

PROLOGUE

Dark clouds hung low above the Irish Sea, fat in the moist morning air, and tracked slowly over the assassin as he stood on the wooden foredeck of the fishing boat. A few screeching herring gulls had encircled the vessel while it was still miles offshore; now that it had entered the harbor channel, a flock one dozen strong swarmed above and around, churning the mist with their white wings.

The seabirds shrieked at the vessel, bleated warnings to the Irish coast of the arrival of a killer to its shores.

But their warnings were lost in the vapor.

The boat docked in its harbor slip just before eight a.m. The assassin climbed off the deck and onto the quay without a glance at the two crewmembers. Not a single word had been exchanged in the three hours since the

forty-foot Lochin had picked its passenger up from a Lithuanian freighter in international waters. He remained on the deck, moving fore and aft, vigilantly scanning the roiling sea around him, his black hooded raincoat protecting him from the salty spray and the occasional shower, as well as the curious eyes of the father and son who operated the boat. The crew remained in the wheelhouse during the journey, following strict instructions. They had been told to pick up a passenger and then keep away from him, to return with him to Howth Harbor, just north of Dublin. After delivering this odd catch of the day, they were to enjoy their payment and hold their bloody tongues.

The assassin walked through the seaside village to the tiny train depot and bought a ticket to Connolly Station in central Dublin. With half an hour to kill, he stepped down the station steps and into the basement pub. The Bloody Scream served a full Irish breakfast for the fishermen in the harbor; the long narrow room was more than half-full of men wolfing down plates of eggs and sausage and baked beans, washing it all down with pints of ink-dark foamy Guinness Stout. The assassin knew how to assimilate in unfamiliar surroundings; he grunted and gestured to hide his foreign accent, and ordered the same as those around him. He dug into his plate and drained his beer before leaving the Bloody Scream to catch his train.

A half hour later he trudged through Dublin. He wore his brown beard thick and a blue watch cap down over his ears and forehead, a scarf tight around his neck,

and a dark blue peacoat into which his gloved hands dug deep to hide from the frigid air. Hanging over a shoulder, a small canvas bag swung with his footsteps. He headed south away from the train station, then turned right at the quay of the River Liffey and followed it as chilled rain began to fall.

The assassin walked on.

He looked forward to getting this errand behind him. He had not been comfortable at sea, nor was he comfortable now in the morning crowd growing around him as he neared O'Connell Street.

But there was a man here in Dublin who, it had been decided by someone with money and influence, should cease to exist.

And Court Gentry had come to see to that.

ONE

At a pharmacy he bought a pack of acetaminophen tablets and a bottled water. He'd been injured a few months back, a bullet through the thigh and a knife blade into his gut. The pain had lessened by the week. The body had incredible power to heal, so much greater than that of the mind. Court had grown dependent on the pills and injections: Vicodin and OxyContin, Demerol and Dilaudid. A surgeon in Nice had kept him supplied since the operation to clean and close his abdominal wound, and Gentry had popped pills each day since. But he'd purposely left them behind when he boarded the freighter; he'd gone over a week now without his meds, and this self-imposed detox was making him miserable.

The acetaminophen was no substitute for a heavy

narcotic, but his mind found comfort in the ritual of swallowing the tablets nonetheless.

Three hours after leaving the boat, he checked in to a Chinese-run budget hotel in a narrow alley off Parnell Street, a half mile north of the river. His room was dark and dank and smelled of mold and frying grease; the restaurant two floors below him blew the stench through the vents. A near-horizontal rain beat steadily on the dirty window but failed to clean it; the oily grime covered the inside of the glass.

Gentry lay on his back on the sagging mattress and stared at the ceiling, his thoughts unfocused. He'd been on a boat for over a week; it felt odd not swaying back and forth, rising slowly up and down.

It took hours to drift asleep, the cold rain unceasing on the pane next to his head.

In the mid-afternoon he sat at the Chinese restaurant in the tiny hotel, ate noodles and pork, and used a store-bought mobile phone to log on to the Internet. He accessed a bulletin board on a Web site that sold adventure tours of the Ural Mountains, entered a password to log on to a forum for employees; with a further code he gained entry to a thread with one other viewer.

Court typed on his phone with his thumb while he drank tepid orange juice.

I'm here.

A few seconds later the tiny window in the phone refreshed. Someone had replied on the forum.

In Bangkok, I trust? This was the code that confirmed

the identity of the other party. Gentry's identity was established with his reply.

No. Singapore. Only by the misspelling was the identity check complete.

Nice journey, my friend? came the next reply. Court read it, bit into a fried wonton as greasy as the window in his upstairs room.

He tried not to roll his eyes.

It had *not* been a nice journey, and Gregor Ivanovic Sidorenko was *not* Court Gentry's friend. Court had no friends. And it was unlikely Sidorenko, or Sid to all those in the West who knew of him, had any himself. He was Russian mob, an overboss in Saint Petersburg. He ran an organization that controlled illegal gambling and drugs and hookers and hit men and . . . out of desperation on the part of the American assassin, he now ran Court Gentry, the Gray Man.

While ostensibly in the same line of work, Gregor Sidorenko was no Donald Fitzroy. Sir Donald had been Court's handler for years, ever since the CIA had chased Gentry out of the U.S. with a burn notice and a shoot-on-sight directive. Fitzroy had taken him in, had offered him good jobs against bad men, had paid him fairly for his work, and had even once hired him to protect his own family. But then Fitzroy had been pushed into a corner, had turned on Court, and though he'd apologized profusely and even offered up his life to his American employee in recompense, Gentry knew he could never trust him again.

He would never trust anyone again.

Sid was scum, but he was a known quantity. Court knew he couldn't trust the forked-tongued Russian fuck as far as he could throw him, but Sid could supply access to some of the most lucrative contracts in the industry. And Sid agreed to Gentry's caveat that he would only accept those hits he deemed righteous, or at least those that tipped slightly to the good side of the "morally neutral" category.

Which had led Court here to Ireland.

This trip to Dublin was Court's first op for Sid. He'd read the dossier of the target, agreed to the job, argued online about the low wages offered for the contract, and then reluctantly accepted.

He needed to stay operational. The downtime and the wounds and the drugs were softening him, and he was a man who absolutely could *not* afford to soften.

Court had memorized the relevant portions of the target's dossier. Standard operating procedure before a wet operation. Name: Dougal Slattery. Age: fifty-four years. Nationality: Irish. Height: big. Weight: fat. He'd been a boxer as a young man but couldn't break out of the thick midlist of local pugilistic talent. Then he found work as a tough guy, a bouncer in Dublin nightclubs. He branched out, did some rough stuff for a local syndicate, slapping around lazy Polish hookers and knocking Turkish drug dealers' heads together for not making quota. He graduated to some low-level killings: gang versus gang stuff, nothing fancy till he was sent on an errand to the Continent. In Amsterdam he'd made the big time, killing his

boss's rival in a hail of bullets after using his gnarled fists to bash in the faces of two of his bodyguards.

From there he'd climbed to the second tier of the killer-for-hire trade. Wet jobs in Ankara, in Sardinia, in Calcutta, in Tajikistan. He did not run solo, Court had noticed in his file; he wasn't the brains behind his operations, but his curriculum vitae included some respectable kills. Not respectable in the moral sense; no, he'd reportedly killed a police detective, an honest businessman, a journalist or two. But Court appreciated that the operations themselves had been, if not spectacular, at least competently executed.

But his last hit on file was six years ago. Court couldn't help but notice that Sid's dossier on Slattery went wafer thin after that. A few speculative inferences aside, all that was known about his life since then was that he played the drum in a traditional Irish band that performed five nights a week in the touristy Temple Bar section of Dublin.

Hardly work that got your name scribbled onto a termination order.

Gentry found this to be one of his more morally neutral operations. The man was a killer, but so was Court. Court rationalized the difference; he vetted *his* targets, made sure their deeds warranted extrajudicial killing. Dougal Slattery clearly did not. According to Sid, the Irishman was now on retainer for an Italian-run international criminal organization. His next victim might well be a recalcitrant prostitute or the owner of a restaurant that failed to pay protection money to the Mafia.

Killing Dougal Slattery wouldn't much improve the evil ways of the world, Court decided, but it certainly wouldn't hurt.

Well, it wouldn't hurt anyone who was *not* named Dougal Slattery.

Hello? You still there? Sid's previous post was three minutes old. Court had drifted off-mission for a moment. He forced himself to concentrate on his phone's tiny screen.

I'm here. No problems.

How long will you need?

Unknown. Will assess situation tonight. Act at first prudent opportunity.

I understand, my friend. Don't take too long. I have more work after.

There was always more "work," Court knew. But most "work" involved contracts Gentry would never accept. Court would be the judge if there was "more work after." He didn't argue the point with Sidorenko, though. Instead he just replied, Okay.

I look forward to good news. Do svidaniya, friend.

Court just logged off. He shut down the phone and stuck it in the side pocket of his peacoat. He finished his meal, paid, and left the hotel.

In the late afternoon he walked the neighborhoods around Grafton Street. He'd spent an hour looking at the dress and mannerisms of the locals, trying to assimilate. It would not be hard for the trained professional;

Dublin was an international city full of Poles, Russians, Turks, Chinese, South Americans . . . even a few Irish here and there. There was no one look or walk or attitude to parrot; still, Court stepped into a used-clothing shop on Dawson Lane and stepped out with a bag. In the bathroom of a department store he changed into worn blue jeans, a hooded sweatshirt, and a black denim jacket. Black athletic shoes and his dark blue watch cap finished off the ensemble.

By nightfall he was a local, moving with the masses. He ran a security sweep, backtracked, stepped on and off a few trains on the DART—Dublin's mass transit—all to make sure he was not being followed. There were more people in this world who wanted Court Gentry dead than would ever give a rat's ass about Dougal Slattery, and Court kept this in mind, just to keep his operation in perspective. His secondary objective was to kill the Irishman; the primary objective, as always, was to keep his own ass alive for another day. His PERSEC, or personal security, needed to remain at the forefront of his thoughts.

Satisfied he had not grown a tail, he headed to the Temple Bar neighborhood on the southern bank of the River Liffey.

At ten o'clock he sat at the bar at the Oliver St. John Gogarty. Although it was a Wednesday evening, the touristy pub was packed full. Americans, Continental Europeans, Asians. The only Irish in the bar were likely the barmaids, the bartenders, and the band.

Court hadn't spent much time in raucous juke joints

in the past few months. He'd laid low in the south of France, lived in the tiny attic room of a tiny cottage in a tiny hillside village and rarely ventured out past the little corner market for canned foods and bottled water. Even his few visits into Nice to see his doctor were tame. It was the winter season; the nightclubs and the kitschy shops on the Promenade des Anglais, always bursting at the seams during the tourist season, were nearly empty or boarded up. That was the way Court liked it. The Oliver St. John Gogarty was anathema to his standard tradecraft; already the female bartender had asked him his name, and two Englishwomen next to him had tried to engage him in small talk. He'd ignored their overtures, sipped his Guinness, scanned the room, wished he had four milligrams of Dilaudid to relax him, and then angrily told himself to unfuck himself and get his head back on this job.

There are two types of people in the world. Only two. Sheep and wolves. Court was a wolf, and he knew it. The past few months had weakened him somewhat, but a wolf was always a wolf, and it had never been more evident to him than it was here at the bar, surrounded as he was by a hundred sheep. No one in the crowd scanned for threats like he did. No one in the crowd had pinpointed the exits and the fit men in the room and the type of glass in the front window. No one in the crowd had taken note of the paucity of law enforcement on the street or the lighting scheme of the back alley. No one in the crowd knew where to sit so no mirror's reflection cast his image about the room.

No one in the crowd had a plan to run for his life if necessary.

And no one in the crowd had a plan to kill everyone else in the crowd if it came down to it.

Yes, he was in a crowd full of sheep, but there was, in fact, one more wolf in the room. According to Sid's dossier, the drummer onstage was a hard man as well. There were five in the traditional, or "trad" band, and though Gentry was no expert on such matters, from the reaction of the patrons, he supposed they must have been very good. The big man with the white hair sitting on a bench to the side of the stage played a bodhrán, a traditional handheld Irish drum. He took his work seriously, kept his head down and leaned forward as if to pick up on the subtleties of the music. He looked to Court more like a middle-aged musician and less like a middle-aged hit man. Maybe it had been a while since he'd worked his "day job." Next to him, a young thin man played a tin whistle into his microphone, the guitarists strummed and sang in harmony, and the crowd of sheep went wild. Court couldn't make out many of the words of the song, but it had something to do with a beautiful young woman and a bad potato harvest and a husband dead from drink.

Court finished his stout and headed out the door.

TWO

Dougal Slattery said good-bye to his bandmates at eleven thirty, covered his thick white hair with a Donegal wool walking cap, and left the Oliver St. John Gogarty with his drum in its leather case hanging over his shoulder. It was a cold but clear evening, like a thousand other nights he'd played in the bar, and also like most other nights, he fancied a pint before heading back to his flat. There were three dozen pubs within a few minutes' walk, but his flat was a mile away on the other side of Pearse Station. He'd do what he usually did: head to his local watering hole for a nightcap.

Slattery walked with a limp, a bad knee. Actually, a bad knee and a worse knee, but limping on both legs was out of the question, so he leaned into the better of

the two weakening joints, his thick body lumbering on through the cold night.

It took the big Irishman nearly thirty minutes to make it to the Padraic Pearse, named after the Irish Catholic leader executed by the British in the 1916 Easter uprising. It was a staunch Catholic pub; photos and relics of the Rebellion decorated the windows of the small establishment.

Dougal limped in, placed his coat and his bodhrán in a corner booth, and headed to the bar for the pint of Guinness already being poured from the tap.

Court Gentry found a darkened doorway and sat down on the stoop. He'd done more walking today than he'd done in months, and he was surprised to feel the ache in the muscles of his thighs and his calves and thought he sensed a faint sting where the bullet had torn into his right leg the previous December. He wished he had a Vicodin, but he knew he couldn't be doped up and operational at the same time, so he just sat there and stared at the front door of the pub across the street. Tonight was reconnaissance only; he'd follow his target home and then assess where and when to act afterwards.

The Padraic Pearse it was called. A tiny saloon by the looks of it from the outside. Probably Slattery's regular haunt, seeing how he'd made a beeline here past countless other opportunities to sit and drink. There were more bars per capita here in Dublin than in any city in

the world. The Irish loved their pubs, and Court was not surprised to find himself spending a portion of his evening watching the front door of a tavern, waiting for his target to down a couple of brews.

Gentry rose stiffly to his feet. He wanted to move his muscles, he was cold as well as sore, and he needed a toilet or a back alley. He knew the most reasonable place for a young local such as himself to be caught taking a piss would be the narrow passage alongside the Padraic, so he crossed the empty street and headed into the dark. Once there, he sniffed his way to a wall beside some rubbish tins, undid his belt, and then quickly retightened it. A noise farther down the alley had caught his attention: two men exiting a back door, a shaft of light fifty feet down from him, and the sound of other men talking from inside the building. The men went to a back wall and pissed, then returned inside a minute later with no idea a stranger stood nearby in the dark.

It was clearly a back door to the Padraic Pearse that they'd passed through. So the pub was much larger than Court had originally thought. He did his business against the brick wall and then walked to the back door. On the other side he heard the cracking of a pool cue against a cue ball and gruff men's voices, audible but unintelligible. Looking ahead, Gentry saw the back alley gave access to a side street, and he wondered if Slattery had already left the bar via this route. Perhaps he'd even made the tail on him, but Court had seen no hint of that at any point in the half-hour walk from the Temple Bar.

Shit. Gentry knew he either needed to knock off the

surveillance tonight and try again tomorrow, or head into the pub and take a look to see if his man was still there. The danger of being compromised in a tavern this large would be minimal; it sounded as if there were dozens inside, and the Gray Man knew how to melt into his surroundings indoors as well as outdoors. He headed back to the front door, tucked his neck deep into his denim jacket to make himself an inch shorter, and then pushed open the front door of the Padraic Pearse.

Gentry entered the pub and immediately knew he'd made a grave mistake. It was incredibly small. The pool area he'd heard from the back was shut off with an access door against the back wall of the tavern with a large sign that read Members Only. The room Court had entered contained just a small bar, three tables, and a few snugs along the wall. He strolled to the bar and took a stool, did not turn his head left or right, just pulled out his wallet and stared straight ahead at the bottles behind the bar. He felt the eyes of the dozen or so patrons, but he did not yet know if Slattery was in the room with him.

There was a hard edge to the pub and its clientele. Court sensed it immediately. Malevolence filled the air.

This was no place for strangers.

Finally he glanced up into the mirror behind the bar. Every man in the pub, Dougal Slattery and the two young mates seated with him included, stared at him through the glass.

Tough crowd, Gentry thought.

A sign taped to the mirror caught his eye: No Singing Allowed.

Tough joint.

Shit.

The bartender eyed him for a long moment over his newspaper, finally laid it down, and raised his red eyebrows slightly.

“Pint of Guinness,” Court said.

Slattery sipped his beer, listened to the two young blokes in his snug complain about a bad call in the rugby match the previous evening between Clontarf and Thomond. Dougal was a Wanderers supporter himself, couldn't give two shits about how bleedin' Clontarf had been bleedin' robbed by the bleedin' referee, but he enjoyed the company of the two young regulars nonetheless. He looked up when he heard the door open; it was late for anyone to come in for a pint, but certainly not unheard of. He cocked his head to the side. His eyes tracked the stranger as he headed to the bar.

Dougal quickly tuned out his tablemates.

Inside Dougal Slattery's large frame alarm bells clanged as loud as those in the belfry of the Christ Church Cathedral a mile to the west. A stranger in the Padraic Pearse was a queer enough sight, but this bloke had been in the crowd at the Oliver earlier in the evening. Moreover, he was young and fit, and just one shade too nonchalant for Slattery's taste.

He wasn't local. He dressed the part, true, but Slattery saw through it somehow. As the man sat himself on a barstool, the Irishman looked hard for evidence of a weapon

in his clothing, either the printing of a handgun or that particular hitch a man with a sidearm must make to accommodate the iron on his hip as he sits. Dougal saw nothing, but the stranger's right side was shielded from him.

He heard the man order. "Pint of Guinness"—nothing foreign or odd there. He even sounded a bit Irish, but his voice was low and soft.

Was he police? Interpol? Dougal knew that cops in a half dozen countries would like to put him in shackles and drag him off his blessed island. No. This man did not appear to be a cop; he seemed somehow too relaxed for that line of work.

He also knew how to order a Guinness, and that was something. Uninitiated foreigners tended to reach for the glass as soon as it's placed on the bar, a cardinal mistake. The stout requires a two-part pour; the bartender allows the foam to settle for a couple of minutes, at which time the beer sits teasingly close to the patron, inviting him to show his ignorance by pulling the glass to himself.

But this stranger knew his manners.

Slattery caught a glance from the man through the mirror, just a quick, impassive, fleeting look. The other regulars in the bar were all staring at the stranger, as well. He looked them over before returning his attention to the bartender. George wasn't any happier to see a stranger at his bar than was Slattery, but he served the pint and took the money and went back to his newspaper.

Dougal leaned forward to the men at his table. He spoke to them softly. There was an affectation of levity, but the words were said with no smile at all.

“Listen, laddies. How would you fancy a little action tonight before your ma’s tuck yas into your beds?”

Court had been made, and he knew it. He sat at the bar, stared into his beer, his body feigning relaxation but his mind tense, going over the protocol for dealing with a dozen men in a room not much larger than the interior of a school bus. There would be blades in this crowd, Gentry had no doubt. Brass knuckles, too, more than likely. Maybe even a sawed-off double-barreled shotgun behind the bar. Court wore a pistol in a holster in his waistband, but it wasn’t much of a defensive weapon. A Russian Makarov. With the silencer in his coat pocket, he could make it an effective assassin’s tool, but the .380-caliber bullet was too impotent to count on as an effective man stopper, the eight-round magazine capacity seemed woefully inadequate for the mass of beef around him in the room, and the magazine release mechanism was poorly placed and inefficient. Yes, Court knew, he could poke bloody holes in a few of these Micks if it came down to it, but if they moved on him in force and with motivation, he’d be good and well fucked.

He took a chug of his Guinness. Never had a pint looked so large. He thought he’d never drain down to the bottom of his glass so he could head out and get back to the dark street. Behind him he heard Slattery whisper something to the men with him. Court did not look up into the mirror. Slattery had seen him earlier at the Oliver St. John Gogarty; that was clear enough. Now

he'd be letting his friends in on the situation. With good luck, Slattery would bug out, set up some sort of confrontation in the street. Send his men outside to hide in the dark and leave with them. With bad luck, it would go down here and now. Dougal would stand and proclaim to the room that the man who pitched the stranger through the front window would earn himself a year's supply of Guinness.

Son of a bitch, Court thought. Recuperating in France, he'd really wanted to get operational again, but this was much too fucking much.

Court began to stand. His pint was half-full, but he thought if he could leave this pub under his own power at any time, it would be right now, before Slattery got his plan together. But before Gentry could slide all the way off his stool, the bartender lowered his newspaper.

"Don't fancy yer pint, eh?"

The redheaded, barrel-chested sixty-year-old must have sensed the bad juju in the room between Slattery and the stranger.

Court didn't want to say too much. Instead he shifted on his stool, like he was just rearranging himself, and lifted his glass. Tipped it to the bartender and took another gulp. "It's just grand," he said. He thought he sounded Irish but wasn't sure.

To his left the two men in the booth with his target stood and left through the front door. Two more at a table behind him stood; Court tracked them through the mirror as they approached. They sat on either side of him menacingly.

The man on the left spoke first. His breath was hot with Irish whiskey and tobacco.

“Woar ye from?”

Court looked straight ahead. He dropped the attempt at an Irish accent. “Workin’ a Maersk freighter. We docked this afternoon. Leave out in the morning.”

“Woar are ye from?” The other man repeated his mate’s question.

“I told you.”

“You born on the freighter? ‘Where you from’ means where you come from?”

“Lads. Leave the man to enjoy his pint in peace.” It was Dougal Slattery speaking. He had stood, strolled over to the bar with his limp, and made eye contact through the mirror. “Always good to see a new face here. Travelers included. Don’t pay the lads any attention, friend.”

Court wondered why it was that everyone was calling him “friend” today.