

PROLOGUE

KOSOVO 1999

The boy liked the peacefulness of the creek, midway between his home and his grandmother's. Despite the roar of water flowing down the mountainside, it was quiet today. No gunfire or shelling. He looked around as he dipped the bucket into the spring water, making sure he was alone. He thought he heard a car in the distance and glanced behind him. Dust was rising from the twisting road. Someone was coming. He hauled up the bucket, spilling the water. The screech of brakes and the sound of loud voices propelled him to run.

As he neared home, he dropped the bucket and fell to the ground, lying flat on his belly, gravel tearing into his bare skin. He had left his shirt hanging on a rusty nail sticking out of a concrete block back where he was working with Papa. They'd been trying to mend the shell damage on his grandmother's house. The boy knew it was futile, but Papa insisted. At thirteen, he knew better than to argue. Anyway, he had been happy to spend a day with Papa, away from his chattering mother and sister.

On elbows and knees he crawled over the dusty roadway into the long scrub grass at the edge. Only a few yards from his house, but it might as well have been a mile.

He listened. Heard laughter, followed by screams. Mama? Rhea? No! He pleaded with the sun in the cloudless sky. Its only answer was a burning heat on his skin.

More rough laughter. Soldiers?

He inched forward. Men were shouting. What could he do? Was Papa too far away to help? Did he have his gun with him?

The boy crept on. At the fence, he parted the long brown grass and leaned in between two posts.

A green jeep with a red cross on an open door. Four men. Soldier's uniforms. Guns slung idly across their backs. Trousers around ankles. Bare buttocks in the air, humping. He knew what they were doing. They'd raped his friend's sister who lived at the foot of the mountain. And then they'd killed her.

Fighting back his useless tears, he watched. Mama and Rhea were screaming. The two soldiers got up, straightened their clothes as the other two took their places. More laughter.

Clamping his teeth onto his fist, he choked down sobs. Shep, his collie dog, barked loudly, circling the soldiers hysterically. The boy froze, then jumped, cracking his front tooth against bone, as a gunshot echoed up against the mountain and back down again. He let out an involuntary cry. Birds shot up from the sparse trees, merged as one, then flew in all directions. Shep lay unmoving in the yard beneath the makeshift swing, a tyre Papa had put up on a branch when they were little children. They were still children, but they didn't play on the swing any more. Not since the war.

An argument broke out among the soldiers. The boy tried to understand what they were saying but couldn't avert his eyes from the naked, dust-covered figures, still alive, their screams now muted whimpers. Where was Papa?

He stared, feeling hypnotised, as the men pulled on surgical gloves. The tallest one extracted a long steel blade from an old-fashioned scabbard attached to his hip. Then another one did the same. The boy was frozen with terror. Watching transfixed, he saw the soldier crouch behind his mama and drag her up against his chest. The other man grabbed eleven-year-old Rhea. Blood streamed down her legs and he quelled an

urge to find clothing to hide her nakedness. Weeping silent tears, he felt powerless and useless.

One man raised his knife. It glinted in the sun before he drew it downwards, slitting Rhea from her throat to her belly. The other man did the same to Mama. The bodies convulsed. Blood gushed and spurted into the faces of the abusers. Gloved hands thrust into the cavities and tore out organs, blood dripping along their arms. The other two soldiers rushed forward with steel cases. The bodies dropped to the ground.

Wide-eyed with horror, the boy watched the soldiers quickly place the organs of his precious mama and sister into the cases, laughing as they snapped them shut. One took a marker from his pocket and casually wrote on the side of the container and another turned and kicked out at Rhea. Her body shuddered. He looked directly over towards the boy's hiding place.

Holding his breath, eyes locked on the soldier, the boy felt no terror now. He was prepared to die and half stood up, but the man was moving back to his comrades. They packed the cases into the jeep, jumped in and with a cloud of stones and dust rising skywards, drove back down the mountain road.

He didn't know how long he stayed there before a hand clamped down on his shoulder and pulled him into an embrace. He looked into a pair of heartbroken eyes. He hadn't heard the frantic running or the frenzied shouting. The vision of the disembowelled bodies of Mama and Rhea had imprinted themselves as a photograph in his mind. And he knew it would never fade.

Papa dragged him towards the bodies. The boy stared into his mother's eyes. Pleading in death. Papa took out his pistol, turned his wife's face into the hot clay and shot her in the back of the head. Her body flexed. Stilled.

Papa cried, big, silent tears, as he crawled over to Rhea. He shot her too. The boy knew she was already dead. There was no need for the bullet. He tried to shout at Papa but his voice was lost in the midst of the turmoil.

'I had to do it!' Papa cried. 'To save their souls.' He pulled the two bodies, and then Shep, into the house. With determination in his steps he hurriedly emptied a jerry can of petrol inside the door and threw in a lighted torch of dry reeds. Picking up his gun, he raised it towards the boy.

No words of fear, no movement. Yet. The boy was immobile until he saw Papa's work-stained finger tremble on the trigger. Instinct caused him to run.

Papa cried out, 'Save yourself. Run, boy. Don't stop running.'

Looking over his shoulder as he went, he saw Papa turn the gun to his own wrinkled forehead and pull the trigger before falling back into the flames. They ignited in a whoosh of crinkling, falling timber.

The boy watched from the fence as the life he had known burned as bright as the sun in the sky. No help came. The war had caused everyone to fend for themselves and he supposed those living in the other houses along the road were hiding, terrified, awaiting their own fate. He couldn't blame them. There was nothing they could do here anyway.

After some time the sun dipped low and night stars twinkled like nothing was wrong. Without even a shirt on his back he began the long, lonely trek down the mountain.

He did not know where he was going.

He had nowhere to go.

He did not care.

Slowly he walked, one foot in front of the other, stones breaking through the soft rubber soles of his sandals. He walked until his feet bled. He walked until his sandals disintegrated like his heart. He kept on walking until he reached a place where he would never feel pain again.

FRIDAY NIGHT, 8 MAY 2015

Ragmullin

CHAPTER ONE

It was the dark that frightened her the most. Not being able to see. And the sounds. Soft skittering, then silence.

Shifting onto her side, she tried to haul herself into a sitting position. Gave up. A rustle. Squeaking. She screamed, and her voice echoed back. Sobbing, she wrapped her arms tight around her body. Her thin cotton shirt and jeans were soaked with cold sweat.

The dark.

She had spent too many nights like this in her own bedroom, listening to her mother's laughter with others in the kitchen below. Now she remembered those nights as a luxury. Because that wasn't *real* dark. Street lights and the moon had cast shadows through paper-thin curtains, birthing the wallpaper to life. Her dated furniture had stood like statues in a dimly lit cemetery. Her clothes, heaped in piles on a chair in the corner, had sometimes appeared to be heaving, as the headlamps of cars passing on the road shone through the curtains. And she thought that had been dark? No. This, where she was now, was the true meaning of pitch black.

She wished she had her phone, with her life attached to it – her cyber friends on Facebook and Twitter. They might be able to help her. If she had her phone. If only.

The door opened, the glow from the hallway blinding her eyes shut. Church bells chimed in the distance. Where was she? Near home? The bells stopped. A sharp laugh. The light flicked on. A naked bulb swayed with the draught and she saw the figure of a man.

Backing into the damp wall, scuffing her bare heels along the floor, she felt a tug on her hair and pain pinpricked each follicle on her head. She didn't care. He could scalp her bald as long as she got home alive.

'P-please...'

Her voice didn't sound like her own. High-pitched and quivering, no longer laced with her usual teenage swagger.

A rough hand pulled her upward, her hair snarled round his fingers. She squinted at him, trying to form a mental picture. He was taller than her, wearing a grey knitted hat pierced with two slits revealing hostile eyes. She must remember the eyes. For later. For when she was free. A thrust of determination inched its way into her heart. Straightening her spine, she faced him.

'What?' he barked.

His sour breath churned her stomach upside down. His clothes smelled like the slaughterhouse behind Kennedy's butcher's shop on Patrick Street. In springtime, little lambs succumbed to bullets or knives or whatever they used to kill them. That smell. Death. The cloying odour clinging to her uniform all day long.

She shuddered as he moved his face nearer. Now she had something to be more frightened of than pitch-black nothingness. For the first time in her life, she actually wanted her mother.

'Let me go,' she cried. 'Home. I want to go home. Please.'

'You make me laugh, little one.'

He leaned towards her, so close that his wool-covered nose touched hers and his sickly breath oozed through the knitted stitches.

She tried to back away but there was nowhere to go. She held her breath, desperately trying not to puke as he gripped her shoulder and pushed her to the door.

'Stage two of your adventure begins,' he said, laughing to himself.

Her blood crawled as she hobbled into the barren corridor. High ceilings. Peeling paint. Giant cast-iron radiators snatched up her faltering steps with their shadows. A high wooden door blocked her progress. His hand slid around her waist, pulling her body to his. She froze. Leaning over, he shoved open the door.

Forced into a room, she slipped on the wet floor and fell to her knees.

‘No, no...’ She swung around frantically. What was going on? What was this place? Windows sheathed in Perspex kept daylight at bay. The floor was covered in damp heavy-duty plastic; the walls were streaked with what she thought looked like dried blood. Everything she saw screeched at her to run. Instead, she crawled. On hands and knees. All she could see in front of her were his boots, caked in mud or blood or both. He hauled her up and prodded her to move. Rotating her body, she faced him.

He pulled off the balaclava. Eyes she had only seen through slits were now joined by a thin, pink-lipped mouth. She stared. His face was a blank canvas awaiting a horror yet to be painted.

‘Tell me your name again?’ he asked.

‘Wh-what do you mean?’

‘I want to hear you say it,’ he snarled.

Catching sight of the knife in his hand, she slithered and slipped on the blood-soaked plastic before falling prostrate before him. This time she welcomed the darkness. As it glided over the tiny stars flickering behind her eyes, she whispered, ‘Maev.’

DAY ONE

Monday 11 May 2015

CHAPTER TWO

They were at it again. Loud and cheerful. Alto and tenor competing with each other, starling and wood pigeon. Bird shit floated down in front of the open window, just missing the glass.

‘Shit,’ Lottie Parker said; her favourite swear word, the irony not lost on her. She tugged the window shut, making the room even more hot and airless, but she could still hear them. She flopped onto the damp duvet. Another night sweating. She would be forty-four next month, at least six years, she hoped, from the age when she could put it down to the menopause. So it had to be the monster heat.

Her eyes were dry from lack of sleep, and then her phone alarm buzzed.

Go time. Work time.

And Lottie Parker wondered how she would cope today.

‘Where are my keys?’ she shouted up the stairs half an hour later.

No answer.

Eight bells rang out from the cathedral situated in the centre of Ragmullin, half a mile from her home. Late. She tipped the contents of her handbag onto the kitchen table. Sunglasses – necessary; wallet – empty; till receipts – too many; bank card – lost cause; phone – would ring any minute; Xanax... Help. No keys.

Opening a blister pack, she swallowed a pill, even though she had promised herself not to slip into old habits. What the hell, she’d

been awake most of the night and needed a shot of something. It was months since she'd touched an alcoholic drink, so a pill was the next best thing. Maybe even better. She poured a glass of water.

The stairs creaked. Seconds later, Chloe, her younger daughter, stormed into the kitchen.

'We need to talk, Mother.'

She called Lottie *Mother* just to antagonise her.

'We do. But not now,' Lottie said. 'I've to go to work. *If* I ever find my keys.'

She rummaged through the detritus on the table. ID, hairbrush, sunscreen, two-euro coin. No keys.

'Is that all you've got to say?'

'Jesus, Chloe, give me a break. Please.'

'No, Mother. I won't. Sean's going round like a zombie, Katie's... not herself, I'm a mess and you're a madwoman the minute you have to return to work.'

Lottie stared helplessly at her daughter and kept her mouth shut in case she said the wrong thing. These days everything she uttered appeared to send the sixteen-year-old into either a sulk or a tantrum. And Chloe wasn't finished yet.

'You need to do something. This family's falling apart and what does all-important Mrs Detective Inspector do? She goes back to work.'

Chloe scraped back her unruly blonde hair, piled it on top of her head and wrapped it up with a bobbin. It stuck out in places and loose tendrils framed her face. Lottie went to smooth it but her daughter stepped away.

'I'm trying,' Lottie said, slumping on a chair. She'd spent the last few months trying to build her family back up after tragedy had struck while she had been trying to resolve her last case. She'd thought things were a lot better now. How wrong could you be? 'You've had

me at home for the last few months. Granny is coming over later to have dinner ready when you and Sean get in from school. She'll keep an eye on Katie too. What more can I do? You know I have to work. We need the money.'

'We need *you*.'

What could she say to that? Adam would have known what to say, she thought, remembering her dead husband's gift for finding the right words. But he was never coming back. Four years dead come July, and she still struggled without him.

Chloe picked up her school rucksack. 'And I hate this shit-hole of a town. What hope have I of ever getting away?' She banged the front door on her way out.

'Want a lift?' Lottie shouted to a shadow.

No keys. Shit! Now she'd have to walk to work. Swiping her hand across the table, she knocked the contents of her handbag to the floor.

The doorbell rang. She jumped up and ran into the hall.

'What did you forget?' she asked, opening the door.

It wasn't Chloe.