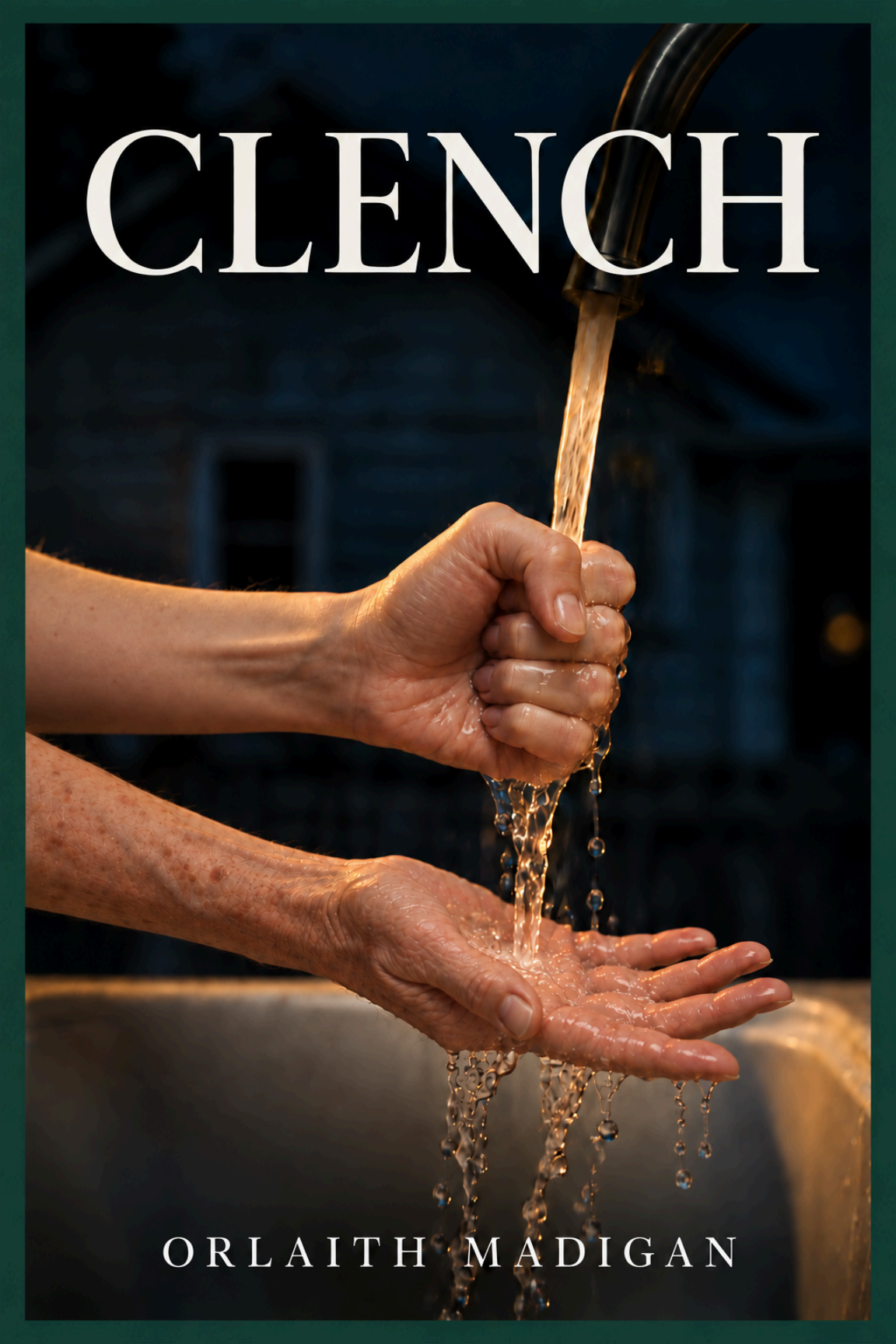


CLENCH

A close-up photograph of a person's hands being washed under a running faucet. The water is clear and flowing, creating a dynamic scene with splashing droplets. The person's skin is fair and shows some signs of aging, with visible veins and freckles. The background is dark and out of focus, suggesting an indoor setting like a kitchen or bathroom. The overall mood is one of cleanliness and care.

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Book One: SPOIL
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Part I



Chapter One

Alec was close enough for Emer to feel the warmth of his mouth. She moved towards it, touching his cheek to bring him back when he turned slightly away.

He came willingly. Beneath her fingers was the roughness of his chin, and she wanted the weight of his mouth, the small adjustment before a kiss became something she could answer.

Her teeth met.

She tried to part them. The muscles beside her ears tightened, drawing the lower jaw up while her lips moved over the closed teeth. Alec waited. His breath reached the damp inside edge of her lip.

She tried again. Pain ran into her ears.

He began to draw back. She followed, her hand slipping from his cheek to his shoulder as she tried to make the movement work. She meant to say his name. Her tongue pressed against her teeth, too large now to find a space.

He was still there. She could see him. She could not tell him to wait.

* * *

Emer woke with her face pressed into the pillow.

When she lifted her head her teeth were still together. Easing them apart brought a dull pull below the left ear, and she touched the damp patch the pillowcase had left on her cheek.

A narrow line of streetlight showed beneath the curtain. She sat up in the dark and reached for the glass on the bedside table. She drank, then swallowed again after the glass was empty.

Her phone showed ten past six on the second Saturday of January. Alec's message from the evening before was still on the screen.

Would half ten suit? Just the brace and bits. I won't need long.

She had answered that it would.

Emer put the phone down and drew the duvet over her shoulder. On the other side of the bed it lay flat. The warmth in the dream had been precise enough for her to place it beside her mouth even now.

She lay there until a car door closed in the street. Then she got up.

Downstairs, she switched on the kitchen light. The bread she had bought on Thursday had hardened at the cut end. She sliced past it and put the next piece in the toaster. While it browned, she took her laptop from her satchel.

She opened the lecture slides for Monday at an image of adjoining cells. The boundary she wanted to show was faint. The students needed to see where to look before she told them what they were looking at.

The toast came up. She buttered it and cut it in half, but chewing the first corner brought back the ache beneath her ear. She left the rest on the plate.

At seven she saved the file.

The kitchen was cold beyond the range. Emer went upstairs to shower, passing the chest on the landing. She left the bedroom door open and stood beneath the water until she was warm through. While washing her face she touched the place beside her ear. The ache had lessened.

She sat on the bed to pull on her tights. In the weeks since Alec left she had seen him twice, both times with a bag ready beside the front door. This morning the tool was still in the drawing cabinet.

In front of the wardrobe she held a blue jumper against her blouse before putting it back for the grey one she had worn on Thursday. A small mark remained near the cuff. She rubbed it with the damp end of the towel, making a darker patch around it.

At ten she went into the study.

The brace lay in the lower drawer with the hammers and the narrow chisel. She recognised the bent steel handle before she recognised the tool. Alec had called it a brace in his message, and she had pictured the case of bits on the shelf above it.

The wooden grip turned beneath her fingers as she lifted the brace onto the desk. In the case above it the shaped metal ends lay in their separate places, with one space empty.

A loose bit lay behind the small hammer. She tried it in the empty space, but it rested too high for the lid to close. She left the case open.

She brought the laptop from the kitchen and made room for it beside the tool. From the study she would hear the bell. She sat down and reopened the lecture.

When Alec rang, she was tracing the wrong boundary with the cursor.

At the front door he stood with a canvas bag folded under one arm, rain settled on the shoulders of his coat. His hair was shorter at the sides.

“You found it?”

“It’s in the study.”

He came in and wiped his shoes. Emer stepped back farther than the hall required. He took off his gloves, pushed one inside the other and put them in his coat pocket.

"It's turned cold," he said. "It was milder when I left."

He looked at the wet patch on his sleeve.

"Do you want to hang that up?"

"I'll only be a minute."

He followed her into the study. At the desk he unfolded the bag and laid it over the chair back.

"I couldn't close the case," she said.

He lifted out the loose bit. It belonged to another set. The one that fitted the space had broken years ago.

"I meant to replace it," he said.

He put the loose bit back in the drawer. The case closed beneath his palm. He tried its catch once, then slid it into the bag.

Emer stood beside the door. When he bent over the desk his scarf loosened, showing the skin beneath his ear and a short dark hair caught against the wool. She wanted him to remove the scarf.

"Have you got something to wrap this in?" he asked.

In the kitchen she took a clean tea towel from the drawer, held it a moment, then put it back. She brought him the one from the oven handle.

Alec had moved the laptop farther onto the desk to make room for the bag.

She gave him the towel. He wrapped the steel end and lowered the brace into the bag. Its handle stood above the top.

He said he would bring the towel back. Emer told him there was no hurry.

He looked into the open drawer again. Emer waited for him to take the chisel, but he was reaching for the larger hammer.

"Can I take this as well?"

"Take what you need."

"You'll have the small one," he said.

"I know."

He held the hammer for a moment before putting it in the bag. The head struck the case through the towel. He shifted it to the other side.

Emer heard herself asking if he wanted tea.

"I can't this morning. I'm meeting someone at the yard."

"You said you wouldn't need long."

"I can stay for a few minutes, if there's something."

She looked at the laptop. The image on the screen had dimmed.

"No. I thought I'd offer."

"Thank you."

When he rubbed rain from his forehead with the heel of his hand, she saw a red mark above his eyebrow. She did not ask about it. She moved past him to wake the screen.

For a moment they stood beside each other at the desk, his coat smelling of damp wool. She kept her hand on the mouse while he leaned closer, the sleeve almost touching her wrist, and lost the cursor against the pale background.

"Is that new work?" he asked.

"Teaching. Monday."

He leaned a little nearer the screen. She found the cursor and held it still.

"What's the blue?"

"The nuclei."

"Right." He straightened. "I've asked you that before."

"It's a different stain in this one."

He looked again, long enough for her to turn towards him. His eyes stayed on the image; below the angle of his jaw was a small patch he had missed while shaving.

The phone rang in the kitchen.

"I should go," he said.

He picked up the bag. Emer followed him to the hall while the phone continued. She knew from the number of rings that her mother would let it run to the end.

Alec put on his gloves. The left one caught at a finger. He pulled it off and shook it once.

"Your mother?"

"Still objecting to the shoes."

"You can answer it." He nodded towards the kitchen. "I'll let myself out."

"She'll ring the mobile."

The phone stopped. He finished pulling on the glove.

"Are you going over?" he asked.

"Later."

"Give her my love."

Emer opened the door. He lifted the bag clear of the step. Rain blew under the porch and touched her face.

"Thank you for these," he said.

She nodded. He went down to the gate, holding the bag away from his leg. At the pavement he stopped to let a woman with a buggy pass. Then he turned out of sight.

Emer closed the door. She stood with her hand beneath the latch.

Her mobile began to ring in the study.

She went to it and answered.

"I rang the house," Maeve said.

"I heard it. Alec was here."

"Oh. Is he still?"

"He's gone."

"You could have put him on for a minute."

Emer sat in the desk chair. The drawer was still open beneath her knee.

"He sends his love."

"Did he get the things?"

"Some of them."

"I told him I'd look for your father's bits. He might be able to use them. They're in the press with the paint, unless you moved them."

Emer told her she had left them where they were. Maeve began to describe a box with a torn corner. Halfway through, Emer recognised the biscuit tin in the understairs press and said so.

"That's the one. I knew you'd know it."

Something rattled against the phone. Maeve apologised to someone away from it. Eileen was there, reminding her where she had put a glass.

"What did you need?" Emer asked.

"Those shoes. Have you still got the receipt?"

When Emer said that she had, Maeve wanted to know when they were going to use it.

"It ought to be today. They'll have nothing left after the sales."

Emer looked at the laptop clock. It was not yet eleven.

"I said I'd come at three."

"I thought you could come now. We could have it done before lunch."

"I'm working."

"On a Saturday?"

"For Monday."

"Well, surely you can leave it for an hour."

The shoe bag had been beneath the kitchen table since Wednesday, when Emer brought the shoes home to return them. Maeve rang the next morning to say she wanted to choose the replacement herself. Emer had since caught her foot twice in the handle.

"Eileen's here," Maeve said. "She could help me with the coat."

"Has she got time?"

"She will have by the time you get here."

Emer could hear water running. Then Eileen's voice, closer to the phone. She had another visit at half eleven.

"It would only take a moment," Maeve told her.

"Mam. I'm coming at three. You can have lunch first."

Maeve drew breath close to the receiver. Emer pressed her foot against the underside of the desk, thinking of the slides waiting until that evening and whatever time remained after Sandymount. She had enough done to teach from them as they were.

"If the shop is full, I won't be able to stand about," Maeve said.

"We'll ask for a seat."

"They have those little stools. You can't get up from them."

Emer turned her chair. The low drawer touched her shin.

"Then we can leave. We can try somewhere else."

"And do the whole thing again?"

"We don't have to buy a pair today."

Maeve was quiet. In the kitchen, Eileen turned off the tap.

"I want to try the ones with the strap," Maeve said. "You were too quick to dismiss those."

"I thought they'd be difficult to fasten."

"I can fasten a shoe."

"You can try them."

"There were brown ones in the window. Quite a nice brown. The blue you bought goes with very little."

The colour was nearer black. Emer did not correct her. She had chosen them for their soft uppers and the absence of a buckle.

"We'll look at the brown ones."

"Bring the receipt. And the box, if you kept it. They can be difficult about the box."

Emer told her that she had kept everything. Maeve asked again what time she would arrive, and Emer said three. This time Maeve repeated the hour to Eileen.

After the call, Emer stayed in the chair with her shin aching where the drawer had rested against it. She pushed it closed with her foot and rolled back to the desk.

She went back to the lecture and worked until her stomach made a small sound. She had eaten only the corner of the toast.

In the kitchen she threw the rest away and cut a fresh slice. While it toasted she checked the shoe box. Both shoes were inside, wrapped in the paper Maeve had folded around them. The receipt was beneath the lid.

She took it out. There was time to eat and finish the slides before three. At Sandymount she would still have to wait while her mother changed, even if Maeve was already wearing the coat.

Emer reached for her phone to tell her to be ready. She put it down before unlocking it.

The toast came up. She buttered it and ate standing at the table. This time she finished the slice. A smear of butter remained on her thumb, and she wiped it on the cloth beside the sink.

The rain had eased. Emer put the plate in the sink and picked up the receipt. She put it in her coat pocket.