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Opening extract from

Twist of Gold

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FOREWORD

WHEN MY GRANDMOTHER GREW OLD AND could no longer play the fiddle because her fingers were so stiffened and gnarled, she used to tell us often of how the first O'Briens came to leave Ireland for California. Sitting in her rocking chair on the verandah of the old ranch house she had been born in and that she would allow no one to alter, she would tell us the story we all knew so well.

She would sit, her knees covered against the evening breeze in a scarlet cloak, a white moon-shawl over her shoulders; and around her neck she wore a wonderful golden torc that caught the red of the sun as it sank over the hills.

Although we knew the story almost word for word, we loved to hear it because she told it with such pride.

'My father was Sean O'Brien,' she would say. 'Your great grandfather he was and a finer man than he never lived; and he told me this story himself, so it's true – every word of it.' She would begin the same way each time she told the story, telling us of the Ireland of 1847 when the potato crop, the food of the people, failed yet again, stricken with a sudden blight that reduced the countryside to a pungent mass of black rot and left the people starving. In a small village in County Cork, Sean spent every waking hour in the desperate search for food to keep his mother, sister and himself alive.

CHAPTER 1

THE BOY AND THE DRAGOON SAT IN THE WARM drizzle on either side of the river. It was a close, still evening, and the flies were down. The boy knew he was there but ignored him as he had been instructed so often by his mother. He baited his hook yet again and cast it into the river. The Dragoon's horse stood with his legs in the cool of the water and drank tidily. The man sensed the boy's burning enmity; he had encountered it often enough before from the children of Ireland, but it hurt him none the less as it always did. He removed his heavy plumed helmet and placed it on the ground beside him balancing it against the bank. His scarlet cloak he threw aside on

the ground behind him and then lay back on it, his head resting on his hands, looking over the top of his boots at the boy who sat rock-still on the bank opposite him. This way, he thought, he could pretend to be asleep and watch the boy at the same time.

The boy wore nothing but rags, like all the other children, and he went bare-foot. He was thin, but not yet as skeletal as some the Dragoon had seen. The signs of hunger were there already, the hollow cheeks, the stick-like legs and the dreadful white of the bones at the knees. It was the child's sunken eyes though that held the Dragoon's attention, fixed as they were in complete concentration at the point where his line lay in the water. His whole body was taut and waiting behind those eyes. It's as if his life depended on it, the Dragoon thought. And then, as he watched, the truth dawned on him in all its clarity. 'For Christ's sake, Will,' he said to himself, 'what are you saying? His life does depend on it. Look at him. You're looking at a dead child. In a couple of weeks, in a couple of months you'll be trotting along some dripping, leafy lane and you'll see a body lying muddy and still in a ditch. And it won't be just anybody's body, it'll be him.'

Impulse took him against his better judgement.

The Dragoon sat up suddenly, resting on his elbows, and called out. 'Son, hey son!' The boy looked up slowly, his face full of smouldering resentment. 'Son, I've some biscuits in my saddle bag. Would you like a biscuit, son? You'll not be catching any fish here, you know. I've been trying for weeks myself. The odd tiddly trout, that's all. Water's too low. You'll not catch anything, not in a month of Sundays. There's eels of course, but it's too light for eels and too early.' The boy glared at him as he spoke, his instinctive hatred mellowed already by the humanity in the man's voice. The Dragoon lowered his voice, deliberately trying to remove the threat from it. 'Look son. I won't hurt you. Honest I won't. I've a few biscuits in my saddle bag and I want you to have them – that's all. It won't cost you. It's a present. I've had my supper and you haven't had yours. You can talk to me, son. I don't bite you know. Look son, I'll tell you what. I'll throw you over three biscuits today – that's all I've got – and then I'll come back tomorrow with some more. How's that?' As he talked he stood up and moved over to his horse and unbuckled his saddle bag. He took out the three meal biscuits he had left and held them up in the air. 'Here you are, son. It's all I've got.'

The boy stood up slowly, his line still lying in the water, his eyes never leaving the Dragoon's hand. He spoke softly, but with not a trace of supplication. 'Don't throw them, mister,' he said. 'I'll come across.'

'Meet you half way, son,' said the Dragoon exhilarated that the child had spoken to him at last.

They met in mid-stream and the Dragoon looked down at the boy as he handed him the biscuits. 'Shall I come back tomorrow, son? Same time, same place? Will you be here, son?'

'Could be,' said the boy, holding the biscuits tight in his hands and smelling them as if to confirm their reality. 'Maybe I will,' he said.

'What are you called, son? What do they call you at home?'

'Sean,' said the boy, never for one moment taking his eyes from the biscuits. 'I'm called Sean O'Brien.'

CHAPTER 2

SEAN SUPPRESSED THE SURGE OF EXCITEMENT that bubbled within him as he approached the village. A fresh source of food was not something to be shared with anyone except with his mother and his sister, Annie. The village was silent, empty of people. Only the smoke from the chimneys betrayed any sign of life. But he knew they were all inside the cottages, those that had stayed, those that had survived. Every door was shut against the world. No dogs came out to bark at him, no children raced down the bracken track from the church, no pigs snuffled in the fuchsia-covered ditches. The dust bowls by the churchyard gate were still there – mud-puddles in winter – but in

summer all the hens and cockerels in the village used to congregate here for their ablutions and talk noisily as they wriggled and squirmed in the dust. Sean could not remember now when it was he last heard the cry of a cockerel.

He turned away from the church before his eyes were drawn to the three red mounds in the farthest corner of the churchyard. He spoke to them as he began the long climb up the hill towards home. He spoke aloud because he knew that only they would be listening. 'Danny, Mary, little Joe,' he said. 'A few more of these biscuits and you'd not be lying out there in the ground. I tried, you know I did, don't you? I'll come over and see you later with Annie, like we always do.'

The cottage was like any other in the village, a low squat building of stone, but with the tallest chimney in Ireland standing proudly out from the thatched roof. The chimney was his father's particular pride and joy. Sean remembered well the building of the cottage all those years before. Every cousin and uncle from round about, every able-bodied neighbour was there that spring and within days there was a cottage where before there had been nothing. His father, still strong and splendid in

the strength of his youth, had supervised noisily as he always did, but louder than ever for this was his house and it was expected. 'The higher a chimney is, son, the better it draws,' he insisted when they scoffed at his giant of a chimney. And when it was finished he sat upon it with a glass of poteen in his hand, the evening sun firing his ginger beard as he threw back his head and laughed with them for it was indeed a monster of a chimney. 'Truly a wonderful creation,' Sean repeated his father's words aloud, and the thought of him brought a smile to his eyes.

The latch on the door was stiff and heavy, so Sean stuffed the biscuits down his shirt-front to leave his hands free to open it. They lay together where he had left them that morning, but his little sister Annie had been as good as her word, and the fire was well built up and the house was warm. Annie sat up as he came in, but his mother could only turn her head slowly. 'Well, Sean dear?' she said. 'Is it a salmon that you're bringing us this time?' It was said with no bitterness and no blame, but in a voice drained of all hope.

'No salmon, Mother, but what would you say to a biscuit, Mother, a great thick oatmeal biscuit, and a present from the British army himself?' Annie threw

her arms around his neck and hugged him as if she would never let go.

'Careful, Annie, you'll squash them. Not so bad for a brother am I?'

His mother struggled to raise herself up to her elbows. In the light from the open door Sean recognised the cold blue hand of starvation on his mother's face, the same pallor that had come over Danny, Mary and little Joe before they died. He had known it for some days now, so it came as no shock to him, but a terrible sadness welled up inside him at the sight of her.

'Are you speaking the truth to me, Sean?' she said, her words punctuated by a rasping cough that took hold of her and shook her. Sean held up the biscuits in triumph.

'There'll be one for each of us, Mother,' he said.

'Can I eat it all, Mother?' asked Annie, caressing the biscuit. 'Can I eat it all today?'

'Every bit, Annie dear. But eat slowly for 'tis manna from heaven. Thank the blessed Mary for it and make it last as long as you can. God bless us.'

'God bless us,' said Annie, crossing herself speedily. 'And can I not begin now?'

The three ate in silence and when the feast was over and every crumb recovered from the ground, they passed round the pitcher of water and spoke once more. 'Did you steal it then, Sean?' his mother said as she sank back exhausted. 'Did you steal it? Well, no matter if you did, 'twas well done. One biscuit for us is one less for them I suppose. And don't they owe us more biscuits than each of us could eat in a lifetime?' and she sat up again, suddenly frightened. 'They didn't see you, Sean? They didn't follow you home? Annie, go to the door. See if anyone's there.'

'Hush, Mother,' Sean said, and he put a hand on Annie's arm. 'Don't trouble yourself, Annie. There'll be no one there. I was given the biscuits, Mother, honest I was. A Sergeant of Dragoons he was and brought his horse to my river to drink. And I know well, Mother, what you said about not speaking to the soldiers, but he stayed by the river and would not leave; and I would not leave either. It was my river before he came and I would not move away for any Englishman. You wouldn't have me run away, would you, Mother? So I stayed and he stayed. But Annie, I wanted so much to catch a fish just to show him it was my river, that the fish know me better than they

know him. And then for no good reason he offers me the biscuits and says I am to come back tomorrow for some more. I've never spoken to one of them before, Mother – but there was something about this one, he was different.'

'Don't you go near the place, Sean,' his mother said, heaving to get the words out before the cough came on her again. ''Tis a trap, sure enough. Don't go near the place. D'you hear me, Sean?'

'But Mother,' cried Annie, putting her arm around her mother to support her. ''Tis food, Mother. Sure there's nothing else left for us. We must eat anything we can live on. 'Tis only what you told us yourself, Mother. We must live, Mother. For Father's sake, we must live. Have you not told us often enough? If we do not eat there'll be none of us here when he comes back to fetch us. And he won't be long now, Mother, I know he won't be long. And we can live on Sean's biscuits, Mother.'

'Your father made you promise him something before he left. Do you not remember what it was, children? He said I was to be mother and father to all of you until he came back to fetch us. Do you not remember the day he came from Cork where he met the sea captain who told him of a paradise on earth

where the sun shines through the winter and there's food enough for everyone and plenty? And do you not remember he said he would go there and find us some land to farm and then come back for us? And you remember he said that while he was gone you were to obey me in all things? And you promised him, did you not?' Sean and Annie said nothing. 'Three of my children, three of his children are dead now from the hunger. Will you tell me how I shall ever face him and tell him that? And am I to lose another, his eldest son, for the want of one biscuit? And have you not yet learnt never to trust a uniform? Do they not tumble the houses, and burn the villages and take what they want from where they want? And do you not remember your father's warning about them? Surely there must still be fish in the rivers and rabbits in the fields. They cannot have all gone. 'Tis a trap, Sean, 'tis a trap I tell you.' And she sank back to the ground and turned her head towards the wall. 'Sean my boy, you're a good boy. Your father will be proud of you. And when he comes home to fetch us I will tell him how you've kept us in food when there was no food – but I will not touch another of your English biscuits – I should die rather.'

'Don't say that, Mother,' Annie said, pulling the blanket up to her chin and kissing her softly on the cheek. 'Don't talk of it. Rest now.'

'We'll be walking down to the church, Mother,' said Sean. 'We've to say goodnight to Danny and Mary and little Joe. Will you be all right on your own for a while?' But his mother did not answer him.

Sean took Annie's hand in his as they walked down the path through the bracken, across the track and up to the church. They walked in silence for each knew what the other was thinking, and they would not voice the terrible fear they both had, for to do so would be to bring what they dreaded so much within the range of possibility.

'I'll find something else for her, Annie,' said Sean at last. 'You'll see – he will not have taken all the fish out of the river – I've heard them jumping further down. She'll be all right – you'll see.'

'I know she will,' Annie said. And then later, 'Sean, why does Father not come back to us? He said he'd be gone a year or so, and it's been near enough two years now. And he does not even write any more. Why doesn't he come for us, Sean?'

'They say 'tis a long way to America, Annie, and a

long way back. And it's a terrible big place when you get there. He'll be finding the farm for us and a place for us to live and that cannot be easy, can it now? 'Twould take time now, wouldn't it?'

'Sure it would,' said Annie. 'But I wish he'd come, Sean, and take us away from here before it's too late. There's the winter coming, and we've nothing put by to see it through.'

'He'll be back, he said he would, Annie. He'll come. And even if the winter does come, we'll manage well enough. Never fear, Annie, never fear. Now we've to pick enough fuchsia to cover the graves, so let's get to it.'

Every evening the two children wandered the hedgerows and the lanes and gathered all the fuchsia they could carry before making their way to the spot where their brothers and sister lay side by side in the graveyard. They were neither of them satisfied until each grave was a scarlet carpet of fresh fuchsia; it made the graves special and covered the shocking nakedness of the earth. They stayed in that place no longer than they had to, working almost feverishly in their anxiety to be gone.

'Will you go back to see your Dragoon?' Annie asked as they walked back home.

'I'll think on it, Annie,' he said.

'Can I come with you then?' she asked, taking his hand again.

'Sure you can, Annie, sure you can. But not a word to Mother now; we don't want to trouble her. We'll fetch in a few turfs for the fire, shall we now? There's plenty cut.'