable flat rock down at the coast then carved the words of an old Gaelic poem into the gritty material and poured a glass of whiskey over the grave. Just as his father would have wanted.

Tradition had been fulfilled.

Diarmuid sighed.

And now it was upon him to ensure that tradition was followed once more. So that Séamus could rest in peace.

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As soon as the sun sank behind the hill, night descended upon them like a murder of crows. They retreated inside and Diarmuid laid a fire to ward off the chill: dried twigs for kindling, built up with scraps of dusty turf from the shed to the rear of the house. Within minutes, it was burning fiercely and he was able to throw on some larger sods.

For dinner, Diarmuid prepared a rabbit caught in a wire snare he'd laid earlier that morning in An Páirc Beag – the small field to the west of the house. He was pleased with his catch. He'd come across the rabbit path a week earlier and his snare had delivered dinner twice since then.

Once he'd skinned it, he butchered the animal, diced the meat and fried it in a pan with onions and melted butter. When it had all sizzled to a deep golden brown, he tossed the contents into a pot with some herbs, carrots and spuds then brought it to the boil. Afterwards, he left it bubble at a low temperature while he washed the knives in a bucket of water. Soon, the rich aroma of rabbit stew began to waft through the tiny kitchen.

He returned to the living room while the stew simmered, settled into the wooden rocking chair by the fireplace and poked absently at the embers with a long fire iron. The young fella, he noticed, had taken up position in the far corner of the room, by the door. He seemed to have accepted the fact that he was staying with Diarmuid without question but although he appeared content to sit there staring into space and fondling the dog's ears, Diarmuid could tell that the boy was alert and keeping a watch on him from the corner of his eye.

He studied the child for several minutes, struggling to associate his presence with the news of his brother's passing but unable to make it straight in his head. He was, he realised, at a loss as to what to do with the child. He had no experience with children and had no notion where to start. Rocking slowly in the chair, he lit his pipe with a twig from the fire and brooded in silence behind a cloud of tobacco smoke. The heat burned into his calves, relaxing the ache in his limbs.

He sighed.

He was tired. Too tired and too distressed to confront such issues effectively at the moment. It would be best, he decided, to simply ignore the child for the remainder of the night, to treat him as he would treat a foreign stranger to his house until he knew what to do with him. In the morning, when his head was clear, he would deal to it.

The decision gave him some respite. Although he acknowledged it for the temporary evasion it was, it served as a course of action – or inaction – for now. Pulling an old leather-bound book of poetry from the shelf behind him, he put on his reading glasses and started to read.

The turf burned low and even.

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When the stew was ready, Diarmuid filled two bowls and placed them on the table in the sitting room, with half a loaf of soda bread, a knob of butter and a clay pitcher of cold spring water. The boy's nose twitched as he eyed the stew bowl hungrily, but he remained by the corner.

'Food,' said Diarmuid. He gestured towards the table. 'We're aiting now.' He picked up a fork and mimed eating from the pot.

Cautiously, the boy approached and sat at the table on the side furthest from Diarmuid. Picking up his spoon, he ate slowly and although he was obviously ravenous he maintained a constant vigil on the older man's movements.

'So, is it true then? Are you my nephew?'

The boy glanced up and peered at him over the edge of his bowl, surprising Diarmuid, who'd expected him to shrink away as he'd done on every other occasion. This time, however, he returned Diarmuid's stare with an attentiveness that was as surprising as it was unsettling. Sitting

there, he realised with a start that there was intelligence in those eyes and it was not that the boy was simple, but that he simply had not been engaging.

He slumped back in his chair and, with a weary sigh, pushed the discovery to the back of his mind.

‘Tomorrow,’ he decided as he returned his attention to his meal. ‘I’ll deal to it tomorrow.’

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After dinner, Diarmuid made up a bed by the fire – a straw-filled mattress covered with a sheet and a pair of blankets. The boy was obviously exhausted for he climbed into the bed compliantly and pulled the blankets around him before turning away to the wall. Within seconds of lying down, he was fast asleep.

Diarmuid extinguished the lanterns then climbed upstairs to the bedroom where he undressed and crawled into his own bed. The day had finally caught up with him; he could feel its weight tugging down on him as he lay there. He smiled grimly. He had, at least, achieved his objective. He was now so physically exhausted he was unable to experience the pain of his brother’s demise.

Blowing out the candle, he pulled the night around him. Shortly before midnight he was fast asleep.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Cork City, 2008

Stepping out of McCarthy's pub and onto the windswept street was like stepping into a darkened freezer. Mos stood on the pavement as his eyes adjusted to the shadowed surroundings. He shivered, assailed by the dramatic drop in temperature and the glacial wind that sliced through his overcoat.

Despite the cold, the worst of the weather appeared to have passed. The wind was easing, dropping from a force eight to an occasional militant gust. The rain, in a display of uncharacteristic restraint, had softened to a mist-like drizzle. Of the earlier thunder and lightning there was no sign. The storm, it appeared, had simply worn itself out.

A movement blossomed in the corner of his eye and he turned to find Ailbhe, the girl from the pub, crouched in the shelter of a nearby doorway. Resting on one knee, she had her back at an angle to him, oblivious to his presence. He watched as she rummaged through her backpack, finally withdrawing a flat hat and some kind of oversized black poncho that she proceeded to slip over her head and wrap around herself.

*Christ! It's Mediterranean Fashion Week.*

*In down-town Cork.*

Mos' lip curled in disapproval. The chic, flimsy covering might have worked on some glitzy Continental boulevard but it was going to be hopelessly ineffectual against Irish rainfall.

He continued to watch as she stood up, slung the knapsack over her shoulder then pulled a cigarette and a lighter from her pocket. She made several attempts at lighting the cigarette but the flint produced nothing more than a rasping click. Exasperated, she flung it into a nearby litter bin.

Mos chose that moment to step forward and hold out his own lighter, a battered Zippo that had seen better days. Startled by his sudden appearance, she recoiled, then relaxed as she recognised him, although her mouth tightened perceptibly. She accepted the Zippo and lit her cigarette. The lighter was returned with an exhalation of blue smoke but with no expression of gratitude.

'You don't have much baggage for a traveller,' commented Mos.

'I travel light.'

'Fair enough.'

Mos bent into the breeze and lit his own cigarette in the nook of his cupped palms. When he looked up she was still standing there, studying a crumpled tourist map of the city.

'Which way you headed?' he asked.

She looked at him coldly. 'The Western Road. I have a hostel there.'

'I'm headed that way. Why don't you walk with me?' He pulled up the collar of his coat and glanced at the sky. 'Who knows. We might be lucky and see a cab we can flag down.'

'No thanks.' Her voice was polite but not particularly amicable. 'You'd offer little protection if we were attacked.' She turned him a sudden and decidedly aggressive glare. 'Unless I offered you as a potential sacrifice.'

'I could get some help while you held them off.'

There was a flicker in her eyes and for a moment he imagined he saw the trace of a grin then, belatedly, recognised it as a grimace. He gestured towards the map.

'At least you won't get lost.'

She thought about it for several seconds.

'All right,' she conceded finally with a conspicuous absence of enthusiasm. 'But I will not sleep with you.'

Mos, not usually a person easily surprised, stared at her in surprise.

‘What?’

‘I said I will not sleep with you.’ She observed him with a dispassionate expression. ‘I know how the male mind works. You shouldn’t have any unrealistic expectations.’

Mos laughed out loud, delighted by such outrageous bravado. He considered her as she stood there brazenly, exuding all the disdain of a Wall Street Banker at a hippy peace festival.

‘Fair enough. I’ll try to repress all expectations.’

Her mouth tightened again as she watched him deposit a beer bottle into the litter bin. ‘Come on, then,’ he called, as he started walking. ‘It’s this way.’

After some initial hesitation, she shook her head and followed. He paused, allowing her to catch up and march in step beside him. They continued for several hundred metres without speaking before she broke the silence.

‘Your home is on the Western Road?’

He shook his head.

‘I have a house by the university. My real home’s in a place called Beara. Down in West Cork. You probably wouldn’t know it.’

‘Oh, I know it all right.’

Mos glanced sideways at her, taken aback by the bitterness in her response. She lunged ahead abruptly, increasing her pace with long strides that ate up the distance. and he was obliged to stretch his own step to catch up with her. He studied her closely as he drew alongside.

‘So where do you live when you’re not chasing the sun?’

‘No particular place. I’ve stayed in Bucharest, off and on, for two years. I move around a lot for work.’ She drew a kick at the sodden remnants of a fast-food container and sent it spiralling several feet ahead of them. ‘It is my belief,’ she declared, ‘...that the action of travelling overrides the importance of the actual destination.’

‘I see. Well, that’s all very fuckin’ zen. What do you do to support this jet-setting lifestyle?’

‘I work in the circus industry.’

Mos halted in mid-stride and stared at her.

‘Fuck off! You work for a circus?’

Ailbhe too had drawn to a halt, frowning at his apparent scepticism. ‘Yes.’ Her voice was brittle.

‘Big tops and clowns and stuff?’

She shook her head angrily, drew herself upright. ‘I was Ailbhe the Magnificent, Hellion of the High Wire, Titan of the Trapeze.’

Producing a glittery business card out of the air, she handed it to Mos. He looked down at the silver embossed calligraphy. The words repeated exactly what she’d just said except that here, ‘Ailbhe’ was spelt ‘Ollva’. Suddenly, their earlier conversation made sense. When she’d introduced herself she had been using her stage name, a moniker that, due to his own background, he’d interpreted as ‘Ailbhe’.

‘You *was* Ailbhe the Magnificent?’

She gave him a haughty look. ‘I ceased my performance work two weeks ago. At present I’m ...’ she yawned. ‘... between careers. I was obliged to leave Bucharest in something of a rush.’

‘What was the hurry?’

‘A last-minute decision. I had to go to a funeral. That’s the reason I’m in Ireland.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry. Friend of yours?’

‘No. My father.’

‘Shit!’

‘That’s okay. We weren’t very close.’

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Despite the relatively early hour, the city was practically deserted. As they ambled through the lonely streets they encountered only but a single other hard-core pedestrian. The vast majority of the population, it seemed, had sensibly decided to jettison their social arrangements and remain at home.

Naturally, because they were actively seeking a taxi, there wasn't a single one to be found. Like the pavements, the roads were bereft of traffic and had taken on a desolate, almost abandoned appearance. The few vehicles that did intermittently appear sped by in a cloud of spray and disappeared back into the gloom without slowing.

Traversing the exposed length of Patrick's Bridge, they followed the curve of Patrick's Street down to the Grand Parade. By the time they reached the Washington Street intersection, the rain had started to fall again. Smattering at first, it surreptitiously grew to a light drizzle that abruptly exploded into a full-fledged downpour. Sheltering in the entrance to Saint Augustine's Church, they stared uneasily as curtains of rain swept down the street towards them, rippling in the orange gleam of streetlights like a parade of forlorn phantoms.

It soon became clear that the inundation was not going to ease and with no other viable alternative, they continued their journey. Exposed to the full force of the elements, they were thoroughly soaked within a minute. Cold and miserable, they took shelter once more at the first available refuge: the bright entrance of another pub. Momentarily dazzled by yellow light showering through the opaque glass panels and the muffled sound of laughter from within, they stood beneath the underhang of the illuminated doorway. Mos glanced at his companion, who nodded her head.

He pulled the door open and stepped inside.

The pub was markedly more upmarket than McCarthy's. The furniture and furnishings were new, the table surfaces well-polished and the bar taps gleaming in the glare of bright overhead lighting. A number of discreet speakers in the walls and ceiling, emitted soft, new-age music to the small crowd of well-heeled drinkers.

Despite the loud murmur of conversations, the pub was little more than half full, the patrons congregated mostly around the central bar. Mos selected a table immediately adjacent to a brick fireplace where a blazing coal fire sent waves of warm air into the room. Shedding their sodden outer layers, they placed them on the back of some chairs facing the flames. The rain had penetrated Ailbhe's poncho, soaking the jacket beneath and she removed this as well, hanging it over a second chair. Mos, noticeably drier due to the water-resistant material of his overcoat, left her and shouldered his way to the bar where he was caught the barman's attention. A few minutes later, he rejoined Ailbhe by the fire with two pints of stout. Placing both glasses on the table, he slid one across towards her, drew up a seat and sat down.

'So', he said. 'Tell me about your Da.'

Ailbhe arched one eyebrow. 'Not much for the small talk, are you?'

'Best to get straight to the heart of things, I reckon.'

'There's not that much to tell. He's quite dead.'

'You said he was being buried in Beara.'

'That's right. Near Na hAoraí.' She tapped the pint glass with the tip of her fingernail, producing a soft clicking noise that was barely audible above the chatter from the surrounding conversations. 'Apparently, he returned to Ireland five years ago and resettled in Na hAoraí. He used to like it there because he could look across the bay at the Iveragh Peninsula without ever having to step foot on it.' A somewhat reflective expression crossed her face. 'Or so I've been informed.'

'He was Irish?'

She nodded.

'His people were from the Iveragh Peninsula. He was desperate to leave as a child. He eventually got away when he was sixteen and ended up working on the Continent for several years. That's where he met my mother. And then ...'

Her voice trailed off.

‘And then ...?’ he prompted.

‘And then, there was me.’

This statement was delivered with a brief, cynical smile.

‘After that, he brought us back to live in Na hAoraí.’

‘Us? *You* lived in Na hAoraí?’

Her gaze had swung away to take in the surrounding tables. It took a leisurely moment before her attention returned to settle on him. He could not tell if this was an affectation, done intentionally to provoke him, or simply a personal characteristic.

‘We lived a few miles outside the village. Until I was six or seven. That was with my mother, mostly.’

Mos said nothing, imagining the kind of reception such a foreign-looking family would have received in rural, conservative, nineteen-sixties West Cork. It surely wouldn’t have been easy.

‘And yer Da?’

‘He was usually away for work on the Continent.’

‘Oh. A diplomat?’

For a moment she stared at him as though he’d spoken in a different language. Then she startled him by laughing out loud. It was a harsh, almost bitter laugh and she stopped suddenly as though she’d caught herself revealing something she shouldn’t have.

‘No, he wasn’t. My father was the most undiplomatic person you could possibly meet. He was a ringmaster. That’s how he met my mother. She was part of an Iranian acrobatic troupe touring around Europe in the early eighties. He was quite famous back then actually. He had his ringmaster duties, of course, but he also had a remarkably powerful voice. People would travel hundreds of miles to see him perform an act where he’d smash wine glasses by raising the pitch of his voice.’

‘Uh-huh.’

Some trace of the scepticism he felt must have been evident in his voice for she leaned forward so abruptly that their faces were less than an inch apart. ‘You don’t believe me,’ she accused.

Mos drew back, extending the distance between them. Her brown eyes, he noticed, had an unusually dark hue that gave her gaze an unsettling intensity.

‘I’ve known you for less than an hour. So far you’ve given me a false name, you’ve almost got me involved in a bar-brawl, you’ve told me you’re a circus performer and now you’re claiming to have a ring-master father who breaks glasses by singing at them.’ He shrugged. ‘Yerra, I dunno. Sure, maybe it’s true.’

‘You asked,’ she said. ‘I answered. Either it’s true or it isn’t.’

‘Shit, girl, you’re in Ireland now. Over here, it is *and* it isn’t.’

A strange expression spread over her face and she stood up so quickly that for a moment, he thought he’d pushed her too far and that she’d decided to leave. Instead, she simply turned, pushed her chair two or three feet back from the table and pressed down on its arms as though testing its strength. In one swift movement, she rolled forwards onto the chair, taking her weight on the arms and raising both legs off the floor until they were stretched high and straight, vertical above her body.

Within the pub, all conversation ceased as seasoned drinkers stopped in mid-sip to stare at this unusual development. The soft, synthesised music in the background seemed to highlight the eerie silence as, arms straining, Ailbhe held her position for another ten seconds. Finally, with another seamless movement, she allowed her legs to drop to the floor and, at the last moment, flipped up backwards from the chair to land on her feet with the elegant poise of a professional gymnast.

The room burst into applause and for several minutes she was surrounded by people slapping her on the back and urging her to accept a drink. When the clamour finally settled and her

newfound fans had drifted reluctantly back to neglected friends and discarded conversations, she returned to her seat, smirked smugly at Mos, and swallowed the contents of her beer glass with a single gulp.

‘No comment?’ she asked.

He returned her gaze.

‘It’s still raining,’ he said.

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‘So, let’s talk about you.’

Mos looked across the table, gave a cynical smile but said nothing.

‘If I heard correctly earlier, you’re some kind of historian or archaeologist.’

For a moment it looked as though he was going to remain silent. Then he shrugged, as though conceding some undefined point. ‘From a professional perspective, I guess I’m both.’

‘You don’t look like an historian.’

‘So I’m told.’

‘Shouldn’t you have white hair or a beard or something? How do you explain that youthful composure to your colleagues?’

‘Hallucinogenic drugs. Fetish sex.’

‘Sex with history?’

‘Plenty of sex in history. Otherwise we wouldn’t be here today.’

She smiled thinly at that.

‘I see. Do you go and dig up ruins then?’

‘Not really. I mostly specialise in finding sites where the ruins have disappeared from sight and memory, places or structures that have slipped through the cracks of recorded history.’ He lifted his glass and peered distractedly at it. ‘Or which were never recorded in the first place.’

‘How very mysterious. Is there some clever process for that then?’

He made a dismissive gesture, as though to say it was perfectly obvious.

‘Research mostly. I do a lot of research. Ancient manuscripts, council land archives, old maps, reference books, topographical investigations, local folklore. If I find a reference to anything interesting, I follow it up and search some more. Once I’ve identified a promising location, I’ll carry out an initial site analysis. If it looks as though it has some historical potential, then I apply for funding or contact the real archaeologists who move in to do the excavation.’

‘You make much money from that?’

‘I make a living from that.’

She nodded but it seemed to him as though she was losing interest in the topic. She grew quiet and he watched her gaze drift across the room to a door with a sign marked ‘beer garden’.

Lifting the knapsack up onto her knee, she pulled out a transparent plastic bag and held it discretely so that he could see the contents; a packet of rollies, some tobacco and a handful of grass.

‘I’m bored with talk. Do you smoke?’

‘Sure. I just don’t inhale.’

She looked at him blankly.

‘Bill Clinton’s immortal line on cannabis. The equivalent of “I drank but I didn’t swallow”.’

‘I ate but I didn’t digest.’

He laughed but she shook her head. She had already tired of the game.

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The beer garden consisted of a walled-in courtyard about thirty-six metres square. A raised balcony with a wide, sloping awning ran the length of three of the walls. The fourth had a poorly-painted depiction of a beach scene that was strikingly out of place in the waterlogged

enclosure. The centre of the courtyard was taken up by a bleak sea of concrete with a single break in its uniform, grey surface: a tiny island of mildewed grass, so small it looked as though someone had sneezed.

They stood beneath the awning by a wooden cask that had been converted into a rough table and stared out at the rainwater pooling around two sunken drains. Ailbhe sprinkled a mixture of tobacco and cannabis onto a narrow strip of cigarette paper, rolled it into an almost flawless cylinder and ran her tongue along the edge to seal it perfectly. She lit the joint, raised it to her lips and took a shallow toke before passing it to Mos. He'd just started to draw on it himself when she turned and unexpectedly addressed him.

'Why history?'

He exhaled slowly.

'What do you mean?'

'Why did you get into history? Why do you find it so interesting? It's all old stuff, isn't it? Things from long ago. Things that are done. Finished.'

He regarded her for several seconds, uncomprehending.

'History's never finished. Everything that we are, everything we say or do, is predicated by the genes or the actions of the people who preceded us.'

She grimaced. 'That's a depressing thought.'

'I wouldn't worry about it. We've just as much potential to fuck things up for our own descendants as they did.'

'That reassures me no end.' She stared into her beer glass without speaking, swirling the residue of foam around the thick translucent base. She had a small scar, he realised. One he hadn't noticed earlier. A white, half-moon crescent on her cheek, just below her left eye.

'Don't take it personally, but studying history strikes me as a bit of an indulgence. I can't see how it could be a priority when we've got so many urgent issues to deal with in the present day.'

'Most people don't,' he conceded. 'But I think you'll find most of today's issues are a result of yesterday's actions. Studying history helps us to understand what happened back then. That's critical because if we don't, we'll never be able to resolve the impact those issues are having on us in the present. And we'll be doomed to repeat the same old mistakes that ...'

He broke off as he felt the first buzz of the drug warming up the inside of his head. He handed the roach back to Ailbhe.

'The problem is that, as a society, we have a child's understanding of the passage of time. Most individuals see it as some kind of linear line with a defined past, a present and a future and no interaction between any of them.'

'Whereas, there is,' she prompted wryly.

'Of course there is. There isn't any line. All of humanity's actions – present, past and future – are intrinsically linked.'

He shrugged.

'But that's human nature. In some ways we haven't really evolved much since the apes came down from the trees and started scratching their arse on two legs rather than on all fours.'

He swirled the dregs of his stout, watching the black liquid merge with the brown-bubbled froth of the head.

'Our preoccupations are still dominated by the immediacy of our senses, the things that impact on us directly in the present as opposed to indirect impacts from the past or the future. The indirect impacts, of course, are the ones that are hardest to conceptualise. That's why we struggle to work strategically on future impacts like resource scarcity or climate change. As for impacts from the past, they're often hard to recognise even though they tend to dominate our lives.'

'Pleeease,' she said with a sceptical drawl. 'That is such a cop-out!'

'What?' He stared at her.

‘Believing that events of the past have such an impact on us. I’d like to think *I’m* responsible for my own actions, not my parents or my grandparents or some great unknown ancestor I’ve never even heard of.’

‘Sure you would. And you are to an extent. But past events have also impacted on you. You’re just not aware of it.’

He leaned forwards onto the barrel. ‘There’s a sliding scale of historical impact. Some – usually the more recent events in the local area – affect you on a personal, immediate level. Others affect you at a more limited, more generic level. These are the events that tend to occur a much longer time ago or off in some distant region. Take the Russian Revolution or the Fall of Rome, for example. Both occurred several hundred years ago and both were geographically distant from where you or your parents were born. Nevertheless, they’ve had an influence on you in that the first dictated current geo-politics in the world you live in and the second had a strong influence on what language you and I are speaking today.’

Ailbhe seemed to lose interest. She turned away and stared out at the dripping darkness for over a minute. As the silence stretched and intensified, she seemed to fade into the gloom as shadows from the surrounding walls peeled away and clustered about her.

‘Wouldn’t it be wonderful,’ she said suddenly, ‘to be able to start afresh? To start on a clean slate and ...’

Intrigued, Mos observed her covertly and wondered where she was going to go with this fresh digression. Instead of continuing, however, she reached over and stubbed out the joint in a cheap plastic ashtray that already bore the scars and scorch marks of a thousand other cigarettes.

‘Fuck it!’ she declared. ‘I believe I need another drink.’

‘Good idea.’ He held out his empty glass. ‘Your round.’

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The conversation declined shortly after she returned with the second round of drinks. The joint had not mellowed them so much as accentuated the fatigue that weighed them both down. Even Ailbhe’s obvious enjoyment of intellectual debate couldn’t save them. She appeared to have hit some transparent wall – her engaging sense of argument had faded, her repartee dwindled to silence.

They made a desultory effort to pick up from their earlier discussion but neither really had their heart in it. Within a short space of time, a curtain of gloom settled down between them and the exchange dwindled into silence. The beer glasses, half-full mere moments before, were now, most definitely, half-empty.

It was Mos who suggested calling it a night but he knew that it was a mutual intention, one that Ailbhe herself would probably have suggested a few moments later. Leaving the glasses on the table, they retrieved their coats and returned once more onto the unrelenting chill of the city streets.

Exposed to the full brunt of the wind and the rain, the walk from the pub to the university gates seemed to last an age whereas, in reality, it probably took less than fifteen minutes. Mos felt both exhaustion and relief when the university’s high, cast-iron gates finally loomed into view.

‘This is where we part ways,’ he said. ‘I live just up there.’ He pointed towards his house.

Ailbhe stood, swaying wearily in the wind but saying nothing, a jaded – almost numbed – expression across her features. Since their earlier discussion in the beer garden, she’d retreated further into herself, barely responding to his attempts at conversation during the walk to the gates. Her shoulders were slumped, her fiery temperament completely doused by the unrelenting downpour.

Mos gestured vaguely towards the Western Road, barely visible through the driving rain. ‘If you keep following the street in that direction, you’ll reach your hostel in about five minutes.’

Rain ran slick down the side of her face, slipping inside the collar of the ridiculous poncho.

For an instant, some faint charitable impulse prompted him to invite her back to the house for a hot drink and some respite from the rain but he immediately suppressed it. Despite his best intentions, such invitations, at such a time, had ramifications he just didn't have the energy or inclination to cope with. Right there and then, he wanted nothing more than to be alone, to crawl into the warm seclusion of his bed, pull the duvet up around him and hold the world at bay for a few blessed hours.

He stood in awkward silence, eager to get away but, at the same time, feeling guilty for abandoning her to make her own way back to her hostel. Fortunately, she saved him the embarrassment by taking the initiative.

'Thanks for the drink.'

Without another word, she turned and started to walk away, following the footpath towards the gloom on the Western Road.

A twinge of remorse rippled through his stomach.

'Hang on!'

She stopped, and looked back over her shoulder at him.

He moved towards her, undoing the buttons of his coat. When he was standing in front of her he shuffled it from his shoulders and held it out.

She looked at the coat and then she looked at him.

'Take it. That wrap just isn't going to hack it in the Irish climate.'

She did not respond for a moment or two, just stood there with a blank expression on her face. He became conscious of the weight of the coat growing heavier in his hand as the rain pounded down upon him.

'Any time today would be good. I'm getting soaked here.'

Finally she reached across and took it in both hands then wrapped it around her so that it hung over both shoulders. She gave a strained smile, as though at a loss to know how to respond to the unanticipated display of gallantry.

'Thank you,' she said stiffly.

He nodded but said nothing.

Turning away, he started up the rise of Donovan's Road. After several steps he paused, prompted by some undefined instinct to turn and look back. He caught a final glimpse of her just as she rounded the corner to the Western Road; a solitary figure in an oversized overcoat fading into a bleak curtain of cold, grey rain.

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There was a comforting finality to the sound of the front door slamming shut behind him. Its solid echo followed Mos up the hall and into the living room, where he stripped out of his clothes and let them fall in a wet pile on the floor. Without a coat, the short walk from the university gates had been more than sufficient to get thoroughly drenched and he was shivering violently with the cold.

He turned up the central heating then switched on the lights but the subdued illumination did little to improve the dreary interior. The room looked just as depressing as when he had left it earlier that evening.

He padded down the hall to the bathroom where he spent over twenty minutes in the shower with the water on full power and at high temperature. The continuous stream of hot water scraped the night away from him. When he emerged, the bathroom was clouded with steam but his skin was warm and he felt revived by the heat.

Retrieving a pair of track pants, a T-shirt and a woollen jumper from his bedroom, he dressed and returned to the kitchen. There, he put the kettle on and swallowed two paracetamol with a full glass of water. He smiled thinly at the irony that, now he was home, he no longer felt any sense of fatigue.

The living room had warmed up by the time he returned with a mug of hot chocolate. On a whim, he switched on the radio and tuned through several different channels but was unable to find anything that suited his mood. Switching it off again, he glanced half-heartedly through his own music collection but once again, found nothing there that he felt like listening to.

He settled into an armchair by the heater with the hot chocolate, sipping it as silence engulfed the room. The sweetness of the beverage did little to counteract the deep sense of dissatisfaction that had overtaken him. He'd had no real expectations for the evening and yet he couldn't shake the sense that it had terminated much more poorly than it should have – a subdued, disappointing, and rain soaked anti-climax.

It came as a surprise when a mental image of Ailbhe formed in his head and he winced at the pang of guilt it provoked. Hardly his finest hour, deserting her to her own devices on the stormy streets of Cork.

*Ab, sod it! Sometimes there's only room in the life raft for one.*

*And, God knows, I'm no Samaritan.*

A strange one, though. Carting some serious baggage, he suspected, but undeniably attractive. She drew the eye.

He'd noticed how people watched her when she passed, intrigued – as he had been – by the exotic features, the flamboyant dress sense and the assertive charisma she projected before her.

He mulled over that for a minute or two. It was true she'd conveyed the impression of haughty resilience but over the course of the night, when fatigue and rain had worn her down, the lofty eccentricity had given way to a frayed fragility that she'd been at pains to conceal.

The cell phone on the table beside the armchair suddenly pealed into life, scattering all Mos' thoughts to the shadowed corners of the room. He glanced at the display screen as he picked it up, surprised to discover that it was well past one in the morning.

'Hello?'

'Muiris. It's me.' Hegarty's unique, haughty intonation was instantly identifiable. 'Where have you been? I've been ringing all night.'

'Desmond,' he said. He was surprised at how deflated his own voice sounded.

'Muiris, forgive me for calling so late but you left without giving me an answer. Are you going to take up that offer?'

Mos felt his head spin in the aftermath of alcohol, regrets, cannabis, fatigue and strange accents and for a moment could barely make sense of where he was. The sensation faded, leaving him with a hazy recollection of Hegarty's proposal back in McCarthy's Bar.

'Can you remind me what that was about again?'

'Jesus Christ, Muiris. The meeting with the Opus Foundation.'

'Aaah! Right. They're the boys who want a briefing on the Fenian Cycle.'

'That's right.'

'Hmm.' He rubbed his chin in thought.

'They found an artefact, didn't they?'

'Yes, well they have but—'

'But all they'd actually want me to do would be to turn up, answer a few questions then bugger off again.'

'Yes, that's pretty much it.'

'Oh, what the fuck,' he said. 'That doesn't seem too difficult. I'll probably regret this in the morning but, all right, I'll do it.'

There was an enormous exhalation of relief at the other end of the line.

'That's excellent, Muiris. Excellent. I'm sure you won't regret it.'

Mos unconsciously pictured Hegarty rubbing his hands together in glee.

'Not so fast. There are two conditions.'

'Oh.' Hegarty's voice suddenly lost all trace of warmth. 'What's that?'

‘The first is payment in cash on completion of the briefing. The amount discussed in McCarthy’s.’

‘Okay.’ Hegarty seemed relieved. ‘Okay, I can organise that. And the second?’

‘Stop fucking calling me.’

There was a brief silence at the other end of the line. When Hegarty’s response finally came, his voice was strained. ‘All right. But one last thing, though. Can you meet them tomorrow morning? Eleven o’clock.’

‘That’s hardly much notice.’

‘They’re working to a tight schedule, Muiris. They’re not in Cork for long and they want the information as soon as possible.’

‘Okay. I suppose for that kind of money I can afford to get up early.’

‘Brilliant! Do you have a pen and a piece of paper handy?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Okay. It’s in Shandon House. Fifth floor.’

Hegarty quickly reeled off an address in the centre of town. Mos automatically wrote it down although he already knew the building well.

‘Right! The person to ask for is David Coffey. I’ve put together a brief synopsis of the Fenian Cycle and sent it to him so they have a basic idea of what it all entails. I’ll fax you a copy of that once I’ve hung up. We can catch up tomorrow after you’ve had your little chat.’ The phone went quiet for several seconds. ‘That’s it then. Is there anything else?’

‘Desmond, you are aware that I despise you, aren’t you?’

The silence over the line stretched out for several seconds.

‘Yes, Muiris,’ he responded at last. ‘Yes, I suppose I am. But to be honest I simply don’t care. Sleep well.’

He hung up.

Mos replaced the mobile in its charger cradle. He sat and listened as the silence was obliterated by a fresh fusillade of hailstones pelting against the window.