

## Prologue

*Quebec*

*July 1854*

It is nine o'clock in the morning but the heat is already unbearable. Sun and sweat are scorching his eyes. Dockers come and go around him, carrying heavy loads. Captains hurl orders and sails flap in the wind. He lifts a wooden barrel and lays it on a cart already half-filled. *Still six more*, he murmurs, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. He has been working since dawn. His throat is parched but his flask is already empty. He is so exhausted he does not hear the tirade of the foreman, Brian McMurray, a Scotsman with a sullen scowl who mercilessly bosses the dockers around, refusing them a moment's rest, even the time to piss.

"I pay you to work, not to drag your bloody ass around!"

A hand is gently placed on his shoulder.

"*A Aintriú... Andrew...*"

He looks up and sees his mother. She tries to smile while holding out a jug and a chunk of bread to him. Despite the harsh July sunlight, he notices her pallor and the bags beneath her eyes. Since Cecilia's disappearance, she finds it hard to sleep but is duty-bound to spend twelve hours a day tailoring dresses for the uptown bourgeoisie. He seizes the jug and knocks back long drafts of fresh water before giving it back to his mother.

"*Ná bíodh imní ort, a Mháthair, tiocfaidh sí ar ais.* Don't be worried, Mother, she'll come back."

He feels a pang of grief thinking about his sister. A few days earlier, Andrew had gone to the lodging house where Cecilia lived, in the Saint Roch area. Mrs. Geoffroy, the owner, dryly confirmed she had not seen Miss Beggs for a good week and that she owed a month's rent. Despite the landlady's protestations, Andrew climbed the dark and dirty stairway to his sister's room. The bed was meticulously made and her clothes tidied away in a rickety little chest of drawers. Then he went to the hat store where Cecilia worked as a sales assistant. The owner, Mr. Fillion, was truly astonished that Miss Beggs, one of his best employees, punctual and always pleasant with the clients, had not shown up for work all week. Andrew shook his head as if to dispel his fears. Cecilia was loyalty incarnate. Each month, she gave more than half of her earnings as a sales assistant to her mother to supplement the family's needs. She would not have disappeared overnight, without leaving a note.

The barrel lands brutally on the cart. The foreman roars something but Andrew is not listening to him. A disturbance quay-side, next to the Champlain Market has caught his attention. Some fishermen, sailors and

onlookers are gathering near one of the docks. A canoe made of bark is approaching. Three Huron Indians with long black hair are on board, paddling rapidly and effortlessly, with robust grace. Andrew makes out a form enveloped in a colourful blanket in the middle of the canoe, which draws alongside the dock.

The Huron sitting at the bow of the boat agilely climbs onto the quay, followed by the second man, while the third one holds the canoe against the supporting posts to keep it stable. A discussion ensues between the Indians standing on the quay and the men gathered near them. Then one of the Hurons turns to the boat, leans over and lifts the form enfolded in a blanket which he hands to his companion. A slender pale-skinned woman's foot bursts out of the blanket. The Huron lays his load on the pier. He starts talking but Andrew scarcely makes out the words, muffled by the merchants' cries and the rolling of the carts. Wearing a straw hat with holes letting the light filter through, a fisherman takes a few steps toward the figure, lifts a corner of the blanket, revealing the body of a young woman with long black hair, dressed in white. Andrew feels a sudden sense of foreboding. That magnificent dark hair, the graceful figure, the muddied white dress... The Hurons are still talking, motioning grandly to somewhere up north. Andrew hears the words "Tiora Datuec", repeated a few times, like a leitmotif, then the words, "sparkling lake". He pushes past the onlookers who protest and kneels near the body. The cover is hiding her face. He slowly removes it. Swollen by a prolonged stay in the water, the face is unrecognizable. The eye sockets are empty. The horror is such that he feels nauseated.

*"It's not her, it can't be her, it can't be her beautiful face, her eyes of such a deep blue, like the Irish sea, laughing and tender..."* A fine white arm falls out from the blanket. The blue veins on her hand are protruding. He recognizes a silver ring he gave her for her birthday the year before, which cost three weeks' wages. He opens his mouth to scream but he hears a roar from someone else.

*"A Shisile! Cecilia!"*

His mother, looking haggard, runs toward the dock. Loose strands of hair fall from her bonnet. Andrew stands up and tries to block her way but she pushes him aside with astonishing strength.

*"A Shisile seo agamsa! M'iníon bheag! My dearest Cecilia! My darling girl"*

She rushes at the silhouette stretched out on the dock, flops to her knees, swaying back and forth, producing unintelligible sounds. Andrew goes back to her, tries to take her away from the corpse but she refuses to leave. He stands back up and looks around. The Hurons have returned to their canoe. Their paddles are tracing silvery circles in the sombre river waters. Just then his eyes lock with those of a blond young man, well-dressed, visibly the son of a

well-to-do family. The man is standing near the dock. His eyes of almost translucent blue are filled with horror, like those of the onlookers congregated around the quay, but there is something else. Fear. Andrew is certain of it. Fear and remorse too. The blond young man stays there for a while, stock still like a statue. Then, he turns his head and tears off as if the devil were on his heels. He climbs into an elegant barouche<sup>1</sup> and brusquely closes the door after him. Stirred by intuition, Andrew runs after the carriage which is fast disappearing over the cobbled street heading uptown. The wheels make a deafening noise. After a desperate breakneck chase, Andrew has to stop, out of breath. He slowly returns to the dock where his sister is still lying. Father MacMahon, the vicar of St. Patrick's Church whom a passerby had summoned, is bent over the remains and murmuring a prayer in Irish Gaelic.

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Cecilia's body is transported by cart to the Emigrants' Hospital, and deposited in a whitewashed room where there are already several stretchers, each covered with a white sheet. His features strained by fatigue, a young doctor examines the corpse and confirms death by drowning. Andrew is standing at the back of the room, pale and grief-stricken. He has had his mother stay with Mrs. Donovan, a neighbour who works uptown as a domestic. The doctor pulls the sheet over the dead body and turns toward him:

"What was your relationship to the victim?"

"Cecilia is... was my sister," he replies, his voice cracking.

The doctor nods, then clears his throat before continuing:

"Did you know she was with child?"

Andrew leaves the hospital and walks aimlessly, his head buzzing. Raging anger replaces incredulity. "Did you know she was with child?" Cecilia had no lover, of that he was absolutely certain. And if she had had one, he would have been the first to know. She had kept no secrets from him. The image of the blond man at the end of the dock, near the Champlain market, returns to haunt him: his look filled with fear and remorse, the hardness in his face... A powerful hatred for this young man, dressed like an aristocrat, takes hold. Could it be possible Cecilia let herself be seduced by him? A terrible thought comes to mind. Perhaps Cecilia had taken her own life. Knowing she was expecting a child, she had thrown herself into the water in shame and desperation. *Why did you say nothing? Why?*

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<sup>1</sup> A barouche was a popular nineteenth century four-wheeled, horse-drawn carriage with a retractable hood at the rear.

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Andrew returns to the landlady, Mrs. Geoffroy, who rented a room to Cecilia downtown. She was the only person who might apprise him on the comings and goings of his sister and, above all, what company she kept.

Standing at her front doorstep, the landlady receives him coolly.

"I hope you've brought my rent. Miss Beggs owes me one month."

He hands her six shillings, more than a week's wages. She counts each coin.

"It's a shilling short," she says, her mouth pinched.

He gives her another coin, swallowing his anger. She slips the seven shillings into a purse she wears on her belt. Andrew abruptly asks her:

"Has my sister ever brought a man to her room?"

Mrs. Geoffroy protests a little too energetically.

"Mine's an honest house! The girls are strictly forbidden to bring a "beau" back here."

She starts to close the door but Andrew comes up to the threshold and blocks the doorway. He is well-built and looks strong and intimidating. The landlady is nervous and wrings her moist hands. In the end, with a disapproving look, she says:

"I saw a young man come out of her room, once or twice."

"What does he look like?"

Mrs. Geoffroy scowls.

"Well-dressed, distinguished. He came from uptown, most definitely."

*Young blond fellow.*

"His name?"

"How d'ya expect me to know that?"

"I'd like to see my sister's room again."

Andrew heads to the stairwell without awaiting her reply. She shrieks:

"Haven't I told you men are not allowed in my lodgers' rooms?"

She runs after him, oblivious to how ridiculous her utterance sounds, considering what she had just admitted. Andrew emerges on the landing, opens Cecilia's bedroom door with a kick and enters without making an effort to close the door behind him. The room is exactly as he had seen it the last time. He starts to search it, looking for a clue which might set him on the trail of the bastard who had impregnated his sister. Some dresses are hanging in a shabby wardrobe whose door hangs ajar. He opens the drawers of an old chest and finds something at the bottom of the third one. It's a drawing of a beautiful face with a sad smile. *Cecilia...* He had had this drawing made by a

street artist a few months previously. His sister was living then. Alive and happy. Tears well up in him. He buries the drawing in his shirt.

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The funeral cortege heads toward the Saint Louis cemetery on Grande Allée. Dressed in a black suit which belonged to his father, Andrew walks behind the hearse, bare-headed, with a vacant look in his eyes. *How can I still gaze at the sky and the trees when my sister will never see them again?* He supports his mother by the arm. Her eyes are haggard and almost translucent, like someone who has shed many a tear. The hatter, Mr. Fillion, walks behind them, a bowler hat in his hands crossed in front of him. Father MacMahon closes out the modest procession. Draped in black, the hearse moves slowly. The wheels crunch on the cobblestones. A few passersby watch the cortege move off.

When the first clump of earth is thrown on the coffin, Cecilia's mother howls a doleful cry and throws herself at the grave:

*"A Shisile, a linbb! Cecilia! My darling!"*

It takes all of Andrew's strength to hold her back. She collapses in his arms in sobs. Andrew hugs her close, his eyes dry but his heart in tatters. He suddenly notices a dark shadow through a row of poplars. The blond man. He's sure it's him. He bolts to run after him but the silhouette disappears. Perhaps he only imagined it? Yet he well and truly saw the young man standing near the quay, looking horror-stricken and remorseful... He remembers the Huron's words "Tiora Datuec" and "sparkling lake", and how he pointed in a northerly direction when he uttered them. After the brief ceremony, Andrew approaches Father MacMahon to ask him the meaning of those words:

"That's what the Hurons call Lake Saint Charles."

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Andrew hires an old buggy and makes the journey to Lake Saint Charles, about ten leagues north of Quebec City. It is a gloriously hot day; the roads are dry and dusty. Not a cloud on the horizon. After a few hours travelling, he sees the lake through a screen of fir and birch trees. He ties the horse to a tree and turns into a path leading to the southern lakeshore. The aroma of conifers mingles with the sweet scent of asclepia, whose clusters of mauve flowers adorn the path. The silence takes him by surprise. All he can hear is the crackling of pine needles beneath his feet. Occasionally, a light rustling coming from the undergrowth makes him shiver. After a few minutes walking,

he reaches the shore. The entire length of the lake sparkles like a mirror. He understands why the Hurons called it the “sparkling lake”.

Willows are reflected in the water. Thousands of firs stand tall, one next to the other, looking like a regiment on the horizon. The magical chant of a loon rings out, amplified by the echo. *An méid seo áilleachta*. So much beauty, he thinks, contemplating the scenery. *An oiread seo áilleachta ar domhan chomb danartha sin...* So much beauty in such a cruel world... He nears the bank, sees a fisherman’s cabin whose disjointed planks let the sunrays filter through. An old boat is tied to a post nearby. Andrew examines it and sees it is filled with water. Straightening up again, he notices an Indian repairing a wooden canoe some distance away. Standing beside him, a little girl watches him work. He walks toward them. The man continues to work without raising his head. The young girl watches him approach. Her eyes are the colour of the lake. Andrew stops by his side. The man looks up. Andrew recognizes him. He’s one of the Hurons who transported Cecilia by canoe to the port of Quebec. He shows him Cecilia’s portrait which he brought with him.

“My sister. You transported her corpse to Quebec City. Where did you find her?”

The Huron remains silent for a moment, then, points toward the lake. Andrew watches him. The lake has become white with the sunlight, like a shroud.

“She drowned in the sparkling lake.”

Andrew fights back the sobs. A fluty voice is heard.

“A beautiful white woman. She was in a boat.”

Andrew turns to look at the little girl. She is frail and her skirt is a little too big for her. Her black braids emerge from a red scarf.

Andrew crouches down beside her.

“What boat?” he asks softly for fear of frightening her.

The girl points at the old boat filled with water. Her dark eyes reflect the sky.

“Was she alone?” Andrew inquires.

The child shakes her head.

“With a man,” she answers in a low voice.

Andrew shades his eyes with his hand. The sun bedazzles him.

“What did he look like? Big, small?”

“Medium,” she said, pouting.

She scoops up a fistful of sand which she shows to Andrew.

“Sand?” he queries, perplexed.

“Like his hair.”

*The blond man...* The youngster lets the sand flow through her fingers.

“The lady in white fell into the water. The blond man stayed in the boat. Afterwards, he left in a black coach.”

The Huron stands up.

“Marie, go get some more pine gum.”

The young girl turns to her father. He nods at her.

“Go.”

She reluctantly leaves. Andrew is about to go join her but the Huron intervenes.

“Let the dead rest in peace!”

The Huron’s face is composed but Andrew sees his hand slide down to the knife strapped to his belt. He understands that he will learn no more.

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On the way back, Andrew is consumed by a single desire: to find the man who killed Cecilia. He is convinced his sister’s drowning was anything but an accident. The blond man took Cecilia to Lake Saint Charles and made her get into the boat. She fell into the water or he threw her and let her drown. Nothing is easier than for the son of a rich family to get rid of a poor little hat seller, Irish into the bargain, whose only crime was to be expecting a child...

After the exhilaration he experienced unearthing the truth, Andrew descends into dejection. He is persuaded of the blond man’s guilt, but he knows absolutely nothing about him, not even his name. *Who is he? Where does he live? No way of knowing.*

Evening falls. He takes the rented coach back to the stable on Dalhousie Street which borders the port. Just when the young groom is about to take the horse by the bridle, Andrew intuits what he should do. The little girl mentioned a black coach. If, as he believes, the blond man had the intention of killing his sister, he must have hired a coach. He goes on foot to the Saint Roch district, near the lodging house where Cecilia lived and around to some of the carters, asking the same question each time: did they hire a coach a few days ago, perhaps even a week ago, to a young man in his twenties, blond, of medium height, blue eyes, dressed in black, who was most likely from uptown? From the stable hands to the owners, no one can shed any light on the matter. He starts to despair when he remembers an old stable on Champlain Street where his father worked for a few months, before being dismissed for drunkenness. The owner, a French-Canadian in his sixties, is throwing straw into a trough when Andrew enters the stable. Old carriages are parked side by side. Harnesses hang from nails; a young stable boy grooms a horse. Andrew approaches the carter who frowns when Andrew introduces

himself. He obviously has no fond memories of his father, and glowers when the young man reveals the reason for his visit.

“Wha’s tha’ to do wi’ you?” he asks, eyeing him suspiciously.

Andrew decides to tell him the truth. What has he got to lose?

The coach owner nods. He heard on the grapevine about poor Cecilia’s drowning but never doubted it was anything but natural.

“I don’t wan’ no trouble.”

Andrew senses the man knows something. He rummages in his pockets and takes out the few remaining coins. The owner then divulges he hired a coach to a young man fitting the description Andrew gave him. He remembers him very well because the young man paid a hefty sum, at least ten pounds, and then, when he returned with the cab, he noticed his suit was torn and muddied as if he had fallen onto wet earth.

“His name?” asks Andrew, his forehead feverish.

The old man searches a register and points to a name with his forefinger.

“Monsieur de Balzac. Honoré de Balzac.”

The same day, Andrew goes to the hat store where Cecilia worked. The young blond man is perhaps a client; maybe he got to know her when he was buying a hat. When Andrew asks Mr. Fillion if he has a client by the name of Honoré de Balzac, the hatter can not but smile.

“You said *Balzac*?”

“Do you know him?” exclaims Andrew, full of hope.

“He’s a famous French writer. He was dead before I had the honour of serving him...”

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His forehead sweating despite the cold, Andrew hauls a cart piled with wood for heating. Almost three months have passed since his expedition to Lake Saint Charles. He had found employment with a wood merchant when the boats had stopped navigating the river. He hasn’t forgotten his desire for vengeance but the hope of finding the one who caused the loss of his sister has dwindled day by day. Passing the Notre Dame Basilica with his cart, one fine October afternoon, he hears the church bells pealing. A couple emerges into the church square to the cheering crowd, illuminated by a gleaming orangey autumnal sun. For a moment, he thinks he recognizes Cecilia: black hair beneath a white veil, deep blue eyes... Then he sees a young blond man holding his bride by the arm, smiling. Andrew sets his cart down slowly as if

hypnotised. *It's him*. Dressed in an elegant, black frock coat<sup>2</sup> enhanced by a white lavalliere<sup>3</sup>, he smiles. The bride is wearing a magnificent white dress and clasping a posy in her hand. Well dressed people follow the couple out of the church. Everything seems clear as crystal to him: the motive for the crime and his reward, a rich marriage in Quebec's high society. He approaches an onlooker.

"Who's the happy groom?" he asks blandly.

"Louis Grandmont, son of the notary, Honoré Grandmont", replies the jovial man. "A fine marriage, isn't it?"

*Louis Grandmont...* Andrew watches the newlyweds descend the steps under a hail of rice and rose petals the guests showered on them in fistfuls. They climb into a magnificent barouche festooned with ribbons and flowers. It passes him. The almost translucent blue eyes of the groom settle on Andrew Beggs for a moment. He frowns slightly as if this angular face and flamboyant red hair were vaguely familiar. The barouche continues on its way but Andrew Beggs stares at it until it disappears out of sight.

He goes into the church which is empty by then. He kneels on a prie-dieu<sup>4</sup> opposite the altar where the bride and groom exchanged their wedding vows. He now knows his sister's murderer. He swears to avenge Cecilia's death, even if it takes his entire life to do so.

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<sup>2</sup> A frock coat is a man's single or double-breasted skirted coat, popular in the nineteenth century and often rented for weddings today.

<sup>3</sup> A lavalliere is a cravat, a scarf worn around the neck instead of a tie, clasped with a decorative pin.

<sup>4</sup> A prie-dieu is a piece of furniture for use when praying. It consists of a kneeler and a narrow front surmounted by a rest for the elbows or joined hands.