



TO KILL A
Cuckoo
BIRD

by
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A Novel

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“The cuckoo does not mourn the nest it empties.

It only knows hunger.

It only knows need.”

PROLOGUE

The Island. November. A Long Time Ago.

Listen.

Before the names, before the bodies, before the detective and her notebook and her quiet terrible patience — before all of it — there is only this: the island in November, and the storm coming in off the Atlantic like God has remembered something He left unfinished.

Inis Cró is not on most maps. The ones that do include it render it as a comma — a small, uncertain punctuation mark nine miles off the Galway coast, as if the cartographer himself wasn't sure whether to bother. There are four hundred and twelve people on Inis Cró, or there were, before the winter the Brennan family took in the boy. After that winter, the number was smaller.

It is always dark on the island by four o'clock in November. The darkness is not the polite darkness of cities, where light bleeds in from somewhere and softens everything. This is the darkness of the end of the world, which is more or less what the island is: the last scrap of land before the ocean takes over entirely and the only thing between you and America is three thousand miles of black water.

On the night this story truly begins — though beginnings are slippery, dishonest things — the storm arrived at half past nine. The fishing boats had already been pulled up. The pub had already closed. Every window on the island was a yellow square of light, every family pressed together around whatever warmth they had, and the wind moved through the village streets like something looking for a way in.

And then, from the Brennan house at the top of the hill, a scream.

Not the scream of wind. Not the protest of a shutter pulled loose from its hinges. A human scream, high and sudden, cut off before it could become a second scream, which is somehow worse than if it had continued.

The neighbors heard it. They told each other they had heard it, in the days afterwards, in the careful lowered voices of people who wish they had done something and did not. Old Mrs. Faherty at number four heard it and blessed herself. The Donoghue boys heard it from their bedroom and lay still in the dark, not speaking. Ciarán the postman heard it from the road and stopped walking and stood with rain running down his collar for a long, suspended moment before he told himself it was the storm.

It was not the storm.

Inside the Brennan house, Siobhán Brennan, age sixteen, was lying at the bottom of the stairs.

And at the top of the stairs, in the dark, perfectly still, stood the boy.



CHAPTER ONE

Inis Cró. Eight Months Later. Detective Inspector Maeve Connelly.

The ferry from Ros an Mhí took forty minutes in good weather. This was not good weather.

Maeve Connelly stood at the bow because standing at the bow was the only thing that helped, which she knew from experience and would not have admitted to anyone. Twenty-three years on the force, two commendations, one internal affairs review she had survived with her dignity intact if not her patience, and the thing that still got her was boats. Specifically the middle part of boats, where the motion was worst and the horizon disappeared and your body became very interested in arguing with your brain about what was level.

The bow was better. The bow you could see where you were going.

She watched Inis Cró grow larger against the grey sky. It looked, she thought, exactly like the kind of place where terrible things happened quietly. Low stone walls. A church steeple. Whitewashed cottages arranged along the hillside as if they had been placed there by someone working from a postcard and not paying close attention. Beautiful, if you liked that sort of thing. Maeve was from Galway and had spent her life surrounded by beauty of this particular variety — windswept, grey, vaguely accusatory — and found it largely unremarkable.

She had the file in her bag. She had read it four times on the train from Dublin and once on the ferry before the motion of the boat made reading inadvisable.

The Brennan family. Father: Pádraig, 52, fisherman. Mother: Brigid, 48, schoolteacher. Children, biological: Siobhán, deceased, 16; Cormac, deceased, 14. Child, fostered: Declan, 11, previously of St. Columba's Residential Home, Galway. Currently residing with the family pending review.

Currently the only one left.

Siobhán had gone first, eight months ago. Fell down the stairs in the night, the inquest said. Tragic accident. The family had been devastated in the visible, legible way of people who have lost something real, and the island had grieved with them, and that had been that.

Then Cormac, three months later. Found at the base of the sea cliff at the north end of the island on a Tuesday morning by a man walking his dog. Ruled a fall. The boy had gone out alone, which he apparently did sometimes, and the cliff path was slippery after rain, and the inquest noted that grief does strange things to children and sometimes they don't look where they're going.

Maeve had read that line four times. She had a particular relationship with sentences that were technically true and practically dishonest, forged over two decades of reading reports written by people who wanted the thing to be simple. That sentence wanted the thing to be simple.

Then Pádraig Brennan. Six weeks ago. Heart failure, the doctor said, and the doctor was not wrong, technically — the heart had indeed failed. The question Maeve had, the question that had apparently not troubled anyone until the county coroner flagged the file on a slow Thursday afternoon and sent it to Dublin, was why a fifty-two-year-old man in robust health had experienced heart failure after a period of gradual decline that one nurse had noted, in a margin of a chart that no one had read carefully, looked consistent with prolonged low-level exposure to something.

Something.

She liked that nurse. She intended to buy that nurse a drink.

The ferry bumped against the dock. Maeve picked up her bag. A Guard she didn't know was waiting for her at the end of the gangway — young, red-faced from the cold, holding an umbrella that the wind had already destroyed.

“Detective Inspector Connelly?”

“Yes.”

“Garda Seán Ó Muirí. I'm to take you to the house.” He looked at her bag. “Is that all you brought?”

“How long do you think this is going to take?”

He opened his mouth and closed it again. She walked past him toward the car.



The Brennan house was the largest on the island, which was not saying a great deal. It stood at the top of a hill on the eastern side of the village, two stories, grey stone, with a garden that had been well-kept once and was now beginning to lose the argument with the wind. There were flowers still, somehow — late November, and something small and yellow persisting in a window box with what Maeve could only describe as stubbornness.

Brigid Brennan met her at the door.

Maeve had a habit, cultivated over years, of assembling a person in the first ten seconds. Not judging them. Assembling them — the way you pick up pieces of something broken and hold them together to see what the original shape was. Brigid Brennan was fifty-eight years old but looked sixty-eight. She had the face of a woman who had been handsome and had stopped caring about that some time ago, which was not the same as a woman who had let herself go. It was more specific than that. It was the face of a woman who had put down everything that was not necessary for survival and had been carrying only the necessary things for long enough that she'd forgotten what else she used to hold.

“Detective Inspector,” Brigid said. Her voice was steady. People in grief either lost their voices or hardened them, and Brigid had hardened hers into something that could cut glass.

“Mrs. Brennan. Thank you for agreeing to speak with me.”

“You’ll have tea.” It was not a question.

“I will, thank you.”

The house was warm and clean and full of photographs. Maeve noted them as she followed Brigid through the hallway to the kitchen: family portraits, school photographs, the kind of accumulated visual record that families make without thinking about it, a documentary of ordinary life. Siobhán in a Communion dress, gap-toothed and delighted. Cormac holding a fish he’d caught, squinting into the sun. Pádraig on the boat, laughing at something outside the frame.

And in many of the later photographs, at the edges, slightly apart, always watching:

The boy.

He was smaller than she’d expected. Eleven years old, slight, with dark hair that needed cutting and eyes that were too old for his face in the way that the eyes of children

from institutions sometimes were — not empty, but careful. Watchful in the manner of someone who has learned that the world requires monitoring.

In every photograph, he was watching someone.

In no photograph was anyone watching him.



The kitchen smelled of bread and turf smoke. Maeve sat down at a table that had clearly fed many people over many years and accepted a cup of tea that was exactly the right strength, which told her something about Brigid Brennan that she filed away.

The boy was not in the room. Maeve had not asked where he was.

“I want to be clear about something, Mrs. Brennan, before we begin.” Maeve wrapped both hands around the mug. “I am not here because anyone is in trouble. I am here because your family has suffered a great deal in a short time and my job is simply to understand what happened. That’s all.”

Brigid looked at her with the expression of a woman who had been a schoolteacher for twenty-five years and therefore recognized a managed truth when she heard one. “And is that what you believe, Detective Inspector? That it is simple?”

Maeve took a sip of her tea. “No,” she said. “I don’t believe it’s simple at all.”

Something shifted in Brigid’s face. Not relief, exactly. Something more complicated than relief. The expression, Maeve thought, of a woman who has been waiting a very long time for someone to say the right wrong thing.

“I’ll tell you about Siobhán,” Brigid said. She looked at her hands. “I’ll tell you about all of them. But I need you to understand something first.”

“Of course.”

Brigid looked up. Her eyes were dry. She had, Maeve suspected, run out of tears some time ago.

“Declan is a good boy,” she said. “He has had a terrible life. What happened to him before he came to us — what they did to those children in that place — ” She stopped. Started again. “He is a good boy. Whatever you find. Whatever you think you know. I need you to remember that he is a child and he is a good boy and someone has to believe that about him or he has nothing.”

Maeve held the woman’s gaze for a long moment.

“I understand,” she said.

She did not say: I believe you.

She did not say: He is the reason I am here.

She said nothing else at all, and waited, and Brigid Brennan began to talk.

Outside, the wind moved through the village. The late afternoon dark was coming down over the island. And somewhere in the house above them, in a room Maeve had not yet seen, a boy sat quietly and waited, the way he had always waited, with the particular patience of a creature that has learned that if you are still enough, people forget to watch you.

He had been still for a very long time.

He was very good at waiting.

End of Chapter One