

**DONNELLY**

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**THE SACRED BAND SAGA**

## Chapter One

### One Man's Fool

I endlessly wonder about the nature of a reflection. To see your copy standing back at you, staring at you, judging you. How many look back with pride? With satisfaction? How many run hot with scorn, vexation, empathy even? I cannot be the only one who sees only indifference, eyes cold as basalt, a demeanour that befits neither friend nor foe. Surely not? My life has been punctuated with too many thrills, too many knocks, and too many complexities to be presented back with such lassitude. The cell they have me in right now contains nothing as fine as an honest mirror of course; an unstable detainee cannot be trusted with a fragile sheet of glass. I look at a single shard of battered metal, just to the left of the steel door. I have been looking at it ever since the first rays of dawn broke through the bars of the letterbox-sized window a good two feet above my head. I have spent just one night here, and the walls are already creeping in on me, claustrophobic as a confessional. One more day, I attempt to convince myself. One more day I could last in this wretched confinement, no, maybe another full night at a pinch. That would bring me to Friday, and the police officers will be strung out by the week's debauchery – the drunks, the assaults, the rapes. All far more serious criminal offences than whatever they may think they are holding against me. They'll let me go, a nineteen-year-old from Dublin who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. No more evidence; thus, no more patience.

I am bleeding, a modest trickle from my nose. Never had any intention of going quietly when they arrived at my flat in Dublin, a cobbler's box

of a living space perched just above a pub on Great George Street. The instant I opened the door and squared up against the puffed black vests and a dizzying array of utilities strapped around the waist, my reaction was instant and foolish. The officer with oddly gentle chestnut eyes and neatly trimmed reddish beard barely got as far as asking my name before he received my first punch. It was a stalled swing – a moment before my knuckles made contact, the flash of rationality bolted into my brain, its impact just enough to violently snap the man’s jaw over his right shoulder, his heavy boots remaining firmly rooted to the spot. His companion responded with a punch of his own. A more gruff and portly lad, with small crooked teeth and traces of whiskey on his breath, he was large enough to pin me down and spit profanity directly into my ear as he contorted my arms behind my back. I sat subdued in the rear seat of their car, silent and stubborn, for the full twenty-minute ride back to the station. I was offered a tissue upon arrival; I refused. ‘Fine. Bleed to death,’ the solemn and gaunt prison officer proclaimed, as he slammed the cell door shut. I won’t, I muttered to myself, because I don’t bleed. Donnellys *never* bleed, I managed to convince myself for all of an hour, the warm iron-rich tang reaching the corner of my mouth. I dared a quick swipe with my sleeve... still it flowed. I staunched it eventually, by lying down on the plinth of a bed until it dried and cracked. It itched, though, a nuanced but persistent little reminder that I had been struck, and it was an itch that deserved to be scratched.

I’m letting it run again, that sobering reminder, and waiting to see if my distorted reflection shifts one way or the other. For a second, the needle of emotion judders just off its median. I feel it through the pulse of blue flame that arcs between my fingers, my heart pounds

and every organ in the body momentarily shakes, and then in a snap, it has passed.

I breathe shallowly once more, so shallow that the breeze outside drowns it out. The trap on the cell door slot springs open with a crisp ring. I am told I have a visitor.



Never have I seen shoes so polished, enough to permit a clear reflection, and having already tired of gazing at my image, I forcibly tilt my head back. It certainly helps with stemming the stream of blood, but my eyes are now fixed on his. My guest has a certain outward serenity to him. I believe I can see through this, for behind that cut crystal gaze I see another world, both beguiling and cautionary. A world spread deeper and broader than the crust of what most come to recognise. His navy blue suit is cut and pressed with authority, and gleaming gold cufflinks appear to bear a symbol I cannot define – an emblem or family crest possibly? There’s a hint of cologne, not overpowering. An expert shave, and a pencil-thin parting of wavy grey hair just off centre. He smiles, and you would be forgiven if you thought it was the first time he had ever done so, the creases in his cheeks freshly made. He asks my warden for privacy in the interrogation room; a request met with an incredulous look. He asks again, his expression reverting to still water, the tone slightly graver. The warden reluctantly agrees, a parting sneer in my direction as the door closes. I now immediately think of control, of *power*. My visitor is *known* here, or if not, his connections are. Military, perhaps? Far from unusual, given the times. More inconspicuous maybe? Secret Service?

A Whitehall type from London, MI5, and all that goes with the shadowy upper echelons within a government. I lower my head at the very notion, a globule of blood splashes on the table in front of me, and a linen handkerchief comes into view. I catch a glimpse of a silver signet ring on his little finger.

‘You may take it. I have plenty,’ my visitor reassures me. He slides the opposing chair out, settles with a relieved exhalation, and loosens his lime-coloured tie. Propped beside him is a polished walking cane, puzzling for a middle-aged man, seemingly without limp or injury. ‘Go on, Mr Donnelly, I’d prefer not to hold our conversation while you convey the image of a common thug.’ He pushed the handkerchief nearer.

‘I ain’t no common thug, sir,’ I reply without thought, but take the handkerchief and dab my nose lightly.

‘Of course not.’ The visitor leans forward, hands locking firmly together. ‘But a criminal, surely?’ he smirks.

‘I ain’t no criminal, either!’ Again, I spit with no reserve. I shrink back into my chair, vulnerable.

‘So, I am greeting you here in prison for no apparent reason whatsoever?’ he counters. ‘Not a common thug, not a criminal. So... what are you?’

‘You tell me.’ I feign confidence, although my stomach is churning.

'Ah, let me guess. A *freedom fighter*?' the visitor replies while seeming to look right through me. 'You realise all this acrimony that has plagued these islands is soon to come to an end, don't you? The British and Irish governments are both in sound agreement.'

'I bloody knew it! You're one of those stinkin' secret service types, ain't ya?' I fire back, the gift of the handkerchief thrown back in bravado. 'Well, I'm tellin' ya, and your self-righteous government pricks, I wasn't there! I don't give a damn about your so-called witnesses and what double-crossing arsehole might have ratted out other members while spewin' passages of their Green Book under duress or whatever tactics you've used...' I take to my feet, my hands are not restrained this time, and my ebullience fuels flickers of blue fire around my wrists that I fail to notice as my tirade continues. 'Speak to my landlord, Liam, I was in my flat that June. Never left.' The pressure valve that had been sealed since arrest had suddenly blown apart, two years' worth of repression expelled in moments. A litany of regret and rage that may as well have been a lifetime sentence played out in a courtroom. Months of mendacity surrounding lone and isolated acts now weakening, buckling against a fiercer, raw honesty I'd not yet truly processed. That needle of emotion, now more like a seismograph sitting upon the epicentre of an earthquake, measuring ten on the Richter scale. My pupils flare blue; my visitor appears unflinching, as my clumsy confession unravels and seals my fate. I kick my chair back. If this man wants all my blood, he can have it. He'll need to fight me for it. My game might be up, but I have a trick or two up my sleeve for all these bastards. The wisp of blue flame becomes elongated, a spear taller than I, with a tip that pierces the bulb hanging low above both our heads. I move to strike, a final stand as shards of shattered glass and sparking electrics rain down. A death blow? Aim

for the exposed sternum of my guest? I would then become a *murderer*, but what did it matter now? My weaponised arm appears detached from my mind, all impulse thrusting forward like a rabid dog. Yet I become a mutt that is instantly put down, out of its misery, humanely. I fly back hard against the wall behind, a shower of blue cinders scattered in all directions, my only wild card trumped by something equally supernatural. *Impossible*. I try to gather my fragmented thoughts in a daze.

The commotion catches the ear of the warden. His firm thumps rattle the door. 'Mr Worthington? Is everything all right in there, sir?' he asks. I scan the corners of the ceiling for cameras, recorders – anything that might have exposed me. Strangely, nothing. 'May I come in?' the warden asks, the door starting to creak ajar ever so slightly.

'That won't be necessary, Officer,' my visitor reassures, rushing to block his entry. 'All under control. Just got a slight temper, this one.' He conjures a believable chuckle. Only when the threat of intrusion has passed do I see the implement of my undoing, a sword, splendid and shimmering white, grasped firmly in the man's hand, its point aimed directly at me. Mr Worthington stands confidently, waiting for the warden's footsteps to echo away before lowering the blade, its burning steel miraculously transforming back into a wooden cane. He casually leans upon it while he returns to his seat. 'Now, you were saying, Mr Donnelly, you weren't *where*, exactly?'

My brain fog lifts, and sheepishly I return my overturned chair to the table. My nose begins to dribble blood again, and I cannot summon the gumption to pick up the handkerchief. I simply sit in shock. 'Manchester,' I croak after what feels like an eternity.

'Right, Manchester. Of course not. Terrible, terrible scene. Why in heavens would anyone think you were there?' Mr Worthington had composed himself again, with the same serenity that greeted me.

'Some folk do,' I answer.

'Say you were. What would that have made you?' Worthington's question invites suspicion, but with both our cards now on the table, and a mutual accord was reached.

'I... I don't know. A fool?' I confess.

'Ah, a fool, you say?' Worthington's sly grin returns. From his suit jacket, he pulls out a monochrome photograph, date-stamped in thick, red ink. 23 September 1993. The image is blurry, taken in haste and in motion, possibly. Bold blotches of grey stand in contrast to its bleaker dark tones, with a dot of glowing light standing out against a heat map drained of its colour. 'One man's fool is another man's saint, Mr Donnelly. Now, let me ask you again.'



## Chapter Two

### I do not bleed

Father Harris had a unique gift. His sermons could boom loud enough to split mortar and glass, yet oddly carry no weight. His voice, like an organ key stuck on a single note, was never once cunning enough to tease contemplation or interest, and certainly could not stir one's soul. Draped in sacerdotal black, his folds of fat spilt over the choking white collar, frequently running with rivulets of sweat. He was awkwardly proportioned, with slender arms and torso but a bulging gut, making it hard to determine where his thighs began. After every fifth or sixth word, there would be an audible gurgle from his throat, the start of a smoker's coughing fit that he just managed to suppress. The manner of his walk down the nave come the end of each service, mechanical but over-rehearsed, had me conjure images of an ominous, dark cloud that produced neither rain nor thunder. A drift of malcontent and shadow would first cast itself over the choir, I being the only one of the eleven boys feisty enough to look him in the eye, then make its way towards the congregation, my mother and father keen to be the first to seize his pious hand, but always beaten to it by the smarmy smiles of the Carstairs family. If there was a genuine fear of God, Mauve Carstairs, without question, considered herself its one and only messenger, her two daughters Erin and Cara cut as small pieces from the same sacred cloth. The Carstairs matriarch would hold Father Harris's attention for almost as long as she would hold my father's, my own naïve mother born without the necessary eyes in the back of her head. Always the last two surnames standing to attention in Saint Patrick's Church, perhaps seeking forgiveness, permission, or both.

‘Attendance is strong, Father. You must be so proud,’ Mauve began to gush. ‘These are such uncertain times for us all, our community. We need your guidance now more than ever. Too many lost sheep, Father.’ She followed the priest down the nave, clinging to his arm like an insecure toddler. ‘I fear so much for the next generation. What do they hope to achieve in a world so, so... *misguided*?’ She revelled in turning back towards my mother, a contemptuous look of judgement with enough force for her to cower and remain a good two steps behind. I could hear little Erin and Cara squeak and giggle between themselves, exchanging whispers no doubt fed by rumours from our school playground, the Donnelly family a seemingly endless mine of solid gossip for God’s golden girls. Each morning when I attended registration with a black eye, swollen lip, or mottled cheek, the same squeaks would start. ‘Bully. Lout. Cheap and common.’ I got used to the presumptions, then I began to believe them. Finally, aged ten years, I came to own them. ‘But still, much to look forward to come next weekend and Easter? You must be welcoming a weekend free of confessions?’ They had reached the door, my mother readying her umbrella for the drizzle outside, my father conveniently sliding his way behind Mauve, fists tight with impatience.

‘Ah, well, dear Mrs Carstairs, while a chance to spare our community their woe of personal sin, we shall not forget that it has spread far and wide across our fair emerald isle, and I shall pray for every soul in Ireland come Friday,’ Father Harris answered. We in the choir still stood to attention, tiny white toy soldiers so eagerly awaiting dismissal that their breaths became trapped. The order wasn’t coming; we knew it wasn’t time yet. ‘I trust I can expect you and Mr Carstairs, along with your sweet children, at the Good Friday service?’ A tickle from a stubby finger came the way of the youngest, Cara.

‘Me and my girls, yes, of course, Father. My husband, Neil? Only the Lord knows.’ Mauve gave a false and clumsy chuckle, my father an uneasy sigh of relief. ‘A busy man in London now, but cannot lie. The coin is good.’

‘True, fortune favours the bold, Mrs Carstairs. Enid, I expect to see the fair name of Donnelly present?’ Father Harris’s tone deepened as he addressed my mother. She fussed nervously with the umbrella button, replying only with a forlorn nod. ‘Excellent. Another full house, as our Lord expects on the most holy of days. Now please, do hurry. This rain looks to be hardening.’ My father instinctively chaperoned Mauve and her daughters, leaving my mother momentarily alone with Harris. Her pastel pink umbrella bloomed in time to provide a shroud of secrecy for the pair, and I saw her lean in and mutter something quick and impulsive, her face as fragile as cracked china. Harris shot a look back directly towards me, one lonely toy soldier still risking observation, cracked a smile and reassured my mother with a pat on her shoulder. She gave me a token glance of appreciation and then braved the rainfall. The door was sealed with a firm clunk, Father Harris’s frame suddenly free of burdens and mobile enough to nearly trot back towards the altar. He loosened his collar, and I joined the ensemble in their toe gazing as he announced our dismissal. Dismissal for all but one, Sean Grady, a lanky peach-haired boy from the Portobello area, not three doors down from me. He was so often chosen. He was the favourite.



Come six o'clock that evening, I was still chasing the final few peas around the dinner plate, partially daydreaming out of the streaky window when I spotted Sean Grady walking back home, head aloft but in tunnel vision, close to passing his own front door, such was the potency of his trance. I almost called to my mother to go fetch him, but breaking her gentle rocking in and out of cigarette fog at the opposite end of the table would have proven just as cumbrous. From the moment dinner table was laid she would sit silently, stubbing out butt after butt, staring at both the clock and the empty chair where my father would sit. As the minutes ticked by the twitch in her right hand would become worse, and the more it twitched, the tougher the night would be, I'd come to learn.

The rain had relented come sundown, and my father's growling Vauxhall Corsa squealed to a halt outside, its headlights flooding our lounge with an amber glow. I heard Mrs Carstairs' delirious cackle echoing around the room, silhouettes of the pair dancing upon the wall, mocking my mother into paralysis. My father would howl in delight, a whiskey-warped wolf that soon became lame once he tripped over the doorstep and collapsed into the pot plants. Profanity followed, and then the sound of clay cracking and soil kicked high in rage. Mauve Carstairs' shadow faded as it always did, custodian of my father's car keys, just sober enough to navigate her way back down along the canal. Our front door would creak open, alcohol fumes lacing my father's every groan. It was then, and only then, that the once timid mouse of a mother became a lioness, wailing like a banshee and raining weak slaps and frail tears on him. His rebuke was swift, her throat seized and her head slammed harshly against the wall. One hard strike across her face would usually not suffice to still her

screams; a second would stun her to silence, and a third would bring her crashing to the floor.

Why on this occasion I chose to intervene I'll never be sure. Perhaps the sight of Sean walking with that oh-so-telling limp and spasm, or simply a surge I felt that convinced me this time, this time I could win. A potent combination saw me throw all five and a half stone of gangly ginger-haired bodyweight between them, immediately hammered down by one of my father's more brutal punches.

'Marcus! No! Not Iain!' I recall my mother yelling. The back of my head throbbed, and my eyes welled. I knew her pleas for restraint were hopeless, tepid, as she so often was. I prepared myself for another blow, and it came, this time from a sharp kick to the ribs that snatched my breath away. My father was in the grip of a haze, not intoxicated enough to tire but tipped to the point beyond reason – *he don't damn bleed*. Mother withdrew to the corner, still wailing, while I crawled towards the kitchen. I heard my father's belt loosen, the crack of its leather licking the balustrades. The opening wallop caught my bottom, a stinging but bearable pain. The follow-through split the skin right between my shoulder blades – for that I cried out at a pitch I never knew I had. A flicker of confidence flashed in me once more, an electric pulse difficult to distinguish from the pain and the adrenalin. My blazing eyes were burning my own tears away, a cleansing fire that spread down through my chest and arms. I twisted around to face my father's third strike with his belt. The brown leather strap was set ablaze by a peculiar blue flame that circled my wrist. The burn caused my father to shriek, drop the cindered belt, and stamp on it furiously as if it were a live snake.

'Freckin'... little... bastard!' Father bared his crooked teeth in fury, and threw a finishing punch at me. Still the blue fire held firm – he thumped concrete. He winced, rubbing his knuckles. The colour drained from his face when I stood, a shimmering ring of sapphire encircling me. We exchanged bemused looks. My heart was racing. Whatever shield I had managed to conjure seemed to feed off my own fear. 'Devil. Devil's work, be this!' Father's tongue tripped over his words, and he pointed a trembling finger of judgement at me as he fled outside spewing blasphemy and uttering poorly remembered prayers. My mother's eyes pooled, the light from the blue fire capturing them, bringing them to life at first in wonder, then only fear.



The bruises on Sean Grady's arms and chest had ripened overnight; all the choir could see them as we changed into our robes for Monday's practice. I had barely slept myself, my mind a whirl, picking apart and studying each and every thought. Where was my father right now? He hadn't returned last night. My mother barely said a word to me when she dropped me off at church, likely too preoccupied with hiding her own bruises with caked-on make-up. She only briefly acknowledged Father Harris at the gate, coyly hiding her face before hurrying across the road to the local shops.

I was transfixed by my own hands, turning them over again and again, waiting for that same blue spark to appear. I flapped them frantically, tried to get angry, and even replicated a gas heating advert from the television. This was clearly not as simple as snapping one's fingers. The

priest's appearance at the foot of the altar was enough to make Grady's lower lip tremble. Harris cast a single glance at the tall boy before catching me waving my hands as if numb, trapped in my own private world. He grunted my name disapprovingly, and cleared that phlegm-ridden throat of his before finishing with 'I shall see you afterwards, young man.' The mere words stoked panic in Sean. He bolted for the back rooms, leaving the rest of the choir stunned. I didn't ask for permission. I followed him, and found him sobbing in the men's lavatory, curled up like a scared animal trying to play dead. I asked him about his bruises; he would not reply. I asked him about his parents; he would not reply. I asked him about Father Harris; he froze. I reached out and touched his waist. His white robes were soaked, and a foul smell of urine filled the air.

'Ewww! Grady's wet himself,' came a churlish taunt from behind. Erin Carstairs blocked the doorway, a wicked grin stretching wider across her face. Her sister Cara trotted to her side, mimicking her disgust. Two evil dolls, cackling, and scheming.

'Away with you, Erin! Leave us alone,' I shouted. 'What you two even doin' here anyway?'

'We said that to your daddy last night when he came to our house,' Erin sneered. 'He said you'd been really naughty. Said you were a *little devil*.' She followed that with a sinister snicker. 'They're going to expel you from the choir, Donnelly.'

'Yeah, you're in so much trouble,' her little sister chimed in support, the duo twiddling their pigtails with childish innocence. Both refused

to move, Erin obstinately putting a polished black-sandaled foot forward, protruding jaw narrowing her lips, freckly face puffed red. 'Get out of the way, Erin!'

'Make me!' The elder Carstairs' initial swagger broke once she caught a hint of blue in my pupils. Her proud posture slipped, taking an inch or more off her towering height, and I watched her neat knee-high socks fly backwards and her chubby frame slide across the tiled floor. A spark of blue found its way onto Cara's blouse. It ignited a stray strand of that pigtailed hair, and she ran screaming to the ladies' room opposite. I looked back at my hands. No sooner had it arrived, the fire had gone.



My mother was begging Father Harris, a conduit to the good Lord to spare her wretched son. Mauve Carstairs' face twisted and churned with the fury of smelted metal, a fragile daughter under each arm. 'Heresy, Father! Desecration of our Lord's name and all this community has come to learn. There is no place for them, Father. None!' I heard her demand. My father had quietly skulked inside the church, drink still mottling his complexion, but sober enough to place himself between the quarrelling women. 'So it goes, Father, the boy's own flesh and blood shared with me last night that the lad is mindless. Untameable as the wind. Any wonder? Look at this pale excuse of a mother! She's never been right, Father, never right in the head. Illness of the mind, we all say. Now, the curse has spread to her own!' Mauve thrust her way forward, mildly restrained by my father, mildly. I had



vague memories of my mother's moments of frenzy, of delirium, but never like this. Her attention towards Father Harris had dissipated; she now was on all fours reaching up for the cross, a heavenly salvation. I was a burden, an insult. The very words I knew both she and my father so often thought were now engraved in the harshest reality.

'Marcus. Please, take Enid home. Let her find some comfort and peace for now,' Harris instructed my father. He asked about me, much to Mauve's annoyance. 'Leave Iain in my and the Lord's care tonight. I will ensure he is looked after until morning.' At this, Mrs Carstairs appeared satisfied, ushering her girls out with my father and weeping mother behind. The remaining choir was sent home, even the ashen face of Sean Grady, the only one who turned his head to look at me as Father Harris sealed the church. Why I crept out from behind the safety of the pew I don't know. There was only a ray of stained glass light between myself and Father Harris, his white collar tugged loose again, his focus wholly and unswervingly on me.



I could fight him off; I knew I could. But I hesitated at first, turned, and ran. His greasy arm reached out and snatched my wrist, his other wrapped around my torso like elastic. I squirmed, enough to wriggle through his grip and find my footing, my burst of speed strong enough to push Father Harris over onto his stomach, my gown ripped from his grasp. In my haste, I had unwittingly narrowed my escape options, left only with the sanctuary of the confessional booth. I bolted straight for it and slammed the door right in the priest's flaring face. Its hinges

rattled, and I prayed for flame and waved my hands manically for a response. The lower panel of the door was split by a firm kick. Still no flame. A final shoulder charge from Father Harris, and it was thrown open, my wrists seized.

‘Oh, indeed. That harlot Mauve told me all about you, Master Donnelly,’ Father Harris snorted, spittle dribbling from the corner of his mouth. ‘Yes! Your own father punished you, and often punishes you... as evil should be punished. But, like the spawn of Hell, you don’t bleed. Barely a scratch come sunrise. Appalling. Unholy!’ His usual gravelly monotone was pierced by high notes of elation. Pleasure awoke in his expression, fuelled further when I managed to wrestle a hand free and claw across his cheek. He seized it back. ‘Fight me. Try. Try, little devil, just like they all do at first.’ Those words brought the image of Sean Grady’s pale and frightened face to the fore of my mind. My imprisoned hands began to burn, yet still, Father Harris held on. But slowly, his apparent ecstasy turned to consternation, unnerved by the flash of bright blue in my hazel eyes. I had prayed for flame, that same circle of protection, but instead, I got a spear. Brilliant and bold, it sliced the air between me and my oppressor. The priest let out a yelp and relinquished his grip, enabling me to stab cleanly below his right lung. I yelled defiantly as his pot belly tumbled backwards, gasping for breath. I remained motionless for a time, spear still shining, eyeing Father Harris as he slunk back towards his pulpit, a trail of warm blood marking his progress. ‘Heavenly Father, curse this child! He is without faith, without cause in your land. There is no salvation for him,’ he wheezed out, a single hand aloft.

I wanted to finish him off; perhaps I should have done so. But for the first time, I felt a strange sense of complete calm, of control. His fate

was of no importance to me, nor was any of theirs. For I knew it to be true. *I do not bleed.*

## Chapter Three

### The Rejection from Family

Come midnight, I would find myself peeking through the lace curtains. A single ochre square of light sat alone in a row of black brick. Its haze remained, often until the earliest hours of the morning, before flicking out. I forced my eyelids apart to watch it, fighting off fatigue. I had to know. Was my mother alone again? Was it safe to cross the street, knock on my home door, and dare ask? There were many days when no car pulled up outside. In the past three months, Sean and I had counted only two sightings of my father, both at weekends, and neither for more than the time it took for a kettle to boil.

‘Maybe tomorrow?’ Sean would say. ‘Your mam would likely be home on Sundays now, free of the church?’ He sucked on a sickly orange lollypop.

‘She doesn’t want to see me, Sean. She don’t want to see nobody. Other than my dad,’ I’d sigh back. Since the incident with Father Harris, the road that separated the Gradys’ home from mine might as well have been the wall of Berlin. That first night, I ran with terror fuelling my feet. I thumped relentlessly on my own door. It was raining, cold and bitter. It finally creaked open, caught by its chain, and I realised then I was too late. The priest had called my mother, the whole saga laid bare, every word another hammer blow to her fragile heart. She could take no more. If faith had abandoned her, what was left for her to guide a child through life? The door slammed, its force rattling my bones. My shock was broken by Sean’s soft call from across the street, his family offering shelter for the night. That night became

a week; the week became a month. Mrs Grady was a tubby woman with a warm grin that used to puff her cheeks rosy red, rarely revealing her misshapen teeth. Her dresses were always floral, and several sizes too big, and her shoes never seemed to fit correctly. I always noticed how both she and Mr Grady would perch on the pews towards the back of the congregation, she grasping a dainty leather handbag that looked several generations old, he forever looking at his knees and coughing conveniently whenever a hymn was to be sung. In the presence of Father Harris, both gave the impression of a loving and tight family unit. I sensed the denial in Mrs Grady's eyes whenever the priest placed his arm around Sean's shoulders. Mr Grady was suddenly more focused than at any moment during the service.

'A voice like an angel, this one, Nelly. You must be so honoured,' Father Harris would acknowledge. Mrs Grady's cheeks puffed proudly. 'And Adrian, so good to see you more frequently during these troubled times.' Mr Grady would snort, glance at his watch, and summon Sean with a snap of his fingers if the Carstairs had not already vied for the priest's attention. Those were, of course, the more fortunate times for Sean, whisked home in a heartbeat. Before my own encounter with Father Harris, I had noticed Mr Grady appear less often, always with an excuse of work or occasional illness. Rumours had spread through the same loose Carstairs lips of infidelity on Adrian's side, perhaps to deflect from Mauve's own transgressions with my father, who did a far better job of remaining concealed. There was also a stoicism from Mrs Grady for which my mother could only pray. I had asked Sean about his father once, perhaps hoping for ammunition in an argument with my own parents to free me from the torturous choir. He responded vaguely, something about his dad's disillusionment with sermons of peace and prosperity, of hope and judgement in the name of the

Almighty. To that I could relate, and even overheard the rumblings of a row between his parents one night - biting comments about justice, rebellion, and oppression. These same feisty flare ups we'd all started to become accustomed, everywhere from on the radio or television, to corner shops and school playgrounds.

Saturday evenings always meant One and One dinners for the Gradys – the kitchen filled with the savoury scent of battered fish and salty chips. A break from the Friday tradition of our neighbours across the Irish Sea. I asked innocently the reason for the shift, with a tepid recollection of the consumption of fish on Fridays, in keeping with the Church and crucifixion. Before Mrs Grady could shovel some chips onto my plate, Mr Grady grumbled, 'We ain't British, lad.' His face would sink behind a newspaper, and on its banner, I could count seven symmetrical stars aligned astronomically, framed in crisp blue. Adrian would reveal himself only once his full plate was gauchely placed down in front of him by Nelly, his cigarette would be stubbed out with a sneer, and the newspaper paused until the plate was clean. The kitchen was then off limits until Mr Grady had retired for the night.

'You sure you won't try? They'll likely be in,' Sean encouraged again, while we sat in front of the television come six. I remember the carpet in their front room being coarse and itchy.

'You getting tired of me?' I snipped back. Sean gave me a look of concern and shook his head in his usual timid manner. 'Nah, she knows where to find me, not like I've moved across the Atlantic or anything.' I felt angry again, that hint of rage that somehow still burnt deep inside, rising to the surface, exposed for all to witness. Rare in the presence of Sean, but perhaps because I had come to know of his

own horrors first hand it was enough to bring my fury to boil. I blinked away the streaks of blue that formed in my irises before he noticed. I had not relived the conjured flame that sprung from my defensive hands that single time in the church, but I felt it flickering beneath the skin. Whenever my parents were mentioned, or any snippet of chat relating to Saint Patrick's or a return to the choir, it was triggered like a defence, my own unique immunity. My wrists turned cold, fingers coiled, chest constricted. My mind would try to trick me, tease me into letting go, and dare me to repeat my attack on Father Harris all over again. I was coming to realise that the calm I felt was drawn not from the actual display of strength, but from the quiet recognition that I could and would not be touched, never again. So many sheep bleating for salvation from God, but only I had been gifted with a taste of power, and it tasted good. 'Your birthday. Mam and Dad got anything planned?' I changed the subject quickly. 'It's next week.'

'Don't think so. I'll get a cake from Mam like always from O'Brien's Bakery down the road and an offer to go rifle shooting from Dad,' Sean replied.

'Rifle shooting?' At ten years old?' I puzzled aloud. Sean simply shrugged, admitting it to be a sort of rite of passage. 'I got two pound coins... bought myself two Cadbury Flakes and a Turkish delight.' I suddenly felt both childish and callow.

'No lollipops?' Sean playfully exposed his bright orange tongue. 'No lollipops,' I chuckled. The front cover of the *Radio Times* stared at me from the wonky coffee table by Mr Grady's armchair. I leant over to grab it once I saw the striking figure of the White Witch adorning it. 'Wanted a copy of this.'

'The *Radio Times*, like? Why?'

'No, you daft idiot. *Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Only copy is at school, and always on loan. My parents never listened.' I flicked over the first few pages, eager to see how Aslan was set to be portrayed in live action for the first time. I stroked the pages featuring shots of his mane as if it were the real thing.

'We don't have a copy, either.' Sean pulled another two lollipops from his pocket. I accepted the raspberry-flavoured one. 'Dad don't like it.'

'Eh? Why? It's about Christ, ain't it?'

'Doesn't care. Wants me to read Joyce instead, not magical nonsense about witches and wizards and shite like that.' Sean lowered his voice, profanity kept out of earshot. He pointed to a brick of a book poised on the edge of the sofa, a scruffy bookmark poking out and only an inch deep into the tome. 'Can't say I'm following it. Penned by an Irishman though, that's all that matters.'

'C.S Lewis was born Irish,' I retorted.

'*Northern* Irish,' came an unexpectedly barbed response from Sean, sucking hard on the tangy orange stick, as if breath itself depended on it. I was prepared to counter and defend my retreat into worlds of fantasy when the tone of the news broadcast shifted. The presenters stuttered, complexions paling, a commotion overheard in the background. We both shuffled closer to the pixelated screen. I heard clips of dialogue not intended to be audible – something about the



British Government. Sean's frosty manner thawed into humour as the television camera jolted around amid the ruckus. 'Wonder if that's us?'

'Us? On the BBC?' I queried, ear now pressed against the screen.

'As in the Irish. Y'know... our Freedom Movement? You must know about that?' Sean slouched back against the sofa cushions.

'Course I know,' I spat back, hoping my friend wouldn't enquire much beyond the basics. Two islands at war over their right to rule, anything further would have stumped me, and this crass carpet might as well have swallowed me if I'd been asked to pick a side. 'Wait, what's Section Twenty-Eight?' I blurted.

'Section *what*? Hell if I know.' Sean turned down the corner of his mouth and crunched the remaining fragments of his lolly. The awkward broadcast continued, the presenters increasingly apologetic. A quick flash of a symbol caught my eye, blurred by the sudden motion of the camera. I recognised it, a memory from a trip to Dublin not a year or so ago – a bright shade of pink, a triangle, etched on the glass of a bar together with vibrant rainbow colours. I asked my parents about it, the vivid explosion of colour appealing to my tendency for escapism – where there's a rainbow, there will be a pot of gold and a leprechaun. 'We'll be rich, Mam!' I remember shouting, chasing my own fortune across the busy street. I was stopped by my father, given a stern warning: *Never in there, boy*. One of the few occasions both he and my mother were in fervent agreement. I watched my fortune wrenched from me with a firm grip, and I stopped believing in the tale. Whether it was the resurfacing of that cruel memory, or the snapshot glimpse of the televised intruder itself, I wasn't sure, but my innate fire

burnt again that night, singing my insides with every twist and turn I made on my tiny camping bed, the squeaks of its frame nearly waking Sean. My mother's window cast an amber glow, like a postage stamp on my forehead, a most unpleasant sign of my rejection from family.

## Chapter Four

### The Plough and the Stars

I had taken to counting the years come each autumn. I loved the colours, the rich chestnuts, maples, and golds, offering a welcome sense of warmth. Nights would draw in, the Grady family knitting closer together with each passing week around the crackling fireplace. Sean and I would spend many an hour lying in front of it after school, heads locked at the ear, staring at the creamy swirls of the Aertex ceiling from opposing perspectives. The world would be put right, favourite songs would be challenged and debated, futures proposed... or sometimes, just how much we despised English classes and how our teacher, Miss Moody, would so often live up to her name, and never seemed to find a pair of shoes that didn't squeak. One time, with a spontaneous chuckle, Sean bolted up, rubbing his right cheek. 'Hey!' he blurted, met with my innocent, freckled face. 'Are you... *shaving?*'

'What? No!' I felt the underside of my jaw.

'Maybe you should. That felt like sandpaper!' Sean leant closer and inspected, turning timid when I returned the favour. Not a whisker to be found. 'Dad can probably teach you, shaves with a real blade, and all.'

'Err... ok, thanks,' I replied, all too familiar now with the growing distance between Sean and his father. The rifle shooting retreats had come to an abrupt end last year, whether at the request of Mrs Grady or due to Sean's lack of interest and talent, I was never sure. The opportunities to get down to the nearby rifle range curtailed,

weekends saw Mr Grady slip away early at first light on Saturdays, a brief peck on Mrs Grady's lips sufficing until Monday mornings, when he would return to her same, expressionless face. While we would regularly be spared church, I would shudder inside, the thought that such a tight family unit was unravelling in front of me, a safety net fraying, and I was to blame. I'd come to learn that Mr Grady admired an intrepid soul, headstrong and resolute, ambitious and unashamedly masculine. A true patriarch, he sought an heir in his family. His son would try, oh how he'd try, from football to athletics, wheezing until blotchy red, forever chasing the boys at the head of the pack, his frail frame daring to lift off the grass like an empty crisp packet caught in a breeze and knees so bony and unadjusted to winter's chill they would tap together faster than Morse code. And here was the Donnelly boy, the usurper, with genes in sharp contrast – taller, faster, stronger – *more*. I was daring, less inhibited, nearly audacious in my questioning, no matter the subject of discussion at the dinner table each night. Once I called Mr Grady out from behind his square shield of newspapers. 'That's *The Plough*, right?' and gave a nod to the blue banner punctuated with stars. Mrs Grady paused, a chunk of potato hovering below her chin, and darted a glance at her husband. 'See it most nights, my parents always called it the *Big Dipper*...' I felt on trial as Mr Grady lowered his guard and looked me up and down. 'They're... they're the same thing, right?' I choked out, promptly returning to the few burnt chips I had left. Sean kept his head low, his peach fringe now acting as the perfect curtain to obscure any anxious appearance.

'Aye, they are, lad,' came Mr Grady's solemn reply. A fresh cigarette was pulled from his shirt pocket, much to the disdain of Mrs Grady as the click of a lighter sounded. 'If you want to know its true meaning,

though, read *Sean O'Casey*, our lad's namesake.' He finished with a sharp suck and a belch of smoke. 'Always follow the stars, m'lad.'

'Adrian!' Mrs Grady snipped. 'Not at the table, please.' I couldn't determine whether it was the impertinence of the cigarette or Mr Grady's cryptic answer that spurred her. I'd certainly not heard of the referenced author, nor was I aware that my closest friend was named after him. As Mr Grady continued and before I could follow through with any further line of questioning, the talk was shut down by a crooked slice of apple pie shoved in front of each of us. Sean and I both picked at the pieces of overcooked fruit, and I blinked several times to rid my eyes of the irksome blue flashes.



It was at the cinema in late September that a harsh truth would cut through us both - many a harsh truth. Sean and I were pressed shoulder to shoulder in the faded grandeur of the Apollo, more accustomed to bingo nights than film screenings now, but a special privilege was given to cater to the phenomenal success of *Jurassic Park* that year. We'd convinced Mrs Grady that the material was suitable for those under sixteen, and that many of our friends had practically begged us to attend despite it being a school night – a complete lie of course, but Mrs Grady clearly took comfort in the thought her son had the resemblance of a social life. We skulked inconspicuously behind a group of familiar faces, pretty girls from our year with clumsily applied lipstick and mascara, giggling at the banalities concerning equally pretty and popular boys, and which one might lose their virginity first. I

confess to smiling when my name was mentioned by Sally Fielding, a popular brunette with a fierce attitude and an enviably narrow waist. Sean elbowed me, teasing, suggested I reveal myself before the trailers finished, then romantically switch seats with Jessica Blake so both of us could become knights in shining armour when the grizzly moments of the film came – a comforting arm around a midriff, a manly chest to bury a face into the instant a tyrannosaurus roared, that sort of thing. I mumbled a rejection of the plan, perspiring at the realisation that being close to Sean was becoming far more satisfying than any woman might be. My thoughts duelled: passion over decency, happiness over moral duty, a surge of conflicting emotions, enough to twist my stomach and grind my teeth down to stubs. True to expectation, the girls shrieked at all the right moments, from ripples in cups of water to severed limbs of goats. Sean huffed at the missed opportunity.

We'd lingered after the closing credits, waiting for our peers to leave. I was fully expecting an earful from Sean. I toyed with the nuclear option of my unequivocal confession, the weight that could be lifted from me but placed upon my dearest friend. A chance for him perhaps, I remember thinking. For what father would want a homosexual for a son, and what better leverage for Sean to use against me when vying for his own father's affections? For me, another casting out, homeless and forgotten, a part of me beginning to accept that was my destiny, and the sooner I accepted the path, the better we'd all be. This drama might well have unfolded had it not been for the sight of Mrs Grady huddled in the arms of her hairdresser-turned-confidante, Wendy Molyneaux, right on the corner of their street. 'Nelly, stop this now. There must be an explanation... Adrian is a good man and would never look to put you and your boy in

harm's way.' Sean and I both heard Wendy soothe his mother's weeping.

'The McGlinchey name hangs forever over us, I tell you, Wendy!' Mrs Grady's remorse carried on the wind. 'He's going with 'em! I can't stop him. Wherever the blood flows, so shall he. It will come straight back to us. We'll never be safe, not now.' Sean began to inch closer, wanting to console his mother. I grabbed his arm before we were spotted. He squirmed, prying himself free. Then I spotted the same khaki-coloured truck sitting ominously down the nearby side road. We'd both seen it before, military looking, scarred and covered in canvas. Mr Grady would always explain that it parked some distance away from the family home, as if his wife was born ignorant. Perhaps a shred of sense and responsibility from the man who so often had sucked his entire family into a whirlpool of despair, torn between creed and kin. The engine rumbled into life, and a tarry plume of smoke obscured the seven small stars crudely etched on its rear bumper. The rear canvas flap was rolled up neatly, revealing space to spare inside, and not another soul was to be seen.

'Follow the stars,' I said.



I knew Sean would require little convincing. This was a chance to fearlessly square up to his father and lay to rest every image of failure burnt into his memory. He ran a pasty finger along the gleaming jet edge of one of the rifles propped up inside, mouth open, but making

no sound. We felt every jagged pothole, each sudden brake, all sharp swerves and curse words spat by the driver at plodding motorists. 'They're in a hurry,' I whispered. Sean remained captivated by the arsenal of firepower surrounding us. 'Heading north, to the border most probably.' I shunted my way over to the edge, pulled free a knot, and peered out from beneath the canvas, a graffiti-splashed wall rushing past, leaving blurred visions of green, white, and orange. The brakes squealed. The high pitch of the driver's window being lowered threw me back to Sean's side in panic, my heavier frame shunting his right into the ivy-green bulb of a rocket. Both our faces blanched as its stalk toppled and rattled its way towards the front. Instructions were barked firmly and with urgency by an unknown voice outside the vehicle, together with a more jovial address to Mr Grady: 'Welcome to the Bandit Country, dear Adrian.' Mr Grady snorted approval. The truck had sprung to life for what seemed like only seconds before a melee of shouts and screams struck our ears. The rapid stomping of boots outside, the whirl of helicopter blades high above, and the shriek of machine gun fire reverberated all around our tarpaulin haven.

Sean buried his face into my back and let out a wail, our heads both wrapped in our arms. Slivers of bright sunlight began to poke through the canvas as stray bullets rained down from the skies. 'We can't stay here, Iain,' Sean cried. 'We've got to get to my dad. He's out there somewhere.' An unfamiliar, thunderous voice sounded from outside. Adrian was being instructed to get one of the RPGs from the rear. Our cover would soon be blown. 'Dad. Dad... we're in here...' I clamped my hand over Sean's trembling lips, pulling him down beside me as the rear flap flew open and brought with it the acrid scent of burning metal. Mr Grady fumbled for one of the rockets. I gripped Sean in a



vice-like hold in the far corner, shielded by the shadows. Grady seized one of the stalks, took a bullet to the forearm, and spun around violently, a puff of red lingering where he once stood. There was no holding Sean now. He wriggled free of me and scabbled towards the opening, his shouts drowned by relentless gunfire. I followed, my eyes flashing vibrant blue, flames surging over every knuckle. The silhouette of the helicopter blotted out the sun, shrugging off the sniper fire from the ground like flies from a horse. Sean had found his father's embrace. Mr Grady lay stunned and bleeding, but conscious, cradling his son while uttering prayer verse after prayer verse.

The hot red glow of the helicopter's guns pulsed brighter, its deadly volley aimed directly at us three, deflected by a sea of blue fire conjured by my own hand in a surge of visceral strength I'd not dared feel since my odious encounter with Father Harris, this time channelled with the unique purpose of protection. Sean and Mr Grady had rolled away blindly, accepting their fate. When they dared turn back, the helicopter was billowing smoke from its tail, listing awkwardly from side to side, a wounded animal retreating to lower ground. I wanted to finish it, silence its blades with a spear of blue-flamed rage, but my heart raced ahead of me, freezing every muscle to stone. I stood statuesque, Grady quivering at my feet. A saviour, God-like and untouchable, an indestructible blue phoenix rising from the ash.

## Chapter Five

### The Crest and the Nadir

‘It was banned, you know,’ Sean muttered into the tome. He took the tentative steps of an infant, intermittently twisting his shoulders to slot neatly between gaps in the crowd. ‘I don’t see why, like. It’s mostly just two lads moaning about their day.’ A lapse in concentration resulted in a bump on his back and a brief apology. ‘My dad never mentioned anything about the Jews. We supposed to be angry with them too?’

‘What? Why?’ I found some free space within the inner circle of the crowd; a greying gentleman stood on a wobbly plinth at its centre, his copy of *Ulysses* split more evenly than Sean’s. He hooked a finger around his collar, cleared his throat with a rumble, and silently mouthed a few words in preparation. All had an eye on the ashen skies above, a few drops of summer rain just starting to land, the local landlords already popping up parasols in welcoming anticipation. ‘The old fella here might tell you.’ I pointed. ‘Seems like he’s more into the novel than you are. I don’t think he’ll be taking questions, mind.’ I shot a playful wink. Sean gave a defiant grunt, undeterred, and forced himself to flick forward several pages. I’d been blessed with a growth spurt since the autumn of the previous year, and what was once peach fuzz was nearly a full amber mane along my jawline. My voice had deepened to a tone nearly unrecognisable from Mr Grady’s when answering the telephone. Sean remained in my shadow, pale as a glass of milk, and just as slender. While the bravery of Newry Road had sparked hope in Mr Grady that his progeny had begun to show some spit and grit, I had again drawn the sun away. I deflected Adrian’s

attention frequently; for every modicum of praise, each smug smile or chummy chortle among his renegade friends, I would bring in Sean, praise his intellect, his fervour, and his wise mind. Mr Grady was undoubtedly proud of his son, but remained in the mood of war, and war was won by slow and steady grind, by soldiers spilling blood, not by academics spouting words. The tradition of Bloomsday was a rare erudite exception, Mrs Grady insistent, clinging to the hope that her husband might have the venom of conflict drawn out through a celebration of Irish culture. The recent funeral of the revered McGlinchey bolstered that hope, but as I was eager to remind my dearest friend Sean, like the Hydras of Greek myth, a head struck clean off usually only leads to two more springing up in its place. I believe the reference was lost on him.

A question was inadvertently answered, however, as the greying man began his Joyce-lauding speech with a jovial warning that some lines of text might not find favour with all ears. No, we will not be hearing those today. Nelly Grady breathed a sigh of relief alongside Wendy Molyneaux, her port-coloured cheeks creasing in reply. Sean heard the word ‘masturbation’ combined with a smirk and giggle of disappointment between the two women. Suddenly, Sean’s eyes widened, and he frantically turned page after page. As the recital commenced, bombastic yet somehow dreary, my attention drifted. Mr Grady, clearly of similar mind, casually propped himself up against a lamp post, thumbing through *The Irish Post*, its cover framing a stately shot of a local representative whose name I struggle to recall, the article given modest headline space. The supporting text, however, was clear as cut glass, and radiated a prism of colour. It portrayed a politician, so familiar with the works of Joyce, linked to a proposal for some universal bill of rights and campaign for homosexual reform. By

this point, I squinted, shuffling past a few engaged bystanders, their applause punctuating each pause in the greying man's performance. Words of tolerance and dignity jarred with freedom of religion and faith, progress and tradition, the crest and the nadir within society. 'You bored as well, lad?' Mr Grady caught me unawares, suddenly within feet of me. 'Here, take it. Nothin' of use in there, anyway. Same old shite,' he huffed and thrust the bundle of broadsheets into my arms, and marched towards the shrine of the Davy Byrnes Pub, which was already several lines thick with custom.

'Christ, I've found it,' Sean beamed as he bounded up to me, book wide open, finger assiduously tracing each line. 'Mam and Mrs Molyneaux weren't foolin', they're describing sex and everything, like. This Bloom character just got interesting,' he chuckled, rabidly turning pages and skipping whole passages. 'All the good stuff the Bible missed out on, or whatever Father Harris said was a sin, and...' The name caught in Sean's throat, his gaze grew distant, a misjudged moment. He fell silent, just as all those around gave way to raucous cheer and merriment as the orator drew his act to a close. The crowds dispersed around us in a flood of chatter.

'God is a shout on the street,' I murmured aloud.

'Eh?'

'Nothing.'

'What you got there? Not like you to read a newspaper.' Sean attempted to lighten the mood.

‘Mr Grady gave it to me. You know this fella here?’ I pointed to the small photo on the front page.

‘Morris-somebody. David, I want to say. Mam mentioned him of late. If you bother to read the article you’ll likely find out, eh?’ Sean finished with a punch to my arm, carrying as much strength as a duckling’s peck, shuddering nonetheless, thinking me akin to an explosive, likely to be set ablaze by the most delicate of triggers. I’d given all the creative explanations and excuses I could summon, from the reflection of a helicopter windshield to an adrenaline-fuelled delusion, but still, Sean swore he’d witnessed a vision of some blue-flamed saviour that night, albeit one he was unsure whether friend or foe. ‘Hey, where did Father go?’ he scanned the passing faces.

I gestured towards the pub down the street, the queue now swollen to twice its size. ‘Ah, grand. Sure, Mam will let him buy us a pint, it being Bloomsday and all... Race you to it!’

‘Sean, we’ll be waiting for ages...’ my words now an echo as Sean’s twiggy legs had already found their unorthodox stride. ‘Fine.’ I raced him the first few yards, deliberately pulling back within arm’s length of my rival to ensure Adrian would witness his son’s rare athletic victory, only to find his attention captured by the old television blinking high above the bar. A rolling news report undercut a solemn-looking reporter broadcasting live from Shankill Road in Belfast. An uncomfortable medley of expressions spread across the crowd, most in shame, some in satisfaction, but none capable of uttering a word of condemnation or condonation. I made certain to catch sight of Mr Grady. A slight flush spread across his brow, but whether of pleasure or of pain, I couldn’t decipher.



It was a grave walk back home, Sean and I agreeing to part company with his parents, as Mrs Grady's temper had come to the boil. Tongues had clashed over such reckless actions, Adrian mounting a firm defence and rasping nothing but admiration for Hugh Torney after months in the doldrums. There would always be repercussions, Nelly would say, blood for blood, and I took some solace from hearing that I was not alone in my assessment. It gave me hope, if only for a short while. And short it was.

We had detoured via George Street, both heads lowered, heels scuffing green and white confetti, and struggling for conversation when shouts were heard. I spotted a raw frenzy just outside a pub with the same name as the street. A middle-aged and slightly portly gentleman was seized by the collar and dragged to the ground, his arms flailing desperately to cocoon his head from a relentless onslaught of kicks and punches. A bystander attempted to intervene, only to be turned on viciously by the quartet of thugs, each with barbed words to match their focused fury. Sean tugged at my arm, trying to get us to turn back. I wrenched myself free, a haze of red just suppressing my blessed blue fire. I charged from a good ten feet away, hurled my full body weight at the tallest offender, and knocked him clean off his heels. Each fist I landed on his temples fuelled me to continue, the iron-rich smell of blood near hypnotic. His buddy attempted to pull me off, allowing the victim time to rise to his feet and balance the altercation, while others from within the bar began to flock and rally in defence. Two thugs broke off, my own affray

continuing for only seconds longer as a careless flaming spear struck the aggressor, who had now successfully levered me off his near-unconscious comrade, brutally through the thigh. His yelp proved a welcome distraction, that and the faint blue flicker of the police van approaching, their sirens a signal for all hostilities to end. The four fled in all directions. My teeth remained clenched, my breathing quietened, the fire drawn promptly back inside. I sent up a silent prayer for ignorance from all around. Sean drew to my side, his trembling hand upon my shoulder, urging me to flee, my mind still too unsettled to argue. The portly gentleman intercepted us briefly, a trickle of fresh blood running down his left eye, and gave me a hearty thank you combined with an offer of a handshake, which I would have accepted warmly had Sean not swatted it clear and towed me away.

‘Iain? What in Hell’s name was that?’ Sean spurted. I could give no answer. ‘One thing to cause a ruckus with a royalist or something, but... but...’

‘But what?’ I finally found my voice.

‘Need me to spell it out to you? Queers! Gay guys, Iain. Really lad, just keep clear. None of our business, that,’ Sean replied, a quick judging look back over his shoulder, or at least feigned judgement, for I’d known Sean long enough to tell ambivalence, even falsehood – a stutter between words, an uneven tempo, a brief moment of eye contact as if requesting permission to make such a statement. My wrist was still firmly locked in his hand, Sean reluctant to release it until well clear of the scene, and I was led around the corner to one of the dimly lit narrow streets illuminated by a flickering neon sign. To my surprise, it was Sean who remained transfixed by the situation, peering

just around the wall to observe what he could in the fading daylight. 'They'll get away with it, the lads that attacked. Police got far more important matters on their minds,' he sighed. His grip on me had eased, now more for reassurance than command. 'Aw, Iain! Why'd you do it? Word will spread around Dublin, especially with my dad and all. The last thing he needs is to think you and I are lookin' out for queers over the cause...' His voice began to croak, the veins in his skinny neck bulging.

'You? You did nothing, Sean. You're fine,' I soothed, attempting to free my wrist entirely, but not succeeding.

'No, but...' Sean's tone became fragile. 'They'll kick you out if they knew, or even thought that...' A swift change in phrasing only made his assertion more volatile. My wrist was finally released, only to allow him to wipe away a welling tear. He sniffled and attempted to rub some masculinity back into his face. He was still shaking. Without thinking, I grabbed him by the shoulders, triggering his customary forlorn gaze down to his feet, which I countered with a chuck under his chin. His shaking ceased the instant my lips met his. We pressed together in silence but broke apart quickly as the police car sparked into life again and drove steadily past us both. The scuffle merited less than three minutes of their time. The battered victim was nursed and fussed over by only closest friends, a silent suffering.



## Chapter Six

### An Undefeated Army

Two springs passed. The first saw me approached by the barman at the eponymous pub on George Street asking whether I was interested in some evening work as a doorman. He went only by his first name, Liam. No one seemed to know his last name. It became clear the incident we witnessed was a single domino in a slowly toppling river, each act of violence spawning a tributary of hate towards those less able or equipped to answer back. A solitary narrative, the hard crimson hand of Ulster firmly serving vengeance, from Newtonabbey to Loughinisland, triggering an exhausting tit-for-tat that engendered headline after headline. Football results of all kinds were relegated to the centre pages, regardless of Ireland's impressive run in the World Cup and the glee over the absence of our island rivals. I remember catching fleeting snippets of games broadcast live from the screen above the bar, an audience just as enamoured with their nation's performance as any other, the same rowdy jeers, the same exasperated tutting and groans of resentment, so quickly turning one-eighty into a symphony of celebration and brotherly embraces. I stood sentry just outside. If the pitch of the crowds was not enough to convey the state of play, then Liam's expressions became my little window into the action. I was a gatekeeper on a bridge, a bridge between two worlds. As for all the mirrored familiarity during supposedly unifying events inside, it felt like a ruse, a cruel mirage of sorts. I would be shoved, pushed, insulted, and even struck on occasion. I never determined whether my attackers were Catholic or Protestant, Nationalist or Liberal, Bohemians or Shamrocks – what did it matter? For all of their inherent discord, they shared a commonality

with some specific targets. The outcasts, those perceived as indecent, the diseased, the vulnerable. When their rage could not be expressed towards each other, the bitterness had to have a release, a focus – what else would allow the tribe’s leader to remain revered when many within the tribe might just dare question its purpose? A convenient deflection during precious moments of pacifism. I thus saw my newfound job as more than a mere ostiary. I was defiant, a sobering reminder to those who saw me that I would not kneel willingly, and never in the name of Heaven or a promised land that was never a gift from others.

I would bleed; on many, *many* occasions I would bleed. My forehead would hit the tarmac, my knuckles chipped teeth, my skin was lacerated by makeshift weapons of glass. They would never see, though, my mantra reminded me, as defined as it was when I was a boy. I would spit globules clear from sight, wipe speckles from my brow, and ensure my clothing was nondescript and obscure. I never threw the first punch, but relished the anticipation. My pupils would be streaked denim blue, my veins would burn hot white; each time suspicion was concealed with a momentary intake of calming breath, a meditation of sorts I had come to master. My wounds became my only giveaway, as Liam would often intervene just as the police made their apathetic appearance. My body was inspected, the bartender certain I had taken a shank to the chest or tummy. But little more than a scratch remained, and come the following day, barely a bruise. As the pub rapidly became my home, I was scrutinised by my peers, even affectionately called a *Gallowglass* by one scholarly attendee, a taciturn English language professor from Trinity College with a malt-coloured comb-over and over-pronounced Adam’s apple. It took me several attempts at guessing which Shakespeare works he was

referencing before I realised that his interest in me went beyond my heroics. It would please me no end to say I could flirt back, develop a charm to match my bold exterior... but I quashed my own confidence the instant I felt it rise. I was welcomed by those around me as one of them, but I wasn't. I was a charlatan of sorts, destined to be different among the different. A flaw? No, that was unfair, I decided.

*Dangerous*, perhaps—and any hint of inner worth a warning that confidence and power could prove a too potent mix. My remaining months there were muted, injecting more and more distance between those I had grown so fond of in my youth. Sean at once shifted from weekend meets to casual liaisons, to a simple nod or wave of acknowledgement when he was seen wandering on the opposite side of the street with fresh company. My sightings of him became less frequent, the smiles more restrained. His company started whispering in his ear within plain sight. I was apparently the subject of their whispers, and I would raise an eyebrow or cock my head each time, but never step away from my sanctuary. That was until the second spring.



There was a futility in Sean's voice. He still stared at his feet, now more proudly dressed in khaki steel-capped boots that left a noticeable gap around his ankles, into which he tucked poorly fitting gorse green trousers. His fingers never left their pockets but fidgeted through the fabric like snakes in a bag. 'You happy working here?' he muttered, looking up for the first time. He looked drawn, grey bags hanging beneath each eye, his fringe cropped and sides neatly shaved, a

deliberate attempt to look indecorous. I wondered, spotting his familiar crowd once more across the street, staring crows. I shrugged my reply, pulling his attention away from our regular customers.

‘What do you want, Sean?’

‘To talk,’ Sean replied.

‘Yeah? About what?’ I remained clinical, arms tightly folded, chin held aloft. ‘Been plenty of chances. You’ve known where to find me, passed this way nearly every week, you and your little gang.’

‘They ain’t no gang, Iain,’ Sean spat. His back straightened, desperate to match my height. ‘We’re more than that, all of us. You know it.’

‘Do I?’

‘Hell you don’t!’ He leant in closer, aggressively. ‘We ain’t carryin’ on like this, blow after blow, and getting’ nowhere fast. We need to act.’

‘Sounds like your father talking,’ I answered drily. ‘Tell me, who you acting for?’

‘Ireland.’ Sean’s response was sharp and instant.

‘Which part?’

‘Aww, don’t you be playin’ with me, Iain!’ There was a flare of frustration from Sean, swiftly muted as heads began to turn. He leant in close enough to whisper through his teeth, ‘We’re damn close,

they're all sayin' it. But petty attacks on London ain't enough; they need something bigger, something to force the British hand, something...' Now it was my temper that had frayed. I seized both his arms and wrenched his trembling digits from their waxed leather abodes, jolting his wiry frame into near paralysis.

'You damn well die for your country if you want to, Sean Grady, I say, let it die for me.' Our entanglement drew some odd snickers from the pub guests – a lovers' quarrel, perhaps? Sean grew paler from the unwanted attention and managed to wrestle his arms back. I sucked in a resentful sigh. 'Sean, whatever you believe this is achieving, ask yourself, is it for your country, or for you, lad?' He returned to his despondency. 'Want to know what I've come to learn from working here? It's that people like us need a future, not a rewrite of the past, and for all the patriotic pride bellowed from each side of our little emerald isle, neither one appears to want to stand up for us. You may think this "Undefeated Army" of yours will have your back, and always protect you regardless of consequences; it will not. Once the dust settles, they'll find the outcasts.' He noticed it this time, I know he did, the streak of blue in my hazel irises, the wisp of flame riding across my fists.

'We could become an Undefeated Army with you in it.' Sean composed himself, the true purpose of his visit laid bare. I oscillated between flattery and fury, wanting to believe my closest friend had approached me with an open and forgiving heart. Part of that was likely true – but the opposing objective I could sense held the perceived moral high ground, a hound foaming at the mouth, just waiting to be let off the leash against oppressors, only to be pulled back by its leash once the victor emerged. My conflicting emotions

rendered me speechless, and I gnawed my lower lip until I nearly drew blood. Sean took advantage, stepped in close once more, pushed a folded piece of paper into my hand then firmly shook my other, and drew back. I watched as he retreated to the safety of the far pavement, blended back into his crowd, and never broke his gaze until they reached the end of George Street.

It took me several minutes to calm down. My heart intermittently skipped beats, and beads of sweat still rolled down the back of my neck. Liam ventured outside and enquired about the encounter as he always did. I dismissed it as history, a nightmare from which I was trying to awaken. The literary reference surprisingly passed him by. His soothing smile and pat on the shoulder loosened me somewhat. I carefully unfolded the piece of paper once his back had turned, squinted to read Sean's tight, squiggly text, and made out the lines:

*Steven and Leopold both sit on A wall,  
then come Bloomsday, one will fall.*

I mouthed it into the wind, instantly picking up the oddly capitalised 'A' midway through – out of character for Sean, for despite his dislike of English, Miss Moody did instil a fair grasp of grammar. An acronym, *S-L-A-B* most likely. My muscles tensed at the possible link. I turned the paper over to find, more distinctly written, the word *Corp* – a punctuated military rank, I could only assume. My brow furrowed. My mind muddled, I flicked the note against my sleeve several times. Joyce in riddles. Only Sean could have concocted that as a covert method of liaising with dissident Irish Republicans and their motives,

Bloomsday the only link to a date or time. I squatted deep in thought, eyes screwed shut to help drown out the cacophony of mockery from inside, as the *Three Lions* football chant hollered through scratchy radio speakers.

## Chapter Seven

### Bloomsday

Murphy was a surname that cut through the air like winter's chill when spoken. Faces paled and fearful glances were cast left, right, and over the shoulder, as if the Devil himself were listening. 'Slab's business is his own, young lad,' one bar regular would say, gulping down the remainder of his pint and quickly throwing on his coat. 'Best leave well alone,' said another after inspecting Sean's note, his attention drawn back to the television. Even when such advice was echoed by Liam, one of the few who dared study the scrap of paper for more than a brief moment, I could not let it lie. Whatever manic web Sean had managed to become entangled in, his approaching me was a signal for help, for *him*, I was sure. The bravado of the cause was a mere guise for his own fear, so doubtful of his own newly found company that he'd risk complete exposure of his true self in favour of a real friend. The first week of June was nearing its end, and I had rattled the door of the Grady house on several occasions. Only once did Nelly open. Ripe finger-shaped bruises were around her neck and her lips had blood blisters. A sweetened tear welled up and smudged her mascara when I asked for Sean. She wrapped her arms around me and sobbed gently. A toxic, slurred voice groaned from inside the house, Adrian demanding to know who was there and laconically dismissing any visitors. The rank smell of whiskey wafted into my face as the door abruptly closed. The enquiring expressions of the Molyneauxs peeped from behind the netted curtains in the next window. Everyone down the street had a story to tell, but uttering a single word meant betrayal and torture.



Scoffs and jeers of appeasement were heard around George Street as the opening football match for the European Championships saw the hosts across the Irish Sea held to a draw, one customer at the bar dipping his Swiss Army knife in Guinness and blessing it with a kiss. I had to plead indifference, for if ever there were chants constructed to harm and antagonise, they would come from the mobs on those football pitches, and I had learnt to either shut out or shut down the moronic nature of its followers. I was truly outnumbered this season, even when there was not a shamrock green shirt on screen to rally behind. The apparent humiliation of a rival was entertainment enough. My stomach knotted as mellow lights cast two foreboding shadows framing the BBC sports correspondent, Wembley's iconic twin towers, and the wall reminding me ever more of Sean's cryptic reference. His commentary shared insights into Germany's opening appearance; the apparent odds-on favourite for victory, Germany's first as a unified nation. *A wall, a fallen wall.* My stomach tightened further at the rustle of newspapers splashed with Republican Army slogans and vitriol. Words of warning and presumptions. Unification by accord or by force, blood, and bomb blasts. Surely not now, with the foundations of ceasefire exchanged between Dublin and London so ardent, and so many eyes of Europe firmly on England as sport attempts to unite even the most fractured remnants of the fallen Iron Curtain? But to be cruel is so often to survive. I had come to know such a base instinct, and Sean had it bred into his veins as much as I. However misguided, he might as well have been fighting on two fronts, both for his country and his place in society. His hand on a trigger that had the potential to ignite the fervent cause of freedom, a display of power and therefore a reward that never shone warmly from his own flesh and blood. A hero to all people, then came the grand reveal that he and I were not the same as others, but fought the

same cause and therefore shouldn't be feared. A romantic, delusional notion. My naïve curiosity was piqued. 'When does Germany play again?' I reached over the bar and addressed Liam.

'Tomorrow, lad, why?'

'Where?'

'Errr... Manchester. Red Devils' playground.' He slid on his reading glasses and drew his finger down the pullout guide from the *Radio Times* tacked onto the mirror behind.

'Devils? Eh?' I raised an aloof eyebrow.

'Old Trafford? Manchester United? Come on, Iain lad, you must know that one,' Liam tutted.

'Sorry,' I mumbled, fishing for Sean's note. 'When does *England* play Germany?'

'They... they don't, not in the group stages, and any encounter won't be before Bloomsday.' Liam huffed, arms tightly folded upon seeing the scrap of paper once more. 'Look lad, don't go losing yourself down this warren... whatever your mate Sean has got himself into, you best leave it at that and not...'

'Germany. The Berlin Wall.' I leapt across the bar top and barged Liam to one side. 'They won't play England, but, but...' I flustered, and rubbed my stubble harshly. 'Here again, Manchester! Against... *Russia?*'

‘Yes, Old Trafford. Which you now know is home to Manchester United, you clever boy.’ Liam mockingly patted my curly red locks and let out a chuckle. ‘Look, why not just leave it be?’ The moment for pleasantries and games had passed, however, as I swatted his playful hand away like a persistent fly, my pupils burning blue.

‘Germany, Russia, walls that crumbled... both red brick and iron,’ I continued to murmur. ‘Steve and Leopold sit on *A wall*, perhaps *two walls*, one each? The endgame being the wall of Ireland’s own collapsing? Damn it, Sean!’ I let out a frustrated sigh. ‘Liam, they’ll bomb again, and soon. This is Sean warning me, wanting me to assist. The target will be one of the football matches. I thought the likely focus to be England, but on Bloomsday, the 16<sup>th</sup>, they’re not playing, Germany and Russia are.’ I ranted as I jabbed the guide. ‘So, Manchester, Old bloody Trafford!’ Spittle in full flow. Liam’s joviality vaporised in an instant. He curved his chubby arm around my shoulder and ushered me out of sight and earshot of the customers.

‘Heavens to God, boy. I thought you were smart?’ Liam threw both arms high and quickly settled with a scan of the crowd. ‘Most around here know, Murphy provides the renegade Republican group with all that they need, be it from here in Dublin or up in Belfast. But you don’t go delving into such business if you want to keep your kneecaps where they should be.’ He straightened up, checked for any familiar devils over his shoulder, pulled me in closer, and prised the note from my sweaty grip. ‘Sean’s deliberately presented you with a riddle, not words or specific locations. Why? Unless you’re an Irishman keen to follow England’s showcase event without a lick of home-grown support in the game, you won’t be travelling to Britain. Unless your purposes are... well, *controversial*.’ I wanted to pull away, if only to

prevent any groundless romantic rumours about me and the rest of the pub's staff, oh how they'd flow. But somehow I felt safe under his cover, now it was me fearing the Devil, him and his Undefeated Army. 'Besides, any planning on any city would have taken weeks and been designed for maximum exposure, but London itself is under too much scrutiny...' Liam too began muttering to himself, suddenly intrigued, drawn into the mysterious vortex.

'Wait... how do you know all this?' I interjected, with a puzzled expression.

'You think that Republican lot is without a fancy boy or two? Loose lips come and go in this bar. It's still a safe haven for some, I'll have you know. Perhaps your lad *Corporal* Sean isn't as alone as he thinks,' Liam maintained stoically, then hammered a blow to my heart. 'Perhaps, *you're* not as alone as *you* think.' My nostrils flared at the impertinence, the vigour of youth against withering scepticism. For vanity's sake, I rebuked such pity, but it stung, not only the thought of my people fraternising with fanatics, but more the seed of doubt that the adversaries we'd come to know would ever lay down arms one day. I had convinced myself this was folly, that we would always be outcasts, and the notion of anything remotely earnest behind it twisted in my gut like a knife. I was spared by the throw of a pint glass from outside, shattering into shards as two hooded hooligans ran off shouting homophobic slurs. My confidence in my own convictions was restored as I sprang back to my guard post.

'I'll need a few days off next week, Liam. Travel plans,' I hollered back while in hot pursuit.



I'd stepped off the ferry two days early, in a moth-eaten grey hoodie and ragged denim jeans, a small leather backpack containing only a toothbrush and towel. Underwear? Socks? Liam's paternal instincts sprang up unexpectedly, preparing a son for their first year at university, one might have thought. His own way of self-reassurance, I deduced midway across the Irish Sea. As the West Coast of England broadened, my doubts multiplied and swelled. A city the size of Manchester, a violent and fanatical operation that, no matter how clandestine or well prepared it considered itself to be, would unquestionably be in the sights of British security. And I, in the twilight of my teens but so seldom untethered from Dublin, and on the few occasions I strayed, controversy struck. Sean and I might have covertly covered our tracks at Newry Road, the stowaway minors caught up in the imbroglio of revolution, but Adrian Grady, the follower of the Starry Plough, with hands rich in both venomous green and cold blood red? No, the surname would have spread. Every face of family and friend, a snapshot of evidence, whispered around corners and from ally to traitor. I could be seen, whether by camera or by human eye, any of us could. My first step onto the Liverpool Docks and paranoia surged. A policeman mouthed innocently into his walkie-talkie as a small group of German football supporters absorbed the majesty of the Three Graces; another police outfit drove steadily past two inebriated Russians pointing up at a statue to The Beatles and crudely spouting *From Us to You*. I cowered on both occasions, grey hood pulled down to my nose, one foot uniformly in front of the other. By the time I reached Lime Street Station, my nerves were shredded, and naively it dawned upon me that my own shadiness was completely

counterproductive. How would Sean, glitchy and patently awkward as they came, have made it this far? A liability, maybe cut loose the instant the plan was hatched? The fervency that came with his surname was possibly the only card he had to play to remain in this trade. I settled slightly as the train pulled away, the palms of my hands beginning to burn in anticipation of intercepting this carnage. A vivid image of my stance at Newry Road appeared every time I closed my eyes to rest. I tried to shake it, but it teased, and the strength it offered satisfied. I felt stronger, more capable, and confident. If I could just reach Sean, I could convince him to come home, and prove to Liam that paltry squabbles of politics and land were beneath me, beneath *us*, our own purpose brought forth and carried as free people, not destined to serve or be persecuted under rule of any colour. The heat flowed down my arms in shades of blue, a trace of smoke writhing from beneath my fingers. ‘Lad, no fags on this train,’ kindly said a leathery-skinned Scouser sitting across me. My confidence ebbed, at first unsure which of my covers had been blown, promptly patting my hands innocently and nodding an apology.



The bustle of Manchester woke me from slumber. My neck was pinched from a rough night on a park bench outside Piccadilly Station. I rubbed the haze and blur from my eyes. A scratchy Tannoy announcement reminded me of the date and time. Two policemen strolled past just as I began to stretch innocently; one gave a judging look but little else. I scrambled inside my backpack for Sean’s note, and recited the line over and over. *S-L-A-B...S-L-A-B...S-L-A-B* – my own

monotonous tune. Was there more to it? There had to be more. I had twenty-four hours to find the location, knowing little of the length and breadth of this city. The football chants were heard from every pub and café down Canal Street, a brightly coloured strip and sanctuary of which Liam had occasionally spoken, and his parting gift of advice. I had only one other item in my backpack, a single photo of Sean and me, taken at the Apollo Theatre, with both bearing our best dinosaur impressions. Not the best memento, even Sean's baby plump cheeks now more sturdy, but it was the only recent image I had to share, courtesy of impromptu disposable camerawork from Jessica Blake and Sally Fielding. Somehow, I felt their intuition towards us both was more perceptive than even we realised at the time. I entered one of the bars, assertive at first but turning sheepish once the owner raised her head from behind the counter, hair ink black, lips studded with metal, and vibrant purple eyeshadow. She said not a word, but perched like a raven, wings spread wide, and snorted. 'Boyfriend, is it?' she finally growled as I pointed to the photograph. I shrugged, earning a coy smile from the goth host. 'No, not seen him, luv.' She seemed to chew her own tongue.

'Ah, no worries.' I gave a resigned sigh, oblivious to both the increased tempo and resonance of police sirens streaming outside and Sean's treasured note that escaped from the backpack and floated down to the top of the bar like a leaf when I pulled out the photograph. 'I know there's football on and all, but... any *Irish* among all this lot?' I asked gauchely, gesturing to the pooling crowds outside, and did a double take as armed police began to deploy a form of shepherding. 'I... I doubt they'd be causing much trouble like, not like we've much to play for, eh? But...' My knowledge of the European Championships was spent, save the game come Bloomsday, but I masqueraded as best I

could, my anxiety spiking with each sighting of a fluorescent jacket. 'But...' I tried to continue, to draw out an answer, despite my heart fearing one might strike me sooner than I wished.

'Your fella in the army?' the bartender spoke sharply. I snapped my attention back, blue beginning to flash in my irises.

'Army? What? No, no, Miss. Why?' I seized my valued note back, frantically concocting a narrative to defend against any allegation of association with rogue belligerents, Irish or otherwise. My guilty stuttering was squeaky.

'Just the *Corp* signoff is all. Trust me, all secrets are safe in these parts, Army, Navy, or otherwise,' the goth offered an open-handed defence. The bobbling heads outside still held most of my attention, but through the goth's stance of surrender I caught a glance of a framed certificate on the wall, standard for all establishments, proof of insurance. The Co-operative Insurance Group, the same as The George back home, headquartered here in Manchester. For all Sean's delusions of grandeur, desperation for recognition, and eagerness to prove himself, no such characteristics were important to Iain, and Grady knew this to be true, as true as their friendship itself. These were scribbles of code, yes, but not a deliberate elevation of status, for he and Iain were on the same side of the war, only not the one unfolding before their eyes. Locations, dates, and even suggested individuals and parties responsible were presented through acronyms. Sean's direct actions remained an enigma, and this was not the instruction of a *corporal*, but merely the charade of one. This was another *location*, abbreviated.



'Where is the Co-operative Insurance Group based?' I hurriedly stuffed all the evidence back inside my backpack.

'Just over the road... Corporation Street, just over there look, you can see it. But looks like the police are...' My goth guide got no further as I bolted back out to the street. I barged and rummaged through the football sweaters, plastic beer cups, shopping bags, and briefcases, swiping left and right, dodging into each available space between bristling bodies until I reached the enforcement line. There I froze, frowned upon by a barrel-chested policeman complete with an assault rifle who urged me to step back. I parted my lips; no sound came out, and I was barked at once more to retreat. A flash of blue fire wove its way around my wrist, writhing and eager. My lungs found air and fortitude, and I began to speak desperate words of warning that crumbled beneath the pounding sound of a single explosion, belching tar-black smoke, rising high and speckled with plumes of incendiary orange and red.

## Chapter Eight

### A better Saturday

I flick the presented photograph several times, toss it back towards my guest and slouch back in my chair, studying every aspect of the austere interrogation room – the mould around the ceiling tiles, the dust settling on the bars of the windows – anything but make direct eye contact. The awkward silence and judging stare from this Mr Worthington finally broke as he reclaimed his evidence. ‘You are curious as to how I obtained this photograph, aren’t you, Mr Donnelly?’ I shrug with nonchalance. ‘Well, to challenge your assumptions, I have no affiliation to any political faction, nor special service branch, nor indeed, private investigation,’ he continues. I cannot help but be drawn in now. The polished cane catches a ray of light, pale, almost pure white in colour, neatly placed between his knees as his jaw perches on the handle. He relaxes, and I mirror him without thought... for once, recognising a commonality, a mutual understanding. ‘There were, of course, witnesses to the events of 15 June 1996 in Manchester, some closely matching your description. Just as information pertaining to the incendiary motives across the Northern Irish border can be sourced, with accounts from both sides of the conflict.’ I cower as he stands, walks around the table, towering over every inch of the room. ‘And I’m certain both Irish and British Governments would rather such matters were left buried, given they are on the brink of unfathomable success in the name of peace. For me, however, the true war has not been won.’ He casually sits on the table by my side.

‘Your IRA? A splinter division?’ I ask.

'Like I said, I have no political inclinations, Mr Donnelly,' Worthington replies.

'So... who are you? What do you want?' My tone grows sharper, frustrated. He places the photograph before me once more, nailing it with several firm taps of his finger.

'The same as you, I believe. Justice for our people.' Now I shiver, whether from rage or fear, I cannot define. 'You are an outsider, aren't you Mr Donnelly? Much like your close friend Sean Grady...' He gets no further before I leap to my feet in protest, eyes burning blue.

'How do you know about Sean?' I demand. 'You've wrangled the Grady family? Dug up some dirt? Well, it's his father, Adrian, you need to concern yourself with, not him. Sean was innocent, just lost like so many back then in Dublin and desperate to be acknowledged, recognised...' I splutter uncontrollably.

'Loved?' Mr Worthington cuts my verbose rambling dead in its tracks. The blue fire is snuffed out as my chest tightens and my stomach knots.

'I...I never found him in Manchester. I don't know what happened. To this day I don't.' A tear trickles and mingles with the blood from my nose, the proffered handkerchief proving useful for masking any emotion. I strengthen my voice once more. 'So, no point askin' me anything about him.'

Mr Worthington returns to his chair, leans again on that staff of his, and lets out a sigh mixed with a slight chortle. 'You wouldn't have found Sean Grady that day in Manchester, for he was never there.' I have no response, spare a quick intake of breath. 'No, despite clear connections to the IRA, he was no more than a pawn, a basic operator of a mobile phone somewhere here in Dublin. Calls to London were made, yes, but when tracked, its owner claimed it had been stolen from him weeks before. Thus, the case is cold.' His position reclines. I try to process his claim; an odd mixture of relief and regret fills me. Perhaps my words of warning found their mark? Sean, for all his tribulations within his family unit and the appeasement of his father, chose to pick his own path after all. But equally, he knew that drawing attention back towards me would expose more than just nationalist belligerence, perhaps a life filled with remorse. He would not dare seek me out again, and left no trail for me, justly holding firm to his belief we would both be the better for it. When I break from my musings, the photograph has been replaced with a small brown envelope, weathered and tea-stained. My name is etched upon it in faded black ink. I recognise the handwriting instantly, matching the same cryptic note thrust into my hand by Sean that fateful summer.

'What is this?' I inspect with quivering hands.

'Something clearly meant for you and you alone.' Worthington blinks slowly. 'It was found during the mobile phone trace and investigation of its owner's home. I assure you, I have not read it.' The photograph is returned safely to his suit pocket. 'You can trust me, Mr Donnelly. It is not your past that interests me – only your *future*.' He pats the same pocket and gives a wiry, calculating smile. He checks his watch before

rising abruptly to his feet. *'Agenbite of inwit.* I, however, prefer not to look back. Would you not agree, Mr Donnelly?'

*Remorse of conscience.* I swallow hard upon hearing the reference to Joyce. A life of regret behind one door, or a chance at redemption. Is that what is being offered? My surprise guest could exonerate me from any previous wrongdoings or connections, as far back as Newry Road, and I could return to the life I had here in Dublin... but what kind of life is one imprisoned in a cage? A peace fulfilled for the land, but not for me or my kind, of his kind... whatever kind that was. Just as Sean made his choice, I could now make mine. I felt my strength return, deep inside like a kraken stirring, anticipating not just opportunity, but the chance at answers, and a new chapter I'd never dreamed would be written. 'Iain,' I announce with authority. 'You can call me Iain.'

'Lawrence. Lawrence Worthington, Sir Lawrence Worthington, if you wish.' He responded with a respectful nod. 'And tomorrow, I'm sure you'll know, is Good Friday, and with the new Agreement between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland comes a cleansing. Prisoners released, records expunged, secrets either put under lock and key forever or laid bare. But the secrets the likes of you and me hold, well, that's a different matter entirely... something my wife and I would be only too happy to share, should you accept our invitation.'

'Your *wife*?' I give a quizzical reply, a potential theory about Mr Worthington's private life and allegiance debunked. 'And, what *invitation*?'

‘Why, to join us, Iain. No politics, no splinter divisions. Just, well, a new vision.’ Worthington toys with the little silver ring on his finger, engraved with an inscription I cannot quite make out. ‘Easter is upon us, and my wife, Morgan, adores the festival more than any other. A fresh beginning, a new cycle, a chance of renewal.’ He straightens his suit jacket and taps on the door to signal the conclusion of his business. ‘But in order to renew, you must be prepared to release your grip on the past, so finish up whatever needs be done, and make your decision come sundown tomorrow.’ He points towards Sean’s letter, still trembling a little in my grasp. ‘The authorities here have my contact details; until then, *Albus Draco*.’ He winks as the door creaks open, and with a confident turn, he departs.

I am left looking down upon Sean’s letter, still unopened. ‘Right, lad.’ The burly warden stands in front of me, arms folded, shackles at the ready. ‘You ready to go back?’

I give a smirk. ‘Never.’

## Chapter Nine

### Holding Water in Your Hand

*Letter from Sean Grady – 10<sup>th</sup> June 1996*

Dear Iain,

You can guess I'm sure which book I've chosen to keep this letter in, and should you ever by chance visit my parents' house, your home from home, then you'll know where to look. They will welcome you in, my father especially, as they have always done – but do not ask for me. They won't tell you anything, for I've asked them not. Both understand, and hopefully, you do as well.

I wanted to tell you all I have come to learn in person, truly I did, but again, couldn't find the courage. I still live in fear – fear of rejection, fear of persecution, fear of judgement. You, however, never showed such fear, always had a path – whether you knew it or not. I won't lie, I was intimidated by your strength, and your resolve. You could lead an army, just as my father knew, but where that army was headed was always your decision. Some are destined to lead, others just to follow, I suppose. I found purpose within the Republican movement. I thought it would please my father just as you had managed to do, but I saw weakness in what I, We, might have become. I refused to accept it, to love another man, permit a reason for both enemy and ally to rally against us, as they most likely will. A piece of Bloom and Daedalus in us both, I suppose, lost souls in their time, but you, however, I'm certain will escape the history, and create a brighter future. A unique future, without borders, vanity, or the curse of pride. You may have to choose to do this alone, that unique future as unique as you are, from all that I have seen, but I hope to be alive when I see it happen. If solitude is the price you feel you must pay, then take this precious message with you that someone on

this small, green island does care for you deeply. If you sense my mind and heart were forever shut following our last encounter, I hope my little puzzle of a note made it clear I too was ambivalent to the cause, the notion that violence and intolerance will somehow reach their goal, a language of hate adopted by different tongues. For this reason, I withdrew and gave clues to the strongest of us all in hope you might bring it to an end, while again hiding from my true self. I have become little more than an orchestrator, a puppeteer, relaying messages via phone. They will try to track me down should the deed be done. Maybe the thread of time grows finer, the Irish or British forcing me to act before the intended celebratory deadline. Still, I will tell them nothing, and I will rest easy that my hands are not tarnished in the same way as others. A simple yet effective mask, you could say, and how I would very much enjoy not to wear one ever again. If only history was something you could escape from, true?

If a wish was to be granted upon me, I would ask to bring back time, have the courage to speak out loud the words I write to you now. With a dream of a wish no better than the holding of water in your hand, I can ask only that you not remember me as a coward, and give strength to those born like us, inspire us, as you have done for me. If we meet once more, I promise you, it'll be my true face you'll see, and trust that will be enough.

Change the subject, and maybe change the world.

With forever fondness,

Sean Grady



**DONNELLY: THE SACRED BAND SAGA**  
**END**

