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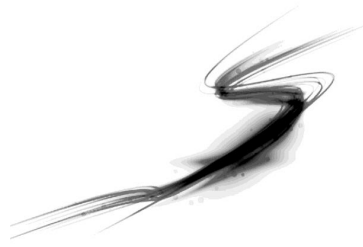
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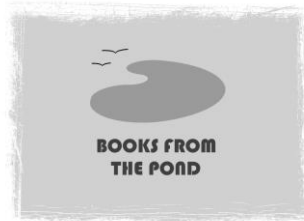
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# INFALL

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**Herb Hughes**



Books From The Pond  
2023

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, organizations, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental unless used in a fictitious manner.

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*This novel is dedicated to the wonderful people of the  
Emerald Isle, and specifically to:*

*Tom and Tess Flynn  
Robert and Siobhan King  
Irish Writer Mike Purcell*

### Author Notes

Embrian units of measurement were replaced with the English system for ease of reading.

Irish and Australian slang is used where appropriate. Some of these terms may appear as typos but are correct in their context.



# Prologue

## Infall – Location Undefinable



*Falling, my arms outstretched to touch the nothing I am passing through. Deeper and deeper, falling. A soft electric sensation like the mildest kiss of a low current shock tingles along my body. My destiny, an infinite mass in this weightless nothing, awaits me far below, so deep beneath the existence I have known and all the existences between. Electric falling.*

*I am confident in the beauty of the numbers that prove there is a bottom in this bottomless pit. The falling goes on and on, but I ride through the long, long dark without hunger or thirst. Space falling.*

*Forever and never are interwoven. After all the waiting, it will be over the moment it started as time no longer applies. Inward falling.*

*The energy that is me is falling far faster than gravity can tug at matter. I do not understand, but it is not mine to understand. I only accept that I am falling to the other side of entropy, from out to in, from doom to salvation, from danger to safety, from death to life. I hope. I believe.*

*But I am not falling in any sense of falling that I have known before, not a child stumbling and falling to the ground or an adult finding someone and falling in love. It is a different falling, a compression of energy beyond comprehension, a passing of space beyond measure without passing at all: Infall.*

# Chapter 1

## Frozen Lake in Western Siberia, Russia



Nikolai Ermakov reached in his sack for the small handsaw he had used throughout his life to cut holes through the iced surface of the lake that meandered through the Siberian forests near his village, holes for something that was both his work and his favorite pastime: ice fishing. He looked at the saw a moment and thought of his father, now long dead. The saw had been a gift from his father so many years ago when the old man became too feeble to go ice fishing with his son.

Nikolai would pass the saw down to his son if he had one, but he had two daughters. He loved them dearly, and they loved him, but neither of his daughters cared about fishing. *Besides*, he thought, *fishing is a man's duty, not a woman's*.

The girls were almost grown. One of them was now married, and the other would soon be. Perhaps a grandson, he mused as he began to saw along the tangent of the hole he had drilled. As his father had taught him, he kept the saw sharp and generously greased with animal fat. The work went quickly. He had made the hole large enough to drop three lines, so the ice plug, at fourteen centimeters thick, was heavy. He laid it aside slowly and carefully. There was no need to bang it around as the noise would travel quickly through the ice sheet, scaring any fish in the area.

Nikolai then baited the lines and lowered them through the hole, unfolded the store-bought chair, and leaned back in the seat, picking up the ragged October 2003 issue of National Geographic. It was the first one that had ever been published in Russian, and he had



saved it all these years even though he had never read even a quarter of it. He liked to look at the pictures. They were breathtaking.

Hours passed, but the fish were not biting. The National Geographic was set down and picked back up three times. Perhaps he should pack up and go home, but he had nothing to show for his effort. He decided to give it a few more minutes as he returned to thumbing through the magazine, looking at the pictures he had long since memorized.

Nikolai caught a flash of color to his right in his peripheral vision. Before he could set the magazine down, there were more bright flashes. He looked up quickly. There was a carnival of color and brightness not ten meters away. The lights were accompanied by blowing, swirling winds. The air was bitter cold even before the wind started. Now it bit deeply.

In the middle of the maelstrom, there was a golden flash, and a creature appeared. The lights and wind began to slow, stopping soon after. The creature was a man but not a man. *A near-man*, Nikolai thought.

The near-man was naked, which, Nikolai realized, should have been devastating in this cold. After a quick moment in which its eyes darted back and forth, taking in its surroundings, the near-man started shivering. Then it crouched over and wrapped its skinny, strangely-jointed arms around itself.

“Zdravstvuyte,” Nikolai said. *Hello*. “Vam holodno.” *You look cold*. “Vee zamerzli?” *Are you cold?*

The near-man looked at him but said nothing. Nikolai could see in that strange face that the near-man was in pain. Obviously, the cold bothered him. Nikolai held up his extra blanket. The naked near-man stood straight and stumbled toward him, trying to walk on the frigid ice with bare feet while it reached its long, strangely-jointed arm out to take the blanket. Its movements were awkward and

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unsteady, perhaps because the creature was so cold, but its eyes never left the blanket.

Its long fingers reached out to take it, but when the fingers touched the cloth, the near-man slipped on the ice.

Nikolai had forgotten about the fishing hole. Indeed, it did not even cross his mind that a person could pass through the hole. But he had cut it large enough for three lines, and the near-man was so thin. When it stumbled and slipped, it went down into the crippling, frigid water, thrashing briefly while still grasping the edge of the blanket. Nikolai moved as fast as his large body allowed. He grabbed the blanket before it went under the icy surface of the water. He gathered his strength to pull the near-man out of the water, but there was little resistance when he lifted. The blanket came out quickly. The part that had sunk under the water was frozen stiff.

The near-man had not been able to hold on.

Nikolai peered down into the lake. The ripples dissolved into stillness, but he could see nothing more than the three fishing lines fading out of sight. The water was too cold, he realized. The near-man lapsed into unconsciousness quickly, sinking fast. There was no hope.

Nikolai brushed his face with his glove. He could no longer help the near-man, and the fish were not biting. He pulled the lines out and gathered his belongings. The frozen blanket would be too difficult to carry, so he left it on the shore and went home to tell the story of the strange creature that drowned in the lake. Would anyone believe him?

# Chapter 2

## A Pastoral Farm in Outback, Australia

### *THREE DAYS EARLIER*



There was a glint of color in his peripheral vision, a flash of red. Jerking his head around, the man looked out of the window and into the dark of night. He saw nothing for a tiny fraction of a second, then two more streaks of light, one yellow and one purple, illuminated the night air. *What the...* “Marlene, come here. Quick.”

The woman placed her knitting on the small table beside her rocking chair and lumbered out of her seat. “What is it, Alfred?” she asked.

Electric sparkles swirled around and flashed in colors as they grew in intensity in a spherical area no more than ten feet wide beside the barn. “Lights shooting about.”

“It’s just lightning. There’s supposed to be a storm on the way.”

When Marlene got to the window, she could see streaks of color whirling through the air constantly, curving around in every direction. Leaves and twigs and dust were whipped up from the ground and swirled around with the colors, going every possible way at the same time. The light from the flashes gave the leaves and twigs and the side of the barn an eerie glow of mixed colors.

He had seen whirlwinds and dust devils many times. He had lived through great storms. Never had he seen anything like this. “That ain’t no lightning,” Alfred said.

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They both watched with their mouths open. “I’ve never seen nothing like that,” Marlene said. “I hear ball lightning does some funny things. Must be what it is.”

There was a quick flash of dark yellow, almost gold, down through the swirl of primary colors, then the lights began to fade. “Lookee there. Did you see that?”

“That gold flash?”

“I think I saw the silhouette of a man in it. Did you see it?”

Leaves slowed then stopped whirling. Lazily, they drifted back and forth as they fell to the ground. There were a few more flashes of color, causing the falling leaves to momentarily jump around, and then the lights stopped. The night was black again.

“I was looking right at it,” Marlene said, “And I never seen no man. No matter. It’s gone now.”

Except for a small cone of dimly lit ground stretching out from the window, made by the house light passing through from the inside, there was only the near black of a moonless, starlit night on the outside.

“Ain’t no storm. Stars are out. I’m going outside to take a look.”

“You don’t need to get out if there’s a storm coming. It was ball lightning. It’s all gone now.”

“Ain’t no lightning,” he said again as he walked over to the gun rack. “No storm, neither.”

“It could have been teenagers from town shooting off fireworks. Just let it be. They’ll go away. If they’re still out there.”

“All the more reason to go out and take a look-see,” the man said as he took his shotgun down from the rack. “Be back in a sec.”



In a flash it was over, almost as soon as it started. But it seemed to have gone on forever, he thought as his feet touched solid

ground. He stumbled but managed to stay upright as the flashing colors and energy sparkles swirling around him quickly died. Small things, unrecognizable debris from this new world, were floating in the air, falling to the ground now that the energy of Infall had ended.

He was hidden in the cloak of a night sky, but it was not completely dark. The sky was filled with the twinkle of thousands, no, millions of stars...

*Stars!* He had learned about them, marveled at holographs of them, but, being relatively young, he had never seen them. Now, here he was, staring at an astonishing night sky filled with millions of stars. A young universe. He was here! And he was still alive. Infall had worked.

His stare at the nighttime sky was interrupted by a banging sound. Jerking his head toward the sound's direction, he saw the dark silhouette of a building with a dimly lit window directly in front of him. A door had popped open. A being stepped from the inside to the outside, a long tube hanging from his arm. Having studied the ancient history of his own civilization, the tube was unmistakable. It was a weapon.

The being carrying the tube weapon turned back and spoke through the open door, saying something to someone unseen. It was evident by the changes in sounds that the being was speaking a language, communicating to another being or beings on the inside. These were not animal calls. Too many distinct sounds. So two, and possibly more, sentient beings lived inside the building with the lighted window. A home in all likelihood.

The window flashed to black. Someone had turned off the light source. Now there was only the starlight to see by. The door closed again, then the being with the tube weapon stepped across a porch and down some steps to ground level. He could not see what this being looked like. It was too dark. But he could see that it turned toward him and began to walk his way. He had to hide!

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There was a smaller building beside him. It was unlit and in poor repair. Ragged holes of several sizes let the inside mingle with the outside. An out-structure of some sort, not a living area. If these beings were similar to the people of his own early history, this was a farm, and the outbuilding was a barn.

He couldn't hide inside the barn as there was a good chance farm animals would be inside. If so, he could possibly rouse them, stir them into making noises. This would warn the being with the weapon that someone was there.

The fields around the house and barn, as best he could see, were open. There were a few scattered trees around the house, but none close enough for him to step behind. Besides, the nearest were not large enough to hide him. If he ran out into the field, he might be seen in the faint light. Or, if the being could not see well enough in the dark, his running footsteps could be heard in the eerie quiet of this place.

After surveying his options, he decided it was better not to move at all.

"Who's out there?" the being shouted. The sounds meant nothing to him except that the creatures on this planet were advanced enough to have language. And buildings. And weapons.

He was the first to pass through Infall, but many more of his people would be coming. He knew now they would not be alone when they reached this new world. That could be a problem, but it was too much to expect that a habitable planet would not have life of some type. He had hoped it would not be intelligent life, especially intelligent life with weapons, but that hope was now destroyed.

Approaching these beings would have to be done carefully. This was not the time and place. Best to hide for now, wait for others.

He leaned against the side of the barn, near the front corner, and slid to the ground as quietly as he could. He spread his hands and

placed them flat on the ground for support. That way, he would not wobble or make a sound that might give him away.

Peering around the corner, he strained to see in the starlight as the being walked to the barn door, opened it, and went in. A light flashed on somewhere inside, illuminating the ground in front of the open door.

This was his chance. Should he run? He looked around at the open field behind the barn. There was no cover to be seen, but it was so dark he was not sure if there was cover out there or not. And he had no idea how well this being could see at night. Perhaps the starlight was too dim for the alien to see well, but if he wasn't seen, he could be heard. And the weapon the being carried might have a way of tracking his body so that all the being would have to do is aim in his general direction. He knew too little about this world he was on. Running was too risky.

As he was thinking about his options, the light was turned off. The being stepped out of the barn and closed the door, dropping a simple latch mechanism into place. The latch would keep nobody out but would keep the farm animals in.

Holding its weapon in front of its body, the being turned to walk toward him, toward the corner where he was sitting on the ground. He snapped his head around, away from the corner, so that he could not be seen, but he could no longer see the being. Still, he could hear the thing taking slow, careful steps, no doubt with the weapon ready to fire.

He could not lean back any further. He was almost a part of the barn wall. Taking stock of his situation, he realized one of his hands was resting on the ground slightly beyond the corner, where it might be seen if the being looked down and had good eyes for dark vision. But he was balanced on it. He could not slide it back without shifting his whole body. The being was only a couple of steps away. Any movement he made would be heard.

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Sweat began to prickle his brow. *It is a good thing sweat makes no noise as it oozes out of your body*, he thought. The being took another careful step toward the corner. It was so close he could not afford to suck in a breath of air. It would make too much noise. So he held his breath and waited.

A sharp pain shot through his finger and traveled up his arm in a flash of agony. He opened his mouth to scream but caught himself, letting out only the tiniest sliver of air.

The being holding the weapon was standing at the corner, looking at the fields in the distance, beside and behind the barn, with the bottom of its shoe mashing down on the tip of his little finger.

His mouth gaped open in distress, but he could not afford to let a sound out. Nor could he afford to pull the tip of his finger out from under the being's boot. The slightest movement might give him away.

But the pain bordered on being unbearable. He felt tears pooling in his eyes. They streamed down his cheeks as he pressed his head back into the side of the barn, trying so hard not to make a sound, not even the sound of air moving from taking a desperately needed breath. How long could he hold his breath?

Not long enough, he feared. Any sound at all would cause the creature to look down. At this range, no matter how crude the weapon it carried, it would not miss.



# Chapter 3

## Sentarien Laboratory, Embria, Artificial Solar System, Fifth-level Universe



Heads huddled around the holographic cube from all sides. The cube contained a lot of display volume, but was only showing one tiny green dot. A lot of eyes were focused on that one small dot. If you looked closely, an almost invisible green mist covered much of the remaining display volume, but the mist meant nothing. Nobody looked at anything other than the single green dot.

“Dontin’s still alive!”

“The atmosphere must be breathable.”

“I honestly thought he would die in transit.”

“This is amazing. Infall works!”

“Dontin is a brave scientist. I would not have gone first.”

The comments melted into a dozen low-level conversations, but the buzz was broken as one of the scientists raised his hands and said loud enough for all to hear, “May I have your attention, please.” Eyes drifted away from the display cube as the buzz of conversation dwindled to nothing. When there was complete silence, the scientist continued, “This preliminary foray may well be the most significant scientific achievement in all of history. I’m sure you all join me, I’m sure all Embrians everywhere join me in congratulating Vahlion on his accomplishment.”

As the speaker, Kaltera, held his hands out toward the person standing beside him, cheers erupted in the room.

Vahlion raised his arms to quiet them, but it took a few seconds for the shouts and conversation to die down. When silence

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reigned, he started speaking, “This is not my accomplishment, but *our* accomplishment.” His statement met with a chorus of good-natured boos. Vahlion waved them off as he continued, “Still, it is not yet time to celebrate, my friends. We believed we could calibrate the equipment so that Infall exit would be on a planet with a breathable atmosphere. Since Dontin is still alive, it appears we were correct. We also believed we could calibrate the equipment so that he would exit on land and not water. We hope that is the case. We hope he is not treading water in some great ocean at this very moment.

“But we cannot claim victory yet. We must continue to observe as long as the signal is readable. As you well know, we can detect his life signs only because his Infall was so recent. The signal will fade to nothing in a few more minutes. If he remains alive at that point, we will have to take it on faith that he will continue living.”

“It’s been several minutes. That should be past the danger point, shouldn’t it?”

“He may yet freeze to death... Or die from excess thermal exposure. We have little control when selecting a departure point with a pleasant ambient temperature.”

“If only we could talk to him, let him tell us what he found.”

“Yes,” Vahlion said. “If only. But remember the nature of Infall. It is hard to understand, but it is not a transmissible process. There is no transmission between our universes, voice or otherwise. Let’s not forget the distance involved. Even light cannot travel this far and still be detectible. We are lucky that we know he is alive, that his heart still beats, but in a few more seconds, when the energy of Infall is fully gone, we will know nothing more about Dontin.”

“Then we move ahead,” Kaltera said. “While the rest of us are building the full-size Infall machines, one crew can use your prototype machine to send a few thousand Embrians to this new world each day.”

“First, we Embrians must reach a consensus,” Vahlion said.

“Yes, of course,” Kaltera reluctantly agreed. “As you insist, we will reach consensus before we have finished constructing the large-scale machines. But we cannot waste time. We do not have time to waste. The prototype machine can send several thousand Embrians a day through Infall, volunteers who are not otherwise needed here. We must start sending them now. If we delay, we could all die. Every single one of us.”

# Chapter 4

## Outback, Australia



Dontin could not reveal himself and hope for mercy. He did not speak the being's language. Besides, he was naked. He might appear to be little more than a strange, mutated animal.

This being was a simple farmer, not a government emissary. Since it was carrying a weapon, it was afraid. In the dark of night, this close to the being's residence, there was little chance that the being would do anything other than fire its weapon.

But Dontin could not stay frozen much longer. His chest was racked with pain as it tried to expand to receive a deep breath. And the sharp fire of pain in his fingertip, still beneath the unmoving being's heavy boot, continued to scream through his brain.

Mercifully, in the next instant the boot lifted from his finger as the being took a step away. The relief from sharp pain was immediate, but the finger still throbbed with a deep ache. He would have to ignore the pain. Breath was the more immediate problem. His chest ached. It stretched involuntarily as he tried to remain frozen.

The being continued to walk along, looking out over the fields. There was a flash of light some distance away. Everything was visible for an instant, colored in white. The being was walking away with its back toward Dontin during the brief flash. It did not see him. A few seconds later, the air roared with a great burst of rumbling sound. Lightning and thunder. Dontin remembered studying about them. They no longer happened on Embria. Had not happened in millions of years.

The being quickened its pace and began to curve back toward the main building. When it was only a few steps away, Dontin let air

seep into his lungs. He had no choice. His body was overcome with the urge to breathe. It was too much like drowning in the atmosphere. Since he could no longer keep air out, he forced himself to breathe slowly. He could not afford to make the noise of taking a large, deep breath. Still, any air was welcome inside his searing lungs.

He watched in the dim light as the being climbed the steps, took one last look around, then opened the door and went into the building. Seconds later, the inside light was turned back on.

*Two things are apparent*, Dontin thought as he took in sorely-needed gulps of air, letting his chest expand as far as it could. First, Embrians could see in the dark better than these alien beings. If their places had been reversed, Dontin would have easily seen the alien being on the ground. He could not have missed him.

*Ha!* Dontin thought to himself. *I thought of this being as an alien, but this is his world. I am the alien!*

Second, the Embrians to come after him would be arriving on a dangerous world. Since these creatures had reached some level of technology, there were, no doubt, many more indigenous beings on the planet. Which meant there would be large cities scattered around the globe. That's how civilizations arose and grew. And these beings carried weapons. The Embrians would be Infalling to this world without knowledge of the planet's language. Or languages if they had not reached the technological level where a single language had been adopted. The Embrians would be naked and unarmed. And there was no way to warn those to come. He shuddered slightly at his next thought. *Infall has the potential to be a major disaster!* Then he reminded himself that, with or without Infall, there would be a more significant disaster: The total destruction of Embria and everyone living there.

Knowing all this did not help. There was nothing he could do to change a thing. He could not stop Infall if he wanted to, which he

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didn't, and he could not communicate with these beings until he learned their language. How could he do that?

The people of his world, Embria, would see the fading signal of Infall that would show them he was still alive. They would proceed with Infall on a major scale, a rate as fast as possible, and would become faster as more and more Infall machines were constructed. Then it would end all too soon. Only a fraction of the population would be able to go through Infall. Most Embrians were destined to perish, to die on a dying world. There was nothing that could be done about that. There was no way to save his planet.

Communication with the local beings would be the key to finding their way in this new world, but that was in the future. Right now, he was reduced to basic survival. That meant finding a source of food and water. And clothes. Wearing clothes indicated intelligence. Once he was dressed, the local beings would, hopefully, be less likely to react out of fear and more likely to react out of curiosity. How could he make clothes, though?

He stood and looked out over the fields. The land was flat with rolling hills in the distance and a few sharper peaks beyond. There were a few trees scattered around the house, a few in the field here and there, and more further away, scattered about the distant landscape. Perhaps they thickened into a forest somewhere beyond the limits of his vision. But if not, even scattered trees would provide some cover.

Breathing regularly once again, and with the ache in his fingertip receding, he began walking toward the distant trees, occasionally looking back to make sure the being from the building was not following him.

The stars twinkled out of existence ahead of him as he walked along. They were being covered by a fast-moving cloud. He had learned about clouds, too. And rain. Water falling from the sky. Nature was so amazing, and Embria had experienced all these things

for most of its existence. That was, of course, before Dontin was born, before the...

Another flash of lightning startled him. It was quickly followed by the boom of thunder, then pouring rain. Huge drops of water. He opened his mouth and held his face to the sky.

The intense storm did not last long. The drops that fell were quickly absorbed by the dry earth, so there was nothing to drink. Dontin wandered over mostly open land, hungry and thirsty, with no idea where he was going other than away from the local being and his weapon. The clouds passed by, and the stars once again filled the night sky, but it was still dark. He stumbled into a shallow stream. The water was clear, perhaps spring fed, so he drank his fill.

A couple of hours later, he was thirsty again. He was also hungry, sleepy, cold, and his digestive system was cramping into great knots of pain, no doubt from drinking the water straight from the stream without boiling it first. But he couldn't afford to start a fire. It would be seen for miles around at night in this sparse landscape.

As long as he didn't die in the process, he would soon become immune to the organisms in the water. The nanotech in his bloodstream would greatly speed the process. Then he could drink his fill and not worry about cramping or stopping every few minutes to dig a hole for relieving his bowels.

The atmosphere was perfect. Oxygen content was good. That was to be expected since they had calibrated the Infall equipment to find a planet with the proper atmospheric components. Everything had worked as it should. He couldn't detect any contaminants through his breathing. There was little doubt they were there since this planet was populated, but the amounts seemed insignificant. He felt no ill effects other than his cramping digestive system, and that was improving with every minute that passed.

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Wrapping his arms around himself in a futile attempt to ward off the cold, he stumbled forward, so tired he bounced off rocks instead of avoiding them. The sky seemed to have gotten slightly brighter. He looked to his right and a little behind. There were mountains in the distance, quite far away. Along the ridge of the distant peaks, there was a thin line of pink-orange. A sun was rising, a real sun, something he had not seen in his lifetime. His grandfather had told him what it was like. Now his grandfather's words would have a real-world vision, not a holograph, to give them greater meaning.

Looking back to where he had been going, Dantin wondered if he should walk in a different direction, perhaps move toward the sun. But he knew nothing about this land or about this planet. And the sun would catch up with him soon enough. So he decided to continue in the same direction, but only after he stopped for a rest.

There were three trees close together not far ahead. Some shelter, though not much. The trees were sparsely leaved. He stepped between the trunks, brushed some rocks away, and then lay down on the dirt, curling into a ball for warmth.

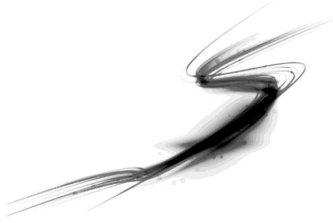
Sometime later, he woke to a quick, sharp pain in his leg. The sky was bright, the sun having risen well into the sky. Although the pain had subsided quickly, he looked down to see what was wrong. He watched as a small rock banged against his leg.

He jerked his head up. A being was staring straight at him, holding a weapon in one hand and a few rocks in the other. This weapon was much more complex than the single, long-barreled rifle that last night's being had carried. This one looked much more complicated. And very deadly.



# Chapter 5

## Cliffs of Moher, Western Ireland



The waves pounded mercilessly against the ragged layers of black and brown stone rising straight up from the raging Atlantic. At the top, hundreds of feet above the water, the howl of the April wind screamed in its effort to drown the roar of the waves, nature raw and untamed. Winter was over, but it still clung to the Irish shoreline at the Cliffs of Moher.

Martin O'Brien leaned toward the ocean, into the teeth of the cold wind, and held his ground. In the florescent rays of the setting sun, he could see the boiling waves beating against the stone walls, but only on the far cliffs as they wove in and out along the sharp edge of the ocean. He never climbed over the path wall to get close enough to the cliff edge to look directly down, not even when he and his friends were bolstered by bravado and drink. Leave that for fools.

Speaking of fools, he watched as a group of teenagers to his left did precisely that. They lay on their stomachs and inched their way to the edge to sneak their eyes over the cliff barely enough to stare down at the angry waves so far below. Martin shivered.

The Cliffs had been changed since his childhood. A path was dug along the top of the Cliffs, from a couple of meters to as many as five meters from the edge, and lined with great square stones set upright. The stones were about two to three inches thick, three or so feet tall, and were backed with earth. You weren't supposed to go over this wall, but some people, mostly teenagers, still did. Yes, a few

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invariably fell to their deaths every year, some accidental and some, perhaps, not so accidental.

When he was young, there had been no wall and nobody to stop a visitor from getting close to the edge. But, oddly enough, there were no fewer deaths now than there were back then.

He wanted to tell the teenagers that crawling to the edge was not the best of ideas. From time-to-time parts of the cliff gave way, tumbling down the ragged cliff face to the cold ocean that seemed an eternity below. But youth was youth and listened only to the surge of hormones that coursed through teenage bodies, especially when incited by like friends. He knew they would only laugh at his warning. It would take an authority figure to make them get back to safety, what most of them probably wanted to do but would never admit it to their comrades. Hopefully, a guard would be along soon. He turned away and looked out over the broad Atlantic.

It was a rare clear day, and the fire that burned in the evening air to the west gave sunset light enough to see the Achill islands far out into the Atlantic. Inland, beyond O'Brien's Tower and well beyond Martin's sight, lay the Burren, a beautiful, unique area of the world where limestone boulders poking through the loose, thin soil looked like the very bones of the earth itself. He almost thought he could hear the stones calling his name. One last visit, perhaps? But the Burren was some distance away, and the light of day reached for the dark end of the cycle. The Burren would have to wait until he returned to Ireland, ever how long that would be.

Seamus McMahon, tall and broad and handsome with tassels of dark hair dangling across his forehead as the wind brushed his face, came walking down the path from O'Brien's Tower and stood beside Martin. He leaned against the stone wall that, at this spot, was a healthy five meters from the edge of the cliff.

"It's still beautiful, even after all these years," Martin said. "I had to see it once more before I left."

“Ah, Martin,” Seamus began in his best imitation of classical Irish. “What am I going to do with you, lad? Slobbering yourself up over some rocks and water when there are pints of stout to be drunk.”

“You love this place as much as I do, Seamus.”

“Not at all, Martin, old friend. I’m deathly afraid of heights and wouldn’t get close to the edge with your feet. I use this place for my ladies. They look out over the cliffs and the ocean on one side and miles and miles of valley on the other, and it makes them feel insignificant. So I take them back to my apartment afterward and make them feel significant again.”

The two Irishmen burst out laughing. When the laughter died Martin asked, “Are you telling me you’re afraid to get near the edge?”

“Promise you won’t tell.”

“Of course, I wouldn’t.”

“Scares the shite out of me, lad.”

“You? The great Seamus? Afraid of a little cliff?”

“Damn right! Besides, it’s not a ‘little’ cliff. These are monster cliffs. But keep it to yourself.” Seamus patted the smaller man on the back, his great strength almost knocking Martin off balance. “Wouldn’t do for one of my ladies to know. To Ennis now. Time for a pint!”

“Let’s go to Kinvarra. It’s a lovely village, and it’s quite close.”

“The lads will have none of it,” Seamus shook his head. “It’s Ennis.”

“If we’re going to go that far, then why don’t we drive a little further and go back to Limerick,” Martin suggested. “That way, we won’t have to risk the dual carriageway after a few pints.”

“Martin, you’re not listening to me, are you? Or... Ahhhh! Could it be that you want to avoid Ennis because you are afraid of seeing a young lady by the name of Sara?”

“She’s not exactly happy with me, you know.”

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“Think of it in the proper light, my friend. You fall in bed with this American girl while you are living in Sara's apartment. Sara sees an email she's not supposed to see and breaks off your engagement. So now you're on the verge of flying off to America to be with your new girlfriend, what's her name? It's only fitting that you spend your last night in Ireland with Sara. It has a certain 'social balance' to it. Don't you think?”

“Her name is Linda, Linda Moore, and that's how I would expect a lady's man like you to think of it. But I'm not you, Seamus. I'm just plain old Martin O'Brien. I'm not significant. I'm certainly not related to whoever built O'Brien's Tower.” Martin nodded toward the tower. “I come from a very mundane branch of O'Brien's. Besides, I'm not proud of what I did. I'm happy about Linda, but it's the messy way it came about.”

“And what, may I ask, is wrong with winning with the ladies? Whether you're Seamus or plain old Martin O'Brien or some twit in Brazil, where's the shame? They filled your head with fairytales over there in that English school.”

“Maybe so.”

“Maybe? Spot on, you mean.”

Martin smiled and turned and stared back out at the cliffs and the ocean pounding at the base. “I was a loser in England,” he said.

“Loser?” Seamus exclaimed. “You got an undergraduate degree with honors from Manchester University!”

“Yeah, but I lost my virginity, my sobriety, and my religion. And I didn't find a single one of them when I came home... Not that I was looking, mind you.”

“All the better to be one of the Guinness gang!” Seamus smiled, slapped Martin lightly on the back of the head, and said: “Come on. There are the lads now. It's time for a pint of the black stuff.”

Two young men came walking up from the cliff path, a trail along the face of the cliff that Martin had never worked up the nerve to try, and which was quite off limits nowadays. Both were smiling and waving. Paul Murphy lifted an imaginary mug to his lips. Ian McAllistar imitated the gesture as they veered from the path, cutting the corner to get to the car quicker. Seamus hurried on to catch them.

Martin turned and took another look out over the Atlantic and to the cliffs that wove in and out along the coast. Then he glanced back to the inland valley that was miles across. The scale was deceiving. The valley seemed so low that it looked as though the ocean would swallow it if the salt water could only get past the cliffs.

“Martin,” Ian called. “Come on.”

“Stealing a last look,” he shouted back. “I’ll be with you in a moment.”

“This place is for tourists,” Paul said.

“And the Ennis pubs are for us,” Seamus added, a broad smile across his handsome face and a twinkle in his steely blue eyes. His long black hair shook as he burst into a laugh.

Seamus, Martin’s best friend in the entire world, was tall and had that bubbly enthusiasm that infected everyone around him. Martin envied the man’s lust for life, his exceptional athletic ability, and his easy way with women. Martin could never be like that. At almost six feet, Martin was four inches shorter and had dull brown hair and brown eyes. He had managed to win a girl or two by copying the manner and the moves of his friend, but he knew he could never be like Seamus. In fact, they seemed an odd pair to Martin. The handsome, outgoing Seamus and plain, dull, ordinary Martin. Seamus had once told him that he envied Martin’s intelligence and creativity. It had surprised Martin that Seamus envied anything about him. It also surprised him that Seamus had called him creative. He had never thought of himself that way.

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“Aye. Getting dark, Martin,” Paul Murphy yelled. “Leg it! It’s time for a pub crawl. Or do we leave you here with the rocks?”

Martin nodded and waved, then turned back and looked at the cliffs and out over the ocean one final time. *Ireland, sweet Ireland*, he said to himself. How would he survive a few months in America without her? One last glance as the sun sizzled into the sea, then he turned toward the car.

Running at a trot as dark crept steadily across the valley, he was almost to the car when a strange streaking of two colored lights in the distance caught his eye. Startled, he stopped running and stared at the spot where the lights had flashed. His friends followed his eyes and turned to look. More vivid color burst into the air, rolling and swirling and blooming into something beautiful at the edge of the horizon in the valley to the northeast, along the line where emerald green land met dark purple sky. With swirling lines of different translucent colors, bright and vivid, it quickly grew in intensity. As bright as it was, he realized that the small ball of lights was still some kilometers distant.

“What in this wide world is that?” Paul asked.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Seamus said.

“Must be some new type of fireworks,” Ian offered.

“For what?” Martin said. “It’s no holiday that I know of.”

“No bank holiday today,” Seamus called from the right side of the car, the driver’s side in Ireland.

“Some idiot American holiday,” Ian said. “They’ve got some strange ones.”

“I don’t believe this is an American holiday, either,” Martin said.

“Perhaps they’re testing some new kind of firework,” Seamus said. “Not important. Cruise’s is calling. Old John Cruce built his home in... when was it, Paul?”

“1658, I believe.”

“Yes. Oldest home in Ennis, so it’s only fitting that we start our night at Cruise’s. They’ve got four pints with each of our names on them.”

“Wouldn’t it have made more sense to name the place Cruce’s after John Cruce instead of calling it Cruise’s?”

“A play on words,” Martin said as the strange, swirling lights began to subside. “Yes, I suppose it is a firework.” Moments later, the colors were gone. It had lasted only a short while.

Martin ran around to the left side of the car and hopped into the front passenger seat as Seamus put the car in gear and drove off.

“Martin’s for Limerick,” Seamus said. “I do believe the lad’s afraid of seeing Sara McCarthy.”

“She’s a mean one,” Paul said and then burst into a laugh. The others laughed with him.

“I’m not afraid,” Martin said. “It’s just that, well, this is an awkward situation.”

“Awkward positions are often some of the best,” Ian said, and they all laughed again.

His friends ribbed him incessantly, but good-naturedly, all the way into town.

Seamus found a spot by the footpath alongside an empty restaurant on the Fergus River. It was not a marked-off parking place and was hardly big enough for a car, but he squeezed his old Ford Focus into it. They shuffled out and walked away from the rushing water of the river.

As Martin walked beside Seamus, the ancient pavers felt good under his feet. He had become quite familiar with Ennis after dating Sara for two years and was comfortable in the small town. They turned left and climbed the slight hill to the intersection at the top where Daniel O’Connell, a famous nineteenth-century Irish statesman, stood on top of his concrete column high above the town of Ennis, his hollowed eyes overlooking one side of town. They could

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have taken a shorter route, but it had become a routine for the Guinness gang to pat the aging concrete pedestal that Daniel O'Connell rode. They continued down Abbey Street until it leveled out then started a gradual uphill climb again. On the right, immediately before the gutted remains of the old Franciscan Abbey, was Cruise's.

Instead of going in the front door, Seamus motioned them around to the large arched door to the alleyway between the pub and the church. They went through the arch and walked down the alley. As Martin stole a last look at the abbey ruins, they entered through Cruise's side door, or what some people considered the real front door even though it didn't face the street. The smoky yellow light on the inside reflected off woodwork worn with age, simple but still beautiful. They stepped across the ancient stone floor, through to the front room, and up to the bar. The candles recessed into niches in the wall were still guarded by swords hanging directly above.

Cruise's was crowded, as usual. Michael, a burly redheaded fellow, was behind the bar. He smiled at the four when they came in. Martin and Michael had gotten to know each other over the last couple of years, but Martin hadn't seen Michael since the breakup with Sara, so he was not sure how the redheaded bartender would receive him. The smile was reassuring.

Michael held up four fingers. "The black stuff," he said. All four of the Guinness gang members nodded, so the bartender pulled two Guinness glasses at once and began to pour the black liquid into the first glass, brown bubbles boiling in the bottom of the glass. Michael set the first glass aside then began to fill the second. After filling the first two, he got two more glasses and repeated the process. Then he let the four glasses sit on the draught drain tray until the boiling of the stout had almost stopped, a careful aging that any respectable bartender would perform for his customers. Pouring a pint



of Guinness was an art, not to be rushed as if you were pouring a pint of mere lager. It took time, but everyone knew the wait was worth it.

When the head had died down, he topped off the four glasses, waited a few seconds longer, then topped them off again. Finally, one by one, in the order in which the glasses were filled, he placed them on the bar for Seamus, Martin, Paul, and Ian.

“Good to see you again, Martin,” Michael said.

“Thanks, Mick,” Martin replied. “How’s life?”

“Lovely. Your lady was a bit hard to be around for a while, but she’s calmed down of late.”

“Sorry about that,” Martin offered.

“Aah,” Michael waved it off knowingly. “Women. You know how they can be. I’ve got a wife I’ll sell you cheap.” The stocky bartender tossed his head back and burst into a short laugh. Before Martin could respond, Michael had turned to get a refill for two older gentlemen standing nearby.

At Paul’s prompting, Martin turned to follow Seamus toward the back of the pub. As he rounded the corner of the back area, a gang of friends stood and shouted, “SURPRISE!” There was a huge round sign, neatly hand-printed, that read “BON VOYAGE” propped up on top of the tables. Martin immediately recognized the faces as he jumped and threw his hands up to show his surprise, letting them know they had pulled one over on him.

“This is, indeed, a wonderful surprise,” Martin said. “Fair play to all of you.”

Many of his friends were up from Limerick. A few of the crowd were natives of Ennis, people he had come to know over the last two years. One face stood out, a thin brunette with long hair, confident dark eyes, and a fiddle case in her hand. She looked like she was in control of everything. She had always looked like that, even when she was in control of nothing. Tonight Sara was in control. And smiling.

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Martin was happy that his friends had gone to the trouble to plan a surprise bon voyage party and bewildered that they had done so without him finding out. He raised his glass to toast them.

The group had pulled three round tables together in a triangle, leaving a hole in the middle. By squeezing into the benches and pushing the rickety chairs against each other so that they almost overlapped, there was enough room for everyone. Barely.

They clinked their glasses together in toasts and drank the black stout and talked as best they could over the din of conversations throughout the pub.

To his surprise, Martin found it easy to talk to Sara. The last time they had spoken it had been loud and messy. She had read an email that was not meant for her eyes, and that was it. But a few months had passed. Tonight, she seemed to be nothing more than a dear old friend.

After everyone had toasted Martin and Martin had returned each toast, someone called out for the impromptu band to play. Right on cue, Sara opened the case that was beside her and pulled out her fiddle. She began to warm up. Three gentlemen in the group, one with a flute, one with a bodhran, and the other with a mandolin, joined her. The four instruments played against each other as they tuned and plucked and blew and tuned some more, creating a pleasant abstract strangeness in the ear.

After a bit, Sara leaned toward the other players and whispered something. Then, with a quick glance at Martin, she began playing a mournful sound. She did not look at him again during the entire song, but the soulful epic gnawed at his belly... and his mind. She was sending a message. A goodbye to what might have been. She would be a friend, but she would never truly forgive. Martin accepted that.

The applause was mild when the song ended, but the band immediately went into a foot-thumping, heart-stomping Irish jig that

brought cheers and loud applause from everyone in the pub, especially the tourists. A man with a guitar came in and joined the group in mid-song. When they weren't lifting a Guinness to their lips, the listeners all clapped and swayed together. Sometimes they did everything at once. There were more than a few drops of Guinness spilled on the floor.

After another pint or two, someone said it was time to move the pub crawl along. Heads nodded in agreement. They started filing out as they discussed which pub they would visit next. Martin looked at Sara as if to ask if she was coming, but before any words came out of his mouth, she kissed him quickly but briefly on the cheek, then sat back down with her fiddle.

"I'll stay here and play," she said with a disarming, almost triumphant smile. "There are tourists about who must live the Irish experience."

Her fiddle, sounding like never before in the hollow recesses of his heart, fired up again, driving hard into an Irish reel. Sara was as good a fiddle player as ever lived this evening and as beautiful a woman as ever walked the face of the earth. It was, indeed, going to be difficult to walk away tonight, to fly away tomorrow. But he had made his own bed, so to speak, and even if he got on his knees, he knew what they had could never be recaptured. He had done the unforgivable.

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