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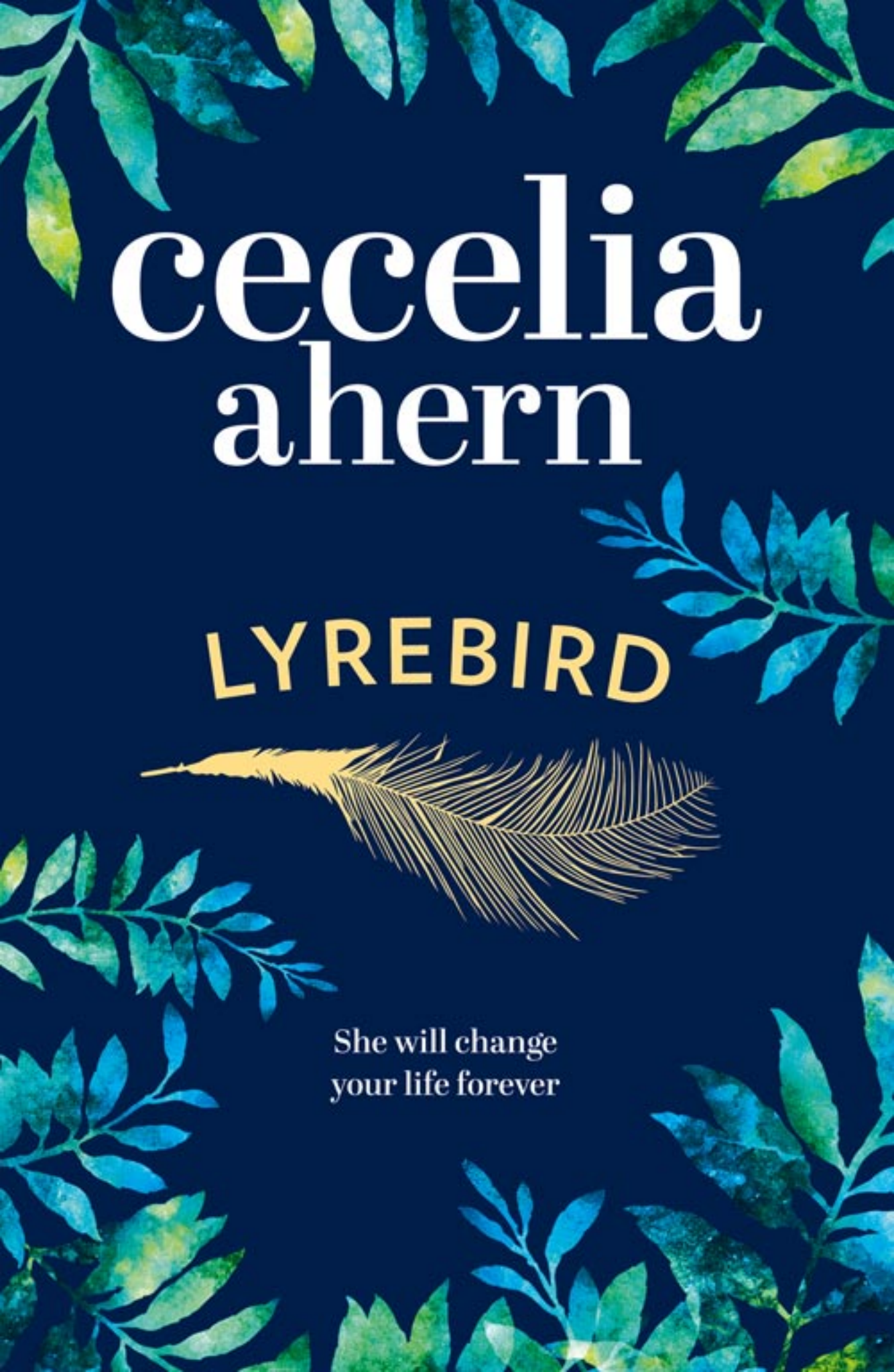
Lyrebird

Written by Cecelia Ahern

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LYREBIRD



She will change
your life forever

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LYREBIRD



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It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent. It is one that is most responsive to change.

Attributed to Charles Darwin

PROLOGUE

He moves away from the others, their constant chat blending into a tedious monotonous sound in his head. He's not sure if it's the jet lag or if he's simply not interested in what's going on. It could be both. He feels elsewhere, detached. And if he yawns one more time, she'll have no hesitation in calling him out on it.

They don't notice him break away from them, or if they do, they don't comment. He carries his sound equipment with him; he'd never leave it behind – not just because of its value, but because it's a part of him by now, like another limb. It's heavy but he's used to the weight, oddly is comforted by it. He feels a part of him is missing without it, and walks like he's carrying the audio bag even when he isn't, his right shoulder dropped to one side. It might mean he's found his calling as a sound recordist, but his subconscious connection to it does nothing good for his posture.

He walks away from the clearing, away from the bat house, the cause of the conversation, and moves towards

the forest. The fresh cool air hits him as he reaches the edge.

It's a hot June day, the sun beats down on the top of his head and is baking the naked flesh at the back of his neck. The shade is inviting, a group of midges do high-speed set-dancing in paths of sunlight looking like mythical insects. The woodland floor is cushioned and springy beneath his feet with layers of fallen leaves and bark. He can no longer see the group he left behind and he tunes them out, filling his lungs with the scent of refreshing pine.

He places the audio bag down beside him and leans the boom mic against a tree. He stretches, enjoys the cracks of his limbs and flexing of his muscles. He lifts off his sweater, his T-shirt rising up with it, revealing his stomach, then ties it around his waist. He pulls the hair bobbin from his long hair and ties it up tighter in a topknot, enjoying the air on his sticky neck. Four hundred feet above sea-level he looks out over Gougane Barra and sees tree-covered mountains extending as far as the eye can see, not a sign of a neighbour for miles. One hundred and forty-two hectares of national park. It's peaceful, serene. He has an ear for sound, has acquired it over time and has had to. He's learned to listen to what you don't immediately hear. He hears the birds chirping, the rustle and crack of creatures moving all around him, the low hum of a tractor in the distance, building work hidden in the trees. It's tranquil, but alive. He inhales the fresh air and as he does he hears a twig snap behind him. He whips around quickly.

A figure darts into hiding behind a tree.

'Hello?' he calls out, hearing the aggression in his voice at being caught off guard.

The figure doesn't move.

'Who's there?' he asks.

She peeks out briefly from behind the trunk, then

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disappears again, like she's playing a game of hide-and-seek. An odd thing happens. He now knows he's safe but his heart starts pounding; the reverse of what it should be doing.

He leaves his equipment behind and slowly walks towards her, the crunch and snap of the floor beneath him revealing his every move. He makes sure to keep space between them, making a wide circle around the tree she hides behind. Then she comes into full view. She tenses, as if readying herself for defence, but he holds his hands up in the air, palms flat, as though in surrender.

She would almost be invisible or camouflaged in the forest if it weren't for her white blonde hair and green eyes, the most piercing he's ever seen. He's completely captivated.

'Hi,' he says, softly. He doesn't want to scare her away. She seems fragile, on the edge of fleeing, perched on her toes, ready to take off at any moment if he takes a wrong step. So he stops moving, feet rooted to the ground, hands up flat, as if he's holding up the air, or maybe it's the air that's holding him up.

She smiles.

The spell is cast.

She's like a mythical creature, he can barely see where the tree begins and she ends. The leaves that act as their ceiling flutter in the breeze, causing rippling light effects on her face. They're seeing each other for the first time, two complete strangers, unable to take their eyes off each other. It is the moment his life splits; who he was before he met her and who he becomes after.

Part 1

One of the most beautiful and rare and probably the most intelligent of all the world's creatures is that incomparable artist, the Lyrebird . . . The bird is extremely shy and almost incredibly elusive . . . characterised by amazing intelligence.

To say that he is a being of the mountains only partially explains him. He is, certainly, a being of the mountains but no great proportion of the high ranges that mark and limit his domain can claim him for a citizen . . . His taste is so exacting and definite, and his disposition so discriminating, that he continues to be selective in these beautiful mountains, and it was a waste of time to seek him anywhere save in situations of extraordinary loveliness and grandeur.

Ambrose Pratt, *The Lore of the Lyrebird*



That Morning

‘Are you sure you should be driving?’

‘Yes,’ Bo replies.

‘Are you sure she should be driving?’ Rachel repeats, asking Solomon this time.

‘Yes,’ Bo replies again.

‘Is there any chance you could stop texting while you’re driving? My wife is heavily pregnant, the plan is to meet my firstborn,’ Rachel says.

‘I’m not texting, I’m checking my emails.’

‘Oh well then,’ Rachel rolls her eyes, and looks out the window as the countryside races past. ‘You’re speeding. And you’re listening to the news. And you’re jet-lagged to fuck.’

‘Put your seatbelt on if you’re so worried.’

‘Well, that’s reassuring,’ Rachel mumbles as she squeezes her body into the seat behind Bo and clicks her seatbelt

into place. She'd rather sit behind the passenger seat where she can keep a better eye on Bo's driving, but Solomon has the seat pushed so far back that she can't fit.

'And I'm not jet-lagged,' Bo says, finally putting her phone down, to Rachel's relief. She waits to see Bo's two hands return to the wheel but instead Bo turns her attention to the radio and flicks through the stations. 'Music, music, music, why does nobody talk any more?' she mutters.

'Because sometimes the world needs to shut up,' Rachel replies. 'Well, whatever about you, *he's* jet-lagged. He doesn't know where he is.'

Solomon opens his eyes tiredly to acknowledge them both. 'I'm awake,' he says lazily, 'I'm just, you know . . .' he feels his eyelids being pulled closed again.

'Yeah, I know I know, you don't want to see Bo driving, I get it,' Rachel says.

Just off a six-hour flight from Boston, which landed at five thirty this morning, Solomon and Bo had grabbed breakfast at the airport, picked up their car, then Rachel, to drive three hundred kilometres to County Cork in the southwest of Ireland. Solomon had slept most of the way in the plane but it still wasn't enough, yet every time he'd opened his eyes he'd found Bo wide awake spending every second watching as many in-flight documentaries as she could.

Some people joke about living on pure air. Solomon is convinced that Bo can live on information alone. She ingests it at an astronomical rate, always hungry for it, reading, listening, asking, seeking it out so that it leaves little room for food. She barely eats, the information fuels her but never fills her, the hunger for knowledge and information is never satiated.

Dublin based, Solomon and Bo had travelled to Boston

to accept an award for Bo's documentary, *The Toolin Twins*, which had won Outstanding Contribution to Film and Television at the Boston Irish Reporter Annual Awards. It was the twelfth award they'd picked up that year, after numerous others they'd been honoured with.

Three years ago they had spent a year following and filming a pair of twins, Joe and Tom Toolin, who were seventy-seven years old at the time. They were farmers who lived in an isolated part of the Cork countryside, west of Macroom. Bo had discovered their story whilst researching for a separate project, and they had quickly taken over her heart, her mind and consequently her life. The brothers lived and worked together all their lives, neither of them had ever had a romantic relationship with a woman, or with anyone for that matter. They had lived on the same farm since birth, had worked with their father and then taken it over when he passed away. They worked in harsh conditions, and lived in a very basic home of humble means, a stone-floored farmhouse, sleeping in twin beds with nothing but an old radio to keep them entertained. They rarely left the land, received their weekly shopping from a local woman who delivered their meagre items, and did general housekeeping. The Toolin brothers' relationship and outlook on life had torn at the heartstrings of the audience as it had the film crew, for beneath their simplicity was an honest and clear understanding of life.

Bo had produced and directed it under her production company, Mouth to Mouth productions, with Solomon on sound, Rachel on camera. They'd been a team for the past five years since their documentary, *Creatures of Habit*, which explored the falling number of nuns in Ireland. Bo and Solomon had been romantically involved for the past two years, since the unofficial wrap party of the documentary.

The Toolin Twins had been their fifth piece of work but their first major success, and this year they had been travelling the world going from one film festival or awards ceremony to another, where Bo had been accepting awards and had polished her speech to perfection.

And now they're on the way back to the Toolin twins' farm which they are so familiar with. But it is not to celebrate their recent successes with the brothers, it is to attend the funeral of Tom Toolin, the youngest brother by two minutes.

'Can we stop for something to eat?' Rachel asks.

'No need.' Bo reaches down to the floor on the passenger side, dangerously, one hand still on the wheel as the car swerves slightly on the motorway.

'Jesus,' Rachel says, not able to watch.

She retrieves three power bars and throws one to her. 'Lunch,' she rips hers open with her teeth, and takes a bite. She chews aggressively, as if it's a pill she must swallow, food for fuel, not food for enjoyment.

'You're not human, you know that,' Rachel says, opening her power bar and studying it with disappointment. 'You're a monster.'

'But she's my little inhumane monster,' Solomon says groggily, reaching out to squeeze Bo's thigh.

She grins.

'I preferred it when you two weren't fucking,' Rachel says, looking away. 'You used to be on my side.'

'He's still on your side,' Bo says, in a joking tone but meaning it.

Solomon ignores the dig.

'If we're going to pay our respects to poor Joe, why did you make me pack all my gear?' Rachel asks, mouth full of nuts and raisins, knowing exactly why but in the mood

to stir things up even further. Bo and Solomon were fun like that, never completely stable, always easy to tip.

Solomon's eyes open as he studies his girlfriend. Two years together romantically, five years professionally and he can read her like a book.

'You don't actually think that Bo is going to this funeral out of the goodness of her heart, do you?' he teases. 'Award-winning internationally renowned directors have to be receptacles for stories at *all* times.'

'That sounds more like it,' Rachel says.

'I don't have a heart of stone,' Bo defends herself. 'I re-watched the documentary on the flight. Do you remember who had the final words? Tom. "Any day you can walk away from your bed is a good day." My heart is broken for Joe.'

'Fractured, at least,' Rachel teases, gently.

'What's Joe going to do?' Bo continues, ignoring Rachel's jab. 'Who can he talk to? Will he remember to eat? Tom was the one who organised the food deliveries *and* he cooked.'

'Tins of soup, beans on toast and tea and toast isn't exactly cooking. I think Joe will easily be able to take up the gauntlet,' Rachel smiles, remembering the men sitting down together to shovel hard bread into watery soup in the winter afternoons when darkness had already fallen.

'For Bo, that's a three course meal,' Solomon teases.

'Imagine how lonely life will be for him now, up that mountain, especially in the dead of winter, not seeing anyone for a week or more at a time,' Bo says.

They allow a moment of silence to pass while they ponder Joe's fate. They knew him better than most. He and Tom had let them into their lives and had been open to every question.

While filming, Solomon often wondered how the brothers could ever function without each other. Apart from the market, and tending to their sheep, they rarely left the farm. A housekeeper would see to their domestic needs, which seemed an inconvenience to them rather than necessity. Meals were taken quickly and in silence, hurriedly shovelling food into their mouth before returning to their work. They were two peas in a pod, they would finish each other's sentences, move around each other with such familiarity it was like a dance, but not necessarily an elegant one. Rather, one that had been honed over time, unintentionally, unrealised. Despite its lack of grace, and maybe because of it, it was beautiful to see, intriguing to watch.

It was always Joe and Tom, never Tom and Joe. Joe was the eldest by two minutes. They were identical in looks, and they gelled despite the difference in personalities. They made peculiar sense in a landscape that didn't.

There was little conversation between them, they had no need of explanation or description. Instead their communication relied on sounds that to them had meaning, nods of the head, shrugs, a wave of the hand, a few words here and there. It took a while for the film crew to understand whatever message had passed between them. They were so in tune they could sense each other's moods, worries, fears. They knew what the other was thinking at any given time, and they gave the beauty of this particular connection no thought whatsoever. They were often bamboozled by Bo's depth of analysis of them. Life is what it is, things are as they are, no sense analysing it, no sense trying to change what can't be changed, or understand what can't be understood.

'They didn't want anybody else because they had each other, they were each enough for one another,' Bo says,

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repeating a line she has said a thousand times in promotion for her documentary but still meaning every word. 'So am I chasing a story?' Bo asks. 'Fuck yeah.'

Rachel throws her empty wrapper over Bo's shoulder.

Solomon chuckles and closes his eyes. 'Here we go again.'



‘Wow,’ Bo says as the car crawls towards the church in its stunning surroundings. ‘We’re early. Rachel, can you get your camera set up?’

Solomon sits up, wide awake now. ‘Bo, we’re not filming the funeral. We can’t.’

‘Why not?’ she asks, brown eyes staring into his intently.

‘You don’t have permission.’

She looks around, ‘From who? This isn’t private property.’

‘Okay, I’m out,’ Rachel says, getting out of the car to avoid being caught up in another of their arguments. The tumultuous relationship is not just with Solomon, it’s anyone who comes into contact with Bo. She’s so stubborn, she brings the argument out in even the most placid of people, as though the only way she knows to communicate or to learn is by pushing things so far that they spark a debate. She doesn’t do it for the enjoyment of the debate; she needs the discussion to learn how other people think. She’s not wired like most people. Though she’s sensitive, she is more

sensitive to people's stories, not necessarily in the method of discovering them. She's not always wrong, Solomon has learned plenty from her over time. Sometimes you have to push at awkward or uncomfortable moments, sometimes the world needs people like Bo to push the boundaries in order to encourage people to open up and share the story, but it's about choosing the right moments and Bo doesn't always get that right.

'You haven't asked *Joe* if you can film,' Solomon explains.

'I'll ask him when he arrives.'

'You can't ask him before his brother's funeral. It's insensitive.'

She looks around at the view and Solomon can see her brain ticking over.

'But maybe some of the funeral attendees will do an interview afterwards, tell us stories about Tom we didn't know, or get their opinion on how they think Joe's life will be from now on. Maybe Joe will want to talk to us. I want to get a sense of what his life is like now, or what it's going to be like.' She says all this while spinning around, seeing the view from 360 degrees.

'Pretty fucking lonely and miserable, I'd imagine,' Solomon snaps, losing his temper and getting out of the car.

She looks at him, taken aback, and calls after him. 'And after that we'll get you some *food*. So that you don't bite my head off.'

'Show some empathy, Bo.'

'I wouldn't be here if I didn't care.'

He glares at her, then having enough of the argument he senses he will lose he stretches his legs and looks around.

Gougane Barra lies to the west of Macroom in Co. Cork. Its Irish name *Guagán Barra*, meaning 'The Rock of Barra',

derived from Saint Finbar, who built a monastery on an island in a nearby lake in the sixth century. Its secluded position meant St Finbar's Oratory was popular during the time of Penal Laws, for celebrating the illegal Catholic Mass. Nowadays, its stunning surroundings makes it popular for weddings. Solomon is unsure as to why Joe chose this chapel; he's sure Joe doesn't follow trends, nor does he go for romantic settings. The Toolin farm is as remote as you can imagine, and while it must be part of a parish, he's not sure which. He knows the Toolin twins were not religious men; unusual for their generation, but they're unusual men.

He may not feel it's right interviewing Joe on the day of his brother's funeral but he does have some of his own questions he'd like answering. Despite his frustration with Bo for overstepping boundaries, he always benefits from her doing so.

Solomon takes off on his own to record. Now and then Bo points out an area, an angle, or an item that she would like Rachel to capture, but mostly she leaves them to their own devices. This is what Solomon likes about working with Bo. Not unlike the Toolin twins, Bo, Solomon and Rachel understand how each member of the team prefers to work and they give each other the space to do that. Solomon feels a freedom on these jobs that is lacking in the other work he takes on purely to pay the bills. A winter spent filming unusual body parts for a TV show *Grotesque Bodies*, followed by summer shooting at a reality fat fit club that sucked the life from him. He is grateful for these documentaries with Bo, for her curiosity. What irritates him about her are the very skill sets that help set him free from his regular day-jobs.

An hour into their filming, the funeral car arrives, closely

followed by Joe, eighty years old, behind the wheel of the Land Rover. Joe climbs out of the jeep, wearing the same dark brown suit, sweater and shirt that they've seen on him hundreds of times. Instead of his Wellington boots he wears a pair of shoes. Even on this sunny day he wears what he'd wear in the depths of winter, perhaps a hidden layer less. A tweed cap covers his head.

Bo goes to him immediately. Rachel and Solomon follow.

'Joe,' Bo says, reaching out to him and shaking his hand. A hug would have been too much for him, not being comfortable with physical affection. 'I'm so sorry for your loss.'

'You didn't have to come,' he says, surprised, looking around at the three of them. 'Weren't you in America when I rang you?' he asks, as if they were on another planet.

'Yes, but we came home straight away to be here for you. Could we film, Joe? Would that be okay? People who watched your story would like to know how you're doing.'

Solomon tenses up at Bo's nerve but she also amuses him, he finds her gutsiness, her honesty, remarkable and rare.

'Ara go on,' says Joe, waving his hand dismissively as if it makes no difference to him either way.

'Can we talk to you afterwards, Joe? Is there a gathering planned? Tea, sandwiches, that kind of thing?'

'There's the graveyard and that's it. No fuss, no fuss. Back to business, I'm working for two now, aren't I?'

Joe's eyes are sad and tired with dark circles. The coffin is removed from the car and is placed on a trolley by the pallbearers. Including the film crew, there are a total of nine people in the church.

The funeral is short and to the point, the eulogy read by the priest, who mentions Tom's work ethic, his love for his

land, his long-departed parents and his close relationship with his brother. The only movement the stoic Joe makes is to remove his cap when Tom's coffin is lowered into the ground at the graveyard. After that, he pops it back on his head, and walks to his jeep. In his head, Solomon can almost hear him say, 'That's that.'

After the burial, Bo interviews Bridget the housekeeper, though it's a title that's used loosely as she merely delivers food and dusts the cobwebs from their damp home. She's afraid to look at the camera in case it explodes in her face, looking defensive as though every question is an accusation. Local garda Jimmy, the Toolin twins' animal feed supplier and a neighbouring farmer whose sheep share the mountainous land with theirs, all refuse an interview.

The Toolin farm is a thirty-minute drive, far from anything, deep in the heart of the mountainside.

'Are there books in the Toolin house?' Bo asks out of nowhere. She does that often, blurts out random questions and thoughts as she slots the various pieces of information that come from different places together in her head to tell one clear story.

'I've no idea,' Solomon says, looking at Rachel. Rachel would have a better visual image and memory than any of them.

Rachel thinks about it, re-runs her shot-list in her head. 'Not in the kitchen.' She's silent while she runs through the house. 'Not in the bedroom. Not on open shelves, anyway. They have bedside lockers, could be in there.'

'But nowhere else.'

'No,' Rachel says, certain.

'Why do you ask?' Solomon asks.

'Bridget. She said that Tom was an "avid reader".' Bo scrunches her face up. 'I wouldn't peg him as a reader.'

‘I don’t think you can tell if someone’s a reader or not by looking at them.’

‘Readers definitely always wear glasses,’ Rachel jokes.

‘Tom never mentioned books. We lived their entire schedule with them for a year. I never saw him read, even hold a book. They didn’t read newspapers, neither of them. They listened to the radio. Weather reports, sports and *sometimes* the news. Then they’d go to bed. Nothing about reading.’

‘Maybe Bridget made it up. She was very nervous about being on camera,’ Solomon says.

‘She was very detailed about buying books for him at second-hand shops and charity sales. I believe she bought the books, I just can’t figure out why we never saw one book in the house and neither of them reading. That’s something I would have wanted to know about. What did Tom like to read? Why? And if he did, was it a secret?’

‘I don’t know,’ Solomon says, yawning, never really hung up on the minor details that Bo dissects, particularly now, as the hunger and tiredness kick in again. ‘People say odd things when they’ve a camera pointed at their face. What do you think, Rachel?’

Rachel is silent for a moment, giving it more clout than Solomon did. ‘Well he’s not reading anything now,’ she says.

They arrive at the Toolin farmhouse and are more than familiar with the land; they spent many dark mornings and nights, in torrential rain, traipsing over this treacherous land. The brothers had separated the work. As hill sheep farmers, they had split their responsibilities from the beginning and stuck to that. It was a lot of work for little income, but they had each stuck to their designated roles since their father died.

‘Tell us what happened, Joe,’ Bo says gently.

Bo and Joe sit in the kitchen of the farmhouse on the only two chairs at the plastic table. It’s the main room of the house and contains an old electric cooker, the four hobs the only part of it in use. It’s cold and damp, even in this weather. There is one socket on the wall with an extension lead feeding everything in the kitchen: the electric cooker, the radio, the kettle, and the electric heater. An accident waiting to happen. The hum of the heater, Solomon’s sound enemy. The room – in fact the entire house – smells of dog because of the two border collies that live with them. Mossie and Ring, named after Mossie O’Riordan and Christy Ring who were instrumental in Cork’s victory in the All-Ireland Hurling final in 1952, one of the few times the boys travelled to Dublin with their father, one of the only interests they have outside of farming.

Joe sits in a wooden chair, quiet, elbows on the armrest and hands clasped at his stomach. ‘It was Monday. Bridget had dropped by with the food. Tom was to put it away. I went off. I came in for my tea and found him here on the floor. I knew right away that he was gone.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I put the food away. He hadn’t done that yet, so it was early enough when he died. Must have been soon after I left. Heart attack. Then I made a call . . .’ He nods at the phone on the wall.

‘You put the food away first?’ Bo asks.

‘I did.’

‘Who did you call?’

‘Jimmy. At the station.’

‘Do you remember what you said?’

‘I don’t know. “Tom’s dead”, I suppose.’

Silence.

Joe remembers that he's on camera, remembers the advice Bo gave him three years ago to keep talking so it's him that's telling the story. 'Jimmy said he'd have to ring the ambulance anyway, even though I knew there was no bringing him back. He came by himself then. We had a cuppa while we waited.'

'While Tom was on the floor?'

'Sure where would I move him?'

'Nowhere, I suppose,' Bo says, a faint smile on her lips. 'Did you say anything to Tom? While you were waiting for Jimmy and the ambulance.'

'Say anything to him?' he says, as if she's mad. 'Sure he was dead! Dead as dead can be. What would I be sayin' something for?'

'Maybe a goodbye or something. Sometimes people do that.'

'Ah,' he says dismissively, looking away, thinking of something else. Maybe of the goodbye he could have had, maybe of the goodbyes he'd already had, maybe of the ewes that needed to be milked, the paperwork that needed to be filled.

'Why did you choose the church today?'

'That's where Mammy and Daddy were married,' he says.

'Did Tom want his funeral to be held there?'

'He never said.'

'You never talked about your plans? What you'd like?'

'No. We knew we'd be buried with Mammy and Daddy at the plot. Bridget mentioned the chapel. It was a grand idea.'

'Will you be all right, Joe?' Bo asks, gently, her concern genuine.

'I'll have to be, won't I?' He gives a rare smile, a shy one, and he looks like a little boy.

‘Do you think you’ll get some help around here?’

‘Jimmy’s son. It’s been arranged. He’ll do some things when I need him. Lifting, the heavy work. Market days.’

‘And what about Tom’s duties?’

‘I’ll have to do them, won’t I?’ He shifts in his chair. ‘No one else left to be doing it.’

Both Joe and Tom were always amused by Bo’s questions. She asked questions that had obvious answers; they couldn’t understand why she questioned things so much, analysed everything, when to them that was that, all the time. Why question something when the solution was obvious? Why even try to find another solution when one would do?

‘You’ll have to talk to Bridget. Give her your shopping list. Cook,’ Bo reminds him.

He looks annoyed at that. Domesticity was never something he enjoyed, that was Tom’s territory, not that Tom enjoyed it either, he just knew if he was waiting for his brother to feed him, he’d die of starvation.

‘Did Tom like reading?’ she asks.

‘Ha?’ he asks her, confused. ‘I don’t think Tom ever read a book in his life. Not since school, anyway. Maybe the sports pages when Bridget brought the paper.’

Solomon can sense Bo’s excitement from where he stands, she straightens her back, ready to dive into what’s niggling at her.

‘When you put away the shopping on Monday, was there anything unusual in the bags?’

‘No.’

Understanding Joe’s grasp of the English language, she rephrases, ‘Was there anything different?’

He looks at her then, as if deciding something. ‘There was too much food, for a start.’

‘Too much?’

‘Two pans of bread. Two ham and cheese, sure I can’t remember what else.’

‘Any books?’

He looks at her again. The same stare. Interest piqued. ‘One.’

‘Can I see it?’

He stands and gets a paperback from a kitchen drawer. ‘There you go. I was going to give it to Bridget – thought it was hers, and the extras too.’

Bo studies it. A well-thumbed crime novel that Bridget had picked up from somewhere. She opens the inside hoping for an inscription but there’s nothing. ‘You don’t think Tom asked for this?’

‘Sure why would he? And if he did it wasn’t just his heart that there was something wrong with.’ He says this to the camera and chuckles.

Bo hangs on to the book. ‘Going back to Tom’s duties. What are the duties you have on the farm now?’

‘Same as usual.’ He thinks about it as if for the first time, all the things that Tom did during his day that he never thought about, or the things they used to discuss in the evening. ‘He saw to the well by the bat house. I haven’t been there for years. I’ll have to keep an eye on that, I suppose.’

‘You never mentioned the bat house before,’ Bo says. ‘Can you take us there?’

The four of them and one of the loyal sheepdogs get into Joe’s jeep. He drives them across the land, on dirt tracks that feel dangerous now, never mind during the winter on those stormy days or icy mornings. An eighty-year-old cannot do this alone, two eighty-year-olds were barely managing it. Bo hopes that Jimmy’s son is an able-bodied

young man who does more than Joe asks, because Joe's not a man to ask for help.

A rusted railing stops them in their tracks. Solomon beats Joe to it and jumps out of the jeep to push it open. He runs to catch up with them. Joe parks in a clearing by the forest, Solomon collects his equipment. They must walk up a trail the rest of the way. The dog, Mossie, races up ahead of them.

'Bad land, we could never do nothing with it, but we kept it nonetheless,' Joe tells them. 'In the thirties, Da planted Sitka spruce and lodgepole pine. Thrive in bad soils, good with strong winds. About twenty acres. You can see Gougane Barra Forest Park from up here.'

They walk through the trails and come to a clearing with a shed that was once painted white but now is faded, beaten away by time, and reveals the dull concrete beneath. The windows have been boarded up. Even on this beautiful day it's bleak, the austere outbuilding at odds with the beautiful surroundings.

'That's the bat house,' Joe explains. 'Hundreds of them in there. We used to play in there as boys,' he chuckles. 'We'd dare each other to go inside, lock the door and count for as long as we could.'

'When is the last time you were here?' Bo asks.

'Ah. Twenty years. More.'

'How often would Tom check this area?' Bo asks.

'Once, twice a week, to make sure the well wasn't contaminated. It's over there, behind the shed.'

'If you can't make money from this land, why didn't you sell it?'

'After Da died, the land was up for sale. Some Dublin lad wanted to build a house up here but couldn't do anything with that bat house. Environmental people' – he throws

his chin up in the air to note his annoyance – ‘they said the bats were rare. Couldn’t knock down the shed or build around it because it would ruin their flight path, so that was that. Took it off the market then. Mossie!’ Joe calls for his dog, who’s disappeared from view.

They cut filming. Rachel moves close to the bat house, presses her face up to the windows to see in through the cracks in the wood. Bo notices Solomon walk away, equipment in hand, and head towards the forest. She hopes he’s heard something interesting to record and so lets him go. Even if he hasn’t, she knows she’s gotten him and Rachel up early and driven them here with no food, and they can’t function without it, unlike her, and she’s starting to sense their irritation. She lets him go, for a few moments on his own.

‘Where’s the well?’

‘Up there, beyond the bat house.’

‘Would you mind if we filmed you checking the well?’ she asks.

He gives her that same grunt that she recognises as signalling he’ll do whatever she wants, he doesn’t care, no matter how odd he regards her.

While Rachel and Joe talk bats – Rachel can hold a conversation about just about anything – Bo takes a little wander, around the back of the bat house. There’s a cottage behind it, run-down, the outside in the same condition as the bat house, the white paint almost completely gone and the grey concrete dreary amidst all the green. Mossie wanders around in front of the cottage sniffing the ground.

‘Who lived here?’ Bo calls.

‘Ha?’ he shouts, unable to hear her.

She studies the cottage. This building has windows. Clean windows.

Joe and Rachel follow her and turn the corner into the path of the cottage.

‘Who lived here?’ Bo repeats.

‘My da’s aunt. Long time ago. She moved out, the bats moved in.’ He chuckles again. He closes his eyes while he tries to think of her name. ‘Kitty. We tormented the woman. She used to hit us with a wooden spoon.’

Bo moves away slightly, closer to the cottage, she studies the area. This house has a vegetable patch beside it, some fruit growing too. There are wildflowers sitting in a tall glass in one of the windows.

‘Joe,’ Bo says. ‘Who lives here now?’

‘Nobody. Bats maybe,’ he jokes.

‘But look.’

He looks. He takes in all that she has already absorbed. The fruit and vegetable garden, the cottage, the windows that are gleaming, the door painted green, fresher paint than anything else in the vicinity. He’s genuinely confused. She walks around the back. She finds a goat, two chickens wandering around.

Heart pounding, she calls out. ‘Somebody is living in there, Joe.’

‘Intruders? On my land?’ he says angrily, an emotion she has never seen from Joe Toolin or his brother in all her time with them.

Hands in thick fists by his side, he charges towards the cottage, as fast as he can, and she tries to stop him. Mossie follows him.

‘Wait, Joe, wait! Let me get Solomon! Solomon!’ she yells, not wanting to alert the person inside the cottage, but having no choice. ‘Rachel, film this.’ Rachel is already on the case.

But Joe doesn’t care about her documentary and places

his hand on the door knob. He's about to push open the door but stops himself – he's a gentleman, after all. He knocks instead.

Bo looks in the direction of the forest where Solomon disappeared, then back to the cottage. She could kill Solomon right now, she shouldn't have let him wander off, it was unprofessional of him. She let him leave because she knew he was famished, because as his girlfriend she knows how he becomes. Grumpy, unfocused, ratty. Again, one of the frustrating parts of being romantically linked with a colleague is actually caring when your decisions mean they go hungry. The sound will have to be compromised. At least they'll have a visual, they can add sound in after.

'Careful, Joe,' Rachel says. 'We don't know who's in there.'

There's no answer at the cottage and so Joe pushes open the door and steps inside. Rachel is behind him, and Bo hurries after.

'What the . . .' Joe stands in the centre of the room, looking around, scratching his head.

Bo quickly points out singular items she wants Rachel to capture.

It's a one-roomed cottage. There's a single bed by one wall, with a view through one of the small windows beside the vegetable patch. On the other side there's a natural fire, a cooker, not too dissimilar to the one in Joe's farmhouse, and an armchair beside shelves of books. The four shelves have been filled to the brim and stacks of books are piled neatly on the floor beside it.

'Books,' Bo says aloud, wonderingly.

There are a half-dozen sheepskin rugs on the floor, no doubt to warm the cold stone floor during the desperate winters in a house with no obvious heating other than the

fire. There's sheepskin across the bed, sheepskin on the armchair. A small radio sits alone on a side table.

It has a distinctly feminine feel. Bo's not exactly sure why she feels this. She knows it's biased to base this on the glass of flowers; there's no scent but it feels feminine, not the dirty rustic feel of Tom and Joe's farmhouse. This feels different. Cared for, lived in, and there's a pink cardigan folded over the top rail of a chair. She nudges Rachel.

'Got it already,' she says, the sweat pumping from her forehead.

'Keep filming, I'll be back in a minute,' Bo says and runs out of the cottage towards the forest.

'Solomon!' she yells at the top of her voice, knowing there are no neighbours around to disturb. She returns to the clearing in front of the bat house, sees him a short way down the hill in the forest, just standing there, looking at something, as though he's in a trance. His sound bag is on the ground a few feet away from him, his boom mic leaning up against the tree. The fact that he's not even working tips her over the edge.

'Solomon!' she yells, and he finally looks at her. 'We found a cottage! Someone lives there! Equipment, hurry, move, now!' She's not sure if the words she has used make sense or if they're in the right order, she needs him to move, she needs sound, she needs to capture the story.

But what Bo hears in response is a sound unlike anything she's heard before.