

One

Sheets of rain lashed the windshield; the high beams of their hired car barely penetrated a summer twilight grown black as pitch. It was a classic Irish downpour.

The road had narrowed to a single lane scarcely wider than a sheep track and was bordered by dense hedges. He took Cynthia's hand; his wife's fear of being hemmed in was only slightly greater than his. Crammed into the rain-hammered Volvo with a carton of books and a testy driver and pressed on either side by the sullen hedges, he counted this moment the very reason he was no traveler.

The flight from Atlanta to Dublin had lived up to his worst expectations. Following a delay of seven hours due to storms in the Atlanta area, the trip across the Pond had been an unnerving piece of business which shortened his temper and swelled his feet to ridiculous proportions. Then, onto a commuter flight to Sligo airport at Strandhill, where—and this was the final straw, or so he hoped—they met the antiquated vehicle that would take them to the lodge on Lough Arrow. When he located an online Sligo car service a month back and figured how to dial the country code, hadn't he plainly said this trip would celebrate his wife's birthday as well as her first time in Ireland? Hadn't he specified a *nice* car?

In any case, they'd be getting no consolation from the driver, a small, wiry fellow so hunkered over the wheel that little more was visible than his headgear—a mashed and hapless affair of uncertain purpose, possibly a hat.

He had visited County Sligo as a bachelor ten years ago, with his attorney cousin, Walter, and Walter's wife, Katherine; they had driven to and from the fishing lodge on this same road. In any weather, it was no place to meet oncoming vehicles.

He unbuckled the seat belt and leaned forward.

'Aengus, I think we should pull off.'

'What's that?'

'I think we should pull off,' he shouted above the thundering din of rain and wipers.

'No place to pull off.'

'Ask him how he can possibly see anything,' said Cynthia.

'How can you possibly?'

'I see th' wall on m' right an' keep to it.'

'Doesn't appear to be any cars coming, why don't we stop and wait it out?'

Torrential. Second only to the hurricane he'd driven through in Whitecap.

'I'll get round th' bend there an' see what's ahead.' Aengus muttered, shook his head. 'Bleedin' rain, an' fog t' bleedin' boot.'

'It's what keeps you green,' shouted his wife, opting for the upbeat.

'That's what they all say. M'self, I'm after goin' on holiday to Ibiza.'

He sat back and tried to stuff his right foot into the shoe he'd removed on entering the car.

'Timothy,' said his wife, 'if there's no place to pull off, what happens when people meet another vehicle?'

'Someone has to back up. I never quite understood how that gets decided. Anyway, there'll be a pull-off along here somewhere; they seem to appear at very providential places.'

‘When he said he keeps to the wall, I realized those aren’t hedges. There’s stone under all those vines.’

He thought she looked mildly accusing, as if he’d neglected to pass along this wisdom.

‘Walls!’ reiterated Aengus. ‘Landlord walls.’

He had promised her this trip for years, and for one reason or another, it had been often deferred, twice rescheduled, and even now there was a glitch. Last week, Walter and Katherine had been forced to postpone tomorrow’s planned arrival in Sligo until four days hence. Walter’s apologies were profuse; after months of red tape and head scratching, he said, the date for meeting with a big client had come out of the blue. His cousin hated the inconvenience it would cause; after all, Katherine was the only one among them with guts to drive the Irish roadways. She was a regular Stirling Moss at the wheel—fearless, focused, fast. Too fast, the cousins had long agreed, but what could they do? They were both cowards, unfit for the job.

Until Walter and Katherine arrived at the lodge with wheels, he and Cynthia would be stuck like moss on a log. ‘How will you manage?’ Walter asked.

‘Very well, indeed,’ he said. In truth, Walter and Katherine’s delay was the best of news. He and Cynthia were badly in need of four uneventful days, having been thrashed by the affairs of recent months.

Soon after she fractured her ankle and lapsed, unwilling, into what she called her Long and Unlovely Confinement, he learned he had a half-brother in Mississippi. There had been a few shocks in his seventy years, most of them occurring during forty-plus years as a priest, but never anything like this.

As a kid, he’d once pulled that nearly impossible stunt of St. Paul’s and prayed without ceasing—for a brother. It didn’t work. Then, sixty years later, there was Henry Winchester. Henry, with acute myelogenous leukemia, needing stem cells from a close relative.

He had quartered in Memphis with Cynthia for weeks, giving over his stem cells through apheresis, standing watch at Henry’s bedside and feeling in an odd and confusing way that he was fighting for his own life. His long road trip in a vintage Mustang hadn’t helped, of course. Then, playing out the proverb of ‘when it rains it pours,’ came the sudden flare-up of his diabetes only days ago.

‘There’s no way we’re not going,’ he told his wife, whose recent sixty-fourth birthday had gone largely uncelebrated.

‘There’s no way we’re not going,’ he told his doctor, who had seen him through two diabetic comas and was as hidebound as they come. Hoppy Harper had preached him the lipids sermon followed by the exercise sermon, pulled a stern face to ram the points home, then caved. ‘So, go,’ he said, popping a jelly bean.

Four days. To walk the shores of Lough Arrow. To row to an island in the middle of the lake and picnic with Cynthia. To sit and stare—gaping, if need be—at nothing or everything.

It would be roughly in the spirit of their honeymoon by the lake in Maine, where their grandest amenity was a kerosene lamp. It had rained then, too. He remembered the sound of it on the tin roof of the camp, and the first sight of her in the white nightgown, her hair damp from the cranky, malfunctioning shower, and her eyes lit by some inner

fire that was at once deeply familiar and strangely new. He hadn't really known until then why he'd never before loved profoundly.

Cynthia nudged him with her elbow. 'We're around the bend.'

He leaned forward and shouted, 'We're around the bend. You were going to stop.'

'There's nothin' so bad it couldn't be worse—another bend comin' up.'

He sank back in the seat. 'That's the way of bends. They keep coming up.'

'What am I t' call you?' shouted Aengus. 'Are ye th' father or th' rev'rend?'

'Reverend,' he said. 'I'm the Father back home, but in your country only Catholic priests are addressed as Father.'

'Here for th' fishin', you an' th' missus?'

'No fishing.'

't is th' fishin' capital of th' west, you should have a go at it.'

'We could reach out and touch those walls,' she said. 'It looks like we're going to rip the side mirrors off their hinges.'

He made another feckless go at shoeing his right foot. 'Always looks that way.'

His earlier foray here had earned him rights to play the old head. 'Never happens.'

Aengus gave him a shout. 'I've been thinkin', Rev'rend.'

'What's that?'

'There's seven or eight them Kav'na families in Easkey.'

'Good. Wonderful.'

She foraged in her handbag, which did double duty as mobile library and snack hamper. 'Here,' she said. 'Eat this. It's been four hours.'

Raisins. He ate a handful with a kind of simple shame, recalling chocolate with macadamias.

She leaned close, her breath warm in his ear. 'Do you think he does this for a living? He isn't wearing a uniform or anything.'

'Ask him,' he said. He was sick of yelling.

She unbuckled her seat belt and leaned forward to the hat. 'Mr. Malone, do you do this for a living?'

'What's that?'

'Drive tourists. Is that what you do all the time?'

't is the only time. 't is m' brother's oul' clunker. I mow verges for th' Council at Sligo.'

She sat back and rebuckled. 'He mows verges,' she said, looking straight ahead. 'It's the only time he's done this.'

There was no point in pursuing that line of thought. 'The sides of the road where weeds grow,' he said, in case she didn't know from verges.

Rain drummed the roof. The fan in the dash spewed air smelling of aftershave. They moved at a crawl.

'Mother of God!' shouted Aengus.

The sudden slam of brakes jolted them forward. A blinding light on top of them. His heart pounded into his throat.

Aengus flashed the Volvo's high beams, scraped the gears in reverse, and squinted into the rearview mirror.

'Bloody lorry,' he snapped. 'We'll be backin' up.'