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The
Belladonna
Maze



An Aria Book

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Conor agus Séamus, le grá mór

Chapter I

1825

Lisheeha, Co Roscommon

‘Come and find me!’

There was a giggle, and then a rustle of leaves as the small, sturdy figure disappeared around the corner of the hedge. Ciarán stared after her, the temptation to run tingling in his toes. But he had not come to the maze today to play, he had an important job to do and had spent so long begging his father for the chance to prove he could work as hard as his older brothers, it would be beyond foolish to let him down now. Dropping to his knees, he took out the small, sharp knife he had been given that morning and began to prune the brownest leaves at the bottom of the thick, strong branches.

‘Come on, Ciarán!’

Moments later, and clearly bored of her own company, Deirdre appeared beside him again, hopping from foot to foot in her heavy navy skirt.

‘I’m bored, do come and play!’

'I have to work today.'

The English words felt thick and dull in his mouth and they made Ciarán feel dull too, and far older than his ten years. He looked down at his hands, already calloused and now itching from the mud that caked the palms and fingers, and felt once again the temptation to run and give chase – and then the decision was taken away from him as the smaller child bent down and grabbed the knife out of his hand, waving it gleefully before turning and sprinting down a long, leafy corridor.

'You have to catch me now!'

And Ciarán O'Mahony was a little bit annoyed, but mostly delighted at the excuse to turn and run after her. His bare feet slipping on the mud, he rounded a corner and then jogged along a narrow passageway. The light was dimmer here, the air thicker, somehow, and he slowed his steps, ears straining as he tried to figure out which way Deirdre had gone. He took a right turn and then a left and then stopped dead, hemmed in by the leafy wall in front of him. Turning, he retraced his steps, but he was at a junction now, the corridors to either side of him equally silent and equally empty. He had been a fool, he realised, to think that catching up with her would be easy. Deirdre Fitzmahon might have been a full two years younger than him – and a girl! – but the maze had been her playground ever since she was old enough to walk and Ciarán was sure that, by now, she could find her way around blindfolded. Of course, not many girls of her station would be allowed to run around alone at all, much less in the company of the gardener's son, but there was plenty about the way Deirdre Fitzmahon was being reared that was far from

typical. Ciarán shared a truckle bed with one of his brothers, across the room from his parents, and he knew from listening to them late at night that the master had been disappointed when his first-born child was a girl, and sadder still when he and his wife were not blessed with other children. And now, although it could not be said that the Fitzmahons mistreated their only daughter, they seemed to care little about how she spent her days. Meanwhile, Deirdre herself was quite happy to have the youngest son of the gardener as a playmate and she and Ciarán had been as close as brother and sister for as long as he could remember. To take his knife, though? Ciarán's heart seemed to tighten in his chest when he thought of it. That knife belonged to his father, a man who was never reluctant to use a belt on one of his offspring.

And then the giggle came again, from the left this time, and so Ciarán chose his path and ran down it, his bare feet pounding against the mud and dust. He rounded a final corner and then emerged, panting, into the clearing at the heart of the maze to find the source of the merry laughter sitting on a large stone plinth, her feet dangling off the edge. The plinth itself formed the base for a statue of an angel, its blank stare taking note of everyone who entered the space. Deirdre had lost a shoe, Ciarán noticed, and her stockings were muddy and torn.

'I knew you wouldn't catch me!'

The child's voice, despite her mocking words, was warm and her eyes sparkled as she looked down at him. Ciarán shook his head. He did not want to argue with her, but his fear of his father was stronger than their friendship.

'Give me my knife back!'

'Here!'

Deirdre stretched out her hand and flung the small instrument away from her, angling the throw carefully so it sailed past Ciarán and landed safely on a patch of grass just behind. He turned to pick it up and then froze as a pair of shiny black boots appeared from around the corner and stopped in front of him.

'What's this?'

The man, which was how Ciarán always thought of Paul Fitzmahon, even though he was barely a year older than he was himself, bent and picked up the knife before Ciarán had a chance to grab it.

'What the hell do you think you are doing, boy?'

Ciarán opened his mouth to speak but the words dried in his throat. Behind him, he heard Deirdre jump down from her stone platform and in a moment she was standing between them.

'You leave him alone, Paul!'

'Leave him alone? I don't think so, cousin. I wonder what Uncle Richard would think if he knew the gardener's boy had been chasing you with such a weapon!'

'He wasn't chasing me...'

But Deirdre's voice suddenly sounded very young and very high pitched and the wobble at the end of the sentence told Ciarán she was fighting back tears. Paul, who was both a head taller and several stones heavier than he was himself, gave a sharp, barked laugh.

'Uncle Richard will want to dismiss his father, I shouldn't wonder, when he finds out what this ruffian has been up to.'

'Oh no, please...'

Ciarán found his voice, at least, but it sounded almost as weak as Deirdre's and he swallowed the rest of the sentence as Paul narrowed his eyes.

'Are you arguing with me, boy? Do you want to fight, is that it?'

And before Ciarán could ready himself Paul punched him in the stomach, sending him crashing painfully to his knees. Winded, he bent double, clutching his midriff, and then froze as he felt the point of the knife against the back of his neck.

'Leave him alone!'

Although his eyes were closed, Ciarán could feel the rush of air as the little girl darted past him and heard a succession of dull thuds as her small fists rained blows down on her cousin. But Paul Fitzmahon's arm did not shake and the blade of the knife remained exactly where it was, not quite breaking the skin at the nape of his neck but with a promise in the pressure that it could do so quite easily.

'Leave him be!'

The sting suddenly disappeared and Ciarán raised his head slowly to see Paul take a step backwards, the knife now glinting in his hand.

'You stay out of this, little girl.'

'You can't speak to him like that!'

Afraid even to breathe audibly, Ciarán tipped backwards until he was sitting on his haunches. His friend was gazing up at her cousin, her fists clenched, shoulders shaking with rage.

'You can't! Ciarán is my friend and I asked him to play with me, I took the knife; if anyone should be getting into trouble it should be me! Oh, Paul...'

Ciarán could see the physical effort Deirdre was making to calm her breathing, drop her shoulders.

‘Why don’t you play with us?’ She waved her hand around at the maze. ‘It would be much more fun with three, we could hide and you could find us...’

Paul’s gaze flickered from the girl to Ciarán and then back again, and Ciarán could see an expression akin to longing cross the plump, spoiled face. For a moment all three were silent and then, as quickly as a cloud crossing the sun, the look of desire disappeared, to be replaced by sullen bad humour.

‘Baby games! I have better things to do, and so should you, Deirdre Fitzmahon, look at you! Running around like a gypsy with the gardener’s boy, and who knows what else you’ve been getting up to? You’re a disgrace, that’s what I’ll tell Uncle Richard when I see him.’

He turned, the knife still clasped in his hand, and jogged out of the clearing towards one of the six identical exits. Ciarán’s stomach twisted so suddenly, he thought he might be sick. He was in trouble now, for sure – the loss of the knife alone would earn him a beating – but if Paul told the Fitzmahon family that he had been threatening Deirdre with it, or worse... The breath left his lungs as he tried to contemplate the horror of how bad things could get. Deirdre’s parents might give their daughter an unusual amount of freedom but even they would surely be horrified if they thought the son of a servant had put her in any sort of danger. Ciarán’s father, Tom, had been gardener at Hollowpark Hall for years but never tired of telling his children that the job and the home they lived in were fully dependent on the Fitzmahons’ goodwill and if one

disappeared, the other would immediately follow. And then Deirdre sank down beside him and put her small pale hand on his grimy one.

‘Don’t worry.’

‘How can I not?’ Ciarán wanted to say but he knew that if he spoke, the tears that were building behind his eyes would spill out and only increase his misery and shame.

But Deirdre continued as if he had answered her anyway.

‘Because you’re my friend, and Hollowpark will look after you.’

Her face was suddenly so calm, and so trusting, that Ciarán almost groaned aloud. Of course, he had heard the stories about Hollowpark Hall, the belief held by the family that no harm would come to them as long as there was a Fitzmahon in residence. But it was just a story, and there was no shortage of strange stories on the estate, nor indeed in the village of Lisheeha itself. Around here, people traded tales at night, calling from house to house and swapping legends of the Púca and the Bean Sí, whispering the darkest of details as firelight flickered across their faces. But those stories were fairy tales, no more than that, yarns told to amuse children and old people and certainly no defence against bullies like Paul Fitzmahon. But even as Ciarán was thinking this, Deirdre closed her eyes and when she opened them again she looked, he thought, suddenly much older than her eight years. When she spoke her voice was steady.

‘Hollowpark looks after its own, Ciarán. And you live here, and that... means it will look after you too. Wait...’

She sat stock-still, a small smile now playing around her lips. Then she jumped up and motioned to Ciarán to follow her.

'This way!'

It took a second for him to clamber to his feet and by the time he had recovered his balance she had disappeared back into the body of the maze. Despite the encumbrance of her heavy skirts she was swift as a deer and it took Ciarán all of his strength to keep the small navy figure in his sights as she disappeared around one corner after another. And then Deirdre pulled up so quickly he almost ran into her, and she turned to him and raised her finger to her lips.

'Listen. Can't you hear?'

It took a moment for his ears to decipher what he was listening to but then the sound crystallised into sobbing, loud, harsh and uncontrolled.

'Come on!'

Deirdre darted away again and it must have been later in the afternoon than Ciarán had realised because the sun had almost completely disappeared now, and some trick of the gloom was making the passageways feel much narrower. But no, no, it wasn't just a feeling, this arm of the maze really did seem to be different from the others, the branches were so close together they were scratching at his face and he was forced to stretch his arms out in front of him to keep the leaves out of his eyes. Ciarán followed Deirdre around one final corner and found that it led to a dead end. And there, hunched at the base of the hedgerow, was Paul Fitzmahon, his face buried in his hands. And Paul was just a boy after all, Ciarán realised, a very upset young boy, and as they approached him, he lowered his hands and looked up at them, mud and tears staining his face.

'I can't get out.'

He was breathless, his words coming in sharp gasps.

‘I turned and turned and there is no way out, I can’t find it, I...’

‘That’s a shame.’

Deirdre took a step forward and Paul jumped to his feet and grabbed her by the wrist.

‘It’s not a joke, you stupid girl, there’s no way out, I’ve been in here for ages, we’re trapped—’

And then his eyes widened as he looked over her shoulder to where Ciarán was standing, a long passageway clearly visible behind him.

‘That doesn’t make sense...’

‘Would you like us to show you the way?’

Deirdre’s voice was light but pointed.

‘Or we could just leave you here?’

Ciarán could see resistance flicker across the boy’s face and then a shudder rippled through him as he dropped her wrist and gave a quick abashed nod.

‘Take me with you. Please.’

‘And the knife?’

Paul dug his hand into his pocket and handed it to her.

‘You can have it, please, I was always going to give it back, I was just joking. I didn’t mean anything...’

Deirdre took the knife and nodded at her cousin to follow her. As the three of them travelled in silent procession through the maze, the sun emerged again, making the passageways feel bright and airy, and it only took three turns for them to find themselves safely at the entrance. Paul darted away without a word and Deirdre handed Ciarán the knife, its handle mud-stained but otherwise unharmed.

‘He won’t say anything now, don’t worry. Hollowpark

looks after its own, Ciarán, I told you that. You don't have to worry about anything while I'm here.'

And she, too, scampered away. Ciarán stood for a moment, looking after her, and then he cleaned the handle of the knife on the tail of his shirt before dropping to his knees and resuming his work, pruning and shaping and caring for the Belladonna Maze.

Chapter 2

2007

Zakynthos, Greece

The world tilted. Slack-jawed faces stared up at me as I hit the water, hard. For a moment I hung motionless, shocked by the sudden cold and anchored by the water pooling in my clothes, but then my survival instinct kicked in and I struck out against the bottom of the pool. My head broke the surface of the water and I could hear, above the pulsating music, some cheers.

‘Ladies and gentlemen! Give it up for Gorgeous Grace!’

I gave the wave they all expected then swam to the side and hauled myself out. Mindful of outstretched phones, I tried my best to look dignified but sodden clothes made elegance difficult and I ended up flopping onto the deck like a dying fish – that was if a fish could wear a yellow Kidz Klub T-shirt and unflattering navy shorts.

‘And now it’s time for BINGO!’

Dave was still shouting, caressing the microphone as if he was on stage at Wembley, not poolside at a family hotel

on an Ionian island, but for once I was grateful for his over-the-top bellowing, because it was diverting attention away from me. It was an unwritten rule that every rep in the resort got dunked at least once every season, usually after losing some random challenge against a hotel guest, and we were supposed to be good sports about it, but I couldn't help feeling it was all a bit, well, beneath me. I was a qualified nanny, after all, not some teenager on a gap year.

I squeezed water from my hair, then squelched into my flip-flops and checked the digital clock that sat high above the pool. Twelve noon and thirty-one degrees, a temperature gauge set to perfection. The morning shift complete, I still had plenty of time to shower and even grab a decent lunch before the afternoon 'Klub' shift started at two, I might even—

I don't know what caught my eye from the centre of the pool. Instinct maybe? Experience? The water was packed with guests, screaming kids, laughing parents, inflatable toys, everybody appeared to be having fun, letting off steam after the structured games of the previous hour. But one flash of pink just didn't look right. A blonde head rose, then sank and didn't rise again. There was no time to second-guess myself, I just ran forward and dived in, forcing swimmers out of my way as I struck out for the far side of the pool. A deep breath, and I was underwater again. I saw more pink, then my fingers closed on a soft shoulder and I yanked it upwards.

There were no cheers as I emerged this time, just the music and above it, one single piercing scream.

'My baby! My baby's in the water!'

The child was pulled from my arms. She was screaming now too and as I stood upright and wiped water from my eyes I realised that had to be a good thing. If she was screaming, then her lungs must be clear. If she was screaming, then she hadn't... As the full realisation of what might have happened hit me, my vision clouded. An ashen-faced Dave took my hand as I clambered shakily out of the pool.

'We just can't thank you enough.'

'Honestly, it's fine, I was just doing my job.'

I took a sip of orange juice then settled myself awkwardly on the bar stool. After the hotel doctor had checked me over I'd been all set to go back to work, but the little girl's parents had been waiting for me outside the first-aid room and insisted I join them for a drink, to thank me, they said. A drink that was now starting to feel like the most awkward first date I'd ever been on.

'If there's anything – anything we can do...'

The man fell silent then looked across at his daughter who was now sitting on her mother's lap, fiddling with a doll and looking as if she couldn't even remember the drama she had been at the centre of.

'I mean it – we're incredibly grateful.'

My mother would love him, I decided. He had one of those posh public-school voices that make people sound like they are giving orders even when they are only saying hello, with another layer on top of it that I couldn't quite place. He turned to his wife and daughter again and I snuck a proper look at him. He was a good-looking guy, tanned and leaner than most of the other dads in the hotel who tended

to look like they only tore themselves away from their cars and computer screens for one brief fortnight every year. The tan showed off his deep brown eyes too, although his hair was too long, flopping all over his forehead, and every few minutes he pushed it away in a manner that was almost, but not quite, annoying.

‘I think you can let Skye down now, darling. She’s fine.’

His wife started, then looked at him as if she couldn’t quite process what he was saying. After a moment, she released the little girl who immediately jumped down and began to bounce on a nearby sofa. Her mother kept her eyes fixed on her face, while her father turned to me again.

‘I’m sure you see this type of thing happen all the time?’

He was clearly looking for reassurance and I did the best I could.

‘Sure, kids run off, of course they do. It’s a big hotel, people get distracted and...’

But then my voice trailed off because, the fact of the matter was, although I had worked in family hotels all over Europe, I had never had to fish a kid out of a hotel pool before. I’d seen accidents, of course, plenty of them, and put my first-aid skills to the test on many occasions with broken wrists and cut foreheads, all the usual tumbles you get when overexcited children meet slippery pool sides. But no, I hadn’t ever seen an accident like this one before. Most of the parents were pretty vigilant, even if they did get stuck into the all-inclusive wine at lunchtime. Hang on though, was that... but the woman beside me didn’t look drunk, nor hungover. She just looked – shattered. As if the worst thing in the world had happened to her, was still happening to her. She was attractive too, or could have been, with long,

fine blonde hair bleached almost white by the sun and one of those broad, strong faces that look best with a tan and no make-up. But right at that moment, all you could see on her face was unhappiness. She picked up a beer mat and began to tear it into small pieces, her eyes still fixed on the small girl.

Her husband cleared his throat. 'It was my fault, of course, I got distracted by my book and—'

'Don't, Patrick. It was my fault. I was looking after her, or was supposed to be.'

Well, there was no mistaking that accent anyway. Skye's mother was what used to be called a 'Sloane', with a voice that could have cut the glass tumblers behind the hotel bar, the good ones they keep for imported drinks that aren't part of the all-inclusive deal. It was a voice full of money all right, but also full of despair and I couldn't imagine what they were doing here, this handsome, anguished couple in this nice but mainstream hotel on a touristy Greek island, when they looked like they'd have been far happier on a yacht anchored offshore.

'My eyes closed – it was only for a minute. I thought, here, things would be OK...'

A tear ran down her cheek, making her resemblance to her daughter unmistakable. Her husband ran his hand through his hair, his fringe flopping perfectly back into place afterwards.

'No harm done, darling, I told you. It's all fine now. Isn't it?'

He looked to me again for support but this time I stayed silent and drained my juice. Time to go. My part in their little family drama was at an end and besides, I barely had

time to eat before my next shift started. Saving the little one would get me a clap on the back from my supervisor, but that didn't mean she would find anyone else to lead Art Attack at 2 p.m. I scraped my chair back and knelt in front of the kid – Skye, I heard them call her – to say goodbye. Sweet little thing. Her parents were bloody odd, but that didn't matter. She wasn't registered with the Kidz Klub, I'd never seen her before and there was no reason to think I ever would again.

Which explains why I'll never make a living as a psychic – or a professional gambler. It was in fact less than an hour later when I heard a knock on the Kidz Klub door and opened it to see Skye's bright blue eyes looking up at me. Letting go of her dad's hand she wriggled past me and dashed towards a box of toys in the corner of the room.

'She's making herself at home!'

Her father ran his hand through his hair again in a gesture that was becoming familiar, and gave an almost nervous smile.

'I do hope it's OK – for her to join in?'

I shrugged. 'It's fine.'

It wasn't, actually. Guests were supposed to register their children at the beginning of their holidays if they wanted them to take part in organised activities; it was one of the reasons our hotel was a bit more expensive than others on the strip. We, the children's reps, were all fully trained and qualified in childcare and were not, as my boss was fond of saying, a fallback babysitting service for people who overindulged on the lunchtime retsina. But I was glad to

see the little one had recovered from her earlier ordeal, so I simply took a step backwards and grabbed the clipboard that was hanging from the wall.

‘Can I get her full name, please?’

‘Skye Uprichard Fitzmahon.’

Skye’s father gave what looked like a practised shrug.

‘I know, it’s a mouthful, isn’t it?’ He extended his hand. ‘You can just put down Skye Fitzmahon. And I’m Patrick – I’m sorry I didn’t introduce myself properly earlier. It was all a bit – well, mental.’

I returned his handshake, which was dry and firm despite the heat of the day, and picked up my pen again to scribble down their room number.

‘My wife is Isla. We’re both incredibly grateful for what you did earlier.’

‘That’s fine,’ I muttered, flustered by his effusiveness. To change the subject, I looked across at his daughter who was now chatting animatedly to a little boy and trying to persuade him to race a pair of toy cars.

Patrick followed my gaze and gave a smile of obvious pride.

‘She’s been asking us for days to come here. It’s the main reason we picked this hotel, to be honest with you, I wanted her to have other kids to play with. Skye starts playschool next term and I thought it would be good to get her used to other children, you know? But when we got here, Isla decided to keep her with us after all. I think that might be why she ran off, earlier. She was getting a bit bored hanging around with her old pair, poor kid.’

There was something very endearing about his obvious concern for his daughter, so I nodded at my colleague to

start giving out the colouring books and decided I could afford to stay listening to him for a few moments longer.

'She hasn't been well. Isla, I mean, Skye's mum. She's had a tough few years.'

'Right,' I said and looked down at my clipboard again, unsure of how to respond. I had been working as a kids' holiday rep for eight years now, but rarely said anything to the parents other than 'hello' and 'will you be back tomorrow?' at drop-off time. It was totally different back in the UK, of course, where I worked as a nanny during the winter months. There, I had to hand the mothers – it was almost always the mothers – a long list of what their kids had eaten, drunk, played with and pooped out every evening when they returned from work. But on holiday things tended to be very different. We only had the kids for a couple of hours each day and the mums and dads tended just to mutter 'thanks, off to have a nice lunch' before they legged it. I suspected most of them used the time to have sandy sex on the narrow beds in their apartments, maybe squeezing in a bite to eat afterwards for the sake of appearances, but whatever their destination, they certainly didn't want to waste precious minutes talking to me. This guy, however, seemed to have all the time in the world.

'Yeah, it's why we really needed a holiday this year—'

'He's stolen my pencil! Miss – he's nicked it!'

Ryan, a tall, gangly child who I was convinced was at least a year older than the 'six' his mother had written on his registration form was, as usual, at the centre of the drama. I whirled around, ready to defuse the row, and Patrick took the hint, pausing only to blow a kiss in his daughter's

direction before telling me he'd pick her up in an hour and disappearing down the corridor.

'Enjoy your break!' I was tempted to say, but didn't. Something told me that Patrick and Isla wouldn't be one of the sandy, sexy couples that afternoon.