

THERE WAS a low buzz of talk in the drawing room. The guests, a score or so, stood about in clusters, the men all alike in dark suits, the women bird-bright and twittering. Sarah moved among them, brushing a hand here, touching an elbow there, trying to keep her smile from slipping. She felt guilty for not being able to like these people, Mal's friends, mostly, or the Judge's. Apart from the priests—always so many priests!—they were business people, or people in the law, or in medicine, well-heeled, watchful of their privileges, of their place in the city's society, such as it was. She had acknowledged to herself a long time ago that she was a little afraid of them, all of them, not just the frightening ones, like that fellow Costigan. They were not the sort she would have expected Mal or his father to have for friends. But then, was there any other sort, here? The world in which they moved was small. It was not her world. She was in it, but not of it, that was what she told herself. She must not let anyone else know what she was thinking. *Smile, she told herself, keep smiling!*

All at once she felt faint and had to stop for a moment, pressing her fingers down hard on the drinks table for support.

Mal, watching from across the room, saw that she was having what Maggie the maid called, not without a touch of contempt, *one of her turns*. He felt a rush of something resembling grief, as if her unhappiness were an illness, one that would—he flinched to think it—kill her. He bowed his head and closed his eyes briefly, savouring for a moment the restful dark, then opened them again and turned to his father with an effort. 'I haven't congratulated you,' he said. 'It's a great thing, a papal knighthood.'

The Judge, fiddling with his tobacco pipe, snorted. 'You think so?' he said, with scornful incredulousness, then shrugged. 'Well, I suppose I have done the Church some service.'

They were silent, each wishing to move away from the other but neither knowing how to manage it. Sarah, recovered, turned from the table and approached them, smiling tensely. 'You two are looking very solemn,' she said.

'I was congratulating him—' Mal began, but his father interrupted him with angry dismissiveness:

'Arrah, he was trying to flatter me!'

There was another awkward silence. Sarah could think of nothing to say. Mal cleared his throat. 'Excuse me,' he murmured, and walked softly away.

Benjamin Black, Christine Falls (2006)