

# DEAD BIRD IN THE WEEDS



# Dead Bird in the Weeds

A SEAMRÓG TALE OF REBELLION



J.E. Seanacháí



*Sunflower Footsteps*

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The 1798 Rebellion in Ireland is an actual historical event. This story reflects that event as accurately as possible and as a result of this must depict several historical figures, albeit in minor roles. It is with every intent that they are portrayed with the utmost respect. All main characters are entirely fictional, as are their lives, and do not bear likeness to any individual, living or dead.

**Birds no longer live in the trees.  
They lie dead in the weeds.**

According to the ancient Irish tradition, the wren would command the birds and the king would become the pauper for one glorious day. In order for life to be restored to its original state, the wren must be hunted and slain.

*Dead Bird in the Weeds* relates the tale of trodden people rising as wrens to win freedom from the tyranny of England during the 1798 Rebellion in Ireland.

This is the story of one such wren named Aisling Doran, a peasant in Wexford, Ireland. Compelled by the murder of her father, the loss of her faith, and the yearning of her being to end the anguish she must endure, this daring young woman joins the United Irishmen. Throughout the fields, hills, meadows, and mountains, she and her revolutionary family wage war for liberty.

During this fight for Irish independence, Aisling discovers the courage to love, to die, and most important, to live.

**“ . . . a strong first novel, a gripping and compelling read from an author I hope to hear a lot more from over the coming years.”**

—[LEVI MONTGOMERY](#), author of *Jillian's Gold* and *A Place to Die*



## CHAPTER 31

Sunday, June 24

North Wicklow

Aisling had not spoken since she left home. Instead, she gazed longingly over the side of the wagon at the road that was wedged between the western hills and the eastern coast.

Her guilt over Michael's death had made her contemplate throwing herself over the side of the cart since they had passed Arklow on their journey northward. Two things prevented her from attempting the feat. She could not move because of the sorrow besieging her, nor could she envision the fall waking her. The wagon would stop, and the cavalry would probably beat her until she was more miserable than she was at present. *No one understands anyf'in'. Ye are all dead. Michael. Miichael.* Michael had joined the world of nothingness and left her behind. Michael with the flashing silvery blue eyes and boyish dimples was gone, and now she had no one. Aisling tried to swallow. The pain in her throat pushed the saliva back into her mouth.

*Easamorf*, a whistle trilled.

Aisling's eyes wandered to the beach. The sea foamed, scratching patterns upon the sand. *Arool aroot*, the whistle chirped. A periwinkle husk spouted from the waves, a glimmering, curved shell escaping from the pits of the sea. *Trapatapatatat*. Aisling's skin tingled as the armor split. The left side transformed into a woman with an auburn braid and spindly legs. The form on the right became a young man. Before his features developed, his hand covered his face.

*I forgot to look at his face*, Aisling wailed at the sea.

"You so remind me of my sister, Elinor."

*Scalish-ish-ash*. The figures lightened, regaining their amorphousness and plunging into the water.

*I forgot to look at his face before I left him*.

"Not in actions, though. Elinor is a headstrong girl with tendencies resembling foolishness. I love her, though. She is the only person who tries to understand me."

Aisling eluded the paralysis clutching her limbs and released the side of the wagon. Untwisting her body, she settled in the cart and wrapped her chained wrists over her bent knees.

"That looks bad."

Aisling stared at the man beside her. He was asleep, his bristly cheeks expanding with each breath he took. The man across from him had stopped stuffing his shirt underneath the iron bracelets in favor of sleeping. His slight form was curled on its side to allow his bearded cheek to

rest on the third man's lap. The third man, wearing a beaver-skinned hat, had renounced glaring at the guards. Instead, his static amber eyes were fixed upon the sea. Aisling wondered if he had seen the two forms amid the waves.

"There is a handkerchief in my pocket, Miss Doran."

Aisling glanced at James. "Use yer sleeve."

"No, no," James said. "I do not need my nose wiped."

"Den I do not care what is in yer pocket."

"I was simply offering you the use of it for your wrist." Aisling looked at her wrist. Blood seeped from beneath the bracelet. "It is in the left pocket of my coat."

Aisling placed her bound hands upon the jolting floor and dragged herself to James. She shoved her hand into his pocket. "Maybe it is in de ot'er one."

"No, I always keep it on the left," James said, raising his arms. "Try my waistcoat."

Aisling opened his coat. Shoving her fingers into the tiny pocket, she unearthed a white handkerchief. The letters *J* and *M* were fashioned into branches on the linen. Dried leaves rained about them.

"What are you doin' over dere?" one of the guards asked.

"Miss Doran took my handkerchief for her wrist," James said. He took the linen and stuffed it beneath the bracelet encircling Aisling's wrist.

"Is dere somet'in' wrong wid ye?" Aisling asked as James' trembling fingers pushed the material around her wrist. Aubergine stains underlined his dark eyes, contrasting with the pallid flesh beneath the dark stubble sprinkled over his cheeks. "Are ye sick?"

"In a way. You see, I am a proverbial drunk." Aisling's wrists dropped into her lap. "I do not mean to be impolite, Miss Doran, but how did you get the...?" James flicked his ear.

"At de hill. How bad is it?"

"The ridge is sliced, Miss Doran, but you have so much dried blood on it, I cannot see much else."

"Ye talk to me like Mr. Barret does."

"Miles' father?" James chuckled. "In what way, Miss Doran?"

"Like I am not a servant or a peasant."

"Or a Catholic?"

"I am not Cat'lic or anyt'in' else."

"Neither am I. However, if I admitted it, my little mother would die. Then my father would disown me."

"I never told me mot'er, too. I never told Michael, eit'er."

"Who is Michael?"

*Michael.*

Aisling stared expressionlessly at James, not sure how to answer his question. Brona had said Michael was not Bran's son. That meant Michael remained her cousin but not by Bran and her father's being brothers. "I

t'ink on him more den anyone," Aisling answered, laying a shaking hand over the ache in her chest. "I t'ink on him more den meself."

"I have never been in love, but I should say if you think about him more than you do yourself or anyone else, you must be sweethearts."

"He is under de dirt."

"Did he die at the hill on Thursday?" James asked.

Aisling nodded. Her stomach heaved. She bit her lip to stifle a gag. "I put him under de dirt."

"I saw you on the hill. If Michael were the man chasing you, then Miles killed him."

"Michael was tryin' to reach me. I was goin' to put Maj. Barret under de dirt."

"What made you decide to do that?"

"Because he shot me sister when we were in de field talkin' to Mr. Barret."

"I am not making excuses for Miles, but it was an accident. He was aiming at Lorcán and missed."

"What about de ot'ers?"

"What others?"

"Me fat'er... me fat'er," she whispered. "Den me uncle. Dat is when Maj. Barret made Finn mad."

"I did not know that," James said, "but your killing him never would have worked. Miles is a giant. He would have been the one to kill you."

"I know. Dat is what I wanted to happen."

"This is interesting. I am trying the slow approach, drinking myself to death. You, on the other hand, are trying the quick, honorable route."

"Dere is not'in' good about de rider. It is just dere to take me away from all dis."

"What rider?"

"Finn said de rider answers to Marcach Dorchadas, but I do not know. Soon it will find me and end dis."

"I want to get away from all of this, too," James said. "I am weary of living in hypocrisy whilst watching those dull, lifeless conspirators play their paltry games."

Aisling was not sure if she understood him correctly, but he seemed to be in exile as much as she. "Why did Maj. Barret turn ye in? I t'ought ye were friends."

"Miles does not have a friend in the entire world. Neither do I. I suppose that is why we have always haunted the same places together." James sighed and rubbed his forehead. "After the battle on the hill, Miles was granted permission to leave his unit and ride alongside the cavalry to lead them to a rebel. I was sent to accompany him. They know of his disagreeable temper and did not want the mission to fail. I succeeded in bungling it instead, and this is my reward. Who would have thought it would end this way?"

“Ho,” the driver shouted. “Ho.” The wagon and cavalry escort halted and the soldier sitting beside the driver jumped from his seat.

The sleeping prisoner’s head raised from the third man’s lap. “Are we stopping?” he asked.

An officer rode to the horses hitched to the wagon. “What has happened?” he asked.

“I do not know yet, Col. Philip,” the soldier replied as he lifted one of the horse’s hooves. “She might have picked up a stone.”

“See to it,” Col. Philip ordered, riding to the wagon. “How is our major enduring the duress?” James’ jaws were slack, and his eyes were unresponsive. The colonel removed the canteen slung over his shoulder. He handed it to the guard. “Private, be certain that everyone except Maj. Mallory receives a drink,” he ordered, riding from the wagon.

“Yes, sir.” The soldier took a swallow and passed the canteen to the other guard.

The prisoner wearing the beaver hat accepted the canteen and gave it to the man beside him. The man in the middle of the wagon took a long drink and nudged the sleeping man across from him. “What?” the roused man sputtered, the air in his cheeks expelling. “We get a drink, do we? Miracles never cease to befall me,” he said before taking a sip and presenting the canteen to Aisling.

“It tastes far worse than a foot soaked in something repulsive,” James warned her. “I should know because I filled it.”

“I can bear it,” Aisling said. She tipped her head and filled her mouth with the burning liquid. James eyes widened as she continued to drink. Aisling returned the canteen to the man beside her. With eyes bulging and mouth ablaze, she looked over the rear of the wagon. The colonel’s back was turned as he spoke to one of the cavalry soldiers. Aisling peered at the two guards. Both were watching the driver examine the horses. Suppressing a cough, Aisling jerked James’ hands to her and cupped them.

“What are you doing?” James muttered.

Aisling emptied the flaming liquid into his palms. James slurped the drink in his hands. After licking the remaining moisture from his palms, he wiped them on his breeches.

“That has to be the most nauseating thing I have ever seen,” the middle prisoner said, stuffing his coat underneath one of the manacles. The man across from him answered with a snore.

“It was a stone,” the driver told Col. Philip.

“I told ye I was able to do it,” Aisling said as the wagon started to roll along the road.

James’ lips twitched. “Miss Doran, if both of us did not look as dreadful as we smell and I were shaved and fifteen years younger,” he mused, “I would ask your permission to kiss you.” James smirked. “Hang permission. I would without it.”

“I do not let ye,” Aisling said.

James threw back his head and hooted, his strident laughter rumbling

above the horse's hooves. The dozing man awoke and glared at James. The other two prisoners shook their heads while the guards looked at James and then one another. The guard nearest James shrugged.

"Maj. Mallory?" Aisling said.

James stifled his mirth. "What is it, my dear Miss Doran?"

"Why did ye save me from de militia at Enniscort'y and den from Maj. Barret?"

"I did not want to see you killed."

"Why did ye give me yer handkerchief?"

"I suspect I gave it to you for the same reason you provided the drink to me."

The wagon traveled over a wooden crossing and advanced onto the widened road leading into a large city. "Dublin," said the prisoner wearing the beaver hat. The wagon rolled beyond the gawking onlookers and the sprawling cathedral with its soaring turret and spire. Eight bells made their home within the large tower.

A passing carriage slowed in the middle of the busy street. A man poked his head through the window and glared at the prisoners. "Good morning, sir," greeted the prisoner seated in the middle of the wagon.

The curious man's eyes snapped to the fetters imprisoning them. "Driver, hurry the carriage," he ordered. He covered his nose with a scrap of lace obtained from the wrist of his coat and drew his head inside the carriage.

"Not very friendly, was he?" the prisoner remarked.

"You would think we were common criminals," the man beside him commented. The team of horses passed a sprawling fortress with an open rectangular yard. A British flag waved over its circular tower. They turned left at a cathedral situated on the corner. Its large nave and stone tower loomed over them as they trotted over the narrowing street.

"This does not even rate as bad," a man said as he exited a dilapidated building on the south side of the street. Underneath the arm of his coat was a large leather-bound book. He opened the volume and rifled through the pages.

Another man scampered from the house, his nose masked with a handkerchief. "Would dis one wank as wuinous?" he asked, rummaging through the haversack slung over his shoulder.

"Ruinous," the first man repeated, accepting a pen from his partner. "I know of no other word to describe such a heap of filth and stench inconceivable." He dipped the quill into the ink and then scribbled on the book's pages.

"What are dey doin'?" Aisling asked.

"I have no idea," said the man wearing the hat. As the wagon drove by, he and the captives continued to gaze down the street.

"Filt'?" a voice screeched from the house. A woman opened the door and glared at the two men. "Ye come arousin' me ailin' husband's renters an' stickin' yer nose where it do not belong just sos ye can count dem."

"See here, my good woman," said the man with the pen, "we are conducting a survey of the entire city."

The woman disappeared into the house and returned with a wooden pail. "I be givin' ye somet'in' to tot up, ye meddalin' lout." She flung the contents of the bucket at the two gentlemen, dousing them with a murky liquid. She re-entered the house and slammed the door.

Aisling glanced at James. His shoulders shook as he chortled softly. The faint chuckles developed into ruthless cackling.

"I thought that would entertain the major," remarked the man wearing the hat.

"Forget him," crowed the other captive as he stuffed his coat sleeves beneath his shackles. "That is the most amusing thing I have seen in my life." The wagon drove through the market square and departed beyond a run-down gate supported by a sagging prison tower and crumbling wall.

"I do not see anything amusing about the entire situation," said the man who had been sleeping beside Aisling.

"Neither do I," agreed the man wearing the hat. "That is where they caught Lord Fitzgerald," he said, nodding to a house with a sloping roof on the north side of the street. "They found him hiding under the roof. Then they shot him and let him die in prison. I should like to get my hands upon the scoundrel who betrayed him."

The wagon passed a brewery and rolled around an ancient stone pillar. A reservoir bordered by walks and trees met them as they departed the city and entered a hamlet of isolated homes. Fields, pastures, and trees greeted them as they continued their journey west. Farther along the road was another building, its four walls enclosing a grassy courtyard. A tower rising over the center gable embellished the entrance. "What is dat?" Aisling asked.

"The Royal Hospital," the man in the hat said as the wagon drove beyond it.

The parade of horses, soldiers, and prisoners passed a cemetery and its intricately engraved headstones. Upon a slab of stone rose a tall, thick pillar with a braided motif. "Dere he is wid his whistle gritted in his fingers," Aisling whispered, "glimpsin' inside de grave of his fat'er. De witch wid de blond curls fallin' down her shoulders tries to steal his soul. If she turns, she will see de jealous fairy and de brot'er wid his bloody hands."

"What is all of that about?" James asked.

"All of what?" Aisling said.

"The man at the grave. Surely you know what you said?"

"I did not know I said anyt'in'. I t'ought I was t'inkin' to meself."

"I thought I was having a nightmare," said the man across from Aisling.

"I t'ought I was, too," Aisling told him.

In the distance another weeping compound for the imprisoned leered at them, its upper-story windows barred and devoid of glass. The wagon continued its journey westward along the road. "We might be having a nightmare at that," said the man wearing the hat. "Look where we are."

“We are doomed,” the middle man said, staring at the yawning limestone and granite building that stood before them.

The wagon was driven to the front of the building. The guards leaped from their seats and unlatched the wagon. “Everyone is to exit except Maj. Mallory,” Col. Philip said. The three fettered men stood and hobbled to the edge of the cart. The guards grabbed the captives’ arms and pulled them down.

“Where are dey takin’ ye, Maj. Mallory?” Aisling asked James.

“Probably to the barracks. Do not worry about me, Miss Doran. I shall manage.”

“Everyone,” Col. Philip reiterated. Aisling stood and shuffled to the edge of the wagon. The guards gripped her arms and lifted her from the cart.

“Move,” one of the soldiers said, nudging Aisling’s back with a bayonet.

Aisling strode behind the man in the hat. Three doors evenly spanned the front of the limestone edifice, each one with inlaid arches over them. Above were three additional entrances, each with identical arcs overhead. The middle doorway was obstructed by an iron scaffold. The drowsy man leading the procession was swallowed by the central passage. Next, the man with the bleeding wrists was engulfed, and at length the man wearing the hat was devoured. *Someone is lookin’ at me.* Aisling’s eyes flicked to the right and then to the left. She glanced above her. Five twisting snakes cast in bronze stalked one another over the door, rattling the chains choking their throats. Their sharp fangs and protruding eyes leered at her. Aisling’s temples throbbed. The beast tethered to her brain had escaped.

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