

THE POINT OF THE SPEAR

A Novel

By John J. McKeon

ONE

Cornelius Michael Tully, aged 60, called Con by his friends and The Con by his critics, was not a man to hear voices in rocks.

Con was not sentimental. Certainly his father was, and his dimly remembered grandfather enough of a romantic to insist that his casket be draped in the Irish flag for his funeral in Brooklyn. What Con mainly remembered of that occasion was the Irish pipes and the row of old men. Six of them, balding and baggy-trousered, with wattled thin necks lost in gaping collars, their pipe-thin calves and ankles tightly laced into high black shoes. Each with his medals, and a ribbon or sash in green and orange and white, with Gaelic lettering that neither Con nor his father could read. The Great Irreconcilables, Mick Tully told his son: They drag the past with them everywhere they go.

It was the sense of a past that brought Con back to Ireland each year. He came to County Mayo as a guest, though he could certainly pay his own way, and while he told himself he came to golf and fish and drink good whisky, he could do all of those things at home. Many resorts replicated the Irish experience, but a theme-park past was not what drew Con.

On the grounds of the Massport Castle Hotel, overlooking Lough Conn, stood the ruin of a monastery. Two tall adjoining walls gave a sense of the high sanctuary, and the other dimensions could be inferred from the remaining wall fragments and scattered stones. Otherwise it was all meadow, scents of rosemary and timothy grass and flashes of hawkweed. Con walked there early each morning and bent his ear to listen for chant, for the grunts of livestock, and the scrape of pen nubs on coarse paper, but he heard only the eternal silence. Looking across the lake from the hotel's terrace as he nursed his evening whisky, Con saw mounds in the distance that he knew to be Famine graves. Perhaps he would take the hotel launch across the lake and walk among the mounds and listen to them as well.

Alert as Con was to the call of the past, the call of the great rock surprised him. The near-sphere of ruby-red sandstone, perhaps fifteen feet in diameter, straddled the out-of-bounds line to the right of the eighth hole of the hotel's Lake Course, squarely between Con and the green. To his right was an untended yard behind a low, flat-topped stone wall. On the wall rested a wicker basket full of golf balls and a hand-lettered sign offering them at three for a euro. Farther off, a squat house with a tiny patio, where a large, chained dog stirred and began to bark.

"Where in the world did this come from?" Con said, mostly to himself.

"The glacier," a voice answered. Father Cavanagh, the local pastor, recruited by the hotel to fill out their foursome, stood by his own ball in the fairway a few yards off. He was a congenial, good humored younger man, and a suspiciously excellent golfer.

The priest pointed. "You can see any number of smaller boulders, all over the course," he said, "all dropped here by a receding glacier ten thousand years ago."

“And it has waited all this time just for me,” Con said. He approached the great stone. Overhead the ubiquitous County Mayo clouds skidded by, and their shadows slid across the grass. Then a burst of sunlight hit the rock and set it afire.

The rock shimmered through the entire indigo-violet spectrum, and the surface seemed to have depth, as though he could step into it, as though if he touched it, he would feel a pulse. Con thought, There is no sunlight anywhere like the sunlight in Ireland.

He marveled at the fine layers of white, of quartz, perhaps, or talc, woven into the rock’s surface and at the jagged edges that could still cut a finger though they were thousands of years old.

“I’d play back to the fairway,” the priest counseled. “You can still get on in three.” Between them, at the edge of the rough, stood Finbar, their caddy, already holding out Con’s six-iron.

“I’m with the padre,” Finbar said, nodding. Then he glanced at the priest and smiled, showing implausibly white and even teeth. He was a small man, his body twisted as though by some childhood disease. Yet he carried both their bags and never fell behind. “Of course, I’d say that anyway. Always agree with the padre, is my rule.”

It struck Con that they had played this little act before, Finbar and the padre. Cavanagh was sociable enough, but he was probably the hotel’s first call when an unexpected gap had to be filled. He arrived the previous day with a very expensive set of clubs in the trunk of a shabby Toyota. He had a rich fund of golfing-priest jokes, and apparently a hollow leg where the Jameson’s was concerned.

“We’ll go over,” Con said. He glanced again at the rock and said, “nine iron.”

In the silent act of swapping clubs, Finbar conveyed a rich blend of stoic amusement and class resentment. Con took the club and glanced at the agitated dog, then said to Finbar, “The dog seems to agree with you.”

“He’s seen it all, sir.”

Con took his stance and looked up one last time, reminding himself of all the little keys to hitting it extra high. After impact he raised his head and followed the ball as it rose against the deep red of the stone, certain to hit and rebound who-knew-where, and then suddenly it was clear against the cloud-dotted sky.

Finbar was already running to the fairway, watching, squinting, then laughing and calling out, “A pretty shot, sir, a fine, pretty shot.”

But Con did not rush. The stone drew him back. He had heard a voice—no, not a voice, surely, rocks didn't talk even in this land of folk tales. But a message had been sent and received all the same. Con approached the rock, paused, came closer. The deep red-black depths embraced him until the rock filled his vision, and he heard it again. Surely not a voice, he thought. Perhaps a sympathetic vibration, an over- or undertone to some ambient sound. Was there a power line nearby? A subterranean river? He touched the stone again; the surface was warm, though the air was chilly and a steady breeze rustled the meadow grasses.

He heard behind him the sound of the priest’s shot, like a fingernail flicked at fine crystal. He began to move uncertainly to catch up, and felt the sleeves of his light sweater flatten against his forearms. It was hard to keep his feet moving. He thought he was walking into a stiff wind, yet the grasses bent the opposite way. He tugged at his belt, hitched up his pants, walked more briskly, and finally was free of the tow, as though he had swum past the surf line at the beach.

Father Cavanagh carried his mallet putter in the crook of his arm and complimented Con on his shot as they neared the green. Their opponents, who had mostly kept to themselves all morning, were hunched in concentration over the longer of their putts. They were venture capitalists who first invited Con on this dozen-man annual outing five years before. He had yet to do any business with them, but he saw the dollar signs in their eyes when they looked at him.

“Extraordinary piece of stone,” Con said. “I almost feel I offended it.”

Cavanagh laughed. “Now, friend,” he said, “think in that direction and you’ll be hearing the banshee next.”

They putted out; he and Cavanagh won the hole. They walked toward the next tee, turning away from the lake, putting the huge stone well behind them, and the priest said, “Mind you, the organization I work for discourages that sort of thing, belief in banshees and selkies and leprechauns. But long after Saint Pat, this land was still full of people who worshipped rocks and trees and thought nature was a conscious, willful thing. Even malevolent. Still some around today, I’m sure. And sometimes I wonder if there isn’t something to it.”

They said no more. They won their match, though no cash changed hands. The reckoning would come at the end of the trip, and Con knew anything he might lose would be forgiven. The venture capitalists weren't fools, after all.

Con spent the late afternoon in his room, reading through a small stack of business papers. He returned phone calls and answered e-mails. He looked, yet again, at the architectural renderings of his latest, most urgent project. The Dermot Tully Center for the Performing Arts in Saint Mary’s County, Maryland: Concert hall, theater, classrooms, lecture halls, practice studios, a restaurant, a picnic grove, all overlooking the Wicomico River.

The property purchases, a half dozen homes and three other empty sites of varying acreage, had been completed six months ago, and today's email brought news that the last owner had vacated. The site, a gently sloping, mostly open hillside, was ready for demolition to begin, with the ground-breaking for the new facility to follow.

Con smiled. He had earned a lot of money, and inherited a lot more, and for years had grappled with the unexpressed question, What now? Every day reminded him that he was no longer young. He had no children, and although he would bestow hefty legacies on his gaggle of nephews and nieces, the bulk of his substantial estate just sat in the back of his mind, nagging him to do something. Something important, worthy, meaningful. The conventional charities—churches, diseases, disaster relief—did not move him, and besides, all they wanted from him was a large check. The Dermot Tully Center would be so much more.

He also looked, once again, at his accountant's latest projections, which told him just how close to the edge he was walking. The Tully Center would be a paying business, Con was determined. It would host enough events and do enough ancillary business to stay in the black, and parts of it would qualify for tax exemptions. In the long run, all would be well. But right now there was the mortgage on the land, plus the construction loan, the architect's fees...

In the long northern twilight the group gathered on a patio for drinks and then in the private dining room for a supper of lake trout, potatoes, and vegetables from the castle garden. After another hour of frivolities he pleaded exhaustion and excused himself. He took a snifter of cognac up to his room, where he slipped off his shoes, opened his window, and stared into the darkening night, across the lake, across the famine graves, into the even darker sky to the east. He stared and thought, for it called for some thought, this new notion that had struck him.

Con Tully was not a naïve man, nor credulous. One did not get to a nine-figure net worth by being gullible. He did not believe in the Loch Ness Monster, nor Bigfoot, nor chupacabras nor little green men from outer space. He did not believe in the free lunch, cold fusion, or trickle-down economics.

But apparently, he believed he had been personally addressed by a big rock.

He slept well and woke wonderful, glad to have forgone a late night. He dressed quickly in his walking clothes, carrying his shoes down the stairs to preserve the silence. He saw no one, though he heard the kitchen staff at work. On the front steps he pulled on the shoes and set off at a quick pace, the sky just beginning to brighten and cool air filling his lungs. Five minutes' walk brought him to the first tee of the Lake Course, where he picked up the cart path and made his way through the thin woods, then across the gently undulating fields. He found the lake swathed in mist, glimmering in the low-angled light of the rising sun. Silence surrounded him. He saw the hills across the lake come slowly into their outlines, moving through shades of gray to mottled dark green.

A suggestive land, he thought, insinuating, seducing, peopled by semi-visible helpers and tricksters. A man in such a place could be brought to believe almost anything. Of course he can worship a tree. At home Con had seen trees a thousand years old, trees already vastly old when Lewis and Clark trekked up the Missouri. He had stared into a volcano and felt the barest tip of inconceivable power.

Sunlight made the dew glitter as Con walked. His shoes were wet but he felt rising warmth on the side of his face. He returned, of course, to the rock. The light had just begun to touch the rough surface, creating a fine lace of shadows. The rock was softer now, less radiant,

but still he felt its pull. He paused, finally, ten feet from the stone. A clutch of small birds burst from the tall grass nearby.

“I heard you, yesterday,” Con said to the rock. “For now, let’s keep this between ourselves, okay?”

The outing group headed for home on Friday morning, but Con extended his stay. He lingered through the quiet, warm midday, wandering the hotel’s public rooms, exchanging nods with the few remaining guests. He walked the road for an hour and was passed by only a handful of cars. At four o’clock he was in the hotel bar when Father Cavanagh arrived. On the golf course, in sweater, gray slacks and peaked cap, Cavanagh could be any glad-handing salesman. Today, though, he was in uniform, black suit and Roman collar, and could never be anything but an Irish parish priest. They were alone in the bar and took their pints to a table overlooking the front garden.

“It’s grown quiet,” Cavanagh observed.

“It always was,” Con replied. “Our group might have been two-thirds of the hotel’s trade while we were all here.”

“I marvel they can stay in business, sometimes,” the priest said, sipping his stout. Con did not reply, but he had marveled too. More than that, he had explored the premises, counted the accommodations and staff, examined the room rates, menu prices and greens fees, looked up the tax account online, and covered several pages with penciled arithmetic. His conclusion was that unless the hotel was the love of someone’s life, it would not be in business much longer. Yet it could be made to pay, he thought, with more astute management, selective modernization, a timely injection of cash...

That, however, was tomorrow's business, and today's remained to be done.

"I appreciate your help with this," Con said.

"Glad to do it. Mr. Nolan is a regular communicant at St. Brigid's, and a donor as well, in a small way, but my sense of it is, he is harder pressed than he wishes to appear."

"Well, perhaps I can help."

"And what is it you propose to do for Mr. Nolan?"

"I want to buy his rock," Con said, and finally sampled his beer.

Father Tim called for Con the following afternoon, Saturday. Though they could easily walk across the golf course to Nolan's cottage, the Father asserted that both dignity and practicality dictated an approach to the front door. Dignity, in that he was a prominent local cleric and Mr. Tully a substantial American bearing a business proposition. Practicality, in that the priest preferred to avoid the large dog.

As he drove, Cavanagh told Con that Nolan was a retired police officer. He had no sooner said this than he amended it. "Inspector," he said. "With the national police, the Garda. In Dublin."

The hotel tower was never out of sight, though they drove for ten minutes and made a half dozen turns. "Now, if we are to believe the television and the popular novels," Father Cavanagh said, "retired policemen turn into jaded skeptics who suspect the worst and interrogate everyone they meet. I don't have that sense about Jimmy," he added, and then, "For whatever that is worth."

He pulled into a gravel driveway. From the road, the cottage presented a more substantial face, broader, with an entire wing not visible from the golf course. The entry, also, strove for

significance, a wide fieldstone platform and dark doorway with an elaborate fan window, flanked by fluted wooden columns painted to mimic stone. Dense knee-high hedges lined the walkway, and where the walk joined the threshold, stone pots to either side held clusters of yellow and red flowers. Apart from these touches, however, the front yard was as disheveled as the back, as though its entire arrangement had relied on whatever seeds the wind brought.

Cavanagh rapped the door knocker and set off a squall of barking. It went on a moment, but Con felt through the soles of his feet the heavier tread of other feet approaching. He heard a guttural murmur that seemed aimed at the dog; in any event, the barking stopped, and then the doorknob turned.

“Ah, Father Cavanagh, welcome,” James Nolan said as he pulled the door open. He stepped back and gestured them into the tiny hall. The dog, now obediently silent, kept vigil a few steps off. A single teardrop light bulb in a wall sconce brightened Nolan’s face and the hallway’s minimal furnishings: A table for mail and keys, a standing coat rack. Cavanagh introduced Con and he shook Nolan’s hand, noting the firm-enough grip. Not a tall man, Con thought, yet he appeared so thanks to an erect posture and a physique still lean in retirement. Con had seen the type back home, he thought, the man who runs half-marathons in his sixties and scans the results to see how he compares to his age group. Nolan appeared to have all of his hair and teeth, though the hair was graying and the teeth a frank yellow.

“I was just preparing our tea,” he said. He gestured to the parlor on their right and added, “Make yourselves comfortable. I will be just a moment or two.” The dog followed Nolan to the kitchen.

The parlor was conventional, except for a rug of labyrinthine Persian design laced with bright red and turquoise and fine lines of gold. Heavy chairs with finely cracked leather

upholstery stood to either side of a low table on which sat a black and white photo of a woman standing on an overlook above a harbor full of pleasure boats. Opposite the chairs, a love seat covered in faded yellow damask. In a corner, on a folding table, was a small and old-fashioned television with a rabbit ear antenna.

The room's other impression was that of books, walls of them, full height to the rear of the house and rising to the window sills along the side and front walls. Cavanagh sat casually and bent to examine the photo. "Jimmy's late wife," he whispered to Con.

Con, still standing, scanned the shelves, which seemed to reflect a concern for completeness. Here was the complete Trollope, the complete Dickens (no oddity, Con's own parents had the same blue-bound set), the complete Jonathan Swift and Bernard Shaw, Churchill's *Second World War*, and, on the front window ledge between stone bookends, the complete Aubrey/Maturin novels of Patrick O'Brian. And biographies...of Napoleon, Beethoven, Disraeli, Churchill again.

Nolan returned bearing a tray and set it down on the table, moving his wife's portrait aside. The teapot was delicate; fine painted birds perched demurely among branches of cherry blossom. The colors were vibrant even though the teapot, Con thought, must be quite old. The mugs Nolan has put alongside it were workaday, heavy undecorated vessels with thick handles wide enough to accommodate whole fingers instead of mere tips. The tray also held a small plate of sugar wafers.

"I must say, Inspector, your taste in books is...eclectic," Con said, letting himself down into the second leather chair. Nolan, pouring, replied, "Eclectic is one word, I suppose. Haphazard would be another. And it's Jimmy, Mr. Tully, not Inspector."

"Jimmy, then. And I'm Con. Short for Cornelius."

“As I had guessed.” Nolan took his own teacup and sat on the love seat. “Tully is an old Mayo and Galway name, though there are Tullys all over.” He snapped his fingers and the dog came to him, eyes fixed on the cookie in Nolan’s hand.

“Sit, Heidi,” Nolan said, and when the dog complied, handed over the cookie. Heidi snapped it almost daintily from his hand, swallowed, and turned to Con, who held out his empty hands, palms up.

“Heidi?” Cavanagh said.

“Nothing like a great, damp mass of black Irish dog to make you think of little blond girls in the Alps, is there?” Nolan said. To Con, he added, “Are you here on a genealogical expedition, Mr. Tully? Con? Most Americans are, I think.”

“My grandfather came from around here,” Con said. “Exactly where, I couldn’t say. He emigrated in 1922.”

Nolan nodded. “So he left at the end of the Civil War.”

“I suppose. Certainly I share your interest in history. I’m surprised not to see more detective fiction on your shelves, though.”

Nolan waved dismissively. “My daughter used to give me detective stories every Christmas, every birthday, even though all I did was cart them over to the town library. The American authors, in particular, have a fondness for the notion of the rogue cop, the loner.”

“Who plays by his own rules,” Con said, smiling.

“That’s the one,” Nolan replied. “No real police force has any use for such a character.”

“I trust your daughter is well,” Cavanagh put in.

“She is,” Nolan replied. “And there’s to be a grandchild soon.”

“God bless her,” the priest said, and Con added simply, “Congratulations.”

“She still nags me from time to time to move to Wicklow,” Nolan said.

“A pleasant area,” Con said, to which Nolan replied, “So is this.”

Silence then; after a moment, Nolan straightened up, buttoned his shirt collar, glanced to the priest and said to Con, “Well now, the padre tells me you’ve a proposition.”

“I do,” Con said. “You have a large and inconvenient rock in your back yard. I want to buy it.”

“It lies partly on the hotel’s property, you know,” Nolan said, showing no surprise.

“The hotel is amenable to selling,” Con said. “It’s rather difficult to say exactly what portion of the rock lies on whose property, so what I would propose is a fifty-fifty split.”

“So you want to buy half my rock,” Nolan said, and finally smiled. “Why on earth would you want to do that?”

Con returned his smile for a moment. “I have my reasons,” he said.

“And I have my own reasons for liking my rock just where it is,” Nolan said. But he shrugged slightly, to soften the hostility. “And do you know, I think reasons for change always have to be better than reasons for leaving things be. So I would really like to know what you’re up to. Nobody buys rocks, you know.”

Con chuckled. “I’m a rich man,” he said. “I’ve decided to squander some of my wealth building an arts center in a beautiful spot in Maryland, in the United States.”

“I know where Maryland is.”

“Of course,” Con said hurriedly. “I mean to name it after my grandfather Dermot, and if I can transport this extraordinary stone to the site, as a part of Dermot’s homeland, I’ll put a plaque on it and it will be the centerpiece of my arts center.”

“So,” Nolan said, “a rich man’s whim.”

Con shrugged. “If you like, but a whim you can profit by. After all, I’m willing to pay, and just sitting there, the rock isn’t worth anything at all.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Mr. Tully. Con,” Nolan went on with a small smile. They fell silent. Nolan felt the teapot, frowned, and poured the last tepid bit into Con’s cup.

“Shall I make another pot?” he said, and Con nodded, “By all means.”

When Nolan had gone to the kitchen, Father Cavanagh leaned over, elbows on knees, and whispered, “Perhaps I should warn you. If it’s stubborn you’re after, you’ve come to the right shop.”

Con smiled. “I have that gene as well,” he said.

Nolan called from the kitchen. “May I ask, at this point, how much you propose to pay me for my half of an allegedly worthless rock?”

“Certainly you may ask,” Con replied. He heard the kettle whistle, heard cupboard doors open and close, and finally Nolan brought the fresh pot and put it on the table. “This will need to steep,” he said.

He clasped his hands and smiled at Con. “I’m a veteran interrogator myself, you know, so I understand that when you introduce an important new fact, you want eyes on the other fellow,” he said. “So now that I’m back in the room and we’re looking at each other, how much?”

“I’m flexible,” Con said. “Say, five thousand euros?”

“I thought you wanted to buy the rock,” Nolan said.

“I do.”

“That offer doesn’t persuade me of it,” Nolan said. He swirled the teapot, lifted the lid to peer inside, then poured. Con watched the steam rise from his cup.

“I don’t think anyone outside Britain and Ireland really appreciates good tea,” Nolan said. “Not even in India, where they invented the stuff. Of course, in America you dumped it in the harbor.”

Con knew the tactic, a brief timeout, a chance for either party to move in a new direction. He waited. Nolan added milk to his tea. Con, taking his tea straight, sipped and winced at the heat. He looked around at the bookshelves.

“I’m a bit surprised to see so much Churchill on your shelves, Mr. Nolan,” he said.

“Call me Jimmy. But yes, you might expect old Winston to be in bad odor in Ireland, what with the black-and-tans and all, but he was quite a character, you know.”

“I wonder how he would have dealt with Napoleon,” Con said, and Nolan laughed.

“Oh, hammer and tongs!” he said. “Churchill was an aristocrat and an Empire man from top to bottom. He and Bonaparte were both born conquerors with a gift for larceny. They’d have ripped each other up, and loved every minute.”

Nolan put his tea cup down and crossed his legs. “You said you were flexible,” he said.

“I could go to six or seven thousand,” Con said. “And sweeten it with some other things. A new high definition TV, for instance, and a satellite dish. For the hurling matches.” Con smiled, and Nolan returned it.

“Ah, if there’s an important match on, I go to the pub,” he said. “It doesn’t do to jump around and cheer when you’re all alone at home.” He sat back, interlaced his fingers above his belt buckle. “I find myself wondering, Con, just how you will actually transport the great old thing. Simply to lift it will require a heavy duty crane. I don’t think I’ve seen a truck in this part of Mayo that could carry it. You’ll have to get it down to Westport to put it on a ship, and there

are bridges along the way that won't accommodate the kind of truck you need. Have you considered any of that?"

"Not in detail," Con admitted. "Not yet."

Nolan leaned forward quickly and jabbed the air with his index finger. "You imagine your money will overcome all. But here you are parsing pence and farthings over what is almost certainly the cheapest element of the entire enterprise."

Con acknowledged this with a tilt of his head and a wry smile.

"Moreover," Nolan added, "it's the one part of the enterprise without which you simply can't proceed. Mind, I'm not trying to shake you down."

"But you haven't yet said how much you would take for the rock," Con said.

"No, I suppose I haven't." Nolan stood and went to the window. Cavanagh put his tea cup down and inclined his head toward the door. Con nodded and made a placating gesture with his hand, palm down.

"You know," Nolan said. "Ann used to love looking at that rock. She could see it from her bed. She talked about how it changed color through the day." He turned to look at Con and the priest over his shoulder. "More than once, she told me she thought the rock was talking to her. She was a chatty one, that she was." He rubbed his hands together and came back to his chair but did not sit down.

"Will it suffice to say I need time to think?" he said. Con and Cavanagh rose.

"May I call again?" Con said.

"Oh, by all means," Nolan replied. "I think we've barely scratched the surface in terms of Napoleon and Churchill." He held out his hand and they shook as they started for the door.

Outside, Cavanagh waited until they were in the car before saying, “As I told you, if it was stubborn you were after...”

“But at least he said I could come back,” Con said. “I can wait.”

“So can Jimmy,” the priest said.

On Sunday morning Con walked to mass at St. Brigid’s, a mile or so, the church coming into view around a curve, all dark brick and small windows beneath a modest steeple, with a cluster of headstones ringing the side and back, some more ostentatious monuments rising above their peers. A small crowd of worshippers was filing in, though only a few cars were parked in the small lot and along the shoulder of the road. Inside the church was dark, shadowed by blue-gray light penetrating the dense stained glass windows. The windows portrayed the usual events: The Annunciation, the Flight into Egypt, Jesus routing the temple moneylenders. Con sat on the left side, toward the rear, beneath the sixth Station of the Cross, Veronica wiping the face of Jesus. In the minutes remaining before mass Con found himself staring at it, a square board of dark wood in which lighter woods, and perhaps some light stone, were configured into the sacred image. He decided it was really quite good; he would ask Father Tim about its provenance. Just before the procession to the altar, Con noticed Nolan coming in the back door and slipping into the last pew on the far side.

Con daydreamed through the service and found Cavanagh’s homily trite, though short. He waited until the church had almost emptied before making his way out the side door at the left transept and finding himself, as he expected, facing the graveyard. Here and there an elderly woman stood, head bowed, before a stone. Behind him Con heard car engines starting and gravel

crunching under tires. He lingered, and silence slowly settled over him. He sensed, rather than heard, someone approach.

“You won’t find it,” a familiar voice said. Con turned, and Father Tim was standing there, hands in pockets.

“If you’re looking for Ann Nolan’s stone, you won’t find it. There isn’t one.”

Con nodded. “I suppose I was looking for her,” he admitted. “Curious, maybe. How long ago did she pass?”

Cavanagh came to stand beside him. “Just over a year. It was a long siege.”

“What did she die of?” Con said, “if I’m not intruding.”

“I just hope you don’t think you can strong-arm Jimmy,” Cavanagh said. “He is a much stronger man than you might think.”

“I don’t think anything,” Con said.

“Ann died of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis,” the priest replied. “What in America is called, I believe, Lou Gehrig’s disease.”

“A bad way to go,” Con whispered.

“Jimmy nursed her by himself through the last two years. After the funeral, I had the impression the cost of a headstone was an impediment. I wished I could have helped.”

Con thought of the basket of lost golf balls on Nolan’s back wall, three for a euro.

“Perhaps I can help,” Con said.

“If you even allude to this conversation, I will call down the wrath of God on you,” Cavanagh replied, without the hint of a smile.

“I wouldn’t be so rude,” Con said. “But I am able to offer help. I have resources. You certainly know the old saying that it’s easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter Heaven.”

Cavanagh smiled. “Don’t be too discouraged,” he said. “Jesus wasn’t referring to a literal needle. The eye of the needle was one of the city gates of Jerusalem, a pedestrian gate. For a fully loaded camel to pass, it would have to be relieved of all its...resources.”

“I get the message,” Con said.

“It is a helpless feeling,” the priest went on after a moment, “knowing how much difference just a few euros here and there could make. Seeing hunger, loneliness, sickness, and thinking, if only we could provide a visiting nurse, a hot meal...”

Con tried not to sigh audibly, and looked away from Cavanagh when he said, “How much do you suppose it would take to make that difference?”

“I’ve tried to help you out with what I must say seems like a frivolous undertaking on your part,” Cavanagh replied. “I’m willing to help some more, to talk to Jimmy on your behalf. But look about you. This is a part of Ireland long since left behind. That silly rock is the first thing anyone has actually wanted from this community in a generation or more.”

“How much?”

Cavanagh met Con’s eyes without reticence. “I would suggest that whatever amount you agree on with Jimmy, a like amount given to St. Brigid’s would be a true ray of sunshine.”

“Consider it done,” Con said. He held out his hand and they shook.

“I will call you later at the hotel,” Cavanagh said.

When Con was summoned to the lobby phone three hours later, he learned that Nolan would expect him for tea at four. “Just remember,” Cavanagh said, “Mr. Nolan is a stickler for protocol. Whatever else you say, when you ask again, be sure to say ‘please.’”