



Excerpt from

Dark Chapter

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PROLOGUE

They say events like this change your life forever. That your life will never be the same as it was the day before it happened. Or even two hours before it happened, when I stood waiting for that bus out of Belfast, along the Falls Road to the west of the city.

Is it melodramatic to think of life like that – of a clean split struck straight down the breadth of your existence, severing your first twenty-nine years from all the years that come after? I look across that gap now, an unexpected rift in the contour of my life, and I long to shout across that ravine to the younger me who stands on the opposite edge, oblivious to what lies ahead. She is a distant speck. She seems lost from my perspective, but in her mind she thinks she knows where she's going. There is a hiking guidebook in her hand and a path that she is following: it will lead here, up this slope, and then along the edge of a plateau to gain the higher ground merging with the hills above the city. She does not know who follows her; she is only thinking of the path ahead. But some things she cannot anticipate.

I stand now on this side of the ravine, desperate to warn my earlier self of the person trailing her, skulking from bush to tree in her wake. *Stop!* I want to shout. *It's not worth it! Just give up the trail and go home.* But she wouldn't listen anyway. She's too stubborn, too determined to hike this trail on a day this crisp and clear. And now, it's too late. She is in isolated country, and even if she were to turn back, she would inevitably encounter him, because he is behind her.

By now, she has gained the slope and found the trail which runs between a sunlit pasture and the steep incline of the glen. She pauses for a moment, breathing in the beauty of this green track, the tree branches arching over the path, the bright field which stretches to her left. She has escaped the city finally; this is where the countryside really begins. It seems like a little bit of heaven, for one last, peaceful

moment. But she is perched on the edge, and to her right, the ground plunges sharply into the ravine. One misstep off the path would lead to trouble.

The River Colin is a distant roar. The air up here smells of manure and sun and warm grass, and lazy insects drift in the filtered light beneath the trees. And then, glancing down the wooded chasm to her right, she sees him coming up the slope, trying to hide in the brush of the forest. Something skips unnaturally in the beat of her heart. Only then, does she realize she is being followed.