Lake of Sorrows

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PROLOGUE

It was the cold that roused him. The moment he plunged into the frigid water at the bottom of the bog hole, his eyes fluttered open, and his mind grasped the fact that he would certainly die here. He knew it was the reason he had been brought to this place, the reason he had been born. His body, however, seemed to require further persuasion. He shook his head, groggy, as though awakened from sleep. Was all this real, or only a vision of what was to come? He remembered running, a glancing blow, and before that—

For a moment he remained very still, then he struggled to right himself in the bog hole's narrow fissure, pressing against the walls with his hands and elbows, treading slowly against the dark, pulpy liquid into which he'd already sunk to his hips. It was pulling him in, downward. Nothing would stop him now. He gasped for air, feeling the leather cord encircling his throat, all at once aware of a strange, spreading warmth upon his chest – blood, his own blood, sticky and metallic. But the primary sensation was cold, a deep, numbing chill combined with an utterly astonishing softness, whose deceitful purpose, he knew, was to draw him into its familiar, bosomy grasp and keep him here forever.

Above his head the midsummer evening remained fair and mild, and his eyes reflected the waning twilight still visible at the top of the bog hole, scarcely more than an arm's length above his head. His muscular shoulders were those of a man who had herded cattle milked at daybreak

and evening, who each spring broke the virgin soil with his plough, who sowed corn and reaped it with sharpened blade – a man ruled by circular, circadian rhythms of light and darkness. The slight hollows in his clean-shaven countenance bespoke hard labour and scant harvests.

He knew this place, this bog. It was a mysterious, holy place, home to spirits and strange mists, a place of transformation and danger. He had crossed it countless times, treading carefully among glittering blue and green damselflies while tracking a hare or a slow-moving grouse. He'd seen the same evening light in its pools of standing water that recalled a hero's footprints or fragments of firmament fallen to earth. At their edges he had crouched, watching crimson masses of bloodworms as they transformed almost before his eyes and rose from the water to join quivering clouds of midges that hovered, faintly droning, above. He would never see them again, for he had entered a place from which there was no return.

Trapped by the weight of his own body, he could feel himself sinking with every passing second, could feel his hands moving uselessly against the seeping walls of the bog hole. Letting go an involuntary howl, he began to twist and claw furiously, reverting to the instinctive behaviour of a trapped animal, baring his teeth and straining with every fibre, unable to reason or comprehend. But his feet were firmly mired in the slurry-like peat and would not come away. He was getting light-headed. His legs were numb, and as the frigid water seeped steadily higher, he began to tremble violently. Even as he felt the dread chill envelop him, he knew that his heart's blood would soon begin to slow. He ceased struggling and kept still, feeling each breath flow in and out, each one shallower than the last. A memory brushed like spider silk across his consciousness – a luminous face, a woman's voice soft against his ear. He had

sunk to his shoulders; soon he would be swallowed up, devoured by the insatiable earth, the origin and end of life.

In the last few moments, it was only instinct that kept his chin above the surface, as each involuntary shudder drew him further downward. The water stung as it touched his wounds, and began to trickle into his ears, slowly shutting out all sound but his own beating heart. Soon only his face and hands lingered above the surface, but his eyes remained open, staring upward, so that the last image imprinted there was the dim, familiar outline of a head and shoulders, framed in the jagged opening above him by the dying light of evening. His saviour, or his executioner? An instant later, living moss and damp peat showered down upon him from above, closing his eyes and filling his nostrils with the scent of sweet grass and heather as he abandoned all resistance and finally yielded to the bog's chill embrace.

BOOK ONE

Deep Crimson on Them

A Feidelm banfáid,
cia facci ar slúag.

Atchiu forderg forro,
atchiu ruad.

'Oh, Fedelm, woman prophet,
what do you see on the host?'

'I see deep crimson on them,
I see red.'

— from the Old Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge*
(The Cattle Raid of Cooley)

Chapter 1

Seventy miles straight west of Dublin, at the northern perimeter of Loughnabrone Bog in the far western reaches of County Offaly, Nora Gavin's mind had already formed a distinct image of the man she was supposed to rescue today. It was not a complete figure she imagined, for the man she was going to see had been cut in half – jaggedly severed by the sharp blade of an earth-moving machine. The image lodged in the back of her mind was of frayed and slightly shrunken sinews, ragged patches of skin tanned brown from centuries spent steeping in the bog's cold, anaerobic tea. She knew she should feel grateful that even a portion of the body was intact; a few more seasons of turf-cutting and he might have been completely scattered to the winds. It made her suddenly angry to think that an entire human being had been preserved for so long by the peat, only to be destroyed in the blink of an eye by the thoughtless actions of men and their machines. But the bleak reality was that she might never get the chance to examine an intact bog body, so she had to make the most of each fragmentary opportunity.

It was Monday, the seventeenth of June. The excavation season had begun only a week earlier, and the bog man had turned up the previous Friday. The business Nora would be engaged in today was just a recovery operation, to salvage the torso dug up by a Bord na Móna excavator. It remained to be seen whether the body's lower half was still embedded

in the bank beside the drain. That mystery would probably have to wait for the full excavation – something that would take several weeks to coordinate, since it involved a whole crew of wetlands archaeologists, forensic entomologists, environmental scientists who analysed pollen and coleoptera and ash content, and experts on metal detection and film documentation. But since the bog man's upper half had been removed from his peaty grave, the recovery was urgent. Without the proper conservation procedures, ordinary bacteria and mould would start their destructive march in a matter of hours.

Nora glanced down at the large-scale map she'd laid out on the passenger seat of the car. Driving into the West from Dublin, you couldn't be blamed for missing County Offaly. The two major motorways managed to skirt it almost entirely. The county had a reputation as a backwater, perhaps befitting a place that was one-third bogland. The Loughnabrone workshop, her destination, showed as a cluster of industrial buildings on a dryland peninsula, a scrap of solid earth jutting out into the bog. Bord na Móna, also known as the Turf Board, was Ireland's official peat-production industry, and had dozens of operations like this all over the midlands. The bog itself appeared on the map as a set of irregular blank areas between the River Brosna, and the hectares of arable land that enclosed it.

She was surrounded on all sides by bogland, and had evidently missed the turn for the workshop. It seemed too arduous to backtrack; the easiest way to navigate now might be to steer towards the looming pair of bell-shaped cooling towers at the nearby power station. That should put her within a quarter-mile of the workshop. The power station looked like the old nuclear plants at home, but chances were the electricity produced here had always been generated by burning peat. No smoke poured from the stacks now, but

the towers remained still and silent landmarks in this strange landscape.

Scale was definitely the overpowering element here, where each furrow was fourteen metres across, and human beings were reduced to miniature among the gargantuan machines and the mile-long mountains of milled peat. Deep drains cut through the bog at right angles to the road. Ahead, Nora saw an enormous tractor with fat tyres that kept it from sinking in the spongy peat. The extensions suspended from its cab on long cables looked like vast wings. Bearing down on her, with two front windows glinting in the sunlight, it took on the aspect of a monstrous mechanical dragonfly. Far in the distance, several similar strange contraptions in a staggered formation churned up huge clouds of brown peat dust. She drove on, towards the very centre of the vast brown-black desert.

The sun was still low, but strong. Racing before her on the road she could see the car silhouetted in the golden morning light, a shape that contained her own weirdly elongated shadow. There was no one else on the road for miles. She opened the window and thrust out her hand out into the wind, the way she sometimes had as a child, and felt her whole arm swimming, salmon-like, against the strong current of the cool morning air. She glanced over at the passenger seat and imagined her sister Tríona as a child, red hair trailing down her back, her arm out the window as well. She grasped Tríona's hand as she had done years before, and they flew along together for a few moments, revelling in their sisterly conspiracy of wickedness, and giddy with the sensation of being at least partially airborne. Suddenly her mother's voice echoed in her head: *Ah, Nora, please don't. You know she insists on copying everything you do.* Tríona's bright face vanished, and Nora pulled her arm back into the car. There was little comfort in such

memories. Tríona was gone, and these fleeting images had become a precious, finite commodity.

Eventually, the road's surface became so uneven that Nora had to slow to a crawl to keep her head from banging against the roof of the car. Bog roads provided only the illusion of solidity; they were merely thin ribbons of asphalt, light and flexible enough to float above the shifting, soggy earth beneath. At this level, right down on the surface of the bog, you could see an unnatural barrenness where the earth had been stripped, year after year, to prevent the spread of living vegetation. It was only in comparing this landscape to what she knew of ordinary boglands that she could understand what was missing here – the teeming proliferation that existed in a natural bog – and could grasp the fact that the dark drains stretching to the horizon and beyond were actually bleeding away the life-giving water.

She imagined what the bog must have seemed to ancient people – a strange liminal region, half water and half earth. To them it had been the centre of the world, a holy place, a burial ground, a safe for stowing treasure, a region of the spirits. She tried to conjure up an image of what this spot might have been like thousands of years before, when giant oaks still towered overhead. She had seen their sodden, twisted stumps resurrected from peaty lakes, the trunks used up for ritual structures, or plank roads to traverse the most dangerous marshy places.

It was astonishing to her that bogs, despite their role as collective memory, were still being relinquished to feed the ever-growing hunger for electric power. Up until a hundred years ago, the bogs had been considered useless, mere wasteland. The men of science had gone to work on them, devising ever more efficient ways to harvest peat – only to find out, too late, that this was a misguided effort, and perhaps the wrong choice all along. Twenty years from

now, the outdated power plants would be gone. This bog would be stripped right down to the marl subsoil, and would have to begin anew the slow reversion to its natural state, layer by layer, over the next five, or eight, or ten thousand years. Without even realizing it, the men of science and progress had given up a book of the past, whose pages contained an incredible record – of weather patterns, and human and animal and plant life over several millennia – all for jobs in a backwater wasteland, for a few paltry years' worth of electricity.

Since prehistoric times, bogs had served as sacrificial sites; it was strange to think that the bogs themselves had become the sacrifice. She thought back to the archaeology books she'd been reading steadily all winter. She had found a kind of fascination in the description of hoards recovered from watery places, including many of the artefacts she'd seen on display in the National Museum. Most had been discovered completely by accident. She had been stunned by the beauty and complexity of the ancient designs. Some of the objects were distinctly military: ornately patterned bronze swords and daggers, spearheads, serpentine trumpets like something from a fairy story. Others suggested domestic, or ritual purposes: gold bracelets and collars, fantastic brooches and fibulae that mimicked bird or animal forms, mirrors with a multiplicity of abstract faces hidden in their graved decoration. The reason these objects had been deposited in lakes and bogs remained shrouded in mystery, the enduring secret of a people without written language.

And of course it was not only artefacts that had been found in bogs; nearly a hundred sets of human remains had turned up as well. Judging by the bare facts in the gazetteer of bog bodies she'd been updating, some people had simply gone astray and fallen into the deadly morass; the careful

inhumations might have been ordinary burials, or suicides, or childbed deaths refused burial in hallowed ground. But there was still vigorous debate surrounding the assertion that some older bog bodies had been victims of human sacrifice. And this was not the only point of argument. The latest studies showed the difficulty of pinpointing radiocarbon dates, and experts debated whether bog men had coloured themselves blue with copper or had just absorbed the element from the surrounding peat, even whether they had been murdered, or had been the subjects of ill-fated rescues. Nothing was absolutely certain. When it came down to hard facts, all they really had were dots on a map, the points at which objects had been found.

Driving across the border into Offaly, she had been acutely aware that she was approaching the ancient region known as the Mide, the centre. It was a place that had been ascribed all sorts of magical attributes, the powerful locus represented by the central axes of the crosses on Bronze Age sun-discs, from a time when the world had been divided up into four quadrants, North, South, East, and West, and a shadowy central place, which, because it was not There, had to be Here. Where was her own Mide, her centre, that point where all the pieces of her life met and intersected at one infinitesimal but infinitely powerful place?

She had tried very hard to avoid thinking about Cormac on the trip down here, but she felt her resolve weakening. It was just over a year since she'd made almost the same journey westward, to the place where their lives had been bound together by the untimely death of a beautiful red-haired girl whose head they'd recovered from the bog. She hadn't meant to find someone like Cormac Maguire. She hadn't meant to find anyone; she'd come to this place as an escape, a retreat from too much feeling. It hadn't happened suddenly, but gradually, like a slow envelopment.

There was no question that she had soaked up the warmth he offered like a person nearly perished from cold, but were those moments of intense happiness real, or only an illusion? It seemed as if the entire year had passed like a dream. With the coming of spring, she'd known that the dream couldn't last; that certain knowledge was like a goad in her side, sharp and getting sharper with each passing day. She couldn't wait to see him, but her eager anticipation was tempered by mounting anxiety.

She had no business fashioning a life for herself here. Her stay in Ireland was supposed to be temporary, a period of respite after her long struggle to find some semblance of justice for Tríona's terrible death. Sometimes she dreamt of her sister's battered face, and woke up weeping and distracted. The dream would linger, encroaching on her waking mind, a heaviness remembered in body and spirit that sometimes took days to dissipate. Worse still were the dreams where Tríona came back, whole and restored, as if she'd never been away. Though Nora knew these visions to be false even as her subconscious conjured them, upon waking from such a dream she still experienced new shock and sorrow.

She had picked up the phone two days ago, and heard the tremor in her mother's voice: 'He's getting married again.' There had been no need to ask; Nora knew she meant Peter Hallett – Tríona's husband, and her killer.

Remembering the conversation, Nora suddenly felt her stomach heave. Afraid she was about to be sick, she brought the car to a screeching halt and climbed out, leaving the car door open and the engine running. She walked back along the road the way she'd just come. If she forced herself to breathe slowly, she might be able to keep from hyperventilating. She sat down abruptly on the roadside and dropped her head between her knees, feeling the pulse pounding in her temples.

After a moment the steady noise of the wind began to calm her, and she felt the nausea subside. Suddenly buffeted by a strong gust from behind, she raised her head. The breeze encircled her, then picked up a scant handful of peat dust. The tiny whirlwind danced over the surface of the bog, spinning eastward into the low morning sun, and then dissipated, nothing more than a breath of air, briefly embodied and made visible.

She sat for a moment longer, listening to the strange music of the wind as it whistled through the furze bushes along the road, watching the bog cotton's tiny white flags spell out a cryptic message in semaphore. Bits of organic debris danced overhead, caught in the updraught, and the strangely dry air contained something new, a mineral taste she could not readily name. When she stood up to return to the car, Nora understood instantly what had given the air its metallic flavour: an immense, rapidly moving wall of brown peat dust bore down on her from only about thirty yards away. She froze, momentarily stunned by the spectacle of the storm's overwhelming magnitude, then made a headlong dash for the car; but it was already too late. The dust cloud engulfed her, along with the road and the vast expanse of bog on either side, closing her eyes and filling her nostrils and throat with stinging peat. Suddenly unable to gauge any distance, she ran blindly until her right knee banged hard into the car's rear bumper. The glancing pain took her breath away. She didn't dare open her lips to cry out, but limped around to the driver's side and climbed in, closing the door against the dust that tried to follow her. After desperately trying to hold her breath out in the storm, she gasped for air and promptly burst into a coughing fit. Once the car door was closed, the dust could not penetrate the sealed windows, but a fair amount of peat had blown in through the open door, and now the tiny airborne

particles began to settle, covering the seats and dashboard with fine dark-brown organic material.

The outside world had disappeared, and Nora gripped the steering-wheel, feeling like a cocooned caterpillar at the mercy of the wild elements. It was far too dangerous to try driving across a bog when visibility was so poor. There was little she could do except wait, and listen to the wind whistling under the car and around the radio antenna, furiously pummelling away at any object, animate or inanimate, that had the audacity to remain upright in its path. She rubbed her throbbing knee; she would have a lovely bruise tomorrow.

All at once, she made out a figure standing just ahead of the car. Although its general shape was human, the face was strange and horrible: huge exophthalmic eyes stood out above a flat black snout. She and the insect-like thing stared at one another for a surreal moment, then another heavy gust blew up, and it was gone. A second later, a solid thump sounded on the window just beside her ear, and she felt a rush of fear, until at last it began to dawn on her that the mutant creature was actually nothing more dreadful than a Bord na Móna worker in an old-fashioned gas mask. She could see that the man was trying to communicate, but his voice was hopelessly muffled by the mask and the wind. He pointed a gloved finger to her, then to himself, and then forward. He wanted her to follow him. The wind was beginning to diminish, and she could just make out the back end of a tractor about ten yards in front of the car. She realised in horror that she might have crushed her rescuer if she'd simply put the car in gear and started driving. She watched through gusty clouds of peat as he climbed up into the cab and turned the tractor around. When he drove forward, she followed.

It was impossible to tell how far they travelled; time and

distance were distorted in the strange dark fog. Gradually the peat cloud began to thin away, the world began to reappear, and they were once again in the clear air. Nora watched the brown wall recede eastward, all the while keeping a close tail on the lumbering tractor until they reached the Bord na Móna sign at the entrance to Loughnabrone.

Inside the grounds, the driver pulled up to a row of hangar-like metal sheds and climbed down from the cab; Nora caught up to him just as he was entering the large open door of a workshop, where several other men in grease-spotted blue boiler suits toiled over a huge earth-moving blade with acetylene torches.

'Excuse me,' she said, reaching out to touch the man's arm in case he hadn't heard her. The other workers looked up, their torches still blazing. The tractor driver turned to face her, and it was only then that the gas mask came off, revealing a youthful face with strong features and intensely blue eyes.

'Excuse me – I just wanted to say thanks.' She offered her hand. 'Nora Gavin.'

He looked at her for a split second, then dropped his gaze, and Nora wondered whether it was her red eyes, her dirty face, or her obvious American accent – or a combination of all those things – that had this young man so mortified. He took her hand very briefly. 'Charlie Brazil,' he finally said, pronouncing his surname the Irish way, with the emphasis on the first syllable. He coloured deeply, and glanced at the other men, who had stopped working when she approached.

'Well – thanks, Charlie. I'm grateful for your help.' She could feel the workmen's eyes upon them, and understood that all poor Charlie Brazil wanted was to be shut of her as quickly as possible. 'I'm afraid I have to ask another favour. Could you point me towards the manager's office?'

'Over there,' he said, indicating a single-storey pebble-dashed building about fifty yards away.

'Right,' she said. 'Thanks again.' Heading towards the manager's office, she heard a leering voice behind her inquire: 'What'd you do for the lady, Charlie?' There was an unsettling chorus of sniggers, and Charlie Brazil's deep voice muttered darkly: 'Ah, feck off and leave me alone, why don't you?'