

## Prologue

*... but above all, he was a soldier for Ireland.*

Father Brendan Sheils was a few minutes early for the evening meeting, so he used the moment to open his breviary and reflect upon its opening prayer. He was standing outside the appointed meeting place, a whitewashed country pub near Monaghan town called Tíg Tommy's. His shoulder pressed against a lamppost and the black prayer book sat opened atop his colossal belly, like a bird alighting on a black boulder. Indeed, prayer and fine food were his favorite diversions. This evening he feared he wouldn't find much joy in either, though. His appointment, a teenager eighteen years of age, had sounded in a bad way over the phone.

Anymore, it seemed that every phone call was from someone in trouble. Teenagers especially were prone to problems that not so long ago belonged to the rest of the world, but not in quiet and holy Ireland. Unwanted pregnancies and substance addictions were so commonplace now that, deep down, Father Brendan wished that the trouble facing tonight's youth would be so minor. He had reason to fear otherwise. A man in Father Brendan's position heard things others did not, after all.

The man of God closed his black prayer book and took interest in a darkening sky moving over Monaghan's solemn blue-green hills, like a charcoal brush scraping over velvet. Murmuring a little prayer that the young man he was to meet might beat the rain, he decided to pass the remaining wait by reading a copy of the *Irish Independent* that he had intended to savor later along with a rack of lamb and a glass of fine red wine. Thinking of how he'd particularly been looking forward to the column written by the syndicated American journalist, Thomas F.X. Hennessy, he contemplated the need for a second glass of wine, at least. A wind kicked up and blew apart the newspaper's pages, so instead of reading Hennessy, his eyes fixed on a report about the recent IRA escape from the Maze Prison in Belfast. One dead. (Not including a poor cat that had the misfortune of being caught in some sort of crossfire in a Lisburn flat.) One wounded and captured. Four on the run. Names of the escapees had not been released. Father Brendan searched the small article for any hint of other news, but found none. Irish newspapers anymore were all about reporting on the booming economy. The old troubles in the north were treated just like that—old troubles.

Hennessy columns were causing quite a stir in Ireland. Twice a week, the American offered deft, thousand-word opinions on Irish politics and man-on-the-street attitudes, as Ireland moved toward a national referendum that could sever the country from its history for the sake of money—lots and lots of money. Many a family meal in Ireland was being ruined by the factions lining up for and against what Hennessy had to say about the Eire Nua or “New Ireland” referendum. He unfolded the newspaper to page two and gave Hennessy an initial overview—as sort of a starter—since he still was hoping Hennessy would join him for the rack of lamb.

Today, the American journalist was probing the referendum's basic issue: that a “Yes” vote enabled Ireland to move away from its historical position of military neutrality and reap huge American dollars as a result. The U.S. military had secretly coveted Ireland's airstrips and harbors for its western European air and naval outposts. A “Yes” vote meant the Yanks no longer would have to squabble with the irascible French every time they wanted to fly their war-planes into the Middle East. The truth of it was, the diehard Irish nationalists were the most vocal in opposition to the referendum. For them, even the hint of stepping away from neutrality was tantamount to abandoning the Six Counties in the north. An Ireland open to Yank military would also be open to the Brits, and this, from an Irish nationalist point of view, was an intolerable position altogether. The diehard Protestant Loyalist, on the other hand, found the issue to be a conundrum. Whereas he believed it only fair and just that the Irish pull their full weight within the European Union, he

was against anything that led to a stronger Ireland, since, in his mind, it spelled ultimate doom for Protestant Ulster.

Unable to contain his appetite for the national debate, Father Brendan was just settling in to a second read of Hennessy's column when, from behind the bar, there came the sound of a car crunching over loose chippings. He moved with a soft waddle to the bar window and pressed his nose flat above the G in the Guinness sign. A skinny lad moved hesitantly through the bar's rear door. He'd grown tall, like an arrow, since Father Brendan had last seen him.

Tíg Tommy's was long, narrow, and dim. A small huddle of men clung to pints of black porter and stared at a mammoth flat screen television hanging from a wood paneled ceiling, which had turned the color of port wine with age. The drinkers were too mesmerized by the replay of an English soccer match to notice a man of God, much less greet him. Alas, there was no luster on the clergy in Ireland anymore, Father Brendan thought. His appointment slid up onto a high stool near the other end of the bar. Out of the dusk, his wet blue eyes shone in Father Brendan's direction.

Malachy McKee was tall and copper-topped, the image of his father twenty-five years and forty pounds ago. A smile flashed across his freckled face. The smile was a family tick. Father Brendan knew all the McKees, going back to the grandfather, to grin spontaneously, even when there was absolutely no reason to smile. This young McKee even drank large bottles of ale, just like his father.

Father Brendan placed his breviary atop the low round table. "God, but you're looking well," he said, grabbing and shaking a freckled arm that felt more like a piece of kindling he might be tossing into a fire. Just below the elbow was a tattoo of a green Phoenix rising out of red and gold flames. The inscription below read, "*From the ashes of '69 rose the Provisionals.*" It occurred to Father Brendan that the boy hadn't yet been born in 1969.

They made small talk in very low voices. The whispering voice, Father Brendan knew, was far more desperate than even cries and shouts. Mostly, the boy kept his lips to the bottle, emptying it so swiftly that it was obvious he was not a stranger to drink. He'd bare his soul soon, Father Brendan thought. It was in his family's nature.

"I have to leave Ireland," Malachy McKee blurted in a restrained whisper. His lips then sank instantly back into the bottle, as if his utterance had exhausted him. Father Brendan said nothing. Instead, he placed a hand on the boy's heaving shoulder and waited. "I hadn't a choice, Father," Malachy McKee continued. "The RUC said that they could put me away for thirty years. Annie, too. That's the worst of it. That's why—" A single teardrop escaped from the dam building in his blue eyes and rolled freely over a pronounced cheekbone. "It's why I hadn't a choice."

Father Brendan understood what the boy was saying. The Royal Ulster Constabulary had caught him and this Annie—must be the girlfriend—involved in republican activities. Malachy would have been forced to play ball and provide information to the security forces, or risk sending himself and the girlfriend to prison for IRA related crimes. Why a dozen men from Malachy's Derry neighborhood had been sent to prison in the last year no longer seemed a mystery. "Have you spoken to your father?" Father Brendan asked.

The boy's jaw twitched. "He won't speak to me. My mother either. I'm dead to both of them. They never liked Annie, anyway. But I have to leave Ireland, now. Will you help me, Father? Please?"

Father Brendan slowly and softly took Malachy McKee's thin hand off the bottle and placed it on top the breviary on his lap. "It would do me no good to lecture on the evils of dealing with the hard men, or that lads like you are just the fuel that keeps Ireland's sorrow burning. But yes, I will help you. Just as Simon became Peter and Saul became Paul, you, Malachy, must repent for your sins and become a new man."

Father Brendan ordered two more drinks and spoke of a priest friend teaching at a university in Seville, Spain, where Malachy could work for his room and board, as well as get a university education. Safe passage would be arranged for him—and Annie, too—but it would take a day or two. “Until then, you’ll have to stay with me at the rectory. Speak to no one, including Annie.” The teenager listened and acknowledged Father Brendan's wisdom, including the advice that they remained in Tíg Tommy's until they could slip away to the rectory under the cover of darkness. With a rising mood, they passed another hour; Father Brendan continued to buy the drinks. Occasionally, he'd ask Malachy questions about his involvement with the RUC. “Have they mentioned anything to you about someone called The Rag Man?” he said.

The blue eyes, now dry and eager, opened wider. “In fact they have,” Malachy said. “Just the other day, my handler—that’s the RUC man squeezing me—he asked me about a Rag Man, as if I should know. But I know fuck-all—Sorry for the language, Father.”

They left Tíg Tommy's in a downpour beating against the windscreen so fiercely that Father Brendan pulled over on a quiet stretch of road where the hedgerows had grown together to form a thick canopy. The rain dripped slowly through the tangle of branches in thick, single drops, reminding Father Brendan of teardrops. “I've new wiper blades in the boot,” he told Malachy. “Perhaps they could be of some use. But I'm all thumbs with mechanical things.”

The slim teenager was eager to help. He was more than a tad tipsy with drink, too. Twice he fumbled the keys to the boot. Father Brendan reached for the flash lamp he kept stowed beneath the driver's seat, and brought it and his breviary out into the rain. He planned to ask the boy if he needed light, but Malachy was drunk enough so as not to be aware of anyone standing behind him. With the breviary tucked in the crook of an arm as one might carry a football, Father Brendan's other hand raised the flash lamp over his head. He then brought it down onto the boy's skull with the full weight of his vast bulk behind it.

Malachy McKee was so very light that Father Brendan had little difficulty using just the one arm to drag him into a hawthorn ditch while still clutching onto the breviary. There was a chance the boy was dead already. Opening the black prayer book to where pages had been carved away, he removed a revolver that lay in the hollow. From the boot of the car, he pulled a plastic trash bag and three short lengths of rope that he used to tie the boy's hands and feet. He used the last strand to secure the trash bag around Malachy McKee's head. Again, it was no trouble at all lifting such a rawboned body into a kneeling position. Father Brendan placed the barrel of the revolver on the lump on the boy's skull. The pounding rain muffled the revolver's retort. Droplets splattered in a slow but steady beat against the black plastic trash bag, and Father Brendan reflected on how few tears would be shed for a dead informer. He then twined rosary beads around Malachy McKee's limp fingers and whispered, “Lord, for your faithful people life is changed, not ended.”

Father Brendan was a man of God, but above all, he was a soldier for Ireland.

