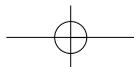


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The
Snowmelt
River

FRANK P. RYAN

JF

Jo Fletcher

BOOKS

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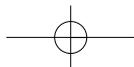
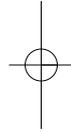
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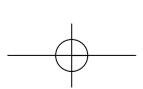
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For William



It is rumoured from sources older than history that once these were happy lands, fruitful and bounteous as any heart might desire. The Arinn were the masters then, a race of magicians of unparalleled knowledge – but that very knowledge rather than wisdom was their undoing. In their arrogance, they wrought a malengin wondrous beyond understanding, yet so perilous that even today few other than the very wise or the very foolish dare utter its name. In such folly lay the seeds of our tormented world . . .

Ussha De Danaan: last High Architect of Ossierel



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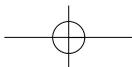
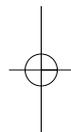
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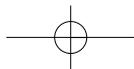
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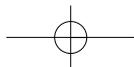
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PART I

The Enchantment





The Kiss

It was a beautiful Sunday morning, early and quiet, before most people were awake. A special day, so special the fifteen-year-old boy astride his stationary bicycle felt overwhelmed by it. Lately he had often dreamed about this day and his dreams always led him here, to the tree-shadowed lane outside the twin gates that led into the Doctor's House. Alan Duval's excitement centred on a mountain now out of sight but looming ominously in his imagination. Slievenamon was the name of the mountain. Beyond the small Irish town of Clonmel, over its streets and the decaying ramparts of its medieval walls, the mountain soared, shrouded in legend, two thousand, three hundred and sixty-eight feet above the horizon. And now on this special morning the mountain beckoned, casting an enchantment on the air like a thickening scent, intoxicating and heavy, so he couldn't help but be drawn to it even though it chilled the blood in his veins.

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The left half of the gates was opening in the high ivy-covered wall. He listened attentively but heard none of the usual creaking. They had oiled the hinges last night, in readiness. He saw the front wheel of her bike roll through, then the flash of her auburn hair, like a warm red flame, and even as his heart began to leap, he saw the excitement in her eyes, the soft green of evening light on the meadow that sloped down onto the far side of the river.

Kathleen Shaunessy lived in the Doctor's House with her uncle, Fergal, and his housekeeper, Bridey. Nobody called her Kathleen except her uncle. Everybody else called her Kate.

Alan held her bike while she closed the half gate. Fourteen years old – she wouldn't be fifteen until 6 November – Kate wore blue jeans, tight-fitting over worn trainers, and her upper body was hidden under a thick white sweater. This early in the morning, even at the close of a particularly hot summer, it would be cold. Over one shoulder she carried a denim backpack, just as he carried one on his back: a change of underwear, toothbrush and toothpaste, sandwiches and fruit. All they needed for a brief adventure.

'What did you tell Bridey?'

'I left her a note. Sure, she won't believe the half of it anyway!'

She spoke with the soft singsong accent that had so bemused the American youth when he had first arrived

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in Clonmel, an accent that in Kate he had come to love. Kate was so excited by the mission she didn't appear to notice his own shakiness. He knew she had crept out through the first-floor bathroom window and climbed down the fall pipe with its convenient bends, as she had many a time before, because if she had left by the door her dog, Darkie, would have barked Bridey awake. He had no need to make furtive arrangements back at the sawmill since his grandad, Padraig, knew all about it. Padraig had helped them plan it. But Alan had worried about it all the same, tossing and turning through the night, with his bedroom window open to the cool night air, fitfully sleepless, as his puffy face now testified, and struggling to come to terms with his own fears.

He said, 'Let's check out the others. See if they're ready!'
Kate switched on her mobile, sending the text message:

RedyRNot

The answer flashed to her screen within moments, and with a shaking hand she held it out for Alan to see:

WotDyuTnkRevoltinGrl

Only Mark could have thought it through so quickly. Revolting had more than one meaning. It was typical of Mark's sarcastic sense of humour.

So it was really happening. The excitement no longer

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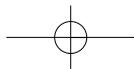
bearable, Alan did something he had never done before, something at once shocking and wonderful: he hugged Kate across the bikes. Then he kissed her on the lips, feeling lost and weightless with the ecstasy of the contact, the quickness of her surprise. He could not have moved a muscle again until Kate, with the same blossoming of friendship into love, kissed him back there in the shadowed lane, the bicycles interlocking like a promise between them.

Now, his heart racing with the thrill of her response, he saw the flush invade her face, an expanding tide about the roots of her auburn curls and down into her throat above her sweater, with its monogram opening letter from the *Book of Kells*.

Wordlessly, they wheeled the bikes around so they faced the town. The road was empty and they cycled side by side, Alan's jittery legs moving around in their own automatic motion, to the crossroads, with the slaughterhouse on the corner and the memory of animals bellowing in the trucks as they trundled in through the gates and the river tributary soon turning red with their blood. They wheeled right around the corner, picking up speed as they crossed over the first of the old stone bridges and then slowing momentarily at the second bridge, with the steps leading down to the river. With every turn of the pedals, the Comeragh Mountains loomed closer, their patchwork of green and yellow fields studded with whitewashed farm cottages, and, below them, extending

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southwards and westwards, the forests that fed Padraig's sawmill. They rode on into the sunrise in silence. All of a sudden, time was running away with them. And there was the scary feeling that it might never slow back to normal again.



The Swans

It had begun only a few months earlier, although now it seemed more like years. Alan had been fishing the River Suir upstream of some small islands opposite the big fork in the river. The morning was misty and cool, and the water meadow, which the locals called the Green, was overgrown, with grasses and rushes way higher than his knees. People said it was unusual. The plants were running wild that summer. The drier parts, up close to the riverbank, were dense with meadowsweet, floating over the ground in thick clouds, and filling his nostrils with its sweet scent. In his hands was the old bamboo three-piece he had borrowed from his grandfather, Padraig. He wasn't expecting to get a bite. Just looking for some space away from the bustle of the sawmill - and away from Padraig's intrusive fussing.

He hadn't got any closer to finding answers since arriving in Clonmel two months earlier. If anything the

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despair had relentlessly increased. It was there right now, as it was during every waking moment. Like the fire had gone out at the heart of him.

He had done his best to get it together. But he had nothing in common with the other kids here. He'd enrolled at the local high school thinking maybe he could connect with them through sport. He had always been pretty good at games. But even the games they played here were very different from back home. There was no American football, no baseball, no basketball, nothing. Football here was Irish football, where, as far as he could make out, they just slugged the daylight out of each other. That or the hurling, which was even worse. He must have looked half crazy to the other kids at times, his thoughts going blank on him, just standing there in the playground or sitting at his desk, his eyes staring, his limbs suddenly weighted down, like he was suited with lead. He just couldn't get his mind around the fact that Mom and Dad were gone, really gone, gone for good - period. How did you make sense out of something that couldn't possibly make any sense? With their loss came a great anger. He wanted to know why they had died. There had to be a reason - somebody who was responsible. He must have drifted into another of his blank spells, his eyes wide open but seeing nothing, when, abruptly, he came to with a sense of danger. There was a *homp-homp* noise from somewhere nearby, something strange cutting through the dreamy morning. And whatever it was, it was heading his way.

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Then he saw the swans.

He had noticed their nest, with three huge eggs in it, on one of the small reedy islands that dotted the shallows. Something, maybe the toss of his line, had made the birds panic. The homp-homp was the beating of their wings as they took off, still only half out of the water and rising into the air like two white avenging angels. He saw every detail highlighted as if in slow motion: the pounding wings, the prideful black knobs on the upraised orange bills, the eyes all-black. He could hear the power in those webbed feet as they battered the surface. For several moments, as they cleared the water just thirty feet from where he was standing, he was overwhelmed by a sense of paralysis. He did nothing at all to save himself. He just stood still, returning, stare for stare, the rage in those alien eyes.

He felt a sudden blow, but from an altogether different direction to what he expected. He offered no resistance to being dragged to the ground in a confusion of bodies, arms and legs, hearing the splintering into pieces of the fishing rod, only distantly aware that he had ended up on his back with somebody else on top of him.

‘Holy blessed mother – are you out of your mind?’

A voice, hot in his ear. A girl’s voice!

He glimpsed a face, pallid as goat’s cheese in striking contrast to the furnace of auburn hair. Immediately above them the swans clattered over their ground-hugging figures. His ears were full of a low throaty hissing. And then they were gone.

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Alan just lay there for a while, the stuffing knocked out of him.

She spoke again. 'Did you hear the sound of them hissing?'

He swallowed.

She added, 'They're supposed to be mute!'

His neck felt stiff. He had to turn his head through a painful ninety degrees to look at his saviour, who was now sitting up beside him. He sat up himself, seeing they were both covered by the creamy petals of meadowsweet.

All of a sudden she laughed, staring after the swans, which were sweeping low over the gentle rise of the Green, clearing by inches the hedge at the top, and continuing the slow ascent until they dwindled to specks against the mountains.

'I . . . I guess it was my fault. My fishing must have spooked them.'

But she wasn't even listening to him. He heard her whisper, as if to herself, 'Sure, it's a sign.'

'A sign of what?'

'Like maybe they sensed something different about you.'

He didn't know what to say to that.

Climbing to his shaky feet, he must have looked even more awkward and gangly than usual. Alan had topped six feet on his fifteenth birthday, two weeks earlier. He kind of hoped he would stop growing soon so he wouldn't end up having to bend his neck to get through doors like his beanpole grandfather. He thought about helping her

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up but he wasn't sure she'd like it. Instead he extended his hand to shake hers.

'Hi! I'm Alan.'

She slapped his hand away instead of shaking it. She hopped to her feet with a grin and said, 'Kate Shaunessy!'

What had he done that was funny? There was an awkward silence. He could see in her eyes that she was weighing him up.

Man! He was useless at dealing with girls. And that made him feel even more awkward than ever. And now he was looking at her, very likely staring, and it was making her blush a bright scarlet. She whistled to a small black and white sheepdog, which came bounding up. She plucked at its coat, brushing it free of grass stalks and petals, like she was getting ready to leave.

He said, 'Thanks!'

He saw her eyes flash, like she had made up her mind about something. 'I've seen you out here before. Pretending to be fishing.'

'I never noticed you.'

'Why would you notice me? I've been watching you, moping around, feeling sorry for yourself.'

'I - I wasn't feeling sorry for myself.'

'I already knew who you are. I know you're an orphan.'

He shook his head, slowly, not knowing what to say.

Then he saw how she was trembling. She had been freaked out too. She blurted out, 'Oh, you needn't get embarrassed. I'm an orphan too.'

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He stared at her for a long moment, wordless. Then he began to pick up the broken pieces of his grandad's rod, making the best he could of the tangle of line, so he could hold the bundle together in his right hand.

She walked about a dozen paces but then she stopped and patted the dog. He had the feeling she was waiting for him.

Alan caught up with Kate and her dog. He was thinking about what she had just told him: *I'm an orphan too*. The way she had said it, kind of defiantly. It made him hope that somehow you really did come to terms with the bad things, even if they never made any sense.

She said, 'I'm taking Darkie home. You can come with me, if you want. I'd like to show you something.'

'Show me what?'

'Are you interested in herbs?'

'I've never thought much about them.'

'Hmph!'

The mist had melted away from the morning and he hadn't even noticed it going. It felt like maybe a little of it had invaded his senses. His mind was groggy and his limbs felt numb, so he hardly registered the grassy bank under his feet as they passed by the island with the swans' eggs.

'Well I'm very interested. I've been learning about them. Teaching myself, really. With some help from Fergal.'

They abandoned the Green to enter the beaten dirt track that ran southwards along the riverbank.

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‘Fergal?’

‘Fergal’s my uncle. But he’s a zoologist and not a botanist.’

They continued to chat and to stroll, following the dirt track, limited on their left by the slow-flowing River Suir and to their right by the hoary limestone wall that separated the river from the Presentation Convent School.

‘Here, Darkie!’

Kate cracked open the right half of the gates, ushering the dog through, and then she waited for Alan to follow after it into a big, overgrown garden. They were within sight of a very strange-looking house.

A woman paused in emerging from a stonewall outbuilding, to take stock of them. Alan guessed that she must be the housekeeper for Kate’s uncle, Fergal. She was about mid-sixties, stocky and aproned, with thick grey hair held back in a bun. Under one brawny arm she carried an enamel basin filled with newly washed bedding.

Kate said, ‘Oh, Bridey – this is Alan.’

‘Gor! I know who he is! Don’t I see for meself Geraldine O’Brien looking back at me!’

Alan caught Kate’s whispered, ‘Sorry!’ Geraldine O’Brien was his mother’s maiden name. Dad had called her Gee.

‘You knew Mom?’

He didn’t know if his question embarrassed Bridey, or if she heard it at all. She was suddenly caught up with

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shaking her fist into the sky. 'Them blessed yokes, with their perpetual thundering!'

Alan glanced up at a jet passing high overhead. The sound might, at a pinch, be described as a thundering, however faint and distant.

Kate said, 'I'm showing Alan around the place. But you could tell him more about the house.'

'Sure he's not interested in this auld ruin.'

'Ma'am, I am interested.'

Bridey peered back at him with a look of suspicion. 'And why is that now? Because it looks so contrary?'

He couldn't help but smile at her choice of word for the house, which captured the look of it perfectly. 'Is it Victorian?'

'It started off as Georgian, but they went through a fit of overhauling it during Victorian times.' Bridey talked into the air, as if half-bemusedly to herself. 'That was the time when it got its name, the "Doctor's House". The Doctor in this case being the medical superintendent of what in them days was known as "the madhouse".'

Kate tugged at his arm to haul him away from Bridey's reminiscences. 'We're going to take a look at the garden.'

'Ah, be off the pair o' you! Leave me to feed Darkie! But mind you keep clear of them greenhouses. Sure that uncle of yours is as stubborn as the tide.'

Kate waited until Bridey and Darkie had disappeared through a side door into the house before explaining, 'My grandmother died when Fergal and Daddy were young.'

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Bridey became their nanny. Then when Daddy died at the mission in Africa, she blamed the planes.'

'She blamed the planes?'

'For taking him to Africa.'

Alan shook his head.

'She's convinced the house is cursed.'

'Cursed?'

'By what went on - in the old asylum.'

He smiled. 'You've got to admit it's a weird-looking house!'

'All the time I was growing up here I thought I was living in the same world that Lewis Carroll wrote about.'

The original house must have been compact and square, with sash windows divided up into small Georgian panes. But somebody, maybe the Victorian asylum keeper, had inserted an octagonal tower on one corner. Alan was standing right outside it, looking up at a structure of wooden frames filled with small glass panes, capped by an amazing minaret-style tower that soared to a tiny flagpole, bearing the Irish tricolour. On the gable ends of the house he saw other additions, very likely arising out of the same fantastic imagination. Ornate canopies topped fussy bay windows and porticos surrounded the front and back doors. There were additional dormer windows on the roof adjacent to soaring chimneys. The surrounding gardens were a labyrinth of arbours for roses, honeysuckle and stuff, so you could wander out of the house into a fairyland of scents and colours.

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They carried on round to the back, taking a course that avoided some large greenhouses, with peeling paintwork and several broken panes.

He murmured, 'Looks to me like Bridey had a point!'

'It's nothing that a bit of fixing wouldn't make safe. They were properly cared for when Grandad was alive. He was interested in plants, an amateur like me. But Fergal is too busy to take proper care of them. Bridey wants to knock them all down. We're the only Shaunessys left of the family. She's terrified something bad will happen. But there are old memories, like when Daddy and Uncle Fergal were growing up. So Fergal can't bring himself to do it.'

She led Alan along a neglected path, overgrown with elderberry and nettles, bringing them face to face with a tunnel big enough to drive a car through. When they stepped inside, it was dank and gloomy. A hesitant light hovered around the entrance, as if fearful to penetrate deeper.

'I used to hide here from Bridey, playing hide-and-seek. It cuts right under the main road. Then there are all sorts of secret carriageways and tunnels before it finally comes out in the grounds of the hospital.'

'This still leads to the asylum?'

Kate nodded. 'It's a mental hospital now. Once I saw a picture of the old superintendent. He had huge side-whiskers and a beard like Father Christmas. The whole place was arranged so patients never left it even when they came to work here in the gardens.'

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‘Creepy!’

Kate hooted with laughter at the expression on his face. ‘Some of the mad people still try to escape this way. Oh, I know I shouldn’t call them that. There are times I feel madder than any of them myself. But Bridey could tell you stories. Those poor souls, they wade out into the river until it comes up to their chins. Then they shriek to the nurses that they’ll drown themselves if anybody tries to come and save them.’

‘Shee-it!’

She led him back to the house where they did a tour of the downstairs rooms. Bridey appeared with two glasses of orange juice, then left them to it. They carried their drinks into a study with collections of tropical insects mounted in frames.

‘Your uncle works with insects?’

‘He’s an entomologist at University College Cork. He’s off right now counting new species in the African jungle before they become extinct.’ Then, with what seemed a clumsy abruptness, she just came right out with it and asked him how his parents had died.

Alan was startled into silence.

‘You don’t have to tell me, if you don’t want to.’

‘There isn’t much to say. It was an accident.’

‘What kind of accident?’

He looked down at his feet. Would she never stop asking him questions? ‘It was in March – just a lousy accident.’

She slumped down into a chair and toyed with

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her orange. She said, 'I'm sorry! I didn't mean to upset you.'

He remained standing, annoyed with himself for letting his feelings show. 'How about your folks?'

'Mammy and Daddy were murdered.'

'Oh, man!'

'You don't need to worry. I've got used to it.'

He took a deep breath. 'I'd been on a school skiing trip. It was snowing a bit but it wasn't any kind of a snowstorm. Dad and Mom were coming to pick me up. A special treat in a chopper. Dad was an experienced pilot. He wouldn't have taken any risk. A bunch of us, school friends, we wanted to get one more run on the slopes. I look back and I think it was a really stupid thing to do. I keep thinking, what if we hadn't gone back for that last run? A kid called Rudy Forrester broke his leg. It was a really bad break, with his shinbone poking out through his skin. Mom and Dad - they had to take him to the hospital about thirty miles away. They were supposed to come right back for me.'

The silence between them lasted several seconds.

'All my life, well, I guess I was your typical American kid. You could say I was one of those laid-back guys. To tell you the truth—!' Alan's right hand suddenly came up and he slapped it against his head, like he somehow wanted to just punch sense into it.

She jumped to her feet and grabbed at his arm. 'Please, Alan! Don't do that. Don't blame yourself.'

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His brown eyes grew distant. 'I guess . . . I guess I was some kind of a stupid jerk. The kind of kid who just goes through life without really thinking all that much about anything.'

She held onto his arm, almost hugging it to her. 'What happened to them? Was it an accident?'

'That's what the wreck report said. They made a big thing about the fact it was snowing - and the fact Dad wasn't familiar with the area. But he was a really good pilot. I just don't buy it.'

'You don't think it was an accident?'

'My grandfather, Padraig, doesn't think so. He's downright paranoid about it.'

'What? He thinks it was suspicious?'

'I know it sounds kind of crazy. But that's what he thinks.'

She took him into a large sitting room, with its big chintzy lounge suite and dark mahogany furniture. The strange tower came off it on one corner, and there was an upholstered window seat so you could sit in there and look out into the garden. There were photographs on the walls of waterfalls, and safari shots of lions, zebras, elephants and crocodiles. In between the photographs, Alan saw rusty iron spears and big wooden clubs. He looked at pictures of a younger Kate with her parents outside single-storey buildings with white walls and red-tile roofs. They were surrounded by palm trees and colourful tropical plants. Kate's parents looked slim, medium height. Her

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father was black-haired and her mother was red-haired, like Kate herself, but a lighter, more golden, red. There was a boy, who looked younger than Kate, with the same red hair.

She brushed her finger over the glass in the frame. 'My brother, Billy.'

'And all that's what - some kind of medical mission?'

'It was a Belgian Catholic Mission, with a school and a small hospital. Mammy was the matron of the hospital and Daddy was the doctor. They worked in the Democratic Republic of the Congo all of the time I was growing up. Billy and me, we lived here with Uncle Fergal and Bridey.' Her green eyes filled with longing. 'We used to really look forward to going out there and joining Mammy and Daddy in the long holidays. The mission was close to the gorilla forest. There were palm trees in the grounds and all sorts of fabulous plants. Right outside our bungalow was a giant aloe that sent up seed flowers as tall as a tree. Then, when they seeded, the whole plant just withered away and died. Sister Marie Therèse, she was like the Bridey over there. She had such a sense of fun. She used to tell us stories of what the patients did behind the doctors' and nurses' backs. They still believed in spells and potions. She called them *les petites feticheurs*! I loved the Africans too. They needed so very little to make them happy. Mammy used to say that the best smiles she ever saw were African smiles.'

Alan saw that the living room was like a mirror image

of the living room back at the sawmill. Bridey and Pdraig had each made a shrine to happier times.

‘What happened, Kate?’

Her head jerked and her eyes darkened. ‘There was a lot of trouble going on. There were enough bad people locally already without others coming out of Rwanda. Mammy and Daddy had been told to leave. But they knew if they abandoned the hospital the mission would have been finished. And they thought they were safe because they were a hundred and fifty kilometres away from the border.’ She hesitated, blinking a little fast, still staring at the photographs.

‘Good job you weren’t there!’

‘I was there and so was Billy.’ Kate inhaled and her nostrils dilated. ‘Sister Marie Therèse saved me. She was in charge of the kitchen gardens. We were out there gathering vegetables when we heard the trucks drive in and then the shots and the screaming. I wanted to run back but she stopped me. There was a . . . a kind of pit. An underground store where she kept yams and stuff. She pushed me into it.’ Kate sniffed and rubbed at her nose. ‘I hid there all through it.’ He could see she was doing her best to fight back tears. ‘I was still there when government soldiers came around, I don’t know how many days later. They found me in the pit. They . . . they told me the rebels had killed them all . . . everybody . . .’

‘Hey—!’

‘I had counselling. I couldn’t bear to go out. I couldn’t

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face meeting people – nobody. Not even my friends.’ Kate’s face was flushed and her eyelids were blinking so fast they were fluttering. She looked very different from the girl who had pushed him out of the way of the swans.

He touched her shoulder, spoke to her softly. ‘C’mon, Kate! Let’s go explore the garden!’

She scampered back out through the door, half running. He gave her a little space to recover her composure. When he caught up with her he found himself standing at the top of a gentle slope of lawn leading down to the open river. Alan followed her gaze across the forty yards of reed-strewn water to the Green, and beyond that, to the mountains, which were so close you felt you could put out your hand and touch them. He realised that they were almost exactly opposite the place he had been fishing, but closer to the big fork in the river.

‘A good job Bridey wasn’t watching us earlier!’

Kate managed a nervous laugh. ‘Bridey would have needed binoculars. But if she had, she’d have had a heart attack.’ She was hurrying on again. ‘Come on – I told you there was something I wanted to show you!’

‘Show me what?’

‘You won’t know about BSBI.’

‘What’s that?’

‘The Botanical Society of the British Isles. I’m helping them with a project on rare and threatened plants.’ She stopped in front of a small tilled piece of the garden, right by the water, about as far away from the house as you could

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possibly get. It was divided up into tiny beds, each about a foot square, separated from its neighbours by uneven rows of bricks. He guessed that Kate had laid out the bricks.

'You see?'

The beds were empty except for one.

'Are you kidding me?'

'Go on! Take a closer look!' Kate went down onto her haunches and so he did the same. He saw a flower that looked a bit like a dandelion. The label read 'Irish fleabane (*Inula salicina*) - rare. K.S. Clonmel, Tipperary'.

'K.S. - that you?'

She nodded, proudly. 'It's on the threatened list. I'm waiting for the seeds so I can send them to the gene bank people in Dublin.'

'Huh!'

She glanced across at him with a wry smile. 'If you're really interested, maybe you could help me.'

'I know nothing about this stuff. If you hadn't told me what it was, I'd have looked at that plant and I'd have seen a weed.'

Kate's eyes turned to the Comeragh Mountains, to the forests that clambered over the lower slopes. 'I just knew it was fate. Your grandfather's woods cover half of those foothills. There are bits of the old original forests up there on the slopes. Bogs, even!'

From the chatter of words she had flung into the air like seeds, Alan's mind plucked out one more curious than all the others: fate.

The Blooming

Mark Grimstone was glad he had agreed to keep his sister company while Mo was looking for crystals. They had scouted a few rocky fields before cutting in to explore the dense woods off the Dungarvan Road. After three-quarters of an hour of walking through shadows and being bitten by midges, they came out into a natural clearing, with a white rocky scarp at one edge. Mo went to investigate while Mark passed a moment or two looking around him, swivelling on the heel of his left trainer. Her squeal of delight meant a discovery had been made.

They would spend an hour or two here. Mark sat in a patch of grass, lounging back against a heather-covered outcrop, whipping at insects with a switch of ash and wondering why the Reverend Grimstone, his adoptive father, had brought them to the Irish backwater of Clonmel.

Grimstone would play his usual games, pulling in the more gullible locals – those hoping for salvation from

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their personal demons – into his rituals of head-touching and shouting their sins aloud. This was all in a day’s work for Grimstone’s style of hellfire and brimstone. But why Clommel? Mark couldn’t fathom it. He gave up trying, and slumped back against the outcrop, watching his sister search for treasures against the sun-bright scarp of pearly rock.

Mo was happy poking around among the crystals, or finding something that caught her eye in a single flower head or an insect scuttling among the stems and roots. She’d take ages examining her finds before sketching them into her album. Mark dropped his head, plucking a battered harmonica from the breast pocket of his short-sleeved shirt. His fingers caressed it, as if the feel of it was comforting, and he played a few riffs to while the time away. His eyelids never completely closed, but he relaxed into a daydream, lulled by the peacefulness of the woods and the image of his sister searching for crystals. He so abandoned himself in mind-mazing that he lost track of time. Only when he noticed that his face and forearms were burning did he swear aloud, causing Mo to lift her head.

‘Mo! You might have warned me.’

‘I – I’ve guh-guh-guh . . . guh-got the cuh-cuh-cream.’ Her stammer worsened because he was annoyed with her.

‘Oh, it’s all right! I’ll come and get it.’

He climbed back up onto his knees, rubbing the skin of his face with hands that were also growing increasingly

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lobsterish. He was burnt all over. And now he saw, with a start of alarm, that they were not alone. A man was watching them from the far edge of the clearing. Dressed in worn denims and leather boots that were laced to just below his knees, he was as lean as a scarecrow, with a face that looked like a weather-beaten mask pulled tight over a long bony skull. It was with a thrill of alarm that Mark noticed his eyes. They were an intense bright blue, so luminous that even from a hundred feet away they seemed to glow with an inner source of light.

Suddenly the man stepped out of the shadows and, with a long-legged amble, he closed in on Mo.

She abandoned her backpack and notebook and, scuttling over to Mark's side, she clutched his arm so fiercely he winced with pain from his sunburnt skin.

'Are you aware this is a private wood?'

The words were spoken in a bass growl. And now he stood over them, the stranger was as tall as a door.

'We're sorry! We didn't know we were trespassing.'

'English it would seem, judging by your accent.'

'Stop buh-buh-buh-bullying muh-muh-my brother!'

The old man's cheeks were lined with vertical wrinkles so deep they could have been gouged by a chisel. His eyes, swivelling from Mark to his sister, were like searchlights.

'You don't much resemble brother and sister.'

Mark muttered, 'We're adopted, if it's any of your business.'

The tall man paused a moment, as if to reappraise Mo

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anew. 'And your names, if you please, without the boldness?'

'I'm Mark Grimstone and this is my sister, Mo.'

'Yes, and if I'm not mistaken, you must be the brood of the visiting Reverend Grimstone?'

'You've met him?'

'Met him? I certainly have not. Nor would I ever wish to do so. Just what do the pair of you think you're doing in my wood?'

'My sister is interested in crystals.'

The man gazed down at Mo, focusing the intense blue eyes on her cowering shape. 'It was crystals then you were drawing in your notebook?'

Mo nodded glumly.

'Well then, go and fetch it. Show me your drawings.'

Mo ran to fetch both her backpack and the notebook. She handed the book up to the stranger.

The man plucked some iron-rimmed glasses out of the breast pocket of his shirt. His gnarled hands thumbed through the tiny pages and the blue searchlights passed over the drawings and words. His frown turned to curiosity. 'Strange and potent images, for all that they are in miniature! And these words that go by them, if words they might be at all, are in no language that I recognise.'

'Mo writes in a language of her own.'

The old man shook his head. 'Why would a child go to such extremes?'

'So nobody else can read it.'

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The blue eyes were softer now as they confronted Mark's own. The obvious question lay in the air between them. But the old man was prudent enough to leave it unasked. Instead he turned back to the notebook and carried on browsing. Suddenly he stopped, his finger tracing one of the images. Whatever the old man had seen, it was enough to turn him from the book to Mo, studying her with the same intensity of scrutiny he had previously focused on the book.

'Perhaps your presence here is not without purpose?'

Mark was curious as to what the old man had seen in Mo's notebook. He was still eyeing Mo, with intense interest. 'Sure you're as elegant as the famous boy pharaoh.'

Mo lifted up her hazel eyes to confront his blue. 'Cuh-cuh-cuh-can I have muh-muh-my notebook back, please?'

'On a condition! Will you be so good as to show me what it was you were so busy sketching by the white rock?'

He held the notebook low enough for her to point out her most recent drawings and secret writings, which covered two pages. Then he studied the pages again through the iron-rims, glancing from her drawings to the white rock and back again. He whistled. 'Well now - aren't you the most remarkable creature. Here I recognise quartz and pyrites, here purple amethyst and ultramarine turquenite. You have the geometry of their structures - that's a fact. But you've captured something deeper than any ordinary eye might see.'

Mo flushed.

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‘And did you plan to take away some crystals in your satchel?’

It took Mo a second or two to recognise he meant her backpack. She shook her head vigorously. ‘That wuh-would be suh-suh-suh-stealing.’

‘Not if I were to give you permission. An artist of your skill demands that much respect. So take what you will of them. Explore my woods wherever you will, or must.’ He returned the notebook to Mo.

Mo nodded her thanks, although her whole body was trembling.

‘A final question. How long have you been here, in Clonmel?’

Mark answered, ‘A little over a week.’

‘Yet still time enough for one gifted with such vision. Tell me, Mo Grimstone, have you been surprised by what you’ve observed here?’

Mark said, protectively, ‘What kind of question is that?’

‘Let your sister answer for herself, if she has a mind to.’

Mo gazed back up at him again. ‘Whu-whu—?’

The tall man leaned closer to Mo, so he could see the true expression in her eyes. ‘Take your time to find the words. I’m interested to know what might have captured your attention.’

‘In nuh-nuh-nature?’

‘In nature maybe – or in the nature of things?’

‘Nuh-nuh-nature is buh-buh-buh . . .’ Mo shook her head, frustrated in her attempts to express the word.

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Mark hissed, 'I've had enough of this. Just leave her alone.'

A huge hand descended over Mark's left shoulder. 'Patience just a moment longer. Leave her room to speak her mind.'

'... buh-buh-blooming.'

'Nature is blooming?'

Mo nodded.

The tall man held his face close to that of the girl a moment longer before he straightened up and gazed about himself at the ring of trees.

'These woods are a confusion of trails and half-trails. Will you be able to find your way back the way you came?'

'Of course we will.' Mark turned on his heel as if to walk away, but Mo put her hand on his sunburnt arm.

'Your sister is not so sure?'

Mark sighed. 'Okay. So why don't you show us the way out?'

The old man looked down at their anxious faces and abruptly turned on his heel, his long paces already creating such a lead they had to run after him. He called back over his shoulder without breaking stride. 'Oh, I think I'll do better than that. I'll escort the pair of you to meet a matching pair of scallywags. You might find you have mischief in common.'

Kate's notion of fate had come to interest Alan a lot more over the days that followed that first meeting by the river.

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The loss of Mom and Dad had certainly made him wonder about fate. But he wasn't sure he believed in it. At least not the superstitious notion of it that Kate and his grandfather had in mind. Over the ten days since then he had enjoyed getting together with her at the sawmill. They had agreed to a daily ramble, planning a route the night before. So far they hadn't saved any threatened plants from extinction, but they had found a fleabane that was heading towards vulnerable and a cudweed that, if it wasn't threatened, was still kind of interesting, at least to Kate. Enough to plant two more beds in the garden of the Doctor's House.

Then, sometime in the middle of all this, Kate had clapped her hands and exclaimed, 'We need to get better organised!'

'What do you mean - like some kind of place of our own?'

She clapped her hands. 'A den!'

He had talked to his grandfather about it, and only yesterday Pdraig had finally agreed that they could use the former dairy, a detached red-brick outhouse in the shade of a dilapidated old pear tree that was peripheral to the main house and the sawmill complex of buildings. And today, after Kate had arrived, they went to have a good look at the place, finding it filthy, with outdated wiring and old lead plumbing, and chock-full of rubbish.

Alan pulled a face. 'Boy - what a mess! It looks like it's been abandoned for half a century.'

But Kate was more enthusiastic. 'We'll just have to put off rambling for a few days and get it sorted out.'

They had only just begun the clearout when Padraig came striding in off the slopes with two strangers in tow: a slim flaxen-haired boy with a bad case of sunburn, and a girl with strikingly bronze skin and shoulder-length dark brown hair. The boy looked fifteen or sixteen, maybe the same age as Alan and Kate, but the girl looked more like twelve or thirteen.

'Company for you!' Padraig tossed the comment into the air and was gone.

Kate was as surprised as Alan with the appearance of the two strangers, who were peering curiously at the cluster of buildings that stood back from the road, including Padraig's plain two-storey Victorian house, built of the same liver-coloured bricks as the dairy, and the labyrinth of corrugated iron sheds, surrounded by piles of logs. Padraig's return to work was announced by the high-pitched scream of an industrial wood saw.

'Hi!' she said, smiling. 'I'm Kate.'

The youth blinked at her, looking embarrassed. 'Hi!' he said. 'I'm Mark and this is my sister, Mo.'

'And that's Alan.' She waved to where her newfound American friend was lounging against the trunk of the pear tree.

Alan lifted an arm in greeting.

'You're English - over here on holiday?' Kate enquired.

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'We wandered into the woods and got lost. The old man found us and brought us back here.'

Alan shoved himself off the tree and came to stand next to Kate. 'He's my grandfather, Padraig.'

'You don't sound local, either. You're American.'

'Yeah, I'm American. Padraig is an O'Brien, my mother's father. Or I should say was - my folks are dead.'

'Mine too,' Kate added. 'We're both orphans.'

Mark looked as if he didn't quite know what to say to that. He exchanged glances with Mo, whose eyes widened. Kate thought she had amazingly beautiful eyes, a pearly hazel in colour, and nothing like the blue eyes of her brother. They appeared lambent against the bronze tones of her skin.

'Whu-whu-whu-what you suh-said about being orphans?'

Kate blinked, taken aback by Mo's stammer. 'It's true. We're both orphans. But, well, you know, it was a lot more recent for Alan - only months ago.'

Mo's eyes shifted fleetingly to Mark, but they returned to look directly at Kate. Her face was tense, her look questioning as she added, 'Muh-Muh-Mark and I, wuh-wuh-we're . . . adopted.'

Alan exclaimed, 'What? Like you're not really brother and sister?'

'Oh, I can't believe this,' Kate implored. 'Don't tell me - you're not saying that you're orphans too?'

Mark shrugged. 'We think we are. But we don't really know if we're orphans or not.'

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'You don't even know - sure that's awful,' muttered Kate'

'We're used to it.'

Alan groaned, 'I can't believe this. It's all getting like too much of a coincidence!'

For several moments an uncomfortable silence pervaded the company. Then it was Mo who was the first to break the tension, shoving past Mark, to peer into the outhouse. Her gaze took in a jumble of old furniture and pieces of outdated woodcutting equipment. The place stank, as if generations of cats had used it for a toilet. 'So whuh-whuh-whuh-what are you planning?'

Alan shoved a clump of brown hair off his brow. 'We're going to make the dairy into a den.'

Mark and Mo couldn't fail to notice that, under his fringe, Alan had a red triangular birthmark in the centre of his forehead.

Kate added, 'And we could do with some help.'

Mark seemed to be the last of them to shrug off the tension. Judging from the look on his face, he wasn't sure that he wanted to spend the rest of the day shifting rubbish.

Mo appeared to read her brother's mind. She said, 'Cuh-cuh-can't we help them, Mark? Oh, cuh-cuh-cuh . . . c'mon.'

Alan nodded up to the ceiling where there was an antiquated electric light fitting. 'Looks like we've got juice. And there's an old porcelain sink over there. So we've got water too, if maybe just a cold faucet and lead-piped, so definitely not drinkable. This place used to be a real dairy,

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back whenever. You've got to watch the floor because it slopes away to the corner where you see the sink. But hey! We get the junk shifted and we've got space for stuff, like maybe a table and chairs and even a phone line.'

Mark sniffed at the green-stained sink. 'You really think you could rig up a connection?'

'I don't see why not. There are two separate lines going into the house and the sawmill. All we've got to do is to hook up to one of them.'

'We could set up a computer station?' Mark's spirits were beginning to lift. He and Mo only had another week, but even a week could become interesting.

'Don't see why not.'

'We could download stuff - music?'

'Sure! We could party!'

Kate cut through the exchanges. 'Partying wasn't what I had in mind.'

'Kate here is saving Ireland's plants from extinction. I've been recruited to help her. The den will be our headquarters.'

'Wow!' Mark pretended to be impressed.

Mo muttered, 'Shu-shu-shut up, Mark!'

The two youths grinned, struggling to control themselves.

Mark lifted his eyebrows at Kate. 'Maybe we can work out a compromise?'

Kate shook her fist at him. 'The only compromise I'll give you is a meeting between this fist and your scalded English face!'

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The two boys fell into uncontrollable laughter.

Mo raked her fingernail along Mark's spine as Kate blushed a furious red. For a moment the two girls looked at each other. Then Mo's lips pouted and she waved Kate to join her. 'Cuh-cuh-cuh . . . Oh, come on, Kate!'

There was no getting out of the chore after that. Mark, still laughing at times, threw himself into it as hard as the others. Clearing the dairy of junk took several hot and sweaty hours. All four of them ended up covered in dirt and spider webs. Alan tugged and hammered at the single cold tap until he got it working, and they washed their hands and faces over the white porcelain sink. They filled up some empty bottles so they could sprinkle water over the concrete floor, getting ready to broom it clean. A careless sprinkle and they ended up throwing the water over each other amid hoots of laughter. An hour later, with the sun heading west, they found an old wooden table and an assortment of chairs, so they could settle down and rest in a little more comfort, feasting on Irish ham sandwiches and ice-cold orange juice from Padraig's kitchen.

A sweat-streaked Kate rested her face on her interlaced knuckles and looked across the table at the fair-haired English boy. His short-sleeved shirt was muddied and streaked. Could it really be that all four of them were orphans? And if so, was Alan right - was this too much to put down to coincidence? The thought caused an anxious fluttering of her heart. She noticed Mark lifting

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a battered looking harmonica from his shirt pocket and she watched how he toyed with it on the scratched bare wood of the table.

‘Are you going to give us a tune?’

His face flushed an even deeper red with embarrassment and he stuffed the harmonica back into the shirt pocket. But from time to time, as they munched and got to know one another, Kate noticed that he would glance her way, as if mentally assessing this bossy Irish girl with her green eyes and a temper to match the colour of her hair.

The Sigil

Mark and Mo were late in getting back to the rented house, formerly a Church of Ireland parsonage, where their adoptive mother, Bethal, was impatiently waiting. Bethal was tall, grey-eyed and bony, with long mousy hair plaited like a show horse's tail and long unshapely hands that always looked raw. Now, in the gloom of the oak-panelled entrance hall, she shrank from the grimy appearance of their clothes.

'Filthy toads!' Her lips were inadequate to cover her gravestones of teeth. 'Filthy! *Filthy* in body and soul!'

With her ribs thrust out, she blocked entry to the tunnel-like corridor that led to the ground-floor washroom.

'Get up there! Let Sir see for himself the state you're in! He'll know what to do about it!'

So saying, she harried them upstairs with raps of her knuckles against the backs of their skulls, on through the tiers of chairs in the Meeting Hall and the tabletop

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makeshift altar, and through the heavy door into the office-cum-sacristy at the back. Here she abandoned them with a slam of the door. Late as they were, evening worship had not long ended and the pungent odour of sweat still permeated the Hall and chased them into the inner sanctum. Sweat, lots of it, was an integral part of Grimstone's services, which had little to say about the gentle Lord Jesus. The Lord he venerated skulked away from the light in deeper and darker places, devoid of anything a normal priest or vicar would have recognised as Christian caring and kindness.

On entering the sacristy, they saw that his soiled dog collar had been flung onto the desk surface. They also saw, with a slender hope, that he had little or no interest in their lateness, or, for that matter, the dirtied state of their clothes. Ignoring the clatter of their arrival, Grimstone leaned against the sill, while staring out into the fading evening through the wide round-topped window. As usual when he was coming down from the high of a service, the black silk shirt was stuck to him with sweat, sculpting his heavily muscled body.

They waited in silence for more than a minute, listening to the deep methodical rasp of his breathing.

'You've been wondering why I brought you here? I know you have, so don't bother to deny it.' His voice was quiet, a sonorous growl, but they knew him well enough to sense danger.

'Well, much as it surprises me too, this town is of

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growing interest.' He inhaled a deep draught of the cool air of evening. 'There is the reek of old power here. Not that you would catch the whiff of it. It is almost buried and forgotten, yet lingering, the way heavy stinks do. Maybe you girl, with your whore-witch heritage, can actually smell it? I've seen you scribbling into that book. So tell me what you've discovered.'

'The nuh-nuh-nuh . . . the name is Cuh-Cuh-Celtic.'

'Cuh-Cuh-Celtic! Of course it's Celtic. Clonmel in their degenerate tongue means the Vale of Honey. But this stink is older . . . far older still. Pah! Why do I waste my breath on the likes of you! What can you tell me that I don't know already?'

'I'm nuh-nuh-nuh . . . nuh-not sure, Suh-Sir.'

'You're nuh-nuh-nuh-not sure? Well, let me explain then what is to be done. We face a more formidable challenge than I realised when I came here to proselytise this backwater. Why, then, I hear your small minds wondering, does he bother to share the good news with us? Why? Because it is my Lord himself, my sacred Master, who senses the threat. The threat is to Him. Oh, yes, indeed. He senses a threat to Him, here in this town, in the old power that still lingers here.'

Mark muttered, 'A threat, Sir?'

Grimstone's head was nodding slowly, his hair glistening with an opalescent sheen of sweat. 'I had anticipated every sewer of Papist heresy, with its confessionals and slothful delusions. But this is far worse. What's at the bottom of

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it? A lingering relic of the old paganism? I wouldn't be surprised.' His voice rose, throaty and rasping. 'Old power! Old power, and a threat to My Lord, that by His blessed will, I will expose and crush.'

Only now, as he spun round to face them, did they see that the black metal cross, the symbol of the church Grimstone had personally founded, was clasped in his right hand. He lifted it lovingly against his brow, pressed its embossed sigil against the scars of many such impressions, a new branding. Although the cross did not look hot, the smell of his burning flesh pervaded the room. Then he intoned the mantra:

'My own Lord! My beloved Master! My personal salvation!'

Mark and Mo shivered, their eyes averted from the repulsive sight. The cross was matted and gnarled with great age. He never tired of recounting how he had acquired it, when, as a young man, he had been a wastrel, heading for perdition. He had rescued the cross from an elderly antiquarian, a greedy robber of graves. Yet the very moment he first held it in his hands, he had his first vision. So forceful was the shock of revelation, he had lost consciousness. When he came round, the collector was dead, drowned in his own blood. Grimstone had staggered from the antiquarian's home, already glimpsing his destiny in the truth and power of the cross. He had dismissed the antiquarian's claim – sometimes there were hints that he had tested that claim on the antiquarian's lips in more violent forms than mere words – that it had come from

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a barrow grave that dated to long before the Christian era. Instead Grimstone pretended that it was a Templar relic, dating back to the Crusades.

He had kept his discovery to himself for some years, immersing himself in ancient learning. Only when he felt ready did he present himself as witness, to begin the foundation of the Islington Church of the Sigil, named after the silvery shape embossed into the metal where the figure of Jesus would normally be, a shape that resembled the symbol for infinity, but comprising three twisted circles of silver instead of two.

No one other than Grimstone was allowed to hold the cross. It was brought out at the high point of conversion for every new flock, a blessing for their eyes, but not their kiss or their touch, and only when they had proved their devotion through weeks of induction leading to a final service of proclamation and dedication, ready to be born again in veneration of Grimstone's unforgiving Lord. It was usually put away after the service ended. But the fact Grimstone had kept it out this evening, that he was still venerating the sigil after the service, was ominous.

Knowing this, Mark's and Mo's hearts quailed as Grimstone turned his back on them, looking down the fall of the gentle hill into the town, where twilight now clothed the rendered walls and slated roofs, his eyes finally alighting on the river.

'The river should also interest you, witch-foetus. Its name suggests a paganish worship by a race much older than

the Celts. Half savages, like your whore of a mother. Now I know you haven't missed the lingering signs in your scratching and searching in the dirt?'

'Nuh-nuh-nuh-nuh . . . nuh-nuh . . .'

'Quack-quack-quack! Enough of your quacking! Three rivers - evocative of the foulest pretence - the stink of a heathen trinity?'

'I . . . I duh-duh-duh-don't know.'

'Liar!'

His growl deepened. 'Old power! Its grip long vanquished, yet such is its hold on the very landscape, it has endured.'

Grimstone inhaled, a deep breath, then, deeming his body sufficiently cooled, he turned away from the open window. His eyes, almost coal-black in the gloom, confronted them.

'I will have no more lies - not a single word! I know where you have been today, from moment to moment, and who you met. I want you to describe every detail of it to me. Not a morsel omitted!'

Mo spoke first, risking his anger. 'I tuh-tuh-tuh-took us into the woods . . . like yuh-you asked me to.'

Mark felt a stab of horror, realising now that the day had been manipulated by Grimstone. The trespassing and, very likely, everything else that had come from it, had been planned. But why?

'Don't keep me waiting!'

Mark described the clearing in the woods where Mo

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had found some crystals, and drawn them in her notebook. The appearance of the old man, Padraig.

'I know you had a lengthy conversation with this man.'

Mark blinked with a second shock of realisation; somebody must have followed them, watched them constantly, closely enough to see what was happening but not close enough to overhear the conversation.

He described how Padraig had warned them they were trespassing. How he had questioned them.

'He asked you your names?'

'Yes.'

'Did he recognise your names?'

'Yes, Sir! He knew about you.'

'What did he know? His precise words?'

Mark did his best to imitate the deep-throated local accent. "You must be the visiting brood of the Reverend Grimstone?"

'Brood indeed!'

'I asked him if he had met you.' Mark tried the accent again. "Met him, I certainly have not. Nor would I ever wish to do so."

Grimstone's eyes widened. 'But he didn't immediately order you out?'

'He saw the crystals Maureen had drawn into her notebook. He was really impressed with them. He went on a bit - I didn't understand all of it.' Mark did a fair imitation of Padraig, "You have the geometry of their

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structures, that's easy to see. But you've captured something deeper than ordinary eye might see of them."

Grimstone's hand fell on Mark's left shoulder. 'Something deeper? What was the old fool alluding to?'

'He didn't explain. He said something like . . . an artist of Maureen's skill should be treated with respect. He said she could help herself to the crystals, if she wanted to take them.'

The hand squeezed harder. 'His exact words!'

"So take what you will of them. Explore my woods wherever you must." Then he gave the notebook back to her.'

'Yet still he did not send you away?'

'No, Sir.'

'You've missed something out. You know what will happen if you continue to try my patience!'

'He asked how long we had been in Clonmel. I told him, one week. Then he said something really odd. Something about time enough for somebody like Maureen.'

A hard slap on his sunburnt cheek jerked Mark's head to one side.

He bit his lip, continued with what he recalled of Padraig's exact words, "Time enough for someone gifted with . . . with vision." Then he asked her another odd question. "Have you been surprised by what you've observed here?"

'Ah!'

'He didn't explain. He just told Maureen to take her

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time to find the right words. "I'm interested to know what might have captured your attention."

'I knew it! I knew there was something else. And what had caught our little witch's attention?'

Mark glanced at Mo, a mute blink of apology. 'She said something stupid, or at least it seemed stupidly obvious. She just said, "Nature is blooming."'

'That's it? "Nature is blooming"?' The dark eyes swung over to confront Mo from a distance of a foot or so.

She nodded.

Before Grimstone could turn his full attention onto Mo, Mark continued, 'He took us back to the sawmill, where we met an American boy called Alan Duval and a local girl called Kate Shaunessy.'

'He made a point of introducing you to this pair?'

'Yes, Sir.'

Mark went on to explain what had happened at the sawmill, the hard work of clearing out the room for a den. Grimstone demanded every detail. Mark didn't mention computers, music or partying. When his story was finished, Grimstone remained thoughtful for several seconds, during which time he held Mark in the intense focus of his gaze.

'I want you to cultivate this friendship.'

Mark was astonished. 'You want us to spy on them?'

Grimstone merely stared.

Mark felt bewildered. All the interrogation, and now this! He wondered if Grimstone had finally gone stark

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raving mad. But even in madness he saw the glimmer of an opportunity.

‘Does this mean, Sir, that we’ll be staying here in Clonmel for longer?’

‘My flock is growing. I have become aware of the real challenge here. We shall stay until I am satisfied that my work is complete.’

Mark hesitated, then blurted it out. ‘It – it might help if I had a mobile phone.’

‘Are you bargaining with me?’

‘No, Sir! They would expect it, Alan and Kate. Mobiles are equipped to take pictures, capture images, even video images. If I’m seen to take pictures with a camera, they’ll be suspicious. But they’ll take no notice of a mobile.’

Those eyes still glared into Mark’s, as if reading his mind.

‘There’s some ulterior motive?’

‘No, Sir.’

Grimstone pinched a fold of Mark’s sunburnt right cheek, squeezing the inflamed skin hard enough to make him wince.

‘It’s that caterwauling you call music, isn’t it?’

‘No, Sir!’

‘You mean, “Yes, Sir.” You’ll find some way of stuffing the gadget with that sluttish screeching. That’s what it is. Don’t lie to me.’

Grimstone’s pinch tightened until it brought tears to Mark’s eyes, but still he defied his adoptive father.

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Grimstone drew back his right hand, still holding the cross. His eyes widened and he almost seemed ready to strike.

Mo wailed, 'Duh-duh-duh-duh-duh . . . duh-don't huh-hurt him!'

For a moment Grimstone's eyes were unfocused with rage. But then, abruptly, his expression altered. His eyes refocused. He brought the cross back into contact with his brow and pressed it hard against the overheated flesh. For what seemed like ages he held it there with his eyes clenched shut. When he opened them again he patted Mark's swollen cheek, as if it had all been no more than a game between father and son.

'Very well! Have your gadget if it's what you really want. Even the most righteous of fathers must show a little indulgence.' He reached down and drew Mo close to him. His arms enfolded them both in a single sweat-soured embrace. 'Why do you provoke me? Are we not a loving family in this, the most sacred of tasks?'

'Yes, Sir!'

'And you, daughter! What can we not contemplate?'

Mark reached out, unseen, to find Mo's hand, to hold it as he had done a thousand times before.

'Fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh . . . failure, Sir!'

Friends

Mo's observation proved to be prophetic. Nature really was blooming. And as July grew hotter the world grew more lush. Even Bridey remarked on it. 'Sure Mother Nature's abandoned her modesty.'

To get through gaps in the hedgerows they had to battle their way through thistles six feet tall, with bristly stems as thick as fall pipes, fighting for space with hogweed, ragwort, and the purple-headed fountains of giant stinging nettles. The untilled fields became lakes of wild flowers. Even in the thick woods around the sawmill the trees were so heavy with leaves you only had to walk into the woods and you were plunged into twilight. The air shrilled so loudly with birdsong it hurt your ears. Even the little grassy glades, where growth was usually scant, were waist-deep in grasses, the air so heady with scents, so clouded with swarms of butterflies, it was like wandering into an enchanted garden.

Meanwhile the four friends worked at getting their den in order, at times going at it almost frantically, as if, instinctively, they sensed that time was short. For days they scrubbed and hammered, all the while getting to know each other.

They emulsioned the walls and the ceiling and covered most of the floor with a mat. Padraig indulged them with whatever they asked for, including the paint and the floor covering. An electrician arrived to replace the old wiring, putting in a working light and a deck of wall sockets close to the table. With a little more persuasion, he put in a phone line.

When they arrived on the fourth sunny morning, they found a battered little electric oven and a fridge waiting for them outside the door. From now on they could heat pizzas and cool their drinks. Alan humped over the desktop computer he normally kept in his bedroom.

Within minutes Mark was parked in front of it. He had already figured out how to connect it to his new state-of-the-art mobile phone.

Alan quizzed him, 'What are you up to?'

'Begging, stealing and borrowing dreams.'

'Like what?'

'Like Stevie Ray Vaughn, *Couldn't Stand the Weather*.'

'Never heard of him!'

'Had a big patch on his left arm - just here.' Mark tapped about halfway up his forearm. 'Where the skin was missing.'

‘Yeah?’

‘He played a mean guitar, hard steel strings. The strings took the skin off the tips of his fingers. He’d put superglue on the worn-out tips. Then, when the glue was still tacky, he’d touch his fingers against his other arm, to put on new skin.’

‘No shit?’

Mark grinned at the expression, which he so identified with American films and television. ‘Yeah! Really – no shit!’

Mo, who had entered the dairy without any of them noticing, said, ‘Mark knows a muh-muh-million buh-buh-blues stuh-stories.’

Alan shook his head, playing dumb. ‘But you still haven’t told me what makes a song into a dream?’

‘Dreams are private.’

‘That says nothing.’

‘You can’t explain “private”. Private is private.’

‘I give up with this guy!’

Kate and Mo eyed one another, also broadly smiling. Kate shoved Alan out of the dairy. ‘Leave the poor idiot to his dreams.’

Mo followed Kate and Alan out into the sunshine. Mark hardly noticed the fact they had gone. In dreams, the first thing you lose track of is time. And the next thing you lose track of is your worries and cares.

It was many hours later before he came out of the dairy, looking exhausted but exhilarated. He just slid down the

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wall and sat on the grass. Mo, who was leaning with her back to the pear tree, looked at him. Mark took his harmonica from his pocket and, without a word, he began to play his own interpretation of the blues track, 'Ain't No Sunshine'.

Mo danced.

Kate and Alan just watched, transfixed. Brother and sister appeared lost in a world of their own. Mo's eyes were closed, her movements as delicate and natural as the flight of a butterfly.

When Mark stopped playing Kate clapped her hands.

Even Alan laughed with amazement. 'What the heck was that?'

Kate murmured, 'I think we just caught sight of a dream.'

Mo said, 'He cuh-cuh-cuh-can remember any kind of muh-muh-music, like a-nuh-nuh-nuh-nuh . . . like an in-suh-sane Muh-Muh-Mozart!'

All four friends dissolved into laughter.

Emulsion-spattered, in gaps between working, they talked and bantered as if they didn't have a care in the world. All the while they kept clear of the real stuff, like fate – or how life just doesn't even pretend to be fair. The bad stuff, the stuff you just couldn't bear to talk about, they left to brood on its own outside of the den.

From time to time, over the following days, Padraig would appear with a moth or a butterfly cupped in the cradle of his hands, exotic creatures that none of them had ever

seen before. He'd let them go for Mo to watch them take flight. She'd squeal with delight, like a child half her age, watching their zigzag progress until they disappeared. Then she'd capture the images in her notebook. Other times it was beetles, myriad different shapes, sparkling with rainbow iridescence. Or the skulls of tiny animals. Or collections of feathers. Other times they would arrive in the morning to find a collection of crystals waiting for them, or a piece of amber containing the stem of a tiny plant, or a single petal of a flower, or an insect entombed within it. Mo's eyes would sparkle with every new piece of what Mark called her 'weirdiana'. She would study and draw them, before adding them to her altars to nature, placed at strategic points around the perimeter of the den.

It was a little eerie. As if Padraig knew exactly what would interest Mo. Kate, sitting on the grass outside the dairy, couldn't suppress her curiosity. The three of them, other than Mo, were cooling off outside, with hot noon hammering down on the leaves of the old pear tree over them. 'What's really going on, Mark? Do you think they're communicating, or what?'

'I don't have a clue.'

Kate looked down at a lodestone she had picked up from one of Mo's altars. It felt as heavy as lead. She showed it to Alan. 'Honestly! It's as if they're on some common wavelength.'

Alan shrugged. 'I warned you guys, Grandad's superstitious.'

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'Yes,' she murmured, 'but you never really explained what you mean.'

Alan lifted up his brown fringe and Kate saw the triangular stork-beak birthmark. 'Grandad even thinks this is a sign - something that marks me out as different.'

Kate chuckled at Pdraig's daft ideas. 'Has it ever given you some strange ability? Like some sixth sense?'

'All it's ever brought me is an avalanche of dragon's piss right down on my head. With the other kids making out like I was some kind of a freak.'

Kate shook her head. 'But I always thought superstitious people were - well, a little bit simple. And Pdraig is far from simple.'

'I'm not saying he's simple.'

Mark, who had been following the conversation, met Kate's gaze with a wry smile. 'Mo's just the same. She's as superstitious as hell. But she isn't simple either. She's just different.'

Alan looked down at the daisy-strewn grass between his feet. 'You know what she reminds me of? I'm not claiming to be arty or anything, but I recall this teacher who was trying to explain stuff like Picasso and modern art to us. She talked about some natural ability we all had when we were kids. The thing is, we lose it. Somehow that happens to most of us. We lose it when we grow up. That's the difference between us and these great artists. They manage to keep hold of it. That's what I imagine is going on with Mo. She's one of those who keep it.'

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Mark looked at Alan.

'Hey, I like Mo. No offence. Okay?'

'No offence taken. I think you might even be right.'

On one occasion Padraig brought Mo a finger-sized chunk of bog oak, as black as liquorice. Mo cooed with delight when she accepted it from his hand. It looked like nature had sculpted it already so it resembled a female form with one body that was the stem and three knots at one end that looked for all the world like separate knobby heads. The heads, when you looked up close, were all different, like the three ages of womanhood. Mo stared and stared at it. But she didn't sit down and draw it. Nor did she place it on one of her altars. Instead she kept it with her constantly, to be taken out and fondled, like a talisman.

Nobody, not even Mark, understood this new twist. And if Padraig had an inkling he kept it to himself.

All of a sudden, it was the last day of July and it felt as if the whole month had been simply too gorgeous to hold onto. Mo was squinting skywards, as if in a final appeal to the sun, where it was peeping in and out of cotton-wool clouds that seemed in no hurry to move along. How she wished this last month could have gone on forever, days so full of sunshine and laughter you wanted to slow them right down. But they just melted away anyway, one day merging into another, so that in the end the whole month of July had gone hurtling by in what felt like no

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time at all. A time spent building sandcastles on sunny beaches. But the trouble with sandcastles is they stand only until the waves come in and sweep them away. And, today, on this exceptionally sultry day, that wave was coming. Mo had sensed it build up, little by little, not out there in the Atlantic Ocean off the beach at Clonea, but within the bodies and spirits of her friends, and the terrible thing was that even though she knew what was happening she was utterly powerless to prevent it. It was there, already, in Alan's angry expression as he put down the paperback he had been reading, pushing Mark and his mobile-phone-cum-camera away with his foot.

'Knock it off, will you, Mark? Don't do that.'

'Oh, look out!' Mark muttered as the phone fell from his grasp into the sand. 'It's hardly a crime,' he remarked while spitting on a tissue and attempting to clean it.

'Hey - it's not very nice to take pictures of Kate when she doesn't want it.'

'Oh, give it a rest, Alan!'

'Grow up - both of you!' Kate mumbled at the squabbling boys, wiping sand off her arm where it had become embedded in her suntan protection.

Mo stared, her gut squeezed in a spasm of worry about Mark. For weeks her brother had been developing a crush on Kate. Was Mark so stupid he couldn't see that Kate had eyes for nobody other than Alan?

Today's trip to Dungarvan had just been another of the bike trips that were originally supposed to be about

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hunting down threatened plants. Mo had been keen enough on the idea because, while Kate scoured the hedgerows and wild spaces for threatened plants, she intended to carry out her own searches for crystals. Alan and Kate already had their own mountain bikes and it had proved to be no problem borrowing two more. Being the smallest, Mo had lowered the saddle as far as it would go to fit her short legs, and so, all too predictably, short-leg jokes became the fashion for the first few trips. She had just shrugged off their banter and surprised them all with her toughness and endurance, pedalling hard to keep pace with the others. But, given the glorious weather, they soon abandoned all pretence at plant or crystal collecting and headed for the beaches south of the Comeragh Mountains along the Waterford coastline. Dungarvan, with its numerous beaches, and Clonea beach in particular, with its two-mile crescent of beautiful golden sand, had become their favourite.

And so it was here, at Clonea, on this serene afternoon, Mo sensed the change in her friends, as obvious to her inner senses as an unexpected gust of icy wind, or a cloud moving across the sun, might be to her physical senses. She remembered what Alan had said about fate: that the four of them coming together was too much to be explained away by coincidence. She also realised, with a certainty that none of her friends appeared to share, that the blooming had something to do with it. And more than anything she was sure that the same fate, whatever it

implied, was closer – that all the time it had been creeping up on them.

‘I’m warning you, Mark!’ Alan insisted. ‘I mean it. I’ve had it with that phone following us around all the time.’

Kate and Mo exchanged looks. It was an argument that had been brewing for weeks.

She talked urgently to Mark, after Alan and Kate had gone in for a dip.

‘Yuh-yuh-yuh-you should stop whuh-what you’re doing.’

‘Tell me – what am I doing?’

‘You’re muh-muh-muh-making eyes at Kuh-Kate.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘Yes yuh-yuh-you are. And know very well that Kate has no fuh-fuh-fuh . . . feelings like that for you.’

‘Oh, Mo – you’re just being silly.’

‘Why are yuh-yuh-yuh-you being so stupid?’

‘I’m not making eyes at her.’

‘Yuh-yuh-yuh-you know Kate and Alan are ah-ah-ah . . . an item.’

‘So what if they are? Girls can change their minds.’

‘Duh-don’t even thuh-think it.’

‘Oh, come on – you know I’m just pulling your leg.’

‘No.’ Mo shook her head. ‘No, no – *no!*’

‘Do you think I’m deluding myself into believing that Kate will fall for me if I just play some kind of long-term strategy?’

‘Yuh-yuh-yes!’

Their eyes met – hers aglitter, his shifty. ‘Okay! I can

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see you're getting all wound up and it's making your stammer worse.'

His words just wound her up even tighter. 'Yuh-yuh-yuh-you're absolutely buh-buh-besotted with Kate.'

'I just want her to like me.'

'Luh-luh-liar.'

'All right - okay! Let's you and me not fall out about it.'

'Fuh-Fuh-Forget it, Mark.'

'Mo - for goodness sake!'

'You're muh-mad.' She put out her finger and tapped, like a cautioning whisper, against the mobile phone.

He sighed. He understood the caution perfectly. Grimstone would kill him if ever he found out!

'Okay, so I'm being stupid, Mo. I'm dreaming of Conan the Barbarian warrior sagas, in which I end up saving Kate's life.'

Mo turned away with a snort. She just couldn't bear his looking at her with that flushed puppy-dog look on his face.

'I know I can't compete with Alan. That's the maddening thing. He doesn't even have to try. They have all that recent orphan stuff in common.'

It was pathetic to watch how he mocked himself. He made a game out of the fact that his attentions only succeeded in making Kate laugh at him. But it was a dangerous game because he was so utterly lost in it, like the one thing he couldn't bear even to think about was

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for the game itself to end. Mark was dipping his bare toes into the sand and flicking it in little frustrated gestures in the direction of Alan and Kate. 'Oh, Mo - don't you so hate the fact we have to spy on people? I can't stand taking the pictures back to Grimstone.'

She could see how, in betraying their friends, he was turning so much of the hate on himself.

'I don't even know why he wants me to do it. It's not as if he even listens to what I have to tell him. It's just our stuff, the little things that are personal to us. That just makes it all the more awful. I want it to stop. But I'd go on doing it forever if I could go on playing games with Kate and at the same time keep Grimstone off my back.'

While Mark headed into the sea to join Alan and Kate, Mo stayed on the shore and watched him, fearful and tense, observing that he had been stupid enough to take the phone with him.

She heard Kate's voice raised in outrage. 'How many times have I told you not to take pictures of me in my bikini!'

Mo heard Alan and Mark's voices raised in argument. Alan was defending Kate, and Mark, as usual, was trying to make a joke out of it. She heard the idiot tell Kate that he had been having Conan the Barbarian dreams about her. The arguing got worse. Mark was laughing, full of self-mockery, 'How could I compete with a fellow whose name is an anagram of dual naval?' Then Mark was

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splashing out towards the shore with Alan chasing him. They faced each other off at the edge of the surf.

'Oh, come on!' Mark shouted. 'You telling me, Alan, you haven't been having Conan dreams about Kate?'

'You're asking for a punch on the nose!'

They locked in a wrestle and fell over in the middle of a breaking wave. Mark was struggling to escape, trying to save his precious phone. But Alan didn't give a damn about the phone. He grabbed Mark again and they rolled over and over in the surf. Alan got an arm free and he punched Mark on the nose. They separated, Alan jumping to his feet while Mark sat in the tide with his phone held against his face, blood trickling through his fingers.

'Enough!' cried Kate. 'Stop it this instant!'

Alan suddenly looked sheepish. He extended his hand to Mark, to help him up. 'Hey, I'm sorry - right? It just got out of hand.'

Mark took his hand but he followed with his head, butting Alan in the centre of the face, so it was Alan's turn to end up sitting in the surf with a bloody nose.

Alan pushed away Kate's consoling hand. 'Okay - if that's how he wants it. He's nothing but a goddam idiot. I've had it with him.'

Mo burst into tears. There was such a look of mortification on her face that Kate ran to her and hugged her. 'Take no notice of those eejits. It'll be all right. Honestly, it will. I know that Alan doesn't really mean it.'

Alan stormed off down the beach while Mark sat down

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in the sand, drying off the mobile phone with a towel and making sure it still worked.

Kate muttered to Mo, 'What's his problem with that stupid phone?'

Mo's trembling turned into a fit of uncontrollable shaking. Her teeth chattered.

'Ah, sure, come on now, Mo. It was just a few stupid photographs.'

Then Mo said something strange. Her voice was a guttural croak, each individual syllable forced out, as if she were struggling to speak through a throat that was shackled with iron.

'Guh-guh-Guh . . . Guh-Grimstone - wuh-wuh-wuh . . . !'

'Grimstone will what?' Kate helped her down, so they were sitting together on the soft wet sand by the water's edge. Kate called to Mark, who was about ten feet away, 'Mo's really upset. Will you please tell me what's going on, Mark?'

But Mark wasn't listening. His blue eyes were staring out to sea.

Old Power

Mark hardly slept that night, too shocked at how close he had come to being found out. And Grimstone added to it, as if he sensed that something was wrong, becoming more sarcastic than usual when he made them stand in front of him in the sacristy and provide the daily summary. He warned them both that their days of tomfoolery were close to an end. Then, when they arrived at the den the next morning, the situation got a whole lot worse. Padraig was waiting with Kate and Alan, all three sitting on the hummock of grass under the old pear tree in the warming light.

The old man's eyes seemed to blaze clearer and bluer than ever as he fixed them with his wide-open gaze. 'Now then, young Mark and Mo! We know that something is not altogether right in this situation. I've been hearing one or two disturbing things. But I want to hear it from you in person. Will you tell me what ails you?'

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Mark felt his throat tighten, and he couldn't hide his panic. 'Nothing, Sir! There's nothing wrong.'

'Ah, now - Sir, is it?'

Mark tried to bluff it out but there was no escaping those eyes.

'Your father would do something if you stopped coming here? Meaning it was Grimstone himself that put you up to it?'

'Muh-muh-muh . . . !'

Mark put a restraining hand on Mo's shoulder, to try to shut her up. 'Mr O'Brien—!'

But Mo shook his hand off. 'If yuh-yuh-you won't tell him, I wuh-wuh-wuh-will.'

Mark shook his head violently at Mo, his eyes pleading for her to stop.

Alan confronted Mark eye-to-eye, clearly still rattled from yesterday, in spite of the handshake. 'I don't know what's going on. But one thing I know for sure is we've got to be honest with each other.'

Mark didn't care what Alan thought. He wasn't going to explain just to please Alan. He tried to steer Mo away. But Mo wriggled free. Stutteringly and painfully, she began to explain. She told them the truth about the so-called Reverend Grimstone, and they listened to her in a shocked silence.

Kate got up off the grass and put her arm round Mo's shoulders. 'Oh for goodness sake - I simply can't believe it. Is this true, Mark?'

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Mark shrugged. 'Mo and I, we grew up to be told that our biological fathers were drunkards and druggies.'

'He cuh-cuh-cuh-cuh-calls us wicked nuh-nuh-nuh . . . nuh-nuh-names.'

'Such as what?'

'Mo is half aboriginal. Grimstone says that she only has to look in the mirror to see the face of her savage whore mother.'

Kate gave Mo a huge hug. 'You're mother was nothing of the sort. If you look anything like your mother, she must have been gorgeous.'

Mo's face fell, her fingers writhing in a heap. 'Muh-Muh-Muh-Mark and I . . . we - we wuh-wuh-wuh—!'

'What she's trying to say,' Mark added quietly, 'is we were abandoned. Tossed away like pieces of rubbish on Sir's doorstep - me at about eighteen months old and Mo less than a year old.'

'Sure and that's awful.'

'You don't know the half of it! You really want to know what he would say to Mo when he felt like hurting her?' Mark smiled, but there was no humour in his smile. 'He'd say, "Now why do you think your mother couldn't stand the sight of you the very moment you were born?" He'd tell Mo that everybody hated her, even when she was a baby, because she didn't look like a Christian child. "Anyone can see that at a glance," he'd say, pinching her cheek so hard his nails would leave a mark. "Go to the mirror," he'd say. "Go take a good long look at your gipsy

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whore face.”

Kate just hugged Mo tighter.

Alan was outraged. ‘Who the hell is this guy?’

‘The Reverend R. Silas – familiarly known as Arseless – Grimstone. Our adoptive father!’

‘Your mother . . . your adoptive mother . . . couldn’t she stop it?’

‘What? Dear sweet Bethal – the werewolf?’

Padraig shook his head. ‘That blackguard sounds worse than a Puritan.’

‘What he really is . . . there’s a better name for it,’ Mark hissed between his clenched teeth. ‘But Reverend isn’t the word I’d use.’

Kate said quietly, ‘He must be mad.’

Mo’s face fell. ‘Cuh-cuh-clever – clever and wuh-wuh-wuh-wicked more than muh-muh-mad!’

Mark added, ‘Recently he’s been getting worse. It’s something to do with the reason he came to Clonmel. But we don’t really know why he came here.’

Kate held Mo at arm’s length. ‘Why he came here? Here to Clonmel?’

‘To spy on you.’

Padraig barked a laugh. ‘You’re pulling my leg.’

‘He thinks that you, Mr O’Brien, are some kind of druid.’

‘And what does he mean by that?’

‘A pagan . . . or something like that!’

‘Well now, isn’t that quite an accusation? What then is a pagan? Is a pagan someone who believes in ghosts? Or

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a child who discovers the meaning of magic? The druids were more than priests. These days they would be regarded as great thinkers . . . like a mixture of priest and philosopher.'

'So you're not a pagan?'

'What were the auld religions but an attempt at understanding . . . maybe at understanding things that might better have been left alone.'

'Grimstone talked about power. Old power.'

'What old power?'

'Don't ask me. I know how weird it all sounds. But it's the way his mind works. He appears to be an old-type preacher but he doesn't really mention Jesus, only the old hellfire and brimstone stuff. All he seems to care about is controlling people. He sets up some new branch of his church somewhere, converting gullible people. He goes looking for scapegoats. Somebody to attack. It brings him publicity and frightens still more into joining him.'

'And that monster, he's here and up to something like that?'

Mark's head dropped.

Padraig stiffened. 'Didn't I sense there was something about you both, but I never imagined such nonsense in my wildest dreams.' He was silent for several seconds. 'But then, maybe we can turn the tables on him. Mo, will you show me your book again? Sit yourself down here on the grass while I take another look at some of your beautiful pictures.'

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The four friends sat on the hummock while Pdraig leafed through the pages in Mo's green-covered notebook. Mo watched the old man's face, his features half-hidden in the shadows and the long hawk-like nose almost touching the paper. She jumped when he pounced on one drawing. He dropped to one knee to point it out to her.

'There!' he exclaimed. 'This is what caught my eye when I first looked through it.'

Mo glanced fearfully at the drawing. Fear made her stammer worse. 'It's thuh-thuh-thuh - it's the suh-suh-suh ...'

Mark spoke for her. 'It's the sigil. On Grimstone's black cross.'

'Sigil? D'you mean some kind of symbol?'

'It's part of the cross. Where the figure of Jesus would be, but this is definitely not Jesus. It's silvery in colour instead of black, like the rest of it.'

'Like suh-suh-suh-something very . . . vuh-vuh-very old.'

'That's right. The cross is made out of a black, twisted kind of metal. Like iron, but I'm not sure it's really iron.'

'Will you tell me everything you recall of it, Mark?'

'It's . . . well, it's kind of gnarly, just like Mo has drawn it, only a lot bigger . . . and heavier.' Mark held out his hands, to give an idea of the dimensions.

'Cuh-cuh-cuh-cuh-creepy!'

'The worst thing, the most repulsive thing about it, is the sigil in the middle.'

'It guh-guh-guh-glows!'

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Mark nodded. 'Honestly – it's true. The sigil really glows, so you can see it shining in the dark. When Grimstone is talking to it.'

Alan interrupted, 'This guy talks to it?'

'He calls it his Lord – his Master.'

'No way!'

'Muh-Muh-Muh-Mark and I . . . wuh-wuh-wuh-we think . . . we think he kuh-kuh . . . kuh-kuh-killed . . .'

Mark took up what Mo was trying to explain. 'We don't know for certain, but from the way he talks about it sometimes, we think, maybe, he might have killed some old man for it. The old man claimed that it came from a barrow grave.'

'Which would hardly be Christian, since barrow graves are far older than Christianity.'

'He suh-suh-suh-says he had a buh-buh-blackout.'

Kate murmured, 'It gets worse and worse!'

'We think Grimstone was a thief when he was younger. He stole stuff for the old man, who was an antiquarian. But when he saw the cross with the sigil embossed on it, it . . . well, it took some kind of possession of him. He says he had a blackout. But we think he killed the old man to get the cross.'

Padraig looked deeply worried. 'It came from a barrow, you say?'

Alan turned to his grandfather. 'What's wrong?'

Padraig placed his hands on Mark's and Mo's shoulders, as if hardly able to believe what he was hearing.

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Alan snorted. 'Hey - the guy's loopy!'

Kate looked at Alan with a frown. 'But you heard what they said. They've seen how this thing glows when he talks to it.'

'Silver can look like that.'

'Nuh-nuh-nuh-no! It buh-buh-burns.'

'Burns?'

Mark agreed with Mo. 'When Grimstone holds the sigil to his brow. When he's calling it Master, it burns his skin. You can hear it sizzle - you can smell it.'

Alan shook his head. 'Mo? Is this true?'

Mo nodded.

Mark added, 'Grimstone won't allow anyone else to touch it. Or even to go near it.'

'Grandad, have you any idea what's going on here?'

'I'm not altogether sure. I know a little about such things. Maybe now I wish I knew more.'

'But what are you thinking?'

'Well, I'm thinking we need to grasp what's really going on here. We have the four of you coming together here, with what appears to be important aspects of your lives in common. Happen it's fate.'

Alan scoffed. 'Hey - come on!'

'Don't you be telling me you haven't wondered for yourselves?'

Mark objected. 'That's as crazy as Grimstone.'

'There must be something happening to you - all of

you. Are you getting unusual thoughts in your heads? Or unusual dreams?’

Kate blurted, ‘Mo and I, we’ve been sharing the same dreams.’

‘What dreams?’

‘We keep seeing a mountain. But it’s not one we recognise. It towers up, like a great pillar of rock, with a figure on the top of it.’

‘You’re sure you don’t recognise it?’ There was a light in Padraig’s eyes, now examining Kate’s expression.

‘No. It’s nowhere I remotely recognise.’

‘What about you lads?’

Mark shook his head.

But Alan looked thoughtful. ‘If it’s dreams about places you guys want, the only place I ever dream about is the River Suir. I dream about the river a lot.’

Padraig was thoughtful. ‘Mountains and rivers! It certainly seems as if something is building up around you. Something – or someone – is trying to communicate with you, perhaps.’

Mark lifted his eyebrows. ‘I suppose I’d better go check my emails.’

Kate thumped him. ‘Don’t you dare mock this, Mark Grimstone!’

Padraig cleared his throat, as if making up his mind about something. ‘Well now, isn’t it time we all were a little more honest with each other? And that goes for you too, Mr Tricky-the-loop.’ He tapped Mark’s shoulder.

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Mark exchanged glances with Mo. 'There was something Grimstone said. He was talking about some kind of old power that was a threat to him. Stuff about the town being old but the power was older.'

'Ancient power?'

'Suh-suh-something about a puh-people from before the Cuh-Cuh-Celts.'

'I'm trying to remember how he put it. Like an old power, almost buried and forgotten, yet still lingering.'

'Huh-huh-huh-he talked about the ruh-ruh-rivers, too.'

'Ancient power to do with rivers?'

Mark said, 'I'll give you his exact words, Mr O'Brien. "It is my Lord himself, my sacred Master, who senses the threat - the threat is to Him . . . here in this town - in the old power that still lingers here."'

'What manner of threat?'

Mo spoke softly. 'Thuh-thuh-three ruh-ruh-ruh-rivers!'

Everybody looked at Mo, astonished. Then Mark nodded. 'Something about a heathen trinity. Its grip long vanquished, yet such is its hold on the very landscape, it has endured.'

Alan looked at his grandfather in bewilderment. 'Is this guy the pits, or what?'

Padraig's brow was deeply furrowed. 'I'm not sure at all as to the nature of Grimstone.'

Kate cut in, 'So how do we find out more about this . . . this power?'

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'I think you won't have to look very far before the power finds you!'

She sighed. 'What on earth does that mean?'

His face reddening with embarrassment, Alan said, 'Grandad sees fate in everything that's happening.'

'Maybe he's right, Alan.'

Alan snorted. 'We're just like the butterflies and birds, following our instincts! That's what you think. Isn't it, Grandad?'

'Four orphans! And you kid yourself it's merely happenstance?'

Kate countered, 'Two orphans - and two adoptees!'

Padraig stared at her, then glanced with a gentle sympathy at Mark and Mo. 'Kate, both you and Alan assume that your parents were the victims of accidents, or deliberate killings by wicked people. But what if it was you yourselves who were the targets?'

'But that . . . oh, for goodness sake - it's ridiculous!'

'Kate, were you not with your parents when they died? And Alan too! Weren't you meant to be in the helicopter when it crashed?'

Alan couldn't help raising his voice in protest. 'So how come we're still here, then, Grandad?'

'Maybe there were other forces protecting you?'

'Aw, c'mon!'

Mark shook his head. 'I don't know anything about what Mr O'Brien is saying. But I can tell you that when Grimstone talks about our biological parents, he uses the past tense.'

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'You mean he knows they're dead?'

Mo was shaking her head violently.

'I'm sorry, Mo, but he doesn't say that your mother *is* a whore. He says she *was* a whore. Always the past tense.'

Alan shook his head. 'How - I mean, what . . . Aw, heck - I don't rightly know what to think any more.'

Mark shrugged. He looked at Pdraig. 'This force, I think you're suggesting it's got something to do with us? If so, can you tell us what we ought to do?'

'Maybe it's fitting to caution you that you're standing in a wood, where you can't see the wood for the trees. If I were to advise you, and I'm not sure I even want to advise you, I would suggest you get above it.'

Kate blurted, 'Above what?'

'Above what's too close to your noses, young Kate!'

'Above the world?'

All four friends stared at Pdraig as he shook his head at their lack of comprehension. He spun through a quarter circle and he lifted his face to the mountains that rose to the south of where they were gathered, their lower slopes cloaked in his own woods.

Kate said, 'You mean, above the Comeraghs?'

'Not just these foothills. The proper mountains that lie behind them.'

Kate stared up at the foothills, which seemed quite mountainous in themselves. She had lived in the shadow of the Comeraghs all her life but she had never attempted to climb them, not the real mountains.

On the Roof of the World

Setting out before eight, they cycled the five or six miles to Ballymacarbry. They had planned it all yesterday, with the best route highlighted on the Ordnance Survey map which travelled with them in Alan's backpack. They took the turning for the Nire Valley. Then, in single file, with map-reader Alan leading, they cycled another two or three miles through the cool morning sunshine until they came to the bridge. After another twenty minutes of twisting and turning, they found their way to the car park at the base of the mountains, where they padlocked the bikes and started out on foot. Here, in the long shadows of morning, they sipped the piping hot coffee from Kate's mammoth flask, high-fived with nervous laughs, and then set to climbing straight away.

Of course not a single one of them really knew what they were doing here. On the compass, which was Kate's contribution, they took a bearing on 76 degrees,