

# FREE AUTHORISED EXTRACT

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## Chapter One

From *The Ballad of Patrick O'Fearghall*

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### Chapter 1: Treasure Ireland

He came in smelling of rain and diesel, the collar of his coat darkened where the weather had been chewing at it. He didn't slam the door. That would've been too much like old times. He closed it careful, like the house was a sleeping child.

Máire was at the sink, hands in suds, shoulders up like she'd been wearing the day around her neck. She turned when she heard the latch, and the look on her face was the one she saved for sirens and late footsteps.

"Where have you been?" she said, soft but sharpened. "You said you'd be back two hours ago."

Patrick didn't answer right away. Not because he was trying to be dramatic. Because he was listening.

Even inside the house you could hear it—distant, low, a dull percussion that didn't belong to thunder. Then another, and another, spaced out like somebody tapping a coffin lid with patience.

Máire's hands stilled. A plate slipped in the water and knocked the side of the basin. Her eyes searched his face like she was looking for a date and a name and an obituary.

"Oh no," she whispered. "Who is it this time?"

Patrick pulled off his cap and stood there a moment with it in his hands. He looked older than he was in that quiet hallway. Not old in the body—old in the knowing.

He said, "It's the government."

Her brow pinched. "Don't start."

"I'm not starting. I'm telling you."

Another boom rolled through the town, a vibration more felt than heard, like the earth itself was swallowing something it didn't want.

Máire dried her hands and came closer, slow. "Where were you?"

"Up by the old estate road," he said. "Where you can see across to the flats."

"Why would you go there?"

Patrick's mouth twitched like he was trying not to say something that would turn into a fight. "Because I wanted to be sure I wasn't imagining it."

"And?"

"And I watched them do it."

"Do what?"

He breathed out through his nose. "Pull the past down in tidy little bites."

Máire stared at him, trying to fit his words to the shape of reality. "Patrick... if this is about those fellas online again—"

He held up a hand, not rude, just needing her to stop loading explanations onto him before he'd finished speaking.

"No," he said. "Not online. In the open. Trucks. Barriers. Men in high-vis. Police vans parked like it's a parade. A signed notice about public safety and regeneration. And then the first blast."

Máire's voice dropped. "What were they demolishing?"

Patrick looked toward the window, though the curtains were drawn. He spoke like a man naming something sacred.

"Where we used to meet," he said. "Where they used to run the youth club after the ceasefires. Where the old men played cards even when the roof leaked. Where the mural was—do you remember it?"

"I remember," Máire said, and now her anger had nowhere to land because memory has no throat to grab.

"They say it's unsafe," Patrick went on. "They say it's derelict. They say it's progress."

Máire's face had gone pale. "And that's what the booms are?"

Patrick nodded once.

"You went and watched?" she said, like watching was a crime.

"I had to," he said. "Because I came home thinking I could still find us."

"Find us where?"

"In the old shape of things," he said. "In the way the town used to sit inside itself. In the language on the street. In the names. In the signs. In the stories your da told and mine pretended he didn't."

Máire swallowed. "And you didn't?"

Patrick's voice tightened, but it didn't break. "No."

Another boom. This one nearer, or maybe the wind had turned. A dog barked somewhere and wouldn't settle. Then—after a pause—sirens, not rushing, just moving like they had all the time in the world.

Máire stepped to the window and pulled the curtain back a finger's width. The night outside was wet, streetlights smeared by drizzle, and far off you could see the faint pulse of blue lights.

"Patrick," she said, "that's not a bombing. That's a demolition."

"That's what I'm telling you," he said. "A demolition."

She looked back at him, baffled. "So why are you talking like it's war?"

Patrick's eyes didn't blink. "Because it is."

Máire let the curtain fall. "That's mad."

Patrick's jaw flexed. "Is it?"

He moved into the kitchen, opened the kettle, filled it, set it down. His hands were steady. That was the worst part—his hands were steady like he'd already decided.

"They learned," he said, more to himself than to her. "They learned what not to do. No more car bombs. No more masked men. No more claiming it on a phone call. They don't need terror when they can do it with policy and paperwork."

Máire crossed her arms like she could hold herself together. "Who's 'they'?"

Patrick looked up. “The ones who sign the notices. The ones who call it development. The ones who tell you it’s kindness, and then they punish you for noticing the cost.”

“You’re talking like a pamphlet,” she snapped, and her voice was shaking now. “You’re talking like—like those fellas shouting in the street.”

Patrick didn’t flinch. “I’m talking like a man who’s been through one kind of conflict and can smell another.”

Máire stared at him and her eyes shone, not with tears yet, but with that awful near-water that comes before you allow yourself to be weak.

“You came home,” she said, “because you said you needed to be Irish again.”

“I did,” Patrick said.

“And?”

Patrick’s voice softened, and it hurt more than the hardness did. “And I find out Irishness has been put up for sale. Not stolen in the night. Sold in the day. With a ribbon-cutting.”

He turned off the kettle before it boiled. The click sounded final.

“I watched them,” he said. “I watched the dust rise. And I thought, that’s not just bricks. That’s consent. That’s memory. That’s the future being told what it’s allowed to remember.”

Máire’s throat worked. “So what are you going to do, Patrick?”

He met her gaze.

“That’s what I don’t know yet,” he said. “But I know this—I’m done pretending I’m crazy for seeing what I see.”

Outside, the sirens continued their slow crawl. And somewhere beyond the edge of the curtains, the government kept on making progress.

. Patrick didn’t sit. He stood at the table like a man waiting for a map to finish unfolding.

“They’re recalling it Treasure Island now,” he said.

Máire frowned. “Who is?”

“Everyone who isn’t from here.”

She gave a short, humourless laugh. “Ireland’s always had nicknames.”

“Not like this.”

Another boom rolled across the town, followed by the low mechanical cough of engines restarting. Patrick nodded toward the sound.

“That’s them making room,” he said.

“For what?”

He finally sat, elbows on the table, fingers laced. He looked tired in a way sleep wouldn’t touch.

“For people who don’t know what stood there,” he said. “And don’t care.”

Máire watched him carefully now. This wasn’t the Patrick who got wound up by headlines. This was the Patrick who’d gone quiet, which meant he’d been counting.

“When I came back,” he said, “I thought I’d be late to my own life but still in time for the place. I thought Ireland would be here waiting, even if I wasn’t sure I was.”

“And?”

“And I find a country being advertised.”

She shook her head. “That’s not fair.”

“It’s accurate.”

He leaned back, eyes on the ceiling like the answers might be written there.

“Posters at the airport,” he said. “Languages I can’t read, but the pictures are clear enough. Smiling families. Keys in hands. Words like welcome and opportunity and your new start.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.”

“It isn’t,” Patrick said. “Until you realise no one asked the house if it wanted to be sold.”

Máire bristled. “People are allowed to come here.”

“I know,” he said. “People always have. And people have always left. That’s not what this is.”

He leaned forward again.

“This is a queue that never ends,” he said. “And a bill that’s already overdue.”

She folded her arms. “You’re talking like it’s an invasion.”

“I’m talking like it’s a business model.”

Outside, a lorry groaned past, gears grinding. Patrick waited until the sound faded.

“None of them are coming to be Irish,” he said. “Why would they? That’s not what’s being sold.”

“What’s being sold, then?”

He met her eyes.

“Money,” he said. “Beds. Benefits. A rung on a ladder they couldn’t reach where they came from. And I don’t blame them for climbing.”

Máire hesitated. “But—”

“But I blame the ones who put the ladder there,” he said quietly.

She sat opposite him now, slower than before.

“You make it sound deliberate.”

Patrick exhaled. “Tell me this, Máire. When did you last hear someone in power talk about becoming Irish?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it again.

“They talk about diversity,” he went on. “They talk about inclusion. They talk about numbers and targets and quotas and capacity.”

He tapped the table once, precise.

“They never talk about inheritance.”

Another boom, farther away now. The work was moving down the line.

“I stood there tonight,” Patrick said, “watching them pull down the places that made us who we were. And at the same time, I watched buses roll in from the other direction.”

Her voice was tight. “Buses?”

“Full,” he said. “Windows steamed up. People staring out like they’d arrived somewhere holy.”

“And that’s wrong?”

Patrick shook his head. “No. But it tells you everything.”

He rubbed his face with both hands, then dropped them.

“They didn’t come looking for Ireland,” he said. “They came looking for Treasure Island.”

Máire whispered the words back to him, testing them. “Treasure Island.”

“That’s what they call it online,” Patrick said. “That’s what the agencies call it. That’s what the adverts promise.”

He gave a short, bitter smile.

“Funny thing is,” he said, “the treasure isn’t gold. It’s what’s left of us.”

She stared at him. “You’re saying we’re being replaced.”

“I’m saying we’re being priced out,” he replied. “Outbid. Outnumbered. Outlasted.”

“That’s dangerous talk.”

“So was silence,” Patrick said.

He stood again and walked to the window. This time he pulled the curtain back fully.

Down the road, temporary fencing glinted under the streetlights. A banner flapped against it, half-twisted in the wind.

FUTURE HOMES — COMING SOON

Patrick read it aloud.

“Future homes,” he said. “Funny how the future always belongs to someone else.”

Máire came up beside him. “Whose homes are they?”

Patrick didn’t answer straight away.

He watched a Garda car idle at the junction. Watched a group of men walk past—new faces, loud voices, phones glowing in their hands. None of them looked up at the banner. None of them needed to.

“They don’t belong to the past,” he said finally. “And they don’t belong to the present.”

She swallowed. “Then who do they belong to?”

Patrick let the curtain fall.

“That’s the question,” he said. “And once you ask it out loud, you can’t pretend you didn’t.”

Outside, the last of the booms faded into the wet night.

Inside, something older and quieter had started to break.

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