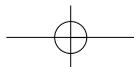


Frank P. Ryan is a multiple-bestselling author, in the UK and US. His other fiction includes the thrillers *Goodbye Baby Blue* and *Tiger Tiger*. His books have been translated into more than ten different languages. Born in Ireland, he now lives in England.

Visit him at www.frankpryan.com



The Snowmelt River

FRANK P. RYAN

JF

Jo Fletcher

BOOKS

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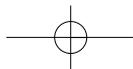
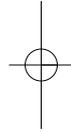
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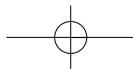
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For William



It is rumoured from sources older than history that once these were happy lands, fruitful and bounteous as any heart might desire. The Arinn were the masters then, a race of magicians of unparalleled knowledge – but that very knowledge rather than wisdom was their undoing. In their arrogance, they wrought a malengin wondrous beyond understanding, yet so perilous that even today few other than the very wise or the very foolish dare utter its name. In such folly lay the seeds of our tormented world . . .

Ussha De Danaan: last High Architect of Ossierel



Contents

PART I: *The Enchantment*

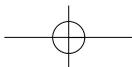
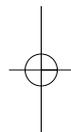
The Kiss	00
The Swans	00
The Blooming	00
The Sigil	00
Friends	00
Old Power	00
On the Roof of the World	00
Fear of Loss	00
The Grave of Feimhin	00
The Spear of Lug	00
The Three Sisters	00
Through Feimhin's Gate	00

PART II:
The First Power

The Stone Circle	00
Granny Dew	00
Strange Comforting	00
A Village, Ice-Bound	00
Mage Lord	00
A Council of Life and Death	00
A Sense of Grief	00
The First Power	00
The Song of the River	00
The Dragon's Teeth	00
Captured	00
The Shee	00
Mo's Secret	00
The Sister Child	00
Shikarr's Hunger	00
A Baited Trap	00
Isscan	00
The Mage of Dreams	00
Saving Mo	00
The Flight from Isscan	00

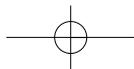
PART III:
Ossierel

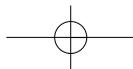
Mysteries and Silences	00
The Ark of the Arinn	00
The Vale of Tazan	00
Brooding Heads	00
Under Attack	00
A Lament for the Fir Bolg	00
Ossierel	00
A Heart of Iron	00
The Dark Queen	00
The Fall of Ossierel	00
The Blood Rage of a Kyra	00
The Third Power	00
Resurrection	00
The Cost of Battle	00
Communion	00
On the Wings of Angels	00



PART I

The Enchantment





The Kiss

It was a beautiful Sunday morning, early and quiet, before most people were awake. A special day, so special the fifteen-year-old boy astride his stationary bicycle felt overwhelmed by it. Lately he had often dreamed about this day and his dreams always led him here, to the tree-shadowed lane outside the twin gates that led into the Doctor's House. Alan Duval's excitement centred on a mountain now out of sight but looming ominously in his imagination. Slievenamon was the name of the mountain. Beyond the small Irish town of Clonmel, over its streets and the decaying ramparts of its medieval walls, the mountain soared, shrouded in legend, two thousand, three hundred and sixty-eight feet above the horizon. And now on this special morning the mountain beckoned, casting an enchantment on the air like a thickening scent, intoxicating and heavy, so he couldn't help but be drawn to it even though it chilled the blood in his veins.

THE SNOWMELT RIVER | 4

The left half of the gates was opening in the high ivy-covered wall. He listened attentively but heard none of the usual creaking. They had oiled the hinges last night, in readiness. He saw the front wheel of her bike roll through, then the flash of her auburn hair, like a warm red flame, and even as his heart began to leap, he saw the excitement in her eyes, the soft green of evening light on the meadow that sloped down onto the far side of the river.

Kathleen Shaunessy lived in the Doctor's House with her uncle, Fergal, and his housekeeper, Bridey. Nobody called her Kathleen except her uncle. Everybody else called her Kate.

Alan held her bike while she closed the half gate. Fourteen years old - she wouldn't be fifteen until 6 November - Kate wore blue jeans, tight-fitting over worn trainers, and her upper body was hidden under a thick white sweater. This early in the morning, even at the close of a particularly hot summer, it would be cold. Over one shoulder she carried a denim backpack, just as he carried one on his back: a change of underwear, toothbrush and toothpaste, sandwiches and fruit. All they needed for a brief adventure.

'What did you tell Bridey?'

'I left her a note. Sure, she won't believe the half of it anyway!'

She spoke with the soft singsong accent that had so bemused the American youth when he had first arrived

FRANK P. RYAN | 5

in Clonmel, an accent that in Kate he had come to love. Kate was so excited by the mission she didn't appear to notice his own shakiness. He knew she had crept out through the first-floor bathroom window and climbed down the fall pipe with its convenient bends, as she had many a time before, because if she had left by the door her dog, Darkie, would have barked Bridey awake. He had no need to make furtive arrangements back at the sawmill since his grandad, Padraig, knew all about it. Padraig had helped them plan it. But Alan had worried about it all the same, tossing and turning through the night, with his bedroom window open to the cool night air, fitfully sleepless, as his puffy face now testified, and struggling to come to terms with his own fears.

He said, 'Let's check out the others. See if they're ready!'
Kate switched on her mobile, sending the text message:

RedyRNot

The answer flashed to her screen within moments, and with a shaking hand she held it out for Alan to see:

WotDyuTnkRevoltinGrl

Only Mark could have thought it through so quickly. Revolting had more than one meaning. It was typical of Mark's sarcastic sense of humour.

So it was really happening. The excitement no longer

THE SNOWMELT RIVER | 6

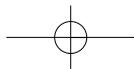
bearable, Alan did something he had never done before, something at once shocking and wonderful: he hugged Kate across the bikes. Then he kissed her on the lips, feeling lost and weightless with the ecstasy of the contact, the quickness of her surprise. He could not have moved a muscle again until Kate, with the same blossoming of friendship into love, kissed him back there in the shadowed lane, the bicycles interlocking like a promise between them.

Now, his heart racing with the thrill of her response, he saw the flush invade her face, an expanding tide about the roots of her auburn curls and down into her throat above her sweater, with its monogram opening letter from the *Book of Kells*.

Wordlessly, they wheeled the bikes around so they faced the town. The road was empty and they cycled side by side, Alan's jittery legs moving around in their own automatic motion, to the crossroads, with the slaughterhouse on the corner and the memory of animals bellowing in the trucks as they trundled in through the gates and the river tributary soon turning red with their blood. They wheeled right around the corner, picking up speed as they crossed over the first of the old stone bridges and then slowing momentarily at the second bridge, with the steps leading down to the river. With every turn of the pedals, the Comeragh Mountains loomed closer, their patchwork of green and yellow fields studded with whitewashed farm cottages, and, below them, extending

FRANK P. RYAN | 7

southwards and westwards, the forests that fed Padraig's sawmill. They rode on into the sunrise in silence. All of a sudden, time was running away with them. And there was the scary feeling that it might never slow back to normal again.



The Swans

It had begun only a few months earlier, although now it seemed more like years. Alan had been fishing the River Suir upstream of some small islands opposite the big fork in the river. The morning was misty and cool, and the water meadow, which the locals called the Green, was overgrown, with grasses and rushes way higher than his knees. People said it was unusual. The plants were running wild that summer. The drier parts, up close to the riverbank, were dense with meadowsweet, floating over the ground in thick clouds, and filling his nostrils with its sweet scent. In his hands was the old bamboo three-piece he had borrowed from his grandfather, Padraig. He wasn't expecting to get a bite. Just looking for some space away from the bustle of the sawmill - and away from Padraig's intrusive fussing.

He hadn't got any closer to finding answers since arriving in Clonmel two months earlier. If anything the

FRANK P. RYAN | 9

despair had relentlessly increased. It was there right now, as it was during every waking moment. Like the fire had gone out at the heart of him.

He had done his best to get it together. But he had nothing in common with the other kids here. He'd enrolled at the local high school thinking maybe he could connect with them through sport. He had always been pretty good at games. But even the games they played here were very different from back home. There was no American football, no baseball, no basketball, nothing. Football here was Irish football, where, as far as he could make out, they just slugged the daylight out of each other. That or the hurling, which was even worse. He must have looked half crazy to the other kids at times, his thoughts going blank on him, just standing there in the playground or sitting at his desk, his eyes staring, his limbs suddenly weighted down, like he was suited with lead. He just couldn't get his mind around the fact that Mom and Dad were gone, really gone, gone for good - period. How did you make sense out of something that couldn't possibly make any sense? With their loss came a great anger. He wanted to know why they had died. There had to be a reason - somebody who was responsible. He must have drifted into another of his blank spells, his eyes wide open but seeing nothing, when, abruptly, he came to with a sense of danger. There was a *homp-homp* noise from somewhere nearby, something strange cutting through the dreamy morning. And whatever it was, it was heading his way.

THE SNOWMELT RIVER | 10

Then he saw the swans.

He had noticed their nest, with three huge eggs in it, on one of the small reedy islands that dotted the shallows. Something, maybe the toss of his line, had made the birds panic. The homp-homp was the beating of their wings as they took off, still only half out of the water and rising into the air like two white avenging angels. He saw every detail highlighted as if in slow motion: the pounding wings, the prideful black knobs on the upraised orange bills, the eyes all-black. He could hear the power in those webbed feet as they battered the surface. For several moments, as they cleared the water just thirty feet from where he was standing, he was overwhelmed by a sense of paralysis. He did nothing at all to save himself. He just stood still, returning, stare for stare, the rage in those alien eyes.

He felt a sudden blow, but from an altogether different direction to what he expected. He offered no resistance to being dragged to the ground in a confusion of bodies, arms and legs, hearing the splintering into pieces of the fishing rod, only distantly aware that he had ended up on his back with somebody else on top of him.

‘Holy blessed mother – are you out of your mind?’

A voice, hot in his ear. A girl’s voice!

He glimpsed a face, pallid as goat’s cheese in striking contrast to the furnace of auburn hair. Immediately above them the swans clattered over their ground-hugging figures. His ears were full of a low throaty hissing. And then they were gone.

FRANK P. RYAN | 11

Alan just lay there for a while, the stuffing knocked out of him.

She spoke again. 'Did you hear the sound of them hissing?'

He swallowed.

She added, 'They're supposed to be mute!'

His neck felt stiff. He had to turn his head through a painful ninety degrees to look at his saviour, who was now sitting up beside him. He sat up himself, seeing they were both covered by the creamy petals of meadowsweet.

All of a sudden she laughed, staring after the swans, which were sweeping low over the gentle rise of the Green, clearing by inches the hedge at the top, and continuing the slow ascent until they dwindled to specks against the mountains.

'I . . . I guess it was my fault. My fishing must have spooked them.'

But she wasn't even listening to him. He heard her whisper, as if to herself, 'Sure, it's a sign.'

'A sign of what?'

'Like maybe they sensed something different about you.'

He didn't know what to say to that.

Climbing to his shaky feet, he must have looked even more awkward and gangly than usual. Alan had topped six feet on his fifteenth birthday, two weeks earlier. He kind of hoped he would stop growing soon so he wouldn't end up having to bend his neck to get through doors like his beanpole grandfather. He thought about helping her

THE SNOWMELT RIVER | 12

up but he wasn't sure she'd like it. Instead he extended his hand to shake hers.

'Hi! I'm Alan.'

She slapped his hand away instead of shaking it. She hopped to her feet with a grin and said, 'Kate Shaunessy!'

What had he done that was funny? There was an awkward silence. He could see in her eyes that she was weighing him up.

Man! He was useless at dealing with girls. And that made him feel even more awkward than ever. And now he was looking at her, very likely staring, and it was making her blush a bright scarlet. She whistled to a small black and white sheepdog, which came bounding up. She plucked at its coat, brushing it free of grass stalks and petals, like she was getting ready to leave.

He said, 'Thanks!'

He saw her eyes flash, like she had made up her mind about something. 'I've seen you out here before. Pretending to be fishing.'

'I never noticed you.'

'Why would you notice me? I've been watching you, moping around, feeling sorry for yourself.'

'I - I wasn't feeling sorry for myself.'

'I already knew who you are. I know you're an orphan.'

He shook his head, slowly, not knowing what to say.

Then he saw how she was trembling. She had been freaked out too. She blurted out, 'Oh, you needn't get embarrassed. I'm an orphan too.'

FRANK P. RYAN | 13

He stared at her for a long moment, wordless. Then he began to pick up the broken pieces of his grandad's rod, making the best he could of the tangle of line, so he could hold the bundle together in his right hand.

She walked about a dozen paces but then she stopped and patted the dog. He had the feeling she was waiting for him.

Alan caught up with Kate and her dog. He was thinking about what she had just told him: *I'm an orphan too*. The way she had said it, kind of defiantly. It made him hope that somehow you really did come to terms with the bad things, even if they never made any sense.

She said, 'I'm taking Darkie home. You can come with me, if you want. I'd like to show you something.'

'Show me what?'

'Are you interested in herbs?'

'I've never thought much about them.'

'Hmph!'

The mist had melted away from the morning and he hadn't even noticed it going. It felt like maybe a little of it had invaded his senses. His mind was groggy and his limbs felt numb, so he hardly registered the grassy bank under his feet as they passed by the island with the swans' eggs.

'Well I'm very interested. I've been learning about them. Teaching myself, really. With some help from Fergal.'

They abandoned the Green to enter the beaten dirt track that ran southwards along the riverbank.

THE SNOWMELT RIVER | 14

‘Fergal?’

‘Fergal’s my uncle. But he’s a zoologist and not a botanist.’

They continued to chat and to stroll, following the dirt track, limited on their left by the slow-flowing River Suir and to their right by the hoary limestone wall that separated the river from the Presentation Convent School.

‘Here, Darkie!’

Kate cracked open the right half of the gates, ushering the dog through, and then she waited for Alan to follow after it into a big, overgrown garden. They were within sight of a very strange-looking house.

A woman paused in emerging from a stonewall outbuilding, to take stock of them. Alan guessed that she must be the housekeeper for Kate’s uncle, Fergal. She was about mid-sixties, stocky and aproned, with thick grey hair held back in a bun. Under one brawny arm she carried an enamel basin filled with newly washed bedding.

Kate said, ‘Oh, Bridey – this is Alan.’

‘Gor! I know who he is! Don’t I see for meself Geraldine O’Brien looking back at me!’

Alan caught Kate’s whispered, ‘Sorry!’ Geraldine O’Brien was his mother’s maiden name. Dad had called her Gee.

‘You knew Mom?’

He didn’t know if his question embarrassed Bridey, or if she heard it at all. She was suddenly caught up with

FRANK P. RYAN | 15

shaking her fist into the sky. 'Them blessed yokes, with their perpetual thundering!'

Alan glanced up at a jet passing high overhead. The sound might, at a pinch, be described as a thundering, however faint and distant.

Kate said, 'I'm showing Alan around the place. But you could tell him more about the house.'

'Sure he's not interested in this auld ruin.'

'Ma'am, I am interested.'

Bridey peered back at him with a look of suspicion. 'And why is that now? Because it looks so contrary?'

He couldn't help but smile at her choice of word for the house, which captured the look of it perfectly. 'Is it Victorian?'

'It started off as Georgian, but they went through a fit of overhauling it during Victorian times.' Bridey talked into the air, as if half-bemusedly to herself. 'That was the time when it got its name, the "Doctor's House". The Doctor in this case being the medical superintendent of what in them days was known as "the madhouse".'

Kate tugged at his arm to haul him away from Bridey's reminiscences. 'We're going to take a look at the garden.'

'Ah, be off the pair o' you! Leave me to feed Darkie! But mind you keep clear of them greenhouses. Sure that uncle of yours is as stubborn as the tide.'

Kate waited until Bridey and Darkie had disappeared through a side door into the house before explaining, 'My grandmother died when Fergal and Daddy were young.'

THE SNOWMELT RIVER | 16

Bridey became their nanny. Then when Daddy died at the mission in Africa, she blamed the planes.'

'She blamed the planes?'

'For taking him to Africa.'

Alan shook his head.

'She's convinced the house is cursed.'

'Cursed?'

'By what went on - in the old asylum.'

He smiled. 'You've got to admit it's a weird-looking house!'

'All the time I was growing up here I thought I was living in the same world that Lewis Carroll wrote about.'

The original house must have been compact and square, with sash windows divided up into small Georgian panes. But somebody, maybe the Victorian asylum keeper, had inserted an octagonal tower on one corner. Alan was standing right outside it, looking up at a structure of wooden frames filled with small glass panes, capped by an amazing minaret-style tower that soared to a tiny flagpole, bearing the Irish tricolour. On the gable ends of the house he saw other additions, very likely arising out of the same fantastic imagination. Ornate canopies topped fussy bay windows and porticos surrounded the front and back doors. There were additional dormer windows on the roof adjacent to soaring chimneys. The surrounding gardens were a labyrinth of arbours for roses, honeysuckle and stuff, so you could wander out of the house into a fairyland of scents and colours.

FRANK P. RYAN | 17

They carried on round to the back, taking a course that avoided some large greenhouses, with peeling paintwork and several broken panes.

He murmured, 'Looks to me like Bridey had a point!'

'It's nothing that a bit of fixing wouldn't make safe. They were properly cared for when Grandad was alive. He was interested in plants, an amateur like me. But Fergal is too busy to take proper care of them. Bridey wants to knock them all down. We're the only Shaunessys left of the family. She's terrified something bad will happen. But there are old memories, like when Daddy and Uncle Fergal were growing up. So Fergal can't bring himself to do it.'

She led Alan along a neglected path, overgrown with elderberry and nettles, bringing them face to face with a tunnel big enough to drive a car through. When they stepped inside, it was dank and gloomy. A hesitant light hovered around the entrance, as if fearful to penetrate deeper.

'I used to hide here from Bridey, playing hide-and-seek. It cuts right under the main road. Then there are all sorts of secret carriageways and tunnels before it finally comes out in the grounds of the hospital.'

'This still leads to the asylum?'

Kate nodded. 'It's a mental hospital now. Once I saw a picture of the old superintendent. He had huge side-whiskers and a beard like Father Christmas. The whole place was arranged so patients never left it even when they came to work here in the gardens.'

THE SNOWMELT RIVER | 18

‘Creepy!’

Kate hooted with laughter at the expression on his face. ‘Some of the mad people still try to escape this way. Oh, I know I shouldn’t call them that. There are times I feel madder than any of them myself. But Bridey could tell you stories. Those poor souls, they wade out into the river until it comes up to their chins. Then they shriek to the nurses that they’ll drown themselves if anybody tries to come and save them.’

‘Shee-it!’

She led him back to the house where they did a tour of the downstairs rooms. Bridey appeared with two glasses of orange juice, then left them to it. They carried their drinks into a study with collections of tropical insects mounted in frames.

‘Your uncle works with insects?’

‘He’s an entomologist at University College Cork. He’s off right now counting new species in the African jungle before they become extinct.’ Then, with what seemed a clumsy abruptness, she just came right out with it and asked him how his parents had died.

Alan was startled into silence.

‘You don’t have to tell me, if you don’t want to.’

‘There isn’t much to say. It was an accident.’

‘What kind of accident?’

He looked down at his feet. Would she never stop asking him questions? ‘It was in March – just a lousy accident.’

She slumped down into a chair and toyed with

FRANK P. RYAN | 19

her orange. She said, 'I'm sorry! I didn't mean to upset you.'

He remained standing, annoyed with himself for letting his feelings show. 'How about your folks?'

'Mammy and Daddy were murdered.'

'Oh, man!'

'You don't need to worry. I've got used to it.'

He took a deep breath. 'I'd been on a school skiing trip. It was snowing a bit but it wasn't any kind of a snowstorm. Dad and Mom were coming to pick me up. A special treat in a chopper. Dad was an experienced pilot. He wouldn't have taken any risk. A bunch of us, school friends, we wanted to get one more run on the slopes. I look back and I think it was a really stupid thing to do. I keep thinking, what if we hadn't gone back for that last run? A kid called Rudy Forrester broke his leg. It was a really bad break, with his shinbone poking out through his skin. Mom and Dad - they had to take him to the hospital about thirty miles away. They were supposed to come right back for me.'

The silence between them lasted several seconds.

'All my life, well, I guess I was your typical American kid. You could say I was one of those laid-back guys. To tell you the truth—!' Alan's right hand suddenly came up and he slapped it against his head, like he somehow wanted to just punch sense into it.

She jumped to her feet and grabbed at his arm. 'Please, Alan! Don't do that. Don't blame yourself.'

THE SNOWMELT RIVER | 20

His brown eyes grew distant. 'I guess . . . I guess I was some kind of a stupid jerk. The kind of kid who just goes through life without really thinking all that much about anything.'

She held onto his arm, almost hugging it to her. 'What happened to them? Was it an accident?'

'That's what the wreck report said. They made a big thing about the fact it was snowing - and the fact Dad wasn't familiar with the area. But he was a really good pilot. I just don't buy it.'

'You don't think it was an accident?'

'My grandfather, Padraig, doesn't think so. He's downright paranoid about it.'

'What? He thinks it was suspicious?'

'I know it sounds kind of crazy. But that's what he thinks.'

She took him into a large sitting room, with its big chintzy lounge suite and dark mahogany furniture. The strange tower came off it on one corner, and there was an upholstered window seat so you could sit in there and look out into the garden. There were photographs on the walls of waterfalls, and safari shots of lions, zebras, elephants and crocodiles. In between the photographs, Alan saw rusty iron spears and big wooden clubs. He looked at pictures of a younger Kate with her parents outside single-storey buildings with white walls and red-tile roofs. They were surrounded by palm trees and colourful tropical plants. Kate's parents looked slim, medium height. Her

FRANK P. RYAN | 21

father was black-haired and her mother was red-haired, like Kate herself, but a lighter, more golden, red. There was a boy, who looked younger than Kate, with the same red hair.

She brushed her finger over the glass in the frame. 'My brother, Billy.'

'And all that's what – some kind of medical mission?'

'It was a Belgian Catholic Mission, with a school and a small hospital. Mammy was the matron of the hospital and Daddy was the doctor. They worked in the Democratic Republic of the Congo all of the time I was growing up. Billy and me, we lived here with Uncle Fergal and Bridey.' Her green eyes filled with longing. 'We used to really look forward to going out there and joining Mammy and Daddy in the long holidays. The mission was close to the gorilla forest. There were palm trees in the grounds and all sorts of fabulous plants. Right outside our bungalow was a giant aloe that sent up seed flowers as tall as a tree. Then, when they seeded, the whole plant just withered away and died. Sister Marie Therèse, she was like the Bridey over there. She had such a sense of fun. She used to tell us stories of what the patients did behind the doctors' and nurses' backs. They still believed in spells and potions. She called them *les petites feticheurs*! I loved the Africans too. They needed so very little to make them happy. Mammy used to say that the best smiles she ever saw were African smiles.'

Alan saw that the living room was like a mirror image

of the living room back at the sawmill. Bridey and Padraig had each made a shrine to happier times.

‘What happened, Kate?’

Her head jerked and her eyes darkened. ‘There was a lot of trouble going on. There were enough bad people locally already without others coming out of Rwanda. Mammy and Daddy had been told to leave. But they knew if they abandoned the hospital the mission would have been finished. And they thought they were safe because they were a hundred and fifty kilometres away from the border.’ She hesitated, blinking a little fast, still staring at the photographs.

‘Good job you weren’t there!’

‘I was there and so was Billy.’ Kate inhaled and her nostrils dilated. ‘Sister Marie Therèse saved me. She was in charge of the kitchen gardens. We were out there gathering vegetables when we heard the trucks drive in and then the shots and the screaming. I wanted to run back but she stopped me. There was a . . . a kind of pit. An underground store where she kept yams and stuff. She pushed me into it.’ Kate sniffed and rubbed at her nose. ‘I hid there all through it.’ He could see she was doing her best to fight back tears. ‘I was still there when government soldiers came around, I don’t know how many days later. They found me in the pit. They . . . they told me the rebels had killed them all . . . everybody . . .’

‘Hey—!’

‘I had counselling. I couldn’t bear to go out. I couldn’t

FRANK P. RYAN | 23

face meeting people – nobody. Not even my friends.’ Kate’s face was flushed and her eyelids were blinking so fast they were fluttering. She looked very different from the girl who had pushed him out of the way of the swans.

He touched her shoulder, spoke to her softly. ‘C’mon, Kate! Let’s go explore the garden!’

She scampered back out through the door, half running. He gave her a little space to recover her composure. When he caught up with her he found himself standing at the top of a gentle slope of lawn leading down to the open river. Alan followed her gaze across the forty yards of reed-strewn water to the Green, and beyond that, to the mountains, which were so close you felt you could put out your hand and touch them. He realised that they were almost exactly opposite the place he had been fishing, but closer to the big fork in the river.

‘A good job Bridey wasn’t watching us earlier!’

Kate managed a nervous laugh. ‘Bridey would have needed binoculars. But if she had, she’d have had a heart attack.’ She was hurrying on again. ‘Come on – I told you there was something I wanted to show you!’

‘Show me what?’

‘You won’t know about BSBI.’

‘What’s that?’

‘The Botanical Society of the British Isles. I’m helping them with a project on rare and threatened plants.’ She stopped in front of a small tilled piece of the garden, right by the water, about as far away from the house as you could

THE SNOWMELT RIVER | 24

possibly get. It was divided up into tiny beds, each about a foot square, separated from its neighbours by uneven rows of bricks. He guessed that Kate had laid out the bricks.

'You see?'

The beds were empty except for one.

'Are you kidding me?'

'Go on! Take a closer look!' Kate went down onto her haunches and so he did the same. He saw a flower that looked a bit like a dandelion. The label read 'Irish fleabane (*Inula salicina*) - rare. K.S. Clonmel, Tipperary'.

'K.S. - that you?'

She nodded, proudly. 'It's on the threatened list. I'm waiting for the seeds so I can send them to the gene bank people in Dublin.'

'Huh!'

She glanced across at him with a wry smile. 'If you're really interested, maybe you could help me.'

'I know nothing about this stuff. If you hadn't told me what it was, I'd have looked at that plant and I'd have seen a weed.'

Kate's eyes turned to the Comeragh Mountains, to the forests that clambered over the lower slopes. 'I just knew it was fate. Your grandfather's woods cover half of those foothills. There are bits of the old original forests up there on the slopes. Bogs, even!'

From the chatter of words she had flung into the air like seeds, Alan's mind plucked out one more curious than all the others: fate.

The Blooming

Mark Grimstone was glad he had agreed to keep his sister company while Mo was looking for crystals. They had scouted a few rocky fields before cutting in to explore the dense woods off the Dungarvan Road. After three-quarters of an hour of walking through shadows and being bitten by midges, they came out into a natural clearing, with a white rocky scarp at one edge. Mo went to investigate while Mark passed a moment or two looking around him, swivelling on the heel of his left trainer. Her squeal of delight meant a discovery had been made.

They would spend an hour or two here. Mark sat in a patch of grass, lounging back against a heather-covered outcrop, whipping at insects with a switch of ash and wondering why the Reverend Grimstone, his adoptive father, had brought them to the Irish backwater of Clonmel.

Grimstone would play his usual games, pulling in the more gullible locals – those hoping for salvation from

THE SNOWMELT RIVER | 26

their personal demons – into his rituals of head-touching and shouting their sins aloud. This was all in a day’s work for Grimstone’s style of hellfire and brimstone. But why Clommel? Mark couldn’t fathom it. He gave up trying, and slumped back against the outcrop, watching his sister search for treasures against the sun-bright scarp of pearly rock.

Mo was happy poking around among the crystals, or finding something that caught her eye in a single flower head or an insect scuttling among the stems and roots. She’d take ages examining her finds before sketching them into her album. Mark dropped his head, plucking a battered harmonica from the breast pocket of his short-sleeved shirt. His fingers caressed it, as if the feel of it was comforting, and he played a few riffs to while the time away. His eyelids never completely closed, but he relaxed into a daydream, lulled by the peacefulness of the woods and the image of his sister searching for crystals. He so abandoned himself in mind-mazing that he lost track of time. Only when he noticed that his face and forearms were burning did he swear aloud, causing Mo to lift her head.

‘Mo! You might have warned me.’

‘I – I’ve guh-guh-guh . . . guh-got the cuh-cuh-cream.’ Her stammer worsened because he was annoyed with her.

‘Oh, it’s all right! I’ll come and get it.’

He climbed back up onto his knees, rubbing the skin of his face with hands that were also growing increasingly

FRANK P. RYAN | 27

lobsterish. He was burnt all over. And now he saw, with a start of alarm, that they were not alone. A man was watching them from the far edge of the clearing. Dressed in worn denims and leather boots that were laced to just below his knees, he was as lean as a scarecrow, with a face that looked like a weather-beaten mask pulled tight over a long bony skull. It was with a thrill of alarm that Mark noticed his eyes. They were an intense bright blue, so luminous that even from a hundred feet away they seemed to glow with an inner source of light.

Suddenly the man stepped out of the shadows and, with a long-legged amble, he closed in on Mo.

She abandoned her backpack and notebook and, scuttling over to Mark's side, she clutched his arm so fiercely he winced with pain from his sunburnt skin.

'Are you aware this is a private wood?'

The words were spoken in a bass growl. And now he stood over them, the stranger was as tall as a door.

'We're sorry! We didn't know we were trespassing.'

'English it would seem, judging by your accent.'

'Stop buh-buh-buh-bullying muh-muh-my brother!'

The old man's cheeks were lined with vertical wrinkles so deep they could have been gouged by a chisel. His eyes, swivelling from Mark to his sister, were like searchlights.

'You don't much resemble brother and sister.'

Mark muttered, 'We're adopted, if it's any of your business.'

The tall man paused a moment, as if to reappraise Mo

THE SNOWMELT RIVER | 28

anew. 'And your names, if you please, without the boldness?'

'I'm Mark Grimstone and this is my sister, Mo.'

'Yes, and if I'm not mistaken, you must be the brood of the visiting Reverend Grimstone?'

'You've met him?'

'Met him? I certainly have not. Nor would I ever wish to do so. Just what do the pair of you think you're doing in my wood?'

'My sister is interested in crystals.'

The man gazed down at Mo, focusing the intense blue eyes on her cowering shape. 'It was crystals then you were drawing in your notebook?'

Mo nodded glumly.

'Well then, go and fetch it. Show me your drawings.'

Mo ran to fetch both her backpack and the notebook. She handed the book up to the stranger.

The man plucked some iron-rimmed glasses out of the breast pocket of his shirt. His gnarled hands thumbed through the tiny pages and the blue searchlights passed over the drawings and words. His frown turned to curiosity. 'Strange and potent images, for all that they are in miniature! And these words that go by them, if words they might be at all, are in no language that I recognise.'

'Mo writes in a language of her own.'

The old man shook his head. 'Why would a child go to such extremes?'

'So nobody else can read it.'

FRANK P. RYAN | 29

The blue eyes were softer now as they confronted Mark's own. The obvious question lay in the air between them. But the old man was prudent enough to leave it unasked. Instead he turned back to the notebook and carried on browsing. Suddenly he stopped, his finger tracing one of the images. Whatever the old man had seen, it was enough to turn him from the book to Mo, studying her with the same intensity of scrutiny he had previously focused on the book.

'Perhaps your presence here is not without purpose?'

Mark was curious as to what the old man had seen in Mo's notebook. He was still eyeing Mo, with intense interest. 'Sure you're as elegant as the famous boy pharaoh.'

Mo lifted up her hazel eyes to confront his blue. 'Cuh-cuh-cuh-can I have muh-muh-my notebook back, please?'

'On a condition! Will you be so good as to show me what it was you were so busy sketching by the white rock?'

He held the notebook low enough for her to point out her most recent drawings and secret writings, which covered two pages. Then he studied the pages again through the iron-rims, glancing from her drawings to the white rock and back again. He whistled. 'Well now - aren't you the most remarkable creature. Here I recognise quartz and pyrites, here purple amethyst and ultramarine turquenite. You have the geometry of their structures - that's a fact. But you've captured something deeper than any ordinary eye might see.'

Mo flushed.

THE SNOWMELT RIVER | 30

‘And did you plan to take away some crystals in your satchel?’

It took Mo a second or two to recognise he meant her backpack. She shook her head vigorously. ‘That wuh-would be suh-suh-suh-stealing.’

‘Not if I were to give you permission. An artist of your skill demands that much respect. So take what you will of them. Explore my woods wherever you will, or must.’ He returned the notebook to Mo.

Mo nodded her thanks, although her whole body was trembling.

‘A final question. How long have you been here, in Clonmel?’

Mark answered, ‘A little over a week.’

‘Yet still time enough for one gifted with such vision. Tell me, Mo Grimstone, have you been surprised by what you’ve observed here?’

Mark said, protectively, ‘What kind of question is that?’

‘Let your sister answer for herself, if she has a mind to.’

Mo gazed back up at him again. ‘Whu-whu—?’

The tall man leaned closer to Mo, so he could see the true expression in her eyes. ‘Take your time to find the words. I’m interested to know what might have captured your attention.’

‘In nuh-nuh-nature?’

‘In nature maybe – or in the nature of things?’

‘Nuh-nuh-nature is buh-buh-buh . . .’ Mo shook her head, frustrated in her attempts to express the word.

FRANK P. RYAN | 31

Mark hissed, 'I've had enough of this. Just leave her alone.'

A huge hand descended over Mark's left shoulder. 'Patience just a moment longer. Leave her room to speak her mind.'

'... buh-buh-blooming.'

'Nature is blooming?'

Mo nodded.

The tall man held his face close to that of the girl a moment longer before he straightened up and gazed about himself at the ring of trees.

'These woods are a confusion of trails and half-trails. Will you be able to find your way back the way you came?'

'Of course we will.' Mark turned on his heel as if to walk away, but Mo put her hand on his sunburnt arm.

'Your sister is not so sure?'

Mark sighed. 'Okay. So why don't you show us the way out?'

The old man looked down at their anxious faces and abruptly turned on his heel, his long paces already creating such a lead they had to run after him. He called back over his shoulder without breaking stride. 'Oh, I think I'll do better than that. I'll escort the pair of you to meet a matching pair of scallywags. You might find you have mischief in common.'

Kate's notion of fate had come to interest Alan a lot more over the days that followed that first meeting by the river.

THE SNOWMELT RIVER | 32

The loss of Mom and Dad had certainly made him wonder about fate. But he wasn't sure he believed in it. At least not the superstitious notion of it that Kate and his grandfather had in mind. Over the ten days since then he had enjoyed getting together with her at the sawmill. They had agreed to a daily ramble, planning a route the night before. So far they hadn't saved any threatened plants from extinction, but they had found a fleabane that was heading towards vulnerable and a cudweed that, if it wasn't threatened, was still kind of interesting, at least to Kate. Enough to plant two more beds in the garden of the Doctor's House.

Then, sometime in the middle of all this, Kate had clapped her hands and exclaimed, 'We need to get better organised!'

'What do you mean - like some kind of place of our own?'

She clapped her hands. 'A den!'

He had talked to his grandfather about it, and only yesterday Pdraig had finally agreed that they could use the former dairy, a detached red-brick outhouse in the shade of a dilapidated old pear tree that was peripheral to the main house and the sawmill complex of buildings. And today, after Kate had arrived, they went to have a good look at the place, finding it filthy, with outdated wiring and old lead plumbing, and chock-full of rubbish.

Alan pulled a face. 'Boy - what a mess! It looks like it's been abandoned for half a century.'

But Kate was more enthusiastic. 'We'll just have to put off rambling for a few days and get it sorted out.'

They had only just begun the clearout when Padraig came striding in off the slopes with two strangers in tow: a slim flaxen-haired boy with a bad case of sunburn, and a girl with strikingly bronze skin and shoulder-length dark brown hair. The boy looked fifteen or sixteen, maybe the same age as Alan and Kate, but the girl looked more like twelve or thirteen.

'Company for you!' Padraig tossed the comment into the air and was gone.

Kate was as surprised as Alan with the appearance of the two strangers, who were peering curiously at the cluster of buildings that stood back from the road, including Padraig's plain two-storey Victorian house, built of the same liver-coloured bricks as the dairy, and the labyrinth of corrugated iron sheds, surrounded by piles of logs. Padraig's return to work was announced by the high-pitched scream of an industrial wood saw.

'Hi!' she said, smiling. 'I'm Kate.'

The youth blinked at her, looking embarrassed. 'Hi!' he said. 'I'm Mark and this is my sister, Mo.'

'And that's Alan.' She waved to where her newfound American friend was lounging against the trunk of the pear tree.

Alan lifted an arm in greeting.

'You're English - over here on holiday?' Kate enquired.

THE SNOWMELT RIVER | 34

'We wandered into the woods and got lost. The old man found us and brought us back here.'

Alan shoved himself off the tree and came to stand next to Kate. 'He's my grandfather, Padraig.'

'You don't sound local, either. You're American.'

'Yeah, I'm American. Padraig is an O'Brien, my mother's father. Or I should say was - my folks are dead.'

'Mine too,' Kate added. 'We're both orphans.'

Mark looked as if he didn't quite know what to say to that. He exchanged glances with Mo, whose eyes widened. Kate thought she had amazingly beautiful eyes, a pearly hazel in colour, and nothing like the blue eyes of her brother. They appeared lambent against the bronze tones of her skin.

'Whu-whu-whu-what you suh-said about being orphans?'

Kate blinked, taken aback by Mo's stammer. 'It's true. We're both orphans. But, well, you know, it was a lot more recent for Alan - only months ago.'

Mo's eyes shifted fleetingly to Mark, but they returned to look directly at Kate. Her face was tense, her look questioning as she added, 'Muh-Muh-Mark and I, wuh-wuh-we're . . . adopted.'

Alan exclaimed, 'What? Like you're not really brother and sister?'

'Oh, I can't believe this,' Kate implored. 'Don't tell me - you're not saying that you're orphans too?'

Mark shrugged. 'We think we are. But we don't really know if we're orphans or not.'

FRANK P. RYAN | 35

'You don't even know - sure that's awful,' muttered Kate'

'We're used to it.'

Alan groaned, 'I can't believe this. It's all getting like too much of a coincidence!'

For several moments an uncomfortable silence pervaded the company. Then it was Mo who was the first to break the tension, shoving past Mark, to peer into the outhouse. Her gaze took in a jumble of old furniture and pieces of outdated woodcutting equipment. The place stank, as if generations of cats had used it for a toilet. 'So whuh-whuh-whuh-what are you planning?'

Alan shoved a clump of brown hair off his brow. 'We're going to make the dairy into a den.'

Mark and Mo couldn't fail to notice that, under his fringe, Alan had a red triangular birthmark in the centre of his forehead.

Kate added, 'And we could do with some help.'

Mark seemed to be the last of them to shrug off the tension. Judging from the look on his face, he wasn't sure that he wanted to spend the rest of the day shifting rubbish.

Mo appeared to read her brother's mind. She said, 'Cuh-cuh-can't we help them, Mark? Oh, cuh-cuh-cuh . . . c'mon.'

Alan nodded up to the ceiling where there was an antiquated electric light fitting. 'Looks like we've got juice. And there's an old porcelain sink over there. So we've got water too, if maybe just a cold faucet and lead-piped, so definitely not drinkable. This place used to be a real dairy,

THE SNOWMELT RIVER | 36

back whenever. You've got to watch the floor because it slopes away to the corner where you see the sink. But hey! We get the junk shifted and we've got space for stuff, like maybe a table and chairs and even a phone line.'

Mark sniffed at the green-stained sink. 'You really think you could rig up a connection?'

'I don't see why not. There are two separate lines going into the house and the sawmill. All we've got to do is to hook up to one of them.'

'We could set up a computer station?' Mark's spirits were beginning to lift. He and Mo only had another week, but even a week could become interesting.

'Don't see why not.'

'We could download stuff - music?'

'Sure! We could party!'

Kate cut through the exchanges. 'Partying wasn't what I had in mind.'

'Kate here is saving Ireland's plants from extinction. I've been recruited to help her. The den will be our headquarters.'

'Wow!' Mark pretended to be impressed.

Mo muttered, 'Shu-shu-shut up, Mark!'

The two youths grinned, struggling to control themselves.

Mark lifted his eyebrows at Kate. 'Maybe we can work out a compromise?'

Kate shook her fist at him. 'The only compromise I'll give you is a meeting between this fist and your scalded English face!'

FRANK P. RYAN | 37

The two boys fell into uncontrollable laughter.

Mo raked her fingernail along Mark's spine as Kate blushed a furious red. For a moment the two girls looked at each other. Then Mo's lips pouted and she waved Kate to join her. 'Cuh-cuh-cuh . . . Oh, come on, Kate!'

There was no getting out of the chore after that. Mark, still laughing at times, threw himself into it as hard as the others. Clearing the dairy of junk took several hot and sweaty hours. All four of them ended up covered in dirt and spider webs. Alan tugged and hammered at the single cold tap until he got it working, and they washed their hands and faces over the white porcelain sink. They filled up some empty bottles so they could sprinkle water over the concrete floor, getting ready to broom it clean. A careless sprinkle and they ended up throwing the water over each other amid hoots of laughter. An hour later, with the sun heading west, they found an old wooden table and an assortment of chairs, so they could settle down and rest in a little more comfort, feasting on Irish ham sandwiches and ice-cold orange juice from Padraig's kitchen.

A sweat-streaked Kate rested her face on her interlaced knuckles and looked across the table at the fair-haired English boy. His short-sleeved shirt was muddied and streaked. Could it really be that all four of them were orphans? And if so, was Alan right - was this too much to put down to coincidence? The thought caused an anxious fluttering of her heart. She noticed Mark lifting

THE SNOWMELT RIVER | 38

a battered looking harmonica from his shirt pocket and she watched how he toyed with it on the scratched bare wood of the table.

‘Are you going to give us a tune?’

His face flushed an even deeper red with embarrassment and he stuffed the harmonica back into the shirt pocket. But from time to time, as they munched and got to know one another, Kate noticed that he would glance her way, as if mentally assessing this bossy Irish girl with her green eyes and a temper to match the colour of her hair.