

Ancient Appetites

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About the Book

Nate Wilderstern's brother has been killed, and the finger is pointed at him . . .

After nearly two years, eighteen-year-old Nate returns home to the family empire ruled by his father – the ruthless Wilderstern Patriarch. But Nate's life is soon shattered by his brother's death, and the Rules of Ascension, allowing the assassination of one male family member by another, means he's being blamed. He knows that he is not the murderer, but who is?

With the aid of his troublesome sister-in-law, Daisy, and his cousin Gerald, he means to find out. But when the victims of the family's tyrannical regime chose the funeral to seek their revenge, they accidentally uncover the bodies of some ancient Wilderstern ancestors, one of whom bears a Patriarch's ring. The lives of Nate and his family are about to take a strange and horrifying turn . . .



ANCIENT
APPETITES

Oisín McGann

RHCP DIGITAL

*For my sister, Erika,
who loves life . . . in all its forms*



Prologue

THE BEAST OF GLENMALURE

It was Gerald who said that the Beast of Glenmalure could be tamed, but it was Nathaniel who said that it would be. Gerald had plenty of time to regret his confident claim as he trudged up the hill after his cousin, constantly glancing around at every suspicious sound that pulled at his ears as they ascended through the trees. And to Gerald, every sound the forest made was suspicious. It took great self-control not to raise his double-barrelled shotgun at each crack or rustle. Nate glanced back to check on him every once in a while, noting with some small satisfaction that his cousin was struggling to keep up.

It was the last hour of dusk and it promised to be a bright night, but that would not help them. Mist hung in strands in the beech trees, and the higher up they went, the thicker it got. The woods around them were already a mottled mass of grey shadow. Nate had made it clear that they were not to use the lamps, and that they must wear earth colours to blend into the landscape. Their tweed suits and flat caps were of the latest cut - the finest money could buy; but Nate wore his with the carelessness that came from being born obscenely rich.

His well-worn boots sank into the soft turf. The soil was a thin skin over the mountain's rock skeleton, and there were grains of silvery-white granite in the mud, catching the last of the evening light.

'We'll follow the waterfall up when we meet the stream,' Nate said softly, pulling up his collar against the damp evening air; the moisture was already dripping from his blond hair and down his neck. 'It'll mask the sound of our approach.'

'And the sound of anything sneaking up on us too,' Gerald muttered.

'You insisted on coming.' Nate stopped and turned to him. 'I could have brought someone else.'

'I thought there'd be more of us,' Gerald replied with a scowl as he hefted the gun cradled in the crook of his elbow. 'There's safety in numbers. This thing maimed two men last week and sent another one home gibbering. It doesn't make sense to take it on alone. We need some more bodies - I mean, someone to carry the *equipment*, at least.'

They had driven a gig to the end of the road in the valley below, before tying up the horse and continuing the rest of the way on foot. Gerald was not accustomed to carrying heavy loads, and the straps of the bag on his back were biting into his shoulders. He resented being used as a pack animal; that was the whole point of having servants, after all. The gun was getting heavy too, but he had ignored Nate's demand that he leave it behind, so he wasn't going to mention it now.

'Are you going to moan the whole way up?' Nate asked.

'You could have brought Clancy.'

Nate looked back up the hill.

'This has nothing to do with him.'

Gerald rolled his eyes, finding it hard to believe that Nate still had issues with his manservant. Nate set off again, even faster than before, his hands gripping the straps of his backpack, and Gerald urged his tired legs

after him. Nate was eighteen, his cousin a year and a half older, but they still shared a schoolboy competitiveness.

They had to cross an open area, the ground beneath the yellow grass damp and boggy after the recent rains. It was difficult to keep their feet from making squelching noises, and both of them kept their eyes anxiously on the tree line ahead, eager to get back under cover. At the edge of the trees they came upon a track, and followed it to where it met the stream that flowed down Fraughan Rock Glen, a steeply sloping valley pinched between two grassy cliffs.

Upstream there was a waterfall, with a rough, rocky path rising alongside it. The fog was getting heavier now; they could no longer see the tops of the hills against the sky. The creature could be anywhere out there. It could be a few yards away and they might not spot it until it was too late.

'This is where it was last seen,' Gerald panted, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief. 'The men in the pub said there'd still be tracks.'

They both surveyed the surrounding land, looking for any movement, any lights or telltale sounds.

'I'm still not sure that three men in a pub is the best source of information on which to base a hunt,' Nathaniel grunted.

'You said you wanted local knowledge.'

'I was thinking more along the lines of someone who could *lead* us to the bloody thing.'

'Well, the last man who managed to find it had his leg broken in three places for his effort, so he won't be leading anyone anywhere for quite a while. Three men in a pub was the best I could do— What is it?'

Nate had stopped suddenly. Gerald looked round his shoulder at the spot on the ground that had seized his cousin's attention. There, in the soft ground near the base of the waterfall, was a single linear track, winding like a

rigid snake into the heather that covered part of the hillside.

'It looks like the drinks are on me,' Nate breathed shakily. 'See the size of that? It's a foot wide if it's an inch.'

'I told you it was big,' Gerald said, nodding. 'I've wanted to catch sight of this creature ever since Clancy used to scare us to bed with those stories of his. All these years, and nobody's managed to trap it.'

He gazed expectantly at Nathaniel, his blue eyes, flushed cheeks and damp black hair making his unhealthily pale face seem as if it were glowing.

'But you handled bigger things than this in Africa, right? You haven't steered me wrong, have you? We can still go home and get more men.'

'And have a bunch of bog-trotters traipsing around, making enough noise to wake the dead?' Nate snorted. 'That's exactly why nobody's caught the thing. No, we can handle it.'

But looking at that track, he was beginning to have second thoughts. After finishing school he had decided to defer his place at university in favour of travelling. While some of his friends had gone off on jaunts to London, Paris or even New York, Nate had wandered further afield. His family had made part of its vast fortune capturing and selling engimals, and he wanted to see how it was done. And the biggest, most dangerous engimals were to be found in Africa.

The family employed the services of the famous American hunter and trapper, Peregrine Herne, and Nate had defied his father, using the family's connections to get a place on an expedition to the Congo. He had spent over a year travelling with Herne across the Dark Continent, studying the various species through books and observation in the wild and, of course, joining in the hunts.

He had thought that after helping trap berserkers and behemoths, he would be well able to handle whatever

minor predator Glenmalure had to offer. Now, without Herne's practical wisdom and the teams of wily black guides, Nathaniel was beginning to feel out of his depth.

'They say there's not a horse in Ireland that can outpace it,' Gerald said over his shoulder. 'And it's particularly partial to crushing people against tree trunks. So, are we going, or what?'

'We're going,' Nate retorted. 'I'm going to need a lamp to follow this. The heather's thick.'

He had a small oil lamp in his bag, with a red lens and a metal hood over the glass to allow only a sliver of light to show. Lighting it, he followed the track carefully through the bent heather. The hill grew steep, and he could feel the burn in the muscles above his knees and in the backs of his calves as he climbed. Behind him, Gerald's breathing became shorter and more strained.

'You sound a bit palsy,' he hissed to his friend. 'You should walk more. This is an easy trek. You wouldn't last a day on the trail in Africa. You're breathing like a steam engine.'

'Funny then that you're the one blowing all the hot air,' came the caustic reply.

The trail wound through some thigh-high growth, and crested a ridge. There were some sparse, stunted trees dotting the hillside, sucking a living out of the marshy soil. Nate and Gerald were peering into the fog, trying to make any kind of sense out of the blurred grey, when they heard the low rumble of a growl far off to their right.

'Did you hear that?' Gerald gasped.

Nate held up his hand for him to be quiet. There came another growl. The fog made it impossible to gauge the direction properly, but it was close enough to set their hair on end.

'This will do, right here,' Nate whispered, beckoning his cousin into a stand of heather at the base of a fir tree. They

crouched down in the soft, rough foliage, and Gerald gratefully propped the shotgun up against the tree trunk.

'If we can hear it, it can hear us,' Nate added. 'That's all I need. Hand me your bag.'

Gerald shrugged off the backpack and handed it over. Nate pulled out a wooden cube no larger than a shoebox, and then another object, covered in cloth. Unwrapping it, he revealed a funnel-shaped piece of metal, much like the end of a trumpet, with a bend at the narrow end.

'A music box? What, you're going to play it a tune?' Gerald smirked. 'I think you spent too much time with those bloody snake-charmers.'

'Watch and learn,' Nathaniel replied as he fitted the narrow end of the horn into the top of the sandalwood box. He inserted a small handle into the side of the music box and started to crank it round. Gerald looked on in fascination, his curiosity winning over his sarcasm.

'Most of the larger, lone engimals are territorial,' Nate explained quietly as he finished winding up the box. 'They don't take kindly to challengers. The Boers use these things as decoys.'

There was another mumbling growl, low and menacing. In the grey, cloudy air it was hard to tell how close it was, or in what direction. Gerald took his small hip flask from his jacket pocket and took a swig of brandy. His fingers were shaking as tried to screw the top back on.

Nathaniel took off the gold rings he wore on each of his middle fingers.

'I would have thought you'd need those,' Gerald muttered. 'You're going to need all the health you can get.'

'I saw a man tackle a berserker on the Cape,' Nate replied. 'His ring caught on its carapace; it pulled his finger off.'

'Ah, right. Well, give them here, so.'

Nate handed over his rings and dragged a large coil of rope from Gerald's bag, pulling one end free. It had a loop

tied into it, not unlike a hangman's noose.

'You're going to hang it now?' Gerald shook his head in puzzlement. 'Or is that for you, in case you should fail? You can take this whole "honour" thing a bit far, you know—'

'It's a lasso,' Nate told him. 'The ranchers use it to catch cattle and horses in America. Herne taught me how to use it.'

'Nate' - Gerald frowned, looking serious now - 'you can't catch this thing with a bloody *rope*. I don't know what you thought you'd—'

'Quiet!' Nate was peering into the fog. There was the sound of movement nearby. 'It's closer than I thought. Stay put. Don't make a sound . . . And don't bloody shoot anything.'

Gerald swore under his breath, fervently wishing he'd never proposed this stupid idea. Shifting the coiled rope onto his shoulder, Nate picked up the box and crept out into the open. He carefully placed the box down in the damp grass and then pulled out the handle. Instead of music, a metallic chugging sound erupted from the horn, the sudden noise harsh in the muffled silence of the fog. Nate sprinted to a nearby Scots pine, dropping the rope onto the ground, making sure that the looped end was free. Wrapping the other end several times around the stout trunk of the tree, he tied it off and sank down into the heather to wait.

He had hoped for more time to prepare, but the beast had obviously heard them. Damn Gerald and his prattle. The box's noise made it hard to hear the sounds of the creature's approach, but Nate knew it was coming. It would not come stealthily, not with such a blatant challenge to its territory.

And then he heard it: a deep throbbing, rising to a rasping roar. Two pinpricks of light appeared through the fog, growing steadily as they rushed towards him. The creature roared again, and its eyes blazed, the mist igniting

with a white glow around it. He could hear the sound of its passage through the undergrowth now, as it crushed the heather beneath its wheels. And then it charged out of the fog towards him, its engine bellowing.

It was the biggest, most savage velocyycle Nate had ever seen.

He lay frozen for a second, terrified. For that instant his nerve failed him, and all he could do was look. Its wheels must have been more than two feet in diameter, its body nearly half that again in width at the cowl. The silvery metal and black ceramic of its torso bulged with power, veined with jagged, angry markings of gold and red. It stood four feet tall at the shoulder, and must have been nearly eight feet long from nose to rump. Its cowl and horns were painted with the dried, rusty-brown blood of its most recent victims. It had raced across the clearing and screamed past him before he had time to flinch. A magnificent beast. Nate closed his eyes and let out a shuddering breath. He was a fool. He should have brought more men.

But the wet tearing of soil as the velocyycle skidded into a turn told him he had seconds before it came back. There was still a chance that he could defeat it. It would be confused. The decoy gave the impression of a large, aggressive engimal, and the velocyycle would have been expecting to be met by a rival. It probably hadn't even seen the box. The next charge would be slower, less confident.

It didn't roar this time, rushing through the grass as if hunting for prey. Its lights were hooded as it came into sight through the mist, and then Nate was up, swinging the lasso over his head. The beast swerved past him, unprepared for a charge, and Nate pivoted and, with a deft flick of his wrist, looped the lasso over the creature's horns.

He stepped clear of the rope just before the coils started to whip away. The engimal was accelerating into the mist, trying to shed the snare. And that was its mistake.

When the velocycle was forty feet away, the rope snapped taut like a fishing line, anchored by the stout Scots pine. The engimal's head and shoulders were wrenched to a complete stop, and its legs and hips swung around it, throwing it onto its side. The creature lay there, stunned. Nate crossed the distance to it at a full sprint, seizing it by the horns and leaping onto its back. Then he loosened the lasso and cast it off. It would just be a danger to him now.

'Right, let's see what you've got, you beauty!'

The thing didn't need any goading. It thrashed around on the marshy ground, trying to get back onto its wheels. The hind legs holding its rear wheel bent at the knees, pushing its rump up, and its front wheel twisted under it. Leaning on one knee, it flicked itself upright, lifting Nate with it. Its engine roared with outrage, and he held on for grim death as it bucked and pivoted, its spinning back wheel sending up a fountain of mud. The beast reared and then took off across the mountainside.

Nate's pulse was pounding as the wind blew his hat off and rushed past his ears. The ride was rough; the engimal swerved and bounced and tried to make sudden stops, but the swampy ground hampered its efforts. Too much turn and it would slip onto its side, and any attempt to skid to an abrupt halt ended in a long slide. Keeping his arms taut and his body supple, Nate foiled one move after another. But it would take a long time to tire, and he wouldn't. The constant shaking was jarring his senses, and he was in danger of having the teeth jolted out of his head. And all the time, Gerald's words echoed in his mind: *You only have to hang on long enough. Long enough to make it remember.*

He hoped it would remember soon. The creature raced back and forth across the ridge, twisting and bucking and tossing him like a rag doll, but he clung on. It jumped off humps and hags, trying to lose him in mid-air, but anything

that came close to throwing him also risked turning it on its side again. It would not have that.

The enraged engimal leaped off a low embankment and Nate found himself lifted off its back as it soared, the momentum carrying him into the air. He went with it, following its movement, and as it hit the ground again, he landed back on it . . . his full weight crushing his groin against its metal frame. Pain drove like spears up from between his legs and he let out an embarrassing, high-pitched squeal. But he kept his grip.

The thing picked up speed, and he forced himself to ignore the excruciating pain. Tears were swept from his cheeks by the wind, chilling his face; grass and heather lashed past his legs. Every bounce over the rough ground threatened to reduce him to a blubbering baby, but he held on. The beast slowed, turning in tight jerks, smacking one horn and then another against his thighs, but he refused to let go. It bucked again, twisting and thrashing and throwing its wheels up, but he screamed defiance at it.

'You won't beat me, you cur! You're mine! You're mine! *You're mine*, y'hear me, you goddamned machine?'

His head was spinning, and he tasted blood in his mouth. His body ached and with every move he felt weaker. His hands and arms gripped the beast's horns with a will all their own. The engimal's thrashing seemed to be growing weaker. Nate's head lolled back and he saw stars above him. Stars in the fog. He slumped forward over the creature's back. It was some time before he realized he was no longer moving.

The engine was throbbing quietly beneath him. Nate raised his head and stared. The velocyycle was standing still, heat radiating off it, steam hissing wearily from its nostrils.

'Bloody marvellous,' Gerald laughed.

He was leaning against a tree a few yards away, holding a cigarette in one hand.

'Best show I have ever seen, bar none,' he declared, tapping some ash off the gasper. 'My God, we could take it on tour. I haven't had this much excitement since that young Lady Haddington flashed her calves at the spring ball. You're a bloody star.'

'Ah thunk ah bit muh tongue.'

Nate pushed himself upright and worked his jaw around. He still had all his teeth, at least.

His hands were clamped around the creature's horns. Stalks unfolded from the metal bars and locked into place within reach of his fingers. Brake levers. It was giving him its brakes. He had tamed the Beast of Glenmalure.

He squeezed the front brake once, to acknowledge the gesture, and then peeled his hands off the horns and uncurled his stiff fingers.

'Are you going to ride it home?' Gerald asked him, stubbing his cigarette out on the tree trunk and picking up his shotgun.

'I'll have to.' Nate leaned back to ease the pain in his groin. 'Or at least as far as the gig anyway. I don't think I can walk.'

Gerald chuckled, but then his smile faded, and he gazed at the engimal for some time. 'I was right, wasn't I?'

Nathaniel nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'It remembered.'

I



A DEATH IN THE FAMILY



THEY MADE THEIR way down the hillside together, Gerald striding and stumbling, Nate riding the cowed velocycle. As he rode, his hips rocked in reflex. Gerald noticed this and laughed.

‘It’s not a horse, y’fool! Stop your bouncing. You look like you’re trying to rattle the thing! Haven’t you bruised your tackle enough for one night?’

Nate chuckled ruefully and settled himself more comfortably on the engimal’s back. He had put his rings back on, but he knew he’d need to apply more gold to his skin to speed up his healing processes. And it wasn’t on his fingers that he needed it.

‘The sooner I get a proper saddle on this thing the better,’ he commented, rolling his sore tongue around his mouth.

‘You going to make it a mare or a stallion?’ Gerald asked.

Engimals were asexual. Their owners referred to them as ‘he’, ‘she’ or ‘it’ depending entirely on their taste.

‘Oh, I think I’ll leave it as the mysterious cur that it is. And it goes like a flash, so that’s what I’ll call it.’

“Flash”,’ Gerald mumbled, lighting another cigarette. ‘I like it. And the girls will go potty over it. They’ll be like flies to honey.’

Nate gave a satisfied nod. He eagerly anticipated riding into town on his monstrous new mount. He would be the envy of every man, and an object of wonder for every young filly who saw him. For once he and not his eldest brother, Marcus, would be the talk of the town.

The mist was thinning out as they descended, and through it they saw a figure climbing through the heather towards them. Nate and Gerald exchanged puzzled looks. The man was quite short, with square shoulders and a ramrod-straight back. He wore a long tail-coat and buckled shoes. He made no attempt to greet them until they had stopped before each other.

‘Master Nathaniel, welcome home, sir. Master Gerald.’ He bowed stiffly, doffing his cap to them.

‘Clancy.’ Nate frowned. ‘How did you find us?’

‘You make your presence felt wherever you go, sir,’ came the reply.

‘I didn’t think we’d made *that* much noise.’

‘Perish the thought, Master Nathaniel.’ A pause. ‘That’s a fine beast, sir.’

His manservant had an ugly face. Bushy, greying eyebrows hung over lined eyes; his wide, prominent cheekbones combined with a nose that had been squashed flat in his youth to give him features like broken stone. He looked weary now, and not from his climb up the mountain. If he felt any surprise that Nathaniel was riding a wild engimal, he didn’t show it. Staring at the ground at their feet for a moment, he took a breath and continued.

‘Sir, I’m afraid I bring terrible news. Master Marcus is dead. A climbing accident in the Mourne, I’m told. I’m very sorry.’

Nate felt as if the air had been drained from his lungs. ‘Are you sure?’ he gasped in disbelief. It was immediately

replaced by suspicion. 'Who declared him dead? Has Doctor Warburton examined him?'

'Yes, sir. I'm afraid there can be no doubt. There . . . there was extensive damage to the body. There was no chance of recovery. The family are being gathered. Master Roberto will be confirmed as the new Heir after the funeral.'

No member of the Wildenstern family could be confirmed dead until one of the family doctors had examined the corpse. With the Wildensterns' special physiology, the opinions of ordinary doctors could not be trusted. Nate twisted the rings on his fingers. Gerald's hand squeezed his shoulder. He barely felt it.

'I'm sorry, Nate.' He heard his cousin's voice as if from a distance. 'It's the damnedest luck.'

'Are they sure it was an accident?' he demanded.

'Yes, sir. He was with two friends, and was being watched by more people from below. Master Marcus was climbing ahead of the other two when he fell.'

Because of the peculiar traditions of the Wildenstern family, every accident was treated with suspicion. One could never be absolutely sure.

Nate stood there, saying nothing for some time.

'I want to be on my own,' he announced at last, handing his backpack to his manservant. 'Clancy, you go back with Gerald. Tell them I'll be along later.'

And with that, he kicked his heel against the velocycle's side. Snarling eagerly, Flash's wheels gouged holes in the turf and they set off down the hillside. It took only minutes to descend to the bottom and cross a rough stretch of ground, plunging through a stream and scrambling up onto the forest track, spitting mud and pebbles in their wake. Instead of heading down to the road at the bottom of the valley, Nate turned left and raced deeper into the forest.

Marcus was dead. It made no sense. A man like Marcus did not die in some freak accident. His elder brother was

the kind of figure that people told stories about, the type of man everyone wanted to have as a friend. He was everything Nate wished he could be. Uncommonly clever, witty, generous and good-natured. Blessed with a natural sense of style, he cut a dashing figure at parties, but was equally at ease in the wild country; when it came to seeking adventure, he had the heart of a lion.

And he was dead.

Marcus was . . . had been the Heir, groomed from birth to be the future head of the family. He shouldn't even have been in the country. His place was in America now, where the family carried out most of its business. He had come back for a holiday, and to see his kin.

And now Roberto would be Heir to the massive fortune. Poor Berto; he wouldn't take the news well. Like Nate, he had no interest in the family business. A warm-hearted, social animal, he was happiest amongst his friends, or immersing himself in poetry and music.

Nate rode the forest roads for nearly an hour, and then slowed the engimal as the track in front of him withered to a narrow trail in the glow of Flash's eyes. He had no idea where he was going. Bringing the velocycle to a halt, he climbed off, confident now that the creature would not wander. Gazing down at it, he ran his hands over its back, remembering the letter he had received from Gerald; the one where his cousin had explained why he thought this beast *wanted* to be tamed.

Gerald had been studying a new work by a man named Charles Darwin, called *The Origin of Species*. This man, Darwin, claimed that animals were not created in six days along with the Earth as described in the Bible, but had in fact evolved over time, through a process he called 'natural selection'. Gerald said this was not the first time somebody had proposed the idea, but Darwin had put forward such a thorough and convincing case, he had thrown the world of science into turmoil. And Gerald believed that it could

mean the end of religion as they knew it by the beginning of the twentieth century.

Darwin's supporters went on to say what he had not dared - that mankind too had evolved and was in fact descended from apes. This didn't go down too well either, and caused much consternation in polite society across the civilized world.

The church had, of course, denounced him as a heretic, despite the fact that he was a devout Christian. They also pointed to engimals as a failing in his logic. These creatures - named for their engine-like internal organs - had long been held as arbitrary, divine creations, because they were clearly machines, and yet were for all intents and purposes alive. Their flesh could heal to some degree, but they could not reproduce like animals, so they had to have been created somehow, and yet their physiology - their *mechanics* - were beyond human understanding. These creatures had not evolved; something or someone had made them, and this offered the most obvious challenge to Darwin's reasoning.

Yes, Darwin conceded in his book, engimals seemed not to have been shaped by their environment, and since any given species of engimal did not seem confined to one geographical area, like marsupials in Australia, or the giant tortoises in the Galapagos Islands, it supported a further theory of his. That they were made by a civilization before that of Man; one which had disappeared before the beginning of recorded history.

This was truly the *de rigueur* topic of conversation at parties, and the cause of much frothing at the pulpit. And Gerald was hooked. He knew that while engimals had been tamed throughout history, the breaking of these animals had been carried out as if they were actually *born* wild. The more he studied their shapes, forms and behaviours, the more he became convinced that they were merely *feral* - that they had been built to perform some function for a

master, and had happened to escape captivity, living out the rest of their lives in the wilderness.

Like a farrier judging a horse, Nathaniel ran his fingertips over the creature's curves, feeling the weathered metal, the myriad scrapes in the ceramic, the joints and hinges, the muscular shock absorbers. Its sides were hot from the exercise, and its breath plumed in pale vapour against the dark air. It bulged with power.

Gerald theorized that serving a function for a master should be a natural state for these machines. It only remained to find out what each engimal's function was, and place it in a situation where it would be compelled to carry it out. From drawings of the Beast of Glenmalure, it was clear to him that, like other velocycles, this creature was made to be ridden. Its back was slightly bowed as if to fit a saddle, much like a horse's, and its horns were the perfect shape for handlebars, almost like a bicycle. If it had brake levers, like others of its species, that would be the final proof. All Gerald needed was someone who would be brave, reckless and foolish enough to try and get on this thing's back and stay there long enough for it to remember its true purpose in life.

So he had put pen to paper and presented his thoughts to his cousin, who was away chasing wild engimals around the Dark Continent.

Nathaniel stroked the beast's back and its engine purred. There had been times on the long voyage home when he had doubted himself. With few distractions aboard for a virile young man, he had been troubled by nightmares of injury and failure. There had been every chance that he would ridicule himself, and be maimed or killed in the process. Not wanting to present himself at the house until after the hunt, he had Gerald meet him at the docks and he had booked into a hotel. Two days later, they had the information they needed, and they had set off into the hills.

But now the Beast of Glenmalure was his. And he had been denied his triumphant arrival home atop his prize by the ill-timed demise of his big brother. Even in death, Marcus had stolen his glory.

Despite what Clancy had said, Nate knew that the family would look on this death with great suspicion. They would not believe that this was an accident, any more than he believed it himself. And since everybody knew that he had the most to gain, most of their suspicion would be directed at him.

‘Damn you, Marcus,’ he breathed through tense jaws. ‘Look where you’ve left me now.’

It was getting late, and now that they knew he was back, the family would be expecting him. It was time to go home. He swung his leg over Flash’s back and groaned slightly as he made his tender groin comfortable. A long soak in a hot bath was in order, perhaps with some of those Eastern bath salts he’d picked up on the Cape to sooth his frayed nerves . . . and his other bits.

‘Right, let’s go home, old boy,’ he said, feeling suddenly exhausted again. ‘And mind the potholes, if you please; I won’t be walking right for a week as it is.’

II



THE TREASURE MAP



FRANCIS NOONAN WALKED on tired legs along Sackville Street, making his way home. Most of the lights had gone out now, and the street had lost its glamour to the night. Even the pubs were quiet at this hour. Nelson's Column towered into the night sky, and he looked across at the Imperial Hotel, the most brightly lit building on the street. It reminded him of the times he and the lads would hang around on the corner, watching the 'lords and ladies' strut like peacocks; laughing when the toffs had to cross the mucky side streets - acting like they were fording a river, trying to avoid getting mud on their fancy duds.

He didn't laugh at them now. Not now he worked at the Wildenstern stables, earning a good wage. Nowadays it was all 'yes, sir', or 'no, ma'am' or 'thank you kindly, sir' whenever they saw fit to talk to him directly, which wasn't often. Mostly they just spoke to Old Hennessy as if the others weren't there, and the old timer passed on the instructions to the rest of them.

There was a man out in front of the hotel, leading an enginal back and forth over the flagstones of the path. Francie stopped to watch for a while. He had seen this one

before, many times. The hotel had been using it for years. The thing was roughly the size and shape of a large chest of drawers, and was rolling along with its downward pointing mouth, licking the muddy footprints off the stone and buffing the surface with its soft, rough tongue. It seemed happy enough, being led on a rope as placidly as a cow, and getting an occasional friendly pat from its keeper. Francie watched until he got bored and then carried on walking.

He shouldn't have been out. He'd hitched a ride into town with the coalman, but he wasn't sure how he was going to get back to his bed in the loft above the stables by morning. He could lose his job if Hennessy discovered he was missing. But they might put him in gaol for the piece of paper he had tucked into his shirt. Francie's father had said to let him know if anything big happened in the Wildenstern house; any inside information he could pass on for a price. Francie's da had friends who could use that kind of information. Francie would do anything for his da, and he had a right juicy bit of gossip for him this time.

He crossed Great Britain Street and made his way round Rutland Square. Further up he could see the silhouetted shape of the Black Church. Legend had it that if you walked three times anti-clockwise around that church, reciting the Hail Mary backwards, the devil would appear to you. Francie had once managed two and a half circuits before his nerve had failed.

A metallic noise near his feet made him start, and his heart leaped into his throat as something brushed against his arm. For a silly moment he thought that the Wildensterns were on to him, that they had sent the peelers . . . He blinked, squinting into the gloom. Instead of a hulking policeman, he saw it was a small engimal, with rotating blades around its mouth, a wheeled base and a long arching tail. The kind of creature that could be used to mow rich people's lawns. Francie had nearly stood on it.

The thing had probably just escaped from its owners. It stared at him with its tubular eyes and then scurried away down the street. Francie gawked at it for a second, and then sprinted after it. He didn't have time to be chasing around after a lawncutter in the dark, but it was too great a temptation to resist. A good healthy engimal was worth a lot of money.

It was dark, and the streets off the main thoroughfares were badly lit, if at all, but Francie knew these streets blindfolded. The lawncutter led him a merry chase, zigzagging away from him, bouncing up onto the kerb, its motor making a shrill whirring sound. He hoped nobody else would hear it. Francie wanted this prize for himself. He was breathing hard and his trousers were spattered with mud by the time he cornered the machine in a dead-end alley. It had turned round to look at him, humming warily. He advanced slowly, making comforting sounds, but it backed away from him into the shadows until its tail touched the wall that blocked off the end of the alley.

'Here . . . thingy, thingy, thing,' he called softly. 'I'm not goin' ta hurt yeh. Come 'ere to me now. Come to Francie. That's a good girl.'

He didn't know if it was a boy or a girl, but it probably didn't matter anyway. He wondered where it was from. Not from around here, that was for sure. Nobody in this neighbourhood had a lawn, let alone an engimal to mow it. He edged closer, admiring the sweeping patterns on its humped carapace.

'Shhh. That's it. That's a good girl. Easy now.'

Francie was good with animals. He got on well with the horses and dogs that were kept at Wildenstern Hall. The stable boys weren't let anywhere near the engimals, but he was sure he could win the lawncutter's trust. Having seen machines like this used on the estate, he knew he had to grab its tail. It should be tame enough once he got hold of it. Its little engine gave a nervous growl. It shifted from

side to side, but Francie had his arms out ready to grab it if it tried to get round him.

‘Shhh. Come here to me now. That’s it. I’m not goin’ to hurt yeh—’

It swivelled and he lunged for its tail. The lawncutter turned and went for his feet, and he barely got out of the way of its spinning blades in time. The machine let out a screech and came at him again, its rotating jaws snatching at his ankles.

‘Aaah!’ he yelled. ‘Holy Mary—!’

Francie jumped clear of the gnashing blades and turned to run. It clipped his heel as he took off, and he thanked the good Lord that he was wearing shoes. He could hear it behind him as he ran, its blades whining with speed. Clattering round a corner, he slipped in the mud and fell hard on his side, jarring his senses and badly scraping his elbow. The lawncutter was only a few yards behind him and, with an agility born of fear, he leaped to his feet and hurled himself at the top of the high wall beside him. His fingertips caught hold and he scrambled up and onto it, flopping down to try and catch his breath. The engimal looked up at him, giving off a petty little growl and spinning its jaws in triumph.

‘Get lost!’ he yelled down at it. ‘Get away from me, yeh maggot! Go on!’

It snarled back at him.

‘Go away, I’m tellin’ yeh! If I have to come down there, I’ll hit yeh so hard I’ll make yeh cough up thrupenny bits. Away with yeh now!’

The lawncutter was unimpressed. It crouched there, waiting for him.

‘What’s all that noise there?’ a voice called down from a window above them. ‘There’s people tryin’ to sleep here. Have yiz no homes to go to?’

The engimal flinched from the voice, its new-found savagery disappearing at the sound of another adversary. It

flashed its blades once more at Francie and then scurried off down the dark street. Francie waited for a couple of minutes to be sure that it was gone. Then he climbed down and brushed down his clothes as best he could. He was plastered with mud all down his left side, and the left elbow of his shirt was torn. His elbow was bleeding and it was starting to hurt. There was no way he'd be able to get his clothes clean by the morning. He was going to be in for a right hiding from Hennessy when he got back to the stables.

He found that the tails of his shirt had come out of his trousers and gave a start. Checking around his sides and back to be sure, he uttered an earthy curse. It was gone.

Desperately casting his eyes around, he searched the ground where he had fallen. It wasn't there. His heart thumping, he worked his way back along the road where the lawncutter had chased him until he saw a pale square in the mud a few yards away. He could easily have missed it in the darkness. Francie picked up the folded piece of paper, wiping it down. Checking that it wasn't damaged, he tucked his shirt into his trousers, tightened his braces and slipped the large folded piece of paper back inside. He breathed a sigh of relief. It had fallen less than a foot from a stream of raw sewage that was oozing down the gutter. And he was lucky the lawncutter hadn't shredded it.

Francie's family lived in the tenements not ten minutes from the bright lights of Sackville Street, in a Georgian house that had once been a fine building, according to his father. Fit for a lord, he said, before the Famine emptied the country, and thousands had moved to the city. Now there were eight families living in that house. Eight *large* families.

Francie found his way down the gloomy lane, past the one outside toilet that served four houses, with its rusting tap where they took their water and rinsed out their privy pails. He clambered over the wall into the yard that led to

the back door of his house. Somewhere a cat yowled like a hurt child. Another one answered it. Patting his shirt to make sure the folded piece of paper was still tucked into it, he lifted the latch.

His family lived on the third floor, and he climbed the bare wooden steps, wincing at the familiar squeaks. He had never been embarrassed by his family's poverty before. But after nearly a year of working for the Wildensterns, he had become painfully aware of the sordid life he had grown up with. From behind the door of one of their neighbours he could hear arguing and crying. From another, the sound of a tin whistle being played with vigour. The third door he passed was hanging off its hinges, the frame splintered. There was no warmth or sound from the darkness within. The O'Malleys must have been evicted. That room would be filled soon enough by some other desperate bunch. Some of these rooms housed as many as twenty people.

He reached his family's door, and knocked before opening it. There was only one candle lit, and his mother sat by the light, darning a hole in the elbow of a jumper. The rickety wooden chair scraped on the floor as she stood up.

'Francis, pet! You're home! Oh, praise be to God, you're home!'

She was always like that. Stating the obvious - and then thanking God for it.

'Shay! Francie's home!' she cried as she rushed over to give her youngest child a smothering hug.

'Can't I see that with my own eyes, Cathy?' came the answer from across the room.

His father stood up from his place by the small cast-iron stove and came over, giving Francie an excuse to extricate himself from his mother's embrace. Shay looked his son in the eye and held out his hand. It still made Francie proud, to have his da shake his hand like he was a grown man.