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Foreword

This novel follows two fictional characters navigating the complexities of life during the final years of the Troubles. It is set in South Armagh in the late 1990s, against the backdrop of ceasefires that altered the course of history. Through their journey, the story explores what becomes possible when old divisions begin to give way to the possibility of new beginnings.

Chapter One

Unaware

August 1994. The eve of the first IRA ceasefire. Cullyhanna. South Armagh.

Is it possible to know exactly where you are and still feel lost?

He lay in wait at the edge of a field, the stillness of the night pressing in. Somewhere in the valley a dog barked, sharp and sudden, then fell silent again. Below him stretched a patchwork of farmland—a tapestry of green and brown squares, each one a testament to generations of toil. His only company was his own thoughts, whispering louder with each passing moment of silence.

The world was shifting beneath his feet. The idea of peace should have brought relief.

Instead, it felt like standing at the edge of an abyss. The old life, his old self, had a place. He was good at it. But peace? Where did that leave someone like him? *Conor, you'll never be a dove. What else are you good at?* The voice in his head was cold, unwavering, an old companion that clung to him like a shadow.

You were raised for this life. You can't change now. The voice knew him better than he cared to admit. Every instinct in him had been honed by years of war, by hiding in hedgerows, lying flat in the grass, his finger hovering over the trigger. And now, that same world wanted to forget men like him—men who had done the necessary things in the shadows while others sat around negotiating tables wearing suits, plotting their way toward ministerial posts. He looked uneasily over his shoulder, every gust of wind in the rushes sounded like boots approaching in the dark. He took a deep calming breath.

He thought of other young men around him, those embracing the prospect of peace, looking for jobs, imagining futures that didn't

involve gunpowder or graves. And yet here he was, a twenty-six-year-old, still chasing ghosts.

He stared out across the valley before him, the darkness consuming the horizon. The air was heavy with the scent of damp earth, and the silence felt as though it could smother him at any moment. *The first soldier to land here will be walking through the valley of the shadow of death*, he thought. The words hung in the air, weighty, as if spoken aloud by someone else, someone watching from above. *That sounds biblical, doesn't it?* His mind turned the thought over, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, though there was no humour in it.

Conor what you're doing is definitely not biblical. Well, maybe it's Old Testament biblical—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. That sort of biblical.

His gaze shifted to the horizon, where the stars blinked dimly, distant and indifferent. *What do you think, Mick?* His throat tightened. *You're up there now, aren't you?* He squinted into the dark as if his brother might materialise in the far-off shadows. *You'd know if I'm doing*

the right thing. Sure ask the boss for me. Let me know what he thinks. The silence stretched on, as deep and impenetrable as the sky above. It swallowed his words, offering nothing in return.

Conor let the thought drift, carried away by the wind, unanswered, just like the boat he carved with Mick's name on it. He had released it from the beach in Bunbeg the day after his funeral, his fingers lingering on the wood, as if by holding on he could keep Mick from slipping away. When he finally let go, he watched it bob and weave headlong into the waves, hoping each crash of water would wash it back to shore.

He had hoped his brother would return too, as he held him in his arms and watched his life slip away. But the Atlantic was as unforgiving as the bullets that had taken Mick's life. Some boats never return.

Out here alone, Conor had time to think. Maybe too much time. His Uncle Tommy's words began to surface. *We're survivors, Conor. And so were the men who came before us.*

Men who hid their families around Mass rocks on frosty Sunday mornings, defying the Penal Laws. Men who dug rottin' potatoes during the famine while the British exported grain. Men who fought and died for Eamon de Valera when Collins abandoned them to the North.

A sudden gust of wind temporarily grounded him in the moment. He glanced back over his shoulder, then down the scope, searching for any movement. Tommy's voice returned. *And Maggie Thatcher thinks this place is as British as Finchley... Let me tell you somethin', Conor—you don't get men like us in Finchley.*

As a dark cloud passed over the moon, the peaceful, moonlit scene took on a sinister edge. The kind of menacing blackness that made his breath catch in his throat. For a moment he thought he heard rotor blades far off, pulsing through the cloud cover. He instinctively crouched lower.

Here, in South Armagh, the night was not a thing to be taken lightly. In other, more peaceful places, parents taught their children

not to fear the dark. But here, the darkness was a living thing, a harbinger of danger, tangible and immediate. It ushered in an invisible tension that travelled like a dense fog of fear, creeping through the glens and clinging to the hillsides, forcing most normal people indoors.

Tiny red lights blinked on distant hilltops, betraying the exact positions of army sangars and command posts. They were like the eyes of a predator, constantly watching, waiting. This was a dangerous place. Dangerous for everyone. If he were caught in possession of the gun, he'd face either life in prison or a hail of SAS bullets. The soldiers wouldn't hesitate, and neither would he. If he got a shot away, a soldier would be dead. The stakes were high.

Are revenge and vengeance the same thing? They sound the same. It's just gettin' someone back. Isn't it Mick?

The crunch of stone carried faintly from the road below, every sound rasping against his frayed nerves. He lay perfectly still in the long grass, his body blending into the landscape. The sheep ruminating next to him didn't

perceive him as a threat, the sound of their rhythmic chewing hanging in the silence. Above, a low hum grew louder as a helicopter approached, its blades slicing through the night. He remained motionless, his breath shallow, as the machine hovered.

Inside the helicopter, a thermal imaging engineer scanned the ground below. On his monitor, thirty small red shapes moved across the field. Conor's still form was indistinguishable from the animals surrounding him, just another warm body in the mass. The operator moved on, unaware of the lone figure hidden among the flock, a wolf among the sheep, poised and lying in wait.

As the helicopter passed overhead, the hostile whirl of its blades represented more than just noise. Conor felt his heart pound like Morse code drumming out an urgent SOS in his chest cavity. Adrenaline surged through his veins, igniting that familiar rush of fire that he had become addicted to. This was what he lived for, the cold, sharp focus that only came when death was near.

Gerry has some neck on him asking us to be doves. Conor this is your thing. This is what you've trained for your whole life. You'll always be a hawk. You owe it to Mick... You owe it to Tommy... He glanced towards the stars. *Mick, keep an eye on me here.*

Conor grew up with guns. They were more than tools, they were an extension of his limbs, as natural to him as breathing. While other kids played Gaelic football in the evenings, he was on a homemade shooting range, perfecting his aim. His mentor was a former US Marine, a man distinguished in the art of war. He had moved to Armagh to join the cause and Conor absorbed every detail of good practice from the Yank. His accuracy was unmatched, but what made Conor truly deadly was his ability to stay calm under pressure.

The helicopter began its descent, touching down half a kilometre away. Conor's pulse quickened as he watched the machine settle on the hillside, its rotors slowing. His plan was simple and brutal: take out the first soldier to step onto the ground. He closed one eye and

pressed the other against the scope, the cool metal of the rifle grounding him in the moment. Carefully, he aimed in the direction of the target, steadying his breath, slowing his heartbeat.

There was just enough light to make out the outline of the soldier. He aligned the crosshairs directly over the silhouette, his index finger resting delicately on the trigger. In and out, he breathed slowly, his mind clearing as he focused solely on the task at hand. He always held his breath as he fired, and the irony wasn't lost on him. His return to normal breathing would coincide with the exact moment his target took their last breath. *This one's for you, Mick.* He squeezed gently, feeling the familiar resistance, then exhaled with one long, continuous breath.

CRACK!

The sound shattered the stillness of the night, reverberating through the hills like a clap of thunder. In that split second Conor's world

narrowed to the sight of the soldier crumpling to the ground, his silhouette disappearing into the darkness from which it had emerged. The cold air filled his lungs as he resumed breathing, the rush of adrenaline gradually ebbing away, replaced by a strange, hollow calm. For a moment, there was nothing but the echo of the shot and the distant whine of the helicopter's blades as they spun down. But as the darkness closed in once more, and the reality of what he had done settled over him like a shroud, Conor couldn't help but wonder how many more times he could pull the trigger before he too was swallowed by the blackness that had claimed so many before him.

He knew there would be pandemonium after the first shot, but he backed himself to force the soldiers back into the helicopter. With calculated precision, he aimed a second shot at the chopper's metal body. This bullet wasn't meant to kill, it was designed to create chaos. He wanted the sharp metallic ping of the ricochet to send a wave of panic through the soldiers, forcing them to retreat.

CRACK!

The sound reverberated through the night, followed by the distinct ringing of the bullet glancing off the helicopter's frame. Conor watched as the soldiers hurriedly loaded the lifeless body back onboard. His strategy was working. The helicopter's rotors spun faster, and it began to lift off the ground, rising rapidly as it angled toward his position. Suddenly, the chopper was directly above, its powerful downdraft flattening the grass around him and buffeting the branches at the edge of the field. Conor's hair swayed in the wind, mimicking the movement of the tall grasses. The noise was deafening, a relentless roar that drowned out everything else. He remained stationary, every muscle tensed, as the soldiers on board fired blindly into the darkness below. He knew they couldn't be sure of his exact location, but the proximity of the shots made his heart race.

More shots thudded into the soil, the heavy impacts vibrating through the ground just

metres away, sending small clouds of dirt into the air. Conor held his breath, his body pressed low against the earth, willing himself to become part of the landscape. The helicopter angled sharply, changing its position with an aggressive jerk, its movements resembling a hornet in a rage—unpredictable, searching, desperate to find its target.

For a few tense moments, it hung over the scene, hovering like an ominous spectre. The soldiers unleashed a final flurry of gunfire before it banked and flew out toward the horizon, its blades slicing through the night air. Conor remained perfectly still, his senses attuned to the environment around him. He listened intently as the sound grew faint and distant, finally replaced by the panicked bleating of sheep. The herd, shaken and terrified by the commotion, moved restlessly across the field.

Only when he was certain the helicopter was gone did Conor allow himself to move. He packed up his Barrett rifle with the same calm precision that had guided his actions all night.

Rising slowly, he surveyed the field one last time, then walked calmly back down the path he had taken to his position. The adrenaline still coursed through his veins, but his mind was already calculating the next move, the next mission. The night's events were just another chapter in the ongoing conflict.

As he made his way back through the moonlit fields, the world around him had returned to its familiar silence, though the echoes of gunfire and the whirring blades of the helicopter still lingered in his mind. He glanced over his shoulder at the faint plume of smoke rising from the chimney of an abandoned cottage. Earlier, he had lit a fire there, hoping the helicopter would be drawn to it. It had worked. He knew this wouldn't be the last time he'd find himself in such a situation. This was the life he had chosen—or perhaps, it was the life that had chosen him. And as long as there was breath in his body, Conor would keep walking this path, driven by a determination as unyielding as that of the ancestors who had tamed the very land beneath his feet.

Liam sat waiting in a car at the base of the narrow, winding lane that led up to the abandoned farmstead. His ginger hair caught the faint glow from the dashboard, the familiar flash of red like a beacon in the darkness. There was a steadiness about him—his easy smile, the calm way he carried himself even when things turned ugly. Liam had been by Conor's side for every mission, an unshakeable presence in the chaos. After Conor lost his brother, it was Liam he leaned on. Their bond had tightened with each impossible challenge they survived, forged in the fire of operations that should have broken them both.

Liam wasn't just a comrade—he was family now. His wiry frame and broad shoulders spoke of years spent on construction sites, where he worked when he wasn't running jobs for the cause. He was a labourer, the kind of man who could haul bricks all day and still have energy for pints after. His quick wit and good-natured banter were the only things that kept Conor's mind from drowning in the darkness some days. But tonight, there was no

room for jokes. The engine was off, and the night hung thick with silence, broken only by the soft rustling of leaves overhead. As Conor's figure emerged from the shadows, Liam leaned over and pushed open the passenger door. "Well?" Liam's voice was low, tinged with the tension of the unknown.

Conor didn't respond immediately. He slid the heavy Barrett rifle into the back seat, its cold metal brushing against the upholstery as it came to rest. *You did what you had to do*, he thought, but there was no satisfaction in it. The rifle was a reminder of the line he had crossed again. He didn't linger on it—he'd learned not to. "Yeah, I got one," he said finally, his tone flat, matter-of-fact. "I'm not sure if he's alive or dead."

Liam's knuckles tightened around the steering wheel, but his voice stayed calm. "I suppose we'll find out on the news tonight," he replied, his eyes fixed on the road ahead as the car began to move. There was no need to say more. Liam had been in it too long to flinch at the cold facts of what they did.

Conor sank back into his seat, his body exhausted, but his mind still running. It *definitely seemed like a direct hit and if it was... then he's dead.*

“Yeah,” Conor muttered, his voice barely above a whisper. “I suppose we will.”

Liam had never questioned a mission. He'd never hesitated, never looked back. That's what made him so reliable. And in this life, reliability was more valuable than anything.

The two men drove in silence, the car's headlights cutting through the darkness as they left the desolate farmstead behind. Conor stared out of the window, his mind replaying the events of the night. The rhythmic hum of the tyres on the asphalt was almost hypnotic, but his thoughts were far from calm.

Conor was unaware of the notoriety that surrounded him, a reputation that had grown with each successful operation. By now, he was the British Army's most feared adversary—someone the state authorities were desperately trying to identify. So far, they had only labelled him “the sniper,” a shadow moving with deadly

precision. Yet Conor remained oblivious to just how impactful he had become.

He was a product of his environment, born into a republican family where stories of struggle and resistance weren't just tales from times past, but realities lived out in the present. Missions carried out by men like his Uncle Tommy, who had taken Conor under his wing from an early age. Tommy was staunch, and physical-force republicanism was the world view he had drilled into Conor.

As the car wound through the rural backroads, moonlight flickered across the fields, casting fleeting shadows. Conor's thoughts drifted to his family—his father, a farmer, another link in the chain of generations that worked this land, and his mother, a homemaker. She had always been his anchor, quietly accepting that her son was lost to the cause. She didn't know specific details, nor did she want to, but she always knew when he had been out on a mission. The look in his eyes when he returned was enough.

When morning came, Conor awoke to the familiar sounds of the house—his mother working, the clatter of dishes, the low hum of the radio. It was a typical morning, but there was an undercurrent of unease. He could feel it as soon as he walked into the kitchen. His mother's face was pale, her lips pressed into a thin line. "Conor, come into the living room," she called, her voice unusually tight. He followed her into the small, cluttered space where the television was on, the news anchor's voice droning on about the latest developments. She gestured for him to sit down, and as he did, his eyes were drawn to the screen.

The grim-faced newsreader's voice filled the small living room, every word cutting through the silence like a knife. "A British soldier from the Scots Guards has been killed in another daring attack by the South Armagh sniper. The incident happened late last night near the village of Cullyhanna." Conor's mind flashed to the knock that might one day come to their door, the split second when the game

would be up. The presenter continued, “The attack confirms intelligence reports warning that a skilled sniper is operating in the South Armagh area. Unionist politicians have condemned the attack, calling it a callous act of terrorism. Police have appealed for information.”

Conor’s mother, her face a mask of worry, reached for the remote and switched off the television. The sudden silence was heavy, the tension in the room palpable. She turned to Conor, her eyes filled with a mixture of fear and desperation. “Where were you last night?” she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

Conor hesitated for a fraction of a second, then replied, “I was out and about.”

His mother’s gaze bore into him, searching for something in his expression that he was careful to conceal. She knew the truth but hearing it aloud would make it all too real. She shook her head, the lines on her face deepening with worry. “You’re going to get yourself killed, Conor,” she said, her voice a mix of anger and sorrow.

“Don’t worry about me, Ma,” Conor replied, trying to sound reassuring, though he knew his words offered little comfort.

She moved to the window and, with a sharp tug, thrust open the curtains to let in the morning light. The room was suddenly flooded with brightness, but it did nothing to dispel the dark cloud hanging over them. “Conor,” she began, her voice firmer now, “in another few years, this war will be over. And you’re going to get yourself killed for nothing. For nothing, do you hear me?”

Conor remained silent for a moment, his jaw clenched. He had heard these words before, but they felt different now, weighted with the fresh reminder of a death that had just been broadcast on the news.

“I told you, Ma, I’ll be fine,” he said finally, though his voice lacked the conviction it once held.

She turned to face him, her eyes filled with tears she refused to shed. “Fine? Conor, you’re playing a game with no winners. You think you’re invincible, but you’re not. They’ll catch

up with you, and then what? What will all this have been for?"

Conor looked away, unable to meet her gaze. He couldn't tell her what was in his heart, the sense of duty, the drive for vengeance that had propelled him into this life. It wasn't something he could explain, even to himself. It was just there, an unyielding force that pushed him forward, day after day, mission after mission.

"It's not for nothin', Ma," he said quietly, more to himself than to her. "It's for Mick. It's for everything they've done to us."

His mother's shoulders slumped, the fight seeming to drain out of her. She knew she couldn't reach him, couldn't pull him back from the brink. The war had taken so much already, and now it was taking her second son, bit by bit, turning him into something she could barely recognise.

"Please, Conor," she whispered, her voice breaking. "Don't let them take you too."

Conor swallowed hard, the lump in his throat making it difficult to speak. "I'll be

careful,” he promised, though he knew it was a promise he might not be able to keep.

She nodded slowly, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “Just...just come home, Conor. Every time you go out, just make sure you come home.”

Conor nodded, but the action felt hollow. As he stood in the doorway, he couldn’t shake the feeling that the lines had been drawn more clearly than ever before. His path was set, and no amount of pleading could change that. He was a soldier in a war that had claimed too many lives, and he knew deep down that it was only a matter of time before it claimed his as well. But until that day came, he would fight. For Mick, for the cause, for everything that had been taken from them. He would fight, and he would survive.

“Conor, this can’t go on forever,” she said softly, her voice trembling with emotion. “You can’t keep doing this.”

But Conor couldn’t see another way. He was too deep in the fight, too entangled in the cause that had defined his entire life. The faces of

those he had lost, the blood that had been spilled—it all demanded something of him, something he wasn't willing to let go of. Without a word, he walked out of the living room, the weight of his mother's words hanging heavy in the air.

As he stepped outside into the morning light, the world felt different, somehow more fragile. The birds were singing, the air was crisp, and the sky was a pale, untroubled blue. But Conor knew that somewhere, in another part of this fractured land, the cycle of violence was continuing, and he was just one part of it—a part he wasn't sure he could ever escape.

Chapter Two

Wine and Cheese

**March 1997. St Mary's Teaching College.
Falls Road.**

The first ceasefire had brought a tense, fragile peace to Northern Ireland, but the divisions between communities ran deep, like scars that hadn't yet healed. In an effort to bridge those divides, a wine and cheese event was organised at St Mary's Teaching College. The idea was simple, bring young Catholic and Protestant teachers together in a relaxed setting, away from the tension created by the crumbling ceasefires and perhaps they could find some common ground.

The common room hummed with conversation, the clinking of glasses softened

by nervous laughter. Small groups formed and mingled, cautiously testing the water, but even here, every slammed door in the corridor made his stomach knot. He sat by the window with his close-knit group of friends, watching the scene unfold. Rays of spring sunshine slanted through a narrow pane, illuminating his face and casting long shadows across the table, which was cluttered with cans of beer. His short dark hair caught the sun's edge, and his piercing blue eyes squinted slightly as he spoke.

"How many Protestants do you actually know, lads?" Conor asked, shielding his eyes with one hand as he looked around the table.

"None," Stephen replied without hesitation, his tone indifferent, as if the question required no deeper thought.

Seamus, sitting beside him, took a thoughtful sip from his can before responding. "I know two or three from playing with the band and believe it or not, they're dead on."

Conor leaned back in his chair, his hand still shading his eyes, and allowed his gaze to

drift across the room. His attention settled on a table opposite, where a small group of Protestant students were seated. Among them was a girl with blonde hair and a soft smile, her laughter ringing out like music above the hum of conversation.

“I’m gonna get to know my first right now, lads,” Conor declared with a grin, his eyes fixed on the girl. “And a fine beur she is.”

His friends chuckled, nudging each other as Conor stood up, leaving the comfort of their group for the unknown territory across the room. But none of them had any idea who Conor really was, what he had done, or the life he led outside of college. He liked it that way. He liked the anonymity, the chance to at least pretend he was a regular student without the complications of his past dragging him down.

Conor had completed three years of Physics at Queen’s University, a subject chosen not out of personal passion but as part of a calculated decision. The IRA Army Council had encouraged him to pursue Physics to hone his skills in creating accurate improvised

weapons, particularly homemade mortars. These were deadly tools designed to bring down an army helicopter or breach the fortified walls of a barracks. His education had been a means to an end, a way to better serve the cause that had consumed his life.

Although he'd finished with a first-class honours, excelling in the rigorous world of physics, he made the unexpected decision to switch to a teaching degree. When anyone asked him why he had made such a drastic change, he would simply shrug and say, "I prefer people over numbers." It was a simple explanation, one that masked the deeper complexities of his life—a life where he was constantly searching for a new identity, a fresh start, and perhaps, a way to reconcile the man he had been with the man he wanted to become.

Conor had always viewed physical attraction through the lens of scientific curiosity. He figured that much like magnetic attraction it was a matter of forces—two norths would repel, pushing each other away, while a

north and a south would be drawn together by an invisible, undeniable pull. He felt he could sense this invisible force between humans, a kind of subtle energy that passed between people when they were drawn to each other. He prided himself on being able to read the signs, the flicker of the eyes, the curve of a smile, the unspoken language of body movement. He watched for the clues—Did she swivel to face him? Was there a linger in her stare?

As he walked toward the table of girls, he let the scientific thoughts drift away. Now it was time for instinct and charm. *Time to find out if she's a south*, he mused. *But what to say?* He needed something that would break the ice, something to make her laugh, to make him stand out. *Call yourself a Fenian... That'll do it.*

His friends watched from across the room, bemused, as Conor approached with that easy swagger they had come to admire. When he reached the table, he stretched out his hand toward the blonde in the middle, his most charming smile on full display.

“Welcome to St. Mary’s Teaching College,” he said, his tone light and playful. “I’ll be your Fenian host for the afternoon.”

For a moment, the girls seemed caught off guard by his bold introduction. But then, just as he had hoped, they burst into laughter, the initial tension dissolving. The blonde girl took his hand, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

“Well, aren’t we lucky,” she said, a teasing lilt in her voice. “I’ve never had a Fenian as a host before.”

He held her hand just a fraction longer than necessary, staring into her green eyes with an intensity that went beyond the surface of his joke. He wanted to see if she would pull away, if there was any hesitation in her gaze. But she didn’t flinch, she stared back, her emerald eyes meeting his with a mixture of curiosity and something else—a spark that told him all he needed to know. *She’s a south.*

As he slowly released her hand, he allowed his fingers to brush lightly against hers, savouring the brief contact as she withdrew. It was a subtle moment, but it spoke volumes to

Conor. He couldn't help but wonder, though, if they would still be laughing if they knew the truth about him. *Would they still find it funny if they knew you actually are a Fenian? Well, a part-time Fenian. The war is nearly over, Conor reminded himself. Get used to this. You're a hawk at heart, but just act like a dove. Act like a regular citizen. Blend in...*

"So, what's your name?" he asked, letting the conversation flow naturally, his tone casual.

She shuffled slightly in her seat, adjusting the neat red cardigan that covered her flowery summer dress. "Grace," she replied.

Conor's eyes lit up with playful mischief. "You could pass for a Fenian with a name like that."

Grace laughed, the sound genuine and sweet. "There's plenty of Protestants with that name too."

"Yeah well... it's the name of the girl in my favourite rebel song. It's about her marrying Joseph Mary Plunkett a few hours before he's executed in 1916."

The others looked towards Grace sensing a misstep by Conor. She paused for a beat then smiled. "I'm glad my name meets the approval of my Fenian host," she raised an eyebrow, "my only concern is how a man ended up with the middle name Mary."

The girls laughed as the tension dissipated. Grace looked directly at Conor. "So... you remind me of someone. Mmm... Who do you think he looks like girls?"

"With the short hair I'm thinkin' Pete Sampras the tennis player," one of the girls proposed.

Grace shook her head. "I don't see it. I think he looks a bit like Keanu Reeves from *Speed*."

Conor laughed almost blushing. "I'll take that comparison."

Grace smiled. "So, what's your name then?"

"Conor," he said, glancing at the other two girls seated beside her. "And what about your friends?"

The fair-haired girl with hazel eyes introduced herself first. "I'm Eve."

“And I’m Naomi,” added the girl with tanned skin and dark hair, her brown eyes bright with interest.

Conor flashed them all a charming smile. “Do you girls mind if I sit awhile?”

Grace pushed a stool forward from under the table with her foot, a silent invitation that Conor gratefully accepted. “Take a seat, Conor,” she said, her voice warm and inviting.

As he settled onto the stool, Conor took a moment to appraise the girls, categorising each in his mind. All three were pretty, each with their own unique allure. Eve, with her fair skin and hazel eyes, had a soft, gentle beauty. Naomi, with her tanned complexion and dark hair, exuded a kind of earthy warmth. But it was Grace who captured his attention the most. There was something about her—maybe it was those striking green eyes, or the confident, almost playful smile—that drew him in. She reminded him of a poster girl he had seen once, advertising the launch of Tommy Girl perfume. She had that effortless kind of beauty that was

classic and timeless, and Conor couldn't help but feel a magnetic pull toward her.

The evening unfolded with ease. Conor kept the girls entertained with a steady stream of funny stories and wisecracks, his natural charisma shining through. He found himself slipping comfortably into the role of the charming storyteller, weaving tales that had them laughing and leaning in, eager for more. The tension that had initially filled the room at the start of the wine and cheese event seemed to dissolve, replaced by the easy camaraderie of new friendships.

As they talked and laughed, Conor found himself genuinely enjoying their company. There was a lightness to the evening that he hadn't felt in a long time, a sense of normalcy that was almost foreign to him. For once, he wasn't the feared sniper or the man with a dark past. He was just Conor—a young man having a good time with new friends, sharing jokes and making memories. But beneath the surface, Conor knew there was still that part of him that couldn't fully let go.

He could pretend to be just another student at St. Mary's, but he knew that the real Conor, the one shaped by years of conflict, was never far away. For tonight, though, he allowed himself to enjoy the illusion. He let the laughter and the warmth of the evening wash over him, letting himself believe, if only for a moment, that he could be part of this world.

When the event wrapped up, Conor found himself walking with the group of girls to the pavement on the Falls Road, where they waited for a taxi. The evening had been light and enjoyable, but he wasn't quite ready for it to end just yet. As they stood on the footpath, the streetlights above them flickered, casting a dim glow on the cracked flagstones beneath their feet. Conor turned to Grace with a casual grin.

"Grace, you know there's a quirky wee bar around the corner from here called the Hawthorn," he said, his tone light but with an underlying hopefulness. "It's strange because it looks like it should be just a house on a residential street, but it's actually a pub."

Grace gave him a wry smile, her green eyes sparkling with curiosity. “Is that an invite, Conor?” she asked, tilting her head slightly.

“Only if you’d like to,” he replied, trying to sound nonchalant, though he couldn’t help the slight edge of anticipation in his voice.

After a brief pause, Grace nodded. “Why not? Sure it’s early yet.”

The other girls exchanged quick glances, clearly tired from the evening’s events, and decided to call it a night. With waves and promises to catch up later, they climbed into the taxi, leaving Conor and Grace standing alone watching the cab disappear along the Falls.

The nineties were not kind to the Falls Road and its surrounding streets. Government investment was virtually non-existent, and the area bore the heavy scars of neglect and conflict. To Conor, the area looked like a boxer in the twelfth round, staggering and beaten after taking too many blows. As they walked, he guided Grace through gritty side streets where

shuttered shops and security grilles spoke for themselves.

They passed rows of run-down red-brick houses, their facades crumbling and worn from years of hardship. The walls were sporadically sprayed with political graffiti, the slogans and symbols a stark reminder of the area's troubled past. At each gable end, Grace glanced over her shoulder, her eyes widening as she took in the huge murals that loomed over them—vivid tributes to republican figures from times past, their stern faces watching over the neighbourhood like silent sentinels.

As they continued down the street, Grace's pace slowed, and she looked around with growing unease. "I'm not going to lie, Conor," she said, her voice tinged with anxiety. "I find this walk very intimidating. I don't really feel safe here."

Conor stopped in his tracks and turned to face her, his expression softening. He could see the apprehension in her eyes, the way she hugged her arms to her chest, and he knew this

was all foreign to her—both the place and the atmosphere it carried.

“I get where you’re comin’ from,” Conor said gently. “Even though I’m Catholic, and this is a Catholic area... the first time I walked around here, I was scared too.”

Grace raised her eyebrows, surprised. “Really?” she asked, her voice a mix of scepticism and curiosity.

Conor nodded, his gaze steady. “Yeah, really, in Belfast both communities feel under threat. It sort of amplifies their need to mark their territories. A lot of the murals are designed to intimidate the other side. Almost like a warning.”

Grace looked around again. “It’s just all... so intense.”

“It is,” Conor agreed. “They’re not exactly ‘welcome to The Falls’ signs.” He offered her a reassuring smile. “The Hawthorn is just up ahead, once we’re inside, it’ll feel a lot less intimidating, I promise.”

They continued walking, and within a few minutes, they reached the bar. True to Conor’s

description, the Hawthorn looked like an ordinary house from the outside, tucked away on a quiet residential street. But as they stepped inside, the atmosphere changed completely. The interior was warm and inviting, and a bearded man played guitar under soft, dim light. The tension that had been building in Grace's shoulders seemed to melt away.

They found a small table near the back, away from the few other patrons scattered around the bar. As they sat down, Conor noticed how the worry in Grace's eyes had given way to curiosity again, her gaze flickering around the room as she took in the new surroundings.

"See? It's not that bad?" Conor said, leaning back in his chair.

Grace smiled, this time more genuinely. "Yeah, not so bad. Thanks for bringing me here, Conor."

"No problem," he replied, feeling a quiet satisfaction that he had managed to ease her fears. As they settled into conversation, the

gritty streets outside seemed a world away, and for a while, it was just the two of them, enjoying each other's company in a place that, like Conor himself, was full of contradictions and hidden depths.

"The city makes me nervous too. I grew up in Cullyhanna. Way out in the sticks," Conor said, leaning forward slightly. "Up here in Belfast I'm a stranger. And in this area, locals are suspicious of strangers."

Grace, her face suddenly lighting up with a mixture of surprise and excitement, caught Conor's arm. "Conor! You know I grew up only a few miles from you?"

Conor's brow furrowed in surprise. "How? Where did you live?"

"Newtownhamilton!" she exclaimed, her tone revealing the same shock Conor felt.

His mouth fell open in astonishment. "No way! You know, we drive through Newtownhamilton on the way to most other places, but I hardly know a single person from the village."

Grace smiled, a touch of playfulness in her eyes. “Well, you know one now.”

Conor looked directly into her eyes, his intense blue gaze locking onto hers. “By the way, your village is fairly intimidating for us Fenians around the Twelfth... The sheer number of Orange Order bands you parade through the town... they don’t really exude ‘welcome to Newtownhamilton’ either.”

Grace presented her palms in a gesture of openness, her expression turning thoughtful. “Well, we see the Twelfth as a community festival. A celebration of our culture.”

Conor’s lips pressed into a thin line, his tone soft but pointed. “It’s not a celebration I’d be safe attending, I’d imagine.”

Grace’s face softened, a note of apology in her voice. “No, probably not.” The exchange lingered in the air, like a delicate thread between them, both aware of the worlds that separated them but drawn to the common ground they might uncover.

Conor drifted toward the bar, ordering another drink, his thoughts circling like crows

over a field. He requested a song on his way back and by the time he was sitting down the singer was crooning ‘Grace’ by Jim McCann.

“So, this is your favourite song Conor?” she quizzed.

“Yeah... her name was Grace Gifford... even though she was only married to Joseph for a few hours... she remained faithful to him for the rest of her life—another fifty years.”

She smiled. “Well, that’s real love right there—the kind few people ever find... especially nowadays.” They listened to the rest of the song, lost in their own thoughts, before Conor sensed a change of subject was in order. “So, what are you studying?”

“I’m hoping to be a religion teacher,” she responded, her tone light but confident. “I did Theology at Queen’s, and this year I’m doing a post-grad at Stranmillis to get my teaching qualification.”

“Wow,” Conor said, genuinely impressed. “So, do you really like religion? I mean, as a subject?”

Her face softened, and the passion in her voice became unmistakable. “Yes, I love it. It’s more than a subject to me... it’s like a link I have with my dad. I guess you could say it’s my life’s passion.”

Conor nodded slowly, absorbing that. “That’s kind of refreshing. I think our generation has lost that sort of earnest belief, like I just feel a kind of disconnect... And I know most of my friends feel the same.” He took another sip, his feelings rising to the surface like the fizz in his beer. “Don’t get me wrong, I actually respect someone being religious, but I just feel like I’m too far removed from it all... like I’m standing on the outside looking in.” He leaned forward slightly, locking eyes with her, “you know the men who signed the proclamation in 1916 were deeply religious, Joseph Mary Plunkett actually wrote a beautiful poem, ‘blood upon the rose’— that’s basically about seeing Jesus everywhere he looked in nature.”

Grace's eyes flickered with concern, she leaned in, her brow furrowing. "You definitely seem more republican than religious Conor."

Jesus Conor, change the subject. "Sorry, it just kinda tied in with the song." He smiled, "I actually forgot you were Protestant there for a minute..."

They both laughed, the tension between them dissolving again. Conor leaned back, swirling his drink, his tone becoming more introspective. "You know, despite not being devout, I'd never change my religion, that's part of who I am." He contemplated his own words. "Like, I'm pretty sure there wouldn't be much difference between what we both hear on a Sunday."

"That's exactly how I feel," Grace said, her expression softening again. "I wouldn't change either. My father, well... he'd kill me if I even thought about it, but deep down, we all know there's more that unites us than divides us."

Conor nodded, staring into his glass as if it held the answers to the very questions they were circling around. "I agree."

Grace's voice was quiet, reflective. "Anyways... what are you planning on teaching?"

"Science... well, Physics mostly."

"So you're brainy then?" She teased.

He looked up, catching her gaze again. "Well I wouldn't say that now," a flicker of something unspoken passing between them.

For a brief moment, the expectations of the world around them, the conflict, the history felt distant, almost irrelevant. Here, in this moment, it was just them, two people trying to understand a world that rarely made sense.

As the night wore on and the bar started to empty, Conor turned to Grace, an idea forming in his mind. "Hey, Grace, it's not really safe for us to walk across the city to Stranmillis at this time of night. So, just hear me out on this."

She looked at him curiously. "Go ahead."

He took a sip of his beer, choosing his words carefully. "Why don't you stay at mine tonight? You can have my bed, and I'll take the sofa." He set his glass down with a deliberate thud. "Actually, you'd be safer if I stayed beside you. I

promise we'd just be lying together, nothing romantic."

Grace's smile was warm, a hint of mischief in her eyes. "What makes you think I wouldn't want something romantic?"

Conor laughed nervously, not entirely sure if she was joking or serious. "First date and all that. Let's just concentrate on keeping you safe."

Grace's eyes twinkled with amusement. "So, you think this is a date?"

Conor met her gaze, feeling a surge of confidence. "Yes, actually. A very enjoyable one, if you don't mind me saying so."

Later that night, they lay shoulder to shoulder in Conor's single bed, staring awkwardly upwards into the darkness. Conor was acutely aware of the warmth of her skin against his, the soft curve of her shoulder pressed against him. He turned on his side, gently draping his arm over her torso. *I hope she feels safer now*, he thought, though his mind quickly wandered. *Her body feels hot. She is hot... I was right—she's definitely a fine beur.*

The intimacy of the moment, the quiet breathing that filled the room, made him feel both nervous and exhilarated. But true to his word, he kept his movements gentle and non-intrusive, simply enjoying the closeness they shared.

In the morning, bright sunlight filtered through the thin curtains of his student room preventing any chance of a lie-in. After they dressed, Conor walked her across Tate's Avenue toward Stranmillis, the quiet of the early hour contrasted sharply with the uneasy tension of the night before. "So, our blade... I hope you slept OK?"

Grace looked puzzled. "I think that's the first time I've been addressed as our blade."

He grinned, "I'm living with a lad from Derry this year, that's what he calls any girl that he's fond of."

She raised an eyebrow, a playful smirk on her lips. "Ha, is that your way of sayin' you're fond of me?"

"As a matter of fact, it is," Conor replied, his tone suddenly more sincere.

As they continued walking, Grace's gaze shifted to a Union Jack quivering in the wind over Tate's Bridge. She pointed to it, a contemplative expression crossing her face. "Even though I'm not from your side of the house?"

Conor followed her gaze to the flag, the symbol stirring up negative emotions within him. He turned back to Grace, his expression softening. "Even though you're not from my side of the house," he echoed. He shook his head, a wry smile playing on his lips. "But I'm not going to lie, it makes things while awkward..."

Grace stopped walking and turned to face him, her expression more serious now. "It's pretty awkward for me too. My dad's a Presbyterian minister, and I'm his only daughter."

Conor rubbed his chin. "Well, that does ramp up the awkward," he admitted, the reality of their situation becoming clearer.

“Conor,” she said, her voice soft but firm, “I’d say it’s not just awkward—it’s a non-runner.”

Conor sighed, turning, and beginning to walk again, the reality of her words settling in. “I’d say you’re right. And to be honest, I’m not sure how well my wee mammy would take to me bringin’ home the only daughter of a Presbyterian minister from Newtownhamilton.”

He knew she was right. The barriers between their worlds weren’t just societal—they were deeply personal, ingrained in their identities and the expectations of their families. *She’s right about the non-runner*, he thought, a pang of disappointment tightening in his chest. *Just walk her to the door and wish her well... Then turn and let her disappear into the rearview mirror of your life.* As they continued walking another thought followed quickly behind, *But you do like chattin’ with her. There’s no harm in being—just a friend. Besides, she’s hot... Just suggest doing something a friend*

might do, like the cinema... No, just leave it. Ask about her weekend plans.

They reached the traffic lights at Lisburn Road, and Conor pressed the button to cross. “Any plans for the weekend?” he asked, trying to keep his tone light.

“I’m going to be really busy,” Grace replied. “We have a church fete, and I have to bake at least three or four decent tray-bakes.”

Conor grinned. “You bake? That’s something you don’t hear people doin’ much these days. I wouldn’t have a clue where to start. When is it?”

The light turned green, and they began to walk again. “Sunday, after morning service. Probably around twelve,” she said. “You know it’s only five miles from you... Why don’t you call over? There’ll be plenty to eat.”

Conor raised his eyebrows, the suggestion catching him off guard. “Are you wise? Your folks would ask me a million questions.”

“You don’t have to tell them where you’re from,” she countered. “Just tell them you met me at Uni.”

Of all the crazy things you've ever done... going to that church fete would absolutely take the biscuit... He couldn't help but chuckle at the thought—*literally, her baked biscuits.*

His expression grew serious as he considered her offer. “Hey, in an ideal world, I'd actually love to call over, but you know the craic... It's probably not a good idea.”

Grace sighed, a trace of sadness in her eyes. “Yeah, our world isn't exactly ideal. In fact, it's almost like we live in two completely different worlds that are just a few miles apart.”

They continued walking in silence for a moment, the distance between their lives feeling more tangible than ever. Finally, they arrived at her door.

“Anyways, that's me now,” she said, pointing to the house. “I'm number 37.”

Conor nodded, trying to push aside the sense of finality that seemed to hang in the air. “Right, sure. I'll maybe see you out some night soon, Grace.”

She surprised him by leaning in and giving him a warm hug, her arms wrapping around

him with genuine affection. “Thanks for walking me home. I appreciate it, and I enjoyed last night.”

“Me too,” Conor replied, his voice sincere. “I really enjoyed it... Thanks for a good night.” As she stepped back, Conor watched her disappear into the house, the door closing behind her with a quiet click. He stood there for a moment, feeling the chill of the morning air. *This is probably the last time I’ll see her*, he thought, the reality sinking in. *But maybe that’s for the best.*

As he walked away, heading back towards his own life, Conor couldn’t shake the feeling that something had changed. He had made a connection with someone from the other side. The sudden siren of a passing police car grounded him immediately. He flipped up his hood and continued through the now busy streets. He found himself wondering if there was a way to bridge the gap between their worlds—or if that gap was simply too wide to cross.