

A chessboard with a light blue and white checkered pattern. In the foreground, a white king piece is on the left, and a white queen piece is in the center. A glass king piece is lying on its side in the lower right, with a red rose petal resting near its base. The text "NUALA LYONS" is in the upper right, and "BRIDE'S GAME" is in the center.

**NUALA
LYONS**

BRIDE'S GAME



GAA women's football is Bride's game and because she's been the top scorer in the team it's problematic that a new player, Jackie, challenges her for that place. Bride takes it in her stride and competes until one day the young brilliant, but unreliable forward doesn't turn up for the semifinal of the Champions Cup match.

Bride's Game

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1

Bride slashed at the nettles in an effort to reach the ball trapped in the entangled branches of a hawthorn tree that fought for space to grow in the confusion of bushes and undergrowth in this congested hedge. It wouldn't budge even though she tried to poke it from different positions with the bit of a branch she'd picked from the weed-smothered ground. What a pain! Now she'd have to clear these tall stingers before she could attack it from a different angle.

The space between the hedge and the trees was so tight it allowed her no room to swing the stick until those annoying plants were broken. She struck at them again but jumped away as they sprang back at her face. 'How on earth am I going to get that ball?' she asked aloud as she stared into the tangle of twigs and briars in the infuriating border, which the park attendants allowed to grow wild, separating the cultivated GAA football pitch from the copse?

She stopped, stood still as an image flashed before her eyes.

'No. That's impossible. Oh God! I'll have to take a look to see if there's anything stuck back there.'

She turned to scan the undergrowth amongst the saplings that bordered the walking path in the sports section of Tymon Park. A frown wrinkled her forehead. It had to be a twig blown down by the wind. Moving closer to the area in question she bent down to inspect the object.

Her eyelids closed, droplets of rain from the overhead leaves straggled unnoticed down her face. Instinctively she brushed them off with an impatient hand.

She forced her eyes open.

One perfectly manicured, bright-red nail pointed to the treetops in the leaf-sheltered copse. A tiny raindrop dripped from an overhead branch, trickled slowly from the tip of the nail down along the white finger until it reached the leaf-covered ground.

Bride crumpled backward into the hedge that had given her so much trouble.

Rain fell onto her still white face slipping as tiny rivulets onto her lips before dropping to the ground where she lay unconscious beside the nettles she'd tried so hard to flatten.

Cormac Flynn's name was respected in the art world where his sculptures were highly valued and the only sport he played, enjoyed, in fact lived and breathed, was rugby.

On his way home from the centre of Dublin to Blessington, his hands had turned the wheel to Exit 11 on the M50 as his mind reviewed his exhibition in the Gallery in Temple Bar.

"Cormac," his agent, Sean Murphy, had said when everything on display had been sold. "This is one fantastic day. I've spoken to agents from Europe, the US and even as far as China looking to purchase your art. They are offering unbelievable prices for your work."

"I'm happy they like my Irish Oak as well as the bronzes," he'd replied.

"If you've any finished pieces in your workshop there are a few agents here who'd like to take a look later on this week before they go to London, New York or even Florence Galleries looking for new objects to purchase."

"I have some but need a few days to get everything ready. Thanks Sean." He'd placed his untouched glass of champagne on a table.

“I’ll be in touch later with the arrangements for a selected viewing in your home.”

When his brain had returned to the present he’d discovered he was in St.Jude’s GAA Car Park. He’d sighed, locked his car and, accepting he had no power over her attraction, had walked with long legged strides to the playing field.

‘I know nothing about GAA,’ he’d told himself for the umpteen time since he’d started watching the game, standing in the damp grass of the open field while his smart Italian leather shoes were slowly being destroyed. ‘What am I doing in Tymon Park watching St Jude’s *women’s* football team play the semi final of a GAA Championship Cup match, in August?’

He hadn’t needed an answer. He’d known what he was doing. A man of thirty-two who’d had lovers knew when his emotions were engaged.

It had been wonderful to find a woman like Bridget but Holy God – a GAA footballer?

He was accustomed to the company of cultured ladies in Galleries, nightclubs, theatres in fact anywhere those with money to spend on art, mingled.

She’d been shouldered to the ground.

By the time the referee had blown his whistle and had ordered him off he’d reached the centre of the pitch.

He’d returned to his place among the spectators who’d known the out of place, smartly dressed, well-built man was there to watch only the captain of the team.

Cormac Flynn was infatuated with Bride Hanrahan.

Why couldn’t he have fallen for her third sister Genevieve the sophisticated golfer, or even beaten Ian to the athletic Aggie the eldest of the triplets?

But no, he'd met Bride and one look into her startling violet blue eyes had captured his emotions.

She'd received first aid from Orla and had gotten to her feet.

It had been humiliating to be the only man here watching the women's match. Oh there were other men around but they'd been engaged in keeping the score, retrieving the balls, being involved in the game. None of them had been there because he'd wanted Bride Hanrahan in his bed.

He'd stood alone in the misty rain watching a woman who had no time for him with a longing in his heart he didn't want, but was powerless to eject.

She'd thrown an angry glance when she'd caught sight of him striding across the pitch. He'd understood she didn't want him there watching the match – no they'd both been very aware he'd been watching *her*. But she'd turned away, had directed her annoyance into her game and had scored a goal.

The thrill that had shot through him, astonished him, filled him with pride and had somehow strangely amused him when she'd shot a triumphant look stabbing him. It was as if she'd scored despite his interference on the pitch proving his actions hadn't affect her in any way.

How could she do that to him? How could she play on so many of his emotions at one time? And how long would this infatuation last?

He was experienced enough to know each love affair had its time to start and its time to finish.

The hotter the feeling, the faster it burned and the sooner it died. But he wanted that fire now. How could he get her to accept him as her lover when she wouldn't even acknowledge his existence?

Her goal had been the last one in the game and her team had won. She hadn't come near him but had joined her team mates in a spirited circular victory hug.

Only one more game before they lifted the cup.

He'd watched, imagining her arms wrapped around him but he'd only tormented himself. If starvation of affection was a cure then he should have been over her long ago. Instead he'd felt as if he had a fever just watching her embracing the other female footballers.

Ignoring him completely, he'd seen her pull on her track suit jacket and trousers and go to retrieve the last of the lost balls that Eithne had kicked high over the bar for a point. It had landed in the middle of the hedge at the far end of the pitch.

He'd waited and waited.

She'd been gone too long.

2

His black hair was plastered against his head as he walked from the celebrating players to where he'd seen Bride enter the copse. She'd have had to fight her way through thick undergrowth to extract the ball from its awkward resting position.

"They cost thirty euro each," her voice still rang in his ears from the last time they'd spoken – sparred was perhaps a better word because she'd been so cross when he'd come to watch a training session. "We use ten of them every week and we have to account for each one."

"*Football*," he forced the word in a disgusted grunt as his long legs took him towards the opposite side of the hedge, "is no sport for women."

Holding tight to his disapproval, ignoring the ruin he was bringing to his expensive business suit, he pushed his way through hard twigs on the lower tree branches searching for her.

"Oh for heaven's sake," he spat, as his keen blue-green eyes saw her lying on her side, half way into the hedge, "leave that stupid ball. I'll get it. Come out of there woman," he commanded raising his voice.

Moving in he saw her closed eyelids ending in long black lashes, etched like spider legs against the pallor of her skin.

"Bride," his voice strained as he laid his strong fingers on the side of her neck and found a beating pulse.

His hands ran over her body seeking the reason why she lay on the ground. There was no blood. Was she bleeding in her brain? Should he move her?

“Bride, open your eyes,” he begged, looking around to see if he could find anything that might have hurt her.

She stirred. Muttered.

He rubbed her ice cold hands between his large warm ones. Bending over her he breathed sweet warm air from his mouth onto her face.

“*Bride,*” he commanded forcefully, “*open your eyes.*”

“Don’t you dare tell me what to do Cormac Flynn,” she retorted, irritation strengthening her voice as her violet eyes snapped open to stare at him leaning over her.

Relief ran through every inch of his six foot two frame as he looked into her angry face.

“Get away from me. What are you doing here?” she snapped, annoyance flooding her body.

“You took too long looking for that...” he started but stopped as her eyes glazed over and her head fell back.

“Oh no you don’t Bride! Don’t do that to me again.” He gave her a sharp open handed slap, which smarted but didn’t hurt, on her cheek bringing a rush of adrenaline through her body.

Instant fury brought her out of her faint.

“*Don’t you dare raise your hand to me,*” she spat at him sitting up against his firm body, pushing him aside with clenched fists. “*I’ll...*”

Her face crumpled as she stared blankly into his ...

“What?” he asked holding her close, his strong gentle hands rubbing her back, “Bride, what’s wrong?”

She shuddered as the vision of the finger returned gripping her body with dread. Barely able to keep from fainting, she whispered in a trembling voice, “the finger...”

“What finger Bride? Make sense! Engage your brain!”

Reluctantly, she began the awful search with her eyes while her mind insisted she was imagining the vision. It could not possibly be here in the public park with the amount of people who used this route. Nobody could have committed that crime here without being seen.

“Over there,” she pointed, digging into his shoulders with a hand that clenched in horror.

Cormac turned his head in the direction she was indicating and looking intently, saw the lonely red tipped digit pointing to the sky.

“*Fuck!*” he said, pulled out his mobile and rang the emergency services.

Bride trembled but remained silent listening to him giving precise instruction in a business-like manner.

“Yes – Tymon Park – the GAA playing fields. Correct a woman’s finger protruding from the disturbed earth in a stand of trees beside the M50. Yes, we suspect it may be an unmarked grave.”

“Cormac, I’d like to go out of this place. Please” she murmured.

He closed his phone, helped her into her feet and shouldering the high weeds and low twigged branches, brought her to the path, which bisected the thicket.

Bride shivered continually in the warm night air.

He kept his arms around her while they waited.

Gradually the team arrived. One by one they stepped into the trees intending to examine the place where Bride had fainted.

“Sorry,” Cormac held out an arm, “No-one can go in there. It’s a crime scene and we mustn’t destroy the evidence or the Gardai may charge us with interfering in a Garda investigation.”

“You’re right,” a number of match officials came beside him. They asked the team to form a line to prevent anyone going into the copse.

“I’ll take the other side to stop any passers-by having a look,” Michael, the coach, offered.

“Good idea. I’ll come with you,” Orla, the manager, said.

They, plus four other players walked on the opposite side of the growth of trees until they were directly facing Cormac and Bride.

The players on the opposing team decided to leave as the night closed in. They said goodbye as there was nothing they could do to help.

“You know where we are if the Gardai want to talk to us,” their manager said as they departed.

3

The footballers gathered on the path heard the ambulance wail compete with the Garda siren for prominence as an official from St Jude's GAA Club directed them to the scene.

The Garda car stopped behind them and their supporters.

"I'm Detective Monaghan in charge of this case. Who called the emergency services?"

"I did. Cormac Flynn."

"Please tell me why?" Monaghan asked, as he took in the crowd of people standing around.

"Bride saw something in the ground that we thought you should take a look at," he replied.

"Show me where this 'thing' is Mr. Flynn."

Cormac lead the way to where the red nail still pointed skyward. He stopped a few feet from it and motioned Monaghan over.

Without saying a word Monaghan stood looking hard at the finger. He shifted his gaze to take in the surrounding area of disturbed earth. Immediately he commanded the Gardai to secure the site.

Detective King had come to stand beside him.

"It appears sir," she said, in a subdued voice as she looked at the beautiful manicured nail, "that Bride Hanrahan was first on the scene."

“I thought you said you rang the Gardai,” Monaghan turned to Cormac.

“I did.”

“Why didn’t Ms. Hanrahan call us?”

“Because she fainted into the hedge when she caught sight of the grave.”

“How do you know this?”

“He came to find out why I was taking so long retrieving the ball and found me collapsed half inside the bushes,” Bride, who had followed King, informed him.

“Are you Bridget Hanrahan a sister to Agnes Hanrahan?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m the second triplet.”

“I remember you now. You’re the Insurance Broker. You have an office in Rathfarnham Village.”

“Yes.”

“Explain what you were doing when you discovered this grave.”

“Eithne had scored the final point and we were celebrating when I decided to rescue the ball before we forgot about it in the excitement of winning the semi-final. I came here, found a stick and began to knock down the nettles before I ventured into the hedge. I’m five eight but they were so high they could have stung my eyes.

“I must have seen it without recognising what it was because I was focused on getting the ball. As I slashed the weeds I realised I’d seen something that didn’t belong among the trees. I turned and saw the woman’s finger. I must have fainted because the next thing I knew Cormac was talking to me.”

“Did you happen to walk on the grave before you searched for the ball?”

The mere question had her shuddering.

“No I don’t think so. But I can’t be sure. Why?”

“If we find a footprint we’ll need to examine your shoes to exclude you from our investigation.”

Bride nodded. “Can I go now?”

“Yes, and you too Mr. Flynn. Give your address to Detective King and then you may go. Send in the Garda medical and forensics team King and let’s get this case moving.”

They walked away from the scene as the Gardai began the job of recording the gravesite and searching for the body – if indeed there was a body buried there.

Bride picked up her sports bag. She went with Cormac over the wet fields towards the clubhouse where she’d left her bicycle.

Cormac kept his arm around her shoulders as they walked in silence. From time to time Bride shuddered.

When they got to the car park she unlocked her bike, Cormac lifted it into the large boot of his SUV.

Bride stood beside him, silent.

Cormac took her to the passenger door opened it and helped her inside. He got into the driver’s seat and drove out.

Halfway home to the apartment she shared with her sister Genevieve, she said,

“Cormac....”

“Not here Bride. We’ll talk when you’ve had a hot shower and a glass of Hennessy.”

She opened her mouth to protest then wisely shut it again when she saw the expression on his face.

He concentrated on the road, but from time to time he glanced at her white face and staring eyes and knew she was reliving the moment when she saw the finger

sticking up from the soil. She was a strong character, not the kind who fainted easily, so why had she fallen comatose into the undergrowth?

A fresh shudder ran through her body.

What did she know about that grave that disturbed her or frightened her so much she'd lost consciousness? He'd wait until she'd recovered from the shock but then he'd ask her.

He pulled into the underground garage and helped her out. Ignoring her hands as she waved towards her bike, he took her to the lift and went up to her apartment. When she'd opened the door he dropped her bag at the entrance hall and brought her to her bedroom.

"Can you manage to shower without fainting or would you like me to stay with you?" he asked, when he found Genevieve was not home.

"What?" she exclaimed, coming out of her stupor.

"I'll help wash your back if you like," he offered.

"You most certainly will not," she exclaimed, her eyes flashing as she pushed him away. "I can manage that myself."

She stormed off to shower.

He took off his wet jacket, kicked off his sodden shoes before he made coffee and opening the Hennessy poured a shot into his cup. He'd stay until her sister came home and if she didn't, he'd spend the night in Aggie's room. Aggie was living with Ian his good friend and fellow rugby player.

Bride was his woman whether she realised it or not and she would not spend the night alone with this shock in her system.

The kitchen was spotless and he wondered if she'd eaten. Her match had started at seven so she would have been at the field at six thirty.

Searching the various drawers in the kitchen he found the take away menu and ordered two Indian meals before he returned to the couch.

He'd give her ten minutes longer but then he'd go and make certain she hadn't fainted in the damn shower.

But just as he'd put his hand on the doorknob she came out dressed in loose baggy trousers and a matching top.

"Were you coming into my bedroom without being invited?" she narrowed her eyes at him.

"You were too long in that shower. I suppose you've got wrinkled skin now."

"What! You are the most annoying man I have ever met. You certainly know how to put a woman down."

He took a long look at her put his hands out and drew her to the couch.

"Here take a sip of the Hennessy. You're still in shock."

She sank into the soft leather giving a sigh of relief as she took a small mouthful from the square cut glass.

"Now," he said, sitting beside her, "tell me how you know who's buried in that grave?"



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