

Chapter 1

Londonderry/Derry, County Derry, Northern Ireland

November 1977

Liam Kelly stood in the middle of a starlit dooryard with his hands in the air and cursed the day he'd met Father Murray.

"What are you doing here?" a man asked from the shadows.

As threats went, the hay fork in the farmer's palsied hands could be categorized in the vicinity of worrisome. In Liam's specific case, however, it could be argued whether the real danger was in the old iron used by four generations of farmers or the remote possibility of tetanus. Regardless, both risks were considerably outranked by the three hastily-dressed men lurking in the shadows — three men who obviously didn't belong on a farm.

"Sorry to be disturbing you. I lost my way, is all," Liam said, again cursing Father Murray, not that the situation was actually the priest's fault. Liam was the one who'd decided to get some air. Naturally, he'd been in a rage at the time. Father Murray had been giving him shite about how he, Liam, needed to take control of his life and stop running from one bad situation and into another. Now that he'd cooled off he was beginning to rethink matters.

The presence of deadly weapons tended to do that to him.

"On your way somewhere, is it?" The youngest of the three asked and stepped into the light pouring out of the open door. He held a Kalashnikov at the ready and was wearing a long brown leather coat with a fur collar the likes of which would've easily fit in on an American television program featuring pimps named after affectionate ursines. The lad looked to be about sixteen. Which, Liam thought, would explain the atrocious taste in outdoor apparel.

For fuck's sake, he hasn't outgrown the spots on his face.

"Do we know you?" the spotty boy asked.

"Don't think you do," Liam said. At least, I fucking hope not, he thought. Things are complicated enough as it is. Although Derry had been home for most of his life, he'd been away for five years if one counted the prison time. He hoped that, combined with the new beard

and punk-cropped hair, would serve as a sufficient disguise in the darkness.

Against his better judgment, he gave the men closer scrutiny. He didn't recognize any of them, which was good. It was a cold night, but he could see that one of them was barefoot and the second hadn't had time to button his shirt and coat. The third, the speaker, was fully dressed and alert.

The sentry, Liam thought.

"And what is your name, then?" The spotty boy's voice cracked with the tension, making him sound about twelve.

Although there was little in the way of light, Liam made out part of a tattoo on the tallest man's chest. It appeared to be a banner. The script scrawled inside was impossible to read – half concealed as it was, but Liam decided to bet his life that if it contained a date, that date was Easter 1916 and not July 1690. Liam addressed the two men in the shadows and attempted to use the Belfast in his voice to camouflage the Derry. "I'm Liam from Andytown." Liam was a common enough name among Catholics, and Andersonstown was a nationalist estate.

"You're a long fucking way from West Belfast, son." It came as no surprise that the older, more authoritative voice came from the taller

man with the tattoo. His tone was hard and neutral with a hint of disapproval but that was to be expected.

There'll be more of them. All are sure to be armed, Liam thought. So, where are they? "Aye. So what?"

"And what's your business here, Liam from Andytown?" the authoritative man with the tattoo asked.

The real question was, what were the three men doing here? Were they paramilitaries or were they smugglers? They weren't loyalists otherwise they'd have shot him dead the instant he'd revealed himself for a Catholic. On the other hand, the likelihood of a Republican recruit getting the piss knocked out of him for dressing like a pimp was high – too high to make either the Provisional or even the Official IRA a sensible option. Liam glanced again at the boy in the fur-collared coat. His face was set in a determined expression.

This is going to go bad, Liam thought. "Been visiting a friend a few miles from here. Couldn't sleep. Went for a walk. Took a short cut through your fields, and got turned around. As I said, I didn't mean to disturb you. I'm sorry, sir."

"He's seen us," the spotty boy said, his accent the same clipped Derry working-class dialect as the others. "He'll have to be done for."

Well, now. Aren't you the wee hard man? Liam swallowed the re-tort. At twenty-two, technically, he wasn't much older than the boy. But Jesus, was I ever that much of a tosser? Liam had to admit he probably had been and possibly still was. He had, after all, walked straight into this mess. Me and my fucking temper. Father Murray had warned him, but he hadn't listened. That was generally the way of things, and generally, the way Liam liked it. On this side of the situation, however, it seemed a wee bit predictable. Once, he wouldn't have cared, but lately he was considering the advantage in other behavioral options.

Will you look at that? Maturity, that is. Mary Kate would've laughed, but Mary Kate wasn't there. She was dead, and he was about to join her if he didn't talk fast. "Look, mate, I don't know or care who you are, or what you're doing. Let me go back to where I came from, and I'll leave you to your business."

"Shut it, you," the spotty boy said.

A big lorry pulled up to the gate and stopped. Liam's stomach did a queasy jolt when he saw that its headlights were off. The sentry signaled to the driver, and the gate let out a groan as it was pushed open by one of the lorry's passengers. Liam mentally cursed a third time when the man with the tattoo signaled to the others with a quick glance and a nod.

"Come with me," the spotty boy said.

My fucking luck, Liam thought with his heart slamming in his ears. He wondered whether they were smuggling whiskey, cigarettes or guns. If he was headed for a bullet in the skull, it'd be nice to know. He took a deep breath as the lorry approached, relying on his unusually powerful sense of smell to glean the answer. Petrol. Smugglers then. Not paramilitaries.

Since he'd "retired" from the Provisionals under less than ideal circumstances, he was relieved to have his suspicions confirmed. If they'd turned out to be Provos and found out who he was, they'd contact HQ and then his future – however short – would most likely involve a thorough hiding, a great deal of screaming and a blowtorch for good measure. On the other hand, Provos had a certain reputation even among smugglers. He'd decided to reveal himself for a Provo and pointedly draw the conclusion that it would be best to let him go his way unmolested, when he spotted a Glasgow Rangers stocking cap on one of the men who had hopped out of the truck. Liam's blood froze. Loyalists. Shite.

Before he had time to wonder how he'd been so far wrong something heavy slammed into the side of his head, and the ground came up fast. Dazed, he felt himself lifted but couldn't protest. He watched the gravel and then the grass pass under his dragging feet and contem-

plated the situation. He discovered he had few feelings on the subject of dying as the two men carried him through a break in the thick hedge at the far end of the dooryard.

"I've no time to be dealing with this. I'm for heading back. So, we're trusting you," one of the men whispered. "Don't be fucking this up. You hear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do it fast. Get back to the lorry. We'll tidy up after."

Liam wondered if he'd see Mary Kate again. The prospect was somewhat comforting. His wife had been dead for well over a year, and although the sharp pain of grief was fading, there were still moments when the guilt and loneliness ambushed him. A strange sort of confusion set in. Not long ago he'd wanted nothing more than to die and couldn't. It was odd that his time should come now when his prospects were better, and for doing something so stupid as not watching where he was going.

Feeling the curious emptiness in the back of his skull – a void he'd fought so hard for much of his adult life to create – he suddenly regretted the lack. Father Murray's little hypnosis experiment would take now of all times. Liam considered calling the monster up out of his subconscious where it'd been banished for the time being but wasn't confident he could, regardless of Father Murray insisting it

was possible. Liam decided against the attempt when he remembered the rest of the priest's plan and how it was likely to end. Best to die now and get it over with, then.

"This will do."

They'd dragged him to a secluded area shielded by a rock wall and the thick hedge. It was far enough from the house that the others couldn't see what was happening and close enough that reinforcements were at hand if called. He was dropped, and the older man left. Liam couldn't help remembering the last time he'd been in a similar situation – only he'd been the one holding the gun and his best mate, Oran, had been facing the bullet. Liam rolled onto his back. A piercing headache began to force its way past the numbness. His palms were stinging. The side of his face felt cool and sticky. Blood. He blinked, gazing up into the night sky. In the northeast, the light from Derry overwhelmed the stars. There were no clouds, the rain having stopped earlier in the day.

Clear night in spite of the cold. No moon, he thought. He discovered that he felt nothing – no fear, no anger – at the prospect of dying, which seemed a wee bit unusual upon closer inspection.

The spotty boy with the Kalshnikov kicked him. "Up on your knees, taig."

At that moment Liam's temper flared up, and he clamped down on an urge to fall upon his captor and rip the boy's throat out. The anger transformed from red hot lava to polar ice in a second. "This is fucking pointless. I said I'll not tell anyone what you are doing here."

"Shut up! Get on your knees!"

"That's a bleeding automatic rifle, mate. You hit me with that thing it'll make a real mess."

"Why do you think we dragged you out here? Get on your knees, or I'll plug you now."

Fucker. Liam gave an exaggerated sigh. "Fine. Fine. I merely wanted to point out that a man with a coat as nice as that might not want to muck it up." He didn't understand why he was taking the piss. The boy wouldn't react well, but Liam couldn't stop himself. He staggered to his feet and considered his options, but it was difficult to think past the ache in his head and the frozen rage.

The boy paused and frowned. "Turn around. Then get on your knees. Now. I'll not tell you again." The rifle was shoved into Liam's chest for emphasis.

The damp cold seeped through Liam's jeans as the wet grass soaked his knees. The icy rifle barrel was balanced against the back of his neck. Without thinking, he jerked away and was rewarded with a sharp blow to the back of the head. Pain exploded behind his eyes.

"Don't move."

The gun barrel was replaced, and Liam attempted not to shiver lest sudden movement caused the gun to go off. He sensed what was most certainly the boy removing his precious leather coat one-handed. If Liam was to do something to save himself, now was the time, but with the rifle barrel where it was, all the kid needed to do was twitch, and Liam would be decapitated in a stream of bullets. Shite. He'd been counting on the wee fuck bollocksing up. Calm yourself. You're alive yet. There's still time. Think. His skull remained empty of all but the feel of the gun barrel, the doubled pain and the drumming of his heart.

A gust of wind jostled the hedge. Liam heard something else too – stealthy movement in the dark. A chill went through him, and his stomach did a lazy flip. They've sent someone to check up on the wee shite. Fuck. Well, that's that. Taking a slow careful breath, cold, sharp air filled his lungs as he attempted to remember a final prayer. It's what one did, right? Pray. He almost didn't see the point. Filled with cold, his chest hurt. Our Father, who art in heaven–

The ache in his head thudded with the beat of his heart, and his senses grew impossibly sharp. He again looked up into the sky. Faded as they were, the stars were beautiful, and as he watched, a lone rebel unbolted itself from its place in the firmament and streaked

across the blackness in a graceful arc. As last sights went, it really wasn't bad. He took in another slow breath to prepare himself and almost tasted grass, damp earth and the spotty boy's stinking aftershave mixed with the smell of stale cigarettes.

Cigarettes. He opened his mouth to request a smoke – an attempt at one last opportunity for life – when he heard a soft sound, and the gun was snatched from the back of his neck. He turned just as the spotty boy dropped to the ground.

"I ainm Danu, cad atá ar siúl agat?" In Danu's name, what are you doing?

Liam turned his head to see the speaker. A tall man with shoulder-length blond hair exited the hedge. There was no point of entry or exit at the spot where he had appeared. This, of course, wasn't the only thing that was out of the ordinary about him. He was also dressed in clothes that belonged in a Queen's University history textbook and was armed with a bronze-tipped spear. A round shield looped over one shoulder by the leather strap completed the ensemble.

Liam feigned a casual attitude regarding his uncle's dramatic entrance while a rush of emotions flooded his brain – anger, disappointment and shame. Gazing down at the spotty boy, he asked in Irish, "Did you kill him?"

"What would I do a stupid thing like that for?" Sceolán asked.
"It's asleep, he is. He'll be fine when he wakes."

Staggering to his feet, Liam then gave the limp form two good solid kicks. "Perhaps not as fine as all that."

"Stop that now," Sceolán said. "We'll be late as it is."

"You took your time in coming." Picking up the rifle, Liam searched his former captor's pockets for a second clip and was rewarded. He pocketed it and slung the Kalashnikov over his shoulder.

"Was looking for you back at the priest's house where you'd called out. If you'd had any patience at all I'd have found you there and not here on the verge of getting your brains blown out. Crossed foolish of you. You are half mortal, you know. There's no promise you'll come back from it, and you'll not impress the Fianna, acting the hot-headed wean."

Liam hid his embarrassment and anger by glaring at the ground.

"You've no worry. I'll not breathe a word of this foolishness. Although, I should, and the tongue-lashing you would get for it would serve you right."

Accepting the cloth his uncle held out, Liam wiped the blood from the side of his face. "Aye, well... thanks."

"You're welcome." Sceolán pointed to the rifle. "I thought you'd retired from the fighting."

"The wee fuck will have an easier time explaining if the gun is missing. They might not even shoot him." Liam straightened and then joined Sceolán at the stone wall. "Anyway, it may come handy."

Sceolán turned, giving him a raised eyebrow. "I thought this was to be a negotiation?"

"Aye. Well, I've had dealings with the Bishop's men before. They're not much for listening without strong motivation."

Liam watched Sceolán scramble up and over the wall, exhibiting a grace that wouldn't normally have been seen in someone his age, but then, a mortal Uncle Sceolán's age was normally moldering in a thousand-year-old burial mound. Liam climbed the wall with far less skill and ease. His collar bone was still healing, and it ached from time to time – particularly if he wasn't careful and, truth be told, he hadn't been careful over the past hour or so.

"Can I ask you a question?" Liam asked, finally working up the nerve. There wasn't much time. Soon he'd be living in what equated to a prison cell for an indefinite period of time, being examined by surgeons who weren't certain he was human. When he thought about it, that wasn't terribly different from Long Kesh, and here he was volunteering for it. He shuddered. "There's something I need to know. Was the reason I'd called for you."

Sceolán nodded.

"Do you dream?" Liam asked.

Pausing, Sceolán glanced over his shoulder with an amused expression. "What kind of a question is that?"

Liam felt his cheeks burn. He didn't know the simplest things about his father's people beyond the stories his Aunt Sheila told, and so far, more than half of those had been proven to be either outright falsehoods or exaggerations.

Sceolán shrugged. "As much as anyone, I suppose."

"When someone like you— I mean, me— us... Are they only dreams?"

"Depends. It could be, or it could be a portent or a message."

Liam squinted into the darkness and debated whether or not to go on. He took a deep breath. "How do you know if it's important?"

"By the feel of it in my skull."

"Oh."

Sceolán gave him another long look. "Is that all?"

Liam wanted to continue. An entire catalog of questions had formed a queue in his brain over the past two weeks. Unfortunately, there hadn't been an appropriate moment for personal questions the three times he'd seen his father since the incident at Raven's Hill — or so Liam had told himself. Now certainly wasn't the time. In any case, he'd already made a fool of himself twice and that was enough for one evening. "Aye. That's all."

"Then I've a question for you as well." Sceolán continued on a few paces before saying anything. "I'll not go against Bran or you in this peace agreement of yours. But I will say you two have far more belief in it succeeding than I do."

"I wouldn't be so sure."

"Is that so?"

"Aye. Well, I wasn't staring down the honor of meeting an Inquisitor when we first discussed it, was I?" At least not without the monster to even the odds if needed, Liam thought. It'd been the reason he'd argued with Father Murray. Dangerous as it was, Liam didn't like the idea of going in without the ability to shape shift. He'd be defenseless. But he couldn't always control himself when he became the Hound and that had been the very reason why Father Murray had insisted on keeping the hypnotic muzzle in place when it'd proved to work.

Sceolán stopped where he was. "Are you saying you don't trust your friend, the priest?"

"I trust him." Liam paused. "For the most part, but there are about a hundred different ways this thing could go wrong. Not the least of which is me ending on a dissection table or in the Kesh."

"You don't have to give yourself over to them. We can call the whole thing off."

Liam watched his uncle navigate around a cow pat in the pitch black field – a thing no mortal could've done – and was reassured. Not being the only one who could see in the dark made him feel normal. "Terms of the truce. Better me than one of you. I'm half mortal. Father Murray says the Inquisitor will show restraint for that reason alone."

"Are you certain of that?"

Nervous, Liam paused and combed his fingers through his hair. "To tell you the truth... well... no."

"Then don't do it."

"The Church must have their proof that the Fey are not one in the same as the Fallen. Without that, they'll never stop the killing. Think of the weans they've murdered." My own included.

"Was this insanity your idea or the priest's?"

"Father Murray's." Liam stole a glance at his watch and began to walk faster.

"I don't like it."

"He'll be with me the entire time. Wouldn't agree to it otherwise."

"What good will that do? It's not as if the man has any authority among them."

"True enough," Liam said. "But he can summon my father and therefore, the rest of you if it should happen that I'm not able to do so myself. I don't think the Bishop would want the Fianna showing up for Sunday mass ready for a fight."

Uncle Sceolán looked thoughtful. "They could quietly get rid of you both while you're in their hands. Catch your Father Murray unaware. Wouldn't take much to make it look like you killed the priest. Problem solved. No need for inconvenient truths or admissions of guilt. Everything back to the way it was. Simpler."

"I really wish you wouldn't say things like that."

"Aye, well." Uncle Sceolán hefted his spear. "I been at the war-ring a long time, you know?"

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Taking a path parallel to the Ballynahatty road and through fallow hay fields, Liam followed Sceolán to the northeast edge of the Giant's Ring – the agreed upon meeting place. It consisted of a flattened hill with a four meter high earthen ridge running in a two hundred meter circle around the top. The grass was worn bare around the inside and close to the ancient ridge where the local people had held horse races in the 1800s. According to Uncle Sceolán, the Fey still did so. Near the center was a small tomb formed from standing stones. The Ring was bordered on the outside by a few trees, the hay field, a

car park to the east, and a small but dense wood to the south. The place fairly vibrated with power. Liam could feel the tingling of it radiating through his feet and his skin, and the air grew heavier the closer he came.

Shouts echoed across the empty field.

"Sounds like they started without us," Liam said.

"We'd best get there before the fighting breaks out." Uncle Sceolán winked. "Didn't think Cathal was going to lose that bet this soon."

Trotting to the northern-most entrance, Liam passed through the break in the earthen bank. A camp table was set up near the rock tomb and a few papers rested in a neat arrangement on top. At the moment both table and papers had been abandoned and a cluster of men were shouting and gesticulating at one another to the side. It took Liam several seconds to spy Father Murray in the cluster of modern Catholic priests surrounding two ancient Irish warriors. He was standing in the middle of the verbal fray with his hands held out as if shielding the two Fey warriors behind him. In spite of the stated agreement of no more than three representatives to each side, Liam counted no less than twelve heavily armed priests in addition to Father Murray and the Bishop.

Fucking typical, that, Liam thought.

However, it was obvious that the Fey had kept their word. Liam's father, Bran, stood at the center of the mob, back to back with a member of the Fianna Liam didn't recognize. Liam wasn't sure who Father Murray thought he was attempting to protect – whether it was the Church's assassins or the Fey warriors. Either way, Liam had the feeling Father Murray was going to end up on the bad side of it. Sometimes Liam wondered if the priest had any sense at all.

He attempted to make himself heard over the shouting. "Have you signed the truce already?"

Father Murray turned. "Where have you been? I began to think you'd changed your mind."

"Needed to clear my head. Went for a short run. Got turned around on the way back, but Uncle Sceolán set me to rights," Liam said. "Although, it would've been easy enough to find you by the ruckus. It's a wonder the Fallen, the British Army or the RUC haven't turned up too." Not that Liam had much faith in the RUC. The Royal Ulster Constabulary operated more like bully boys than police in Liam's experience.

One of the priests burst from the group surrounding the Fey. He was short and had a long scar across the bridge of his nose. Limping, he drew a long dagger. Liam remembered the Kalashnikov in time to bring the rifle to bear. Several priests scurried out of the way. Others shouted warnings. There came the clatter of weapons being drawn as

the others prepared for the fight. Spotting the rifle at last, the limping priest came to an abrupt stop. "Demon!"

"Evening, Father Dominic," Liam said. "How's the leg?"

Father Dominic muttered something very un-priest-like.

"Liam!" It was Father Murray. "Put down that rifle!"

"Be happy to." Liam poked the barrel of the Kalashnikov at Father Dominic. "However, I wasn't the one who drew first."

One of the other priest-assassins muttered, "As if a blade warrants an automatic weapon."

"Poisoned blade. Therefore, I beg to differ," Liam said and then paused. "Then again, when assessing the danger I should've factored in who was wielding the bloody thing." He shouldered the rifle.

The insult took several heart beats to register on Father Dominic's face. He growled and charged, raising the dirk. Liam stepped out of the priest's path at the last instant. Dominic shot past before stumbling to a halt. He prepared for another charge.

"Dominic!" An older man who Liam assumed was Bishop Avery pushed his way through the protective circle of heavily armed priests.

Father Dominic's face contorted with rage. "This... creature maimed Father Christopher."

"You ambushed me," Liam said, feeling his anger rise. "I could've killed you, and I didn't."

"Everyone, please," Father Murray said. "This is no way to begin. I thought we agreed to a peaceful meeting?"

Bran stood at the ready, bronze-tipped spear in hand. "It is they who have not kept to their word. Your holy man brought yon army."

Bishop Avery gaped. "Too many times we've been met with treachery—"

"Not at the hands of the Fianna," Uncle Sceolán said, edging his way past angry priests to take his place at Bran's side.

Father Murray sighed. "Look, we'll get nowhere like this. There must be something we can agree upon. Anything?"

"Is there?" Bran asked.

"Ireland will be lost if we refuse to cooperate with one another," Father Murray said. "Can we at least agree to that?"

"We are the Fianna," Uncle Sceolán said, "and we'll not be defeated."

"Then why are you here?" Father Murray asked.

Uncle Sceolán looked to Bran, opened his mouth and then shut it.

Bran straightened. "We are here because there is need. We cannot fight two wars at once."

Uncle Sceolán harrumphed.

The ghost of a smile brushed Bran's lips, and his eyes glittered with what might have been a red reflection. "Well, not with ease."

"And Your Grace?" Father Murray asked.

Bishop Avery sighed. "The situation could be better."

"There. We agree on something. So, please, everyone. Stay calm," Father Murray said. "We're here to talk."

"Put away the blade, Dominic. Now," Bishop Avery said. "Come here."

Father Dominic leaned close enough for Liam to smell whiskey on his breath and whispered, "I'll sort you out later, demon. Best watch yourself." He sheathed the dagger and went to the Bishop.

"Liam, the gun," Father Murray said, holding out a hand. He looked angry, and Liam couldn't help being a wee bit glad.

Bran said, "Best do as he says, son."

"Are you?" Liam asked his father.

Bran glanced at Bishop Avery and then put his spear on the ground. "We are here to negotiate a truce, not start another war. If your Father Murray feels the Bishop is here in earnest, I'll not refuse."

Not seeing another choice, Liam handed the rifle to Father Murray.

"All right, then," Father Murray said once he'd placed the rifle under the table out of easy reach. "Let's begin." He picked up the papers and distributed copies to both Bishop Avery and Bran. "The Roman

Catholic Church agrees to a temporary cease fire between Herself and the Fey for the duration of one week within the confines of the Diocese of Raphoe, Derry, Down and Connor, Armagh, Dromore, Clogher, Kilmore, Ardagh and Clonmacnoise, and Meath."

Bran frowned at the paper in his hand. "What is this? The truce was to include all of Ireland for a month."

"Bishop Avery is only authorized to make this offer for the Archdiocese of Armagh," one of the Church clerks said in a thick Kerry accent.

"I'm giving you my son," Bran said, dropping the agreement onto the table in disgust, "You ask me to risk him for this?"

Father Murray laid a hand on Bran's arm. "A lasting trust is built with small steps."

"He's my son. I'd hardly count that a small step."

"Then have another take his place," Bishop Avery said. "We are offering a hostage in exchange. Father Martin will go with you. That's all I can offer."

For a brief moment, Liam wondered if he'd be consulted at all or if they'd continue to discuss him as if he weren't present.

Father Murray lowered his voice. "Liam will be safe. I swear it."

Bran turned and gave Liam a long look. "It's your neck. You've the last word. What do you say?"

Here's your chance, Liam thought. Tell them all to sod off. He held his father's gaze and thought of Mary Kate, Oran and everyone else who'd died. He thought of the baby that would've lived. Mary Kate's baby. Our son.

"I'm in," Liam said.

Bran nodded, went to the table and signed the truce with the pen Father Murray offered. Looking up from the agreement, Bran stared at Bishop Avery. "If anything happens to my son – if he's harmed in any way, you'll not make old bones. I'll see to it myself. I don't care where you hide. Me and mine will find you. Do you understand me, Robert Avery, priest?"

Bishop Avery swallowed. "I do." And with a nervous pause, he signed the document.