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Opening extract from

Wilderness

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The Eyes

The two boys looked at the dog's eyes.

"What colour are they?" said Johnny.

"Don't know," said Tom.

The eyes were like nothing the boys had ever seen before. There really was no name for their colour.

"Blue?" said Tom.

"No," said Johnny.

"Turquoise?"

"Not really."

The dog stared back at them. Most of the other dogs in the pen were howling and making noises that sounded quite like foreign words. They were rattling and stretching their chains. But this dog in front of them was different. He stood there in the dirty snow, as calm as anything, and looked at the boys, at Tom, and then at Johnny, at Tom, then Johnny.

They weren't really like dog's eyes at all. At least, they weren't like the eyes of any of the dogs the boys

knew at home. Lots of their friends had dogs, and their aunt had two of them, but all of those dogs had proper dog eyes. But this dog looking at them had eyes that seemed to belong to a different animal, maybe even a human.

"It's like there's someone trapped in there," said Tom.

Johnny nodded. He knew exactly what his brother meant.

They stepped back, still looking at the dog. They were afraid to turn their backs on him. They stepped back again, into thick, clean snow. They did it again, and bumped into something hard. They turned, and looked up at the biggest, tallest, widest man they'd ever seen.

The man was a solid wall in front of them. The dog was right behind them.

"Why – are – you – here?" said the man.

CHAPTER ONE

Johnny Griffin was nearly twelve and his brother, Tom, was ten. They lived in Dublin, with their parents and their sister. They were two ordinary boys. And they were being very ordinary the day their mother made the announcement.

They were in the kitchen, doing their homework. It was raining outside, and the rain was hammering on the flat roof of the kitchen. So they didn't hear their mother's key in the front door and they didn't hear her walking up the hall. Suddenly, she was there.

They always loved it when she came home from work, but this was even better, because she was soaking wet. There was already a pool at her feet.

"I'm a bit wet, lads," she said.

She shook herself, and big drops of secondhand rain flew at the boys and made them shout and laugh. She grabbed them and pressed their faces into her

soggy jacket. Tom laughed again, but Johnny didn't. He thought he was too old for this.

"Let go!" he yelled into the jacket.

"Say please," said his mother.

"No!" said Johnny.

But she let him go, and his brother too.

"There'll be no rain where we're going, lads," she said.

That sounded interesting.

"Only snow."

That sounded very interesting.

So she told them what she'd done that day, at lunchtime. She'd been walking past a travel shop and something bright in the window caught her eye. She stopped and looked. It was a hill in the window, made of artificial snow, and there was a teddy bear skiing down the hill. It was an ad for winter holidays.

"It was really stupid, lads," she said. "The poor teddy was wearing a crash helmet that was way too big for him and his skis were on back to front. But, sure anyway, I went in and booked a holiday for us."

"Where?" said Johnny.

"Finland."

The boys went mad. Tom ran down the hall, up the stairs, jumped on the beds and came back.

"Where's Finland?" he asked.

They got Johnny's atlas out of his schoolbag and

found Finland. Their mother showed them the route they'd be taking. Her finger went from Dublin, over the Irish Sea.

"We've to fly to Manchester first," she said.

And her finger turned at Manchester, and headed north across the page.

"And then to Helsinki."

They liked the sound of that place.

"Helsinki! Helsinki!"

They thumped each other and laughed.

"And then," said their mother, "we change planes again and fly even further north."

Her finger went up from Helsinki, and stopped.

"To a place that isn't on the map," she said.

"Why not?" said Tom.

"It's probably too small," said Johnny.

"That's right," said their mother.

"What's it called?"

"I can't remember," said their mother. "And I left the brochure at work. But it looks lovely."

"When are we going?" said Johnny.

"In two weeks," she said.

"Deadly," said Tom.

"But we'll still be in school," said Johnny.

He'd worked it out. It was the middle of November. Add two weeks and they'd be at the beginning of December, still three weeks before the Christmas holidays.

"No, you won't," said their mother. "I already phoned Ms Ford."

Ms Ford was the principal of their school. Johnny was in sixth class, and Tom was in fifth.

"She said she was inclined to look favourably at my request, because it'll be such an educational experience for both of you."

"Does that mean we can go?" said Johnny.

"Yes," said their mother. "She said fire away, but to be sure to bring her home a present."

So that was it. They were going to Finland.

"Coo-il!"

That much was true. But some of the things their mother had told Johnny and Tom weren't true at all. She'd told them she'd left the brochure on her desk at work. But she hadn't. It was in her bag. But she didn't want them running off and rooting through her bag. There were things in there that she didn't want the boys to see. She'd told them that the teddy in the window was wearing a helmet that was too big, and skis that were back to front. That wasn't true. Because there was no teddy. And she'd told them she'd gone straight in and booked the holiday. But that wasn't true either. She *had* booked the holiday at lunchtime that day. But she'd been thinking about doing it for weeks.

Johnny and Tom's mother was called Sandra. Sandra Hammond.

"Is Dad going with us?" Tom asked later, when they were having their dinner.

Their father's name was Frank. Frank Griffin.

"No," said Sandra.

"Why not?"

"Well," said Sandra. "It's an adventure holiday. And you know your dad. His idea of an adventure is going to the front door to get the milk."

"What about Gráinne?"

Gráinne was their sister.

"No," said Sandra. "She won't be coming either."

"How come?" said Johnny.

"She wouldn't want to," said Sandra.

Tom and Johnny didn't mind. Their mother was right. Gráinne wouldn't want to go with them, even to as cool a place as Finland. Gráinne was much older than the boys. She was eighteen. And Tom and Johnny didn't like her much. Mainly because she didn't like them.

Their father came home. They heard the music. He always played it loud, with the car windows down, but only when he turned into the drive. He did it to annoy their neighbour. It was a long story. Or, at least, it went back a long time. It went way back, to when Gráinne was only three, and Frank was married to a woman called Rosemary, and they were moving into the house. Frank was helping the removal men carry a couch into the house. But he wasn't being much help.

Actually, he was in the way. He was standing at the door watching Gráinne. She was talking to a woman who was cutting her side of the hedge. This was Mrs Newman, their new neighbour, although she wasn't new at all – she was at least forty. And Gráinne was talking to her.

"Hello," she said.

But the new neighbour wasn't talking back.

"Hello, lady," said Gráinne.

Mrs Newman just kept chopping the hedge.

"Hello, lady," said Gráinne.

Frank hopped over the couch and went straight over to the hedge.

"My daughter has been saying hello to you," he said.

"What?" said Mrs Newman.

"She's been saying hello to you," said Frank.

"I didn't hear her," said Mrs Newman.

She didn't really look at Frank. She leaned out and chopped a bit of hedge with the shears. It fell at Frank's feet.

"I'm a bit deaf," she said.

"Oh," said Frank.

He put his hand out, over the hedge.

"I'm Frank Griffin, by the way."

But Mrs Newman didn't shake Frank's hand. In fact, she nearly chopped his fingers off. He took his hand back just in time. He felt the breeze on his fingertips as the two blades snapped together.

He picked up Gráinne and carried her into their new house. He didn't speak to Mrs Newman again, but he didn't start playing the music loud until much later, about three years after they'd moved into the house. It was the sad part of the story. Frank and Rosemary weren't happily married any more. He didn't know why not, and neither did she. It just seemed to happen. They didn't love each other any more. And they argued. About small things, about stupid things. They had a big argument about a rotten apple Frank found in the bottom of Gráinne's schoolbag. The apple mush had seeped into two of her copy books, and he blamed Rosemary for it. He knew he was being mean. But he couldn't help himself. That was what it felt like – he wanted to stop but he couldn't.

"If you had any interest in her education you'd have found that apple before it exploded in her bag," he said.

He was shouting.

"And what about you?" said Rosemary.

She was shouting back. They were in their bedroom, at the front of the house. It was a nice night, in September. The window was wide open. Frank saw it, the open window, and he didn't care.

"Where's *your* interest in her education?" said Rosemary.

"I'm more interested than you," said Frank. "That's for sure."

The argument went on like that. It was really stupid and pointless.

The doorbell rang. Rosemary looked out the window and saw the police car.

"Oh, God," she said.

They both went down to answer the door. The two Guards, a man and a woman, looked embarrassed and very young. There'd been a complaint about noise, they told Frank. The woman, the Bean Garda, did the talking. Rosemary was right behind Frank, looking at the Guards over his shoulder. Frank apologized, and Rosemary behind him nodded too. They were both very sorry.

"Yes, well," said the Bean Garda.

She was looking carefully at both of them, Frank suddenly realized, and he wanted the floor to open up and swallow him. She was looking for bruises, or red skin, proof that they'd been violent.

"It was just a row," said Frank. "Sorry."

The Bean Garda had finished her examination.

"Well," she said. "We all have them now and again. But maybe you could close the windows the next time, Mr Griffin."

Frank laughed but, really, he'd never felt less like laughing in his life. He felt so humiliated and awful – he just wanted to shut the door. And that was what he was doing when he saw the cigarette. They both saw it. It was dark out there, especially when the police

car turned and went. But there it was, the glowing cigarette, at the other side of the hedge. Mrs Newman was behind the cigarette, looking at them. And they knew. She was the one who'd phoned the Guards.

"She's only deaf when it suits her," said Frank as he shut the door.

Frank and Rosemary hugged each other in the hall. They went into the kitchen, made tea, and agreed that they couldn't live together any more. It was a terrible night, and Frank always blamed Mrs Newman for it. He knew he wasn't being fair. But when he thought about that night, and the days and months that led up to it, he always saw that glowing cigarette. Thirteen years after that night, eight years after Mrs Newman gave up smoking, Frank still played loud music when he drove into the drive, just to let her know. He *knew* – she wasn't deaf at all. He wasn't angry any more. But he still liked to annoy Mrs Newman.

Johnny and Tom met him at the front door.

"We're going to Finland," said Tom.

"Make sure you're home in time for bed," said Frank.

"In two weeks," said Tom.

"Are you serious?" said Frank.

He took his jacket off and hung it on the bannister.

"Yeah," said Johnny. "We're going with Mam."

"Come down to the kitchen and tell me all about it," said Frank.

But he knew all about it already. It had actually been his idea. And the excitement on the boys' faces was the best thing he'd seen in a long time.

The day after their last argument, Rosemary made Gráinne's lunch for school. She helped Gráinne put on her coat, and then she walked with Gráinne down the road to the school. She kissed Gráinne, and hugged her.

"Bye-bye, honey-boo," she said. "Have a lovely day."

Then she stood at the school railings and watched Gráinne as she walked across the yard and in the door. She was crying and she didn't care that people were looking at her. She walked home and packed two suitcases. Gráinne's granny collected Gráinne from school, and Frank collected her from her granny's house on his way home from work. Rosemary was gone when Frank and Gráinne got home.

"Where's Mama?" said Gráinne.

"She's gone on a holiday," said Frank.

That was the question, and that was the answer for days after that, and then another question was added.

"When's she coming home?"

And another answer.

"In a while."

And another question.

"When?"

And the answer.

"I don't know."

Then Gráinne stopped asking the questions.

For a long time Frank heard nothing about Rosemary. He found out that she'd gone to America. Then he heard she was living in New York. She phoned her parents a few times a year, and sent her love to Gráinne. But that was all.

For a long while, it was just him and Gráinne. And it was fine. They were lonely, but they were lonely together. Gráinne missed her mother, and stopped believing that she'd ever come home. But she loved her father and he was always there, smiling, always downstairs when she was falling asleep, always awake before her. Always her father.

Then he met Sandra.

They met at a concert. She was there with her boyfriend, and she was sitting in Frank's seat.

He looked again at his ticket.

"M17," he said. "You're in my seat, sorry."

"Really?" she said.

Her boyfriend, on the other side, stood up.

"What's the story?" he said.

"It's my seat," said Frank.

The boyfriend looked at Frank's ticket. Then he looked at his own.

"N18," he said. "We're in the wrong row. Oops."

He left his seat, and Frank sat down beside Sandra. And, by the end of the concert, they were in love,

even though Sandra's boyfriend was sitting right behind them. She explained it to Frank, later.

"It was the way you listened," she said. "You leaned forward in your seat. You really listened. I loved that. And you have a lovely nose. What was it about me?"

"Everything," said Frank.

He meant it. He loved everything about Sandra. He even loved the way she'd coughed when she swallowed a sweet during one of the quiet songs.

"What about Jason?" said Frank.

Jason was the old boyfriend.

"Ah well," said Sandra. "He was all right. But I could never really love a man who says oops."

Sandra met Gráinne, and they liked each other. Gráinne was six. Sandra made her laugh a lot, and Gráinne thought she was beautiful, and she liked the way her dad looked at her. He laughed a lot too.

And three weeks after that, Frank took Gráinne to the Bad Ass Café, just the two of them, and he told her that Sandra was going to move into the house with them, and how did she feel about that?

"What about Mammy?" she said.

"She lives in New York," said Frank. "She probably needed to get away. For a while, maybe. She loves you, Gráinne, but not me. You can go to New York to see her. When you're a bit older."

So Gráinne nodded and said, "Fine." She liked Sandra. It would be nice.

And it was. Sandra wasn't much good at cooking but she was funny and lovely, and she sang a lot. They went shopping together, and she bought Gráinne clothes that Frank never thought of – jeans and tops, socks and knickers. Frank always bought her party dresses and skirts, and coloury tights and necklaces. They went driving a lot, the three of them, up the mountains and to Howth or Malahide.

Then one morning, Gráinne woke up. It was still dark outside, so she went into Frank's room, to get into the bed beside Frank. And Sandra was in the bed beside Frank, both of them asleep. Gráinne stood looking at them. She was cold. She got into the bed, beside Frank. He hugged her. His eyes were still closed. He turned, still hugging her, and she was between them, squashed between Frank and Sandra, and it was fine. It was lovely and warm. When she woke up again it was bright outside, and the bed was empty, and she heard laughter from downstairs. Frank and Sandra were laughing.

Then, another day, months later, they took her to the Bad Ass again and they told her – Sandra told her. She was pregnant, she was going to have a baby.

"Are you the daddy?" she asked Frank.

Frank was shocked at the question, and impressed. Gráinne was looking straight at him.

"Yes," said Frank. "The baby will be your sister or brother."

"No, it won't," said Gráinne.

She worked it out.

"It'll only be my *half*-sister, or half-brother."

"But it's great news, isn't it?" said Sandra.

"Yeah," said Gráinne.

But, really, she didn't know what it was, good or bad, or even news at all. She didn't know what she felt.

The baby was Johnny. And Gráinne loved him, he was so cute. Sandra was at home all the time now and, even though she was often busy feeding Johnny and playing with Johnny, Gráinne loved it. She was old enough to walk home from school on her own, and Sandra was always there when Gráinne rang the bell or went around to the back door and, nearly always, her dinner was ready, the smell of it filling the kitchen. She sometimes felt alone, and a few times, when she went into her dad's room to get into the bed, he asked her to go back to her own bed because Johnny was already in the middle and there was no more room.

"He's a brute," said Frank. "Look at the size of him."

But Frank and Sandra made sure Gráinne wasn't left alone for long. She loved it when Frank got down on the floor beside her and played. He did it a lot, and so did Sandra. Gráinne knew that they were looking after her. They checked her homework, checked that her clothes were clean, checked her hair for head lice when the letter came from school.

"Uh-oh, the lice letter."

"It's the same one every time," said Gráinne. "The exact same words."

"That's not fair on the lice," said Sandra. "Every louse is different. Come here, till we look."

Then they took Gráinne to the Bad Ass again, and Tom was born soon after. He was cute too, but Sandra was mad busy, and Johnny was very jealous. He climbed and pushed his way on to Sandra's lap when she was feeding Tom. He threw his food across the kitchen. He dumped it on top of his head. He did anything to get Sandra to look at him. There wasn't much room for Gráinne. But Frank always kissed and hugged her first when he came home, even though, sometimes, Johnny bit his leg while he was hugging her. And he often took her out for special times together. They even went to Paris for a long weekend. It was OK, living in that house, growing up with Frank and Sandra, and Johnny and Tom. Gráinne was happy.

Then she was a teenager and suddenly, it seemed, she was unhappy and unfriendly, and silent and loud at the same time. She spoke to no one, but slammed the doors. She turned her music up loud, talked loudly to her friends on her mobile phone, telling them how stupid her family was and how she hated them all. It was teenage stuff, Frank and Sandra knew, but it was hard. Especially for Frank. He felt guilty and, sometimes, angry. She was like this because he

was a bad father – there was something he wasn't doing right. Other times, he decided she was just a selfish wagon, like her mother, and the sooner she grew up and got out of the house the better. And then he'd feel guilty again. He was the selfish one. She was a teenager; it was a phase she was going through. It would end and they'd be pals again.

"Fancy going to the Bad Ass?" he said one Friday, when he came home and she was by herself in the hall.

"No," she said.

"Just the two of us," said Frank.

"Like, wow," she said, and she went up the stairs. He felt her door slamming. The whole house shook a bit.

"You're not my mother!" she roared at Sandra. More and more often.

It was rough.

"It'll only last a few years," Sandra told Frank, even though she'd just been crying because of something Gráinne had said to her. "I was like that myself when I was her age."

"Yeah," said Frank.

But he didn't sound convinced.

He stayed out of Gráinne's way. He didn't interfere, and he hoped she was doing OK at school. He hoped she wasn't being stupid when she went out at night, on the weekends. He always stayed awake

until she came home, but always in bed. He didn't want her to think that he was spying on her. The next day, he always asked her how she'd got on, and he never looked too closely at her eyes or tried to smell her breath. He kept his distance and respected her independence. But it was hard.

She was caught mitching from school, and suspended for two weeks. She was caught shoplifting. Mrs Fallon, from the shop at the end of the road, didn't phone the Guards, but it was awful. Frank apologized, and thanked her, and bought loads of things he didn't need or want.

Gráinne left school two months before the Leaving Cert exams. She wouldn't go back.

"You can't make me," she said.

And that was the really terrifying bit: she was right. They couldn't make her. They just had to hope she'd be OK, that she'd calm down and become Gráinne again, their Gráinne.

But, for now, she was a different Gráinne. A monster, a big, horrible kid. A terrorist. It was after she threw the cup at Sandra that Frank suggested that Sandra and the boys needed a break.

He wrapped the broken pieces in some newspaper.

They could get away for a while, he said. It would be good for them. It might even be good for Frank and Gráinne to have the house to themselves. Like the old days.

"Like the *good* old days," said Sandra. "Before I arrived."

"Ah stop," said Frank.

"No," she said. "I won't."

She was still shaking. The cup had just missed her head. She looked at the coffee stains on the wall and on her blouse. She took off the blouse and soaked it in cold water. Frank put the newspaper into the bin and wiped the wall.

"I'm not going anywhere," said Sandra. "And what about the money?"

"We'll manage," said Frank. "We can do without a holiday in the summer."

"No," said Sandra, finally. "She's not going to push me out of my own home. It *is* my home."

"I'll talk to her" said Frank.

"Give me a break," said Sandra. "Just shoot her."

It was quiet enough for a few months. It wasn't too bad. They all kept out of Gráinne's way, and she kept out of theirs. The days got colder and shorter. Sandra came home one day and found the three of them, Johnny, Tom, and Gráinne, watching the telly. They were all on the couch, long legs and arms all over the place. It was the sweetest thing she'd seen in a long time. But Gráinne saw her looking at them. She took back her arms and legs, stood up, and walked out of the room, past Sandra. Black eyes, black lips in a sneer that would have been funny on someone else's daughter – stepdaughter.

Then the news came. Gráinne's mother, Rosemary, was coming home.

"Oh, God," said Sandra. "How do you know?"

"Her mother phoned me," said Frank.

"I don't want to meet her," said Sandra.

"Fine," said Frank. "We can work that out. No problem."

"For good?" said Sandra.

"What?" said Frank.

"Stop being thick, Frank," said Sandra. "Is she coming home for good?"

"Oh," said Frank. "I don't know. Her mother didn't seem to know."

Sandra stood up, and sat down, and stood up. Frank tried to hug her, but she sat down again as his arms went out to her.

"I've changed my mind," she said. "I'm going away. Me and the boys. I can't stay here."

And the day after that, she came home in the rain and told the boys the good news.