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The Nameless Dead

Written by Brian McGilloway

Published by Macmillan

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BRIAN McGILLOWAY

**THE
NAMELESS
DEAD**

MACMILLAN



First published 2012 by Macmillan
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-4472-0782-5

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Typeset by CPI Typesetting
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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For Bob McKimm

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Saturday, 27 October

Chapter One

The cadaver dog, a small black spaniel, was moving across the field towards the island's edge, its snout pressed close to the ground, its body twisting and flexible as it turned this way and that, following whatever scent it had picked up. It snuffled into the surface vegetation, then cut suddenly left and followed an alternative scent instead. The handler, trailing a few paces behind, did not look up, his attention focused on the animal before him, following its every move with grim determination.

Just beyond them, at the water's edge, gulls wheeled and circled, twisting in the wind. A heavy-bodied heron picked its way along the shoreline, its head angled towards the water, one beady black eye swivelling towards us. Around its feet, the river water lapped onto the gravel shore, instantly disappearing between the stones, then reappearing further down the beach as it drew away from us again towards the Northern side of the river.

The sky above us was heavy with rain clouds, the wind

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skittish along the river, running down the valley towards Derry. I shivered and zipped up my Garda overcoat.

An urgent yelping broke the silence. The dog had picked up on a scent it recognized. It raised its head and barked sharply, its ears pricked, its tail erect and wagging furiously. Its head lowered, it sniffed again at the ground, then began barking louder, shifting quickly back and forth as it did.

‘Apparently they train those things using dead pigs,’ Lennie Millar, the man beside me, said.

I looked at him quizzically.

‘It’s the closest thing to decaying human remains; the smells are almost indistinguishable,’ he added.

‘I’ll never look at bacon the same way again,’ I said.

He laughed forcedly.

‘Yo, Lennie! Inspector!’

To our right, a few hundred yards along the field, a small mechanical digger sat silently. Its driver, and the man who had been directing him where to dig, had been sifting through the mound of soil at the edge of the hole they had dug earlier. It was the latter of these men, a forensic archaeologist who’d been introduced to me only as Jonas, who had called to us.

‘We’ve found another one.’

Millar and I moved across to where they worked. As we approached, I could see something white against the darkness of the soil in the six-foot hole that they had dug. It was only when I reached the edge of the site that I realized it was a human skull.

A tiny human skull.

Chapter Two

Islandmore is a geographical limbo: running for about two and a half miles, but less than half a mile wide, the island sits in the middle of the river Foyle, its two lateral shores no more than 200 yards from either Northern Ireland or the Republic. But the island belongs to both and neither; the Irish border, which runs along the riverbed from Derry to Strabane, dissects the island down the middle.

The island had once served as a crossing point for the Derry–Donegal railway. The train had started from Derry City in the North, then travelled along the southern side of the border until, just short of Lifford, it crossed the Foyle via two small bridges, through Islandmore and then on into Strabane.

The problem with such a narrow crossing, however, was that it was exploited by smugglers, either running the railway line across the border with illegal goods and produce or navigating the narrow crossing beneath the bridges in rowing boats.

As a consequence, the bridge on the Northern Irish side,

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which actually lay to the east of the island, was allowed to fall into disrepair, before it collapsed completely in the 1960s, leaving only a few desultory support pillars jutting impotently out of the river. The bridge onto the island from the Republic, on the western shore, likewise soon fell into disrepair, until the island became separated from both sides and grew wild.

The search team working on the island was part of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains. The victims in question were a specific group, collectively known as the Disappeared, individuals who, during the early days of the Troubles in the North, had been targeted because of some slight, imagined or actual, against the local IRA commanders. Some, it was claimed, had proven too friendly with the police or army; some were suspected of providing information or were considered likely to indulge in loose talk. None were ever granted the dignity of proper obsequies, secretly buried in nameless plots, usually in isolated spots around the border, thus condemning the family to double anguish: the loss of a loved one, coupled with the uncertainty of never knowing for sure what happened to them, or being able to lay them finally to rest in consecrated ground.

The Commission team had been on Islandmore for several days now, looking for the corpse of a local man named Declan Cleary. Instead they had stumbled upon a nineteenth-century *cillin*; an unofficial burial site for unbaptized babies.

'Most parishes would have one,' Millar, the Commission's lead investigator on the dig, told me, the first day we had

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walked the site. 'Often they were found close to churches, but, in fact, an island in the middle of a river would be seen as perfect. The Catholic Church would not allow babies that had died before baptism to be buried in consecrated ground, so families often selected somewhere either close to a church, or on a border or boundary between parishes. Or near a river.'

'Where is the one here?' I asked.

'At the easterly end, on the tip. They always faced east, towards the rising sun. The one here's at least 150 years old but there are more recent remains in it. It's not the first time they've been found. A more recent one was uncovered in Milltown in Belfast not so long ago, just beyond the wall of the existing cemetery.'

I recalled hearing about it; children, trapped in limbo for eternity according to old Church law, who had simply vanished, as if never even born, their burial spots secret, unmarked. I remembered hearing, with much admiration, that the Bishop of Down and Connor, John Tohill, instructed before his death in 1914 that he was to be buried in the field outside the local cemetery, hoping that in doing so, the blessing bestowed on the land during his funeral would extend beyond his site to the children buried thereabouts.

The discovery had no bearing on the Commission's work on the island, so they had reinterred the bodies where they were found and contacted the local priest, Father Brennan. He planned, he said, to hold a Service of Blessing on All Souls' Day, the 2nd of November.

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This new skull was different. For a start, it had been recovered on a different part of the island, facing west towards the Republic.

‘It’s not part of the *cillin*, is it?’ I asked.

Millar lay almost flat on the ground, examining the skull in situ. He looked up at me and shook his head grimly.

‘It’s in the wrong place. But it is a baby, too, by the size of it. Probably disabled. Photograph it, then look for the rest of the remains,’ he added to Jonas.

‘Why disabled?’ I asked.

‘You’ll see.’

Jonas stepped towards the rim of the pit and began taking photographs of the scene. Then, moving closer, he placed a small strip of paper, marked out with measurements, beside the skull and continued to take shots. Finally, satisfied that he had recorded the skull from each angle, he handed the camera up to the driver and gently lifted the skull out of the Earth.

He held it up towards the light, grasped in one gloved hand.

‘It’s very young. Another newborn. You can still see the light through the joints where the plates of the skull haven’t fused.’

I suppressed a shudder. The bones of the face on the right-hand side looked to have melted into one another, the upper jaw twisted. The hollows of the eyes were abnormally large, wide spaced and sloping.

‘There are bones missing from the cheek,’ he added.

‘Could an animal have damaged the skull like that?’ I asked.

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Jonas shook his head. 'I don't think so. There are no jagged edges to the bone structure, like you'd expect, no bite marks. Plus, there was a stone over the remains, to keep animals from getting at it.'

He nodded towards the mound of earth below the digger bucket. A large flat stone lay atop the mound.

'We'll work by hand the rest of the way down,' Jonas said to the driver, who nodded and lifted two spades that were leaning against the digger's heavy rubber tracks.

Jonas moved across and handed the skull out to me. I pulled on my gloves before taking it. It was almost weightless, little bigger than an orange. I regarded the hollows of the eyes, the curve of the upper jaw, and tried, without success, to imagine how the child might have looked.

Below me, Jonas and the digger were already removing further bones from the earth and laying them on the ground at my feet.

By the time the light began to die later that afternoon most of the skeleton had been recovered. It had been easier than expected; as the dig progressed, they discovered that the child had been wrapped in a cloth, which still contained the bulk of the remains. Remarkably, the pelvic bones lay inside a dirtied but intact nappy.

The child was no more than twenty inches in length. Jonas had spent the latter hours arranging the bones into some

semblance of the correct order, while the digger operator, whose name I learnt to be Mark, continued to recover the bones from the earth. Even in such a state, bare of all flesh, there was something shockingly vulnerable about the infant now lying on the grey woollen blanket in which it had been wrapped.

Jonas lay flat beside the remains, examining each bone. Only when he had finished cataloguing each in a notebook did he stand up.

‘We might be best to get a post-mortem on this one, Inspector,’ he said. ‘There are signs of fracturing on the sternum and the lower jaw. The hyoid bone is also fractured.’

‘Strangled?’

Jonas shrugged. ‘Or compression over the mouth and neck. I don’t know for sure. A PM will better reveal any injuries. Plus, we’d want a more thorough examination of the facial injuries, the missing bones and that. They’re not in the ground.’

‘How old are the remains?’

Jonas shrugged. ‘We’ll not know until we examine further.’

‘Might it be a *cillin* baby?’

Millar shook his head. ‘The blanket seems wrong. Babies would have been wrapped in white sheets or towels before burial.’

‘The nappies a disposable,’ Jonas said. ‘That means it dates sometime from the mid-seventies onwards.’

Suddenly, across from us, the spaniel began yelping again. The dog handler whistled sharply to get our attention, then,

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raising his hand high above him, exaggeratedly pointed to where he stood. Three small red flags dotted one of the two-metre-square areas that the men had marked out with bamboo canes on their first day.

‘We have another spot by the looks of it,’ Millar said. ‘For Cleary.’

‘Will you start digging today?’

He glanced above him where the sky was darkening.

‘It’s a little late to start. We’ll see the family and tell them we’re planning on resuming work in the morning.’