



Deals

His real name was Dominic Develin. He was so Irish he bled green, he told me the first time we met. That was when we were six. We had our first fight that day. Prove it, I said to him. You're a liar. Show me your blood. We were face to face on the school field. Chest to chest. Toe to toe. Our noses would have touched if we'd stood any closer together, but I was such a snotty child, I don't really blame him for not getting any closer.

'Right then, I will.'

He looked around for something to do it with. To open his arm and spill his Irish blood on the floor to prove to me it was emerald. Twigs from the tree were too knobbly and blunt. Stones too rounded. There was a shard of broken bottle glass embedded in the mud, so we crouched down, heads close, to try and dig it out.

We were still digging when the bell went and we still hadn't settled anything. We heard the teacher on duty calling our names across the playground and our eyes met. Dev looked like a dog I'd once seen on the street. Amber eyed. Cowed.

I snatched his arm and raked my nails across the underside of his wrist before he realised what I was planning. He squealed like a rabbit in the night but he did not snatch his hand back. We both stared in fascination at the streaks of white skin reaching for his palm. They were raised above his dirty tan like bleached straws

with a thin line at the centre. Neither of us realised the teacher had come to find us until we were both hoiked by the scruffs into the air.

I reached for his arm even as we were dragged apart.

'Filthy children! Filthy, dirty children, scrabbling about in the mud! You'll get lock-jaw!'

His amber eyes reached for me in amazement. The drips of blood welling to the surface and streaking his arm as they over-ran the scratches were as red as his cheeks. I commiserated with him with a look. Bright tears filled his eyes and they stung me more than the cane I got across my hand in the headmaster's office. I felt as hollow as my victory and he didn't speak to me until we were at least eight. That's when he kissed me for the first time. The second time was three minutes ago.

I can't say I made a big fuss about knowing Dominic Devlin. I mean, a lot of girls at college think he's gorgeous. They love the black curls that start to grow out of his crew cut. They love his milky skin and coal eyelashes. Most of all thought, they love his pale, pale eyes and his silver Irish tongue. Oh, I know it's a cliché. I know the Irish aren't really blessed with the gift of the gab any more than they bleed green when you slash them with your nails.

The girlies in the drama club like to believe it though. They like to listen to him weave his tales in the canteen and they feel special when he catches their eye and give them one of his patented leprechaun winks. He's about as Irish as I am, if truth be told. It was his grandma who had the Irish accent. Who had her front window smashed once a year every year, for putting an orange lily in the window because she lived on a Catholic street in Manchester.

The first kiss was mainly due to an argument. He claimed that kissing made you live longer, so was grabbing every girl in the playground to prove it. I'm not entirely sure what his scientific criteria were, but I tell you, I did not like being kissed in public, experiment or not. I managed to lay him out flat that time. They pulled me off him eventually, but it took a trip to casualty to put his eye right. I often wondered over the years if he remembered the last two times our lives collided. But tonight, he was certainly not being scientific. You see, tonight, Dominic Develin decided to do a deal with the devil.

He's kept out of my way over the years. You can probably imagine why. About thirty of us from college were out at the clough, celebrating. Leaving college for good. A level results. Moving away from home. We were just being silly. Messing around on waste ground, with candles and bonfires. Saying silly goodbyes to each other and making empty promises about the future. Someone had marshmallows on sticks, someone else had brought a bottle of cheap vodka. There was quite a lot of laughing and pushing and a fair amount of not-so clandestine snogging.

Fed up with the general stupidity and feeling bored, I ended up wandering away from the crowd. He was sitting on his own, cross legged, eyes closed. Unusually, there were no dramarites following his every move. He was alone, lost in thought, harmless. His hair was longer than usual, corkscrewing over his collar. It shone like a healthy pelt in the firelight.

'You can come and sit with me, you know, I won't bite.'

He hadn't even turned his head. I sat down, thinking he had no clear idea who I was. He probably didn't care, anyway. Anyone would do as long as they sat quietly and listened to him.

'You never have liked me, have you?'

At first I thought I'd misheard him. Everyone was still laughing and messing about. It was like we were in some kind of bubble.

'Right from the start, you just decided I was beneath you.'

He sat very still. My arms had started to fur up with goose bumps, but I didn't seem able to just get up and walk away. I wanted to disagree with him, but I didn't really know how. I hadn't wanted to make him feel bad, that day by the oak tree. I hadn't even really objected to him kissing me when we were eight, if I'm totally honest. The main objection I had was that I was about the tenth or eleventh girl he approached. I didn't like the idea of all that girl spit all over his lips. That was what made me so mad. He hadn't chosen me first.

'Well, I've done a deal. I've sold my soul for you, Roberta Johnson. You belong to me forever now.'

He turned towards me, very slowly and in the flickering light, his golden, goat eyes observed me with interest.

'See, here is my mark...' He showed me a scar on his wrist, three tiny pale lines reaching up his arm like tributaries in a secret river. 'The devil always leaves a mark.'

I let him smother me in his words, let them drip all over me. I certainly had left my mark on him, hadn't I? Even though I thought he'd never remembered me.

'And what did you offer the devil in return for me?'

He smiled, slowly. His teeth seemed sharper in the reflection of the dancing flames, but maybe that was just his usual spell, spinning its web all over me.

'Oh the usual,' he slid towards me on the dry grass. His jeans made a slithery, crackling sound, like flames leaping across tree tops in the wind. 'The soul of our first born child. That sort of thing.'

His lips were warm and dry this time. I let him close his arms around me and his upraised leg supported my back.

'Ah, but there won't be a first born child,' I told him, as we examined each other's flickering features. 'Not with me, anyway. I don't want kids.'

He tipped his head to one side, thoughtful. 'I'll just have to see what else I have to offer then, won't I?'

I nodded, pulling him closer so that I could lay my head on his shoulder. I felt his pulse against my temple, the warmth beneath his skin, the not-green blood thumping in his veins. His soul was probably safe. It was his heart that was probably in danger and he'd probably already lost his senses, trying to make a deal with anyone or anything with me as the prize. I tasted salt on my lips from the hollow of his neck and I closed my eyes in bliss.

I'd waited a long time for this. I stroked the inside of his arm gently, my fingers trying to apologise for the damage I'd inflicted on him all those years ago, in the name of curiosity. The air stirred over my left shoulder and a breath of smoke from the bonfire prickled my nostrils. Sharp, acrid, sulphurous smoke. Feeling my momentary panic, Dominic clutched me tighter.

'It's alright,' I whispered. 'Someone just walked over my grave, that's all. nothing at all to worry about.'

Nothing of any significance at all.