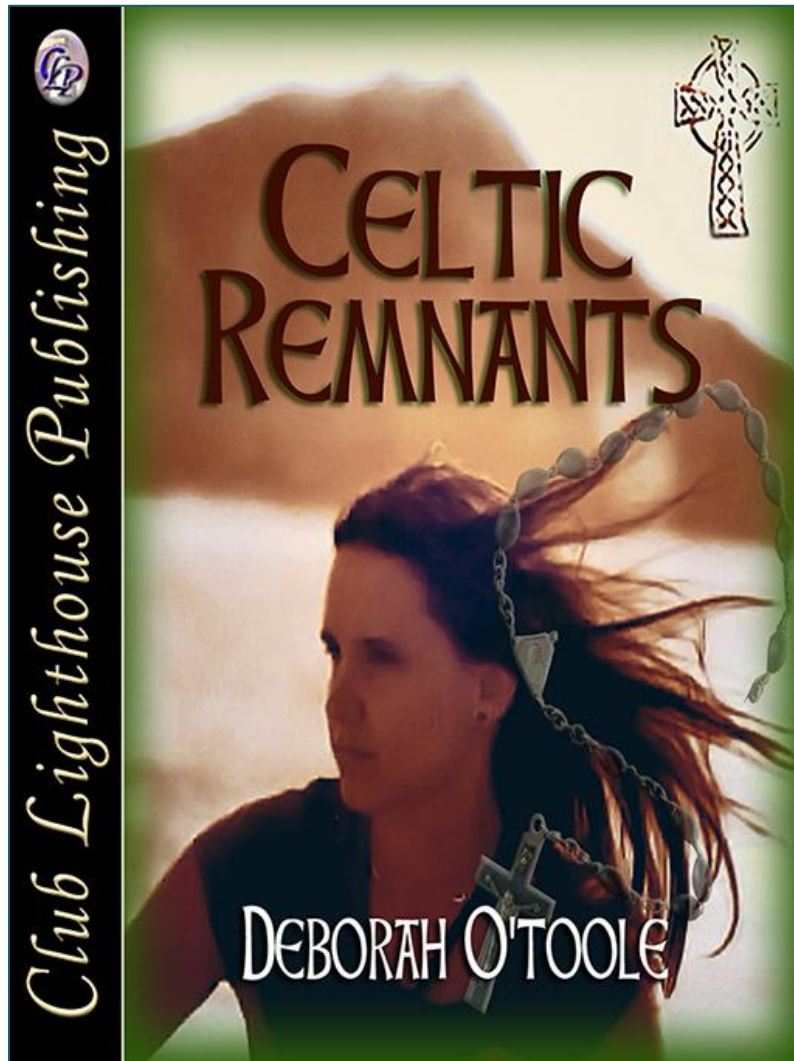


Excerpts from:

Celtic Remnants

By Deborah O'Toole



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ABOUT "CELTIC REMNANTS"

Celtic Remnants by Deborah O'Toole is a novel of enduring love and betrayal set in the political turbulence of Ireland, glamour of London and the wilds of Scotland.

A young girl is shaped by horrific events which change her life forever. After Ava's brother and parents are killed by British soldiers, she vows to avenge their deaths as she picks up the pieces of her shattered world.

Before she can move on, Ava falls in love with handsome nobleman David Lancaster, eldest son of a belted Earl. Their relationship ends dramatically when his family refuses to accept her. Afterward, Ava sets her life on a course of violent revenge in the name of political justice with her childhood friend, Tim O'Casey.

Unable to forget Ava, David hires a private investigator to look for her years later. When he finds her, Ava is hardened by more than a decade on the run and wants nothing to do with him. However, after being injured during an ambush in the English countryside, Ava and Tim go to David for help. He spirits them off to a remote Scottish hunting lodge to heal.

Momentarily safe amidst the rugged beauty, Ava begins to wonder if she can give up her deeply-felt political beliefs to build a normal life with David. Or will happiness forever elude them?

Can Ava relinquish her political convictions, even for love?

Celtic Remnants was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing.

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CELTIC REMNANTS: Excerpt from Chapter One

*January 1972
Northern Ireland*

RESTING HIS HEAD against the back of the rocking chair in the Egan living room, Eamon closed his eyes. He swayed the chair in a slow, steady rhythm. His face was blank, his shattered feelings protected behind a wall of numbness. It had been two days since the event now called Bloody Sunday, two days since he lost his partner and friend. It seemed like years ago, but then again felt like seconds. He had been debriefed immediately after the riot, but because of his personal relationship with Patrick, Chief Constable McMurty had released Eamon quickly. Since that day he had been off-duty, secluded at home with his family and with what remained of Patrick's family.

Sitting across the room from Eamon, keeping his voice quiet for the sake of the women weeping in the next room, McMurty asked: "Tell me what you saw, Eamon. What can you tell me that will shed light on the matter?"

"'Twas Brit soldiers," Eamon said softly, stopping the motion of the rocking chair and opening his eyes. "There were two of them at first, and then more."

Frowning, McMurty leaned forward. "That's impossible, Eamon."

Eamon's eyes flashed as he looked at his commander. "Are you accusing me of lying?"

"Perhaps you were mistaken, confused because of the melee?" McMurty responded carefully.

Eamon began rocking again, turning his head away to hide his disgust. "I know what I saw, John. I was *not* confused. I saw them, heard them. There was no just cause for the shooting, and no rationale for Patsy's killing." He gestured toward the kitchen. "Listen to them. I've lived with that for a day, trying to understand what happened. I've been over and over it in my head, and *I know what I saw.*"

"I'm trying to understand, too," McMurty said impatiently. "Yesterday was a terrible tragedy. Besides Patrick and his daughter, fourteen other people were killed on Rossville Street."

"Yes, I heard," Eamon said bitterly. "Of course, the British are claiming civilians fired on the soldiers first. It's a load of bullshyte, and you know it."

"The investigation into the incident has started already," McMurty replied. "That's why I need to hear your detailed version of events. Please, Eamon."

"I told you what I saw," Eamon said curtly. "Believe it or not, it's up to you."

McMurty furrowed his brow in distress. Eamon was understandably in shock. He had just lost his best friend and partner. McMurty knew Eamon was a loyal member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, ever since the day he signed on. Eamon had proven his worth over the years, despite Seamus Egan's vocal protests, and had become known for his honesty and diligence on the force. McMurty understood Eamon had silently raged an inner war about the conflicts in Northern Ireland from the start, but he never imagined Eamon could be turned the other way. *Until now.* The bloodshed had been too close to home this time.

"Would you be able to recognize the soldiers if you saw them?" McMurty finally asked.

"I don't know," Eamon said dully. "One of them was my age, the other one was younger. It looked like the older one had taken off his jacket, so I couldn't see a name. The other soldier was behind the older one. I didn't get a good look at him." Eamon gazed at McMurty. "What's the point in all of this? The British will claim they were fired upon, and that will be the end of it. But you know as well as I do that neither Megan nor Patrick O'Casey fired any first shots. We're talking about Meggie, for God's sake. How plausible is that? A seventeen-year-old girl carrying a weapon *and* her hair barrette?"

"Was Meggie involved in any shenanigans that you knew of?" McMurty pressed.

Eamon was incredulous. "Are you daft, man? You knew Meggie, for chrissakes. What do you think?"

McMurty reddened. "I have to explore all of the possibilities, Eamon. You understand, don't you?"

Eamon stared at McMurty, disbelieving. The man was up to something; all of his talk was leading somewhere. Eamon demanded: "Are you laying the groundwork for a cover up?" He leaned forward from the rocking chair, his expression full of building rage. "Tell me, John, are you being told to steer the investigation toward the truth, or to what the British military wants you to find? Have you sold out? Just what the hell are you hiding?"

"Eamon, be serious," McMurty blurted angrily. "You know better than that, man. Jaysus, I realize you're grieving, but please don't be shooting your mouth off like that. Someone is apt to hear you and think the same thing."

"From the way I see it, what harm could it do? Especially if I speak the truth?"

McMurty stood, his face red with anger. "I won't listen to this," he snapped. "I'll come back when you've come to your senses."

Eamon stood to join him. "I have all my senses, thank you. You're avoiding straight answers to my questions, John. Or is there more? Was Patsy fingered by somebody? Was that the plan? Shoot a police officer and blame it on the civilians? Give the British another excuse to murder one of us in cold blood and get away with it?"

Silently, McMurty turned to the front door.

Eamon watched him. "I hope you can live with yourself, John. I hope you can sleep tonight. If you've done anything that even remotely caused Patsy's death, you *will* rot in hell for it."

McMurty glanced back at Eamon briefly, and then walked out. He slammed the door behind him.

* * *

TIM O'CASEY SAT huddled on the fence between his family's property and the Egan's, his jaw buried in a jacket against the bitter wind. Winter's cold had doused Eglinton, with drizzle spitting out of the blustery gray sky.

Ava leaned against the fence, watching Tim carefully. They both wore their Sunday clothes. She pulled her coat closer and brushed the hair from her face with a cold hand. "Let's go inside to wait," she said. "I'm freezing."

Tim shook his head. "No, I can't go in there. Me Ma will start crying again. I couldn't take it." He peeked at Ava over his coat collar. "You go inside. There's no sense in both us staying out here. We have an hour before we have to leave for the cemetery."

"Na. I'll stay here with you."

Tim looked at Ava, blessing his good fortune for having such a true friend. He could not imagine muddling through the last few days without her. She rarely left him alone, and was always on hand if he needed her. Ava felt the tragedy, he could see that. She had lost a friend in Megan, and she had thought the world of Patrick O'Casey.

The injustice and brutality of the afternoon on William Street was etched in their minds forever. Tim could not accept that his father and sister were gone. He still half-expected to look up and see their faces. He understood he would never know them again, but speaking it out loud made it fact, and he was having none of that. Still, in a few hours he would be burying his father and sister. He had no clue how he was going to cope, but Ava would be there for him.

Ava tried to talk to Tim about why British soldiers shot Patrick, Megan and fourteen others. He listened, nodded his head, but said nothing. Eamon had been little help. He was mired in his own grief, barely able to explain the events to his own daughter. Ava was hurt and angered by the neglect, but she said nothing, not daring to push her father.

She glanced at Tim. "Come on, Timmy. Please. Let's go inside and have a cup of hot tea. Your Ma is there with mine, waiting. If you get sick, where will that leave your Ma? She needs you."

Tim took a deep breath and closed his eyes, then jumped down from the fence. "All right, Ava girl," he said resignedly. "I'll go inside, but only to stop you from nagging me beyond common decency."

Ava managed a small, sad smile.

* * *

THE CEMETERY IN Eglinton was behind St. Martin's Church on the outskirts of the village. Almost a hundred people had come to Patrick and Megan O'Casey's funerals, along with several uniformed members of the RUC.

Eamon Egan stood next to his children Cary, Ava and Sophie, while Franny held the arm of Maud O'Casey, who was weeping. Tim stood on her other side, trying to comfort his mother while holding in his own grief. Members of the RUC stood nearby, heads bowed, while Father Michael O'Doherty read from the Bible.

At the last minute Eamon's younger sister, Siobhan, arrived and came to stand next to her brother beside the open graves. She wore black and carried a single rose. Ava glanced at her aunt. Siobhan sent back the stare and nodded slightly. Ava returned her attention to the service, thinking what a relief it would be to talk with Siobhan about what happened. Siobhan had solid common sense with a passionate flair, traits enhanced by her dark red hair and uncommon beauty. With Eamon being so withdrawn, and Franny caring for Maud, Ava was glad Siobhan was there to help her.

When the service was over, and the RUC had given a twenty-one-gun salute in honor of Patrick O'Casey, the mourners began to disperse. Most of them would be heading to the Egan cottage where Franny had planned a small reception of gratitude to those attending the funeral. Maud had been inconsolable in her grief, incapable of doing it herself.

After the service, Eamon and Siobhan lingered beside the graves. Siobhan laid the rose on Patrick's coffin, and then turned to her brother. When he raised his eyes to look at her, she saw his pain. "What was the way of it, Eamon?" she asked. "Is it true British soldiers shot down Patsy and Meggie?"

Eamon nodded.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"What can I do?" he said bitterly. "Me own commander doesn't want the truth."

"You need to make sure people know the truth and to hell with your commander."

"You sound like Daddy and Rory."

"They were my father and brother, too," Siobhan said. "Whether you choose to believe it or not, they did what they thought was right. I'm not here to tread on your sergeant pride, only to remind you where your real loyalties lie."

"The truth? Who will listen to the truth?"

She looked at him and said quietly: "The IMC."

Eamon's eyes widened. "Oh, yes, that's the ticket. Run to the men who carry on the violence I've been sworn to defend Derry against."

"Defending Derry from the British hasn't turned out so well, has it?" she countered.

He walked to the edge of Patrick's grave and looked down at the rose on the casket. "I owe Patsy something," he said. "I don't want his death, or Megan's, to be in vain." He ran his hand through his dark hair. "I thought about my own family while I stood here today, listening to the priest speak of Patsy and Meggie, praying for their souls. That could have been *my* family, Siobhan, just as easily as it was Patsy and Meggie. For all the years of service and loyalty I've given to the RUC, against the wishes of my own father, it could have been *my* kids, *my* wife, in those graves . . . even *me*. If the roles were reversed and Patsy was standing here instead of me, would he try and find the truth? Would he seek revenge for my death?"

"You know he would. Patsy may have been a member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, but his first loyalty was to you, Eamon. He wouldn't have let your death go unnoticed, or swept away by British attempts to hide the truth."

"And how can the IMC help me uncover the truth?"

"You know the organization has its own network. They *will* find out who is responsible. You know they can do it, but they will also want something in return."

"Are you their messenger now?" Eamon frowned.

She shook her head. "No, I have my own life to lead, and you know it. But I still maintain ties with Daddy's old cronies, and they do have a message for you."

"What is it?"

"If you seek the truth, they will help you. They will also help you avenge Patsy's death. You know how it works, you were raised by a Republican the same as me. I'm thinking all of it goes much deeper than a few British soldiers run amok, and the IMC thinks so, too. Something stinks about the whole thing, and the IMC is determined to find out what it is."

"With or without me?"

"That's up to you."

Eamon turned away and looked across the cemetery. He saw Franny helping Maud into their car, the children piling into the back seat. They would wait for him to come. Eamon realized Franny was letting him have a private moment to deal with his grief. He

rarely expressed deep emotions to his wife, so he was surprised by her understanding. She knew him very well, despite his inner defenses and gruff exterior. He turned to Siobhan again. "And what will it look like if I up and resign from the RUC? Don't you think fingers would point at me, that it would rouse some sort of suspicion?"

"Of course it would. But does it really matter now?"

He looked at her for a long moment, hearing echoes of Seamus Egan's voice saying: *"Place yer loyalty to yer own first, rather than the masses."* Then he saw Patsy's bloody dead face.

"I'm in," he choked. "I give up." Hanging his head, he covered his eyes as silent sobs shook him.

Siobhan reached out to her brother, and he finally gave into his grief.

* * *

THE DAY AFTER the horrific events in Derry, British Home Secretary Reginald Maudling made a statement to the House of Commons regarding what was now known as "Bloody Sunday."

"The Army returned fire directed at them with aimed shots and inflicted a number of casualties on those who were attacking them with firearms and with bombs. The paratroopers fired in self-defense."

**CELTIC REMNANTS:
Excerpt from Chapter Five***May 1980**Monasterboice, County Louth, Ireland*

ALTHOUGH ELIZABETH LANCASTER had not been born into position and wealth, her years as a Countess and the wife of a very prominent nobleman taught her to believe in the English class system. She had forgotten what it was like to be Miss Elizabeth Hughes. With her natural grace and style, she had been grafted into Edward's way of life. She rarely, if ever, mentioned her humble beginnings, preferring to let people believe she had always been a part of the upper class.

When David and Ava walked into the drawing room at Ambercurry Lodge with Bart, Edward was stupefied by Ava's beauty. Elizabeth sensed his delight and took offense to it, but true to her rigid self-control did not show her displeasure. Besides, David seemed so happy and proud to be with Ava that she did not have the heart to be anything but gracious and cordial.

"Mother, Father, this is Miss Ava Egan," David said, beaming. "Ava, these are my parents, the Earl and Countess Lancaster."

The Earl smiled, shaking Ava's hand. "Please call me Edward," he preened. "It is very nice to meet you."

"Thank you, sir," Ava said softly. "I mean, *Edward*."

"And do call me Elizabeth," the Countess said, following her husband's lead as she always did.

"What would you like to drink, Ava?" the Earl asked affably.

"White wine, please," she replied. "If you don't mind."

"Coming right up," the Earl said. He walked over to a small sideboard near the large picture window, where he began preparing drinks.

David led Ava to a settee and motioned her to sit. They sat closely together, a move not unnoticed by the Countess. She sat across from them on a brocaded divan, her posture upright and prim. She took a glass of brandy from her husband with a smile and a brief nod.

"I'm sorry to hear about your family, Ava," the Countess said, sipping her drink. "What a horrible time it must have been for you."

"It was," she said politely. The Earl handed Ava her wine and she thanked him. David took bourbon, neat, and sipped it appreciatively.

"Am I to understand your aunt owns the Blackwater Inn?" Elizabeth continued.

Ava nodded. "Yes. Her name is Siobhan Egan."

"I love the Blackwater Inn," the Earl declared, sitting next to his wife on the divan. "Best damned food for miles."

"I quite agree," Ava responded with a grin. "But then I'm prejudiced."

The Earl laughed, completely charmed by the girl. He could see why David was so smitten with her. She was not only beautiful but articulate with a sense of humor. Better yet, she possessed proper manners.

Elizabeth, a smile still on her face, turned to Ava once again. "Where do you attend school, my dear?"

Ava sipped her wine nervously, but managed to keep her hand steady. "I attended the local school in Eglinton. I haven't decided if I want to go on to college." *"Listen to the likes of me,"* Ava thought to herself, watching David's mother for reaction. *"College! I have no intention of going to college, but I certainly can't tell these people that."*

"Of course I think Oxford is the most prestigious," the Earl told Ava. "But since you're close to Dublin, I believe Trinity College is also ranked as one of the best in the British Isles."

"British Isles?" Ava thought with a stab of anger. *"Since when is Dublin part of that horrific entity known as Great Britain?"*

"You have an interesting name," the Countess mused. "It's not at all Irish-sounding."

"My Mum named all of us after movie stars. My brother Cary was after Cary Grant. I was named for Ava Gardener, and Sophie was . . ."

"Let me guess the other one," the Earl interjected jovially. "Sophie must be for Sophia Loren, right?"

Ava smiled. "Yes, who else?"

"Of course," the Earl said, delighted. "Your mother must have had quite a good sense of humor."

"She did," Ava agreed.

The conversation continued for several minutes before a uniformed maid came to announce dinner was ready. At the same moment, a young man entered the room. He was dressed in gray slacks and a silver pull-over sweater. He was clean-shaven with short, dark hair. He wore a bright smile on his face, carrying an air of pleasantness about him which was instantly apparent.

Ava assumed he was Peter Lancaster, David's younger half-brother, whom she guessed to be around twenty years old. Peter resembled David to some degree, apart from his darker hair and shorter height. There were also discernible pock marks scarring his cheeks, although they did little to detract from his looks.

"Hello all," the young man said cheerfully, extending his hand to Ava. "I'm Peter Lancaster. And you must be Ava."

She took his hand. "Yes, I am. Pleased to meet you, Peter."

"The pleasure is all mine," Peter said warmly.

The group went through a side door in the drawing room which led to the dining area. Ava was breathing a bit easier now. Her initial exposure to the Lancaster's was almost over, and she felt as if she had done well.

Now all she had to do was get through the rest of the evening, and then she could be alone with David.

* * *

THE DINING ROOM at Ambercurry Lodge was large, with a tall ceiling and long, slender windows. Two Waterford crystal chandeliers adorned the ceiling, surrounded by dark red wallpaper which gave the room a rather mirthless air. The Countess had seen to it that several burning candelabra were strategically placed at various points on the dining table, casting a subdued glow on its occupants. The table itself was quite long and almost reached the length of the room, but for the occasion of dinner with few guests, settings had been placed at one end, with Edward sitting at the head.

Peter found himself seated across from Ava. As the meal progressed, his awareness of her youthful beauty and complete social unsuitability for David imposed itself in his mind.

Peter watched Ava throughout dinner. Subtly of course, as it wouldn't do to gawk at her openly. Serving maids scurried about setting plates in front of the diners. First with whiting consommé, and then a salad of greens followed by the main course, lamb cutlets with mint sauce and steamed potatoes. Peter observed Ava with a growing fascination. She was certainly not David's usual type - the upper echelon of the nobility with glamour looks - but there was something about Ava's demeanor, her very presence which spoke volumes about her character. Her *Irish* character, with the dark hair and pale skin and the damned brogue. Peter surmised Ava was but a simple Irish girl out to snare the son of an English earl.

As he slurped his soup, Peter admitted to himself Ava was reasonably attractive, and might be worth a quick tumble if she wasn't David's tart. For that was all she could ever be: a passing fancy, a summer diversion. An Irish-Catholic was not in the cards for David, not if he wanted to maintain the Lancaster social standard. Ava was young, and obviously from poor stock to boot. From the way she looked at David when he spoke, Peter could sense she was entirely smitten with him.

Peter pecked at his salad, glancing up at Ava as she ate her own greens with dainty aplomb. At least she had decent table manners, he thought grudgingly, which surprised him. He assumed all Irish to be savages. He noted her small hands and the blue veins running along the tops and up her wrists, and the dark blueness of her eyes. Her mouth was full and well-formed, not slatternly or covered distastefully with gooey masses of lipstick.

As Peter cut into his lamb cutlet, he was uncomfortably aware Ava simply did not fall into a general category. Try as he might to deflect her impressive qualities, he knew she was unlike others of her kind. She was obviously intelligent and well-read, and had the good sense to listen when others spoke, displaying her grasp of social politeness. Peter chewed his meat rapidly, taking sips of wine from his glass at hand, and continued to watch Ava.

As maids served apples and cheese, it dawned on Peter that Ava was probably the emotionally perfect woman for his brother David. She was lovely, well-informed and her manners were without flaw. The crux of the situation was her Irish origins and her religion. It was the element which would dash David's hopes of a future with her, but life would go merrily on. Even in the depths of his romantic transgression, David nonetheless managed to find the cream of the crop. Peter felt a flash of resentment toward his brother, a sentiment which had become increasingly frequent as they grew older. David had it all, and yet he persisted in his detours from duty and birth-right obligation.

Peter glanced at Ava once more and found her returning his stare. Her expression was detached. Peter felt a hot blush creeping up to his face from his neck. She looked away without much ado, while Peter returned his attention to his apples and cheese.

"It doesn't matter what you do, Ava Egan," Peter thought with satisfaction. *"David will never marry you. Our father the Earl will see to that."*

* * *

THE EVENING APPEARED to be an unqualified success, but when the Earl and Countess Lancaster retreated to their bedroom suite at Ambercurry Lodge for the night, their main topic of discussion was David's obvious fascination with Ava Egan.

The Earl sat up against several pillows in their large bed, while the Countess removed her make-up and applied cream to her face as she sat at her dressing table.

"I think Ava is a remarkable girl," the Earl stated, watching his wife go through her nightly beauty routine. "Not only is she lovely and well-mannered, she appears very intelligent and has a wonderful sense of humor." He shook his head. "If only she weren't the daughter of Eamon Egan."

"Who?"

Edward hesitated. He often told Elizabeth about his exploits and various missions for in the British Army. He knew he had mentioned Egan to her before. However, like most women she tended to pay little attention to battle fatigue talk. She was accustomed to his military activities, used to his long absences in the past but rarely asked him what he did while he was away. It was probably for the better.

"Eamon Egan was watched by British intelligence for years," Edward finally said, looking down at his hands on the bed. "He was a supposed member of the IMC, but authorities were never quite been able to catch him out in the act. He always had an alibi after bombings took place in Belfast - or anywhere else, for that matter - and he was a thorn in my side for a long time. Remember the bombing at Orange Hall a few years ago, when I took a bullet in the stomach?"

Elizabeth nodded, a look of trepidation on her face.

"Egan was responsible for the planning, and he was also the man who took the shot at me," Edward told her, his voice growing bitter at the memory. "But I could never prove it. Egan had an alibi for the day it happened, an ironclad alibi, and the matter was dropped. The worst part of it all is Egan used to be a member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, retiring shortly after the Bloody Sunday incident. Earlier this year, an opposing terrorist group in Belfast apparently bombed the Egan cottage, wiping out Ava's family. However, it was the end of Egan and his activities, although I'm sure there are plenty of others willing to take his place."

Elizabeth was aghast. "Is David aware of all this?"

"No, not all of it," Edward said quickly. "And I'd rather he didn't know at present. Please keep it under wraps."

Elizabeth glanced at her husband in the dressing table mirror, her brow furrowed. "Yes, dear, of course I won't say anything to David. To top it all off, Ava is Catholic, and from what I could glean her family was below working class. She tried to sidetrack us in regards to *that* little fact, I assure you. She never came out and said her family was poor, but what else could they be coming from a cottage in Eglinton? Even if her father was a supposed member of the IMC?" Elizabeth shuddered. "It's utterly barbaric and sordid."

"I understand your hesitation in accepting her," he said. "I want someone of proper breeding for our oldest son as well, but you have to admit Ava is perfect for him. If only she had the right background. David could be happy, and we would be satisfied."

Elizabeth sighed. "I like Ava well enough, too, dear, but I'm really hoping this is just a summer romance for David, and that come autumn he returns to Oxford and mixes with his own kind - especially knowing her father's background."

The Earl frowned. "I agree, but let David have his fun, will you? Let him be with this girl, let him have some sort of happiness. When he is old and gray and the official Earl Lancaster, he can look back on the summer of 1980 and dream about his Irish lass."

"If you insist," Elizabeth said tiredly, adeptly hiding her irritation with the analogy. It was too close for comfort, almost like a comparison with Edward's first wife Mary O'Brien, David's mother. Elizabeth rose from her dressing chair and joined Edward in their bed. "I only hope David doesn't carry his little fling too far, such as taking matters into his own hands. If he were to run off and marry this girl, it would be disastrous for his future, and the future of the Earldom." She pulled the bed covers up to her chin and looked at him. "I do have someone else in mind."

"Who?"

"The Earl Colchester's daughter, Lady Victoria Eddington," Elizabeth said with a tone of satisfaction. "She's starting Oxford in the autumn. I think she would be perfect for David. I know her mother, the Countess Anne. While I was in London a few weeks ago, we had tea at Belgrave Square. Anne is also quite keen on the idea of getting her daughter and David together."

The Earl grunted. "Haven't they already met?"

"They've met sporadically for years, mostly at casual social gatherings," Elizabeth replied drowsily. "David has never taken much notice of Victoria, but I'm sure he will change his tune once he's back at university."

Edward glanced at his wife as she fell asleep. He had a gnawing feeling in the pit of his stomach that the matter was not so easily settled. David had a mind of his own, and seeing him with Ava Egan only confirmed the fact. David was in love with the Irish girl. The Earl realized it was more than a summer fling for his son. It spelled trouble, and there was no way around it.

Settling himself in bed, Edward suddenly knew with strange clarity that Ava Egan would break his son's heart in the end, that he would probably spend his life trying to get over her. He was sure David would never recover from the likes of Ava - *ever*.

CELTIC REMNANTS: Excerpt from Chapter Eight

1982

Dublin, Ireland

NED FERMOY WATCHED Ava and Tim as they took their seats around the table of the Claddagh kitchen. Both of them seemed well-rested for a change, although he noticed Ava appeared a bit thinner than the last time he saw her a few months ago. But her eyes were clear, and her nerves seemed steady. He heard her poke fun at Tim about the shock of blond hair protruding from behind one of his ears.

As other members of the group settled in and poured themselves coffee from the pot on the counter, Ned shuffled some papers in front of him and continued to observe Ava discreetly. She sat straight in her chair, waiting expectantly.

Almost a year ago, Ava's entry into the IMC had been supported by her connection to her father Eamon Egan and the persuasive tongue of his sister, Siobhan. Eamon had of course played a central role within the organization, and his violent death by explosion had been a severe blow to the group. Ava was known as one of Eamon's surviving children, along with her sister Sophie. Fiercely protective of their own, several of the IMC members had volunteered to keep an eye on Ava and Sophie, but after a time Ava retreated to Kylemore Abbey to bear a child out of wedlock. Shortly after the birth, Siobhan contacted Ned to sound him out about adding Ava and Tim to the IMC mix.

It hadn't been as simple as that. There were rarely any secrets within the IMC. Members were closely scrutinized, even those who had been a part of the organization for many years. It seemed unlikely Ava would have anything valuable to offer a large group of men intent on ridding Northern Ireland of British military presence. Not only were members trained to handle firearms and explosives, they were taught surveillance techniques and various tricks of the trade when on the run.

But Ava had been determined and persistent, Ned remembered, refusing to cave or take no for an answer. She had passed the six-week training exercise in Abbeylisk with flying colors. And to be honest there was something different about her, something not tangible to the naked eye yet very present within her. It was steadfast and unwavering purpose, sheer strength of will. Ned had never before witnessed such discreet force of personality in another person, including some of the hardcore members of the IMC. In typical sarcastic, matter-of-fact Ava-fashion, she had informed those opposed to her that where she went, Tim O'Casey followed.

Tim had been the *coup de grâce*, mainly because of his immense size, but he was loyal to Ava and would not consider becoming part of the IMC without her. Ava had proven herself over and over again through the last year without fault, never having been caught, and never suffering serious injury. Her first "job" had been as a floater, a rather hazardous operation in which several armed IMC members randomly traveled the streets of Belfast in search of a British army patrol to fire upon. Ava could hold her own with a weapon, and she was developing a real talent for handling explosives. She was also naturally intuitive, and possessed a drive kept alive by the knowledge British soldiers murdered her family. It was

the same for many of the IMC members who had lost loved ones over the years. In Ava, however, it was like a fiery ember which burned through her like bonfire rage.

"What are you staring at, Fermoy?" Ava finally demanded of Ned, eyebrows arched and arms crossed in front of her as she regarded him over the table.

"I was just remembering your first days in the IMC," he admitted honestly, "and how far you've come. You're an amazing person, Ava Egan."

Ava snorted while Tim laughed. "Ahh, yes," she spoke, tilting her head to one side. "The lone female amidst a group of Irish brutes. Tis amazing I've survived, if I say so myself. It surely helped me along when my first assignment was on a float. If that didn't scare me off, nothing would have."

Ned laughed, but then turned his attention to the dozen-strong group at the table.

"Are we here to socialize, or get down to the business at hand?" Brian Talbot asked gruffly across the table from his spot next to Ava. Talbot brooked no levity, and did not appreciate it in others. Ned glanced at him sharply.

"Settle your knickers, Talbot," Ned snapped. "We're getting there." He picked up a piece of paper from the small file in front of him.

"First, I need to remind one and all, and this is not directed at anyone specifically, that relationships or attachments cannot be allowed to occur while interrogating prisoners. It simply cannot happen. I have to stress this rule a bit because of a message I received from our commander in Bantry. Apparently one of the men allowed himself to fall for a female informant, and nearly got his ass blown off while - how shall I say it? - having a romp with the lady in question."

"Who was she?" Talbot wanted to know.

"She came from one of the orange splinter groups in Belfast, inconsequential, really," Ned said. "The point is, we need to remain emotionally detached from what we do. It's imperative."

Then he continued:

"The next bit of business involves a new contact for our supply of Semtex," Ned began, naming the highly developed explosives the IMC used in operations. "We can get large quantities through Libya. I have given the final go ahead to have the exchange take place in Skerries, just a mile or so from the village of Loughshinny."

"Who's handling the exchange?" asked Mike Creed from his seat on the other side of Ava.

"Buster McKinney from Slane," Ned replied.

Mike nodded. "That sounds logical. His fishing trawler will be good cover."

"Next," Ned continued. "I'm setting up a few cross-border raids on some Brit installations just outside of Belfast." Ned glanced at Talbot. "I'll need you to cover the operation near Ardglass, Brian."

"Righto," Brian agreed. "When and where? And with whom?"

Ned slid another piece of paper across the table toward Talbot. "The particulars are there. If you have any questions, just ask them."

Talbot nodded, taking the paper. Ned pulled out another sheath of paper from his file. He glanced at Tim and Ava. "We've developed a contact in Belfast right across from a Brit checkpoint on Falls Road. I need the two of you to go there and execute a sniper attack. This is just a bit of retribution for the ambush of one of our lads last week in Belfast. Some Brit soldiers arrested our man and proceeded to try and beat a confession out of him."

"A confession to what?" Tim wanted to know.

"A bombing at a Belfast bank," Ned responded. "Our lad kept his yap shut, and was beaten senseless for his efforts. The Brit who hammered him is stationed at the checkpoint I mentioned, and steps need to be taken to assure he doesn't wallop any of our lads in the future."

Ava raised her eyebrows but said: "Understood. Tim and I will get on it."

Ned shuffled the remaining papers, and slipped them back into the file folder. "That will cover it for now, but I need to impart a few words of advice," he said, glancing around the table. "I have been advised that some of our lads in the field have been sidestepping a few of the ethos we preach within the IMC. I'm not naming names, but I would like to remind all of you of a few good points to keep in mind."

He took a slight breath and continued. "The IMC ethos is there for a reason: it has worked for many years, and will continue to do so." He glanced down at the file folder, as if choosing his words carefully. "The purpose of the IMC is to guard the honor and uphold the unity of Ireland and to secure and defend civil and religious liberties and equal rights for all citizens. Our means are based on the spirit of camaraderie, as well as carrying out an armed struggle - if need be - for the freedom of our country from the British government. We are to encourage popular resistance, mobilization and political action in support of these objectives."

Ned paused for effect. His next words came with arresting alacrity: "No informants within the ranks will be tolerated. Such violators will be dealt swift retribution, with obvious final consequence. There are no exceptions to the rule." His eyes fluttered around the room, slowly, and then he finished: "None."

**CELTIC REMNANTS:
Excerpt from Chapter Nine***1985**Hampstead Station, North London, England*

HAMPSTEAD STATION NEAR London was an odd mixture of old and new, with an ancient stone terminal and newly constructed platforms. The station itself had been in existence since 1903, and had weathered many changes through the age of modern travel. Despite the availability of buses and personal cars, many still preferred to take the train on Track 9 in order to get to and from their places of employment in London. Gliding along the rails and seeing the various sites was a relaxing preface to a day in the city.

The wisps of smoke and steam curled up into the eyes of Ava Egan, blurring her vision momentarily. She tightened her grip on her jacket front, trying to bring it closer to her body. The wind whipped the drizzling rain through the echoing train station, spraying a fine mist on the platform and clearing the steam from the train. People were pouring into one of the waiting cars, most of them in a rush to catch the early train to London.

Ava glanced over at Tim O'Casey, who stood next to her sipping coffee from a styrofoam cup. He appeared unperturbed by the activity in the train station, and even seemed a bit bored. She noticed his blond hair had curled from the rain-mist in the station. She leaned closer to him so she could whisper:

"It seems like we've been waiting forever. How much longer, do you think?"

Tim barely looked at her as he answered: "Soon. It looks as if the last of them are boarding."

"Have you seen him yet?"

"No, but there's still time. Mike said the informant was reliable. Besides, this is the train back to London, which is where Mulrany has to be this afternoon. Unless he took a car or begged a ride off someone, he's bound to show up here."

"Maybe he passed by in a hat, and we didn't notice him?" Ava asked.

"Na. I think he's just late."

Ava pursed her lips softly. They were waiting for the arrival of Reverend Neal Mulrany, a member of the British House of Commons and an ordained Presbyterian minister. Mulrany had represented County Londonderry in the British Parliament for more than three decades, and was a known protagonist of militant Protestantism against Catholics in Northern Ireland. Mulrany supported the total integration of Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom. He had led several anti-Catholic marches, which incited riots and the passion killings of more than a dozen Catholics.

Mulrany had been a prime target of the Irish Militant Council for some time. He kept a house in a working class section of Hampstead while Parliament was in session, taking the train to and from London every day.

Ava was nervous, but tried not to show it in front of Tim. He was bound to sense her anxiety as he knew her as well as he knew himself. Tim glanced at her briefly, finishing off his coffee in the process.

"This will get easier, Ava, I promise," he told her quietly.

She wasn't so sure but said nothing. Instead, she looked around the platform as the crowd thinned out, keeping her eyes on the double doors which led into the station building.

Tim nudged her gently. "Don't feel sorry for them, Ava. They don't give a damn about you, do they? If you feel any pity, think of what happened to your family, how they were blown to bits by British soldiers. Think about my Dad and sister Megan, shot to death by British soldiers. It has to stop, the persecution and the brutality. It will never stop as long as the English occupy our country. We have to fight back in a way they understand."

Ava nodded. "I know, Tim. I'll be fine. Isn't that Mulrany coming now?"

The stream of people on Platform 9 had trickled to just a few, but Tim and Ava saw the heavyset older man walking quickly to the train. They recognized Mulrany from photographs, not only those splashed in newspapers but from surveillance pictures shown to them by Ned Fermoy. Mulrany was in his sixties and grossly overweight. His hair was dyed a chestnut brown, closely cropped with straight-cut bangs. He carried an attaché case and a closed umbrella. Despite his girth, Mulrany made the train and climbed a set of car stairs, heaving himself up by grasping onto one of the side rails.

"God, he looks like Friar Tuck," Ava whispered in Tim's ear. "His arms are so big they're rolling about like sausages."

Tim choked on a laugh, flashing a look of warning at Ava. Then he touched her on the arm, applying slight pressure. They began to move out of the terminal, heading for an exit door at the end of Platform 9. To most eyes Tim and Ava appeared like an average young couple, taking their time as they left the station. Once outside the exit door, they found themselves on a cement walkway which led to a parking area.

Tim and Ava walked in the direction of the parking area, where they took a detour and hurried up a pathway just above the cars and Hampstead Station. The path wound through a forest area, dense but well-kept, which was high on a slope overlooking Track 9. There was very little foot traffic in the pouring rain, although joggers appeared here and there. For the most part, Tim and Ava walked unobserved as they continued at a swift pace along the path. Then, suddenly, they were off the path as quickly as they had been on it.

Two men waited for them in a dense copse of trees which overlooked Track 9. Tim quickly gave them a thumbs-up signal. Ava joined them as they stood in a semicircle, pulling the hood of her jacket over her head. She nodded in greeting to the two men waiting for them, noting they were drenched from the rain. Mike Creed looked like he had been through a mud bath, while Brian Talbot appeared barely ruffled. While his thinning dark hair was plastered to his head, his eyes were clear. And they were hard. He hadn't worked with Tim and Ava for a few years. Hampstead Station was one of the few jobs they had organized together.

"The lines are set on Track 9," Mike said. "Has the train been loaded?"

"Yes," Tim replied before Ava could. "It's full to the brim, and our special guest just boarded."

"Good," Talbot noted. "The bloody caffler would be late to his own funeral if we let him. I figure we have about ten minutes' tops to get this off and skitter out of here. Thanks to Tim's surveillance notes, we were able to place the charges just before dawn this morning. The English are nothing if not consistent. They don't rouse lights in the station until six on the nose. We were done long before then."

"When this is over, I want you and Ava to get back to London," Mike spoke up, addressing Tim. "Lay low for a few days, but as soon as you think it's safe, take the Sealink to Dublin. We'll meet two days hence at the safe house."

Ava listened to the men talk, but she felt numb and merely nodded her head at appropriate intervals. She knew what they were about to do was atrocious, plain and simple murder, and her conscience was fighting with her common sense as it always did. It wasn't as if she had never taken another human life before, but it didn't seem to get any easier. They had to pay, these people, for killing her family, destroying her life, brutalizing her country . . .

Neither Mike Creed nor Talbot knew Ava as Tim did. He could see the flickering emotions cross her face as she struggled to justify what they were about to do.

"Maybe Ava should do the honors," Tim said, watching her surprised reaction. "Don't you think?"

Mike agreed. "Certainly. It's a good point to get started. I know this might be a bit overwhelming for you, Ava. It's a lot different from running guns, kidnapping informants and taking shots at soldiers, but I promise you'll get used to it. Now, are you ready?"

"Yes," Ava said firmly, her fears suddenly washed away. She was doing the right thing. Tim saw her resolution and breathed an inner sigh of relief. Once Ava made up her mind to do something, there was no stopping her. Even as a child, she had singular purpose once she decided on a course, whether it was as simple as mastering the technique of cooking *Dublin Coddle* or more complicated, such as meticulously cleaning a rifle. As an adult her resolve had not wavered. The choices were a bit more serious, but her instinctive drive remained the same.

Talbot removed the detonator from his pocket and handed it to Ava. The object felt cold to her touch. She fingered it lightly. At that moment, they heard the whistle from the train at Track 9. Mike spoke up: "There are twenty-five cars on the train, Ava. After today there will be fewer Brits in the world, and maybe this time they'll take more notice."

She looked at Mike, her eyes clear but somehow very cold. "All right, then. Let's get on with it." She turned on the detonator as the men hurried to the small clearing which afforded a view of Track 9. Ava followed them slowly, almost holding her breath. She looked over Mike's shoulder and saw the green lights on the track blinking, indicating the receiver was getting the carrier wave. The noise from the train became louder as it started to pull out of Hampstead Station, chugging and hissing, steam rising from its engines.

In a split second, the first rail car rode over the explosives set in the tracks. Ava pushed another button on the detonator. For a brief moment nothing happened. The train gnashed its wheels in momentum as it moved, but then the noises below suddenly changed. A metallic ripping rendered the air with a deafening wave, followed by several more tearing noises as metal turned to shreds. The back cars of the train began to stack onto the cars in front of them. Then the noises became intermingled with the screams of metal and human suffering.

Then it was quiet, a hush filling the air, but the silence only lasted a few seconds.

As the human screams began in earnest, and smoke and flames filled the air, Ava gave one final passive look down below before turning on her heel to follow the men out of the copse. Her mind was racing, but her nerves were calm:

"That was for you, Daddy."

**CELTIC REMNANTS:
Excerpt from Chapter Ten**

*November 1992
London, England*

SIR DAVID LANCASTER settled back comfortably in his linen-covered office chair. He set the palms of his hands on the shiny, polished surface of his desk and pulled the chair closer in. His gaze wandered to the telephone messages neatly clipped together on the right side of the desk, the yellow color of the paper catching his eyes. There was also a stack of letters waiting to be signed and returned to his secretary, Jade Agulary. The letters were addressed to various charities which David and the Earldom of Lancaster sponsored, all worthwhile and all deserving.

David's eyes roved around his modest corner office. There were tall plants in the two corners of the room, with a bookshelf in between. Although he could have afforded sumptuous working space on Woods Mews in Mayfair, he had elected to lease a rather sparse office in Chelsea, in a building he shared with other business individuals. There was a small, simple couch with a coffee table and two end-tables on either side. No marbled fireplace and no oaken bar. David desired no ostentation, but rather practical and effective simplicity. He was also conscious that expenses incurred in the office were paid for by the Earldom of Lancaster. He had no intention of giving himself any unnecessary fringe benefits just because he was Viscount Locksley.

As he reached for the telephone messages on his desk, the office door opened from the outer reception area. His secretary Jade stepped into the room and quietly shut the door behind her. She was carrying a steno pad and a mug of hot tea for David. She smiled as she approached the desk, handing over his morning cuppa.

He sipped the scalding liquid slowly, enjoying the generous amounts of milk and sugar Jade added, well-knowing his preferences. Then he set the mug on the desk and looked at her.

"How was your weekend?" he asked in a slightly clipped tone. David had the typical upper-class Oxfordshire accent, speaking from the back of his throat rather from the mouth.

"I had a smashing weekend, boss. I went to Cheltenham to meet my boyfriend's parents. They were awfully nice, very sweet. They seemed to like me."

David smiled at her. Jade was tall and slender with amber-colored eyes and dark red hair pulled into a simple pony tail. The skirt of her dark gray pin-striped dress suit came just above her knees. She was completely professional, at ease in her own skin. He relied on her calming influence and sharp efficiency. She reminded him of a typical English girl with peaches and cream complexion, a self-deprecating sense of humor and an infectious laugh.

"Not much to do in Cheltenham, is there?" David commented, his eyes twinkling.

"Not really," Jade admitted, looking into his blue eyes. She simply adored David. She considered him her boss, of course, but he was also a friend. She could always count on him. "Cheltenham is very quiet and relaxing," she continued, sitting down in the chair in front of the desk, steno pad on her lap. "You could use a weekend like that."

He laughed. "Don't I know it," he said ruefully. "I just might take you up on it one of these days."

"You're more than welcome anytime," she said, meaning it. "Did you have a rough weekend in Oxfordshire again?"

"To say the least," he replied grimly. "However, I do believe I finally brought my father around to the practicality of getting rid of that monstrosity of an office in Mayfair. It was costing a bloody fortune every month, and to what purpose? This new office is much more suitable and economic, and I think old Dad saw my reasoning once I laid out some hard facts and figures on paper."

Jade nodded, watching him as he drank from the tea mug again. Six months ago, David had closed his father's office in Mayfair and moved to the less grandiose establishment on Chester Row in Chelsea. It had come as a great shock to the Earl, who had kept the office in Mayfair for many years, but he told David to use a free hand in reorganizing the administrative aspect of the Lancaster Earldom. David's first task had been to muck through the legalities of being freed from the Mayfair office lease, which had been no small feat.

"How did your father react when he saw how much money you've been saving by moving here?" Jade asked, smiling.

"Dad didn't believe it." David responded, shaking his head slightly. "But by the end of the day on Saturday, just before high tea at Amber Court, reality set in. Actually, I think the old boy was quite proud of me when he saw the figures I put in front of him. I *am* saving him a fortune, you know, and he's not one to condone throwing money away, no matter how solvent the family is. That's exactly what he was doing before I moved us to Chester Row."

Jade nodded her agreement. She admired David's persistence and the way in which he managed his father's business affairs, not to mention his consulting work for the Museum of London. David was a busy man who seemed to thrive on hard work and long hours. It was almost as if he were driven somehow, anxious to squeeze out every minute of every day and put it to good use. He could be unrelenting, and without question he expected those who worked for him to be the same. Yet he was unfailingly loyal and worked no one around him any harder than he did himself. He was also extremely generous to Jade. Her salary had nearly tripled in the last year. It wasn't as if she hadn't earned it, because she had. She recalled the many times when she worked long hours in the office during the day, only to accompany him on his various evening engagements which often went on into the early hours. She would never think of trying to get out of the events, any more than she would ever be disloyal to him. David inspired trust and loyalty in other people automatically. It made Jade, and others, go the extra mile for him.

David Lancaster was a special man, Jade admitted to herself. She had never known anyone quite like him, and suspected she never would again.

He finished his tea and then reached for the stack of letters on his desk. "We'd better get down to business, I suppose," he said, anxious to begin the day. "I'll sign these letters first, and then we can go over the messages you left for me. Okay with you?"

"Fine with me," Jade said, well accustomed to his headlong switches from simple conversation straight into the task at hand. "You have a few appointments scheduled for today, too," she reminded him gently.

He grimaced. "Great. We'll get to that later."

She watched as he scanned each letter quickly before signing them with his fast, hard script. The letters were courtesies, responses to requests from various businesses which the office dealt with every day. David had many friends and contacts in London, and he unabashedly used every one of them to garner support for the dozen or so charities administered by the Earldom of Lancaster. It was an ongoing part of the work he did every day. While others might leave the mundane tasks to underlings, he preferred to peruse each letter quickly before signing his name to them.

Jade settled back into her chair, crossing her legs comfortably as she waited for him to sign the letters, knowing he would not take long. This gave her the brief opportunity to observe him covertly, which she enjoyed doing from time to time. On the first occasion she met David four years ago, she had been weak-kneed by his good looks and his kind, persuasive charm. He had long, slender legs and a trim waist, with a slightly muscled upper body and dark blond hair, which fell slightly curled to his collar. He seemed to have a perpetual dark shadow of a beard, even though Jade knew he shaved at least twice a day. His lips were full and finely developed - highly kissable - and his nose was long and thin, slightly flaring at the nostrils. He had short sideburns on the tops of his cheekbones, and she knew he kept those trimmed, too, but they grew as quickly as the hair on his face at a daily rate. He was a fine specimen of masculinity, but rarely flaunted it.

David was no common punter, Jade thought with a smile. He was extremely blessed in almost every way possible. He was good looking, wealthy, charming, intelligent, hard-working, compassionate and considerate, loyal to his family and friends, intelligent and intuitive, and to top it all off he possessed one of the oldest and most respected noble titles in England. By order of his birth he was Viscount Locksley, next in line to inherit the Earldom of Lancaster. He seemed to have it all, but Jade knew his social life was somewhat drab, apart from the endless charity events he organized and attended, as well as the annual social parties in Oxfordshire. His personal life puzzled her. David had been briefly engaged to Lady Victoria Eddington, daughter of Earl Colchester, but the relationship went by the wayside quickly. Now Lady Victoria was betrothed to one of David's few titled friends, Sir Robin Grantham, Viscount Hartley. David, Victoria and Robin had remained good chums. As far as Jade could tell, the friendship among the three was warm and sincere. No artificial saving face there.

David finished signing the letters and slid them across the desk toward Jade. Next, he picked up the telephone messages, thumbing through them quickly. He paused suddenly, his expression turning somber.

"Clive Bender rang me?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," Jade replied. "He wants to see you today. I told him you had some other appointments and might not . . ."

"Ring him back and tell him I'll see him," David interrupted her.

"But, what about . . ."

"I don't care about my other appointments. Cancel them if you have to. I need to see Mr. Bender." David's tone was short and brusque, and not like him at all.

"I'll call Mr. Bender as soon as we're through here," Jade said.

He nodded. "Good." He held up the last message. "Bart wants me to meet him for lunch today?"

"Yes. One-thirty at *Patisserie Valerie* on Compton Street. Will you be able to go?"

"Only if it fits in with Clive's schedule," David responded thoughtfully. "Ring up Clive first, and if that leaves me free to meet Bart for lunch, so be it. Then call Bart and confirm."

"Will that be all for now?" Jade asked, scooping up the signed letters on the desk. "No dictation this morning?"

"No. Not yet, anyway," he replied, still appearing to be deep in thought. "But please do ring up Clive right away and let me know when he can come round."

She stood up from her chair. "Sure, boss. I'll call him right now."

"Thanks, love."

* * *

THERE WAS AN enclosed stairway in the Chester Row professional building, but the lift was in constant use, gliding from the first floor to the sixth all day long. The structure housed an odd mixture of solicitors, psychiatrists, a rape crisis hotline, marriage counselors and a medical supply company.

David shared the second floor with two solicitors and a psychiatrist. His was the first office when coming off the lift. Jade's desk was situated outside his office door. The only indication to the nature of David's business was a small, hard-plastic sign which was attached to the door: *Lancaster Holdings, Chelsea SW1, 738-7190*, and in smaller letters underneath: *David Locksley, Director*. He was reluctant to advertise his connection to the Earldom publicly unless it benefited his charitable endeavors, thinking it a bit upper-handed. He preferred to be more subtle in business, so he settled for using the name Locksley because most people did not associate it with the Earl, unless they were titled themselves.

Clive Bender was compact, wiry and soft-spoken. He was not a handsome man, but rather blandly average. He was in his late thirties with short, curly brown hair and brown eyes. His nose was knobbed in the middle section as if it had been broken once or twice. He was dressed neatly in gray corduroy trousers and a cream-colored knit pullover.

He entered the reception area from the elevator, brushing his jacket shoulders and then looking directly at Jade. Her eyes narrowed as she saw Clive walk toward her slowly.

He stood in front of Jade's desk. She was used to his quiet presence when he came to the office, along with his prompt punctuality. It was ten o'clock in the morning, right on the dot. She smiled cordially at him, but did not rise from her desk. She knew she was taller than he was, and didn't want to make him uncomfortable by towering over him.

"Is Locksley ready for me?" Clive asked, his tone neither unfriendly nor hospitable. Just matter-of-fact.

"Yes," Jade stated. "He's waiting in . . ."

"I'll show myself in," Clive cut her off. She blinked as Clive went through the door, shutting it softly behind him.

* * *

DAVID STOOD AT his office window, looking down on the barren birch trees which lined Chester Row. He heard the office door open, and turned around to see Clive Bender. The man returned the gaze, his expression unreadable as he waited for David to speak.

Remembering his manners, David waved his hand in the general direction of the small sitting area.

"Please take a seat," David said. "I'm anxious to speak with you."

"I'm sure you are," Clive replied, his tone noncommittal. He sat on one end of the small couch, keeping his back straight and resting his hands in his lap.

David joined him, sitting on the opposite end of the couch.

"Would you like something to drink? A cup of tea, perhaps?" David asked politely.

Clive held up one hand. "No thanks, I'm fine. I just had a big breakfast."

"Very good. Now, to the business at hand. Do you have any information for me yet?"

"I do," Clive replied guardedly. "But this was no easy job. In fact, it was a bit more than I bargained for."

David furrowed his brow. "Did you run into some kind of trouble?"

"Yes and no," Clive responded. "You asked me to find a lady you knew in Ireland ten years ago. Right. Easy, especially with the basic information you provided, such as the general area where you thought the lady in question might be. Easier still, it seemed, because you knew a relative of hers. Ordinarily, that would have been enough to get the job done."

"But it wasn't?" David's tone was light, yet expectant.

"Not really," Clive crossed his legs and leaned back into the couch. "I found the relative all right, just like you said, but she wouldn't tell me anything. She wouldn't budge an inch in either direction."

David nodded. "I suspected as much when I told you about her."

Clive snorted. "I've been tracking people for a living for a long time now. Finding someone named Ava Egan in Ireland should have been easy enough, but there's one little thing you forgot to tell me."

"Such as?"

"You never informed me you were after *the* Ava Egan."

David was surprised. "What do you mean - *the* Ava Egan?"

"Oh, she has other names, too," Clive continued. "I found that out right quick."

David was bewildered, speechless.

Clive stared searchingly at him, and then asked: "Do you have any bloody idea who we're dealing with here? Do you have a clue as to who Ava Egan, *et al*, really is?"

David shook his head, genuinely puzzled. "I don't understand you."

Clive broke in. "She's a bleeding terrorist, Locksley. Your Ava Egan is an Irish militant, a bona fide terrorist. What in sweet Christ's name would you want with the likes of *her*?"

"What?" David was shocked.

"I had a time finding all of this out, mind you," Clive admitted sourly. "You don't mess around with these people, or ask too many questions about them. Lucky for me, I have an old mate who lives in Belfast, and he knew who Ava Egan was almost before I got the name out of my mouth. And then he got scared."

"There has to be some mistake," David protested. "I met Ava Egan twelve years ago in Monasterboice, Ireland. She was only seventeen at the time. She was staying with her aunt, Siobhan Egan, who runs the Blackwater Inn. It's about eight miles from my family vacation home in Cullen."

Clive nodded. "Right. I spoke with Siobhan, very briefly. Told her I was a friend of Ava's, and that I was looking her up for old time's sake."

"What did Siobhan say?" David wanted to know.

Clive shrugged. "She had questions of her own, Locksley. She was very suspicious of me, and asked where I knew Ava from. Before that, she wouldn't even admit that she knew Ava herself, so I made some headway. I had to think fast, and then I remembered you telling me Ava was from Eglinton, near Londonderry. I told Siobhan I knew Ava from there, a long time ago, and then she had more questions. What was my name, who was my family in Eglinton - Jesus, she went *on and on*. She never once really answered one of my bloody questions."

David smiled involuntarily. He remembered Siobhan Egan only too well. It sounded as if she had not changed one bit: defensive, protective, coy, street-smart and cagey. Not even twelve years had made a difference in her, it seemed.

"This isn't funny, Locksley. I had a hell of a time getting out of the situation with Siobhan. She wouldn't let me off the hook. I know she thinks I'm up to no good. She's probably already contacted someone - maybe even Ava herself - and God knows what will happen if I'm fingered in some way."

"I know it's not funny, Mr. Bender," David said smoothly, but he was still smiling. "Please, how did you arrive at the conclusion that the Ava Egan I'm seeking is a terrorist? All you really have is heresy from an old mate. Do you have any actual proof?"

Clive smiled thinly. "I'll let you be the judge, Locksley." He stood up and removed a folded piece of paper from his back trouser pocket. He handed it to David and sat down again.

David looked at the paper blandly, and then began to unfold it slowly. Clive watched him intently, waiting for confirmation that he found what David was seeking. Clive realized he hadn't actually *found* Ava Egan physically, but he knew who she was, as did every bloody copper and government official in Great Britain.

David stared at the grainy photograph, which was centered in the middle of the letter-sized paper. His eyes darted to the writing underneath the picture. He had to read it several times to properly comprehend the words:

***WANTED:** Ava Francis Egan for suspected murder, kidnap and property destruction in the name of the IMC (Irish Militant Council), a self-proclaimed political organization attempting to rid British military presence in Northern Ireland. Ava Egan is considered armed and extremely dangerous. A reward of £50,000.00 is being offered for information leading to her capture and arrest. Contact the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) in Belfast at 457-0232, or Scotland Yard in London at 0800 789 321.*

David let his eyes return to the photograph. He knew it was Ava, without a doubt. A bit older, certainly, but not much different from when he saw her last. She had the same dark hair, the same pert nose and arched eyebrows. Even in the picture she appeared to be sarcastic and taunting, her lips slightly twisted into a sardonic smile. He allowed his mind recall her demeanor: *Come hither*, her eyes beckoned - *Piss off*, her mouth snapped - *I dare you*, her facial expression challenged - *I love you*, her voice whispered - *I need you*, her eyes cried again - *I hate you*, her mind screamed - *You're nothing to me*, her entire body language seemed to say.

"How old is this photograph and where did you find it?" David asked shortly.

"I don't know how old the picture is," Clive replied. "But it's plastered all over Belfast, with some in Dublin. Christ, even Garda in the Republic are looking for her."

"Has she ever been caught?" David pressed. "Has she ever been jailed?"

"Never," Clive said flatly. "That's the odd thing. Most of the IMC members have been caught and jailed at one time or another, but not Ava Egan. That's why the authorities on both sides want her so bad. She'd be a real feather in some copper's hat. However, she always seems to be a step ahead of anyone who's looking for her."

"*She's too smart to get caught,*" David thought to himself. "What else did you find out?" he continued out loud, his voice a bit strained. "Surely you have more than this."

Clive glanced at David. "I have more, but not much."

"I'm listening," David said calmly, laying the wanted poster face-up on his lap. He continued to stare at her face.

"You know about Siobhan Egan," Clive said, lighting a cigarette. "As much good as she was in helping me." He paused. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead. It doesn't bother me."

Clive took a deep drag. "Ava has a sister, her name is Sophie Egan. She's a few years younger than Ava."

David narrowed his eyes. "Yes, I knew that, but I don't remember Sophie very well."

Clive laughed harshly. "Sophie is a nun. Jesus, talk about extreme opposites in two sisters. Do you believe it?"

David was momentarily stunned. "A nun? Sophie is a nun?"

"Yes. A Catholic nun."

"Is there any other kind?" David asked wryly.

"She teaches at a private girl's school in Connemara. The whole place is run by a bunch of nuns."

"What's the name of the school?" David asked, watching the ash on Clive's cigarette grow longer and longer.

"Kylemore Abbey."

"Did you go there? Did you speak to Sophie?"

"Not yet."

"Why?"

Clive exhaled a stream of smoke. "I haven't had time yet," he groused. "Christ, Locksley. I just found out about Sister Sophia two days ago. I figured you'd want to hear about it before I traipsed off back to Ireland."

"You're quite right," David agreed apologetically. "That was our agreement. All exchange of information is to be made in person, never by telephone or written message. Sorry, I didn't mean to jump you."

"I don't think you fully appreciate the spot I've put myself in," Clive said petulantly. "They're dangerous people, the IMC. Murderers, most of them, although you'd never know it if you met one of them on the street. Ironically, the majority of them are God-fearing Catholics who attend Mass regularly." Clive shook his head, taking another puff on his cigarette. "I was lucky when I connected with my old mate in Belfast. He's in the know about what's going on with the group. But now *he's* scared to death. He thinks somehow or other the IMC will find out he's been talking, and that they'll finger him for a hit. Or me, for that matter."

David smiled gently, trying to stay as calm and courteous as possible. "I completely understand your position, Mr. Bender," he said. "I simply had no idea Ava was involved

with . . . a terrorist group. Until now, that is. Rest assured, you will be more than amply compensated for your efforts."

"I know. I trust you. Otherwise, Bart Quantrill wouldn't have led you to me."

"Does your mate in Belfast know if Ava visits Kylemore Abbey? To see Sister Sophia?" David rose from the couch as he spoke, retrieving a small crystal ashtray from his desk. He set it down on the coffee table in front of Clive, and then resumed his place on the couch.

Clive flicked the long ash off his cigarette. "He's not sure. Actually, no one knows for sure. Ava has never been seen near Kylemore Abbey, but that doesn't mean she hasn't been there."

"Exactly," David said flatly. He eyed Clive. "Anything else?"

"Just one more thing."

"Yes?"

"It seems wherever Ava goes, she's with some chap named O'Casey," Clive said, crushing out his cigarette in the ashtray. "Apparently, he's part of the IMC, too. My mate said O'Casey is a big one - tall, bulky and blondish, built like a freight train. But I don't have a picture of him yet."

David was startled. He had completely forgotten about the inimitable Timothy O'Casey. How could he fail to remember trusting Tim, Ava's ever-present shadow? The doe eyes, the immovable and utter loyalty to Ava? Doe eyes, yes, but also watchful and attentive eyes.

David looked at Clive again. "You've done very well, Mr. Bender. Thank you. Are you planning on pursuing information to be had at Kylemore Abbey?"

Clive nodded. "Yes, of course. I have a flight scheduled for Dublin in three days."

"Do you have enough money?"

Clive hesitated. "Well, now that you mention it . . ."

"How much?" David asked bluntly, rising again to walk back to his desk.

"Whatever you think is right, Locksley."

David sighed. "Come on, Clive. Don't go shy on me now."

"Five thousand pounds," Clive blurted out.

David did not even flinch. "Are you keeping track of your expenses versus what I actually agreed to pay you?"

"Yes. Would you like to see my accounting now?"

"Not yet. Perhaps after your visit to Kylemore Abbey," David said pointedly.

"I'll have my papers and figures with me the next time I come to see you," Clive promised.

Clive waited as David wrote out a bank draft, quickly and concisely. "Can I ask you a question, Locksley?" he said tentatively.

David looked at him, pausing in his task. "Yes?"

"Why don't you talk to these people yourself?" Clive asked curiously. "Why don't you go to Kylemore Abbey or the Blackwater Inn on your own? If you knew them once - even though it was a long time ago - surely they would talk to you . . ."

David's eyes became hooded and his voice turned cold as he completed the bank draft. "Mr. Bender," he began. "I hired you to find a woman named Ava Egan, by any means possible. My reasons are my own, and have nothing to do with you. You do not have the

right to question my motives. I consider my request to be a private and confidential matter. And my reasons are certainly none of your concern."

Clive reddened. "Of course. I - I just . . ."

David walked back over to the couch and handed Clive the bank draft. "This should cover you."

Clive took the draft and stood up, still flushed with embarrassment. "I'm sorry if I offended you, or went over the line," he mumbled, shoving the draft into his trouser pocket. "But you have to admit, it's a very curious situation."

David smiled stiffly, but his voice was formal. "Quite. But then, that's part of your job, isn't it? Mystery and curiosity?"

Suddenly Clive became defensive, his voice coming in a stubborn lilt. "Yes Locksley, and you can't say I haven't done my job. But now that you know who I'm dealing with . . . I mean, the IMC for chrissakes, can you cut me a little slack? What if they finger me, and come after me? It's a possibility one of them - even your Ava - will track me somehow, with questions of their own. What then? I won't risk my very life, by God. No sir, not for this, not for finding some lady you used to know. If they find me and ask me questions with a gun to my head, or a knife to my throat, what do I tell them?"

"You tell them you were hired to find Ava," David said softly.

"Yes, but by whom?" Clive persisted. "What do I say if they ask me who?"

David sighed. "I hope it will never come to that, but if it does . . ."

"It *will* come to that if they find me," Clive snapped. "Siobhan Egan has probably already contacted Ava, and they'll be watching for me the minute I go back into Ireland. Hell, they might even be tailing me now . . ." He looked ill at ease at the prospect.

"Tell them . . ." David groped for words, not wanting Clive to know the truth, if at all possible. "Tell them you were hired anonymously by someone who claims to have known Ava Egan many years ago, but that you don't know why. That's all you need to say, and you'll only be half-lying, right?"

Clive still seemed uncertain.

David saw his hesitation, so he continued in a taut voice: "Only reveal my identity if it becomes necessary. If you feel your life is in real danger, then tell them the truth. Inform them, plainly and simply: it is imperative I speak with Ava Egan. Please stress how important it is that I see her, and *her alone*. Reassure them it is a completely private matter, and has nothing to do with police manhunts or official investigations."

"Doesn't this Ava know you're a Viscount?" Clive asked, visibly relieved David had given him leverage in case he was found and questioned by the IMC.

"Yes," David replied, his voice brittle. "She knows me by the name of David Locksley, too. At least, I hope she remembers."

"Fair enough," Clive conceded. "Sorry to put you through such hoops, but I hope you understand my position."

"I do," David said. "And I apologize . . . I didn't realize this might become dangerous for you. I swear, Mr. Bender, I had no idea matters were . . . that Ava Egan was part of a group like the IMC. I'm not one to keep abreast of Irish politics, so I wasn't aware, you see?"

Clive nodded. "I'll just be bloody careful. I'll try and get back to you within a few days or a week, at the most. Is that all right?"

"Yes. Contact me whenever you need to. Do so in person here in my office, or at my home in Marylebone. Even when I'm in Amberwood, if you have to."

"Righto, Locksley. I'll be in touch."

Then Clive Bender was gone. David was left standing where he was, his past memories washing over him.

CELTIC REMNANTS: Excerpt from Chapter Twelve

*November 1992
Monasterboice, Ireland*

MONASTERBOICE HAD CHANGED little in twelve years. The same could also be said for Siobhan Egan.

The Blackwater Inn was still a local favorite and tourist draw, remaining busy, especially during the summer months. Winter saw mainly local customers, but it was enough to keep Siobhan quite comfortable.

She was busy in her red-bricked kitchen around eleven one November morning, slicing freshly-baked bread for the expected lunch crowd. At forty-six years of age, she was still a striking woman. Her red hair was now cut short, falling just below her jaw line. There was a dusting of girlish freckles across her small nose, matching in color with her brown eyes. She was wearing a pair of faded blue jeans and a cream-colored Irish knit sweater to ward off the November dampness. With her in the kitchen were two cooks, a maid and a waitress.

Molly Allan, a waitress who worked the restaurant during lunchtime, entered the kitchen shortly after eleven and made her way to Siobhan. Molly was a local girl who had been in Siobhan's employ for six years.

Siobhan glanced up and saw Molly approaching her. "How is it going out there, Mol?" she asked.

"I'm done setting the tables, Siobhan," Molly said. "But you have a couple of men to see you."

Siobhan paused in her task. "The restaurant isn't open for another hour."

"I know. These two gents aren't lunch customers, I'm thinking. They asked for you specifically."

Siobhan became slightly alarmed. "How did they get in? The doors are locked."

"They knocked. I tried to tell them through the door we were closed, but they insisted on seeing you. Said they were old friends of yours."

"Did they give you their names?"

Molly shrugged. "Just their first names."

"Well?" Siobhan prodded impatiently.

"David and Bart," Molly answered her.

Siobhan froze, feeling the blood drain from her face. "*What the hell do David Lancaster and Bart Quantrill want with me?*" she thought. But Siobhan knew why they had come to see her. Their appearance was somehow connected to the pesky Englishman who had been sniffing around several days ago, asking questions about Ava. She was tempted to tell Molly to get rid of David and Bart, but knew they would only keep coming back until she talked to them. Deciding to put an end to the snooping, Siobhan removed her apron and handed it to Molly. "I'll go and talk to them," she said tersely. "Tell everyone to stay out of the restaurant until they leave."

"Should I bring in some tea?" Molly asked, puzzled by her manner.

"No," Siobhan said firmly. "They won't be staying long."

As she walked toward the dining area of the restaurant, Siobhan tried to steel herself for the meeting ahead. She had not seen Bart Quantrill for twelve years, and the initial anger she felt toward him and David had diminished a long time ago. Her main concern had been for Ava back then. She could not see continuing her relationship with Bart when Ava became pregnant and David left her high and dry. During the summer of 1980, Siobhan meant for her affair with Bart to be a simple fling, ending when he returned to Oxford in the autumn. Even though she dismissed Bart from her life, Siobhan still had lingering feelings for him which remained unresolved in the back of her mind. She knew Ava had the same problem where David was concerned, although she never discussed it with anyone.

Siobhan saw them before they saw her. David and Bart were sitting at one of the dining tables, both of them dressed down in cords and sweaters. Bart had not changed a whit. He was still as adorable as ever, almost ageless with the passage of twelve years. David, however, was another story. He was still classically handsome, but there was a mature air of sadness about him now. Siobhan recognized the vibe because Ava had much the same air about her. There was no other word for it but *sadness*.

Both David and Bart looked up expectantly when Siobhan stopped at their table. She allowed a veil of coldness to harden her face. "Why are the two of you here?" she asked scathingly. She pointed a finger at David. "You may have a home nearby, but that does not give you the right to bother me. I have nothing to say to either one of you."

David stood up, but Bart remained seated, his mouth slightly agape as he stared at Siobhan. She was as lovely as ever. He felt his old feelings for her return in a blood-rush to his face. He was dumfounded by the emotions assailing him at the moment, but knew he had to collect himself.

"Please, listen to me for a minute, Siobhan," David pleaded. "I have to talk to you. It's very important."

"I'll bet it is," Siobhan spat at him. "You're the one who sent that damned investigator to snoop around, aren't you?"

David nodded. "Yes, but I have my reasons . . ."

"What reasons?" Siobhan snapped. "How dare you send someone to spy on me and my family? What gives you the right?"

Finally, Bart stood up. His voice took on a pleading tone as well. "Please, Siobhan, will you just hear David out for a minute? Please, I'm begging you."

Siobhan paused to look at her former lover. Her eyes were still cold, but she wavered. Sighing loudly, she took a seat at the table. "I can only give you a few minutes. I'm very busy today."

David and Bart resumed their seats. "I'm trying to find Ava," David said bluntly.

Siobhan glared at him. "Do you think me an idiot? I know you're trying to find Ava. Why else would you send someone to hound me?"

"Do you know where she is?" David asked.

"Why?" Siobhan demanded. "Why would you want to find her after all these years?"

"I know we have a child," David said quietly. "I realize I made an ass out of myself years ago when I let Ava go, but I've changed, Siobhan. I haven't been able to get Ava out of my mind since, and I've never forgiven myself for the way I treated her when she told me she was pregnant. I have to talk to her . . . I know she might spit on me, but I have to try. I want her forgiveness more than I want anything else in this world."

Siobhan held up her hand, her face becoming rigid. "Hold it right there. Are you telling me it took twelve years for your conscience to kick in? Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"It's the God's honest truth," David said earnestly.

"What do you know about God's honest truth?" Siobhan asked him scornfully.

David was quiet for a minute. Then he leaned forward, his eyes on Siobhan. "It's taken me this long to realize I still love Ava. I always have. I spent years trying to forget her, but to no avail. God, Siobhan, don't you think I know how stupid I was twelve years ago? I was a young, idiotic man. I didn't know what I wanted, not even when it was staring me in the face. I cannot go on until I talk with Ava in person. I have to see for myself that there is no hope left."

"I can save you some time and tell you right now there is no hope," Siobhan said coldly. "Ava knows you're looking for her, and she doesn't want to see you. I repeat: *She does not want to see you.*"

David sat back in his chair, eyes watering. "Are you positive?" he whispered brokenly.

"Yes, I am."

"Then you leave me no choice."

Siobhan remained stubbornly silent.

"I will keep looking for her until I find her myself," David said simply. "When I hear from her own lips that she wants nothing to do with me, then I will accept it as fact."

Siobhan watched him passively, saying nothing.

"Is there a child, Siobhan?" Bart asked quietly.

Siobhan glared at him. "Even if there was, why should I tell you? Do the two of you have some deep fear Ava will bring forward a bastard child, claiming it as David's to scandalize his name and reputation?"

"I know Ava wouldn't do that," David interjected. "She can't do that."

"Why not?" Siobhan sneered.

David shook his head. "She can't, and you know it. If she did, she would expose herself to the authorities. They're looking for her, aren't they?"

"You're pretty damned sure of yourself and Ava, aren't you?" Siobhan asked him, her tone full of anger.

"If I was so sure of myself, I wouldn't have messed up my life twelve years ago," David replied. "And Ava's life. If I had come forward like a man, perhaps she wouldn't be living the life she has now, and we would be one happy family. All of us." He looked pointedly between Bart and Siobhan.

Siobhan stood up from the table. "I have nothing further to say to either of you," she said icily. "Please leave my restaurant and return to your home. I will only say this once: I can't legally stop you from coming in here to eat, but I want you to know you are not welcome at the Blackwater Inn. Now please leave, we are not open for business yet." With that, she turned around and walked away.

David hung his head. "Damnit," he muttered. "She's as cold and unrelenting as ever."

"What did you expect, Davey?" Bart asked gently. "Open arms?" He glanced around. "Let's get out of here. Siobhan made it quite clear we are not welcome."

Once they were outside of the restaurant, Bart said: "What's next?"

"Kylemore Abbey in Connemara," David replied promptly. "That's where Clive Bender said Sophie is. She's a nun now, using the name of Sister Sophia." David glanced at his friend. "Are you okay, old boy? Did seeing Siobhan again upset you?"

"Quite the contrary," Bart admitted. "She is as beautiful as ever, and my heart did flip-flops the whole time she railed at you. God, I would have never thought . . . I sure wish things were different, Davey, for both you and me."

"So do I," David agreed wistfully. "So do I."

CELTIC REMNANTS: Christmas Excerpts from Chapter 17

*Christmas 1992
Pikestaff Lodge
Daviot, Scotland*

CHRISTMAS MORNING CAME with a flourish of bright sunlight, which only lasted a short time. It was quickly replaced with a fast deluge of dark clouds and heavy snow.

David awoke in his bed feeling refreshed, remembering the previous day. His room was a few doors away from Ava, but he had gone to bed without seeing her again. She had fallen asleep shortly after dinner, and although he kept peeking in on her, she never awakened. Bart teased his friend: "She'll be there in the morning, Davey. She needs rest to recover. Ava is not about to sprout wings and disappear again, heaven forbid."

Instead, David spent the better part of the evening in the company of his daughter. Bart, Tim and Siobhan joined them as well, although Sophie begged off to her room. David sensed Sophie felt the need to return to her prayers on a daily basis, but did not want to dampen the mood of the group by saying so.

Bart and Siobhan eyed each another warily for the remainder of the evening, while Tim sat morosely by the fireplace, smoking cigarettes and drinking endless cups of coffee. David coaxed Chee into playing a game of chess after he placed the board on a small table near Tim. In typical fashion, Tim offered comments as he saw fit, especially when David lost a game to Chee.

"The Irish win every time," Tim had quipped as Chee clapped her hands together in delight. "The sooner you realize it, the better I'm thinking it'll be, Locksley."

David smiled in his bed as he remembered the evening. Chee was vibrant and happy, and seemed to enjoy herself. She offered to help him put away the chess board, and then proffered her hand in a good night shake.

He rose from his bed, thinking: *"I can't wait until her handshake turns into a big hug."* Dressing quickly in a knit-sweater and a pair of jeans, he slipped on black canvas shoes and decided to go downstairs. He glanced at his wristwatch, noting it was six o'clock.

He went directly to the kitchen and flipped on the coffee maker. The house felt cold, so he went into the drawing room to light a fire in the grate. He looked over at the Christmas tree in the corner and shook his head. They arrived at Pikestaff on such short notice the only tree he could find was located in Daviot Wood, which he felled with Tim's help yesterday afternoon. There was no time to decorate the tree or adorn it with lights, so it stood alone and naked.

He lit the fire in the grate, touching a long match to paper spills to ignite three wood logs. He walked over to the tree and noticed there were plenty of presents underneath, which amazed him. Who had time to shop for gifts? Sophie and Siobhan had gone into the village the day before and returned with several packages, but David had no clue as to their contents. He felt himself flush a deep red: he had no presents for anyone, but in all truth there had been no time prepare. What could he possibly give Ava or Chee, anyway? He didn't know Chee well enough to be familiar with her preferences. Did she like toys? Games? Books?

"Penny for your thoughts," he heard Ava's voice from the doorway. He swung around to look at her.

His eyes widened when he saw Ava leaning against the frame of the door, one hand gripping the outer edge. Despite her pale complexion, she had managed to dress herself in a pair of beige sweat pants and a dark blue sweater. Her long hair was combed and free, and her eyes were alert and bright. She seemed to be mocking him with her gaze, with one eyebrow characteristically raised in question.

He flew to her side. "What are you doing out of bed? You shouldn't be moving around. How in the hell did you get down the stairs?"

"Very carefully," she replied dryly. "Didn't you hear me? Were you so lost in your own thoughts you didn't notice the thumping sounds I made hopping down on one leg?"

He touched her arm. "Bart will kill you. Let me carry you to a chair."

She laughed. "You'll seize any excuse to get me into your arms, won't you?"

Ignoring her comment, he bent slightly and lifted her carefully yet effortlessly into his arms. Her hands circled around his neck. She moaned as he moved toward the chair by the fireplace.

"Am I hurting you?" he asked.

"It's just the movement," she said softly. "It jars my hip, but I'm okay."

When she spoke, her breath fanned his cheek. He felt his heart flutter. She molded against him as he carried her, and he could feel the slightness of her frame. A surge of protectiveness came over David, and he marveled at it. He never thought of Ava as vulnerable or in need of help, but she was both of those things right now. He came to a stop in front of the chair, still holding her in his arms. He looked into her eyes. She returned his stare, their faces merely an inch apart.

He tilted his head and kissed her, desire for her overcoming common sense and knowledge of her possible anger. The second his lips touched hers, a thousand memories came flooding back to him, hidden and denied for twelve long years. It was as if he had never left her; kissing her was like coming home, and it thrilled him to his core. He parted her lips with his own, and began to explore her mouth. He closed his eyes naturally, although part of him knew he did so from fear of reprisal and her accusing stare.

But Ava wasn't shocked or angered by David's actions. She admitted to herself that she wanted him to kiss her. She responded in kind, placing her hands on the back of his head to pull his face closer to her. She felt like a starving woman finally being offered a feast. Ava drank of David and relished in him, having denied herself for so long, yet she cursed her weakness and then felt awe in one fell swoop.

He could sense Ava was losing her breath. Regretfully he stopped kissing her, but did not relinquish his hold on her. He was not about to let her go now.

Ava looked at him through sleepy eyes. When she spoke, her voice came as a whisper: "Are you happy now, David Lancaster?"

David chuckled as he lowered Ava into the chair. He was careful to ease her down gently. She let go of him slowly, still looking up at him. "You always manage to twist the truth," he said with humor. "*Am I happy now?* I didn't seem to notice your loud protests over the matter."

"You took me by surprise," she insisted, but her eyes were dancing.

"You had plenty of time to stop me," he declared.

She lowered her eyes, suddenly feeling very shy. "I know."

David regarded her warmly, his entire body flushed with heat. "Would you care for a cup of coffee?" he asked.

She glanced at him, a tentative smile on her face. "I'd love a cup. Remember, I only take cream."

"Yes, I know." He bent over and kissed her quickly on the mouth. "Sit tight and I'll be right back."

She raised her eyebrow at him. "I don't think I'll be running any races today," she told him sardonically. "Unless it's a one-legged arse-kicking contest."

He laughed. "You'd win hands down, my dear."

"Or arse-down," Ava muttered as David left the room to fetch coffee.

She leaned back into the chair, noticing its high-back and wide armrests. It was an antique, of course. Even in their far-flung vacation homes, the Lancaster's only had the best. Her eyes roved around the room. She smiled as she saw the Christmas tree. Chee had told her about the tree yesterday, that it had no decoration but stood proud all by itself. Chee liked the tree as it was, declaring it was "as pure as God made it."

Ava looked at the four tall windows in the room, all of which were covered by sheer curtains with heavy damask shades of dark burgundy. One of the shades was partially open, where she saw snowfall careening against the window pane. The light from the fireplace illuminated the room with a warm glow, reflecting off the table lamps and oak walls in the room. The furniture was old and overstuffed, but seemingly of good quality. It was quiet and peaceful, and for a change Ava felt her instinctive wariness diminish a notch. She closed her eyes and laid her head against the chair's backrest.

When she awakened that morning and decided to go downstairs no matter the effort, she hoped David would be there alone. And he was. She was perplexed by her softening regard for her former nemesis. Ava had been so angry with David for so long, but he had pulled through this time by bringing her and Tim to safety. Seeing David again had chipped away at her deep-seated anger. She was fed up with being in a rage over him. It was debilitating, and a waste of time. She knew she could say it was for Chee's sake, but it wasn't the only reason. Ava had buried her feelings for David so deeply they resurfaced only because she was forced to be near him by rote of circumstance.

The tranquility of Pikestaff Lodge made Ava languid, as did the knowledge David would never betray her to the authorities. One nagging worry in the back of her mind was the possibility locals from Daviot Village might be roused to suspicion, but the lads on the "fringe" were keeping an eye on things. Ava made a mental note to somehow recompense Mike Creed and Jeff Mullen for their time at Daviot during the holidays.

"I'd give more than a penny for *your* thoughts," David said softly as he stood before her, a steaming cup of coffee in his hand.

Ava took the cup gratefully. "Thank you." She sipped the brew and smiled. "Actually, I was thinking how peaceful it is here. The solitude is lovely, and the snow falling on Christmas morning is just perfect."

He pulled over a large footstool from near the fireplace, placing it next to her. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask her if he could come to her room tonight, but he held himself in check. "*Let the day bring what it may,*" he thought, scolding himself. "*If I rush things now, she's apt to get nervous. You need to calm down, Locksley. Let events transpire naturally.*"

She sipped her coffee again. "Did you call your family?"

He made a show of rolling his eyes heavenward. "I telephoned Amber Court and spoke with my father. He wasn't too pleased, but that's where I left it. I told him I wouldn't be coming home for the so-called festivities. He made a bit of a ruckus, but here I am so no worries."

"What about Bart's father?" She wanted to know. "Is he upset?"

"Bart called him and broke the news. Guildford is a good egg. He knows he'll see Bart before the holiday season is over, so he didn't complain much."

"What in bloody hell are you doing out of bed?" Bart bellowed from the doorway of the drawing room, startling both David and Ava.

He stepped into the room, advancing on them. He was dressed in blue-print pajama bottoms and a white tee-shirt. His hair was disheveled and his eyes were bleary, the lower half of his jaw darkened with beard growth. He was barefoot as well, forcing David to smother a laugh. It was unlike Bart to parade around in such a manner. He was usually dressed to the nines with not a hair out of place, even when he adorned casual garb.

"I feel better," Ava defended herself. "I made it down the stairs quite well, thank you. Bart, this is Christmas morning. I wasn't about to hold court from my bed like one of your bloody queens."

Bart came to a stop in front of her chair. He still appeared disgruntled as he felt her forehead, took her pulse and looked at her eyes, holding one of her hands all the while. Ava accepted his ministrations calmly. Finally, he let go of her hand.

"Your color is better," he admitted, surprised. "How is the pain?"

"Still there, but better than yesterday," Ava replied, finishing her coffee and handing the cup to David. "I tell you, I feel fine. I won't try and do too much today. I'll just stay downstairs while Chee opens her gifts, maybe have a bit of breakfast, and then I'll go back to bed. I promise."

Bart seemed appeased for the moment, so David spoke up: "I have to ask. Why are you looking so out of sorts, my friend?"

Bart flushed slightly. "I didn't sleep well. I kept tossing and turning. I could hear Siobhan and Sophie talking in the room next to mine."

Ava chuckled. "You're still soft on Siobhan, aren't you Quattrill?"

"Not in the least," Bart said quickly. "I simply couldn't sleep over the noise."

"My bloody hell," Siobhan said cheerfully as she walked into the room. She came to stand next to Bart, glancing at him. "We quit talking at midnight because Sophie fell asleep. How do you account for the other five hours?"

Ava started to laugh as Siobhan ribbed Bart. David allowed himself to watch the friendly interplay, warmth filling his heart. The scene reminded him of the old days when they spent the summer in Monasterboice so many years ago. Only now all four of them were older and hopefully wiser. There was a glimmer of sanguinity in David's mind that somehow Bart and Siobhan would get back together. There was nothing keeping them apart, no ugly history and certainly no recriminations.

"*Unlike Ava and me,*" David thought with a quiet sigh. "*We have so much baggage, and so much to get through.*"

* * *

CHEE WAS DELIGHTED on Christmas morning. Despite the oddness of the circumstances, she couldn't remember when she'd had a better time with her mother, Siobhan, Sophie and Uncle Tim. It had nothing to do with gifts. It had to do with being family and enjoying the closeness of it. In Chee's case, she knew the peace and tranquility could be shattered at a moment's notice and her mother would be gone again.

Chee also felt surprising warmth toward David Locksley. She was prepared to dislike him - he was a *sasanach*, after all - but he was helping her mother, which alone made him shine bright in her eyes. He was awfully nice in general and *very* good looking. Chee was simply unable to resist David's charm.

The Egan family, along with Tim, Bart and David gathered in the drawing room at Pikestaff Lodge midmorning on Christmas day. The snow continued to fall heavily, so David added several more logs to the fire. Ava remained in her seat by the hearth, while Chee snuggled around her feet with a thick, multicolored comforter.

"Who gets to open a present first?" Tim asked, looking at Chee as he spoke.

She laughed. "Well, since I'm the only kid here, I suppose that would be *me*."

David chuckled at Chee's remark. She sounded so much like Ava, wording comments in the same cryptic vein without realizing it. It was uncanny, but fascinating. David remained seated on the footstool near Ava, next to Chee. Bart couldn't resist taking a few photographs with the instant camera he purchased in Daviot Village the day before.

"The three of you make quite a picture," Bart muttered in David's ear as he handed him one of the instant pictures. David glanced down at the photograph. It depicted Ava in her chair, a light throw draped over her knees, with Chee at her feet and her head on Ava's knees. Ava's right hand rested atop Chee's head lightly, with her other hand poised on the chair's arm rest. David sat next to them on the footstool, his head turned slightly toward Ava as he gazed at her.

David nudged Ava and handed her the picture. She looked at it briefly. Then she met his eyes, where he saw slight tears forming. Despite her uncharacteristic show of emotion, he still could not read her or even attempt to guess what she was really thinking, but knew she was touched by the photograph.

Chee was opening the present from her mother. She chortled with glee when she finally saw it. She raised a leather jacket out of a box and held it up for all to see. "I've wanted one of these for *ages*," Chee exclaimed happily. "Mummy said I was too young, but this is just my size." She jumped to her feet and kissed Ava on the cheek. "Oh, thank you Mummy. I'll treasure it."

Ava regarded her daughter's shining eyes and broke into a grin. Chee was supremely happy, and it stirred her soul. "You nagged me long enough," Ava told her playfully. "Tim finally talked me into getting the jacket for you in London last autumn. He said he'd heard enough of your begging, too."

Chee giggled. "Whatever works, I always say."

Tim came over and put his arm around Chee's shoulder. "You're just like your mother," he said, pretending to be stern. "What in God's name will we be doing with *two* of you?"

"Love us twice as much," Chee responded, hugging Tim around the waist.

"And that I already do," Tim said softly.

The remainder of the gift-opening progressed rather quickly. It was unspoken among all that the holiday event and get-together was precipitated by unusual

circumstances, with no one having time to shop properly for presents. Nonetheless, Ava was speechless when she opened the gift Chee made for her. It was a homemade book constructed from stiff cardboard paper, covered in needlepoint. The stitching depicted the Holy Trinity of Ireland, bathed in a milky green background. The contents of the book were in Chee's own handwriting, and related the history of Ireland as she saw it. The cover title was also stitched, and read: *My History of Éire by Shenachie Maura Egan, 1992. Given with love to my mother, Ava.*

Sophie spoke up from her place by the Christmas tree. "Chee worked on her book project for almost a year," she said proudly. "She insisted on doing everything herself."

Ava was stunned as she held the priceless gift in her hand, deeply moved by Chee's devotion. Then she set the book down on her lap and held out her arms to her daughter. Chee wrapped herself in the embrace.

Even David felt the hot seep of tears in his eyes as he looked at mother and daughter. Any doubts he may have had about Chee's happiness and well-being were completely erased in that moment.

* * *

CLIVE BENDER WAS having a time of it. Not only was he stuck in Daviot for the Christmas holiday, he was failing miserably in his purpose for the visit. Samuel Gisbourne was relatively little help, and in fact seemed to be possessed of some sort of after-guilt for talking to Clive about David Lancaster. Since the first evening they met at Buttons Pub, Gisbourne had made himself scarce. Clive decided not to bother with the man again. He was more interested in finding out if Ava Egan was holed up at Pikestaff Lodge, and in the ensuing fifty thousand dollar reward if he could provide police with information leading to her capture.

Christmas morning was a virtual blizzard of snow, but Clive set out on foot from his room above the Buttons Pub, bundled in an oversized brown down-coat and gloves. The main street of Daviot was deserted. Holiday lights of red and green blinked above closed shop doorways and at the village's two intersections. The snow continued to swirl around him as Clive buried his chin deeper into his coat. He left the pub and walked out of the village, following the general directions Gisbourne had given him to Pikestaff.

The lodge was only about a mile from the village, but the weather slowed Clive considerably. He became irritated as he kept slipping on the slick snow, almost falling to the ground several times. He hated the circumstances he found himself in, but he had no other recourse. He was convinced Ava Egan was hiding at Pikestaff, and he desperately needed the bounty on her head. All signs pointed to her whereabouts, not only with the presence of David Lancaster at the lodge during the holiday, when he would normally be ensconced at Amber Court with his family, but also with Lancaster's dismissal of Gisbourne for the duration of his stay. What other reason could Lancaster have for isolating himself at the lodge?

Still, Clive cursed the ill-fortune which forced him to be in Daviot. Ever since he stopped working for Lancaster, his financial situation had been precarious at best. Clive knew it was his own fault, the root of his problems linked to an over fondness for gambling and imbibing one too many pints. He could have spent the holidays with his brother Simon in London, but it would have been fruitless. He needed to act as quickly as possible.

It was through a friend in Belfast that Clive heard of Ava's situation. He didn't know many details, but word came Ava was injured in an ambush in Oxfordshire and was taken to a remote location to recover. It was all Clive had to go on, but he put two and two together and did a little investigating. David Lancaster was not at the family seat for the Christmas holidays, and Siobhan Egan was not spending the season at the Blackwater Inn in Monasterboice. It stood to reason Ava would have been unable to travel far with her injuries, so Clive decided to explore the possibility that they all scattered to Pikestaff Lodge. If Gisbourne's information was accurate, Clive was about to hit pay dirt.

Clive paused in his stride, trying to catch his breath. The snow was coming down so hard he could barely see in front of him. The white images of tree branches caught his eyes to the right and left, the snow having fallen so heavily the branches were leaden and drooping. He began to panic. He wasn't sure if he was on the road leading outside of Daviot anymore, or if he was headed in the direction of Pikestaff. Even if he turned around and tried to head back to the village, he was uncertain if he would be going back the way he came.

"What a damn pickle I've gotten myself into," he grumbled out loud, rubbing the outside of his arms with his gloved hands. "I was so busy cursing my bad luck that I went ahead and stepped right into more."

"You most certainly did, mate," a voice hissed in his ear.

Before he could react, Clive fell to the ground with a thud. It would be the last thing he remembered for quite awhile.

* * *

JEFF MULLEN HATED cold weather, but tolerated the elements because he was on assignment for the Irish Militant Council. After meeting Mike Creed in Inverness a few days ago, Jeff came to the tiny village of Daviot and the estate known as Pikestaff. Not only was Scotland miserably cold, the snow seemed to have no intention of abating. To make matters worse, it was Christmas Day. He had foolishly volunteered for the gig and was sorry he put himself up for it.

Jeff and Mike were holed up in an old tool shed on the Lancaster property. The shack had seen better days. It was freezing, but because of their desire to remain invisible they hadn't been able to light a campfire. Mike brought large batteries that he and Jeff used for two electric blankets, but it wasn't quite enough. Tim O'Casey slipped over to see them at least once a day, always bringing a thermos of hot coffee and a small canvas bag filled with sandwiches, crisps, hard-cooked eggs and soft drinks. Jeff and Mike were able to communicate with Tim through a pager he kept with him at all times, although neither man had seen the sense in bringing their laptop computers to Daviot. The hardness and discomfort were facts of life in the IMC. They were protecting their own. Not only Ava Egan, who was an elemental part of the IMC, but Tim O'Casey as well. Not to mention the presence of Ava's daughter, her sister and aunt.

Nothing out of the ordinary had taken place at Pikestaff since Jeff and Mike arrived, apart from a brief appearance by the caretaker Samuel Gisbourne. No one else had been seen snooping around the lodge. Jeff and Mike took turns roaming the estate, with one man lagging behind at the tool shed. They rotated by the hour, so neither one of them had gotten much sleep.

Jeff was making his last round on the outer edges of the lodge when he saw a man on the road, almost stumbling upon him. The heavy snow made visibility less than ideal. Jeff sensed the man was lost, but then wondered what the hell he was doing at Pikestaff in a blizzard on Christmas Day. Because of the man's winter attire, Jeff could not make out his features but he knew it was not Tim O'Casey, and he assumed it was not David Lancaster or Bart Quantrill. The man in front of Jeff was walking from the direction of Daviot Village. Jeff knew no one had left the lodge in several hours.

Because of the suddenness in which Jeff found himself behind the stranger, he acted swiftly but carefully. He conked him over the head with his pistol with just enough force to knock him cold. Tucking the pistol back in his belt, he leaned over to remove the man's hat. He was shocked when he recognized the face.

Clive Bender? The useless blighter investigator? The alcoholic gambler who couldn't find his way out of a sack of potatoes? Jeff almost laughed out loud, but he held himself in check. There would be time for levity later. Right now he had to get Bender back to the shed and decide what to do with him.

* * *

"ARE YOU SHAGGIN' nuts, bringing a body here?" Mike Creed exploded when he saw Jeff drag the lifeless form of Clive Bender into the tool shed. "Who in bloody hell *is* that?"

Jeff dropped Bender's body just inside the door of the shack. "I came upon him in the road," he defended himself, shutting the door. "I didn't exactly have time to pussy-foot around." He glanced down at the man on the floor. "This is the one and only Clive Bender, at your service. His fame precedes him, thanks to his bumbling search for Ava a few months ago."

Mike rolled his eyes and shook his head, rubbing his hands together. He regarded Bender first, and then his eyes traveled to Jeff. The man was soaked to the skin and out of breath. He must have carried Bender for quite a distance. Jeff's short blond hair was plastered to his head and his week-long growth of beard was dusty coal in color, almost a match to the deep shadows under his eyes.

The shed was small, but Mike and Jeff managed to arrange two thin bedrolls on the creaking wooden floor. Slats missing in the walls had been covered with old newspaper and rags, which barely kept out the cold. A solitary candle burned on a small wire crate in the middle of the sparse room.

Mike Creed had been a member of the IMC for more than twenty years, and he was also a personal friend to Ava and Tim. Well into his forties, Mike had a shock of white hair on his head. There were creases in the corners of his eyes and around his mouth. He liked Jeff Mullen well enough, although he was a bit leery as the lad had only been with the IMC for two years.

Mike walked over and knelt down in front of Clive, looking him over. "Did you talk to him?"

Jeff shook his head. "No. I knocked him out as soon as I came up behind him. I think he was walking from Daviot, and became lost."

Mike glanced up at Jeff. "Bender being here is no coincidence, I'm thinking. Who might have sent him?"

Jeff shrugged. "Not Locksley, that's for sure. Bender went off his payroll awhile back."

"What about the Earl himself?" Mike wondered aloud.

Jeff whistled slowly, his eyes widening. "I hadn't thought of that. But why?"

Mike stood up, facing Jeff squarely. "O'Casey told me the Earl was a tad upset when Locksley didn't make it home for the holidays, but it's not just cause to send out a private dick. Besides, the Earl knows Locksley and his doctor friend are at Pikestaff. No, I think Bender has some wild hair about doing something on his own. He's aware of the price on Ava's head, and perhaps he was miffed when Locksley let him go. Bender had just enough information to put some things together, and maybe he checked out Locksley's current whereabouts more thoroughly." Mike grinned. "That's just a possibility, mind you."

"But a good one," Jeff admitted. "You utterly amaze me, Creed. Your powers of deduction sometimes border on the bizarre, but in this particular case you make sense." Jeff had known Mike to be quick on the draw when evaluating circumstances, and nine times out of ten he hit the mark. It seemed to be a particular talent for men who had been in the IMC for many years.

Clive began to moan on the floor, his body moving slightly. Wordlessly, both Jeff and Mike pulled their black ski masks over their faces, adjusting the fabric so the eye holes fit into place. Jeff knelt down next to Bender, muttering. "Now, how do we get rid of him? Scare him and let him go?"

Mike pursed his lips. "No. Bender knows too much. Maybe not about the particular situation at Pikestaff, but he knows enough about Ava and Locksley to be a liability. I don't trust him. If we let him go, he'll either find some way to come back or he'll alert the coppers."

"We can't keep him here," Jeff said, aghast at the thought.

Mike rested his eyes on Bender's form. "I know. Let me think for just a minute." Bender was a royal pain, Mike thought grimly. Clive's brother Simon was a physician of some note in London, while Clive made his own reputation in private investigation. When the IMC had gotten wind Clive was snooping around Belfast and Kylemore Abbey some months ago, asking questions about Ava, most of those loyal to the IMC went on alert. Clive was known to be rather talented at finding lost family members and locating people who skipped on their bills, but he was in over his head when he started looking for Ava. Bender simply didn't have the wherewithal or the stamina - much less the intelligence - to wade around unscathed in the world of the IMC. He was pegged from the beginning and watched carefully, but as he seemed harmless and not likely to unearth anything of much import the IMC let him roam at will.

The current situation was different. Bender was too close for comfort now, and something had to be done about it.

Jeff watched Mike closely, and then exclaimed: "You're not thinking of elimination, are you?"

Elimination was the term used by the IMC to remove a person permanently. It was a tactic rarely used and only with great forethought, never to be taken lightly. Violence for the sake of violence was not how the organization operated, although they would be hard put to convince the world of their ethos.

"What else can we do?" Mike finally asked.

"We talk to him, reason with him, threaten him," Jeff said, almost pleadingly. "But for God's sake, we don't eliminate him for snooping around."

"And then trust he'll take our threats seriously?" Mike's response was another question.

"We have to," Jeff replied. "If he flaps his gums, we can get Ava out of here quickly."

"Is it worth the alert, and the consequences?" Mike pressed him. "If Bender gets the coppers into this, not only will Pikestaff be pegged as a 'safe-house' for the IMC, but Locksley will be under watch as well. You know I'm not one to condone violence just for the sake of it, there has to be a god-damned good reason first, but I can't think of another alternative for this bloody bastard."

Jeff hesitated. Mike was his superior, but he was having doubts about eliminating Bender. It just didn't seem necessary. "I say we badger him," Jeff finally said weakly. "If we can sense he's not going to abide, then we'll undertake your suggestion."

"One of us has to be keeping watch," Mike pointed out. "We don't have a lot of time to sit here and mollycoddle this baboon."

"It's your turn to do the watch," Jeff said. "I'll stay here with Bender and talk to him."

Mike nodded. "Fine. I'll be back within the hour to see what you've come up with."

After Mike left, Jeff stared down at Bender. His eyes were starting to open slowly. He clutched his head with both hands, moaning anew.

The sight which greeted Clive when his eyes focused scared the living daylights out of him. The figure of a man was bent over him, wearing a black ski-mask with holes in the eyes and mouth. The eyes behind the mask were intent upon him, and devoid of emotion. Clive knew he had stepped right into the IMC, and he was frightened beyond words. The ski mask was a dead giveaway. He didn't even bother trying to take stock of his surroundings. He knew he had to give the right answers to any questions they posed to him in order to preserve his life.

"Where am I?" Clive asked, his voice cracking.

"Where you shouldn't be," the man behind the mask spoke coldly. "What are you doing in Daviot, Bender? Taking the highland air for your health, are you?"

Clive swallowed and noticed his throat was dry. He did not respond.

"You'd best be answering me," the man spoke again. "Tell me the truth, and there might be some hope for your future."

Clive knew he had to think fast, but also realized giving a glib response could prove fatal. Clive had heard about IMC "inquisitions." It was rumored they could sense when a person was merely trying to save their own skin and not telling the truth.

"Keep in mind no one knows where you are, including you," the man spoke again. "And no one can hear you." The man chuckled, but it was an impersonal sound. "Your fate is entirely in your own hands."

Clive tried to sit up, but Jeff pushed him back down. "Stay as you are," he warned. "Start talking, Bender."

Clive raised himself slightly on his elbows. His head was throbbing, but he forced himself to speak. "I was trying to find out if Ava Egan was in Daviot," he croaked, deciding in a split second to be completely honest with the man staring at him. "I've been down on my luck since Locksley discontinued my services. I still have various connections in Ireland, and I was told Ava was hurt in an ambush. Locksley left Amberwood before Christmas, and

Siobhan Egan was not in residence at the Blackwater Inn. I sort of put two and two together."

"And you figured you'd do a bit of follow-up, and maybe collect a big reward, aye?" Jeff finished for him, the tone of his voice scathing.

Clive flushed. "Yes, to be honest. I told you, I was down on my luck."

"More like down on hooch and dice," Jeff snapped. He inched his face closer to Bender. Clive could see cold, steel-blue eyes through the ski mask. They were unflinching. "In all your time as a so-called investigator, haven't you ever come to the conclusion that it's not wise to cross over and snoop where you don't belong?"

Clive nodded. "Yes, I realize that. But I was desperate."

"Desperate enough to trade your life for your foolishness?"

"No," Clive answered, his voice shaking with the real fear he was feeling.

Jeff regarded Bender for a long moment. "And you still think your prize money is to be had by snooping around here?"

Clive nodded. "Yes. It simply stands to reason."

"Your reasoning is wrong," Jeff stated flatly. "And typically English. I'm thinking something needs to be done about you, but *what* is the big question."

Clive was silent. He dared not speak.

Jeff stared at Bender, his gaze steady and unblinking. The seconds stretched into minutes, and still Jeff did not move or talk. Bender felt his nerves stretch as far as they would go, until he thought he would snap.

The silence spoke volumes, and sealed Clive Bender's fate.

CELTIC REMNANTS: Christmas Excerpts from Chapter Eighteen

*Christmas 1992
Pikestaff Lodge
Daviot, Scotland*

THE TOOL SHED on the grounds of Pikestaff Lodge was freezing cold. It was late in the evening on Christmas Day when Tim made a quick trip to check on Jeff and Mike to see how they were faring. He found Jeff alone and huddled by the door, an old blanket draped over his shoulders. The first thing Tim noticed was Jeff's hands. They looked cut in a few places, and there appeared to be remnants of blood on his knuckles.

Tim stood over Jeff, who looked up at him with a blank look on his face. Three - or was it four? - hours had passed, and Jeff had made his patrol around Pikestaff twice since apprehending Clive Bender, trading off with Mike. Bender was no longer a threat. Mike and Jeff had decided to "eliminate" the problem. Apparently, Tim did not agree.

"What do you mean, you *eliminated* Clive Bender?" Tim exploded. "Are you off your nut? Bender once worked for Locksley, and he is well known in London as a private investigator. Do you think no one will notice he just disappeared and not look into it?"

Jeff stood up, letting the blanket fall to the ground. "We discussed it, Mike and me," he defended himself. "Do you think we offed him just for the hell of it? He was bound and determined to find Ava, or traces of her, so he could get his hands on the reward money. We could have let him go, sure, but then what? If we kept him, where could we hide him? In a snow bank? Tell me, Tim, what would *you* have done?"

Tim started pacing the narrow confines of the shed. He lowered his head and closed his eyes briefly. For as long as he had been in the IMC, the thought of killing and the actual act itself had turned his insides out. Perhaps not for the sake of self-defense, but the premeditated scenario of outright murder went against his inner morality, despite the situation he found himself in. He would kill to protect Ava in a heartbeat, and he supposed that's what Jeff and Mike had done. But Tim was alarmed, and almost sick with uneasiness.

Tim stopped pacing and asked: "Where is the body?"

Jeff stared at Tim, and then let out a breath. "At the bottom of Loch Ness."

Tim narrowed his eyes. "Who the Christ took the body there?"

"I did," Jeff said weakly. "I had Bender inside the shed, and when Mike came back we talked about the situation. There was no safe alternative, O'Casey, I'm telling you. The man was a liar, and he would have said anything to save his skin. If we had let him go, or even kept him here, he would have flapped his gums the minute he was out of earshot. You know how we all trust our inner instinct - Ava, too - and both Mike and I were sensing the same things from Bender. He would have squealed, and the coppers in London would have been on Locksley like the plague. We assumed it would eventually lead to Ava somehow, and we weren't prepared to take any chances."

Tim began pacing again. "You did the right thing," he finally said, much to Jeff's relief. "I'm sorry I blew my cork, but the news was unexpected. I agree. I would have done the same had it been me. Bender was a bloody nuisance and a menace. Did you get anything out of him? Was he alone?"

"He said he was alone in Daviot. He met Pikestaff's caretaker at the pub in the village, but insisted it was just a friendly chat over a pint. I didn't believe him, and Mike also had doubts."

"We can't go roaring through the village and off anyone who might have met Bender," Tim scoffed. "We need to ride it out. If someone starts sniffing around again, we have to leave - *plain and simple*. I don't like this one bit, Bender showing up. I think we should leave anyway, but I have to let Ava decide. And I need to call Ned."

"I think so, too," Jeff replied, relieved Tim had calmed down. Whether O'Casey knew it or not, his sheer size and presence was highly intimidating.

Tim walked to the door of the shed. The wind was starting to pick up, rattling the door on the hinges. "How did you off him?" he asked quietly.

Jeff lowered his eyes. "Mike held his head by the hair, and I slit his throat. He struggled quite a bit, but . . ."

Tim held up his hand to stop the explanation. "That's all I need to hear, thank you. And you took the body to Loch Ness? How?"

"Loch Ness is only about a mile away," Jeff said. "I wrapped the body in an old tarp, and drug it to the shore. I weighed it down with several rocks - tied them on, actually - and slipped the body into the water. It floated out about twenty feet, and then sunk."

"Did you make sure no one saw you drag the body?"

"It was still snowing, and dark. I went through areas with trees and snow-covered shrubs mostly. I saw no one. Visibility was very poor in some spots, but I was able to find my way. You know I've always been good at navigating myself."

Tim nodded. "Ned said you could find your way out of a wet burlap sack in the middle of the Irish Sea."

"It's the truth."

Tim rested his hand on the doorknob of the shack door. "Let me speak with Ava either tonight or in the morning. We have to make some decisions, and I definitely have to call Ned Fermoy."

"I'll wait to hear from you."

Tim hesitated. "Again, I'm sorry if I blew up on you at first, lad. I meant no harm."

"I know," Jeff responded. "And it's all right."

Tim smiled quickly and then was gone.

Jeff exhaled deeply. Tim O'Casey was one of the most dichotomous people he had ever known. On one hand, Tim gave the impression of being rather slow and quiet, and yet underneath was an astute mind. He had the uncanny ability to assess situations swiftly and accurately, much like Mike Creed did. O'Casey also lived and breathed to protect Ava Egan, and he made no bones about it.

And Ava was a legend in the IMC, Jeff knew. She had devoted nearly her entire adult life to the Irish cause for independence and had done her share of selfsame protection watches for other people within the organization. Her loyalty and tenacity were unmovable, and yet her sudden coldness toward a betrayal within the ranks was just as unshakable.

Jeff would protect her life as well as he would protect his own, and Ava would do no less for him. The simple facts of the matter calmed Jeff somewhat. He huddled down on the floor again, wrapping the cold blanket around his shoulders.

He dozed fitfully as he waited for Mike Creed to return from his watch, or to hear some word from Tim O'Casey that it was time to leave Scotland.

* * *

TIM HAD TO narrow his eyes when he entered Ava's bedroom just past dawn the day after Christmas. At first it was because of the dim light in the room, but secondly it was the sight he beheld when his eyes adjusted to the duskiness. He had always known in the back of his mind Ava was still in love with David Lancaster, even after all the years of bitterness and professed hatred on her part. When Tim asked her about it sporadically in the past, she had hotly denied it in defense of herself and wouldn't even allow Tim to tease her about it. Now the proof was in the pudding, so to speak, but he was still shocked beyond mere words.

He stepped closer toward the bed, and still Ava did not stir from her slumber. Her head rested on David's shoulder as he lay on his back. He was sound asleep as well, so soundly Tim could barely hear him breathing. In all the years he had known Ava, Tim knew her to be a light sleeper. She had always been awakened by the slightest noise throughout their childhood and into her time with the IMC, but not this morning.

Tim cleared his throat loudly. He hated to wake her, but it was imperative they get moving quickly.

Ava's eyes fluttered. She turned her head from David's shoulder to look at Tim. She seemed startled to see him, but made no move to extract herself from David's arms.

"What are you doing in here?" she asked groggily.

"*Faghail sinn air thoir*," Tim replied simply, switching to Irish just in case David was feigning slumber.

Ava came fully awake. She gently pulled away from David, her eyes lingering on him briefly. With her arms, she turned her lower body so she was sitting up and facing Tim from the bed, the sheet pulled over her upper body. They spoke in Irish.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Bender came snooping," Tim snapped. "We don't know how he tracked us to Daviot, but if he managed to find us, others will. I called Ned, and he said we need to get out of Scotland right away and return to Dublin."

"What happened with Bender?" Ava pressed. "Did Jeff and Mike get a hold of him? Did they question him?"

"Yes, but they weren't able to get anything." Tim hesitated, unwilling to reveal more at the moment. Typically, she prodded him.

"What did they do with him?"

He sighed. "They removed him. That's all I can say right now, if you catch my drift. Ava, come on, we have to pull together and leave as soon as possible."

She bit her lip. She knew they had to leave, but she was torn. David was beginning to stir next to her. There was little time, but somehow she had to explain to David and Chee she was going to disappear again. She had to do it carefully, yet quickly.

"Go and wake Siobhan and Sophie," she said, almost in a whisper. "They have to leave as well, but not with us."

Tim nodded, his eyes resting on David. "*Co dha fein?*"

Ava shrugged. "I'll tell him. Now please go, Tim."

As soon as Tim left the room, David touched Ava's arm. "Tell me what?" he asked groggily. "I heard the tail-end of Tim's rude intrusion, his Irish gab. What's going on?"

She looked down at David from her position on the bed. He appeared ruffled, but happy. There was a slight smile on his lips. She felt a stab of regret as she knew her coming words would destroy his contentment. Yet she had to be honest with him. He had known their interlude in Scotland was not permanent.

"Tim and I have to leave right away," she said bluntly, wincing as his face fell. "Please don't ask me for details, because I can't give them to you. Chee has to leave as well, but she'll go separately with Siobhan and Sophie."

"Just like that?" David asked her, aghast. He pulled himself up to face her.

"If I stay much longer you can visit me in Brixton Prison," Ava replied. "I'm serious."

He leaned closer to her. "But after the night we just spent together . . ."

"What we did last night does not change the fact I'm wanted by the law," she said, trying to be patient. "Time is of the essence right now."

"You'll contact me again?"

"Yes, never fear. I'm not about to forget . . . what we did. Please, David. Help me get up."

He leapt out of the bed, his mind racing with emotions and a myriad of wild thoughts. Just hours ago they were locked in one another's arms. He did not want their time together to come to an end. He wanted to take her and Chee and spirit them to safety under the protective guise of the Lancaster name. He knew he could pull it off, if Ava would only give him half a chance, but he also knew now was not the time to broach the subject with her.

He helped Ava move her legs so they were hanging off the side of the bed. "Please get my pants and shirt," she asked him. "The clothes are in the closet. I saw Bart hang them, if you can imagine." Trying to inject levity into the situation, she said: "Bart would make quite a ladies maid if he wasn't a doctor."

"I always thought Bart would make a good nurse," David tried to sound cheerful as he retrieved her dark trousers from the closet. He returned with the clothes, ready to help her dress. "Shouldn't you ask him for extra medication before you go?"

She glanced at him as he slid the pants up both her legs. "I can get my hands on a wide variety of medications in Ireland," she laughed. "Oh, David, if only I had the time to tell you the little details of my everyday life. I can get anything I want, within reason. Mind you, I don't take advantage of it very often, but I know where to go."

"I should have known," he muttered as she fastened the buttons on her trousers.

"I heard you," she said. "I thought you were being awfully brave."

"What else can I do?" he demanded. "Would you have me beg you to stay, or plead with you to run away with me?"

"Run away to where?" Ava scoffed as he pulled her dark blue sweater over her head. Her voice was muffled when it came forth again: "Where can the son of an Earl run away to, may I ask?"

"I have the money to go anywhere," he informed her as he pulled the sweater all the way over her head, stretching it down her torso. "We can change our names, start a new life together."

"I already have different names, remember?" she mocked him. "Why would I want another? David, money or identity is not the problem, and you know it. Please help me up."

He helped her stand slowly. "I love you Ava," he said simply. "That's all I want you to know right now." He sighed. "I'd wait for hell to freeze over rather than lose you again."

"You won't lose me again," she whispered, reaching out to touch his face. "I'll be in contact, I promise."

Before David could respond, Tim burst back into the room. "Siobhan and Sophie are packing," he informed Ava, giving David a casual but dismissive glance. "I told them to wait until this evening before they leave."

Ava nodded. "Good. I have to talk to Chee, and then we can go."

"Mike and Jeff are waiting for us outside," Tim continued.

"I have to talk to Chee," Ava snapped. "Give me five minutes, will you?"

"I'll get her," Tim said shortly. He left the room.

Ava held onto the bedpost near the foot of the bed, looking at David. He could sense she had a favor to ask him. It surprised him that he understood her silent signal. "The gift Chee gave me," she said. "Will you keep it for me? Just for now? I can't take a lot with me at the moment, but I know you'll keep it safe."

"Of course," David said. He felt so helpless. He wanted to stop her, shake her out of her insanity and her bizarre life. Instead, he kept silent, knowing such actions would only worsen the situation.

"The book is in the drawer in the bedside table," she said. "Please take it back to London with you. As soon as I can arrange to see you again, I'll get it back."

It occurred to David he never asked Ava where she lived. Did she have a conventional flat, or did she continually travel like a vagabond? There were so many questions, but no more time in which to ask them.

She read him as well as he had read her. "I'll answer all of your questions in due course, David," she said. "Never fear. You may hear more than you care to on that auspicious occasion."

They both heard Tim out in the hallway. David went to Ava quickly, grasping her by the shoulders. "Please be careful," he implored, moving his mouth to hers. "I love you."

"I know," she mumbled against his lips.

Tim came into the room, a sleepy-eyed Chee in tow. Chee saw her mother in David's embrace, and her demeanor changed. She smiled tremulously, but then frowned when she noticed her mother was dressed. Having lived through Ava's sudden disappearances many times in the past, Chee knew the signs. Tim coming for her in a hurry should have alerted her.

"You're leaving." Chee cried as she sped across the room to her mother. David released Ava, and she enveloped Chee into her embrace.

"I'm afraid so, love," Ava told her daughter sadly. "You know how much I hate it, but I have to go."

Chee choked on a sob, burying her face in her mother's chest. She despised it when Ava had to leave her, and she wanted to cry and beg her to stay, but she knew it would only upset Ava and postpone the inevitable. Chee was aware Ava was consumed with a large amount of guilt because of her lifestyle, and although Chee played along and pretended not to know what was really going on, she *did* understand and it only served to make her own guilt that much stronger. She always refrained from referring to the truth, as it would horrify Ava to admit it to her, and would only make the situation worse than it was. Chee breathed deep of her mother, trying to get as close to her as possible.

Ava stroked the top of Chee's tousled head, tears streaming down her face. "I'll come to Kylemore in a few weeks, okay?" she said, trying to steady her voice. She gingerly extracted herself from Chee, wiping away the child's tears. "It'll go fast, you'll see."

Tim felt his heart breaking as he watched the desperate scene unfold between mother and daughter. Tim abhorred this bit of their leave-taking, as he always did. He could never quite get used to it, and he turned his head to look away. His own tears threatened to spill, but he had no intention of letting Locksley see such a display.

David felt helpless, yet again, as he saw Chee step back from her mother, trying to be brave. He wanted so much to console his own daughter, but he knew she would reproach him if he tried. They were not familiar enough, and they hadn't spent nearly enough time together. He wanted to shout his frustration out loud, but instead he stepped forward and cleared his throat.

Ava looked at him.

"Why don't you let me take Chee back to Kylemore?" David asked her. "We can catch a plane out of Edinburgh. I'll rent a car at Shannon Airport and then drive Chee and Sophie to the abbey. I can also give Siobhan a lift to Monasterboice."

Ava hesitated. Her first instinct was to deny David his request, but she had come to see him in a different light the last few days. He would not betray them, and she knew he would protect Chee with his own life if need be.

"Oh, please yes, Mummy," Chee spoke up, her voice hopeful. "It would be wonderful if David took us home. Can he, please?"

Ava nodded. "Okay. But all of you need to be especially careful."

"We know, mother," Chee stated, rolling her eyes.

David met Ava's eyes and smiled. "Chee is safe with me. I promise you that."

"Ava," Tim interjected. "We really have to go."

Ava bent down to kiss Chee. "Take care, love. I'll see you in a few weeks, okay?"

Chee hugged Ava tightly once again. With great reluctance, Ava removed herself as Tim came forward to help her. She turned to David and spoke quietly: "Thank you, David. I'll be in touch."

"I'll be waiting," he replied lightly, his eyes trying to soak her in.

After Ava and Tim slipped from the room, Chee ran into David's arms and began to heave great sobs. He tried to quell her anguish, and realized for the first time he was able to console his own daughter in her time of need. His heart swelled with emotion as he clutched her tightly to him. He swore in that moment he would never let Ava and Chee down, no matter what happened. They were his life now, and he would never give them up again. No matter how bizarre or strange their life might be - snatched moments of togetherness, or months on end with no contact - he would treasure each and every second. At least he would be with them, and he was willing to pay any price for all of the stolen minutes, hours and days.

David held Chee tightly, resting his cheek on top of her head gently. He closed his eyes and let his own tears fall. It was a long time before either of them roused from the comfort of their mutual embrace.

CELTIC REMNANTS: Christmas Excerpts from Chapter Twenty-One

*April-June 1993
Ireland & England*

NED FERMOY SAT at the kitchen table in the Claddagh flat. Tim and Ava regarded him warily, if not a little hopefully. It was apparent to Ned that his two best operatives were extremely hostile to one another, aside from the fact they had blazing rows practically every day. The air about them was fraught with tension and laden with anger. It made Ned uncomfortable being in the same room with them, he who was used to commanding an organization with the size and power of the IMC.

It was the first day of April, but there seemed to be no relief in sight for Tim and Ava. The investigation into the death of Clive Bender was still ongoing, and the intensity of it had not abated. Ned knew something had to be done to alleviate the turmoil between Tim and Ava. If he didn't, one day he would walk in and find one of them dead. He was sorely disappointed in both of them.

"I've known the two of you for a number of years," Ned began, letting his eyes rove between them equally. "You have handled some of the toughest assignments within the IMC, and you have accomplished these goals *together*. Please notice I emphasized the word *together*," he continued, his voice becoming crisp. "You have been holed up in worse places than this, although I grant you not for such a length of time. To boot, you're both adults. I don't understand what the hell is going on between the pair of you, but I can tell you I don't like it. Not one bit."

Tim looked irritated, and not the least bit regretful. He was angry, and he didn't care if Ned knew it or not. "Everything was fine until Ava contacted Locksley," Tim said stubbornly. "We were grand until then. The bastard has been nothing but trouble since the get-go, but Ava won't let up on him."

Ava flushed with her own anger and leaned forward to retort to Tim's comment. Ned, however, held up his hand. "Please, Ava, hold that thought," he commanded. "You'll get your say." Then he turned his full attention onto Tim. "So, O'Casey, what do you suggest I do about the situation?"

"I need to get out of here," Tim replied empathetically. "I can't take another minute in this place. Send me anywhere - the Middle East, Switzerland, the States - just get me the hell out of this damned flat."

Ned regarded Tim thoughtfully for a minute. Ned had known the situation would come to this, and he was prepared. Ava looked stricken, despite her anger with O'Casey.

"We can try and get you to a safe house in New York," Ned stated. "We'll need to make the necessary arrangements first, and you must change your appearance a bit. Dye your hair or something. That fuzz on your face will help, too."

Tim looked relieved. "Anything you say, as long as I can leave." He refused to look at Ava.

"Would you like to go, too, Ava?" Ned asked.

She shook her head, her mind already set. "No. I don't want to leave Ireland for a long period of time. It's bad enough I can't see Chee, but at least I'm close by if the opportunity presents itself."

Tim glared at Ava. "You mean if the opportunity to see Locksley presents itself."

She exploded, rising from the table so quickly her chair fell back to the floor. Ned closed his eyes, and decided to let the spat run its course. It might be the last one Tim and Ava would ever have.

"You bastard," she screamed at Tim, her face flushed scarlet and her eyes wet with angry tears. "I'm tired of your whining; I'm tired of your accusations and innuendos, but most of all, I'm sick to death and tired of *you*! I never thought I'd see the day when I hated the very sight of you and your motoring gob, but that very day has arrived. Go to America, and I hope you never come back." She choked on a sob, then whirled around and ran into her room, slamming the door behind her.

Tim looked drained. He glanced at Ned nervously. "I wish it wasn't like this," Tim spoke softly. "I hate it when it's like this between Ava and me. I'm telling you, I've turned into a real gobshite. I can't stand being inactive, day after day. Ava's always been the reader, the one who figures things out, but she's changed since Locksley entered the picture again and I don't like it. It's as if she's lost the fight in her."

"Maybe she has or maybe it's just taken another direction," Ned pointed out. "It's not for me to say. Ava is one of the best, always has been, and my opinion hasn't changed."

Tim nodded. "I know. Ned, she's like a sister to me."

"Perhaps you shouldn't leave things as they are, then," Ned suggested, sensing he was making some ground with O'Casey. "You never know what might happen one day from the next in our line of work."

Tim hesitated. He was a stubborn man, and very proud, but he loved Ava like his own flesh and blood. And he knew Ned was right. Yet Ava was equally as stubborn, and if he were to try and talk to her she would probably fling it back in his face. "I'd just as soon leave it as it is," he finally said. "When do you think I'll be able to go?"

Ned hid his disappointment. "Probably in a day or two. I'll let you know."

"Thanks, Ned."

"Try not to argue with Ava during the time you have left," Ned advised. "It does neither one of you any good."

"I'll try, but I can't control Ava."

"*Stubborn to the end*," Ned thought wryly. Aloud, he said. "That's all I ask. I'll be in touch, Tim."

"I'll be here."

* * *

TIM LEFT THE Claddagh a day later, sooner than Ned planned. Tim was ready, though, and he left without a backward glance. He refused to talk to Ava, and she in turn avoided him like the plague. Tim botched a bleach job on his hair, and ended up having to shave himself bald. Ava knew he would never be recognized. Even though they had pointedly ignored one another for a day, it was also a blessed relief their arguing had stopped.

After Tim had gone, Ava resigned herself to the fact she would be alone in the Claddagh flat. After the last months of acrimony with Tim, it was a welcome isolation for her. She could read in peace, and she could continue studying the IMC files without caustic and drunken remarks from him. She thought she would be happy, but there was a hollow, empty feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Ned stayed behind at the flat for a short while after Tim left. O'Casey was in good hands with a fellow IMC member who was used to going back and forth to America. Ned was mainly concerned about Ava. She seemed unusually quiet and introspective, so he joined her for a cup of coffee in the kitchen before he left.

"Will you be all right alone?" he asked her as they sipped their coffee, regarding one another.

"I'll be fine," she insisted. "Anything is better than the incessant arguing with Tim. Maybe this trip to America will restore his former humor."

Ned laughed. "Tim's former humor wasn't too uplifting, either, as I recall."

She had to smile. "He's always been an old bear, but being stuck inside made it seem worse."

"True. I'm hoping when this Bender thing blows over, Tim can return and the two of you can continue on as before."

"And when will *that* be?" she asked him.

Ned shrugged. "I don't think much longer. It's not as if Bender was some rich and important man. He was a private dick with a gambling problem. The investigation will remain open, but I'm sure the intensity of it will die down."

"And in the meantime?" she wanted to know, her tone cryptic.

"You'll stay here and reap the benefits of the administration files," he teased her.

"When can I see my daughter?"

Ned was quiet for a minute, which alerted Ava. She was still, waiting for him to speak.

"The abbey is being watched," he finally replied, scratching the side of his face, avoiding her eyes. "I suppose the police assume you'll try to get to Chee somehow, or have her sent to you, so they are watching Kylemore. There's no getting around it for the moment, I'm afraid."

"Damn," Ava swore. "Here I sit, in the same country as my only child, and I can't even see her, or pick up the phone to call her."

"I know, Ava," Ned tried to soothe her. "It can't be helped right now. We simply can't take any chances."

She looked away from Ned, the e-mail she sent to David flashing in her memory. It had been a stupid thing to do, and she wondered if she should tell Ned about it. Common sense said she should, but her heart stubbornly refused. She felt it was her private affair. Ned and the IMC didn't have to know every bloody detail. She decided not to tell him.

"I must have been born with the patience of a saint," she muttered, trying to adopt a light-hearted tone. "How else could I possibly cope with all of this?"

Ned looked at her carefully, smiling at her remark. He knew Ava Egan, and he could tell when she was holding something back, or trying to flash attention off herself and the subject at hand. He was tempted to pursue his hunch, but decided against it. He would wait and watch, like always. It had served him well over the years, and with the exception of Jeff

Mullen's defection, it had never failed him. Whatever Ava was hiding would come to light sooner or later.

Ned stood up from the table. "I'll leave you to the files, then. How much have you managed to get through?"

"The master list and the weapons inventory," Ava replied, relieved she seemed to have thrown Ned.

"I'll be back in a few days. I have to make a trip to London tomorrow, but I should return fairly quickly. Do you need anything before I go?"

"No. I'm fine." She looked puzzled. "Are you sure it's safe for you to go into England?"

Ned grinned. "I'm not wanted by the law like you and Tim at the moment. You see, that's one of the benefits to being behind the lines, so to speak. The police can't really tie me to anything. I'm not involved out in the field in the physical sense, so they have nothing on me."

"How would it be?" she asked sarcastically.

"Very nice indeed," he winked at her with humor.

"Why do you have to go to England?" she continued, curious.

"I'm meeting with a possible supporter to our cause. Don't worry, it's all very up and up. I'm hoping they'll donate arms or money. I'll take either or both."

"Where in England?"

Ned arched an eyebrow at her, surprised by her questions. "London," he said simply, although Ava heard the finality of his tone. He'd answered enough questions.

"Be safe," she said lightly. "I'll see you when you get back. I'm sure I'll be right where you left me, parked at the table going through files."

Ned smiled at her. Then he turned and left the room.

Ava sighed deeply, and then exhaled with a groan. She hadn't displayed her true feelings in front of Ned - what good would it do? She was so tired of being cloistered over the Claddagh and ready to go stark, raving mad. She knew she had more emotional control than Tim in the same situation, and was grateful for her own perseverance. Where would she be without it?

She rose from the kitchen table and stretched briefly. She was hungry for a change and decided to make herself a sandwich before burying herself into the IMC administrative files again. Her mind wandered to David, but she willed herself to stop. What purpose would it serve to think about him, to wonder what he was doing at this exact moment?

Then Ava felt a flash of guilt assail her. She should be thinking about her daughter instead of David. Losing her appetite all of a sudden, she sat back down at the kitchen table and pulled out the IMC files. Nothing erased and replaced self-torture better than a good run-through of perfectly boring clinical reports which told her what she already knew: her life was mapped out for her now, and there was no going back.

Not even for David.

* * *

DAVID CALLED JADE at home the morning after the Scotland Yard visit. He told her quite plainly he had caught cold, and wouldn't be in for a few days. He gave her simple

instructions to keep the work flowing smoothly, as if she didn't already know the routine by now.

He thought he would have felt better after a good night's rest, but he was still emotionally drained. He had fallen asleep on the sofa in front of the fire the previous night, and Bart left him there, covered with a blanket. Sometime during the course of the evening, David had risen and sought his bed, where he slept several hours more. He could not account for the empty, almost shaky feeling he had inside.

Shortly after calling Jade, David retreated to his study with a large cup of coffee. The hearth was ash, but he was in no mood to begin another fire. Instead, he drew the curtains open to let in the gray light. It was raining again, coming down in a steady drizzle. He returned to the sofa and sat down, draining his coffee in several swallows. All he really wanted to do was go back to bed, but he fought the urge. He would lie on the sofa, and try to regain some semblance of normalcy. He was half-ashamed of his weakness, and tried to rationalize he was simply under a great deal of stress, anticipating what was going to happen next. How could Ava have lived for years with the daily uncertainty? His mind was a jumbled mess. He knew he'd better sort it out quick.

It was early yet, just half past six o'clock. David did not expect Mrs. Kindersley for another hour. That was just enough time to lay prone on the sofa and think of nothing; to *be nothing*. But it was impossible. No matter what he did - or attempted to do - Ava came rushing into his head in one form or another. It consumed him with guilt as he felt he should also be thinking of Chee and what she must be going through, but he couldn't help himself.

The knock on the front door annoyed David. His first thought was Mrs. Kindersley had forgotten her key. Then he assumed it was Scotland Yard back again, and he felt his blood begin to boil. Leaping off the sofa, he strode out into the entryway of his townhouse and flung open the front doors.

There was a man standing outside, and for a brief second David thought he must be related to Tim O'Casey. The two did not necessarily resemble one another facially, but the man standing at his front door was tall and bulky like O'Casey except for the red hair and hard blue eyes. His nose was bulbous and padded, indicating it had once been broken. He regarded David coolly, almost arrogantly. David was immediately on the defensive.

"Can I help you?" David asked, not bothering to hide the annoyance in his voice.

"Maybe," the man answered, and David was instantly alerted to the Irish accent. His demeanor changed, and he became slightly less irritated.

"Are you David Lancaster?" The man asked. "Also known as Locksley?"

"Who are you?" David responded with his own question.

The man was silent for a moment, regarding David. Then he leaned closer and spoke softly: "I'm a friend of a friend."

"Indeed." David scoffed, suspicious at once. "The friend of a friend, really? Or are you on special assignment for the Yard?"

The man smiled, seemingly not offended. "Not quite. I'm here from Dublin for a visit. I was wondering if we might have a word? Inside, perhaps?"

David tried to think fast. The man was either from Dublin and in Ava's camp, or it was a pathetic attempt by Scotland Yard to entrap him. Which was it?

"Come in," he finally said. "But this will have to be quick. I'm rather busy today."

The man looked over his shoulder toward the street, and then stepped into the townhouse.

David shut the door. He whirled to face the red-haired man. "All right, please tell me who you *really* are and what you want," he snapped.

The man became equally blunt. "My name is Ned, and I come from Dublin. I'm here to take you to someone you know rather well, or *think* you know. Are you game? Will you trust me?"

"Take me to whom?" David prodded, although he already knew the answer.

"Ava," Ned said simply. "You're going to have to trust me."

David was dumfounded. His inner instinct told him to trust no one. But the other part of him, the part which was desperate to hear anything about Ava, proved to be the stronger of the two.

"I trust you," David said. "Did Ava send you?"

Ned shook his head. "No. You're going to be quite a surprise for her."

David was stunned. "You mean, she has no idea?"

"None. All the better though," Ned continued. "She needs something for her spirits, and I think you'll be just the ticket."

"She's not ill, is she?"

"No. Just going a bit stir-crazy. Look, you'll see her soon enough, and then you can ask her all the questions you like. I'm afraid I can't let you take very much with you, perhaps a small overnight case."

"How long will I be gone?" David wanted to know, suddenly concerned. "I've had Scotland Yard at my office, and God only knows if they're watching my house. Won't they notice if I leave for any length of time?"

Ned nodded. "I'm aware of what goes on with you Locksley, never fear. I have my own ways of getting information about the activities of the Yard, and it's probably more reliable than their own inside network. They are likely keeping their ears open, but they don't really think you have anything to do with a bunch of Irish terrorists. It must be the mysterious class system you belong to, and that I have yet to understand."

"I'm sure," David said dryly.

"You'll only be gone a day or two," Ned responded to his first question. "If anyone asks, you were here all the time and ill with the flu."

David had to laugh. "I called my secretary this morning, and told her I was ill. I'd say that was good timing, although my ailment was solely the result of a visit from the Yard yesterday."

"You'll have to tell me about it on the way over," Ned said. "You really need to get ready now."

"My housekeeper is due to arrive shortly," David spoke up. "What shall I tell her?"

"Call her and tell her to take a few days off."

David was unsure. "I've never done that before. She might think something is amiss."

"Call her anyway. Look, do you want to go with me or not?"

He could sense Ned Fermoy was fast losing patience. "I can be ready in ten minutes," David replied without hesitation. He wasn't about to let an opportunity to see Ava slip through his fingers again.

CELTIC REMNANTS:
Excerpt from Chapter Twenty-Four

July 1993
London, England

WILLIAM FORAKER CLOSED his eyes tightly, trying to block out shooting streaks of pain that traveled through his fingers and up to his hands and arms. Each nail on each finger had been meticulously sliced up the middle and removed with agonizing, brutal slowness. Every time a nail was yanked from him, he could hear its clipping tap on the concrete floor underneath him. One by one, they were removed. Foraker thought he would go blind from the pain.

"Are you ready to talk yet?" A man's voice asked him. Foraker looked through his sweat-stained eyes to see the source of the voice. It was a man, a tall one, his face covered with a black ski mask. Slits for the eyes and mouth gave the man a frightening appearance. He was also wearing green army fatigues, with the sleeves rolled to the elbow.

In a haze, Foraker thought it odd the man was wearing a ski mask in the heat of July. Then he understood he was facing a terrorist, an Irish one by the sound of the brogue, and that his life was likely over this day.

"I don't know what you want," Foraker croaked.

"Who sent you to kill the nun at Kylemore Abbey?" the man barked.

"What nun? And where the hell is Kylemore Abbey?" Foraker tried to answer the man strongly, but instead his voice came in a whimpering moan.

The man nodded to someone standing behind Foraker. A slight figure, dressed the same as the man and with the same style of ski mask, came around to stand in front of Foraker. The eyes were cold and unmoving. Foraker sensed it was a woman. The build was akin to a female, and the small blue-veined hands gave her away as well. There was no pity or compassion in her eyes, so Foraker expected no quarter.

The woman bent over slightly and stuck the hot end of a burning cigarette into the raw flesh of Foraker's nail bed. He screamed. The pain was worse than the nails coming off. He could smell his own burning flesh as the woman ground the hot ash into his open wound.

She finally stopped as Foraker let out a ragged breath. "Answer the fucking question, you bastard," she spat at him.

Foraker looked up at the woman again, and the man who stood behind her, both like unmoving stone. "*How did these two find out who I am, and what I did?*" Foraker wondered vaguely to himself. "*Then again, if they are the Irish variety of terrorist anything is possible.*"

"Who sent you to Kylemore Abbey to kill the nun?" the man in the ski mask asked again.

Foraker narrowed his eyes, but his vision was blurred from the pain. He remained silent.

The tall man picked up a hammer from the floor and went to stand behind Foraker. The woman remained in front of him, her eyes impenetrable behind the ski mask. Then she started talking. "My friend here doesn't take kindly to liars. Years ago, he perfected the technique of hitting a man square on the shoulder with a hammer. It hurts like hell, yes, but

also dislocates the shoulder without breaking any bones. I think it's time we applied that bit of persuasion on you, and then we'll throw your kicking but useless body into the Thames."

Foraker tensed, but refused to speak.

The woman looked over Foraker's head to the man behind him. She nodded. In the spiral of one second, the hammer slammed down on Foraker's right shoulder. He screamed in pain. He hung his head down as his scream turned to a moan. "Oh God, please stop," he cried. "Please!"

"Then quit whining like a plonker and spill your tea," the man behind him ground out angrily.

The woman spoke again. "Don't force us to go after your family, you dumb shyte. All we have to do is make one phone call, and your stupid wife and children will be bones in the back yard."

Foraker swallowed. He thought back to that morning when he left home. His wife Jane had kissed him goodbye, and his twin son's Alex and Andrew hugged his legs. They were only six years old, and had no clue what "Daddy" did for a living. Not that they would understand anyway. At the moment, Foraker wondered if he would ever see his little mites again. The entire day had started so typically, except for when he parked his car in back of Branbury's Pastry Shop on Aldersgate Street to get his daily blueberry tart. Despite his years of training to vary daily routines for safety, he hadn't been able to break his penchant Branbury tarts. It was turning out to be the worst mistake he ever made.

He was knocked over the head from behind when he returned to his car. He remembered feeling the pain. Then his senses went numb, and his vision turned black. The last thing he recalled was the skidding sound of his tart hitting the ground as it fell from his hand. Foraker regained consciousness with his body strapped to a chair. It was every agent's worst nightmare. He was being tortured for information, and would likely die whether he gave over what he knew or not.

"Who sent you to Kylesmore Abbey to kill the nun?" the man repeated a third time.

Foraker tried to keep his secrets for one more round. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he sputtered. "But please, don't hurt my family."

The woman slapped Foraker hard across the face. "You will rot in hell," she snarled, "but not before your wife is raped and dismembered, and your children burned alive."

Foraker sobbed, the wetness of his tears burning the open wounds on his face. Still, he remained silent. Then he heard the sound of a switchblade knife snapping open. He stopped breathing, listening for more sounds but blind to sight. Then he felt the tip of the knife touching his ear lobe. In one violent motion, the flesh was slashed from his body.

"Talk, you bastard!" the woman fairly screamed. "Or I'll cut your bollocks off next!"

Foraker began choking on his own saliva. He bent over as far as he could to vomit on the floor. He was on the verge of breaking. Nothing was worth the excruciating pain, and certainly not worth threats to his family. And none of it was worth protecting Edward Lancaster.

"I'll talk," Foraker said weakly. "Please, stop, and I'll tell you what you want to know."

He heard the knife hit the floor, and then there was a moment of silence. He looked up and saw the two people regarding him, waiting.

He spoke quickly. "I work for MPS, but the Earl Lancaster - Edward Lancaster - sent me to Kylemore Abbey."

The woman drew in her breath sharply but said nothing. However, the man had plenty of questions.

"Why did Lancaster send you to kill the nun?"

Foraker moistened his dried and cracked lips. "The nun was a relation to another woman, someone the Earl's son once had an affair with. The Earl wanted to send a message to this woman by killing her sister."

"What message?" the man persisted.

"It was supposed to be a warning, to steer her away from the Earl's son Locksley." Foraker hung his head. Now that he was telling the truth, he felt drained. He was also relieved, as if he were unburdening his soul.

"What other errands did the Earl send you on?" the lady snapped, rounding on Foraker as he looked at her from the chair. He could sense her rage.

"The nun was the worst," Foraker whispered. "I actually killed a living person. I've been ill ever since."

"When did you start working for the Earl?" the man barked.

Foraker shook his head, moaning as he did so. "Years ago. I was part of his brigade in Belfast, and when I joined the Metropolitan Police he kept after me to do him favors. He had me watch his son, so I placed him under surveillance. Another time he had me pay off the father of a girl his other son Peter mistreated. I swear to you, I've never killed a person until he sent me after the nun. I've been living with my own shame, the horror . . ."

"I'm not interested in hearing your problems," the woman shouted. "You did what you did, and that's the end of it. If you want to save your own skin, you'll cooperate with us *here and now*."

"What do you want me to do?" Foraker asked, frightened they would begin to torture him again.

"You're to get the Earl to a place we designate," the woman said, her voice suddenly steely calm. "You will not be released until this is accomplished. Then you can go to the devil for all I care. You'll end up in hell for killing the nun anyway."

The man in the ski mask had been silent for some time, but now he spoke. "Can you get the Earl to meet you somewhere?"

"I'm reasonably sure," Foraker replied, switching his swollen eyes to the man.

"The sooner you do as we say, the sooner you will be released with your life," the woman spoke once more.

"Tell me when, and I'll do it," Foraker exclaimed.

The woman nodded her head at the man. "Give him the details. I have to step out for a moment." She turned and walked away from them, disappearing behind several large boxes stacked in a corner of the warehouse.

The man started to circle Foraker, walking slowly. "You're going to call the Earl," he said carefully. "Tell him to meet you at Hyde Park, near Serpentine Lake. You have an emergency, tell him, and it has to do with the incident with the nun. You will place the call *tonight*, and the Earl had better show up *tonight*. Give him no time to get out of it. He has to meet you *tonight* in Hyde Park. Do you understand?"

Foraker nodded. "Yes. Will I actually meet with him?"

"Shut your gob and listen," the man snapped. "You will remain here. When the meeting is kept and all goes as planned, you will be released. But remember this," the man bent down so that his face was half an inch from Foraker's. "You will be watched. You won't know when, or for how long. If one word of this leaks anywhere - and I mean, *anywhere* - you will be taken care of, as will your family."

"I understand," Foraker muttered, averting his eyes.

* * *

REMOVING HER SKI mask, Ava was violently ill behind the boxes in the warehouse. She vomited bile as she had not eaten in three days. The nausea had grown worse the longer she interrogated Foraker. She held out her arm, leaning against one of the old musty boxes, taking deep breaths but trying to remain quiet. The last several days had been a terrible ordeal, and the strain was finally eating away at her nerves. This in itself was rare for Ava, and she cursed her weakness. There was a job to be done, and she had to stay strong.

With the help of several English informants, including a secretary working in the Scotland Yard office, the IMC deduced William Foraker was the agent who killed Sophie. It had taken three weeks to obtain the information, but once in hand Ava proceeded with barely controlled anticipation. The man had to suffer, and at worst die, but if there was a root cause to his deed she had to know it as well. The knowledge David's father had sent Foraker to kill Sophie sickened Ava. She knew the Earl was cold and almost subhuman, but she never imagined he would resort to ordering the cold-blooded murder of a nun, her sister.

She stood straight, grateful her nausea had abated. Thank God Tim was back. He had been her strength the last few weeks. He returned from his trip to America a more somber man, but still very much her friend and supporter. He profusely apologized to her for the behavior he displayed before his departure (*was it only three months ago?*), and he was devastated by the news of Sophie's murder. Tim had been filled with the same cold rage that consumed Ava because he viewed Sophie as part of his own family. Sophie Egan had to be revenged, although Ava was sure Tim hadn't counted on the Earl being the culprit any more than she had.

Placing the ski mask back around her head and tucking her hair up inside, Ava stepped out from behind the boxes and returned to Tim and Foraker, still in debate. Several other members of the IMC were now in the warehouse area. They stood a short distance from the tableau, watching and waiting for instructions.

She walked to Tim, pulling gently at his shoulder so that he leaned his head down. "Tell the lads to wash him up and let him go to the privy. Then he needs to make that telephone call."

Tim nodded, and then looked at Foraker. "You'll be allowed to clean up and go to the loo. Then you'll call the Earl. The rest is up to you."

Foraker glanced from Tim to Ava, and then whispered: "I'll do whatever you say. Please just let me live."

"As I said, the rest is up to you," Tim repeated simply.

CELTIC REMNANTS**Excerpt from Chapter Twenty-Five***July 1993**Amber Court, Oxfordshire*

DAVID AND CHEE spent the rest of the evening in the company of Maura Lancaster. David dismissed William for the night so he and Chee could be alone with his grandmother. David brewed the tea himself and served for the three of them.

Maura was holding up remarkably well considering it was the day of her only son's funeral. Edward's treatment of her had left a deep chasm in the feelings she had for him. He had barely acknowledged her for years. Maura realistically felt nothing in her life would change whether Edward was alive or not. Yet he was her son - her flesh and blood. The tumult of emotions left her troubled.

After a long tea service in which the threesome consumed two pots of tea and several scones, Maura dozed in her wheelchair while David and Chee started to talk softly. Fading light from the window cast murky shadows in the room, but Chee was not afraid of them. She felt comforted somehow, and very safe.

They became silent after a short time, each lulled by the hot tea and scones. He leaned his head back in the chair next to Maura, closing his eyes. Chee stretched out on the small settee in front of the fireplace, where she stared into the cold depths of the dry hearth. It was too warm for a fire, but she could imagine what it would look like in the winter, during Christmas. It would be soothing and inviting, and probably decorated for the season. She would like nothing better than to spend Christmas at Amber Court with David and Maura, even though it was five months away. The only missing element was Ava.

There was not a sound in Maura's sitting room, but Chee felt her spine stiffen all the same. She sat up and looked over her shoulder toward the doorway. Her heart skipped a beat. Ava stood there. She looked healthy and rested, swathed in dark clothes. She was smiling at her daughter.

Mindful of Maura, Chee glanced at the older woman still asleep in her wheelchair. Then she sped across the room to Ava. She wrapped her arms around her mother tightly and started to cry.

"*Sshhh*," Ava whispered in her ear. "We don't want to rouse David, do we? Is that his grandmother in the wheelchair?"

"Yes."

"We don't want to rouse her, either."

Chee pulled back from her mother so she could see her face. "But Maura is okay, Mummy. She knows a lot, and she keeps secrets so well. Where have you been? I was so worried, and not a word from you."

Ava touched her daughter's face, delighted to be seeing her after so long. She had grown in just a few months, and was even taller than she remembered. "I've been working, darling," Ava said lightly. "Tim returned from his trip to America, and we've been traveling around quite a bit since. This is the first chance I've had to come and see you."

Chee hugged her mother again. "I'm just glad you're here," she exclaimed. "How long can you stay?"

"You mean *we*," Ava said. "I've come for you, lass."

What Chee had been dreading for weeks was finally becoming a reality. She hid in her mother's arms, not daring to show her face which she knew revealed her feelings, her unwillingness to leave. Ava could sense her daughter's discomfort. Slowly, she held Chee away so she could look into her face. It was then David opened his eyes and saw both of them standing in the doorway. He felt an elation course through his body at the sight of Ava. He could barely contain himself as he alighted from the chair and hurried over to them.

Ava held out her arm and took both David and Chee in her embrace. She gripped them both tightly, wanting to hang on for as long as possible. It was then she fully realized Chee's unease at the mention of leaving with her. Forcing herself to break free of the embrace, she looked to her daughter's face again.

"You don't want to leave with me, do you?" Ava asked, flashing her eyes at David as she spoke.

"I didn't say that," Chee protested.

"Do I get my own greeting, Ava Egan?" David spoke up, taking Ava's arm and pulling her close to him. He kissed her on the mouth, not gently but fiercely, and she could not help but respond to him. For one brief moment she forgot Chee was watching them, and fully returned David's kiss.

Finally, he mumbled against her lips. "I'm glad you're here and I'm glad you're safe."

"I'm sorry to hear about your father," Ava said quietly. "I came as soon as I heard."

"The Earl was murdered," Chee said bluntly. "But the police don't know who did it."

"Hopefully they'll find out," Ava replied, locking eyes with her daughter. "Are you ready to leave with me, love?"

Chee hesitated again, so David broke in. "Do you have to be in such a rush, Ava? Can't you stay for a little while?"

"No," she shook her head. Her eyes narrowed as she regarded David and Chee. "The two of you are a couple of conspirators. I know something is on between you, and I'd like to know what it is. What are you trying to hide from me?"

In the candid style she inherited from her mother, Chee blurted out: "I know David is my father for real, Mummy. I sort of guessed, and grandmother Maura knew the minute she saw me."

Both David and Chee expected Ava's anger, but she surprised them. She took in the words rather calmly, her hands behind her back. David thought she looked thinner, but it was hard to tell because of the dark clothes adorning her body. "How can I be upset?" Ava finally said. She turned to gaze at Chee. "You look so much like David, and the rest of the Lancaster's. Maura sounds like a very observant lady. Funny I should have given you her name when you were born. I never met her."

"You're not upset?" Chee asked, still not convinced.

"No, actually I'm relieved," Ava said, smiling at them. "Now you know the truth Chee, once and for all. I'm sorry I kept it from you all these years, and I'm sorry I denied you a relationship with David for so long. Will you ever forgive me?"

Chee went into her mother's arms. Ava listened as her daughter spoke. "I know him now," she quavered. "That's what matters. I have a lot of time to make up for, but I would like to try."

"Which leads me to my first question: you don't want to leave with me, do you?"

Chee looked up at her mother, guilt written on her face. "I want to stay with David for awhile, but I don't want you to be hurt or sad. David will keep me safe, Mummy, and you can come here or to London anytime. Did you know David is now the Earl Lancaster, and that he is very rich? He said he'd make me his heir."

Ava glanced at David, but he was unable to read the emotion in her eyes.

"I'd like to make Chee my legal heir," David spoke up. "If it's agreeable with you, Ava."

"How could it not be?" she countered. "Why would I deny my daughter a safe home, and a secure future?"

"You wouldn't."

"Exactly."

"But Mummy," Chee cried. "You always said when you came to get me, David was not to stop you. If you want me to, I'll leave with you tonight. I'll go wherever you want me to. I just don't want you to be sad or hurt."

Ava turned away from her daughter, trying to hide the tears in her eyes. When Chee was born, Ava had thought the experience the pinnacle of unconditional love. Nothing could or would replace such a feeling, she thought at the time, but she was wrong. Chee would be consumed by guilt if she stayed with David, but miserable and unhappy if she left with Ava. The poor child had created her own hell in her mind, and there was nothing Ava could do or say to alleviate her dilemma. Chee had been through so much in her short life, and Ava knew it wasn't fair to make her existence even more insecure.

She turned back to her daughter. "Stay with David if that's what you want," she said simply. "I just want you to be happy."

Still, Chee was uncertain. "But, are you sure? Will you still come and see me?"

Ava laughed. "Of course I will, silly lass."

"But when?"

Ava shrugged, a veil suddenly shading her facial expression. "Like it was before - when I can."

Chee chewed her lip in vexation. David longed to comfort her, but he didn't dare. The room was too highly charged with her emotions. Then Chee started to cry. "But that's what I hate, never knowing. I'll always wonder if someone has killed you, like they did Aunt Sophie, from one minute to the next."

Ava went to her daughter, and led her to a nearby chair, making her sit down. Ava's voice became somber, but the concern she felt for Chee was still evident. "Listen to me, darling. I've made my own choices, and I can't change them. Not now, and you know why. I love you very dearly, and I love David your father. But I also hate as much as I love, and I abhor what has happened to the Irish people, and how they have been prosecuted and massacred by the British for centuries. It's not just because of the plight of the Irish, it's also because of what was done to the Egan's and O'Casey's. I've seen too many people I love die: my parents, my brother and sister, Tim's father, sister and mother. You see, I could never be happy if I let it all go now. It wouldn't change a thing. I could stop tomorrow, and start living a normal life with you and David." Ava paused, taking a deep breath. "But my heart would never be content. I would always wonder if I had done one more thing for the Irish, if I had kept on my course, could I have made a difference? I can't live with the uncertainty, Chee, I just *can't*. In this one case, my hatred and desire are blind to all else. I don't hold you

to that. You have your own life to live and your own choices to make, just as David does." She stressed her final words: "Just as I do."

Chee regarded her mother silently for a moment, her face a mask of emotions. She reminded David so much of Ava at the moment. He wondered if she had fully understood what Ava told her. David had the need to speak with Ava privately. He wanted to make it clear he had nothing whatsoever to do with Chee's decision, lest she think he planned the scenario.

David spoke up. "Chee, love, will you let Ava and I step out for a moment alone? Can you sit by grandmother Maura just for a bit?"

Chee looked relieved. She glanced at Ava as if to seek her approval. Ava nodded. Chee hurried over to the still-sleeping Maura and took the chair next to her, but her eyes remained on her parents.

David gently led Ava by the elbow to the foyer of Maura's rooms, where they would be assured of privacy without being overheard. As they came to a stop, Ava reached out and laid her head on his shoulder. He instinctively put his arms around her.

"I've missed you," she whispered, her voice breaking. "I know you don't believe me, but I truly missed you and Chee. I wanted so much to come back sooner, spend some time together as a family whether Chee realizes it or not. Now I see she has discovered the truth, and she's happy about it."

"I didn't try to sway her in either direction, Ava," David said, speaking over her head as she remained in his arms. "I think Chee suspected the truth all along, and Maura merely confirmed it for her."

Ava laughed through her tears. "I'm sure your grandmother figures she had nothing to lose. She was probably anxious for Chee to know the truth."

"She was," he agreed. "And Chee took to Maura instantly, as she did to my housekeeper in London, Mrs. Kindersley. I never once tried to talk Chee into living with me, never even hinted at it. She was the one who started talking about it, and how guilty she would feel when she had to tell you."

"I know," she told him, pulling away so she could look at him. "I can see it, David. She's happy. What have I ever offered her but instability? There were times when I couldn't see her for months on end. What the hell kind of life is that? She was safe, which was my primary concern. I suppose my main priority should have been to be a better mother, but life kept interfering and the years slipped away . . ."

He was wrenched by the genuine grief he saw in her eyes. "Chee loves you," he said strongly. "Ava, you have been a wonderful mother, and you will continue to be so."

She was resigned, but still sad. "Chee will live with you, and I won't fight it. And yes, I understand you had nothing to do with her decision. Chee is right, you know. I'm in London more than I'm in Ireland, and perhaps I'll be able to see her more often now that she won't be shut away at Kylemore Abbey."

David stared at Ava. She was struck by the intensity of his gaze. "What is it?" she asked. "What are you thinking?"

"Marry me," he blurted out, forging ahead even though he knew what her answer would be. "Leave what you're doing and marry me. We can have a wonderful and full life. With the money I now have at my disposal, we can change your identity and you can live your life as my wife."

She laughed shakily, stepping away from him. She wiped the tears from her cheeks, sniffing. "You tempt me sorely," she finally said. Her voice was soon steady again, and he braced himself for her words. "If only it were that easy." She shook her head, and then whispered: "I can't."

He swallowed. "I know, but I had to ask."

"And I had to answer. Besides," she added, trying to lighten his mood, "can you see me as the Countess Lancaster? Little Ava Egan from a shanty in Northern Ireland, the wife of an Earl? Your social dizzies would have a field day. They would be horrified."

"I don't give a damn."

"I know you don't, not anymore. That's what makes it even harder."

David and Ava stared at one another for a long time, each of them drinking in the sight of the other. He felt as if his heart was breaking, and she felt much the same. Deep down she also knew he would never stop wanting her to leave her life as it was, and he would never cease to desire her. And Chee would always feel guilty about the decision she made today, no matter what happened. And there was nothing Ava could do to alleviate their suffering. Then she furrowed her brow.

Or was there?

"What are you thinking now?" David asked her. "You look very serious all of a sudden."

"I'm thinking we should get back to Chee."

He felt the dread of finality. "I love you very much, Ava Egan. I want you to know my offer will always be open. You have been my wife in my heart from the minute I laid eyes on you."

She felt a sob catching in her throat. She reached out and caressed his cheek. He leaned into her and heard her whisper: "You are the only man I have ever loved, David. Please never forget it."

He nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He looked down at his feet. Ava took him by the hand to lead him back into the sitting room.

Chee saw her parents as soon as they reentered, and hurried across the carpet to greet them. They enveloped her into their arms, and for a brief few moments they stood as one family, united in their desperate love and yet torn apart by it as well.

This was the sight which met Maura Lancaster's eyes when she opened them. At first she thought she was dreaming, but then as her eyes focused she realized she was seeing David with his daughter and Ava Egan for the first time. This was the woman who had her grandson's heart, who always had it. Maura remained quiet and still, not wanting to intrude upon their private moment, but her curiosity about Ava led her to regard the woman closely.

She was small and dark, with the intense air of Chee about her. Or was it Chee who had the air of Ava? At the same time, Chee was so obviously a Lancaster. The child possessed the absolute best of both her parents. The thought struck Maura with a surge of alacrity. The threesome was sad and clinging to one another. It did not bode well. Chee was either leaving with her mother - which Maura prayed was not the case - or Ava was leaving without both Chee and David. Maura suspected the latter.

Ava opened her eyes, still in the midst of her embrace with Chee and David, her gaze meeting the clear and open directness of Maura Lancaster. Ava smiled at the older woman. She felt as if she knew her, oddly enough, and the woman smiled back. *"If only I had the time*

to get to know Maura," Ava thought. *"I'm missing so damned much, but I have no other choice."*

David noticed the direction of Ava's eyes, and he looked to his grandmother. She smiled peacefully, taking in the sight. He returned her smile and winked.

Chee was the first to break the familial embrace. She laughed when she saw Maura was awake. She grabbed Ava by the hand. "Since you're here and grandmother is awake, you *have* to meet her," Chee insisted. "Please, Mummy. She won't tell anyone."

"How can I refuse?" Ava asked. As Chee led her away, she glanced back at David and raised her eyebrows at him.

Maura was already holding out her gnarled hands to Ava, the ever-present notepad in her lap. *"I have waited to meet you for a long time,"* Maura wrote. *"You're beautiful, Ava. David has told me so much about you."*

"As he has told me about you," Ava murmured. "I'm finally glad to meet you. It's very nice putting a real face to the name."

Maura took the pad and wrote: *"And I take it you will soon be leaving us."*

"I must," Ava responded simply.

Maura nodded, writing again: *"I think I understand, my dear. God be with you."*

"And with you," Ava said, and both women smiled.

Ava turned to Chee. "I have to leave, darling. I've stayed longer than I should have."

Chee's face fell. "You can't stay the night at least?"

Ava shook her head. "I'm afraid not. Tim is waiting for me on the edge of the estate. We have a trip to take, and we'll be gone just a few weeks. When we're done, I can come back. By that time, you should be all ready for school."

"David said he can send me to a wonderful school in London," Chee replied, excited by the mention of it. "I'd rather live here and go to school in Amberwood Village, but David's work is in London so I have to live there."

"Only the best for my girl," David said, laughing at Chee's enthusiasm.

Ava hugged Chee to her. "Take care, Shenachie Maura. I'll see you before you know it."

"Please be careful, Mummy," Chee pleaded.

"As always."

Ava gazed at David, her smile turning sad. "Goodbye, my love," she said. Then she left the room quickly, not looking back.

Maura could see the tears coming to Chee, and she held out her arms to the child. Chee settled herself at Maura's feet, sobbing softly as the older woman scribbled a note: *"You heard your mother. She'll be back before you know it."*

"But I worry so much," Chee fretted. "The kind of stuff she does . . . I mean, she never knows from one day to the next what will happen. Each day could be her last."

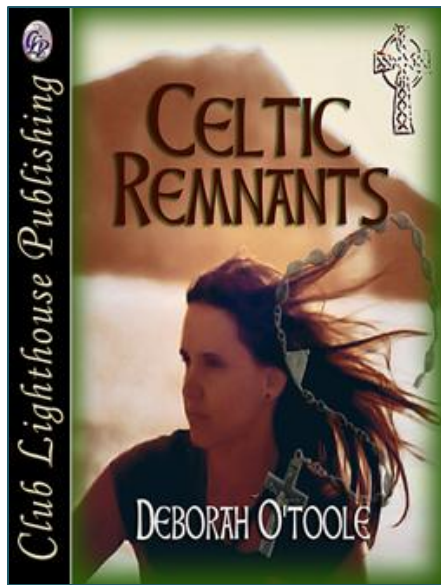
"Ava is too smart for that," David said, his eyes still on the doorway from where Ava had vanished. "She knows how to take care of herself, as does Tim O'Casey."

Chee looked at her father. "Didn't the Earl know how to take care of himself, too?"

The sitting room fell silent.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Deborah O'Toole is the author of *Celtic Remnants*, *The Crypt Artist*, *Glinhaven*, *In the Shadow of the King* and *Mind Sweeper*.

In addition, she writes darkly abstract poetry (*Torn Bits & Pieces*) and short-story juvenile fiction (*Short Tales Collection*), and is the author of a series of historical essays, articles and book reviews for *Ambermont Magazine* and *Class Notes*.

Writing as Deidre Dalton, Deborah is author of the "Collective Obsessions Saga," which chronicles the extraordinary loves and dark obsessions between two families sweeping a span of more than 150 years, all set against the backdrop of a magnificent seaside mansion in Maine. Books in the eight-part family saga include *The Advent*, *Quixotic Crossings*, *The Twain Shall Meet*, *Enthrallment*, *The Keeper's Journal*, *Hearts Desires*, *The Twilight* and *Megan's Legacy*. The novels were released by Club Lighthouse Publishing.

Also writing as Deidre Dalton, Deborah is author of "The Bloodline Trilogy." The novels follow the uniquely magical yet ominous journey of three women through time. The trilogy includes *Bloodfrost*, *Bloodlust* and *Blood & Soul*. The novels were released by Club Lighthouse Publishing.

Using the pseudonym Shenanchie O'Toole, Deborah also writes for the recipe website Food Fare. She is writer and co-editor of thirteen cookbooks, along with more than forty titles in the *Food Fare Culinary Collection*.



Deborah O'Toole

<https://deborahotoole.com/>