

A.M. SHINE



An Aries Book

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# Prologue

DECLAN

‘Take Gracie to her room and don’t come out, no matter what you hear.’

Chrissy’s parting glance was a snapshot of contempt, the worst of him having finally awoken the worst in her, and it was no less than he deserved. Their daughter had been warming by the fire, ten toes aglow, at peace amidst the panic. Her pyjamas were too short in the ankle and mottled overall with tired stains and bobbles. A new pair might have scrunched Gracie’s little face up into a smile, but Declan never considered that until Chrissy’s jewellery box had been stripped as clean as their savings. It would have been nice though to see it one last time: something so rare as a smile in a home where sorrow had long outstayed its welcome.

‘What are you going to do?’ Chrissy asked him from the doorway, holding on to Gracie’s skinny shoulders, her hands hidden neath those curls shimmering bronze in the half-light.

The woman’s eyes were dead as her voice, and it harrowed Declan to meet them.

‘I don’t know,’ he replied, giving her an honest answer for once.

His family receded into the darkness of the hallway before he'd chance to say sorry. Not that a word could have fixed the damage he'd done. Declan heard the door to Gracie's bedroom click softly into its frame. Cold floorboards creaked under Chrissy's feet before the chest of drawers was dragged across them. Bedsprings squeaked, lively enough to hint at who was responsible. A whisper was shushed. And then, in a house whose sounds travelled lightly as powder on a breeze, there was silence.

He'd spun so many lies around their innocence, entwining their fates with his own. Chrissy couldn't have known how dire their situation had become. If she had, then she was a far braver woman than Declan had ever given her credit for.

Sending them over to the mainland wasn't an option, not after what happened to the Corcorans. Nothing in nature could have risen the waves to rage the way they had that morning. Declan had never seen anything like it. The rocks skirting the shores of Croaghnekeela could raze the strongest hull to scrap. And after the capsize and the screams, the islanders had huddled together – united in shame and horror – watching as the blood of five bodies exploded in the seafoam. Declan still saw it whenever he closed his eyes, a scar on the mind, a memory scored too deeply to ever be forgotten.

He reached for the bottle glowing amber on the coffee table. A half-glass was poured before the trembling became too much to bear. Fingers flexed and clenched, reaching for a hope that wasn't there. Declan never let slip any clues as to what he was thinking unless he was selling them for a reason. But all those tells he'd taught himself to conceal at the poker table were now exposed, and the truth was bleeding from him like an open wound.

With the whiskey gulped back, he slammed down his glass. Chrissy would have heard it: his last drink, as if she'd have thought it possible until now. Declan slouched back in his armchair – a threadbare throne for a goddamn fool – abandoned by every doomed soul that'd ever crossed his own. The fire drew his gaze. The golden light of its flames sparkled atop the salt that Chrissy had sprinkled in long battlements along the hearth. Declan fidgeted around that band of pale skin where his father's watch used to be. Lost now, like everything else. A lifetime of regrets spiralled maddeningly around his thoughts – torturous glimpses of all those godsend he'd taken for granted, coupled with the solemn surety that they would never be his to hold again. A gambler's remorse. The pains of lost possibility. It's true what Fergal had said about him: if good luck were a blessing, then Declan O'Dwyer was more cursed than the Devil himself.

'Where are you, you bastard?' he grumbled, searching the shadows that draped between the lamplight of the room. 'Why don't you just get it over with?'

Declan still disbelieved that it had come to this. But the island was dying long before anyone realised it. If there'd been some early symptoms of its sickness, then nobody had the good mind back then to see them. And now it was too late. Croagnakeela had become a black heart festering in the bay, its inhabitants no better than maggots writhing in its salty air, waiting for dark wings to descend and devour them.

He had visited Finnerty's that afternoon, desperate enough to cast off his pride. The very air on the island felt tainted on that walk, soured by some sepsis rising up from the soil, as though a bloated corpse were bleeding rivers of black beneath it. Trees were few on Croagnakeela, but amidst that

westerly gale their leaves shivered like a thousand cymbals in the silence. And all the while that hill in the island's centre seemed to billow like some monstrous lung, as if the damned rock they lived on was alive, not just with life, but with hate and malice and an evil that no man could reason with.

The pub was a short walk from door to door, and yet Declan's shirt was soaked through when his knuckles found its wood. Firelight streamed down its two teary windows. But in lieu of the music and the laughter that'd once met his ears, there was only the reluctant rhythm of John Finnerty's shoes, approaching more out of obligation than the man's own free will. His pub had been a safe place for so many for so long. But nowhere was safe anymore. And some had learned that lesson in the worst ways imaginable.

The door cracked open just enough for John to peer an eye out. 'What do you want, Declan?' he asked, stern but unsteady. 'Shouldn't you be at home looking after Grace?'

Every other family on the island had locked themselves away to guard their young, lining their doors and windows with salt, as Chrissy had done. Not one amongst them could explain how they'd been taken. There was no sign of entry. No weaknesses that an intruder could target. Little consolation to those parents who'd awoken to find their child's bed empty. Three nights. Three more missing kids.

'I need a loan, John. It needn't be cash, so long as it has some value. I need something to give him.'

The publican's eyes narrowed. 'I've nothing to share, Declan. You know that. Whatever I've left I need to keep my own safe.'

'Please,' he said, closing his hands in prayer. 'I've lost everything. Chrissy has no idea.'

‘Go home, Declan. For once in your life would you ever look after that family of yours. You shouldn’t have left them to come here. Charity died on this island a long time ago.’

With that said, the door closed, and the click of Finnerty’s footsteps faded behind its wood, leaving Declan to traipse home, alone and none the richer.

The lamps in the sitting room now flickered like a flurry of winks forced on the eye. He looked to the hallway, that which led towards Gracie’s bedroom, and imagined his wife and child bundled up under the duvet, Chrissy hugging their daughter close, caressing her hair, listening out for those same haunting footsteps that had visited them these past nights.

The light bulbs faltered again, their filaments fizzling like scorched insects that’d flown too close to a flame.

‘You’re here, aren’t you?’ Declan asked as a sudden chill slithered over the knots of his spine. ‘You don’t have to do this, you know. We could come to some—’

In a blink, all of the lamps died in the same second, leaving only the firelight to gleam across the table’s dusty lacquer. Declan needed to know that he wasn’t to blame – that the game he’d played had been rigged from the start – and the proof he needed was right in front of him.

‘I never had a chance, did I?’ he whispered, snatching the deck up in his hand.

The cards, so familiar to Declan’s touch, were shuffled effortlessly, almost confidently, as if their dealer stood a chance of winning. The room grew colder. The flames burned a little weaker, like orange petals wilting in a frost. The cadent swish of the cards had drawn the evil closer, irresistible as blood to a beast. Declan leaned over the table and slid his glass aside. Chrissy would have heard that too. She’d probably guessed

what he was doing. Her husband never did know when to quit. He squeezed the deck in his hand, faces flat on his palm, breathing hard like a fighter stepping up to a bigger man.

‘What do you say?’ he grumbled, eyeing up the darkness flanking him on all sides. ‘A quick game of higher or lower? Who knows, maybe you’ll let me win this time.’

He slid off the top card and placed it down on the table.

*Eight of hearts.*

Of course, it had to be. The only number in the deck that offered him no advantage.

‘Higher,’ he spoke aloud, knowing that the other could hear him.

Declan drew the next.

*Seven of hearts.*

He’d left his hope at the door that night. Jesus, he’d abandoned that old dog long before it ever came to this.

‘Higher,’ he repeated as his nervous fingers pinched another card and set it down.

*Six of hearts.*

This was the way of it. Nothing he could do would ever change his luck.

‘I know you’re there,’ he said, casting his eyes about the black, seeing nothing and hearing less.

The next card was held aloft before he put it down.

‘Higher,’ Declan shouted, pursing his eyes shut.

Chrissy would have been listening. She’d have heard the desperation in his voice.

He opened his eyes and there it was, lucent in the firelight: proof of the trickster.

*Five of hearts.*

Declan threw the remaining cards towards the fire. A few

found its flames. Others scattered on the floor or were swallowed up by the darkness on either side.

‘All hearts,’ he muttered, running a hand down his face, ‘you son of a bitch.’

The air was tightening like a noose around his neck. Declan picked up the dice – six in all – and rolled them in his cupped hands, counting each precious moment, indulging one last time in that gambler’s optimism that maybe – just maybe – he could win this round.

‘Even numbers,’ he declared, casting them across the table as the first tears glazed his eyes.

The dice scattered, tumbling and cracking, until they came to rest in a perfect line.

Declan held his head in his hands, mesmerised by those numbers face up by the firelight – six little dots spread across six dice. *Odd*, every single one of them. Luck like that wasn’t possible. But never was a card drawn or a die cast without that thing watching from the darkness, torturing a man’s hopes into something unrecognisable.

Misty shadows infested the light in slow and sinister increments. His nostrils flared at the stench, like a bonfire of dead bodies burning, only without the smoke; Declan’s regrets were suffocating enough.

‘Is there nothing else I can give you?’ he pleaded, looking to his empty glass.

The room darkened as the firelight rolled into the hearth like a golden rug.

Declan hastily poured out one last measure. A quarter of the whiskey bottle remained. Maybe Gracie would have a taste for it someday, though he sure as hell hoped not. His little girl was better than that. He brought the glass to his

nose, inhaling deeply as a tear trickled down his cheek, but there was only that noxious taint in the air, denying him even that last pleasure.

‘There must be something else you want?’ he whispered, his heart thrumming with a pain that coursed across his whole chest, like a closed fist beating on the dark underside of a coffin lid.

From the darkness, footsteps stormed behind Declan’s shoulder, each one a roll of thunder that quaked through the floor. And there they stopped, behind his chair. Declan raised the whiskey to his wife and child. He hoped with all his heart that Gracie was too young to remember him and the horror that he’d invited into their home.

‘I’m sorry,’ he mouthed to them.

Chrissy would have heard his glass fall to the floor.

And then, only silence.