

HUNGRY FOR LIFE

By

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Chapter 1

For the first time since the fever took his darling young wife ten years ago, Joseph McLaughlin was glad she was dead. The unseasonably cold, August Sunday would have been Carmel's thirty-third birthday but as Joseph placed a posy of ox-eye daisies on her grave, he thanked the Lord the mother of his three children had not lived to see it. At least she had been spared from knowing what was to become of the family she'd loved so dearly. He turned away from her hillside grave, angry, ashamed. Tears stung his weather-beaten cheeks.

He looked down the rocky hillside towards the cabin where his eldest daughter Kit hunched over a long-handled hoe, nurturing row upon row of prime potato plants. Kit paused, stood tall and stretched her back, aching as it did from tending to her family's life-blood. Even from where he stood, it was plain to Joseph that the slip of a girl who'd loved nothing more than to sit on her daddy's knee was now blossoming into a handsome young woman. Yet her spirit was as strong as any lad's and on more than one occasion she'd humiliated her boisterous cousins with her determination.

Joseph couldn't take his eyes off Kit as she ran her hands proudly through the foliage of the potato plants that stood tall and promising, reluctantly bowing to the chilly wind. It seemed to her only weeks ago that the shoots burst through from beneath the soil like small, pale green stars. Now, luxuriant deep green leaves crowned the buxom lumpers strung together beneath the soil, the potatoes that would sustain her family through the winter months to come. But Joseph knew it was a sham. It was all just a matter of time.

He had noticed it yesterday, the first sign that this was another fruitless harvest in the making. A froth of white, just a tiny spec on one or two leaves, but that was enough to herald the danger. Then this morning, as he stooped at the edge of the lazy beds to collect a posy of wild flowers for Carmel's grave, he knew he'd been right. There it was, right before his eyes and a day that should have dawned with quiet reflection was now full of foreboding.

To the naked eye, it looked no more threatening than a drop of cuckoo spit, but Joseph knew better. He had seen it before, too many times. Within days this foamy, white curse would turn his entire potato crop into a putrefying mess. It would stride a rampant path through the neighboring farms and villages too quickly to save any of the crops. The salvation that lay beneath the soil would be gone; earth's larder – and Ireland's bellies - would be empty once again.

Joseph shook his head and began the slow walk back to the cabin. His feet grew

as heavy as his heart as the cloying mud clung to his worn out boots. He looked far older than his thirty-seven years, though there was still scarcely a speck of grey in his dark, thick hair. His lined face was made rugged by the Irish weather and Irish worries. Now, there would be more difficult decisions to be made and they had to be taken soon. He had been making plans since the partial crop failures of the previous year. Desperate plans he hoped would never have to be put in place. Now the blight had returned, what had seemed an unthinkable choice appeared to be the one, single alternative to watching his family die slowly before his own eyes.

'Daddy – look! See how well they're growing,' called Kit.

As her father scrambled down the hillside, she scraped back the sticky wet soil to proudly reveal the small tubers she'd been nurturing. But Joseph's expression was impassive as he carried on walking, the sickening knot in his gut tightening with every step.

Kit shrugged, put his sadness down to the melancholy anniversary and, tucking an errant curl back under her plain blue cap, she returned to her chores. Her family had so much to be thankful for, she considered, and much to look forward to. Hard though it was, this was the only life she had ever known, Ballygall the only place she'd ever been. Yet still she knew this was all she wanted. The hills may be stony and the soil heavy, but it was her home. She knew every hillock, every valley, and every soul who drew breath here in the heart of the Irish countryside. Equal distance from the two seas she had never seen, generations of the McLaughlin family had lived and farmed this same valley for more than a century, and to a man – and woman - the intention was to continue.

Joseph had decided it would serve no purpose to tell his family now: there was nothing to be done. The blight would already be coursing through the plants and within days the stink of a thousand rotting suppers would fill the air. Last year, they had tried so hard - oh, Lord how they had tried. Thankfully they had already harvested and stored their first, smaller crop before the blight struck. But the large horse potatoes that would provide the bulk of their winter diet, had failed disastrously. Frantic to save something, anything, they had tried every method known to Irish peasant farmers from previous failures. They had clamped half in a pit, salted some and stored others side by side in the cabin, fastidiously ensuring none were touching. Kit and her sister Maeve had peeled frantically until their slender fingers were sore, cutting away the infected parts and cooking what was left of the white, moist potatoes. But nothing had worked and they were left with the stink of despair and empty bellies.

No, he would let them enjoy their ignorance for a few more days, they were after all, little more than children. Kit was barely fifteen, just a year older than her sister Maeve. Then after years of stillborn disappointments, Eugene had been born as his mother died. Now, he had just seen out his first decade and his father could

only pray it wouldn't be his last.

As Joseph walked past the lean-to that had once been his forge, he recalled how good things used to be. He loved the trade he'd learned from his father; the smell of singeing hooves as the metal shoes were hammered home, the sound of the bellows bolstering the fire. The memories loomed large every time he looked at the now desolate forge where all that remained were a handful of tools and the old anvil that had belonged to his father and his father's father before him. Most of the trappings of his trade had been sold, the remainder lodged in the cabin for safekeeping or hard-times. Few people in these parts had horses now, let alone money to shoe them. Few people were ploughing or harrowing, or taking their produce to market by horse and cart. His one remaining customer was Lord Edgerley, his own landlord, but the master's horses were turned away without shoes in summer, left to graze at Coralee Castle with the faint possibility they might hunt that winter, though it would be the first season for three years if they did. So with no money from his trade as a farrier, and no income from his own small conacre tenants, the pittance from his corn crop and one undernourished pig had been all that kept their heads above the ever-beckoning waters of disgrace and starvation.

Eugene's dog Tori had scampered back to the cabin ahead of Joseph and now lay panting in a heap by the door. Joseph walked past the bitch without a second glance and headed inside into the dingy cabin. In the smoke-filled darkness Maeve sat beneath the only window, busily sewing neat patches onto Eugene's worn smock. Her slim legs were crossed tidily at the ankles as she rocked the chair gently back and forth. Joseph could not look at her without thinking of his wife, so strong was the resemblance. She was less of a tomboy than her sister and whilst not as sturdy, her character was as strong as anyone he'd ever met, with the same grit and tenacity he had found so attractive in Carmel. She had an understated composure that seemed it should belong to one far older than her tender years. But when Maeve set her mind to something, there was no shifting her. She had made her mind up at an early age that her role was to keep her family together, her father content and she had most certainly succeeded in doing just that.

Ten long years, he thought to himself, since he'd lost her. And yet it seemed like only yesterday that the beautiful fifteen-year old Carmel Kennedy had agreed to be his wife. The raven-haired lovely, whose kindness was as renowned as her beauty, had made him the happiest, most blessed man in Ireland. How could he ever leave this place? A place that had been shaped by generations of McLaughlins but more particularly, by Carmel's own hand. How he missed her gentle touch, her love. Still in his prime, Joseph's needs were few, but they needed satisfying. His family was all he had to turn to.

The wider McLaughlin family all lived in this same part of Ireland – his brothers, their wives and their children within a mile or so, and a dozen or more uncles,

cousins and friends just a little further afield. With a fortnightly market just four miles away, they had no need or inclination to venture further than their own valley. Only in times of great hardship had the men folk undertaken a journey out of this, their own domain, in the desperate pursuit of work or food. Joseph had himself experienced the trauma of leaving his home for foreign lands when he'd worked the English harvest as a young man. He'd vowed never again to leave his farm and his family.

Maeve looked up at her father as he stood stone still. Her dark hair was swept back and braided into an iridescent cluster that tumbled onto the embroidered cushion behind her shoulders. The simple cushion had been the last thing her mother had made before she died and was Maeve's pride and joy. She looked up at her father and frowned:

'You look so cold,' she said. 'Here, come and sit a while. I'll put a little more peat on the fire.'

Joseph held back his tears as he looked at his daughter. She was a beauty; pale skin, fine bones and a sparkle to her deep green eyes that could set a man's pulse racing.

'Don't fuss. I'll be staying no more than a minute or two. I have things to do, business to be seen to.'

'Are you going to buy the autumn seed?' She asked, still sewing, rocking.

'No it's not the seed I'm going for - even if I could afford it. There's talk of oats making more than a shilling a stone - can you believe that? This harvest will provide us with enough to pay rent, but little more to spare; certainly not enough to keep us through until summer.'

She reached out to her father and squeezed his cold hand.

'Don't be worrying too much, Kit has told me how big the potatoes are growing. There's sure to be a little corn left over - and the turnips are coming through now.'

Maeve's words fell on deaf ears.

'We'll be fine, sure we will.' She reassured him. 'Please, sit with me a while before you go to... Where did you say you were going?'

'I'm calling on the master's agent.'

Maeve put down her sewing and began to stand.

‘Oh, shall I come with you? I would so love to see Lady-’

‘No. Not today.’

‘But Lady Edgerley said-’

‘I said not today.’ His voice was harsh, his face set. ‘I’m going on to meet with the Flynns and the O’Dohertys after, so I’ll be gone for some while. You have things to tend to.’

‘Of course...’ Maeve knew her place and it was not to argue. ‘Please, take a small piece of the dried pig belly we have left for the O’Doherty’s little ones. I’ll fetch some now. Their little Sean must be almost a full year old.’

Maeve wrapped the fatty strip of meat and some meal in a cloth, tied it tightly and placed the little parcel in her father’s strong hands. She kissed him just above the bridge of his nose. Joseph knew the O’Doherty baby would be fortunate to see his second birthday and his siblings were scarcely stronger, but he couldn’t bring himself to tell his daughter that the pork would be wasted on them.

‘They’ll be so pleased to see you, wont they just.’

‘I hope they will - truly, I do.’

Maeve looked at her father and considered his despondency. If it was the memory of her mother haunting him, he was not alone. They all missed her, but despite the loss, they were a happy, complete family – Maeve saw to that. Of course they all tired of the meager portions they had to put up with at dinner but that was just until the harvest was in, she reasoned, and was no different to any other year. She knew her father had a whole range of skills and knowledge about farming. The potato was truly the only substantial crop the poorest Irish farmers could afford to grow in any quantity, but the additional crops Joseph had planted last year had been their salvation. Somehow, they had managed to live comfortably enough with the occasional wild fowl for the pot. All manner of wildlife seemed to be attracted by the variety of vegetation on their holding, and Joseph had taught Kit and Eugene the tricks of trapping and sling shotting.

And yes, Maeve considered, she too had developed skills and was accomplished now in virtually all of the duties required of the woman of the house. Whilst most of the families she knew existed on a diet of potatoes and buttermilk, she could stew or roast dishes with tantalising aromas. Theirs was a home of a reasonable size with a proper door as well as a real window and she took great pride in keeping it clean and orderly. One of her very own drawings was affixed to one wall and against another stood a dresser with four plates and four beakers on the shelves. This piece of furniture had enjoyed pride of place in the household since

her mother's family had provided it as a dowry. They also had three wooden beds, each with six slats a-piece and a mattress stuffed with dry straw. Kit and Maeve generally shared the largest bed, the one that their mother had died in.

As Maeve watched Joseph disappear over the hillside, another small figure drew closer. She smiled. It was Ruarie O'Connor, son of Martin and Esme O'Connor. She'd recognize that walk anywhere. This was the young man who could make her cheeks flush pink just by smiling at her. More or less since their children had been born, the McLaughlins and O'Connors would make the journey to one another's home to share food and gossip, chatter about the harvests, while the children played together. Though Kit and Ruarie were the boisterous players, it was Maeve who Ruarie would sit with while they ate or assuaged their thirsts. Even as a child, Maeve knew there was something very special about what she felt for Ruarie and she was sure he shared that feeling.

She turned back indoors to take off her apron and tidy her hair, just in case he should come into the cabin to pass the time of day, as she dearly hoped he would. But instead, Ruarie stopped as he reached the spot where Kit was still hard at work. Maeve watched curiously as the two began to chatter. He was tall now, a strong lad both physically, and by nature. His hair was the same rosy blonde as Kit's but, unlike hers, was straight as a poker. Maeve squinted, trying to see why he was lingering by Kit for so long. She watched as Kit looked up and her face broke into a wide, infectious smile. But Maeve's face was somber. As Kit pulled off the damp cap and shook her head about until the curls bounced around her shoulders, Maeve turned to focus on Ruarie. Even from this distance, she could see that the lad loved Kit's hair. And all at once the daunting realization hit her that in fact, he loved everything about her sister.

'Good day.' Said Ruarie, in a perky voice.

'Oh, good day to *you*, Ruarie. I didn't hear you arrive - are you on your way to the O'Regans?'

'No, Kit, I came to see you... to see how you are... and such things as that.'

'Well thank you Ruarie, I'm very, very well. Look!' Kit pointed to the rows of potatoes. 'They will be ready for earthing up very soon now - the turnips and our corn are looking fine and healthy too.'

'I'm glad, Kit, really I am. Our potatoes are looking grand as well. And not before time! We've just about finished the last of the oatmeal - not that it would be a sadness to me right now if I never saw another bowl of that gruel again.' He smiled at Kit and patted his belly. 'I can't wait for the taste of the lumpers - that sweet fodder drives away the summer hunger like nothing else.'

Ruarie looked Kit squarely in the eyes, and considered what an important part she already played in his life; whatever he was doing, she was there. As he sieved the dark soil he saw Kit's face in the sharp flints and stones he removed. He heard her voice as he spread his homemade nets across the narrow brook, its clear, cold waters tumbling and rolling on their way down the hills to the valleys beyond. He felt her touch when the sun warmed his face as he gathered berries and nuts from the hedgerows. His heart told him now was the time to make Kit aware of these feelings, to see if they were reciprocated.

She had returned to the rhythmic hoeing of the soil, occasionally tossing a small stone or rock on to a heap that had been growing steadily all morning.

'Kit. There's something...'

'Yes?' She replied, her eyes fixed to the ground.

'Kit, will you listen please.'

'Oh, I am Ruarie, I am listening.'

She leaned on the hoe, her face perched on her hands, and stared at him in feigned concentration. Ruarie took her grubby, worn hands in his.

'I'm thinking I might be speaking with your daddy about an important matter - very soon.'

'And what might that matter be?'

He squeezed her hands gently as he thought about his answer. Was Kit really being naïve or was she teasing him?

'That's for your daddy and I to know. But would you be happy for me to be talking with him about... Whatever it is I am going to talk with him about?'

She shook her head and laughed as she took hold of the hoe once more, returning to the soil and the job in hand.

'Ruarie that is the most silly question I've heard all year. How can I be minding when I don't know what you're talking of, you silly boy?'

There was a silent pause before Ruarie spoke again, this time with a mature tone to his voice.

'I'm no boy, Kit. My daddy was married when he was my age.'

He looked straight into Kit's sparkling, blue-grey eyes. She returned the stare and

all at once she realised what his words meant.

‘Oh... well, no, Ruarie.’

‘Is that no, you don’t want to me speak with him, or no you don’t mind. Kit?’

Her neck suddenly felt hot and for once she found herself stumbling for words.

‘I don’t suppose I’d mind at all if you were to talk to my daddy about - anything.’

Ruarie leaned towards her and gently took her shoulders in his trembling hands.

‘Dia is Muire duit.’ He said quietly as he kissed her forehead, then her pretty, upturned nose.

‘And may God and Mary bless you too, Ruarie.’

As Ruarie went on his way, Kit’s smiling eyes returned to peering amongst the potato plants with a new perspective. But the moment was lost almost immediately as she caught sight of the same, white froth that had made her father despair. It was the second time she’d spotted it that day and in an instant she knew it was the blight, the pestilence that would destroy everything in its path.

An equally aching void had opened up in Maeve. Whereas moments earlier there had been hope, now there was only disappointment. Seeing Kit and Ruarie together gnawed at her and snuffed out the commonly held belief that it was right and proper for an elder sister to find a husband first. If it had been anyone but Ruarie she would have been content to comply with family – Irish – tradition. She was well versed in coping with the harsh blows life could throw, but this? She walked back into the cabin, angry and betrayed. Scolded by her father, usurped by her sister - what was becoming of her family, her life?

Chapter 2

Eugene’s happy song was almost drowned out by his banging and Tori’s barking, but he didn’t care. He’d sat himself down on a mossy patch near his father’s anvil, his slim, short legs crossed and his back straight. He sang contentedly: he had a fine dog - even if she did bark a lot - and a fine family. And right now, he was very proud that if his handiwork were successful, he would also have made a perfectly serviceable scythe. He could then do real man’s work in the fields, with his daddy. Kit, he considered, would be free to help Maeve with the ‘women’s’ work’ around the home.

He took the sharp stone in his right hand and began to rain blows onto a twisted piece of metal. With a good many of their tools sold, swapped or broken, this was Eugene's chance to make a real difference to his family's fortunes and the very thought of it made him sing even louder. Moments later a second voice joined the chorus; it was Kit.

'I'm very pleased to see you keeping so busy, Geney.'

Kit caught Tori's head in her hands just in time to stop two large muddy paws landing on her smock. 'This dog of yours is still a pup though she's three years old if she's a day!'

Eugene's round face took on a serious frown beneath the thick black fringe. His grey-green eyes were far too beautiful for a boy, thought Kit.

'Oh don't scold her, Kit, she's just pleased to see you that's all. Look here, this stone would make a fine digging tool don't you think? And have you seen what I'm making - guess? Can you guess? It's a scythe!'

Kit smiled at his impatience and his enthusiasm.

'Well done, Eugene.'

Kit turned away and mumbled to herself: 'I hope we can use it.'

Eugene stopped what he was doing.

'What do you mean?'

He stared up at Kit, trying to make sense of the words that conjured up a sense of dread inside him.

'Don't you worry.' She reassured him. 'You just get on with that, you're doing a grand job.'

Kit had first seen the white froth as she weeded the north end of the beds near the thicket of beech trees, earlier that day. The rain had washed away all but a tiny spot of the sticky spume from the tallest plants, but it was there nonetheless. She'd reeled at the implications of the innocuous looking scum. She refused to believe it and kept it to herself, a horrible secret that she knew would not be denied for long.

Kit barged through the cabin door, rushing to get out of the chill, wet wind that for the third day was turning this into a bad summer even by Irish standards. Maeve turned away as her sister came towards her, taking her seat in a dark corner of the cabin. Kit managed a small smile for her father, but it was not returned.

‘Ah, well.’ She said, hanging her shawl near the fire. ‘At least the rain will swell the corn.’ Her tone was as cheery as she could muster. ‘If it doesn’t stop soon those potatoes will be swimming down the valley.’

Joseph’s voice came softly from the shadows where he sat on a three-legged stool and gazed into the smoky peat fire.

‘Have you seen the lazy beds, Kit? Smelt them?’

There was a lost look to his eyes. Even in the dim light, Kit could see the desolation on his face. A downdraft through the hole in the roof suddenly sent the smoke twisting back into the cabin. But her father’s bleak countenance was still visible through the shroud that filled the air. She turned to run out of the door again.

‘Kit, be still. Call your brother in. We have business to discuss, family business.’

Maeve was sitting quietly, pretending to read the fine bible given to her by Lady Edgerley. Kit spoke in little more than a whisper.

‘It’s going to be bad, then?’

‘Yes, it’s going to be very bad.’

Before she could go and fetch him, Eugene tumbled in through the door, tears welling in his eyes.

‘Is Kit right? Is it back; the pestilence?’

Kit leapt to her feet:

‘I said nothing that-’

‘Sit down, Kit, and you too Eugene, there’s a boy. Maeve, come closer so you can all hear what I have to say.’

Obediently, Maeve drew closer to the fire and her father. Eugene sat by her feet, poking the fire with an old piece of wood. The sense of solemnity was overwhelming as they sat in respectful silence waiting to learn what they must do to survive.

‘I must warn you now, we’ll likely have no potatoes this winter. None at all.’

Kit moved to speak, but without even turning to look at her, Joseph raised just one finger of his left hand; she immediately fell silent. The usual ruddy glow of his

lined, weather-beaten skin was now tinged with the pallor of two sleepless nights and woeful days. His dark, piercing eyes seemed more deeply set in his face, the corners of his mouth turned irrevocably down towards the soil that was betraying them once again.

‘We’re facing a famine.’

As the three siblings swallowed gasps, Joseph continued.

‘The new laws say no one with more than one quarter of an acre of land to work will be given a penny in aid. So we have to rely on our own selves – and it’s going to be a fearsome task.’

His voice was bitter. He drew a deep breath to calm himself, for his family’s sake.

‘This is no time for false hopes. I have to look at the reality of our situation and it’s not good. It certainly is not.’

Joseph also began to poke at the peat with a dry stick. Then, as he mustered the courage to speak again, he threw the stick on the fire and folded his arms firmly in front of him. Eugene grasped Tori by the scruff of her neck as she excitedly tried to dive after the stick.

‘As you all know, I’ve lately been to see Lord Edgerley’s agents, and I’ve also met with the O’Dohertys and the Flynns. Now, neither of the latter is able to pay me any rent for their conacres, nor do they have any hope of providing their families with food through the months ahead. There’s no work on the castle lands or elsewhere in the province. Neither Mr. Flynn nor Mr. O’Doherty made the journey to England to find work on the harvest there for fear of leaving their families starving at home; they have endured a summer of hunger already. And no one is expecting help from the Board of Works - even getting your name on the list to earn a few coppers is a costly business if it’s a dishonest agent.’

The silence was heavy as they all visualised the terrible days that lay ahead; but none of the young McLaughlin family could have imagined what the alternative could possibly be – or what it might bring.

‘To be blunt, we are facing yet another year of famine; as a family, a province – perhaps even as a nation. It bodes worse than we’ve ever seen before - ever.’

Again, Kit opened her mouth to speak, but quickly resumed her silent stance when she caught the angry glance her father flashed in her direction.

‘When I met with the master’s agent, I put a proposition to him that has just now been confirmed as acceptable to his Lordship. In return for my paying him just one quarter of the rent when we harvest the corn, and returning to him half of the

land we now farm - free of any tenants - Lord Edgerley will pay the passage for the O'Doherty and the Flynn families to emigrate to the new lands of America.'

There was not a single sound other than the crackling of the fire.

'One of you girls will travel to the Americas with the Flynns and the other one with the O'Dohertys. When you arrive you will each send a letter to Father O'Leary so he can tell me all is well and God willing, you will be able to find one another before too long. Eugene will remain with me to work the holding. This is how it will be, and how it must stay until it is sensible for you to return to us here - if you choose to do so. It is the only chance of survival, for all of us.'

Kit broke the stunned silence, her face white, her voice stumbling, almost incoherent.

'You're making us leave... And for you...' Mumbled Kit. 'You'll face the hanging gale if you don't pay the rent in full. Daddy, you could lose everything if we go and-'

'And I'll lose everything if you stay, everything including my little girls. Somehow, we'll get through these times, Eugene and me, but I cannot feed you all. You have to go away, girls, just for a time - there's no choice.'

Kit could not believe her father had tossed aside two of his most dearly held principles. He was going to do the unthinkable - not pay his rent and have the debt hanging over him until the next harvest, like a hangman's noose. But worse still, was the final part of his proposition. He was advocating a division in the family - one that would see them saying goodbye, possibly forever, to the lands they loved so well.

'Why don't we all go together and make a fresh start - as a family. Daddy, I can't bear to think...'

'Kit, it's been the hardest thing for me to contemplate, for sure. I can hardly bear the thought of you girls being apart from me. But I cannot leave your mother here, alone. You'll be with good people and if we can hold this little piece of Ballygall together just until things get ...'

Close to breaking down, Joseph just caught himself; he knew there would be no crawling back if he gave into the emotions that now beckoned him.

'You and Maeve will come back bringing with you all the wisdom and knowledge you've gathered from your travels. We'll be as one again, all of us. But for now...'

Like her siblings, the look of devastation on Maeve's face was plain and she

could no longer hold back her tears. In just one day she had been betrayed first by her sister, and now her father.

'I won't leave you and Geney. You might die. How can you be so cruel?'

'I don't want to do this - I'm trying to save our family. If there are just the two of us, well then maybe we have a chance of making it through.... two mouths instead of four.'

'Yes, but two pairs of hands instead of three.' Kit pleaded.

'Four!' Exclaimed Maeve, angrily. 'Four pairs of hands. And who will look after you both? Who'll care for you, tend to your every need? I cannot believe you're sending me away. I cannot believe you can do it.'

'Maeve, sometimes the best decisions are the hardest. Do you think I relish the thought of my girls leaving for a strange land without me to watch out for them? Do you think we won't miss you, long for your loving touches and your beautiful faces in what will be the darkest of times? But I cannot bear the thought of watching you all starve, slowly and surely, to death. And I cannot leave these lands, with your mother out there, cold and alone. I have no choice.'

Joseph checked his emotions once again.

'And neither do you. Maeve, I suggest you should go with the Flynns as they have no children. If you travel with the O'Dohertys and their four little ones you'll run yourself ragged and probably die of exhaustion. You will leave for the Americas from Liverpool in England, as Mr. Flynn has a need to visit his brother who has been working the harvest there. Kit, you will be leaving with the O'Dohertys from Killala in County Mayo. Your journeys begin in three days.'

'So soon? Oh no, please don't make it so soon.' Cried Eugene. 'I won't be used to the thought of being without my sisters by then. It's too cruel, daddy, too cruel.'

As the tears coursed down Eugene's face, his father drew him near and sat him on his knee.

'It has to be now. The weather is already poor for this time of year, but it's nothing compared to the storms and gales that will soon descend upon the seas. I have no wish to see these journeys made any harder than they are already destined to be. No, the time to be doing this is now. We have found ourselves a generous landlord who is helping to resettle you girls in a more promising world. If you do not leave within days, you will have to wait until next spring and that would be to wait too long. Now, go and make ready for what lies ahead. Tomorrow we will invite your cousins and their families to sing and dance with us one more time. It will be a night for us all to remember.'

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It would take very little time for the girls to prepare the few possessions they were to take with them on a trip neither wanted to make. They agreed not to tell even their closest family what lay ahead for them, and for Ireland; to spread the word was to spread panic - and what good would that do? Joseph would tell the family once the girls had left if the blight hadn't already told its own story.

That evening, a welcome break in the cold rain prompted an early start to the ceilidh. Kit and Maeve had nineteen cousins, and the twelve who lived nearby all joined in the gathering along with their parents and their remaining grandmother. Maeve had prepared a tasty broth and mealy biscuits, whilst Joseph had secured a few nips of Finbarr Keating's poteen. As was Kit's way, she joined in as best she could - she chatted, danced and even sung a little, free for a few brief minutes from the burden she knew she would soon have to face, alone. But Maeve was quiet, and - though Kit could not understand why - seemed indisposed towards her. But she put it down to the terrifying wrench they were about to face.

As John Scully played tune after tune on his fiddle, the extended McLaughlin family churned the straw into the mud beneath their feet as they spun and leapt about with more gusto than skill. Eugene coaxed Tori on to her hind legs, clasped her two front paws in his hands and danced merrily as his family watched on chuckling at the sight. Joseph's sisters-in-law, Margaret and Geraldine, danced together, their husbands away earning a small wage on another man's harvest. But it was cousin Michael McLaughlin who was the real king of the jig. He was slightly built, with a contagious smile and a quiet demeanour that was rare amongst the McLaughlins. Wherever he was, at a wake or a crossroads, the well loved little treasure was always to be found prancing and singing along as soon as any music was heard.

This night, the McLaughlins believed they had come together to celebrate the abundant crop that was about to be harvested. They were no different to any other family in Ireland - a love of family, food and companionship. Music and story telling were their finite solutions to loneliness. The girls absorbed every detail of the tableau before them, knowing this was to be the last such occasion for many a month. Kit whispered to Maeve:

'Do you think we'll be dancing on the ship, Maeve? Maybe there will be a fiddle player there to rival Scully.'

'Don't suppose so - at least, I wont. I'll have nothing to celebrate or dance about.'

Maeve turned and went back into the cabin, drained and beaten. She had hoped for some retreat by her father but it was plain none was coming. A loud drunken voice could be heard from outside.

'Tell us one of your stories, Joseph. C'mon now.'

Maeve recognised the inebriated young man as Kelley, her cousin Mary's husband to be. 'Come on, now, Joseph, I've heard all about them. Tell us one now.'

Joseph was generally a man of few words but as one of the 'elders' of the family, he had heard a good many tales over the years. He toyed with his ear, stroked his chin and then nodded his head.

'Come along, then, find yourselves a place to sit and make sure you have had your fill of Maeve's food. Once I start, I cannot tolerate any fidgeting or interruptions. Is that agreeable to you all?'

The response was unanimous and everyone scrambled for prime position outside the cabin. Eugene settled himself at his father's feet, looked up at him in anticipation as Joseph leaned against the smooth side of a rock, one that Maeve frequently used for scrubbing the more troublesome stains from their clothes. His pipe in his right hand and his chin in his left, he stared silently at the ground until he had made up his mind and the story began. Slowly, deliberately he spoke in a clear unflinching voice.

'One warm summer, many years ago, an English gentleman began to court a young Irish maiden. Though he was rich and handsome, he was devious and he set out to deceive our trusting maiden from the very beginning. She was fair of face, yet strong and hard working and she did not suspect his wicked intentions. All she wanted was to ensure a future for herself, her family and her family's family; a future that would mean food in their hungry mouths and work to mould their under-used muscles.

She would sit listening to his sweet, soothing voice as it made promise after promise. At times, so powerful were his skills of persuasion it was as if she was in a trance and all her misgivings were forgotten. When he slipped her hand between his, she failed to notice the strength of his grasp. Likewise, his embrace grew to be ever more stifling and she found it harder and harder to say 'no'. As the courtship went on, he hinted at his intentions; he wanted a union, a marriage.

Flattered and hopeful of a happy ending, she asked those close to her what they thought of her prospects. Her closest friends told her to leap at the opportunity - after all, she could scarcely be worse off. They persuaded her that her beauty was of no worth if she was hungry, nor her abundant charms any use if she was sick. A positive demeanour would not find her work, nor a nimble dance provide a roof above her head. No, she could do no better than enter into a union that must certainly improve her position. Why doubt the man? Why wouldn't he be a man of integrity - he was an English gentleman?

So with the hope of bettering her lot and that of those around her, she waited eagerly for the proposal. When it came, she readily accepted and elation broke out all around her at the prospect of a new future, a new beginning.'

A chorus of cheers broke out as Joseph's spellbound audience saw a happy ending approaching. Eugene clapped his hands excitedly.

'And so, the marriage took place, the union legitimised. But if she thought happiness was now her bedmate, she was mistaken. His greedy ways soon became apparent. He was selfish and cared not a bit for anyone else's feelings or hardships. What should have been a harmonious institution turned to rape, again and again. She soon realised that the 'friends' who had advised her had, in fact, been in his pay. She had been betrayed.

She was not allowed to walk alongside him, but was instead made to walk blindly in his shadow, observing and fulfilling his every command. Yet when she told him she was hungry or had other needs, he did not listen. Not a penny would he spend unless it was in his own lands and would be of direct benefit to him. He began to dress her in clothing of a foul orange colour. It tore and chafed at her fair skin until it ran with blood. She was not even allowed to pray in the manner of her fathers and forefathers before them. If he had just a tiny inclination that she might rebel against his dominance, he would beat her viciously, putting her down and whipping her in an attempt to crush her very spirit. But every blow fortified her character, every drop of spilled blood deepened the significance of her roots; these were things no Englishman could ever diminish.

After years of suffering this brutal marriage, she turned to a man whom she believed might be able, in time, to unravel the predicament she found herself in. Swaggering Dan was a man of words and a man of the law. Gently, politely, he began to court the Englishman in the hope of quietly persuading him to dissolve this most awful union. But he would not listen. Dan decided his voice was maybe just too quiet, too sweet. He thought carefully about what to do next and resolved to encourage his friends and countrymen to come to the aid of the poor woman. He told them of her fate, how she'd been deceived and her continuing sadness at how she was being treated. Angered, they clenched their fists, waved their arms in the air and threatened to do for the man; how could he treat her so, and after all his promises! But Swaggering Dan persuaded them their way would never work. He would have the law on his side and if threatened, would undoubtedly take revenge on all of them, but mostly on his poor wife.

So, instead, Dan began to organise meetings, not secretly but in an open public place. Quietly, peaceably, they made their feelings known. First, there would be just a few men and women, then a few more. And then the meetings turned into real monsters with people from far and wide joining together to beseech the Englishman to let her go and dissolve the union. The Englishman and his cohorts

were frightened by all this and wanted to stop the meetings and protests. They trumped up a whole load of charges against Swaggering Dan and put him on trial. Despite there not being one jot of truth in the allegations, the crooked court convicted Dan and he was whisked off to an English jail where he suffered for many, many months.

At last, one fine summers day, Dan was set free. But the meetings did not begin again; the thrust of the men had gone the same way as Dan's health. He was a broken man, and the mission had failed. To this day, that poor deceived woman is still in purgatory.

The confused silence of the crowd held for a full minute. Where had the happy ending gone? This story was sad and the lack of resolution dissatisfying. Then Michael McLaughlin spoke.

'What was the poor lady's name, Joseph? Do we know her?'

'Only too well, Michael.' Joseph took a deep breath and sighed. 'The lady's name is Eirin.'

**

Before the sun was fully up, Kit crept through the cabin door carrying a small hand trowel and a smock with a large, deep pocket. Unknown to Kit, Maeve watched silently across the dimly lit cabin as her sister slipped away. She knew where Kit was going and as she slipped from view, tears began to slide down Maeve's pale, cold cheeks. But these were no tears of sadness – these were tears of rage.

Outside in the cool morning air, as she stumbled down the rocky hills to the valley of thorns where Ruarie and his family lived, Kit changed her mind a dozen times. What if she'd misinterpreted feelings, his intentions? She could be about to make a complete fool of herself. Supposing he really did not mind in the least that she was going away, the knowledge that she might never set foot on these shores again might mean nothing to him?

Well if that was the case, she thought to herself, she'd lost nothing. As likes as not, she would never have to face the lad again - Lord she'd probably not survive the crossing if the stories were only half true. No, regardless of any impending sense of grief - or embarrassment - she was determined to do it. Ruarie should know what was about to happen, and she couldn't bear to think of him finding out from someone else.

The weather was changing from sheets of rain to a slow drizzle as she first saw the smoke curling from the roof of the tiny cabin across the valley. Another fifteen minutes walking and she would be there. She hadn't decided what she would say

when she got there, but there was still time to think that through. Perhaps she would tuck herself away, somewhere with a good view of the cabin. She could then sit and watch patiently until she saw him leaving. Perhaps then she would follow him and speak to him alone. But one small whisper changed her plans.

‘Kit? What are you doing here?’

The familiar voice came from behind a cluster of rocks perched high on a grassy bank. Kit spun round, loosing her step and tumbling sideways as she did so.

‘What are *you* doing here?’

He jumped from the craggy overhang and in three strides was beside her, clasping her hands in his and pulling her back to her feet.

‘It’s a good time of day to catch rabbit; see, over there.’

Kit looked to where he pointed below the rocks. She could just make out a twisted loop of flax, with a worn string leading back to where he had been concealed. She smiled as she looked back at the handsome boy with eyes as blue as her own.

‘You are a devious young man, Ruarie, tricking those poor rabbits into a noose.’

‘Come on, sit with me a while. It’s sheltered here from the rain and I have some berries I collected on the way. We can share them.’

Ruarie was still holding her hands tightly as Kit leaned forward and impulsively pressed her lips against his. For a second he seemed to freeze, but then he kissed her back. And it was beautiful.

He put his arm around her shoulders and walked her over to a small, level area amongst the rocks, brushing away some of the mud she had collected on her clothes when she fell. It felt good to feel his warmth against her side, his breath against her face.

‘Ruarie, I have something important to tell you.’

‘And I you. My father and mother are keen for us to be wed, Kit. Isn’t that grand? I just now have to go to visit with your father and-’

‘I’m being sent away. Maeve and me, we’re being sent to the Americas with some of the tenant farmers.’

‘Oh, Kit, Kit! You cannot leave now - we’ve just found each other.’ Gaspèd Ruarie.

'Daddy says we'll starve if we stay here; the pestilence is back and no potatoes will survive this year. Oh, Ruarie, what's to become of us? And our families?'

'You can't go, Kit. Say you wont.'

'I don't want to but I have to do as daddy says. I have no choice in the matter, Ruarie. But I'll come back as soon as-'

'Please, Kit. You mustn't leave.'

'But I must. I don't want to go Ruarie but I cannot disobey my daddy. And how can you keep me as a wife when your family will hardly have enough to live on?'

'We have a pig! And there are fishes in the Shannon waiting to jump on to my line. The valley of thorns has berries and wild fruits, cress – mushrooms! I don't need potatoes to live, Kit; I need you.'

Ruarie wrapped his arms about her, his mouth searching for hers again. This time, their lips parted as he laid her down on the soft ground behind the rocks. As their love overpowered even their sadness, they shared an unspoken understanding that they had nothing to lose - except each other.

Later, as they lay quietly together, her tears mingled with the rain that again drizzled from the skies.

'I will come back, Ruarie. Truly. I promise.'

'I know you will, Kit. We are destined to be together- for always. Nar laga Dia do lamh - *may God not weaken your hand.*'

Chapter 3

First there came a wail, a woman's scream so desolate that all who heard it were left in no doubt. It was back; the foul pestilence had returned and undeniably right there in its shadow lurked the famine. Within days, no matter where you were in Ballygall the foul stink of rotting potato tubers made your nostrils flinch. Half-empty stomachs retched as the cloud of yet another blighted harvest hung over Ireland. But the smell of fear was as almost strong as the rotting tubers. People struggled in hopeless desperation to quickly dig and store potatoes that were already turning to a blackened mush. Family, neighbours and fellow farmers appeared at Joseph's cabin door, frantic with worry. They sought reassurance that all would be well. He could do nothing but shake his head and tell them to pray. Landlords may be cruel, he thought to himself, but nature could be even tougher. Joseph derived some small comfort that the harsh reality and the

interminable rain reaffirmed he had made the right decision for his girls, but life for everyone else was soon to grow ominously harder by the day. But of all the tough days ahead, he knew today was sure to be the worst. This was the day his girls would leave for the high seas. This was the day they would say goodbye, perhaps forever. There would be a huge hole in his heart, and his home.

The girls lay in silence in their bed. Neither moved, or even breathed any deeper than was necessary. Maeve had already been awake for several hours when the dawn light imparted its cold, harsh hue. She wondered what it had been like for Kit to feel Ruarie's arms enfold her, her cheek chaffing against the soft bristle on his young chin. All the years Maeve had adored Ruarie from afar had come to nothing – but she would somehow resolve the unfairness of it all. She closed her eyes and imagined Ruarie was holding her, loving her. And one day, she decided, she would make that a reality.

The girls had packed their few possessions the night before as both parties were due to set off soon after sunrise. Lady Edgerley had sent both of them a travelling bag made from a tough hessian weave with small, black fleurs de Lys emblems woven into the fabric. Lord Edgerley had also excelled his normal levels of generosity by purchasing passage for all of them on ships bound for New York - more than twice the cost of passages to the colder, northern extremes of Canada. Joseph found it hard to be grateful, though he tried.

'I've heard there are opportunities a plenty there, with work for girls too - and not just as housemaids.' Joseph's cheerful voice did nothing to disguise the heartbreak he felt inside. 'Just think, eight maybe nine weeks, and you'll be there getting settled and...'

His words were met with silence as the girls tried to keep busy. He shuffled uneasily around the cabin before reaching into an old wooden box stowed away under his bed. First, he took out two strips of rag, knotted half way. Each contained a few coins, which he handed to the girls without a word. Next, he took out a piece of patterned cloth with something heavy wrapped inside it. He turned to Maeve.

'Put out your arms, Maeve.'

Maeve remained resolutely still, a disdainful look on her face as she took in her father's pain. He raised her arms, and gently placed across them a fine, green dress that Maeve knew had been given to her mother by Lady Edgerley.

'I know your mummy would have wanted you to go off looking fine and smart. Please, wear this for me. You must take your bible with you because when you read it, you'll know you are never far from our thoughts.'

Maeve said nothing, her emotions kept silently in check. Joseph turned to Kit.

'Kit, read your bible every night just as you have always done at home and remember when you look up at those stars and the moon, that we're all looking at the same beautiful heavens.'

He handed her a small bundle wrapped in sacking.

'I want you to have these; take them with you and try to make use of them. They've served me well.'

Kit folded back the rough sacking to reveal her father's best rasp, pliers and bolster; the tools of his trade. The trade she loved so well and had learned from her father in the hope of one day following in his footsteps. She looked down at the rusting offering and could only muster a grunt in acknowledgement.

'What's the matter?' Asked Joseph, disappointed. 'Not good enough for you?'

'Oh no, daddy, thank you, they're wonderful.... but I can't deprive you of these. What will you work with when-'

'I'll have no need of them. Take them, please.'

Maeve could control her anger no longer and exploded in a torrent of vitriol.

'Oh, so Bella's the next to go is she: fine, fine - get rid of the poor old mare, and then Tori too maybe? All of us women, why don't you - just you make sure you laddies are in good shape and stay together. I'll manage just fine on my own - without you. Just fine.'

Maeve's inner fury had turned to words and before she could stop them, they were ringing in her father's ears.

'It's perfectly plain to me, Joseph McLaughlin, that you love your bonny son, but you are indifferent to your daughters.'

'Maeve!' Cried Kit, but it was too late.

'There! Now I've said it. And I'm glad.' She drew a deep breath and as she paused her faced hardened, from anger to hatred.

'I'm more than a daughter, and you know that. You won't manage without me - not the holding, this home... nothing!'

Maeve stared at her father, awaiting some sort of response, but there was none. Moments later she was out of the door, running alone through the morning mist towards the old shed. Kit turned to follow her sister.

‘Leave her,’ said Joseph. ‘She has a right to be angry.’

‘But she’s-’

‘I said leave her. These coming months are going to see you both needing all your resourcefulness, and determination. If she survives through her hatred of me, to spite me, then it’s a good thing I’ve done. Mark me well, Kit, you are going to need every grain of strength to come through this.’

Eugene began to weep.

‘Father, you do love our girls too, don’t you?’

Joseph turned and held Eugene close, wrapping his arms around the boy’s shoulders.

‘I could truly never love any one of you more than another because the love I have for each of you is so strong, so complete, it would be impossible to better it. The saddest thing I have ever had to do, Eugene, was to watch your dear, lovely mother die. If Maeve and Kit stay here, for even one more winter, I know as sure as the sun will rise again tomorrow that I will probably have to face the dreadful sorrow of watching a loved one slip away again – or worse still, leave you all behind to face starvation alone. They must take their chances in a more bountiful place. At least they will have a real chance of a future - a different future to that which Ireland has to offer.’

‘And what of us, you and I?’ Cried Eugene.

‘I do believe, Eugene, that we can pit our wits and strength against the worst the famine has to offer and survive. Would you agree with that, son?’

Joseph cupped Eugene’s face in his hands, and the boy nodded sadly in agreement. Outside, the rain began to ease back and through the open door they could make out a shape clambering towards them across the rocky escarpment. It was The Flynns, and close behind them were the ramshackle O’Doherty family, with a gaggle of youngsters and bundles of precious belongings swaddled in strips of old rags. Dennis O’Doherty seemed to be dragging something along behind them.

Maeve had seen them approaching too, but she still refused to acknowledge her father’s calls. Finally, she considered herself to be sufficiently composed and ready to face her future. With her head held high, she fastened the last buttons of the fine green dress and strode forward. After just a few steps, Eugene flew to her side, wrapping his arms about her waist, desperately trying to force her to

stay. She patted her brother's head then stooping down, spoke quietly, gently as had always been her way until now.

'There's no need for all this, now is there.'

'I might never see my very own dear sisters again!'

'Truly, Geney, there is no need to fuss. Just a short while, then you will see me again. I promise you, I will come back to Ireland.' Maeve shot her father a piercing look. 'I'll come back for *you*.'

'Promise?' Said Eugene as his voice cracked with sadness.

As Maeve nodded her affirmation and held him close, she did not shift her gaze from her father. It was not a look Joseph had ever seen on his daughter's face before and it chilled him more than the cold rain on his face. As she eased herself away from Eugene, Maeve also shivered, but it was at the sight of Gerald Flynn, not from the wearing of such a delicate fabric on a cold morning. Flynn was not a man she admired and she considered both him and his wife to be ignorant, and vulgar. The thought of travelling with them turned her stomach. The only consolation was the knowledge that if anyone had an eye to the main chance, it was the Flynn's. She was now filled with determination to complete her journey and make a new life for herself. But she had no intention of finding her sister or contacting her father. They would have to suffer the anguish of not knowing if she was dead or alive. When she finally returned to Ireland it would be for her brother, and it would be in triumph.

With her chin in the air, she looked as prim as any Dublin lady as she strutted out to greet the Flynn's, now taking instructions from Joseph.

'You're to head due south until you meet the river,' he said, pointing out the route to Flynn with a trembling hand. 'Follow it down until you come to the old stone bridge on the coast road. You should be able to get a ride right to the port with one of the traders for no more than a shilling - but make sure there's always one of you awake just to be safe.'

Joseph's voice betrayed none of the turmoil in his heart as he waved a small piece of paper under Flynn's pockmarked nose.

'This is as precious as corn. It entitles the bearer to claim three passages to Liverpool.'

'Oh, you can be counting on me to watch over the ladies, Joseph, make no mistake. No harm shall come to them whilst they are in the charge of Gerald Flynn, of that you can be sure.'

Joseph backed away as Flynn's tombstone smile liberated his foul breath.

'Passage from Liverpool to America has been arranged by the master's agents and the money wired to the passenger ticket office at the quayside. Make sure you are there in plenty of time to collect your tickets because the ships are all full and if you miss yours, there's no saying when the next opportunity might be. There is a thriving Irish community in New York, I am told. Someone will surely take you in or at the very least provide you with some assistance until you find yourselves accustomed to the place. Kit, you and Maeve must try and make contact – perhaps through the church and at the very least, write to Father Duffy to let me know you've arrived safely. I want your word on this, girls. D'ya hear that Maeve?'

Joseph looked at Maeve in the hope of seeing some small sign that her stance had softened. But there was none. He turned instead to Kit who by now was in a daze. The O'Doherty children were scurrying excitedly around her feet whilst the Flynnns were preparing to take Maeve away with them right before her eyes.

'Now, Kit, you are to travel with Dennis and Noreen and their family to the western shores of Mayo by way of horse and cart.'

Kit was puzzled.

'But how?'

He pointed over to the sorry looking contraption Dennis had dragged along behind him. She was not sure what it currently masqueraded as, but it had once been an old corn wagon.

'Dennis has replaced the rotting timbers with wood from the old O'Leary estates. He even fashioned a fourth wheel.'

Kit gasped.

'But that's stealing. Mr. O'Leary would never have allowed that if he were-'

'But he's not here now is he? If the man chooses to spend most of his time in England and allow his estates to fall into a state of ruin, then that is the man's natural entitlement. But just because he has chosen to be an absent landlord it doesn't mean we shouldn't make the best of the situation, now does it?'

Kit smiled for the first time that day and folded her arms tightly across her chest in indignation.

'And am I to pull this thing myself across the hills to Mayo then?' She grinned.

As she spoke Eugene came from behind the house, leading Bella on a length of frayed rope. The leather bridle she had once proudly been driven in had long since been sold and was now replaced with one made of plaited twine. The metal bit in her mouth was worn and rusty, though Eugene had done his very best to polish it until it shone again. A harness had been fashioned from piecemeal straps of leather, hessian sacking and a handful of small brass hoops that once held a pair of heavy drapes at Coralee Castle. The only part of the original tack that was still intact was a set of worn leather reins.

‘You’ll be able to halt old Bella no matter what with these reins. And when you get there, you’ll probably be able to sell her and the cart for a few coppers, if she’s made it that far. Now, start getting your bundles into the cart while Eugene and I back Bella into the harness.’

Joseph could see that the full weight of what was now happening to her family had suddenly hit Kit like a gale rocking a sapling. He put his hands on her shoulders, squeezed them reassuringly and spoke with a firm, but quiet voice.

‘This is just the first stage of a long journey, but always remember Kit, no matter how long, a journey is only made up of many steps. When you’re tired or can’t face the next hill, when you feel like giving in or turning back, just remember – it’s another one of those steps taking you on your way. A step closer...’

‘Or a step further away.’ Said Kit, sadly.

The rain began to fall heavily once again as the horse, with a set of ribs like window bars, was carefully maneuvered into place. Eugene slipped in the mud and landed clumsily against a rock, banging his shoulder. It scarcely hurt, but provided the excuse he needed to let his unmanly tears flow. He ran to Kit’s open arms and sobbed, uncontrollably. Maeve was helpless to resist her brother’s sadness and within moments the three siblings clung to one another.

Unable to bear the pain and responsibility for his decisions any longer, Joseph knelt on the ground and for the first time in many years, he prayed so fervently the entire gathering bowed their heads in silence.

‘Oh dear Lord, watch over us all and keep us safe until we can be together again. Mary, mother of God, I’m not a devout man, but please don’t take your revenge on my girls. Have mercy and don’t take them away from me forever.’

Kit put one arm around her father’s shoulders as she held Eugene tight. But as she looked at Maeve, there was only a cold stare for the man at her feet and the sister at her side.

The sad little procession set off for the summit of the hill in silence, each person

deep in thought. Flynn brimmed with optimism, believing he was on the brink of a fresh start, a well-deserved chance to snatch a better life; an improved deck of cards to those Ireland had dealt him. The O'Dohertys prayed this was to be their family's salvation, the prospect of their children maturing into fine, happy young people instead of scavenging paupers who'd be lucky to survive their childhood.

Kit watched Maeve closely, expecting that hardened jaw to drop at any moment; but she was unflinching in her determination to punish her family. They were poised on the crest of the hill. Hands were shaken and embraces tightened as the travellers prepared to set off in different directions. Kit embraced her unresponsive sister one more time and whispered over and over again.

'God save us, God protect us.'

'Come along now girls,' Said Flynn. 'We have a long journey to make before we even get to that boat, you know. Time is passing us by.'

Flynn's voice irritated Kit at the best of times, but now more so than ever.

'We're all ready, Mr. Flynn.' Said Kit, coldly. 'Don't you worry about that - good and ready for anything.'

Kit helped Dennis and Noreen load their children and their few possessions into the back of the cart, carefully propping the youngsters against a sheath of old hay that was to be Bella's sustenance where the grass was poor. Then Kit clambered up on to the driver's bench and took hold of the reins. It felt good to be sitting in the driving seat, something she had not done since she was a child when she would sit besides her father and he allowed her to take the landlord's mare and trap along the estate drives.

'Well, Bella. It's going to be a long road.' She glanced back over her shoulder. 'Are we all set?'

'As well as we're ever likely to be, Kit.' Said Dennis, trying hard for his family's sake to sound optimistic. 'Joseph, we're in your debt for this; you're a good man, a fine man.'

'Just take care of her, that's all I ask.'

Joseph stood perfectly still, not daring to move for fear of halting the exodus in a moment of weakness.

'Goodbye daddy, and remember – I will be coming home; when the time is right and the chance is there, I'm coming home to you and Geney.'

Kit made a clicking sound with her tongue and gently shook the reins. She tried

to focus on the road ahead, but it was difficult as the tears stung her eyes and blurred her vision. Bella moved forward, hesitantly at first but then lengthening her stride as she relaxed into the harness and the hands of her driver. As they climbed slowly towards the point where the road curved away to the left, Kit gathered her strength and cast a glance back over her shoulder. Joseph, with little Eugene by his side, was about to disappear from view as they rounded the hill and headed west. Maeve and the Flynns had become little more than shadows against the horizon as they struggled along the banks of the stream that would lead them to the main river by dusk that same day.

But for the clatter of the cartwheels, all was silent as Kit contemplated just what she was taking on. Nausea swirled in the pit of her stomach and she felt her shoulders straining to convulse. As she struggled to suppress the urge to vomit, a warm face nuzzled against her arm. It was Noeli, eldest of the O'Doherty children. Though thirteen years old, he had the fragile intelligence of one half his age. He squeezed Kit's arm and as she looked down, she had to smile. His right eye often seemed to look towards his left, and there was generally a tiny slither of dribble at the corner of his mouth where his tongue liked to rest. But he exuded a simple warmth, unspoilt by the pressures of life.

'What's his name?' Noeli pointed both his free hand and his tongue at Bella.

'It's a she, Noeli, a mare. Her name is Bella.'

'I like Bella. She smells happy.'

Kit laughed.

'Well you know, I think she probably is happy, for now at least. I'm thinking she's very proud of the fine cart she's pulling.'

'My daddy made the cart, y'know. He made it all by himself 'cause I was more trouble than the rusty nails.' Noeli beamed. 'But 'twas me who found the very piece of wood we are seated on right now. Did you know that Kitty?'

Kit gave him a little squeeze as she looked around her. The vibrant shades of the approaching autumn helped Kit to store every plant, every tree in her memory: The rugged Irish countryside had been the love of her life - until Ruarie. Now she needed to remember every detail of her world as there was no telling when she might see such beauty again. Ballygall was all she knew, her whole world just this slither of rural Ireland. None of them know what the Americas would be like. There was talk of savages, tall cities and vast plains with strange wild beasts. Her father had spoken of growing Irish communities and she knew they would seek them out, but Kit could not imagine living in a place flanked by towering buildings instead of rolling hills, of working inside instead of in the fresh air.

The little cart had bumped along slowly for almost an hour and Noeli was as sound asleep as his siblings when Kit's thoughts were interrupted by a sound in the distance. She drew the worn reins in hard towards her half-empty belly, sitting back as she did so to exert all her strength. This great effort had proved unnecessary as Bella came to a halt with great relief, dropped her head and breathed deeply as her mouth searched for a few blades of grass. Kit listened carefully. At first she thought it was a buzzard on the wing, screeching high above the grey clouds somewhere. But as the sound gradually became louder and clearer she knew it was a voice, Ruarie's voice. Faintly but drawing distinctly closer, it called over and over again.

'Kit, Kit...'

She knew it was Ruarie long before her eyes could pick him out amongst the boulders and hillocks. She pulled firmly on the handle for the brake and as the wood hit hard against the wheel, she wrapped the reins around the brake handle and leapt down. Noeli remained in a deep sleep, and lay with his arms straddled across the warm spot where Kit had been seated.

Kit's feet slipped in the mud as she ran straight into Ruarie's open arms, burying her face in the soft folds of his neck as her breathless words trickled out.

'I thought perhaps you were not coming to say goodbye.'

'How could I let you go without trying just once more to make you stay?'

'You know I cannot, Ruarie.' Kit broke away. She touched his lips gently with her forefinger. 'Will you watch out for daddy and Eugene – for me?'

'Of course I will, Kit, I will tell him about-'

'No!' Cried Kit. 'You must never speak of our love to anyone. It would tear daddy apart to think he'd come between us.'

Ruarie looked into her eyes, exploring them for the truth.

'Promise me, Ruarie.'

'All right then, I promise – but I have to know. Did you mean it when you said you would come back?'

'Oh Ruarie, this is my home and I love it dearly.'

'And me?'

Kit looked into his expectant face and kissed him gently on the bridge of his

nose.

‘Yes, Ruarie, I do love you.’

‘And I you. If I were to speak to your daddy about-‘

Kit places a finger on his lips to silence him.

‘We’ll tell him, together, when I return.’

Ruarie took her hand and walked her slowly back to the cart, neither daring to speak. Holding her right hand in his, he reached out to the makeshift harness and tugged a small brass curtain hoop from one of the straps. He raised her hand and placed the hoop on Kit’s finger, then slowly kissed her hand.

‘Now we are bound together, Kit, by our love for one another and our pledge to be together. Nothing can part us - no oceans, no mountains and no famine.’

He placed his lips on hers and she felt her whole body yearn for him again. Once more, he swept her up in his arms, but this time he set her down on the bench of the cart. He knew she must go.

‘Remember, Kit. Remember.’

She looked down at the slim tarnished piece of metal on her finger and then back at Ruarie’s kind, handsome face.

‘How could I ever forget, my love? Wait for me – I will come home to you Ruarie.’

Chapter 4

Lady Sophie Jenison took the final two steps down the insecure gangplank, released her grip on the handrail and finally stood smiling on the bustling quayside. It was the first time in her life she found the grimy Liverpool docks with their odious smells a welcome sight. At last she was free of the terrible sickness that had held her in its grasp as the ship pitched and rolled its way back from Ireland. Equally as important, the obvious poverty that now surrounded her bore no comparison to the hunger and destitution she had witnessed on the way back to the port from their Irish estates.

Her face, though still pale from the horrendous journey, was nonetheless a beautiful sight, with clear, peachy skin and lips shaped like a perfectly tied bow. Her thick, light-brown hair was neatly coiled beneath a red-brown velvet hat that glowed as warm as embers. Yes, despite her Scottish ancestry, Sophie looked every inch the English rose. Though small in stature, she had shown herself to

be strong of character, not least over the past five years when she had lost four deeply desired babies in the late stages of her confinement. The doctors had told her she would be unable to carry another, her body decimated though her maternal desires remained intact.

Her husband Charles was busy making arrangements with an overweight purser for the transportation of numerous pieces of baggage from the ship to their country estate some twenty miles to the east.

‘Right,’ grunted Charles. ‘Let’s just go through that once more, shall we old man?’

The purser sighed as the ex-army Captain insisted on reconfirming the arrangements yet again.

Sophie looked back at the ‘Elizabeth and Constance’ as the ship bobbed on the calm waters of the Waterloo dock. The three-masted barque sat higher in the waters now much of the cargo had been unloaded and many of the passengers had disembarked. A good number of her fellow travelers still lingered on the quayside. Some were smartly clad, others in little more than threadbare rags. To a man, they would stagger as they first walked on the wooden decking of the quayside, still unbalanced after long days at sea, either nauseously reclining in a cabin or crammed into one of the dark holds beneath deck. Sophie watched as a disheveled man leaned against a stack of bulging sacks that had just been unloaded from the ship. He looked disorientated, his face was drawn, the colour of parchment. On his bare head were tufts of unruly hair wafted in the brisk sea breeze. Liam O’Rourke was in a bad way after months of starvation in Ireland, and a tortuous journey to the English shores. As he ran his hands across his head, they caught Sophie’s eyes. He had the weathered face of a once handsome man. His grubby hands were strong, with long agile fingers that grabbed at the sacking to steady himself. As she watched him, Sophie realised with horror that Liam was probably younger than her own husband. He coughed, bending almost double before sprawling at the feet of a stout, angry docker.

‘Get away, ye thief! You leave our grain alone – off with you I says, before I call the peeler.’

The buttons strained on the docker’s under-sized vest as he vented his anger on the man with a sharp kick to the posterior.

‘Away I tell you!’

‘I’m no thief, sir – just a man seeking an honest wage for an honest job.’

Unimpressed, the portly man accompanied his latest threat with a sterner kick, this time to his victim’s side. Sophie watched in horror as Liam crawled away,

helpless, too weak to argue. All this time, the bulging stack grew rapidly on the quayside, as sack after sack was unloaded from the ship. Sophie caught her husband's arm.

'Charles, that poor man needs help not punishment.'

Charles patted her hand as he led her away from the angry scene.

'My darling wife, you really do have the kindest of hearts,' purred Charles, 'but please, we cannot possibly become involved in the day to day work of these men. They are entrusted with safeguarding the goods brought by sea to these shores. It is a difficult job and we should leave it to those who know best.'

'What's in those sacks anyway? There are so many of them.'

'It's corn, my love. The Irish harvest was a poor one this year but some land owners still managed a few tons; prices are good, too.'

'But there is great hunger in Ireland - why has this corn been shipped out?'

Sophie paused, suddenly alarmed.

'Charles, did we export our corn back to England too?'

'My dear, no one in Ireland has any money - did you expect me to give it away?' He laughed and patted her hand once again.

'I cannot believe we have taken food from their shores – people will die.'

Charles was beginning to lose patience with his wife.

'If they die it is purely a result of the work-shy attitude of the Irish. What I have done makes good business sense Sophie. Please don't get involved. I am simply doing what every other sensible landowner in the district is doing.'

Sophie pulled back, struggling to maintain her usual placid manner.

'There are more important things than profit, Charles. The Irish-'

'The Irish are a nation of slackers and scoundrels, always looking for a soup kitchen or a handout. Just look at him!'

He pointed to Liam O'Rourke who by now was pleading for help from everyone he passed as he was pushed and jostled along the docks.

'Now, let's get you into the landau – I am taking the other carriage to attend to some business that cannot wait. The luggage will follow.'

As Charles offered his arm to his wife once again, Sophie dutifully slipped her gloved right hand through. She didn't always agree with everything her husband said but she knew him to be a good businessman. His strength of character was as inspiring as his physical presence, though she would be the first to admit that it had been his striking good looks that caught her eye when they were first introduced at the Hendersons' summer ball. Seven years ago – how quickly the time had passed. She remembered so clearly his face, and how handsome it looked, as though it had been carved rather than born. From the sparkle of his brass buttons to the shine on his riding boots, he was the most dashing and immaculately turned out soldier she had ever set eyes on.

The strong profile and angular cheekbones remained despite a broadening of the girth and chin. But Sophie knew she was not the only woman to find the dashing Captain attractive. Although she chose not to see it, their married life had been punctuated with numerous indiscretions. Even now, she suspected that the urgent business Charles insisted upon attending to would be Mlle Amelia de Vendray.

'Now, let's make haste.'

His wife settled inside the landau, Charles looked at his pocket watch then kissed his wife's hand.

'If things go well I should be home in time for supper. Until tonight, my love.' He turned to the driver. 'On your way, Quigley – with all haste.'

Ernest Quigley cracked his whip and braced the reins at the same time, knowing only too well he needed perfect control to navigate the carriage through the melee of goods and people milling around the dockside area. At little more than a walking pace, the carriage moved forward slowly past the goods and chattels lined up beside the mounting pile of corn-sacks. As Sophie looked ahead through the window she spotted the shabby outline of Liam O'Rourke stumbling almost blindly on his way. She leaned forward and called to her driver.

'Stop, please, Mr. Quigley.'

'Ma'am?'

'I said stop, please, and come here Mr. Quigley.'

As the wheels ground to a halt on rubbish-strewn cobbles, Sophie reached into her small, embroidered bag and took out two coins. When Quigley appeared at

her window, she reached out with her neatly gloved hand and passed some coins to Quigley.

‘Please ensure the gentleman receives these alms, Mr. Quigley.’

Quigley looked at O’Rourke; the poor ruffian was oblivious, his head reeling from malnutrition and the kicking he’d just taken.

Quigley wasn’t happy at all, halting in such a place. His mistress was in his charge and she was exposed, vulnerable here. He respectfully took the coins from Sophie’s hand and, raising O’Rourke’s right hand, pressed them into his palm and wrapped the grubby fingers around them.

‘Now, on your way before someone stronger relieves you of the alms Lady Jenison has provided.’

O’Rourke looked up at Quigley, then back to the carriage. There was no mistaking the compassion on the woman’s face or on Quigley’s. As he clasped the coins to his heart, he crossed himself and blessed his benefactors as Quigley gently patted him on the shoulder.

‘God bless you, son,’ murmured Quigley as he hurried back to his driver’s seat.

With a crack of the whip, the horses clattered away down the cobbled street. As Lady Sophie snuggled down into the soft upholstery, Quigley drew his collar up towards his ears, and then cast a glance back towards the poor Irishman stumbling along the edge of the street behind them.

‘And God keep you – if just for another night.’

Reaching Cork somehow made the whole journey seem worthwhile to Maeve. She could never have imagined such a place - so many people, so many buildings. Wherever you were, at any time of day, there was noise. Yes, there were beggars and plenty of misery. Urban populations had swollen as more and more country dwellers were driven towards the towns for sustenance, but the atmosphere was so alive it invigorated the spirit. She had worried that the experience would be terrifying; instead it was breathtaking. But the time Maeve spent near the quayside was agonizing despite her fascination with the buzz of city life all around her. This would be the most dangerous adventure of her life. It was the point of no return and when she walked up the gangway on to the deck of the ship that would take her to Liverpool, everything she knew, and everyone she loved would be left behind. Inside, an almost physical ache rested in the pit

of her stomach, but she was a determined young lady, nonetheless. He had sent her away, but she *would* make the best of this; somehow, some day, she would make him pay for cruelly abandoning her.

Maeve watched closely as sacks of grain were hauled on board along with kegs, boxes, trunks and bundles of fabrics. By the time the hundred or so passengers had also boarded, she was convinced the vessel would sink at any second. The ropes were cast off and the sails fluttered in the salty breeze, as the creaking timbers of the ship edged away from the harbor and towards the English coast.

The very fact that the ship stayed stayed afloat was like a minor miracle to Maeve, but it was one that was over none too soon for her. The tossing and rolling turned her stomach almost as much as the company of Gerald Flynn and his wife. But she was an independent young lady now, she told herself; she would get through these unnerving times under her own steam and her determination grew stronger with every passing hour.

Soon, the thin ribbon of land on the horizon blossomed into a welcoming estuary, and the docks of Liverpool loomed up fast. Closer and closer they came until the ship bumped and shuddered as it tucked itself in, adjacent to the walls of Waterloo Dock. Once more, Maeve was taken aback. This was a vastly more imposing place than Cork. Everything was bigger, louder, faster moving – and dirtier. Before the cargo and the rest of the shaky passengers could disembark, Gerald made it his business to disappear, leaving Maeve to cope with Eileen, his nauseous wife. When he returned, he announced that he had located the passenger ticket office and confirmed the ship that would take them to America:

‘We’ll be needing lodgings nearby for a night,’ he said. ‘We sail at first light Thursday from this very dock.’

‘And how have you got money for lodgings?’ Asked Eileen.

‘Oh, it was all part of the arrangements made by the master,’ said Flynn. ‘We’ll meet my brother tonight so as I can tell him just what is occurring and when.’

Eileen frowned:

‘How did you manage to get in touch with him? You don’t know-’

‘You’re wearying me woman with your ceaseless chattering. Now, be quiet. I’ll be off to find us somewhere to stay and-’

‘Not alone, you wont.’ Interrupted Maeve. ‘I for one don’t trust you one bit Gerald Flynn and am going to be at your side wherever you go until we’re safely on board the next ship.’

‘Please yourself, if you want to wander these dark and dangerous streets rather than sit across the way in that cosy looking inn with Mrs. Flynn. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

‘That’ll be fine with me,’ said Maeve with a sarcastic smile.

They accompanied Mrs. Flynn, still unsteady on her swollen feet, to the run-down Inn and watched as she ordered a glass of port as a reviver and special treat. With a promise to return later that day, Gerald Flynn set off, with Maeve walking right at his side, not a foot in front nor a foot behind.

The foul air from the sewers savaged her nostrils as sorely as the stench of rotting potatoes back home. Home. It seemed a lifetime away from here. They passed by road after road of buildings blackened by the acrid smoke and gasses puked from a thousand chimneys. How she longed for the whiff of a Ballygall peat fire. But all around her was filth, the streets awash with the rubbish that fed the enormous rats. As they turned yet another corner, Flynn pointed to a tenement block in front of him.

‘There, that’s the place I’m sure. We’re to go down the steps to the basement and ask for Rory O’Neal. That’s the man. O’Neal.’

Maeve didn’t like the look of the building. It seemed far too tall for its own good, with tiny windows set into discoloured brickwork and steps too narrow for comfort. Flynn headed for the steps regardless.

‘I’ll be just a few minutes if you care to wait.’

‘Don’t think you’re slipping away from me, Gerald Flynn,’ said Maeve, pushing in front of him to descend the steps first.

She lifted the hem of her dress a shade higher, trying not to catch the needlework on any rubbish or ruin the fabric with splashes of mud. As she concentrated on safely negotiating the flight of steep steps, the sound of Flynn’s wheezing breath was just behind her. And then suddenly she was falling. A huge thump to the side of her head knocked her sideways against the wall of the stairs before sending her tumbling down the final six or seven stone steps. Nails tearing, she clawed at the rough brickwork, then at the steps themselves in a desperate attempt to halt her fall. But nothing could slow her until she reached the ground below, where finally, she laid still, her eyes closed.

Maeve’s thoughts swam as her eyes flickered open, but she could distinguish nothing more than colourless shapes. At first, all she could hear was the blood rushing around her aching head. Then there were footsteps running - running away. And a dry laugh she knew to be Flynn’s: And then... nothing.

Flynn was pleased with himself. His simple plan had worked. He quickly made his way unencumbered to the passage office, collected his ticket for America then demanded and received a refund of the monies for the other two passengers whom, he claimed, were making another altogether more celestial voyage. For the first time in his life, Flynn had money in his pocket and no nagging woman at his side. He was off like a shot from a gun to a nearby gin house and the embrace of a lady with lips as red as the broken veins across her cheeks. He would board that afternoon. His new beginning was to start from the Prince's docks in little more than an hour, less than half a mile from where his wife would be waiting for him, port in hand. Life was at last beckoning Flynn on to bigger and better things, he was certain.

Maeve slowly dragged herself back to some semblance of consciousness. She groaned at the sheer effort of staying awake as her head pounded and every bone in her body ached, but she was not going to let herself die in a distant slum. Neither did she intend to let Flynn get away with cheating her. Step by step, she pulled herself back up until finally she was in the empty street again. She looked up and down the narrow road but though she had vague recollections of the way they had come, things were now a blur. She stumbled along indistinct cobbled streets, tripping over rubbish and splashing in deep, stagnant puddles of human waste. Voices drifted across the night air, some shouting, some laughing, but none familiar.

At last, she heard a noise she thought she recognised; abrasive sounds of metal rasping against metal then against something more malleable. Looking up ahead, she recognised the motion of the hoists and ropes at the docks and realized she must be close to the quayside again. By now, her vision had grown dim, weakened by the fading evening light. Images were faint, sometimes duplicated. But on she staggered, still clutching her valise. She grasped walls or railings to steady herself from falling again. The sound of merry-making, and drunken laughter caught her attention and as she squinted her eyes to try and focus on its source, a small inn loomed out from the gloom. It was the place where Mrs. Flynn now sat with an empty cup, her head lolling forward in a tired, drunken stupor. Maeve lurched towards the inn, but her balance deserted her and again, she tumbled to the ground, this time landing in a shallow drainage gully. As she rolled to try and drag herself up again, she could see nothing, but the sound of hooves striking the stones was deafening. The last thing she heard was a screamed warning from the driver, Ernest Quigley, but it was too late.

The expanse of water took her breath away. Kit had seen only rivers, streams and ponds before, and now here was an ocean that was bigger and wider than even her imagination could have ever conceived. As the wind rippled across the water's surface it reminded her of long, summer grass, swaying rhythmically in the breeze. She could see the white tails of scattering rabbits as the waves rose

then tumbled, foaming back to the sea. As gulls soared to the craggy cliffs on a salty wind, Kit stood and watched in silent amazement.

The dock was poised high above the swelling waters below, making Kit quite dizzy as she stared down at the cold blue-grey expanse. Squeezing her hand excitedly, Noeli tossed small pebbles into the water, watching with breathless excitement as the waves erased their point of entry. He'd scarcely left Kit's side for the entire journey. Not that she minded; the genuine warmth the lad exuded was a true comfort to Kit. Dennis and Noreen were generally busy with their younger three children so, sadly, the less than perfect Noeli seemed to be their burden rather than their eldest son.

The journey had left Kit hungry and tired but despite this, for the first time she felt excitement at the prospect of sailing across these waters that sparkled with the tiniest hint of sunshine. The wind began to blow in stiff gusts and despite the shelter from the natural harbour, the waves gurgled with tumbling white foam. To their left was a sizeable ship called the *Coral Rose*, rolling and bobbing on the swell. Her decks were deserted and her masts bare, but still she seemed to have a life of her own. The small fishing port of Ennislee had quickly become accustomed to the growing number of ships like the *Coral Rose* that brought lumber from America and Canada. These ships were huge compared to the fragile fishing boats that once dominated the quayside. With the lumber ships' rapacious appetite for ballast, they frequently returned home with a human payload, a cargo that was as comfortable on board as a fish out of water.

Kit quietly absorbed her surroundings, relishing the sea air that was invigorating her and bringing her flesh alive again. But, with work to be done, Kit clasped Noel's hand and headed back to where Bella was tied up. The three younger O'Doherty children were resting close by their parents on a grassy knoll while bereft of her cart, Bella grazed ravenously on any grass she could sniff out. Kit's pocket jangled to the tune of five coins: Not much, she thought, for a cart that had carried them safely across so many miles. But they were all hungry, and Kit needed money for food. She had hoped to spend the newly acquired funds on fish but there were no fishermen to be seen either selling their catch or making ready for the next day's expedition to the plentiful waters around the rugged coastline. There was just one small curragh, and that was perched upside down, beached and broken. It seemed to have been there for a long time, a huge hole gaping through the tarred canvas of the hull. Kit looked about and spotted a man sitting on a capstan, checking a length of rope for weaknesses.

'I was wanting some fish, sir; could you tell me please where I can find some?'

'Out there.' The man inclined his head towards the open seas. 'Herrings a-plenty out there.'

'But have all the fishes been sold today then sir?'

‘There were no fishes today, or yesterday - or for many months.’

‘I don’t understand?’

‘They’ve sold their nets, their boats, everything, just to try and buy food. There was no one with money to buy their fish, nor could they afford to buy the salt to cure it to use later in the year. So they gave it all up.’

He returned to his futile task, feeding the coarse rope through his hands, methodically testing and tugging. Kit shook her head. The solemnity of the port was so different to how she had imagined it. A handful of hungry men began to haul cargo on to the quays but there were no shanties here, only the unmistakable spectre of a growing famine.

Looking about for inspiration, Kit saw a woman walking along the pebbled beach, a child perched on her left hip. She watched carefully as the woman bent over to inspect the seaweed lying on the shore, selecting certain pieces yet leaving others to rot. Kit walked over and approached the woman, quietly, from behind.

‘Are you hunting for fishes caught in the weeds?’ She asked.

‘No.’ The reply was short and sharp, as the woman went about her business. Kit followed her, stumbling uncomfortably on the loose pebbles.

‘Please, I know you are busy with your boy but I have hungry mouths to feed as well.’ The woman stopped and looked at Kit and Noeli.

‘It is the kelp itself that will feed us tonight if I can find enough. Dillisk is as good as any meal, and it’s tasty enough – especially if we can find a limpet or two to go with it.’

Kit did not know what a limpet might feel or taste like but she squirmed at the thought of the seaweed alone. The woman cast a sly glance over her shoulder, concerned lest anyone else might try to covet her crop. There was no one even close. She walked up to Kit and thrust out her boney hand.

‘Taste this.’

Kit took a small piece of what looked like bread, but almost black in colour. She squinted as she smelt it and her stomach lurched at the strange odour.

‘Eat - go on.’

Kit broke a small corner off and put it on her tongue. It felt good to have food in her mouth again after the enforced fasting towards the end of the journey when

their food had run out. The dry, crumbly texture was not what she had expected from the unpleasant smelling piece of food. Slowly, she chewed and relished the tangy taste in her mouth.

`Do you have any more of this - that you wish to sell?'

`We have a little but what am I wanting with money? We can't eat money, now can we?'

`I have a horse, a strong horse. She's old but obedient and will pull a cart or...'

`I have no use for anything unless it can be eaten. I have six hungry babies and a husband who has come down with the fever. If you have something of real use to me, then I can give you enough larva bread to keep you from starving for a few days or so.'

Kit walked back to where Noel held the end of Bella's rope just in case the weary horse took it upon herself to trot away.

`Here, give her to me.' Says Kit.

`Have you sold her, Kit? How much did she fetch? She's a strong horse, to be sure and worthy of-'

`Just give the rope to me and be quiet.' Kit interrupted 'I'll be back soon with something for us all to eat.'

Noeli patted Bella's neck as they walked away, but Kit didn't look at him.

'You've been a good friend, Bella,' said Noeli. 'I'll miss your happy smell, and your big warm neck.'

He swung her tail then patted her one last time. Kit pushed the knowledge of Bella's fate to the back of her mind as she went in search of the small stack of bread. The woman was waiting just where she said she would be, her silent baby staring vacantly into the distance. Wrapped in a scrap of cloth were the fruits of the beach, just as the woman had promised. Kit grasped the lifesaving pile of protein with both hands.

As the newly forged family sat on the bare ground and chewed the strange smelling bread, not a word was spoken. The bread staved off the hunger pangs and some water from a nearby trough quenched their thirst. But Kit could not eat. She had no stomach for the costly bread.

Chapter 5

Kit and the children shared Noeli's excitement as they clambered along the swaying gangway and up on to the polished deck of the Coral Rose. But Dennis and Noreen were aghast. Wobbling from side to side, they crept like nervous crabs negotiating the banks of a rock pool; one slip too many and they feared the waves would be embracing two more reluctant guests.

There was a steady stream of activity as the sailors made ready to sail. The chunky rope that swathed the capstan was slowly uncoiled, whilst the sails were unfurled and made ready for hoisting. The crew prepared to haul the anchor out of the shadowy waters as a tall, raven-haired sailor shouted above the noise:

'Steerage passengers this way,' called the tall sailor. 'Quickly now, your berths await you.'

As the family was chased below deck, Kit grabbed one final look at the shores of her beloved Ireland.

'I'll come home soon... as soon as possible, I swear.'

A sailor landed a full swipe across Kit's backside, shouting for her to make her way down the ladder. Alongside her, dozens of equally bemused fellow travellers trickled down the practically vertical steps. Kit half clambered, half fell down into the hold, and when she got there the darkness snuffed out her bearings, but not her instincts; something felt very wrong about the accommodations they were to be sharing for the coming weeks.

'Catch me, Kitty, catch me!' Cried Noel, as he leapt into her arms from half way down the steps.

'Noel, you will be the death of that girl,' chided Dennis.

'Oh let him be, he's just a child.' Replied Kit, cheerily.

Every passenger shared the same disorientation as they struggled to adapt from the light to the dark, with the unfamiliar smells of damp and vinegar to greet them. At first as Kit's eyes began to adjust, all she could make out were some crude bundles of rags with piles of dull straw scattered willy-nilly about the hold. And then realization dawned; these were the sleeping arrangements for the entire passenger list. Those bundles of rags already had dormant bodies swathed within them.

'Oh lord, will you look at this place,' moaned a troubled Noreen. She held the baby close against her chest as the two elder boys clung to her skirts.

'It's grand, isn't it,' beamed Noel as he peered down the dark, cavernous hold. 'I've never seen a place so huge, and yet it's bobbing along on the water as easy as a twig in the river!'

He raced down the centre of the hold flushed with the innocent excitement only youth sustains. Timber supports were spaced about four feet apart with patched sailcloth hanging between some to provide a lucky few with a small degree of privacy. Kit dashed to a corner of the hold and staked their claim behind one of the tattered curtains. She called to the O'Dohertys:

'Here, quickly - put your things in this corner. At least this way, we can only be jostled from the one side!'

There were four small portholes on the starboard side and two to port, but they were fixed permanently closed. With no air circulating other than that coming through the hatch, the atmosphere was already becoming heavy, oppressive. This hold, with endless people crammed side by side, was to be their home for the entire voyage- at least eight weeks, and probably a whole lot more.

Before long, the groan of ageing timbers heralded the start of their journey. Slowly, the ship began to roll and dip as the wind and tides carried them, little by little, away from the quayside, away from Ireland. Sailors shouted orders, swore at one another and the sea. Chains echoed noisily through the hold and the sound of moving water – both inside and out - soon became a constant backdrop. Within the hour a lucky few would spend ten minutes on deck, eyes fixed in awe of the great expanse before them as towering waves crashed across the bow of the ship. This was to be the daily pattern for those passengers fortunate enough to be clothed and strong enough to ascend the vertical ladder from the pit below. For the weak, and the half-naked men, women and children, there was to be not a moment's respite, not a breath of air, not a jot of privacy for the entire perilous journey.

Irish port authorities had little or no regard for the Passenger Act. With no one to enforce such legislation, the *Coral Rose* was typical of many ships that turned profiteering into a macabre art. The ship's Captain, Augustus Mortimer, should have carried no more than 200 passengers on this voyage to America, but instead he took the money from almost 300 poor souls. He needed, of course, to compensate for this extra weight, so took on board less than half the amount of water deemed necessary for the voyage. Likewise, rations that should have been distributed to the tune of 7lb per person per week were virtually non-existent. Instead, his desperate passengers shared just 32 berths - and no sanitary arrangements other than a couple of pails.

Though Kit knew nothing of this abuse of the law, she understood the seriousness of the conditions they had to endure. Crammed into the squalid hold like desperate animals awaiting the relief of the slaughterhouse, the few minutes

on deck each day were precious and the only reprieve from their squalor. The rest of the ship was virtually unknown to them, unvisited and firmly out of bounds. Indeed, Captain Mortimer had a broad, white line painted to indicate precisely how far they could walk along the deck before they drew too close to the upper deck, where the first class passengers took their air; cross that line and a day's water ration would be forfeit. Their world was the hull of the ship, little more than a dark, cavernous trench.

By the third day the weather deteriorated and the hatch was battened down to prevent the ship from taking on water. Very little light crept through the portholes that were caked with filth and salt. One small oil lamp shed the only light on their situation. On the fourth day, the ship continued to pitch and roll, with the result that almost the entire complement of passengers suffered miserably from seasickness. Suddenly, through the darkness a piercing shard of light made Kit shield her eyes. The stream of brightness poured through the opened hatch as two drunken sailors leaned in, then pulled back in revulsion as the overwhelming smell of human wretchedness reached him.

'Mary, mother of God!' Growled the taller of the two as they clambered down the steps. He clung tightly with his right hand, a bucket swinging from his left. The other sailor, with a small keg balanced precariously on his left shoulder, had hands as black as coal, and a face that matched. As the sweat trickled down his forehead, strange, winding tracks had appeared on his weather-beaten face.

'Those of you able to partake of a little nourishment, here it is!' Called the shorter, stocky man as his collaborator held aloft the bucket. As it tilted to one side another day's ration of hard, tasteless biscuits were revealed.

'Those of you who dare venture on deck can collect your water ration there.'

He shook the bucket as the ship lurched, nearly knocking him off his rather shaky legs.

'Mind you don't spill it though! It's precious stuff. The rest of you will need to mind yourselves as we're sluicing down your shit-hole in just a while.'

As his eyes fell on the oil lamp, he cautiously lowered himself the last few feet into the pit, and staggered across to where it hung from a crossbeam. He opened the glass, extinguished the flame and took a firm grip on the handle.

'Best be relieving you of this – could be dangerous.'

Desperate to hang on to the lantern, their one source of light, Kit reached out and clutched his arm.

'But that's the only light we have down here and-'

She was cut short with a swift cuff from the back of his free hand.

'You have the light of the Lord, heathen. Now, get up on deck or forgo your water rations – all of you!'

Those that could manage the climb struggled up the ladder, while the two men prised open the small keg and began dousing the floors with vinegar. Designed to kill the germs and disguise the reek of effluence, the improvement was negligible. With the aid of a bristle-free broom, the vinegar was swilled around the hold but as the ship lolled from side to side, the evil smelling mix of vinegar, piss and seawater became almost as tidal as the ocean beneath them.

Despite their plight, those all too brief moments in the fresh air left Kit marvelling at her surroundings. With her shawl wrapped tightly about her head and shoulders as a buffer to the wind and spray, she would quickly re-establish her balance before turning a full circle where she stood. The amazing sensation of seeing nothing but the greatness of the seas did not diminish and became the highlight of the mundane days spent in the grim hold. Time after time she would marvel at the sensation of space that God's handiwork offered, even as the long days, weeks and - worst of all - the nights of their interminable voyage continued to torture them. She watched in awe as a young boy no more than nine or ten scaled a towering mast as quick as any squirrel she'd ever seen. He wore no shoes or stockings, and his feet wrapped around the timber as nimbly as a pair of hands. As quick as his ascent, he was down again as a voice shouted at him.

'Sonny, get yourself back down here and help Enda tend to the mizzen-burtons!'

Jumping down from the final stretch, Sonny landed squarely on his feet with a bounce and a grin. He looked across at Kit, and gave her a cheeky wink before heading off for his next task.

On dull or stormy days, the sky was the colour of rock and seemed to dissolve into the sea with no distinguishable point of separation. But today was one of the rare days when the sun burst through the clouds with spectacular effect. The fire in the sky lit up the heavens and sent sparkling jewels skitting across the azure sea. As Kit lifted her face to feel the warmth on her cheeks, she could almost smell the rich soil of her father's fields. With her eyes closed, she recalled working in the fields all day long with Eugene and her father; she could see Maeve gathering wild food and tending to the cabin; she could hear her sister's voice cussing Tori as she barked and dragged muddy sticks in front of the unlit peat fire. And then she could see Ruarie; her happiness should have been complete when she found Ruarie, but it was a cruel world.

On clear, starlit evenings Kit would sit at the foot of the steps and read by the light of the moon from her bible. Sometimes she read out loud, sometimes to

herself, but more often than not she read to Noeli. He hung on her every word, mesmerized by the stories Kit seemed to bring to life. It was hard to read in the dim light and even harder for the hungry boy to learn, but somehow they both enjoyed trying to succeed.

'When I grow up in the new land, I'm going to write a whole bible about that place, and the things our family do, Kit.'

'The bible is the holy book of God, Noeli, you can't write a holy book about the O'Dohertys!' Kit smiled as her indignant pupil retorted:

'Of course I can write a whole book about the O'Dohertys – why, there's plenty to be telling already about this family's adventure. Just think what's to come!'

Kit laughed at the lad's mistake and marveled at his innocent enthusiasm for life. But the joy never lasted long, it seemed. Just two weeks into the voyage, Martin was the first of the O'Doherty children to fall ill with the fever. Suddenly, they had space to breathe as fellow passengers shied away from the illness that was feared throughout Ireland. Families had been known to run away from one another to escape infection. But not the O'Dohertys – and where could they run to? Martin's fever quickly engulfed his brother Michael and the two frightened boys writhed side by side. Their bodies were so hot, their agony could be felt from a foot away. They began to hallucinate but their ravings could scarcely have been worse than the reality their parents were enduring, blaming themselves for bringing such misery upon their family. They should never have left their home, Doreen wailed. Silently, her husband agreed.

Less than an hour after the two boys died, the same men who distributed their daily rations took away the two boys. There was scarcely time to say a prayer and swathe them in rags before the scrawny, skeletal bodies were dragged out by their wrists. The crew also feared the fever and refused to lift and carry the bodies in their arms lest they contract the sickness. On deck, the bodies were concealed beneath a piece of canvass until the first class passengers returned to their quarters and the two brothers were disposed of overboard.

The grey morning when Kit awoke to find baby Sean full of fever was almost too much to bear. His frenzied cries drove Kit to the brink of despair as his desperate parents pleaded for more water. But rations were scant, with scarcely enough to quench the raging thirst they all shared let alone bathe those poor souls with flushed cheeks and burning hearts.

'Oh, baby, baby, don't be crying so, now.' Whispered Kit as she rocked the baby in her arms. 'We'll find you some fresh, cool water soon, don't you worry. Hush, sssshhhh...'

Having lost two of their four sons at sea and now with their baby at death's door,

Dennis and Noreen alternately watched Noeli for signs of the fever coming, and Sean for any deterioration. Desperate for water, Kit could stand it no longer. Time and again they had been told there were no further water rations to be had, and it was forbidden for any of the passengers to venture on to the deck other than at the designated time each morning. But Kit knew there were water barrels towards the stern; she had heard the sound of the ladle skimming up the cool water and the trickling noises as the excess liquid drained back into the barrel once the sailors had drunk their greedy fill. Her mind was made up; she would wait until dark, then after the watch had changed, she would take her chances. She *had* to do something now before it was too late for Sean; for all of them.

As soon as she could be sure nighttime had fallen outside as well as in their hovel, she took her worn, dark shawl and wrapped it tightly about her head and shoulders to ensure her bright fair curls did not shine in the moonlight. She slipped a small jug into the deep pocket of the smock she had once filled with watercress gathered by the stream. Hoping desperately that she had left enough time for the sailor on watch to be quietly slumbering, she began her ascent. Twice she lost her footing on the steep steps, clinging on with hands that now held as many splinters as her feet. Once, as the jug banged loudly against the steps, she stopped in silence, feeling to see if it had broken, listening in case someone below would see her and call out. Her fears were unfounded; all that could be heard was the babble of low moaning voices.

At last, she reached the top three steps, the open hatch immediately above her head. She prayed it was a cloudy night with no stars or moonlight to create a moon shadow. And she prayed she was right and the water barrels were where she believed they were.

Looking up, she saw a sky as black as charcoal; luck was with her so far. The only sounds were the wind in the sails and the sea crashing against the bow of the ship. How different the sea sounded in the fresh air, she considered. The thunderous, frightening roar below deck brought them only unwanted, salty water and a deal of panic. But now, the melody was as mesmerizing as the day she first set eyes on the great ocean.

Slowly, she raised herself until her eyes were level with the deck. In front of her were empty stretches of timber that were usually cluttered with human debris when she was allowed to clamber up on deck. Now, there was not a soul in sight and the area seemed far longer than she had remembered. She peered in the opposite direction and was relieved to find was just as quiet. Encouraged by her good fortune, Kit pulled herself out quietly and cautiously looking around.

As she stood up the fresh, sea breezes almost knocked her off balance. The sense of freedom was overwhelming; she was alone. There was no one groaning in her ear, fidgeting against her or coughing in her face, watching her every move. The smell of salt water filled her nostrils instead of human waste. It was

not the rugged hills that she loved but even so, it was bliss; for a brief moment, she was alone and it was heavenly.

She hoisted her shawl even tighter about her, and began to make her way towards the stern and, she hoped, fresh water. As she moved silently, the deck was smooth against her bare feet. The damp hem of her smock beat rhythmically against her shins.

Just a few yards ahead of her she could make out the silhouette of three barrels, lashed together with rope against the side of the steps to the upper deck. Still, there was not a single soul in sight. She lifted the lid from the first barrel and was relieved to find it half full of water. Taking the jug from her pocket, she dipped it in the cool, clear water and drank ravenously, wallowing in the sensation of water running down her chin to her neck and her body below. She flung her shawl to the floor and held the jug just above her head, pouring slowly so it trickled silently through her hair and down her back.

Setting her own self-indulgence to one side, she refilled the jug, replaced the lid on the barrel and backtracked silently along the deck to the confines below. As quietly as she had left, Kit climbed back into hell, conscious that it was as important she kept her secret from those below as well as those above deck.

Against all odds, the baby survived the night thanks to the water. But Kit's adventure had not gone unnoticed. That night, the midshipman tore a strip off the lazy sailor Cormac Mulcahy who was supposed to be on watch, but was instead found to be sleeping.

'Mulcahy, you are an idle, wasteful Irishman,' he screamed, waking Mulcahy from a deep slumber with a sharp kick to his side. 'There's spilled water running down the deck and the lid on the barrel has not been replaced properly. Had we hit heavy weather, we probably would have seen most of what remained spill out. Any more of this behaviour, Mulcahy, and it's the cat for you, d'ya hear?'

The thought of the leather stinging into his ample rolls of flesh made Mulcahy wince and he apologised profusely for something he had not even done.

'You can count on me, sir, I'll do my duty.'

Mulcahy groveled, stooping humbly before the man who stood some four inches taller. But he had no intention of taking the punishment deserved by a fellow sailor, not Cormac Mulcahy; he was no fool.

The next night he concealed himself behind a stack of packing cases, covered by an oily sheet and lashed down against the weather. It was not even his watch but no one got the better of Cormac Mulcahy. From here he could just see the outline of the barrels rolling gently against the horizon. He watched and waited;

he was convinced it would be one of the no-good 'Prods' that had managed to get on to the ship's roll call. Protestants had no honour and no morals, he reasoned; it would certainly be one of them - probably one of the young jacks who knew no better. But Mulcahy would teach them respect!

The lulling motion of the boat had rocked Mulcahy off into a fitful doze when a shuffling noise jarred him back to life. He looked down to find a rat sniffing about his feet, trying to burrow its way through the oiled cloth to the supplies stored beneath. He kicked out, missing the vermin by a yard but sending it scuttling for cover further down the deck. And then he saw a shadow looming, moving slowly but surely towards the barrels. At last! Here was the action he had been awaiting. He'd stay right where he was until the thief got his hand into the barrel then he'd rush up behind and press him into an arm-lock while calling for the midshipman.

But as the outline of the vagabond became clearer, Mulcahy could see it was in fact a woman's form. As she reached the barrels, he moved slowly towards his unsuspecting victim as once again, Kit scooped up half a jug of water and drank until it flowed down her chin. As she raised the jug above her head to refresh herself once more, she was grabbed roughly from behind. As a huge, callused hand silenced her scream of surprise, she gagged and struggled for air.

'Don't make a sound, or I'll kill you,' said Mulcahy. 'And if I don't, the Captain will surely toss you overboard as shark bait for being a thankless thief.'

Kit gasped for breath as he released the pressure on her mouth. His hot breath against the side of her face was repulsive as he pressed his body against her. Held in his vice-like grip, she felt the hardening in his trousers. Her body became rigid, her arms tight and straight by her side. She locked her knees and clamped them tightly together in a desperate attempt to fend off the inevitable.

'I know what you need, little lady, and I think you know what I need. Now, are we going to make one another happy?'

He grabbed the hemline of her ragged skirt and lifted it high as he ripped at the tattered garments beneath. Straddled across the barrel, he took her there and then, cautioning her to remain silent as he grunted and groaned with pleasure. Her face taut with pain and misery, she bit hard on her bottom lip as he thrust violently into her. This was not how it had been with Ruarie; this was not about love or even pleasure, but violence, control. No emotions, no tenderness, no feelings - just self-gratification and a delight at domination and inflicting pain. Her body may have been open but her mind was closed as she detached herself from these terrible moments. She was in Ballygall, not a windy ship's deck as she tried to focus on the past, not the present. What was just a few gruelling minutes seemed like an eternity but finally he withdrew, brushing his rough face on her neck as he stood back, laughing, and landed one more slap across the side of her head.

‘Now that wasn’t so bad was it?’ He said, straightening his breeches. Kit reeled with disgust and pain, slumped to the floor in a huddle against the barrel.

Mulcahy grinned: ‘Am I the first? Surely not!’

Kit could not speak, her teeth still clenched as she struggled to contain her revulsion. Mulcahy picked her up from the floor and filling the jug with water, handed it to Kit. He smiled broadly, revealing broken, stained stumps where his teeth should have been.

‘I think you enjoyed that, hey? Now, I can keep you supplied with as much water as you want - here, look I can even get you more food.’

He took a chunk of bread and a piece of cured pork belly from his pocket.

‘What do you say, then? Some more pleasure tomorrow night, huh?’

Mulcahy put his hand on her breast and squeezed it hard. Without a moment’s hesitation, she pushed him back, kneeling him in the groin. She turned to run, but Mulcahy grabbed her right arm and tugged her back hard towards him.

‘You little bitch!’ He whispered in a hoarse, vitriolic voice as he forced her hard back against the rails. His filthy fingers splayed across her face, pushing her out away from the deck and towards the rolling seas below. With one hand still clutching the jug of water, she clung on with the other to the slippery rails as her head loomed closer to the foaming waves below.

Suddenly, Mulcahy put both his hands beneath her arms and with one easy motion, lifted her clean off her feet. Kit braced herself for her fate; the prospect of a watery grave had never seemed so appealing. But he dropped her back on to the deck as suddenly as he had lifted her.

‘If I thought I could toss you into those waters without you screaming, making a loud splash, I’d do it. But we’ve already made enough noise to wake the dead. Now, go back to your hovel and rot with the rest of them! A pox on you and your family, little Bridget. A vile pox.’

Kit pulled herself upright and quietly began to run as quickly as her trembling legs would go. The hold seemed miles away and although Mulcahy’s abusive voice was little more than a whisper, it rang in her ears every step of the way.

‘Mark my words, you’ve not heard the last of Cormac Mulcahy.’

As she rushed towards the comparative safety of the hold, she didn’t notice the

pair of tearful eyes following her. Hidden by the darkness and the oiled cloth that was his hammock-like shelter for the night, Sonny bit his lip in shameful sorrow as he watched Kit scramble back down the ladder. Awoken by the kerfuffle, part of him had immediately wanted to rush to her aid. But he was well aware that he was one of the most insignificant and dispensable members of the crew. Mulcahy would have had no qualms about tossing him to the wolves – if not overboard! So instead of following his heart, he used his head and remained hidden, vowing he would make it up to Kit at some other time.

In her panic to escape back to the hold, almost half of the water spilled from the jug and by the time she had clambered down the last rungs and made her way through the sleeping human debris, even more had been lost.

‘Here, take this Noreen. I have a piece of rag we can moisten and place it on Sean’s head to cool him down.’

‘Too late.’ Said Dennis, his quiet voice devoid of any emotion. ‘He’s gone.’

Noreen rocked silently back and forth, the baby clasped against her breast. Dennis simply stared into the desolate nothingness that surrounded him. All around them was death and desperation; those not driven mad by hunger were smitten with an insatiable thirst. Dennis now considered that the prospect of a famine on dry land was vastly preferable to one on the high seas, but it was too late. A smoldering resentment had begun in his heart, a loathing of the man who had pushed him and his family into such drastic action. Joseph McLaughlin, he decided, could have had only one thing on his mind when he tricked them into leaving; he wanted his holding back for himself, with no tenants. And the price he was more than happy to pay had been Dennis’s. The man was pure evil, considered Dennis, prepared to get rid of his own two daughters into the bargain but keeping his son with him, of course, to work the holding. Maybe there was no famine in Ballygall at all; maybe it was all a swindle, invented by a greedy man who wanted to steal back land from poor, trusting farming families.

Dennis stared at Kit and all he could see was her father, all he could feel was hatred. Joseph was killing his family as surely as if he’d taken a knife to them.

But Kit knew nothing of the voices ranting in Dennis’s head; instead she sat silently absorbing her own terrors, twisting the ring on her finger round and round again. She guessed that with the fever now rife, if even half of those on board made it to America, it would be a miracle. And that was just what Kit now prayed for, a miracle.

Chapter 6

If there was one time in his life Joseph McLaughlin hated being right, it was now. The full extent of the crop failure was plain to see. Everywhere he looked the

blight had turned good potatoes into a blackened pulp. Everywhere, green stalks stood tall but scorched and blackened leaves now fell to the ground, beneath which the rotting tubers continued to fester.

After a hungry summer with nothing more than some coarsely ground meal, many desperate men still unearthed their rotten crop and tried cooking them in the hope that some form of nourishment remained in them. But all this brought was sickness and the fever. The corn crop had largely been a disaster too for those who had grown it, with harsh weather conditions delivering a meager harvest. In Ireland, corn was almost universally grown as a cash crop, a way to pay the bills. Now many hard-working Irishmen found themselves unable to pay their rent.

The evictions began quickly with greedy landlords seizing the opportunity to rid their lands of unprofitable tenancies. Destitute families sat on banks near their former homes, homeless and hungry. The structures would be torn down to ensure the destitute families weren't tempted to return, and even their neighbours would be put on pain of eviction should they proffer help. The never-ending walk from place to place began, in search for food and shelter. Scalpeens - hovels - were dug out from the hillsides or ruins were roofed over with branches and peat if it could be found. Yet as the people starved, ships laden with corn continued to leave the Irish ports for the mainland and Europe. As families were turned out of the homes they had lived in for generations, the food was also taken from their mouths, thanks to the artificially high prices maintained by the Corn Laws.

Joseph placed a few sprigs of heather beneath the simple cross on Carmel's grave; despite the troubles he faced, it was Sunday and he never failed to keep the promise he had made to himself place a piece of nature's beauty on her grave every Sunday. He sat himself down and whispered a short prayer for his devout wife's sake. Life had driven the Lord from Joseph's heart, but he found this a peaceful place, and he liked to share the good and the bad times with his wife, just as they had done when she was alive.

'So, where do we go from here, my love? My plans only took me this far. What am I to do next?'

Joseph leaned back on one elbow, gazed up into the grey skies, deep in thought.

'Let me explain to you, Carmel. We have seed potatoes enough to grow something of a crop for next year - if the disease hasn't already crawled into them. There are two sacks of seed corn we could sow that might pay the rent, if it provides a decent harvest. But do I take the chance and plant - or do we eat it now? What if the blight comes back again next year? Those beds have been lovingly tended year in year out and until these past two years we've never had a jot of bother with this accursed pestilence. I don't even know how it comes! I mean, is it on the wind - brought by foul weather such as this, perhaps? Oh,

darling, I have so many questions and here you are, just resting in the soil.'

Deep in thought, he passed his hand across the surface of her grave as though he were smoothing her long, shiny hair. As he explored old memories, his thoughts began to fall into place. He recalled the mode of farming employed by the English, how Lord Edgerley's estates in Shropshire were planted in rotation, with one tract always left fallow, resting. How the livestock moved from field to field – the sheep nibbling and clearing up the debris from the cattle once their gritty tongues had pulled enough long grass to fill their bellies. Maybe the fact that Joseph's family had tended these same potato beds for so long was part of the problem? Just as Carmel lay silently beneath the soil, could the pestilence be doing the same thing, he asked himself? He just didn't know it, but was almost convinced that the cold, wet weather had much to do with the spread of this latest Irish curse. Nevertheless, it was something to consider. By removing the rotten potatoes and growing corn there instead next year, and conversely growing potatoes in the cornfield, perhaps they would have a better chance of a decent harvest. He smiled.

'Thank you, Carmel, I do believe you've given me some hope for the future: And our girls – I know you'd be asking me this! I have heard nothing yet of course, but I have a strong sense that they are safe. But then, you'd know that better than me, my love, wouldn't you?'

He stood up and made his way back down the hillside. At the halfway point, he stopped and surveyed the lands that had failed so abysmally to feed his family this season and last. He looked at how he might rotate the crops to try and force a yield that would provide enough to feed them and pay at least a part of the rent. The flatter, more productive field normally set aside for corn would instead, he decided, be cultivated for potatoes with a few rows of turnips. He would sell half of the seed corn and they would eat half of the seed potatoes, planting the remainder of both. The money would give him enough cash to buy meal when they needed it most – just before the crops came in. He had little choice. Something had to be planted or they would have no future. Equally, they needed food now, to live. It was a decision that might help to save their lives – or end them. But most importantly, at least he had a plan; he had hope.

As Maeve opened her eyes, panic followed a brief moment of confusion. She was in a dark, silent place, unable to move scarcely more than a finger.

'Mary, mother of God, I've died - have mercy on my soul.' She thought to herself as she struggled to raise her right hand to cross herself. At last, it broke free and she realised her shroud was in fact crisp linen covers on a sumptuous, feather

bed. Tucked in tightly beneath a heavy brocade quilt and numerous blankets, the firm hand that held Maeve wore a velvet glove.

She looked around her and was relieved to see this was no poorhouse or sanitarium. The glass in the windows was smooth and clear and the walls were tall with silver candelabra glowing dimly. Above her the ceiling was pure white, embellished with fancy shapes like feathers in the wind. Ornate drapes and huge paintings in gilt frames adorned every wall. The heavy, wooden door shone like ice on the winter puddles and was so tall a giant could have passed through, she thought to herself.

She tried to lift her head from the soft pillows, but a searing pain shot through her body. As it passed, it left a droning, ache thudding from her forehead to the back of her head. Wincing as she suppressed the urge to vomit, Maeve struggled to remember what had happened. She had a vague recollection of walking down a dark street with Flynn - and then nothing until she woke up in this heavenly place. The sound of voices came from just outside her door. One voice was soft and refined, the other less so. As the door opened, Maeve closed her eyes tightly, feigning sleep. She had no idea why she was in this fine bed in a fine house let alone how she had arrived there, but in case she was in trouble, she closed her eyes and prayed everything would be all right.

‘Betsy, fetch a jug of warm water. It’s time we refreshed our young guest.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

There was a swishing, sweeping sound and footsteps approached. Maeve felt the mattress dip as someone sat gently on the edge of the bed. A cool, smooth hand was laid on her forehead and again, the sweet voice she had heard moments earlier, this time little more than a whisper.

‘You poor child.’

The hand that caressed her face was fragrantly scented and stirred long forgotten memories of the hours she had spent with Lady Edgerley. The door opened yet again; this time the harsher voice she had heard earlier filled the room.

‘I’ve got the water, Ma’am. Where shall I put it?’

‘Sssshhhh.’ Lady Sophie put one finger to her lips as she turned and faced the bad-tempered maid. ‘Just put it over there Betsy and leave it to me. I’ll take care of this.’

‘What? *You* wash ‘er, Ma’am? That’ll be my job - you dunno where she’s been or what she’s been up to, if you’ll pardon my saying so, she - ’

'I said, be quiet - I don't want her disturbed. Now, please will you be a little more charitable. This poor soul has clearly been a victim of some terrible misfortune. Look at her dress - a fine gown if ever I saw one. And she carries a Bible inscribed by one Lady E, with the family's coat of arms beneath her signature. No, she must have been attacked - robbed, of her possessions. That must be the reason she was on the streets alone.'

'More like a few gins too many if you ask me.' Mumbled Betsy beneath her breath. Lady Sophie ignored her maid. 'He should have left her in the street to rot.'

'Mr. Quigley acted in the correct Christian way by bringing her to Haringdon Hall, after all, it was our carriage that ran her down. Thank the Lord, the doctor believes it seems to have dealt her just a glancing blow rather than any broken bones.'

'She's got a lump on her 'ead the size of a goose egg, Ma'am.' Said Betsy. 'I know that from when I was combing out her hair.'

'I wish we knew who she was - her family must be absolutely distraught wondering where she is. But there's nothing to even give us a clue.'

'Mark my words, she's no lady, Ma'am. When I undressed her she was wearing-'

'Betsy! Please! Don't you think she's suffered enough without your gossiping? I'll hear no more of this. Now, leave us. You have other things to be getting on with. Go!'

Betsy Brown spun on her heel and stomped indignantly from the room, angry at being chastised, and the unfairness of it all. She was, after all, only pointing out the honest truths to her mistress. Betsy knew a waif when she saw one, even one masquerading as a lady in a fine frock. But *she* had seen what was beneath that dress. Frayed and tattered drawers and just a single limp petticoat that had seen neither water nor a linen press for many a day. And that slender shape was not thanks to stays or whalebone corsets. No, it was deprivation not fashion that had carved this body into the vulnerable shape now asleep in the west wing.

'Them's no lady's hands neither,' she grumbled to herself as she closed the door with a thud. 'When did a lady have such chapped, dry hands? They've worked hard - damned hard - for many a year, I know. Why, they're more like mine than 'er Ladyship's!'

When Betsy had joined the household as a scullery maid some ten years ago she was just thirteen. The Jenisons were fair and considerate as employers went, and Lady Sophie was a good Christian woman. Betsy knew her heart

ached for the child she could not have but after years of miscarriages and stillborn babies, her health could take no more. As for her husband, well, he seemed to enjoy the practice – with his wife or anyone else he took a shine too, including Betsy when she was young and tender prey.

Nevertheless, this household was the closest thing Betsy had to a family; her mother had died in the workhouse soon after her father had run off to avoid taking the King's shilling. Apart from Quigley and Cook, she was the longest serving member of the domestic staff and she didn't much like her opinion of some trumped up little harlot being ignored by her ladyship. She was right, she knew it and she was going to make it her business to ensure everyone else knew she was right too. No, if that little slip of a strumpet knew she was up against Betsy Brown, she'd not be sleeping so easy in that fine bed, she told herself.

The touch of the cold compress on her forehead made Maeve start and her eyes involuntarily flickered open with the shock.

'Ah, you're with us!' Said Sophie, softly. 'I'm so pleased.'

She reached across from where she sat on the edge of the bed and squeezed the excess, cool water from the face cloth. Maeve opened her mouth as if to speak, but Sophie gently put her forefinger against her lips.

'Shh, just rest. Here, let me soothe your head with this gauze again.'

Sophie gently laid the cloth on Maeve's bruised forehead, sympathizing as a wince sprung from her lips. Tenderly she stroked the young cheek with the back of her hand as Maeve breathed in deeply, imbibing the sweet fragrance of the woman's skin. She began to remember what had happened to her; the journey across the Irish Sea following her father's betrayal; Flynn and his deception. She remembered the blow to her head and surmised it had been Flynn who had attacked her. No doubt he would be long gone now with the money destined for her passage to America in his pocket. Then the sound of hooves on shingle came through the partly open window and she cringed as she remembered the last piece of the puzzle. The sound of clattering horseshoes had been closer and far more painful the last time she had heard it. She remembered nothing of being brought to this place, but she was glad she was there and not lying in a gutter with all the other poor, unwanted detritus.

'That's better, you poor thing,' cooed Sophie. 'Tell me, what is your name dear?'

Maeve took a few shallow breaths and opened her mouth to speak, but only silence lingered in the air. Then she managed a faint sound.

‘Mm....Mmaa...’

Frustrated at her own lack of ability to speak, tears welled in Maeve’s eyes.

‘Shhh, child, I shouldn’t have encouraged you to speak. I am surmising that you were trying to say *Mary* but you really need to rest. Now, try and sleep; our physician has prescribed plenty of rest to heal the bruising and speed your recovery.’

Maeve considered her position carefully as she lay in the huge bed. Destitute and alone without even the means to return to Ireland, she knew she had no other option but to stay just where she was. There was nothing to reveal her true origins all the time she remained silent, but her voice would be a certain giveaway. No, Maeve would not say a word - at least not until she had perfected the crystal clear tones of a real lady, like Lady Edgerley, whose voice she knew so well. This was something she would need to master if she was to carry off the role she had decided she must play; the role of a real lady, speechless and with no memory thanks to the tragic accident that befell her.

Chapter 7

With strong winds and a willing tide, the crossing to America could easily be achieved in five weeks. But thanks to a drunken crew and a recalcitrant captain the *Coral Rose* followed the wrong course for almost ten days, prolonging the agony for those passengers in the bowel of the ship. As the days passed miserably by, and conditions worsened, the crew became increasingly more reluctant to visit the hold. As their cursory visits became ever more infrequent, the hold was nothing more than a fetid pit. The groaning stench hung like a fog in the air, almost visible, tangible. Relief only came as death stalked the old, the sick and the young. And then there was no time for prayers let alone a wake. The body would be hauled out, removed quickly and unceremoniously, for disposal overboard at the earliest opportunity. It was an unpalatable job for the sailors but hardly strenuous as few of the bodies weighed as much as a small barrel of grog.

Each time Kit’s turn came to drink in the sea air, she would wonder how long it would be before she made her final appearance on deck in the grasp of two sailors hands, instead of under her own power. But her greatest fear as she mounted the top steps was Cormac Mulcahy; she found death easier to contemplate than his hideous treatment. She would look cautiously around the deck before stepping from the hold, watching for him, waiting in case he should appear from some dark corner. So far she had successfully evaded looking upon him but today she was not so lucky.

His braying voice stung her ears. Caught half in, half out of the hold, other frail passengers were coming up the steps behind her. She had no choice but to

continue, and then cower on deck until she could slip back out of sight. With her shawl wrapped about her head as tight as a Nun's habit, he failed to recognise her as he sat, cross-legged, sewing a length of ragged sailcloth. She watched as his fat, rugged fingers tugged at the stout needle, the leather thimble on his thumb helping him to press hard from beneath the fabric. Where his head was lowered in concentration, she could see a bald patch on his crown beneath the matted mess of brown hair. His scalp was dry and flaky, like the reddened skin on his face. She shuddered at the memory of what he had done, turning her stomach even as it groaned with hunger.

It was almost time for the passengers' ration of hard, unpalatable biscuit. This 'delicacy' now frequently appeared with a liberal accompaniment of grubs and beetles, but at least it was meat of a fashion. The daily water rations were scant and depended largely on the sailor distributing them; one day it could be almost a full beaker to last the day, another just a few sips. Anything stronger than water was strictly for the Captain and his crew.

Corbett Mortimer sat back in the low-backed mahogany chair and stared mindlessly at the walls of his cabin. As cabins went on the *Coral Rose*, it was not a bad size; even the oak panelling was reasonably intact. But, he believed, these quarters hardly reflected his status as the ship's captain. He picked up the chunky glass, half full of cheap rum, and downed it in one. Resting the empty glass on his copious belly, he considered what he should do next. The rum won and continued winning until the flat-bottomed decanter was almost empty. Now, as he had suspected, the decision he knew he had to take was far easier; he had no problem making good use of the news he had just received.

For some days the *Coral Rose* had been hugging the coastal waters of America as it sailed towards its final destination. The sometime dangerous waters were now providing sanctuary for the storm-battered ship and its sailors. Just out of sight of the 'promised land', they now drifted in this welcome haven, freed from the blows dealt by the unseasonably early storms that had dogged the last few weeks. Its sister ship, the *Laurel Legend*, was slowly working its way back to Ireland, using these same safe waters. When the two ships came within signalling distance of each other, there was great excitement on board both vessels. As they drew closer, the Captains hollered greetings to one another, with Mortimer keen to hear the shipping news from New York. What he heard was troubling. Numerous ships full of sickly passengers were arriving on a daily basis resulting in a wait of several weeks before passengers could disembark at the port. The port authority was inspecting every ship and its human cargo, and when necessary quarantining the vessels and passengers indefinitely to stop fever spreading to the mainland. The rush to escape the famine and beat the worst of the winter weather had backfired and thousands now faced a similar, sea-borne destiny.

Mortimer had no intention of allowing his ship to stagnate like a foul floating

coffin, moored aimlessly for weeks on end. The crew's supplies were running low and water now strictly rationed. The passengers below deck had decreased in number by more than a third since they set sail – the single reason the surviving passengers had any rations left at all. Without a fast turnaround in port, the Coral Rose would probably be too late to collect its homebound cargo, and would have to wait, then facing the prospect of harsh weather when it finally made its return crossing of the Atlantic. The longer the delay, the worse it would get. No, Captain Mortimer decided, there was no alternative. They would head north to Boston instead of New York. He'd empty his hold there, hopefully pick up a profitable cargo, and head off for Ireland without a glance back at the misery he was leaving behind. Not his problem – at least, it wouldn't be once he could get them all off his ship.

He tipped his head back to empty the final golden drops from his glass and smiled at his satisfactory justification of the decision. Within minutes his orders were dispatched and a fresh bottle of rum delivered to his cabin by Sonny, a lad who knew better than to keep his captain waiting.

Kit felt the sway of the boat and sensed they were changing direction. They had been heading south for New York for some days now; the stars told her as much. At first, excitement welled; perhaps they were navigating their way through the waters to the docks that the crew had bragged were drawing near. She hoisted herself up and clawed at the side of the ship trying to reach the small porthole. It was almost a man's height above the top of her head but she just had to try and see. Her nails ripped against the splintering timber, her feet frantically pressing for a grip, but none came. She fell back to the floor with a large splash.

She turned to Dennis to tell him her thoughts, hoping it might cheer him. As Noreen's head rested in his lap, he stroked her forehead gently, silently. Not a word passed between them. Kit could not intrude on their grief, their helplessness. She turned to Noel, also lost in his thoughts.

"It won't be too much longer before we arrive, I'm sure, Noel. You're going to be alright, you and your mum and dad." She put one arm around the small boy's shoulders and squeezed him gently. Beneath the tattered clothing she could feel the bones of his shoulders and upper arms alarmingly clearly. She looked at his legs, his bare feet slumped aimlessly apart. She'd seen more meat on a rook.

She sighed and pushed her matted hair back from her face; she'd swapped her small comb for a piece of biscuit three nights ago so now her curls tangled together unimpeded. Moments later, she felt the direction of the ship shifting again. She had to get to that porthole; something told her instinctively this was wrong. She tugged at the rags wrapped about her feet, revealing swollen, bloodied toes. Her only hope of reaching the porthole was if she could press her feet against the ship's timbers for support as she gripped with her hands. There was no sudden spurt of energy, just a grim determination to see what fate now

held for them. Inch by inch, she clawed her way up. Her toes and fingers sought and found the softer, rotting parts of the timber. Her nails were thick with splinters and filth but she could almost smell the fresh air of the sea as she drew closer and closer to her goal.

'Noeli,' she called in little more than a whisper. 'Here, come just give me a little shove, that's all I need. Please, Noel.'

But he didn't move. Her arms were growing tired at supporting her own body-weight, even though she was little more than skin and bones. Still she clung on, and pushed herself upwards. Suddenly she felt something wrapped around her legs and there was a surge of energy lifting her towards the porthole.

'I hope you're not planning on staying here for too long, kit,' teased Noel. 'I've a busy afternoon ahead of me – preparing my bible and so forth!'

He grinned as his frail arms squeezed tightly about Kit's knees. At last her eyes drew level with the very bottom of the small porthole. Salt coated the thick glass on the outside as Kit squinted her eyes to try and make something – anything – of what she saw. It was all a blur, smeared with white crystals that sparkled when caught in the weak sunlight. As the ship pitched and rolled, a tall foaming wave hit the portside. Kit closed her eyes, fighting to retain her grip. As she winced with the effort, her eyes opened and she watched as the water drained down from the window. She was losing her hold and would fall at any second. And then it all became clear. A distant shoreline was just visible through the tarnished glass. From this side of the ship Kit knew it could only mean one thing; they were travelling north, away from New York.

'What is it, Kit? What did you see?' Asked Noel.

'I can see land, Noeli, we're not far now.'

'Not far from where?'

Kit's hands and feet went into spasm, and she tumbled helplessly down to the ditchwater below. As she peered up at Noeli, she tried to force a smile.

'I wish I knew –but at least it's land.'

Still the days dragged by, the monotony of life in the hold rarely broken by a few brief minutes in the fresh air on deck. The knowledge that there was a distant silhouette of land was the glimmer of hope that just sustained them. Almost daily a corpse departed the ship for the inky waves, entering with barely a splash as

the daily cycle of sleep, agony, sleep was finally broken for another poor soul. It seemed the ship was making unbearably slow progress, often heading directly into the truculent winds. Kit would spend those precious minutes in the fresh air marveling at the movement of the sails and the unexpected skills of many of the ship's hands; how could they tie so many different knots, so hard – and so fast? How did they work the ropes and unfurl the sails at just the right moment? In particular, Kit was full of admiration for the courage and skills of the young boy they called Sonny. His face would beam with a cheeky grin as he clambered quickly up a mast to fulfill some urgent task, amidst strong gusts that bounced him from side to side. In general, it seemed to Kit that the entire crew was now a more sober bunch, perhaps as keen as she to reach land and end this interminable journey. The very last dregs of the paltry provisions were now being distributed, sometimes with just a mouthful each day for each remaining passenger.

Early one morning Kit was awoken from a deep sleep by a low moaning. The dreams of peat fires and Irish hillsides were chased away by Noreen, who was slumped against her shoulder, dripping with sweat. When the incoherent mumbling stopped, Kit knew she had to act quickly and stop Noreen from slipping into a coma-like sleep. Once Noreen succumbed to the darkness behind her eyes, Kit knew she'd never come back.

'Noreen, Noreen, listen now; listen!' Kit shook her gently. 'You have to stay awake, d'you hear me, Noreen. Open your eyes, please, come on now.'

She momentarily let go of Noreen's hands to pull the shabby shawl away from the ailing woman's scrawny neck. Her skin roared like a fire and her eyes just rolled back in her head. With Dennis still asleep, and Noel just staring silently at his mother, Kit knew she needed to jolt them into doing something.

'Noeli! Come - help me please. We need to cool your mammy down – is there any water in that beaker over there?'

Noel scuttled across to the other side of the hull where a chipped beaker was perched on a low beam. Just as he reached it, the bundle of rags to the left of it suddenly leapt up and pounced on him.

'Yer a bigger young fool than you look if you think you can steal from me. Leave that water where it be.' The man lashed out with a poorly aimed blow to Noel's shoulder, sending him and the water tumbling.

'What's the good of that!' shouted Kit.

The commotion woke Dennis, who began to weep helplessly, while a traumatized Noel was also unable to help. Kit shouted at the pair of them:

‘Dennis, come here now! Noreen needs you.’

As she saw his blind misery, a glimpse of pity softened the edge of her voice.

‘You did well, Noel, truly you did; look, you have the means to soothe her fever after all - take that wet shirt off and give it to me to cool her forehead with. You hold your ma’s hand.’

A sudden warm brightness stunned Dennis from his melancholy. The glow was followed by a rush of fresh air and a great deal of shouting; the hold had been thrown open and the morning brilliance showered him with hope.

‘Noreen, take my hand, my love, take the hand of your husband.’

He took Noreen in his arms, resting her head against his chest. Noel began to fan Noreen’s face, wafting the cool, fresh air across her searing skin. Slowly, the beleaguered woman’s expression began to change. Once again, she was back with them, in the land of the living instead of that strange place between heaven and earth, life and death. Her lips trembled and on the ghastly, putrid breath of starvation she pleaded quietly for water.

‘Someone must have water here – just a few drops, I’m begging you.’ Dennis’s desperate voice echoed around the lifeless hold. ‘On the life of my wife and child, I’ll never ask for anything again, just a sip of water to cool my wife’s parched throat. Please. PLEASE!’

Kit looked at the steps, now shrouded in sunshine, and considered whether she could bear to make the climb and beg for water. As she made up her mind to do so, a pair of small, bare feet, then two scrawny legs slowly began to descend towards her. It was Sonny, the boy she had so often watched skimming up masts with the speed and agility of a cloud in a gale. Silently he stepped off the final rung, placing his right forearm across his nose. In his left hand was a small jug, the sort she had seen used for poteen. He carefully picked his way through the squalor towards the corner where Noreen lay against Dennis.

‘Take this,’ he urged as he came to a halt. ‘Quickly, before anyone else sees!’

‘Thank you, you’re an angel.’ Kit hadn’t been this pleased to see someone since Ruarie had appeared to bid her farewell. ‘What shall I call you?’

‘Sonny, just call me Sonny.’

‘Sonny – this is so very kind of you, but why are you-’

'Sssh!' He whispered. 'I've come to tell you all that we're nearing land – the place where you'll be leaving the ship.'

'Mary, mother of God, all praise and blessings upon you!' Cried Dennis, bulbous tears rolling once more down his scrawny cheeks

'Be quiet, and listen.'

Sonny moved closer as his nostrils became accustomed to the reek of the hold.

'We are making for the Boston docks but the Captain has heard there's a long wait to get passengers on shore.'

'I *knew* something had happened.' Kit shook her head; this 'Boston' was a place she had heard nothing of. How would she ever find her sister in a totally different City to the one they were supposed to meet? Dennis shielded his wife's ears even though she plainly had not a clue about anything going on around her.

'We diverted from New York for the very same reason – too many nosey port officials refusing to off-load passengers who were sick. Now, it seems, the same things is to happen at the docks in Boston and Captain Mortimer is refusing to wait. He says the delays will mean we miss the weather for the return voyage and the Coral Rose is just not up to the winter seas.'

'I don't understand.' Said Kit. 'If we're to be landed in Boston... oh, Jesus, you're not saying we're returning to Ireland are you?'

'No, I'm not. The Captain cannot be rid of you fast enough.'

The boy glanced around him to make sure no one else was listening, his voice so low Kit could scarcely hear his words.

'I'm telling you that he won't wait to off load you at the docks; instead, every passenger is to be thrown over the side when the Captain gives the command.'

'WHAT!' Screamed Noel.

'There are shallow waters coming close now,' comforted Sonny. 'You'll be able to walk most of the way to shore!'

'Oh Lord,' Kit exclaimed. 'It will be a disaster. We're all so scared of the sea – and we have neither the knowledge nor the strength to swim.' She paused, and for the first time felt a sense of true defeat. 'Even if the shore is close enough to walk to, we won't make it - what with all the panic and desperation-'

Sonny hushed her once again.

'No, you can do it; there is a way. Very soon, everyone will be brought on to the deck with what chattels they have left, supposedly for some fresh air and a first look at the new land. It is expected there will be great excitement at the prospect of this spectacle. While this is happening, you must slip to the furthest point you can get to at the back of the ship, away from the Captain and most of the crew. The wind has dropped and we've slowed the ship down so the Captain can navigate the shallow waterways. You must wait there quietly until you see the mud-banks coming closer. These will look like deep brown fingers creeping out from the shore towards the ship. The water's pretty clear so you should be able to make out just where they are and which are just shadows. As soon as you see a stretch close enough to the ship, you must throw all your belongings over the side then quickly join them.'

'But we can't swim, I've told you.'

Sonny squeezed Kit's hand.

'Your clothes will catch pockets of air as you fall. It will give you a few seconds of buoyancy so if you move quickly, you should reach the shallow, silted areas with ease. It's not a perfect plan, but far better you each jump in your own time, alone, rather than be thrown overboard with this lot.'

He cocked his head towards the remnants of the passenger manifesto. Kit knew he was right – they had no choice, but she couldn't imagine how they would cope with Noreen as well as fighting for their own survival.

'I must go now, before they come down to chase you all on deck. You'll be fine. Trust me.'

Kit watched as he dived for the ladder and was gone in seconds. She turned to Dennis, who was still stroking Noreen's head.

'I can help, Kit.' Said Noel, standing over her. There was a look of life in his eyes she hadn't seen for weeks. 'I'm a strong lad, least I was, and I'm good in water – even as a laddy I'd splash like a fishy in the pond down in Kilairny. Please, Kit. Let me help.'

'Oh, Noeli, of course you can help. You shall go into the water first with these.' Kit grabbed her hessian bag and pushed a shabby bundle into it. It was the last of the O'Doherty's possessions. 'Your father and I will ease your mother over the side immediately after you've gone, so when we drop her she should still be close to you if the ship is moving slowly. I'll go next, then your father. With a bit of luck if we all make straight for the shore, we'll be on dry land in no time. No one on board will care that we've gone even if they do notice. Dennis? D'you agree?'

Dennis nodded, tentatively. Before he could speak a clatter of feet and loud voices filled the hold.

‘Come on, you peasants. On deck now, every last one of you. Bring what little you have with you; we’re going to clean this hovel through while you’re taking the air.’

Kit knew it was lies, but still a small voice nagged inside her that perhaps the boy was wrong. Perhaps they should take their chances with the ship, rather than the seas? As they clambered up the steps for what her heart told her would inevitably be the last time, she considered their chances. They were weak, exhausted and half-starved, but at least, she thought to herself, only Noreen had the fever. Noeli was truly emaciated but as yet his jaw hadn’t become distended nor his belly too swollen. Besides, he had some clue about getting along on top of the water instead of beneath it and that was a blessing. Dennis and she had the benefit of having started the journey a little stronger than the others and perhaps even a morsel of fat still remained stubbornly on their bones. Yes, she decided, they had a better chance than most. This was another step, another stage of their journey.

The wind hit her face full on as she stopped, midway between the hold and daylight. It was a fresh day and the gusts chilled her partly exposed skin but it was fine and bright, with a blue sky the colour of Ruarie’s eyes. Ruarie; how she longed to see him again. Noeli reached down to offer Kit his hand. He too seemed to have found a sudden strength, and for once Kit felt she was not alone in the struggle to pull them all through to safety. She and Noel each took one of Noreen’s hands, clasping her at the elbow and easing her on to deck as Dennis pushed from below. The sight that met Noreen’s glazed eyes for the very first time transfixed her; an array of tall trees with verdant green foliage that crept almost to the water’s edge. The occasional tumbled tree allowed narrow views to the beautiful hinterland beyond. Between the trees, tall ferns and bushes shaded abundant clumps of long grass that were already beginning to collect the first golden sheaves and leaves of autumn. Noreen’s shaking hand reached out, pointing feebly to the stirring sight as she mumbled over and over again:

‘Erin, Erin ...’

Dennis took Noreen around the waist and tried to lift her into his arms. He stumbled forward and only Noeli’s hasty interception saved them both from falling down flat on their faces. The other passengers followed instructions from the crew and began making their way towards the bow, just as Sonny had predicted.

‘This way, quickly,’ urged Kit. ‘Noeli, give me that bag, I can take it now – you help your mammy.’

She followed close behind them, guarding against one or all of them dropping to their knees. As they slowly, quietly, made their way towards the stern, Kit looked at the silhouette of the diminished family of three; set against the brilliance of the blue sky, she realised just how wretched they had all become. But step-by-step, inch-by-inch they progressed, neither looking back nor at the waters below that flanked the ship and now beckoned them towards their destination.

The Coral Rose seemed to be slowing gradually and Kit felt the winds were losing their battle with the sunshine. Though it might make their leap of faith easier, it also meant the time they all feared was rapidly approaching. Exhausted by fear as well as the sheer effort, they stumbled to a halt by two small barrels. Noreen leaned on one of them as fast, shallow pants of sour breath clattered out of her wheezing chest. The sudden sound of bare, naked feet running behind them alarmed Kit. Praying they had not been found out, it flashed through her mind that this might be how her life would end, tossed overboard by an uncaring crew for disobeying the Captain's orders. As her pulse raced uncontrollably, a hand touched her shoulder. Kit jumped nervously, but it was Sonny.

'Quickly! There are shallow waters and a sand bank just ahead. You can reach land there with a very small effort and a pinch of good luck. Quickly, now, hurry.'

Sonny lifted Noreen clean off her feet. He made for the opening where the gangplank would be dropped in port. Its low, gated area was just the place to save them from clambering over the rails, making their descent just a few precious feet shorter.

'Ladies, tie those shawls tightly around your waists lest you lose them. Gentlemen, if you need something to grab these fine ladies by, I suggest you reach for the ends of the shawls; they will help you to pull them through the water should the need arise. Now, hoist those skirts up and catch them into loose knots. With luck, they'll catch some air like a kite and help you to float across to the sand bank. I have these two small barrels here – they're empty so no grog for you I'm afraid, but they will help keep you on the surface of the water if you can get a hold of one.'

The boy remained at a respectful distance as he helped Kit, but Noel was more tactile as he frantically worked to entwine his mother's clothing.

'Look!' Kit whispered, pointing at something ahead of the ship. 'That must be it, the sandbank.'

Sonny leaned out over the port side, shielding his eyes from the bright glare on the water.

'Yes, yes it is. Now is the best time to go, trust me. Do you know what order you're jumping?'

'That we do,' answered Dennis, nodding his head. 'Noreen, we're here, my love, in the new lands of America. It's just a few more steps and we'll be there. Don't you worry, we'll do fine.'

The boy glanced up along the deck before slowly opening the gateway, and whispering to the anxious little gang hovering between hell and salvation.

'Now, you must jump quickly, one after another – that way you're all close in the water as the ship moves off and can help each other. Try to stay calm and make your way to shore as quickly as you can. Remember what I've told you, head northeast and you should reach Boston in a day or two. Now go!'

Noel put one hand on each side of the rails and looked back at Kit.

'I'll be waiting,' he smiled.

The boy stepped up behind Noel and put his hand into the small of his back. A gentle nudge encouraged him on his way, arms and legs flailing in mid-air. As soon as Noel's feet left the deck, the boy turned and tossed one of the small barrels overboard. Then he took hold of Noreen, sitting her down and quickly sliding her off her perch.

'She's in - quickly now, Kit, pass me that bag; it'll fit in the barrel. Come on, you must go now!'

For the first time, Kit felt the reality of this impossible choice - to die on board or take her chances in the water. She twisted the curtain hoop on her finger nervously and turned to Sonny:

'Will you not take your chances with us?'

'No, I'm staying here with the Coral Rose and heading home for Ireland, then maybe even to England. 'It's a fine job for a man – to be a sailor. Now off you go!'

As Sonny's gentle hands eased her from the deck, Kit's thoughts raced back to Ireland; she had to live, she had to go back. Her clothes flew high above her shoulders in the seconds before her toes felt the shock of cold water. As her feet hit the surface she instinctively pushed her skirts down and sure enough, she popped back to the surface just feet from the barrel. As the flood of cold water cleared from her ears, she saw Noel, supporting his mother's head above water, his voice calling to her, quietly, urgently:

'She's not with us, Kit. Her eyes are closed and I can't see her breathing.'

Kit grabbed the barrel and frantically began splashing and kicking in the cold murky waters. Desperately she struggled to propel herself in Noel's direction. There was no sign of Dennis, but she was too concerned with her own survival to ponder whether or not he had survived his jump. She kept her chin high above the water, her lips firmly closed; she dared not speak for fear of the muddy water flooding her mouth. But after so many weeks of deprivation, cold and unfamiliar though it was, the feel of the water stimulated her every sense.

Noel sorely needed help as he struggled to hold Noreen's head up, but despite her frantic efforts, Kit was not moving any closer to Noel. As she looked to her right, the sandbank seemed to be slipping away. She was drifting helplessly along with the slow tide.

'Don't come for me or your father, Noel,' Kit cried. 'Make for the shore - as quick as you can. You'll be able to help your Mam far better when you get her on to the land, trust me.'

She turned to see if Dennis had surfaced and sure enough he was bobbing in the same direction, clinging desperately to another barrel. Then suddenly, she saw him let go of his only hope for survival. Had he gone mad – was he finally giving up on life? Surely he had enough strength in him to fight just one more battle?

'Kit!' Dennis called. 'Kit, it's all right, I can stand up. I can walk to America!'

Kit edged closer to the shoreline and dared to lower her feet. Sure enough, she too could stand up in the silty, muddy sand. As her feet slowly began to sink, she wriggled her toes and stepped forward to grab Dennis's arm.

'We've done it!' She cried. 'We're here!'

'Help me, I can't hold her up much longer,' called Noel, now just feet away from them.

No sooner had he spoken than Noreen slipped from his grasp and disappeared beneath the water. Dennis plunged headfirst towards Noel with Kit close behind. The water was clearer in the shallows and as they gazed down, Noreen's face was visible just inches below the surface. She was completely still; a string of tiny bubbles trickled slowly from the corner of her mouth. Her face was beautiful, serene and untroubled. Every line on her face was smoothed away in the refracted light. If this is the moment of death, thought Kit, it's not so fearsome.

Dennis grasped his wife about the waist, and dragged her back into the real world. As she rotated lifelessly in his arms, he squeezed tighter still while Noel and Kit helped to drag them both towards the shore. The pressure from Dennis's arms beneath her ribs caused a sudden spout of foamy water to spurt from Noreen's mouth. As she coughed and choked, Noel sobbed with relief.

And then they were there. For the first time in their lives their feet dug into the warm soil of a foreign land. Noel crumbled to the ground and filled both his hands with sticky, dark earth.

'Mary, mother of God, thank you, thank you.' He murmured.

Dennis sat with Noreen's head propped against his chest as he rubbed first her hands, then her cheeks.

'We're here, Noreen, here in America. 'Tis a fine place indeed for a fresh start and a new beginning. Who knows, perhaps we'll be raising an even bigger family here than in Ireland.'

Kit was absorbing her new surroundings when she looked at her hands and realised the precious curtain ring Ruarie had blessed her with as a parting token of his loyalty had gone. Desperately, she rushed back towards the water, her eyes scouring the sands and tufts of coarse grass where she'd clawed her way out of the sea. But there was nothing, no sign of the priceless gift. She stared bitterly at the water that was so nearly the death of them all, the waves that had spitefully taken the last precious thing she possessed. And then as if the water had regretted its meanness, she spotted the barrel that contained her tattered bag. Wedged in a clump of sea grass it was about to work itself free and disappear in the wake of the ship. A final surge of adrenaline propelled Kit back into the water and she clawed frantically through the weeds. Just as it seemed it would slip from her fingertips, she lunged a shade further, deeper into the silty water and grasped the edge of the barrel, dragging her bag from inside before sending it on its way downstream.

Back on dry land, she searched the bag, desperately looking for the tarnished metal of the curtain. She rummaged beneath the tools, and then at the bottom of the sodden, hessian-bag she saw a faint glimmer of brass. Against all odds, the ring had slipped from her finger as she hauled what had been left of her possessions into the bag.

Convinced this was a good omen, a turning point for them all, she turned to tell Noel and Dennis her good news. But in a second, her optimistic moment had passed. Slowly, she walked back and sat herself beside Dennis. Oblivious to her presence, he was talking quietly, comfortingly to his wife.

'We'll find a place with a piece of ground,' mused Dennis, stroking his wife's hair. 'They say all manner of plants and food grow in these soils, good robust foods that build strong lads and lasses.'

Kit took hold of his hand, lifting it from Noreen's forehead. She spoke quietly as Noel slumped at his father's side.

'She's gone, Dennis.'

Dennis shook his hand free and clasped his wife's head close to his own damp, frail body.

'Corn, turnips...'

As Noeli began to weep, Kit gently took Denis's arm.

'We can do no more than give her a Christian burial, something she would not have had on the Coral Rose.'

'Kit's right, daddy,' said Noel, softly. 'Let us help you.'

As the two remaining men in Noreen's life sat on either side of her, Kit left them alone with their grief. She walked slowly up the slope of the undulating ground, searching for a place where Noreen could be laid to rest in peace. It had to be close by, they were too weak to carry her far. As Kit's eyes scanned the lightly wooded terrain, she wondered how they would manage to dig that resting place. But though they had neither the proper tools nor the strength, they did have the will to ensure it was decently deep and properly marked.

Two symmetrical rows of trees that were steadily shedding their rose-coloured leaves bowed as they parted to reveal a pathway, a break in the foliage created in the wilderness by wandering wildlife, creatures of habit going about their business. Their tracks were fresh and had softened the ground, treading in the still moist leaves. This was the place, she decided.

Silently, steadily, she and Noel hacked away at the ground with her father's rasp and a slim, pointed rock Noel had found in the shallow waters. Neither spoke or looked up from the depressing toil there was no escaping.

The task completed, Kit looked around for something to make a cross to mark the grave. Nature could offer nothing but two small, fallen branches, almost straight and not yet crumbling. With a handful of coarse dried grass, she bound the two shards together.

Side by side, they stood silently beneath the arc of trees. Dennis was drained and defeated, his homeland, his wife and all but one of his family gone. Kit slipped her arm about Noel's shoulders and took him away, leaving Dennis alone to bid his last farewell to his wife. He stared down at the place where his wife now lay at rest. But there were no tears now. He placed his right hand on his pounding heart and spoke in a quiet but determined voice:

'I swear to you Noreen, this will be avenged. Rest easy in your grave my love, and be sure the man responsible for this will die. Somehow, I will find the way and the means to do this for you, and for our boys. I promise you now that before I die, I will return to Ireland and see to it that Joseph McLaughlin pays with his life for our misery.'

Chapter 8

Margaret McLaughlin had always been considered to be the more bonnie of the wives of Joseph's two brothers, but Geraldine McLaughlin was never the less a striking woman. Her considerable stature and proud bearing were eye-catching, and made many a man sigh at the sight. But when Joseph entered the cabin that December morning, his heart almost stopped as he absorbed the scene before him.

Geraldine was slouched on a three-legged stool, as close as it was possible to get to the small peat fire. At her feet sat two of Joseph's nephews, huddled against her shins. In the dim light, Joseph was unable to determine just who was who. He had long since learned that hunger removes those distinguishing features like a chubby chin or rosy cheeks, but these tiny faces were also bereft of any emotion or hope. Listlessly chewing at her breast was the youngest child, now all of twenty months. There was no milk, no sustenance to be derived from the woman's weary body but still it pursed its lips and sucked feebly between little cries of hunger and frustration. A small lad sat poking the peat fire with a stick, his eyes distant and unseeing. On a bed of straw lay three more children, huddled together for warmth and comfort. The air was acrid; fever could not be far away.

Fearful of the fever, Joseph raised his arm across his face, covering his nose and mouth as he spoke quietly to Geraldine.

'Where are your eldest lads – Tom and Pat?'

There was no response.

'Where are they, Geraldine?' Joseph coaxed. 'I know your husband's away for the harvest in England, but the lads; where are the boys?'

Slowly, her eyes moved in Joseph's direction, her chin lifting just a shade, as if she were trying to identify the voice, and from whence it came.

'Please, listen to me. It's Joseph, your husband's brother. Now, think; where are they?'

A small voice came from the huddle of small bodies, tucked away behind the twirling stream of grey smoke.

'They've gone for work. To the public works in...'

The small voice trailed away, his concentration gone.

'Is that you Michael – I can't quite see you clearly in this light. I said, is it you?'

'No, my brother Michael's dead. I'm Corin. This here's my twin brother James and that's Robbie there, playing with the fire.'

Joseph did not recognise a single one of them, even though he had seen them all only a few months ago at the ceilidh. He squatted down by the fire and began to untie the small bundle he carried under his arm.

'Corin we have work to do, come now. I want you to draw me fresh water so we can cook up some of this meal. Where does your father keep the straw?'

Corin nodded his head towards a dark corner.

'Over there; we had to bring it all inside lest it be stolen.'

'Right, I'm going to make up another bed for your brothers and one for your mother too. Are there any more blankets anywhere?'

'No. None. Everything's been sold, stolen or swapped for food.'

'What about shawls? Where does your mother keep her clothes?'

'She's wearing them all, or the best part of them. There may be some scraps of woollen cloth over there, we've been using them to swaddle the baby.'

As Joseph's eyes scanned the darkness his gaze latched on to a broom and a pile of rags. Plunging a rag into a pail full of water, he began squeezing it out across the floor, sprinkling it everywhere to subdue the dust as he set about sweeping the earthy surface. Once the worst of the grit and dust was out of the door, he grasped an armful of straw and sniffed at it inquisitively. After deciding that though dusty, it was dry enough to use, he arranged the straw in two piles. He lined each with a small piece of hessian from the sack in which he had carried the paltry provisions he had dared spare. Tenderly, he lifted the two sickly boys, one at a time, and placed them close together on the smaller of the straw beds. He covered them with the large tattered shawl he'd found wrapped around the rags. When they were lying quietly, he poured some water from the pail into a small bowl, took a frayed piece of cloth and washed them gently. Their bodies were pitifully thin but almost hot to the touch, and they whimpered as they tried to escape his cold hands. But Joseph knew only too well that dirt and lice were

fever's friends. Eventually the little sparrows settled down into their clean new nest, and Joseph began removing the used straw and soiled rags from the cabin.

'Corin, take a light from the fire and torch this stuff. Robbie, help your brother wont you and fetch me some more water.'

Robbie clambered to his feet, took a piece of kindling and headed off, a stick glowing orange in his hand.

'James, will you come and hold your baby brother for me while I attend to your mother, please.'

'It's my sister, Marie.' James murmured, almost smiling. 'But I suppose she does look like a boy, what with her dirty feet, and rags for clothes!'

As the boys busied themselves, Joseph began to poke about along a low shelf where a few cracked bowls perched haphazardly. He found an old black, iron pot took hold of the sturdy handle and tipped half of the coarsely ground Indian corn into the vessel. Then he poured some of the cold, freshly drawn water over it until the pot was half full. Finally, he added a small piece of fatty pork and a couple of sad-looking turnips before hanging the pot on a cast iron frame that straddled the fire. He stoked the fire higher until the flames licked the bottom of the cauldron. Almost immediately, the warm glow seemed to bring colour back to Geraldine's cheeks. As Joseph watched, she began to show slow but steady signs of rejoining the world of the living again.

Joseph took another piece of rag, soaked it in the bucket and turned to Robbie and Corin as they came back into the cabin.

'Here, take Marie and wash her down with this.'

Joseph passed the boys the baby and then the rag.

'Rub it all over her head as well as her face and body, but dry her off and make sure you're sitting nice and close to the fire so she doesn't get the chill.'

Joseph picked Geraldine up from the stool and carried her to the second straw bed he had carefully set out. He sat himself down beside her and allowed her to gradually recline against his shoulder. Gently, he felt her forehead and was relieved to discover it warm from the fire rather than fever. Nevertheless, he washed her face, neck and hands before tucking her beneath a makeshift cover made up of the remaining rags and odd pieces of clothing he could find.

'Right lads, keep the fire stoked and give the broth a good stir.'

As he spoke, Joseph threw open the door, and tugged the screen away from the window.

'What are you doing, uncle – we'll surely freeze to death, even with the fire burning!' Shuddered Corin.

'We have to get the air moving around this place to get rid of any pestilence. It's only for a few minutes and if you keep close to the fire, you won't take a chill from the cold.'

The shrill wind sang through the single room, fanning the flames so they danced high up the sides of the pot. After a few minutes Joseph closed the door and the window, and soon the room began to fill with an aroma the boys had long since forgotten all about.

'When did you last eat, Corin?'

The boy thought for a moment, his brain addled by a lack of sustenance.

'It was two, no perhaps three days back when we shared the last two potatoes.'

His lips were cracked and chapped but as he spoke a sense of anticipation played on them as he took in a deep breath through his nose, and enjoyed the wholesome smell.

'We've had some roots and grass, mind, and I found some half-dead nettles that we turned into a soup, but it wasn't too good.'

'To be honest, uncle, it was downright disgusting!' Chimed in James with a wide grin.

'Right, we'd best get you all started on some of the clear broth before you try and eat the stew.' Said Joseph.

Joseph knew anything entering their stomachs would be a shock to the system. Their guts would have shrunk dramatically and would fill easily; if they gulped down stodgy food too quickly, they would suffer chronic stomach cramps and probably vomit everything back up. Unfortunately, the Indian corn he had brought with him had only been coarsely ground. The makeshift millstones he'd used were nothing like as powerful as the metal ones required to truly smash 'Peel's brimstone' into a palatable form. Importing the yellow maize had been the British government's solution for the poor starving Irish, but the corn required hours of grinding and even longer cooking if gut ache and cramps were to be minimised.

He took two bowls from the shelf and carefully began to scoop scalding hot liquid from the pot. Skimming only the top of the brew, leaving the solid goodness to

carry on cooking, he filled each bowl to about half way. The cured pork had already imparted some fat and its saltiness to the juices and Joseph knew it would warm the very souls of these boys and their mother. Finally, he found a tiny beaker, half filled it with cold water then added some of the hot broth.

'Here, boys, take one of these bowls to your mother and then you can share the other two between you,' said Joseph. 'Pass me the baby.'

The boys didn't need telling twice. Fast as a diving kestrel, they took it in turn to cup the bowl in their hands, sipping joyously, sharing as only family can. Joseph supported baby Marie in the crook of his left elbow and dipped his finger in the warm broth, smearing it across the baby's lips and tongue. Instinctively, she sucked against the finger, desperate for sustenance. Joseph picked up the beaker, extended his forefinger underneath the rim so when he carefully tilted it towards Marie's quivering lips, the lukewarm broth trickled slowly down his fingertip and into her mouth. At first she sucked so hard she gagged and almost choked, rushing to swallow each tiny mouthful. Gradually, as she realised it was not going to be taken away from her, she began to relax and enjoy the warm sensation.

An air of happy expectation soon filled the room, replacing the threat of fever. Just those few sips of what was, in reality, little more than warm, salty water had brought the smile back to the family as they patiently anticipated better things to come. After another hour of slow cooking, Joseph was satisfied the half-empty stomachs were now ready for some real food. He took the pot from the fire and stood it carefully between the two straw beds so as not to waste the warmth it exuded. Once again he began to scoop from the pot. But this time, he dug deep to catch the thick porridge-like meal, chunks of turnip and even some tiny pieces of fatty meat.

By late afternoon, the sleepy little cabin was warm, quiet and full of a sense of satisfaction. Joseph shared in the mood but was now torn. He had to return to Eugene but he feared for this family if they were left alone again. Sleeping quietly, Geraldine and her children were safe for now, but for how long? He didn't care to guess. Only James was awake, sitting opposite his uncle by the fire.

'So, tell me properly now, how long have your brothers been gone, James?'

'It will be two... almost three weeks now.' He shook his head. 'They said they'd be home after a week, so mother's been in despair. She thinks they're dead or dying in a hedgerow somewhere. You don't think so do you uncle Joseph?'

'No James, I'm sure they've found some profitable work and are making the most of the opportunity. Did you not have enough provisions when they left?'

'Oh yes, but only just enough for a week - maybe two at the most. After they'd gone it turned so cold we started eating more just to keep warm. I suppose we brought this on ourselves with our greed.'

Joseph beckoned the boy to his side, put an arm around his shoulders and squeezed him hard.

'There's nothing greedy about trying to keep body and soul together with a little food,' he said softly. 'God sent this blight, for whatever reason, but it's the ways of the world that have made the famine - not you, James.'

James smiled, content in the warmth of his uncle's embrace.

'James, I need to be getting back to Eugene now before it gets too dark. That broth should last you for another two days and I've put enough corn and some vegetable tops up on that shelf so you can make another pot when that runs out. I've no more meat but at least you'll not have empty bellies. By the time that runs out your brothers - perhaps even your father - should be home again and I'm thinking they'll be laden with all kinds of food. Now, James, when he returns, I want either you or one of your brother's to come to my home and tell me all is well. If I don't hear from this family by Saturday when the food I've left you will run out, I will come back again, so tell your mammy not to fear. Do you promise me you can do this, James?'

'I promise, uncle, and don't worry, I'll not let mammy fret. I'll come tell you myself then perhaps I can stay awhile with Eugene and his pup.' James patted his uncle's shoulder as though he too was an adult, on equal terms. In many ways, thought Joseph, the lad was.

Joseph let quietly as the others slept. He had managed to claw his kinsfolk back from the very edge of life. They were simply existing, not living, but at least they had a tentative grip on life by the time he left them. But every step of his journey home, one frightening thought haunted him: how many families across Ireland were less fortunate?

By the time he reached the final leg of his journey home it was dark and as Joseph approached the door of the cabin he heard a rustling in the grass, then a low, guttural growling. The door flung open and Eugene rushed out into the cold night air, a chunk of firewood grasped threateningly in his hand:

'Oh, daddy - it's you! Tori you good, good, girl! Did you hear her, daddy, protecting me, she was! And you just wait until you see what else she did today!'

Eugene grabbed his father's sleeve and pulled him inside. There was a good fire burning and a bubbling pot, not unlike the one he had recently prepared for his brother's family.

'You have been busy, Eugene. I'm very proud of you.'

'Look, though, just look at this.' Eugene rushed over to the small dresser and grabbed a sack. He thrust his right hand inside and triumphantly pulled out a large if wizened hare.

'She caught it all by herself and brought it right back to me, daddy. She didn't run off with it, or try and eat it, but dropped it right at my feet.'

Joseph smiled. He knew how much Eugene loved his dog, but he also knew it was another mouth to be fed and soon, its life would be in the balance. On this occasion, however, she had proved herself to be of great use to the family.

Across the seas, the scarcity blighting Ireland was affecting England too. Liverpool was virtually overrun by migrants, many just hobbling along 'in transit', whilst harsh decisions were being taken. Without the fare money for a steerage passage to America or Canada, spalpeeni – itinerant labourers – were everywhere, hopeful of finding work across the Irish Sea in the now not so great Britain.

Liam O'Rourke had loved Liverpool from the day he arrived. Even though he was half-starved and penniless, within an hour of staggering on to the quayside, a handout from an English lady provided enough to feed him and give him a roof over his head for a week. During those crucial first days, he not only regained some of his strength, but also prudently assessed the situation, and his limited options. He knew only too well that hard pushed though the average workingman was, he always found the means and the time for a gamble, and nothing excited an Irishman more than watching a good fight.

So Liam O'Rourke somehow found the strength to earn a few coppers as a street fighter. His spectators were a sickly, poor lot with little to spare, and with the Irish punters his best customers, inevitably things were only going to get tougher. Business was hard, but finding other work was nigh on impossible with another desperate Irishman always prepared to do the job for less money. He knew he was facing an unforgiving winter and needed a good fight, a good crowd – a lucky break: And maybe a good woman too.

Chapter 9

A sharp crackling sound woke Maeve with a start. She quickly sat up in bed and looked nervously all around her.

'Oh, I'm so sorry miss, I hadn't meant to disturb you,' pleaded a well-rounded maid of about the same age as Maeve. She was dressed in a smart, dark dress with a crisp white pinafore and matching cap. 'I just came to light the fire. Shall I open your drapes now you are awake, miss?'

Maeve nodded her head and lay back, listening to the noise of the crackling twigs. The young girl drew open the three sets of drapes that adorned each of the huge windows in the room where she slept.

'I'll be leaving you, miss. I am so sorry, really I am.'

She walked away but continued to apologise quietly until the door was firmly closed. Maeve looked up at the ceiling from the soft, feathery pillows beneath her. Her head still throbbed a little when she first began to move about in the mornings but all in all, she was quite well now, almost back to her old self – better, maybe.

'Good morning,' she whispered to herself in a perfectly crafted English accent. 'I am exceedingly well, thank you sir.'

Maeve swung her legs out of the enormous bed and grabbed an oyster silk robe that was lined with a pretty, floral fabric. She tightened the belt around her tiny waist and with slow but positive steps, walked to the window and gazed at the undulating countryside that continued as far as the eye could see. It couldn't compare with her Ireland but it was beautiful in an almost decadent way; lush, under-grazed pasture, untapped woodlands, and orchards with fruit left to drop and rot. She looked around the room and decided her bedroom was much the same. Everywhere, copious rugs were strewn across the floors overlapping one another as they disappeared beneath the furniture. An ornately carved washstand boasted a porcelain bowl, with pale pink roses embellishing the rim. Maeve knew the matching jug, full of hot water, would be on its way to her right now.

The two high-backed chintz covered chairs - each with a marquetry cover, two plump cushions and a neatly folded travel rug – were symmetrically arranged at either side of the mahogany fire surround. On the mantelpiece Dresden china figurines flanked a chiming clock with a mother-of-pearl face and shiny brass hands. The walls were full of gilt-framed paintings, ancestral figures mingling with sweeping landscapes and Japanese ladies. Her favourite was an oil painting of a pair of chocolate brown hunting dogs, one of which seemed to have the same cheery disposition of Eugene's little mongrel, Tori. She smiled to herself as she recalled the day her father gave the tiny pup its name; Victoria – queen bitch, he'd said. Eugene struggled to get his young tongue around the name so simply called her Tori.

She sighed deeply: had she really grown accustomed to this extravagant and selfish way of life so quickly? Maeve sat herself down at the cherry-wood dressing table. To either side of the embroidered runner were cut-glass bottles filled with creams and lotions, some with silver stoppers, others in gold. She peered into the central mirror and the image that met her gaze pleased her. Her face was fuller but the high cheekbones were still prominent. Her eyes were bright and her skin glowed; this life seemed to suit her very well.

She picked up a soft brush and skimmed it through her thick, dark hair. It shone like moving water as it tumbled across her shoulders and on to the ruffled collar of her robe. She ran a gently perfumed hand across the soft fabric that now caressed her body, and almost wept at such luxury. This was a life she had never considered possible, a life she had watched Lady Edgerley live from a distance; she had never dared to even envy the trappings of the wealth she witnessed. And now here it all was, at her fingertips.

Drawing the two side mirrors inwards so she could catch sight of her profile, she continued to practice her English accent. She pursed her lips to make a 'shoooo' sound, then dropped her lower jaw a shade to create a purring 'saaaah' sound. She practiced a further ten sounds meticulously, using her tongue to recreate the clipped tones she now heard on a daily basis. Next, she spoke individual and variously sounding words in the fashion of bullets from a gun; targeted, focused and precise: sugar; please; quite.

Finally, she strung a few words together. The perfectly natural tone with which they tumbled from her lips was at the same time both refined and unaffected.

'May I take some tea? Sugar would be wonderful. Quite, I agree.'

Then, in her broad Irish voice she laughed: 'My, my, Joseph McLaughlin, what would you think of your little girl now?'

But a gravelly voice soon interrupted her laughter.

'Well, well,' said Betsy Brown. 'The mute speaks – and in an Irish voice, if I ain't mistaken.'

She stood in the doorway holding a jug of hot water, a broad grin smothering her worn and weary face.

'Nancy sent me up with your hot water, and aren't I glad she did!'

Betsy swaggered towards Maeve who sat nervously in front of the dressing table mirror. Her first public performance was to be unexpectedly sooner than she had imagined. She stood up, her full height still leaving her several inches shorter than the buxom maid. Maeve spoke quietly, but her accent was faultless.

'I... I seem to have recovered my power of speech.'

'Don't try and pull my leg with that one, little Bridget.'

Standing just inches from Maeve, Betsy's face was reddening with excitement, and her voice grew steadily louder.

'I know your game, you little thief! Thought you'd cheat 'em did ya – find a place to stay and then rob 'em? Well no amount of water's gonna clean you up.'

With that she tossed the entire contents of the jug of hot water at Maeve. As it caught her full-face, Maeve gasped and reeled from the impact, falling back against the dressing table. Bottles and jars went flying in all directions; a crystal perfume spray smashed, nicking a small cut to Maeve's right hand as it shattered into tiny pieces. The perfume stung as it seeped into the cut, but she knew this was the least of her problems.

'You little harlot,' screamed Betsy, grabbing Maeve by the hair and hoisting her towards the door. 'Think you can fool us all, d'ya? Well let's see what her Ladyship has to say about her precious *Mary* now, hey?'

'More to the point, Betsy, why don't I tell you precisely what I think about you!'

Betsy froze, unaccustomed to the harsh tone of her mistress's voice. By now, the corridor outside had begun to fill with anxious – and nosey – servants. Even Quigley had hurried upstairs at the commotion. But Lady Sophie was coping very well with Betsy, entirely unaided.

'Remove your hands from Mary – immediately!'

Maeve slumped to the floor as Betsy released her grip.

'I think you are an uncouth bully who deserves no place in this household, Betsy Brown. Now, go pack your things and get out. And don't bother asking for a reference; there wont be one.'

'But she's..'

'I said go – now.'

Betsy's protestations fell on deaf ears; her – former - employer was resolute. Furious, she grabbed a porcelain jug and lifted it high above her head. Quigley lunged forward and grabbed her arm just as Daniels the butler rushed to restrain her other arm. The jug crashed free from her grasp and as it hit the floor, smashed into a hundred jagged pieces.

'Get her out of here!' Said Lady Sophie as Maeve cowered anxiously. Seeing a smear of blood against Maeve's cheek, she gasped: 'Oh Lord, you are hurt, my sweet.'

Swaying on her feet, Maeve touched her head and took a deep breath. This was her opportunity, a moment to be grasped boldly and turned to her advantage.

'I... I am quite well, actually. Thank you, Ma'am.'

Lady Sophie was stunned.

'Oh my dear, how wonderful! The shock of this despicable assault has brought back your voice. At least some good has come of Betsy's disgusting behavior.'

She threw her arms about Maeve and held her close. Lady Sophie's heart beat against her Maeve's cheek, the warmth from her fragrant skin so soft against her face. 'And I am *not* Ma'am.'

'Then... what shall I call you?' Asked Maeve, looking up from the embrace, but careful not to escape it.

'Why not Mama? Unless...'

Lowering her gaze but not her guard, Maeve spoke quietly, considering every vowel and consonant before she spoke. The effect of the slightly fractured words only served to heighten Lady Sophie's compassion.

'I... I have no mm...memory of family. No memory of anything before ...'

'Then why do we not presume that we are your family – at least until we know otherwise? Mary, I have longed for a family of my own but God has not blessed me – us – with children. It may be that you are my destiny, and I yours.'

Maeve felt a twinge of guilt, but the lure of a new life overwhelmed her sense of remorse. She feigned a look of shocked surprise. But when Lady Sophie tenderly kissed her forehead, her tears were no charade. As the two embraced once more, Charles Jenison stopped in the hallway, peering through the open door.

'Well, well, I see our patient is much improved.'

'Oh, more so than you could ever imagine, my darling Charles. Mary, say good morning... to Papa.'

Charles' demeanor changed in a split second.

'Papa? Sophie are you-'

'For now, Mary has no family and neither do we.' Sophie's eyes pleaded with him to coalesce. 'Darling, please.'

Charles sighed; ultimately it was not a difficult decision. He knew that if he kept his wife happy, his life remained easy and comfortable. He had very quickly become accustomed to the wealth his marriage had brought him, and with her ageing, sickly family promising further endowments, he had no intention of upsetting her now. After all, his own inheritance had provided him with a title but very little else. He looked at Maeve, then to his wife.

'My darling, all I wish is to make you happy.'

As he gently touched Sophie's cheek, his eyes were on Maeve.

Chapter 10

Private Cormac Mulcahy adjusted his military cap yet again. As the sun moved slowly in the stark blue sky, he needed to shield the tips of his ears from its scalding rays. Already, his nose glowed brightly beneath his flaking skin, and the rest of his fair, freckly body was just a few blisters behind. Every inch that had been exposed to the pounding Mexican sun now tingled pink and raw. Like his fellow soldiers, he had removed the sky-blue jacket that absorbed every degree of heat. The regulation shirt, unfastened to the waist, was sodden two shades darker with sweat. As he loosened the braces from his shoulders, his trousers slipped down a good inch to reveal the ample belly that had been steadily swelling since he signed up and began eating US Army rations some six months earlier: All that food and eight dollars a month!

Maintaining his concentration in the cruel heat was a debilitating task, but an essential one; too many of his compatriots had got lazy. And got shot. Peering through the heat haze that rose from the parched ground was mesmeric, but the vultures that circled above kept Mulcahy sharp.

He brushed away a noisy fly then ran a sweaty finger down the barrel of his rifle to remove a small piece of fluff from the sights. The searing heat of the gunmetal scorched his fingertips.

'Mary mother of Jesus, that's hot!' He yelped, alternately sucking and waving his fingers.

The slim soldier to his right chuckled:

'You're not wrong there, Cormac. I did the same t'ing myself just now.'

'Now that makes me feel a whole lot better, Feargus,' replied Mulcahy, sarcastically. 'We must be thankful once again for the luck of the Irish.'

Within weeks of jumping ship, Mulcahy had signed up in Boston. It hadn't taken him long to surmise that most of the Irish in the burgeoning city could hope for little better employment than the arduous task of reclaiming the backlands. The pay was poor and the work backbreaking. No, Mulcahy had seen enough of bogs in Ireland and he had no intention of taking a risky job in one here unless the pay was good and the prospects better. Worse off still, were those poor Irish souls engaged in the mines. Invariably they would be tasked with undertaking the most dangerous jobs. From planting explosives to the exploring of new sites, it was generally an Irishman prepared to put his life on the line for a few coins. But not for Cormac Mulcahy, oh no. This was his new horizon, a chance to make the fortune he knew he deserved. If there was a war a-foot, as likes as not there would be booty to be found. He just needed to be in the right place at the right time and Mexico had seemed as good a place as any when he signed up along with a host of unemployed fellow countrymen.

It was at least an hour since he last fired a shot but his cracked lips were still stained black from biting the cartridge paper. Mulcahy had a reputation as a rapid, accurate shot. Despite the cumbersome process required to fire his muzzle-loading rifle, he could manage up to three shots per minute when he kept his cool, and they were invariably on target. The muzzle-loader may be slower than a musket, but its range and accuracy was vastly superior. His Company had been on the offensive for weeks, pushing hard into Mexican territory. The encampment at Huadalgo on the San Juan River was one of the lowest points of the territory, geographically. Their camp was in the dusty valley on the south bank of the river, a river that provided the water not only for cooking and washing, but also bathing. As a result, dozens of his fellow soldiers were afflicted with dysentery. Many died and went to an early shallow grave with nothing more than a coarse army blanket for a shroud. The grave digging detail was one of the most dreaded, not just because of the flies and the reek of death, but for the stone-like quality of the ground.

After two weeks, their Company was divided into two sections; one remained at Huadalgo awaiting the reinforcements that would allow them to head south in a pincer movement, the other - including Mulcahy - had been dispatched to advance on the nearby town of Zaratha. The town was taken with comparative ease as the Mexican army fell back, determined to fortify its vital cities. They left behind them some rich pickings and beautiful señoritas. And Mulcahy, of course, had made sure of more than his fair share of both.

But today was different. They were besieging the convent of Churubusco where more than one hundred men of the St. Patrick's Battalion were holed up. Every Irishman who had taken up arms for the Americans knew of Los San Patricios,

as they had become known. They had joined the American army as fearless Irish fighters, but were soon disillusioned by the all too familiar oppressive war they'd been tasked to fight. Tired of the poor treatment at the hands of the officer corps, many had deserted and under the leadership of Captain John Riley of County Galway, had joined the Mexicans. Fighting under a flag emblazoned with the figure of St. Patrick and the harp of Erin, they were now in a sorry position and even Mulcahy, who was bereft of morals or a conscience, found it offensive to be attacking a flag of St. Patrick and Ireland, waved above his own countrymen.

There were signs of movement on the south wall of the building as two men worked in harmony to raise the distinctive flag of San Patricios.

'Will you look at that,' mused Mulcahy. 'D'ya think they know we Irish boys are here, ready to fight them?'

'To be sure, they're looking for some mercy from their compatriots.' Replied Feargus, who then began to sing loudly:

'I'll give you three-o, green grow the rushes-oh...'

'Feargus, if I hear that cursed song one more time before I die, I think I'll-'

'That song is the very reason the Mexicans call us all gringos! 'Tis a fine song, Cormac, a fine fighting song and that's what we're here for, a fight. To be sure there'll be some treasures inside into the bargain.'

'You're right.' Mulcahy nodded his head in the direction of the convent. 'There can only be one winning side, Feargus, and we're on it.'

As they spoke, word was sent down the lines; muster for an attack. Ammunition was distributed, jackets donned and individual water supplies topped up. Every man gave his weapon one last check, one quick clean. No one wanted his rifle to fail at a crucial moment; it could be his last.

The final moments before the bugle called more than five hundred men to battle were always intense, humbling. Mulcahy could hear his own heart pounding in his ears. His mouth was dry but his hands were strengthened by the adrenaline surging through his body. He felt invincible.

The first steps were the worst. Your senses were acute as the noise of the bugle competed with the roar of your comrades. Your eyes fixed on one point in the distance and one closer to the lines that might afford some degree of cover, a place to reload your rifle and take stock. The smell of gunpowder was all around you, stronger even than the stink of your own sweat. And then you were running, running past bodies and a stronger, more pungent smell assaulted your nostrils;

the stench from opened guts, shattered bone, blood oozing on to dusty, sunbaked foreign ground.

Mulcahy stepped around the bodies as they fell before him, stopping to reload behind the corpse of a particularly large sergeant. He plunged the rammer down, holding the cartridge in his mouth. Five seconds. The paper bitten, the gunpowder poured and again the rammer forced home, firmly. Fifteen seconds. Take aim; steady, there's time, he told himself, take it slowly. A gentle squeeze of the trigger to avoid the muzzle-flip and POW! One more soldier fell from the wall, mortally wounded. Yes, Mulcahy thought, I am invincible.

He watched as the first US soldiers broke in through the convent gates, heard the screams of men as they felt the sting of a bayonet. It didn't take long. By the time Mulcahy was inside, the surrender had begun. Those fearsome San Patricios who had put their principles before their own lives were rounded up and made ready to be moved off in chains. A platoon was quickly mustered to accompany the prisoners to a humiliating trial, bereft of a single juror from an Irish background, just in case. Fifty would be hung and many others, including Captain Riley himself, would spend the rest of their lives with the letter 'D' branded on each cheek.

Within the hour the prisoners left, and Mulcahy was one of many who removed his cap as they passed him by. But the moment was gone as quickly as the prisoners. Mulcahy had work to do. He had long since discovered that a church was always a good place to start in search of treasure and the convent had two chapels as well as an ornate Catholic church.

The nuns were busy helping with the sick and wounded from both sides of the battle as Mulcahy entered the Church. He breathed in deeply to absorb that wonderful sense of familiarity of every Catholic Church. The cool, slightly damp air carried a faint smell of incense and old, polished wood. The icons, statues and pictures were all of customary subjects in a familiar style. The benches were more sparsely constructed but were still spaced just that little bit too close together, though there were no prayer books waiting at the end nearest the aisle. Few of the worshippers could read. Those who could - the nuns - knew the catechisms by heart.

The altar was equally frugally equipped, with a simple wooden crucifix gilded at each tip and two small, turned-wood candlesticks. Even the altar-cloth was of plain, unembroidered cotton rather than ornate silk. There was no poor box and no solid silver incense burner as he had hoped. Disappointed, Mulcahy decided to try his luck elsewhere.

The first chapel was even more Spartan, and the second looked just as unpromising when he first went inside but then he spotted something. His foot snagged on the worn red and purple rug at the foot of the altar, and as he jerked

it free, he could see a faint hollow joint in the flooring. It ran from the furthest edge of the rug to beneath the altar. Mulcahy tugged the rug away with both hands and almost squealed with delight when part of a carefully concealed trap door was revealed. After double-checking he was still alone, he quickly and quietly dragged the altar table to one side, exposing two small brass loops that were recessed into the trap door. With one finger in each small handle, he levered the door upwards and open until it lay flat against the floor. As his eyes slowly became accustomed to the dark he tried to make out what this room could be - a crypt, perhaps or a hideout for priests?

He grabbed one of the small white candles, and thrust the light into the darkness. Lying flat on his belly, he peered into what seemed to be a chasm some three feet deep at its most shallow point. Honed from the rocky ground, the sides had been roughly rendered and had timber struts to support the roof and stop the whole place from caving in. Surely there would be treasure here somewhere in this secret place? He plunged into the darkness and his joy changed to dismay; it was empty. Someone had beaten him to the rich pickings – or maybe there'd never been any. It was only a convent, after all. And then he saw it. Tucked right into the far corner, where the dark shadows were most dense, was an iron casket. It looked heavy, and a quick push proved him right. He placed the candle on the floor and reached for the box. It took a few tugs to drag it close enough to open, but though the lid was fastened shut, the frail lock flew off with one swipe from the stock of his rifle.

He didn't need the light from the candle to appreciate the rich glow of gold. There were more than fifty small, gold coins, a gold chain with a hefty gold crucifix along with a solid silver salver that had probably once served communion bread to the faithful.

'God bless the Catholic church!' He whispered as he gleefully ran his fingers through the coins. The cool sensation of wealth in his grasp was what he'd been waiting for, hoping for; now all he had to do was find a way to get the hell out of there.

Chapter 11

The trek to Boston that followed those desperate moments on the riverbanks had taken far longer than they had anticipated. Along the way, Kit and the remaining two members of the O'Doherty family had enjoyed mixed fortunes. There were those who would pass them by without flinching as they pleaded for a ride in a half-empty cart. There were even those who would hurl abuse at them and their faith. But Kit was invigorated by many of the other people she stumbled across who were prepared to share their bread with a family they had never met before; people who were happy to give them a ride in wagons or carts of all shapes and sizes, and once even in a shabby old carriage. Some of the good Samaritans were of Irish descent, others originated from England, Italy and even faraway

Russia. Everyone, it seemed, was heading for the great city of Boston and more particularly, its docks - or the Quincy Market to tender their wares.

Kit loved to talk, but she also loved to listen. During any of the rides with Bostonians, she would eagerly question her hosts about day-to-day life in the city. She wanted to know what was in store for them when they reached this grand place; to garner some inkling of how they might fare in their new lives. She soon learned that though the Irish was a race loved by many, they were hated by at least as many others. There were even Irish who had lived in America for several generations who liked to call themselves the Scotch-Irish, to set themselves apart from the poorer newcomers. One such gentleman by the name of Will Kehoe gave them a ride in a very fine cart pulled by two grey horses. He told Kit that he estimated almost half of the bars in Boston to be owned or run by the Irish, and many shops too – but the Scotch-Irish, mind, not *her* sort.

Kit listened as he told her that there were many Irish policemen and firemen, and large contingents working in trades such as shoemakers, painters and stonemasons. But for the unskilled, this pool of workers was controlled and successfully manipulated by labour unions. Despite the cautionary tales, Kit defended her fellow countrymen, replying that she was certain the traditional Irish neighbourly ways and their deep-rooted determination to help one another would shine through in America as it did in Ireland.

Kehoe laughed and told her that it was invariably the Irish who were to be found doing the most backbreaking and often the most dangerous jobs, from the mines or the railways, and out to the backlands. They were handed the jobs that were too risky for a black slave to be wasted on.

‘But what of the women,’ Kit asked anxiously. ‘I’m told the women work hard too in this country. What jobs do the women do?’

Kehoe thought a while before answering.

‘Oh there’s work, for sure’ he said. ‘Some in the mills or factories but it’s mostly domestic work that provides Irish women with a chance to earn a living.’

He explained how maids would probably have to work eighty hours a week, every week, and could expect to be harshly treated. They would take the blame for any problems that arose within the household, from broken crockery to missing food, and probably get a good beating for it. It didn’t sound very inspiring to Kit, but if it put food in their mouths, she vowed to herself that she would do it.

Kit had heard it said that more than one hundred thousand people lived in Boston. The day she and the O’Dohertys arrived, it seemed like every one of

those citizens was out on the streets. But at last they were there, and as they teetered down bustling thoroughfares, the sights that met their eyes were difficult to understand or absorb; buildings that towered high above them without the slightest wobble even when the wind blew; streets with carriages, people and horses mingling in a colourful mass as they went about their separate ways. People scurried about everywhere, walking or running in different directions, talking noisily in a variety of languages and accents. Everyone seemed busy, purposeful, and all wore suitable warm clothing and looked well fed. It was an awesome sight for Kit, daunting and inspiring at the same time. In her short life, she had known only hills and villages, not streets and cities. But the land had let them all down so badly of late that, and like most of the Irish, Kit was content to contemplate a life in the city, if only for a while.

When they finally reached the docks where Dennis hoped to find work, the distant sight of a ship approaching the harbour on a strong tidal sea brought back abhorrent memories. At the heart of the docks, three ships were berthed directly in front of a half-built structure. The building was so big and proud, Kit was sure it must be the biggest church ever to be built; yet it was called the Custom House. Great columns rose imposingly above deep stone steps. On each one crowds of people sat talking, eating, laughing, just passing the time away. All about her were wagons and carts either bringing goods in or taking away the cargo that had been unloaded from the ships. Barrels and kegs, sacks and crates were hauled about by burly men who worked in their shirtsleeves despite the first flakes of winter snow.

'Will you just look at those men – they've thumbs broader than my wrists.' said Dennis. 'We might as well be on our way now, there'll be no work here for me.'

Kit laughed at Dennis's self-deprecating tone and gave him a consoling pat on the back.

'Let's ask someone the best place to find work and lodgings, then, so we don't keep wandering around getting lost.'

'That's a fine plan, Kit, a fine plan. Go and ask that lad over there,' said Dennis, pointing to a slender, tall youth. Resigned to acting as the group's communicator, Kit strode across to where the young man was poised, resting.

'Good morning to you, sir,' she smiled. 'We have recently arrived in your great country and I would be in your debt if you could tell me just where we might find work and lodgings?'

'Now there's a voice a long way from home, if I'm not wrong. Recently arrived you say?'

He had a handsome if dirty face, and his eyes smiled even though his expression was stern.

'I'm not sure exactly when, but I should say we've been here in America for about two weeks. We've just arrived today in Boston. Can you tell me please where we can-'

'Find work,' he interrupted, 'and lodgings. Yes I heard you. I'm thinking.'

The pause seemed to last forever. Kit grew steadily colder and more impatient as the snow fell more heavily, blanketing the sound of the streets.

'Don't worry,' she said in exasperation. 'I'll ask someone else.'

She turned on her heel, tightened her shawl about her head and headed towards a small group of well-dressed men she presumed were merchants.

'Pudding Lane,' he called after her, pointing. 'Head for Pudding Lane in the North End area - up there for about twenty minutes or so, then left for about another five. You'll find it between Water and Milk Streets. It's good and central, and there should be plenty of cheap rooms. You'll find a lot of Irish there too, I promise you that.'

'Thank you kindly,' Kit replied. 'We'll be heading there right away, then.'

The man was as good as his word, and in less than fifteen minutes they found themselves standing at the north end of the place with such a tempting name. By now, the snow was falling in large, dry flakes. As it settled on the ground it made the shabby buildings in the street look quite beautiful. Kit could see people busily going about their business, warmly dressed and wearing leather boots. Some carried baskets full of food, others small parcels. But she did not see one half-naked or barefoot person. And there were shops – lots of them - on both sides of the street; some were full of pots, others sold fabrics or clothing. The most exciting sold food – loaves, carcasses of meat both fresh and dried and vegetables she'd never seen before. A family could feast for a month on just one shelf!

'Dennis, come on – you too Noel. This is the place for us. I can feel it. Let's try that big tall building over there; there must surely be a room spare in a place that enormous!'

'And what are we going to be paying for it with?' Asked Dennis. 'I don't suppose you've thought of that have you?'

Kit shook her head, excitement mixed equally with exasperation.

'Are you forgetting the money for selling the cart in Enislee? Here, look!'

She stretched out her hand revealing a cluster of small coins nestled in the palm of her bony hand.

'These must be worth something and by the time they've been used up we'll be working, wont we.'

'My you are a one, Kit,' said Noeli with admiration. But his happiness was cut short with a sharp clip round the back of his head.

'Noel, do as I says and go with her to find us a place to stay. I'm going to inspect the area, just to make sure it's a fine enough place to bring up what remains of my family.'

Dennis was curt, the accusatory tone of his voice leveled squarely at Kit. But she was not perturbed; her conscience was clear – and so was her thinking.

'Ah, I understand,' said Kit, angrily. 'And no doubt you'll be starting out by investigating that bar down there?'

'How can I – I have no money to my name, unless you want to-'

'I seem to recall that never stopped you in Ballygall, Dennis.' Kit retorted. 'So off you go try, your luck on this side of the water but you'll get nothing from me.'

Her words still stung his ears as he slipped away. Kit grasped Noel's hand, gave it an encouraging squeeze as they set off towards the tall building, keeping close to the houses that lined the street for shelter.

Number eighty-four Pudding Lane towered above the buildings on the opposite side of the street, though the adjoining properties were all of a similar height. The towering surroundings consisted predominantly of commercial properties, with offices of the Eastern Express Company, Boston Lumber and a privately owned carpet warehouse the biggest. Kit could not imagine who would have enough money to fill an entire building of this size with carpets – she'd only ever seen one in her entire life!

Suddenly, she felt nervous, unsure of herself. She looked at the lofty front door with its large, iron doorknocker. It was a big, tall house with lots of windows and the sheer scale of it towering above them was daunting. Just two steps, she told herself; two steps more of the journey and I'll be there, but they were hard ones to take. As her trembling hand at last reached out for the doorknocker, there was a squeal of hinges and a creak of aged timber and the door was flung wide open. A woman, almost as round as she was tall, threw a drunken man past them. He tumbled down the steps and on to the street.

'When you're sitting in some cold doorway tonight trying to get some sleep, just remember those last few drinks,' she hollered, tossing a small bundle of ragged clothes after him. 'Those last drinks you chose to buy instead of paying your rent, Billy Maguire.'

The man half crawled, half walked away, his feet slipping in the snow with almost every movement. His brain was still addled with booze but Kit knew the cold night ahead would soon sober him up. The woman turned her attention to Kit and Noel.

'And what are you staring at?'

'We were – are – looking for lodgings, ma'am. We were advised to come here and... here we are. I have money.' Kit thrust her hand out, the coins dull on her palm.

'So I see.' She took the money in her hand and examined it closely. 'Where do you think I'm going to spend those, then? Ireland, no doubt.'

She went to close the door but Kit dashed forward and held it ajar with her shoulder.

'Please ma'am, we have to find somewhere to stay – the boy won't survive this cold. I'll find work straight away and so will his father.'

'And where is this husband of yours then?'

'Oh I have no husband. I've travelled with the O'Doherty family from Ireland and he's all that remains of them, well he and his daddy. Please, don't turn us away.'

She folded her arms across her ample chest and looked Kit up and down.

'I suppose I could let you have Maguire's room. There's nothing much in it but it's warm because it has only one small window. You'll have to clean it – then you can come upstairs and earn your first night's keep cleaning the better rooms I let to respectable folk.'

'God bless you Mrs-'

'Peg. Just call me Peg, dear. Now come on Bridget, you've work to do.'

'My name's Kit, not Bridget.'

'To me, every Irish girl is Bridget. You'd best be an improvement on the last one that cleaned for me, mind; a one armed blind man could have done better. Lord,

she even came down the stairs backwards because she was only used to ladders!

Peg roared with laughter.

'Oh I'll work hard, rest assured. Noeli, go find your father and bring him back – quickly.'

Peg's house was an eclectic mix of rooms of differing size, aspect and adornments. Most prolific were the cheap rooms, often with five or six people living in just the one small room. Kit peered inside each time she passed an open door. More often than not an entire family sat huddled together for warmth. The furnishings generally consisted of little more than bedrolls on the floor, but the lack of privacy in such cramped conditions was the least of the tenant's worries with any illnesses spreading like wildfire. But the shared body heat stopped them all from freezing and the reassurance that, as long as the rent was paid, they would have a roof over their heads ensured a degree of contentment.

On the westerly side of the building were five less frugally furnished rooms that were let to 'gentlemen'. These were usually to be found occupied guests who might pay by the week, or the night. Occasionally Peg would rent them by the hour, if the money was right and the whore looked of a decent class.

The privy - or tubber as Dennis called it - was in the yard out back as was the well. The rear of what had been Maguire's room was in the basement but the front was partially visible from street level. The single window in the cell-like room was not only small but also had rusty metal bars, each one running vertically about six inches from its neighbour. Nevertheless it only had one crack in the glass and it overlooked Pudding Lane very nicely. Kit could have happily sat for hours watching some very interesting legs walking past her window, but she didn't, because she was far too busy. So successful was Kit's first day's cleaning that Peg agreed to keep her on for the week in exchange for the rent. In the evening when she'd finished her long list of duties Kit would set out, exhausted, to try and find some other kind of work. She was grateful to Peg but her heart was elsewhere - in the streets, the fresh air. But it seemed a hopeless search; domestic work was generally all that was available to decent Irish girls.

Thankfully Dennis had secured work for a dollar and a half a week as a labourer, infilling the boggy backlands to enlarge the city's territories. Noel worked alongside his father for the princely sum of seventy-five cents a week; he was smaller and described as 'even scrawnier' than his father. It was hard work with no end in sight but they weren't starving and it was only an hour's walk from home. Home; a room almost as big as the cabins they were used to, but made of brick - and a window with *g*lass in it! No wonder I need a drink, Dennis thought - who wouldn't celebrate this marvel at the end of a hard day's labour?

One week after she began working for Peg, Kit managed to find the time to go and spend the last coppers she had on buying the materials to write to the parish Priest in Ballygall, as she had promised her father she would do. She'd had no time to locate the biggest church in the city but there was no urgency – Maeve would be in New York and she was in Boston. Her hope was the Priest might be in touch with Maeve too by now and tell her where her sister was living. When she stumbled on a tinker selling odds and ends in the street, she bartered with him for a piece of paper and a slither of charcoal on his promise to undertake the posting of said letter. Kit quickly duly wrote a short note, tucked it inside an already used envelope and addressed it to Ballygall. It was getting dark now and she knew she had to hurry if she was to have any time left to seek alternative work. Hurrying away, the tinker's promise still ringing in her ears, she felt just a little bit proud of how quickly she was becoming accustomed to her own self-reliance and this new, American way of life. But before she'd turned the corner, the tinker took the note and the envelope, rubbed away the charcoal scrawls and smoothed them flat, ready for resale once again.

It was late and Kit was exhausted, but just as she was considering turning for home after another unsuccessful evening, Kit caught a smell on the wind she'd almost forgotten. It was an area of the city she had not visited before and the shops she'd passed on her way were enthralling. There was even one shop that was full of nothing but books. Hundreds of them!

She lifted her nose into the air and sniffed again. There was no doubt about it; she could smell scalding horn – the hooves of a horse. Her mind went back to the days when she would watch as her father expertly shod the feet of the local gentry's horses. As she stoked the fire and squeezed the bellows to boost the flames, one shoe after another would be heated until the metal glowed grey-white. Their dog would sidle up close, then scuttle off with a strip of horn cut from the overlong feet and sit just out of sight chewing happily on what must be a canine delicacy. The most exciting moment came when her father put down his rasp and carefully pressed the hot shoe against the underside of the freshly trimmed hoof to check for size and fit. It was this same deliciously evocative smell she now relished. Following her nose she turned left down Chancy Street and keeping to the south side, she soon spotted the source: just by an establishment called McGinty's Bar was a worn sign swinging in the cold wind: *Samuel Hobson's Blacksmith and Livery Yard*.

It was an impressive set of buildings, made more beautiful by the dense layer of snow that had settled on the roof and the ground. Two large timber gates had been flung fully open and were secured against the fence to reveal a large yard. To one side was a row of six empty stables, to the other a row of stalls, each with a sizeable hayloft above. In the far corner by the stalls, Kit could see an anvil beside a beautifully built brick forge, with a cast metal canopy above. The fire had almost burnt out, with just a slender tail of smoke now weaving its way up to the canopy where it disappeared.

A low two-storey building linked the two blocks and coming from inside, Kit could hear singing. It was not a fine voice but a happy one. She walked boldly across the yard intent on persuading the owner he needed her services. She tugged at her bonnet, smoothed down first her curls and then her skirts, before knocking firmly on the door.

A stocky, well-fed man of about forty opened the door and stared suspiciously at Kit.

‘Yes? What can I do for you?’

‘I’m looking for Mr. Hobson, please. My name is Kit McLaughlin.’

‘And is Mr. Hobson expecting you?’

‘No sir, he is not – but I believe he’ll be very pleased to see me when he learns why I’ve come.’

‘Is that so? And why is it you’ve come in this harsh weather?’

‘I’ve come to offer my services as a blacksmith.’

The man began to laugh, holding his corpulent belly with one reddened hand as it rocked up and down.

Kit frowned, angrily.

‘And what is so funny about that, sir? I have tended to the hooves of gentlemen’s horses since I was a child and I would respectfully ask that you please tell Mr. Hobson I am here. Perhaps he will take me a little more seriously.’

‘I am Sammy Hobson, dear, and I must apologise – I meant you no disrespect.’

His ruddy face was kindly and as he smiled warmly at Kit, she shrank with embarrassment at her own harsh words.

‘Here, come inside my office and warm yourself by the stove. It’s a perishing night out there.’

Without hesitating she followed him inside. Almost as soon she stepped out of the wind, Kit’s cheeks began to glow. She looked around and quickly realised this was more than just his workplace. The room was almost thirty feet long and about half as deep. There were several chairs upholstered in various shades of worn, brown leather, three small tables and a large oil lamp. In one corner a tall, black stove burned fiercely, its curly pipe taking the smoke outside through the

front wall. The other end of the room opened up into a small bothy, stacked high with tools and brooms.

'Here, lass, come and sit by the stove where it's nice and warm. What did you say your name was?'

Kit was still taking in her surroundings as she mumbled her name.

'Surely this place is a hotel of some sorts? It's so big.'

'Well I suppose the livery yard means we're a hotel of sorts – for horses.'

Sammy chuckled at his own joke then nodded as he continued:

'This here is the room where owners can wait while their horses are being shod. Gets pretty busy at times – inside and out.'

'So you could be doing with an extra pair of hands maybe?'

A real sense of optimism coursed through Kit for the first time in months.

'Now, not so quickly, Kit. I started training a young Irish lad a few years back; he soon decided it was not for him and took off – grabbing half the week's takings on his way too.'

'But I'm not a thief!' Kit exclaimed. 'And besides, I don't need training. I've shod horses-'

'For the gentry, I know, I know.'

He stroked his whiskery chin, deep in thought.

'If I'm honest, I was planning to call it a day with the shoeing side of things. I'm not a rich man, but smithying is hard work and I've no real need of the money that it brings. I'd rather save my old back.'

'But you wouldn't need to do the hard work – I would. And I *do* need the money.' Pleading Kit.

'What about your family – where are you living?'

'I have no family here in America, but I'm living at number eighty-four Pudding Lane with Dennis O'Doherty and his son Noel. We all travelled across from Ireland together, me and his family; they're all that's left now.'

'You see, I would prefer live-in help. There's rooms upstairs..'

'That would be fine with me, sir.'

'Yes, but it wouldn't be proper you living here with me – just us two.'

'But it wouldn't be just us. Dennis and Noeli would come too. I couldn't just leave them – I've been looking after them since Mrs. O'Doherty and the rest of the children passed away. We'd be no trouble, I swear, and I can-'

'I tell you what we'll do. You come and work for me next week and if things go well, then we'll talk about you all moving in. You'll not earn much, mind, by the time I've taken off board and lodgings for three of you.'

Kit rushed forward and threw her arms around Sammy's generous waist.

'Oh thank you, you're an angel for sure.'

'Tell me that again when you've finished your first day's work. I shall expect you here by seven o' clock in the morning and you'll leave when the last horse has been done and the yard swept. As for tools-'

'I have some!' Kit interrupted excitedly. 'I have some fine tools, given to me by my father, and used by his father before him.'

'We're all set then. Seven o' clock on Monday it is. Now be off with you before you're snowed in and I have to put up with you for the whole evening!'

As she left the yard, past the raucous noise of the drinkers at McGinty's bar, Kit's heart soared. She didn't walk home that evening, she flew; her feet had wings, as did her heart. Cutting back across the dark streets to tell Dennis and Noel the good news, she came across a small, timbered church tightly packed between two overpowering and more sturdily built buildings. But for the sound of a mass being chanted from within she might have passed it by entirely. As she stood in front of it she felt as though it was a sign from God, a message that all was well. Instinctively, quietly, she crept through the single, oak door and into a world that was suddenly familiar. The scent of incense and beeswax polish, the glow of candles, the comforting sound of the Mass.

As she knelt on the bare, flagstone floor, she knew this was a place she would always remember, always return to. At last she felt as though she was truly on her way to the life her father had anticipated for her. If only he were here to see it happening.

Chapter 11a

The park-like grounds of Maeve's cuckoo's nest were as much of a contrast with the hills of Ballygall as she could have imagined. The panoramic view from her

bedroom window was matched on the ground with shrubberies, lakes, secret gardens tucked from view, and follies of all shapes and sizes in the most unlikely spots. There was a manicured rose garden that, even on this early winter morning, yielded a cluster of tightly closed red rosebuds. But for Maeve, the place she liked best of all was the cobbled stable yard and coach-house. Here wafted the familiar smells of hay and leather that took her back. It was as if her favourite childhood memories had been blended into one harmonious scent; the happy days when her father shod horses in the hunting season, and the clattering sound of wheels on cobbles that she recalled from her visits to Lord and Lady Edgerley's fine house. She had lingered here many times before, reminiscing alone and allowing her senses to silently absorb the melancholy atmosphere. But she was no longer a child, and today she was visiting the yard with a purpose.

In the centre of the yard was a raised floral bed that she had seen Charles Jenison use as a makeshift mounting block. Immediately opposite her was the clock tower. Despite the fact that the hour hand always pointed due south to the six, the minute hand continued to rotate obliviously, day in, day out. The tower adjoined the coach house on the left, and an impressive run of stables to the right. Mr. Quigley lived in comparative style in the rooms above the coach house while the two young boys who assisted him with his duties shared makeshift accommodation adjacent to the hayloft. Maeve knew Mr. Quigley would be alone as she had seen his two boys gingerly leading Bolt, a young injured stallion, around the grassy headlands of the cornfields. With a nasty tendon injury some six weeks earlier, the time had come to start to try and bring the beast back into work – or determine if it should be shot. Thanks to the stallion's fiery nature, the forward planning and considerate Mr. Quigley had suggested the two boys tackled him together, with both of them on foot for this first outing. Even so, Quigley knew that if the beast took a mind to it, no one could restrain it, least of all these young and inexperienced lads. But he tried not to let it trouble him as he made ready for the trip into Liverpool at his master's request.

As he polished the lacquered door of the carriage with his warm breath and a soft cloth, he didn't hear Maeve approach. His hearing was not what it used to be, thanks to years of alternately driving carriages and pheasants. The clatter of the wheels, mind, was nothing compared to the bursts of shotgun fire that were often too close for comfort. On many occasions the pellets from the lead shot would rain down on him like hail as he beat his way through the dense undergrowth, chasing the beautiful birds high into the cloudless winter skies for the gun's to home in on.

If there had been any advantage to becoming older and less agile, it was his mistress insisting to her husband that his duties as beater ceased. Ah, yes, Lady Sophie; a kinder more Christian employer no man could wish for, and to see her new found contentment of late was a joy. The young lass he'd brought home from the gutter seemed to have given her a new lease of life, and who was he to

listen to the gossip of some of the other servants? Betsey's dismissal had divided the household, but he remained detached from the idle chatter and refused to comment. After all, the delirious mumblings and rants he heard coming from inside his carriage were barely audible, particularly to a man with his poor hearing. He could have been entirely mistaken in thinking the odd word he did manage to catch was spoken by an Irish voice, after all it was more than a decade since he'd worked with Seamus O'Regan and the memory can play wicked tricks on a man.

As the weeks flew past since that day in Liverpool, he doubted his recollections even more as he watched the poor lass recover and bloom. No, this was a fine English lady, he told himself as he buffed the door one last time and stood back to admire his work. It was only when he saw Maeve's reflection that he was aware of her presence and spun round, dutifully removing his cap and lowering his head.

'Please, put your hat back on, Mr. Quigley. The biting wind is quite fierce today and I should hate you to take a chill on my account.'

Maeve touched the carriage admiringly, peering inside as though she'd never seen the likes of one before.

'So this is what you transported me in,' she said quietly. 'I confess, I have very little recollection of my journey.'

'It's hardly surprising, miss, you was in a very poor way. You were lucky it was the wheel that caught you, not the hooves of the horses, otherwise ...'

Quigley stopped short, searching for the right words. The silence felt awkward, strained. When it was broken, it was by Maeve.

'I wanted to thank you, Mr. Quigley.'

'Thank me? 'It was me who ran you down, Miss. I should be thanking you for not insisting I was packed off without a reference.'

'No, I'm sure you were not at fault – and your Christian charity in stopping to help me is most commendable.'

As another pause engulfed Maeve, Quigley shuffled awkwardly. He was not comfortable in this young lady's presence, though for the life of him, he did not know why. As she tightened the straps of her bonnet beneath her chin, it seemed to Quigley that she too felt ill at ease, unsure what to do, what to say. When she did finally speak, her words compounded Quigley's embarrassment.

'As you know, I was unable to find my voice for some six weeks after the accident, though thankfully I am now restored to full health. I am curious, Mr. Quigley, as to exactly when this affliction struck me down, as I have no memory of anything before waking up in my bed here. So, I thought I would inquire whether you can perhaps shed any light on this matter... whether I spoke or-'

'No, miss, not a peep. Scarcely even a groan.'

A silent sigh escaped from Maeve's lips as she smiled broadly at Quigley, her deception intact. The kindly Quigley would not give her away. After thanking her saviour once more, she swept away across the cobbles and back towards the main house. Quigley watched until she was out of sight, admiring her almost majestic bearing. No, he must surely have been mistaken; this was no Irish hussy as Betsey would have them believe.

Slowly, he shuffled back into the stables and lead out a fine bay mare he had already tacked up ready. He backed her into place between the shafts, secured the rest of the driving tack and climbed into his comfortable, familiar seat to take the carriage round to the front of the house where he knew Lord Jenison would be waiting for him.

Quigley enjoyed these regular trips into the town and, he surmised, so did his Lordship. A man of the world, he was well aware of the kind of business being transacted by his master at the Grand Sefton Hotel.

Once they were on their way, Quigley kept the pace steady. The weather was good so the drive took less than an hour. Having deposited his passenger at the hotel for his 'meeting', there was a two-hour interval to fill. As soon as he'd safeguarded the horse and carriage in the hotel's livery yard, he pulled his hat down fast on to his balding head, turned up his collar and set off down Bolton Street to the small tearooms on the corner of Wickham Road, where he habitually treated himself to a bun.

He sat in the same seat as usual, in the window, to the left of the front door. This he knew from experience minimised the drafts and maximised the view. He sat contentedly nibbling at his toasted bun, staring out and doing what he loved best - watching people going about their business. Today was to prove more interesting than many. As a podgy man opened the door of the tearooms to leave, the sound of shouting and excitement wafted in. Quigley's eyes were drawn to the source of the commotion and a group of men on the corner of an alleyway just along from where he was sitting. Flailing arms and cheering left him in no doubt that this was a fight – not an affray, but an organised scrap between two men, both keen to win some prize money.

As a waitress cleared away his plate, he took his leave of the warm surroundings and made ready to return to his driving duties. But as he strolled outside, the

urge to see what was occurring just along the street was irresistible. He crossed over and headed cautiously towards the alleyway. Before he reached the corner of the dark back alleyway, shouts of glee and dismay in equal force filled the air. The small crowd dispersed quickly, with one man hauled away suspended between two others. His feet clattered along the ground, dragged behind his semi-comatose body. This, thought Quigley, was clearly the loser in the brawl. Seeing that the excitement was over, he was about to turn away and head back to the Sefton when a voice called out to him.

‘Sir! Can you be offering a helping hand to a poor wounded soldier?’

From the shadows, a bloodied and bruised man stepped out. Quigley backed away, fearing for his own safety.

‘No, please – don’t go. I just need a shoulder to lean on to get me to the inn on Candle Street. They’ll see to me there – it’s worth a penny for your trouble.’

As the man slumped against the wall, Quigley could see he was in a bad way. He paused and through the blood that made the pummeled, puffy right eye smart, Quigley recognized the fella from the docks just months ago. The alms had clearly helped him survive, but to what end, he considered? But he seemed a cheery enough soul despite his wounds.

‘If you’re thinking I’ve taken a bruising,’ he chuckled, ‘you should see the other fella.’

His laughter quickly turned to a cough and as he grabbed his sides, Quigley stepped forward to help to support him.

‘Here, put your weight on my shoulder,’ he said quietly, ‘and try not to breath too deeply – that’s your best way to kill that cough.’

‘If it doesn’t kill me first!’ He joked, crumbling into another coughing fit.

‘What’s your name, kind sir – mine’s O’Rourke, Liam O’Rourke.’

O’Rourke squinted at Quigley through a pained expression.

‘Do I know you, sir?’

‘My name is Ernest Quigley, Mr. O’Rourke, the driver for Lord and Lady Jenison.’

‘Ah, the kindly lady at the docks – without her assistance, I might not have survived those cold nights. I am beholden to your mistress, sir, greatly indebted to be sure.’

Quigley nodded, as he struggled with the man's limp frame pushing against his own.

'Now, where was it you said we were heading, Mr. O'Rourke?'

'Just a few doors along – see that... aaah'

Lunging forward, the injured man clasped his chest and leaned even more heavily on Quigley.

'Ribs, no doubt about it,' said Quigley. 'Just hobble a few steps more and we'll be there, then you can rest a while.'

They were almost directly beneath a sign for the Candlemakers' Inn, and the smell of ale was already heavy in the air. As the sign creaked back and forth, Quigley threw the door open wide. With the force from the wind behind it, the door slammed flat against the wall, shocking the inebriated clan within into silence for a moment. But as Liam O'Rourke edged into view, a gale of laughter to rival the wind met them. A buxom woman of a certain age and uncertain character stepped forward and took over from Quigley. As O'Rourke's ribs enjoyed the anaesthetizing powers of a jug of ale, he turned to Quigley with a smile of gratitude.

'I'm in your debt Mr. Quigley, and I'll not forget your kindness. One day, I hope to repay you, sir.'

Chapter 12

It seemed to Joseph that the brilliance of the sun mocked them as he and Eugene scoured the bare fields and hedgerows in search of kindling and anything remotely edible. The cold air silhouetted their breath against the cobalt blue sky, like steam from a bubbling pot. Oh Lord, thought Joseph. How long until we bask in the smell of boiling potatoes or a slither of meat?

Neither spoke, both conserving their energy for the task in hand. It was now all but inevitable that Joseph would have to go and seek work elsewhere if they were to avoid starvation, but he dreaded the thought of leaving his son alone, and feared greatly what he might come back to.

He watched Eugene move across the field; his bearing was like that of an old man, with little energy and no strength. Even Tori ambled at the pace of an old bitch. She would have to go soon. Every ounce of common sense told him they could not feed a useless dog when they had scarcely enough to keep themselves alive but until now he'd never been able to find the right moment. As he drew closer to the boy and his best friend, he decided today was the day that he must break the news. He simply could not allow it to go on any longer. In his pocket

was a small, dark-skinned potato; little more than the size of the tip of Joseph's thumb, it had managed to escape their scavenging these past months. He walked towards his son with a heavy heart.

'Here, see what I've found.' His voice was quiet, even the simplest tasks proving a drain on his energy. 'It's yours, son.'

Eugene looked up at the boney, extended hand before him and forced a smile.

'We'll share it, half for you and half for me.'

'No, this is the second I've found today,' Joseph lied. 'I've had my share.'

Eugene looked at Tori, who stood beside him, her tail unusually still.

'Come on girl, we've a bite to nibble on!'

He ruffled the mangy fur about her neck as her tail whipped slowly back and forth. Joseph wrapped his fingers around the tiny potato and raised his hand in a halting motion.

'No son, I'm sorry but with things as they are, we simply cannot feed an extra mouth. I'm afraid the dog-'

'If Tori goes, then so do I!'

His voice was little more than a whisper, but the determination in it was clear.

Joseph had always known this would be a major problem. They stood staring silently at one another, a generational stand off that defied their hard-times. A shadow crossed in front of the sun, denying them what little warmth the cold morning held. As Tori's gaze went slowly from one face to the other, father and son shuddered as one. The moment had passed. And then, in the distance, Joseph heard a small voice. As the hazy figure drew closer, he tried to make out who it was, and what slender shape hobbling towards them was saying. At first it was little more than an indistinct blur to his wasted senses. Joseph drew Eugene close to him, knowing only too well how desperate many of his fellow Irishmen had become.

As Eugene squinted, he could make out a hat – a ragged hat being waved high in the air. Arms flapping, hands outstretched, the stranger drew closer. And then the sound of a young man's voice – a cheery voice, the unmistakable noise of good news.

'He's back, he's back; my daddy's home!' Cried a small boy.

And then at last they could make out a friendly face; it was young James McLaughlin, and though his legs were weakened from the hunger and worn out from the long walk, he bounded closer to them, almost as fast as Tori hurtled towards him. Joseph smiled with relief to see his nephew.

‘James, lad! My word you look stronger than when I last set eyes on you, for sure. And your ma – is she...’

‘Yes, yes, she’s fine and my brothers – and my daddy too! He’s very well and has brought both food *and* money home with him. enough for us to repay your kindness. See here!’

James tugged at the cord holding a makeshift jacket tight to his body. As it fell open Joseph could see a small hessian sack straddling the boy’s belly.

‘I tied it about me so no one could see it. Even decent folk have been known to rob to save their families.’

He unlashed the bulging pouch and handed it to Joseph.

‘Here, please take this with the love and gratitude it has been sent.’

Joseph peered inside and discovered not only cornmeal as he’d hoped for, but also a collection of small, root vegetables, and even a piece of bone. Joseph stared at what looked to be the shinbone of a pig. There was a slither of dry, once pink meat, and a chunk of fatty gristle near the knuckle. Eugene’s eyes widened and he was already planning the first carnivorous broth that would delight their bellies after weeks of wild nettle soup.

‘I cannot take this from you James; there’s at least a week’s rations here for the two of us. Your family and its needs are greater than ours.’

‘Of course you can! You *are* our family.’ James smiled broadly. ‘Oh, and there’s more – something very, very special.’

Carefully James slipped his bony hand into the pocket of his breeches and pulled out his piece de resistance; an egg – a small, pale almost translucent hen’s egg. For protection, it sat in a handful of dry leaves and soil that to all intents and purposes looked like a nest.

‘And daddy says to tell you that the Board of Works is paying for a road to be built between Dalmurray and Bridgers Bog. He says that Eugene can come stay with us while you are away.’ James turned to Eugene, grinning broadly. ‘We’ll take Tori to the stream and teach her to catch fishes!’

Eugene's eyes widened at the thought not only of this fun but also a reprieve for Tori. But the serious expression on his father's face told a different story.

'Your daddy is very kind, James, and I will certainly go to seek this work. And though it is tempting for Eugene to live with your family while I'm away we cannot leave this place empty. It would soon be overrun by the dispossessed from near and far, desperate for shelter.'

Joseph also knew that even the most philanthropic landlord would be tempted by such an opportunity.

'My daddy told me that's what you'd say so instead I will stay here with Eugene until you return.'

Joseph shook his head but before he could speak again, James had the last word.

'And before you tell me I'm too young to care for Eugene, you were just a few years older than me when you married his ma.' He took Tori's head between his two boney hands. 'We'll have Tori to look after us, wont we girl?'

The two lads looked at Joseph, both grinning broadly with satisfaction – and anticipation of the adventures ahead. Joseph put an arm about the shoulder of each of the youngsters; squeezing affectionately, he flinched at the lack of flesh to their bones.

'And I suppose your daddy told you that too, eh? Well, let's be off inside for supper. We have some of Peel's brimstone boiling as we speak – perhaps we can disguise its abominable texture with a helping of these most beautiful vegetables you've brought us, James.'

'And that little potato you have hidden in your hand, dada,' teased Eugene.

The cabin was a welcome respite from the chill in the air. Though the room was scarcely warmer than the outdoors despite the small fire, they were at least sheltered from the stinging wind that had whipped up from nowhere to rasp the thin skin of their fingers and cheekbones. The boys huddled close to where a blackened pot hung precariously above a sorry looking fire, the low flames just managing to keep it simmering.

Taking a wilted dock leaf from his pocket, Joseph carefully wiped the soil from the fragile vegetables. He chopped them carefully into pieces and lowered them slowly into the pot one at a time, ensuring not a drop of the broth splashed against the sides of the pot where it would harden, burn dry and be wasted.

The warm glow of happiness on his son's face outshone the flickering firelight. How like his mother he was, thought Joseph – and his sister, Maeve. But the memories of a happy past were pushed aside as he recalled once again the day his girls left Ireland. What had become of them? Not a word from either Kit or from Maeve; was Kit dead – had she survived the perilous journey? And Maeve – was she still angry with him and silent, or was she too gone from this earth? He had never imagined as he caressed the dark silky hair that framed Maeve's face, that one day he would pray she would be so angry with him that she could not even bear to speak his name. But if that were the case now, it could mean she was still alive.

'Are you thinking of our girls, daddy?'

Joseph turned silently towards his son and realised Eugene's expression was of one who had seen far more than any twelve year-old should.

'Yes, Geney, that I am. I was wondering...'

'Of course they're alive. They'll be living in some fine place, where food's plentiful and there's dancing every night. Kit loves to dance, James, she does that. You'll see one day just how well she leaps to any tune the fiddler makes. And Maeve, well she's a cook like-'

'Lick the juices from your plates boys, before it turns cold – or Tori steps in!' Joseph interrupted.

'Then we need a good night's sleep. We'll be up early tomorrow if I'm to show you what needs to be done while I'm away working.'

'Don't worry, daddy, I know just what we need to do. I'll keep things safe – watch the crops, and the tools, I'll even remember to put flowers on mammy's grave every Sunday. You just sleep on. Those few extra minutes will make your journey a little easier. God bless, and to you too, James.'

'God bless.' Replied James sleepily.

'And God save us all.' Mumbled Joseph quietly to himself.

Chapter 13

The flurry of early morning activity was over as quickly as spring snow. Having slept in their clothes once again, Dennis and Noel were out of the door just minutes after waking. Beneath Noel's arm was a small piece of cloth containing two large chunks of bread, and an apple that had seen better days. A corked bottle of sweetened water would not only serve to quench their thirst, but also provide them with a little more energy - and enough moisture to soften the bread so it could be eaten without the further loss of teeth.

Noel marveled at how Kit somehow managed to organise all this, and attend Mass before they were even awake. He knew that the small church just three blocks away had become a special place for Kit, but he didn't truly understand just how special – or why. Always busy working, Noel had fallen by the ecclesiastical wayside and only attended Mass on those rare Sundays when there were no chores to be caught up with. But for Kit, the tiny place of worship had become even more important than the church in Ballygall she had visited all her young life.

Her mother and Father Mahoney might have instilled in her a love of the Mass, but the church here provided her with an unbroken connection to Ireland; the sounds, the smells, the peace. She could close her eyes and absorb the essence of the place and know that she was still at one with her origins. Her father had turned away from the Church after her mother's death, but for Kit, something continued to burn deep inside her, driving her back to her knees. Whether it was familiarity, a sense of duty or a truly religious experience didn't seem to matter. It was simply the hub of the world she was slowly rebuilding.

'Be sure you come straight home, mind,' called Kit.

Home; just months after leaving Ballygall and she was already calling this place home. Though it was cobbled together from a stable and an old tack room, the accommodation that Sammy had provided them with was a haven after what they'd been through, and unlike Peg's room, it was spacious - and free.

'No stopping at McGinty's now, on your way back,' she reminded Dennis, only too well aware of the lure of the bar across the street. They had little enough money as it was, but Dennis still managed to drink away at least half of his and Noel's wages if the opportunity arose.

'And be careful!' She yelled after them, as they headed out of earshot.

Every week brought news of more injuries and fatalities. Workers were said to have drowned in the mud on the reclamation project west of the city, where some six hundred acres of brackish Charles River marshlands were being drained and filled with soil brought by rail from the hills of Medham Heights. Disease was carried through the wet, pungent air and the damp crept into every bone and joint. The mines were no better; just last week two Irishmen, rumoured to have arrived from County Mayo only the week before, were blown to pieces. Perched on a platform, and supported by no more than hoists and worn pulleys, the explosives that were supposed to penetrate the coalface had detonated in their hands.

Kit licked the breadcrumbs from her fingers before setting about airing the room. She'd no appetite of late, least of all first thing when she often felt out of salts, but

there was far too much to be done and too little time to do it so a little tiredness could not be allowed to hold her back. First, she drew back the thin blankets and scraps of rugs that were thrown over three straw mattresses. She flung open the door out on to the landing and eased open the small window from its sticky frame, venting the room with clean, fresh air. On the street outside, snow was whipped up and swirled in the wind. Pedestrians fought their way along the dawn streets to work, their faces fixed low as they squinted against the sting of the northerly winter wind. Kit sighed; yesterday she had cleared the yard clear of snow and ice but clouds of white haze whipped from nearby roofs spun busily around in the cold winter wind. It hadn't snowed for three weeks now but the temperature had remained stoically below freezing. Sammy had already warned her that this would as likes as not continue for a good while yet; her first winter in Boston was set to be a long one.

The bitter gusts billowed into the room, pursuing first the blankets and then Kit's skirts as it raced around the walls. Then the mischievous gust was on its way out of the door, taking with it the dust and lice that Kit knew could strike them down. Even now, they were still a little weak from the months of hunger and despair. They grew stronger by the day and more flesh clung to their bones but their health could be so easily undermined. Kit knew her duty, her father had instilled that in her as a child; she must do all in her power to keep this little 'family' together, and take great care of them all.

Picking up the small, red rug by the door, she hung it outside the window and beat it vigorously against the wall below. Satisfied the mud and dirt had shaken free of the worn pile, she quickly dragged the rug in and closed the window. A voice rose loudly from the yard.

'And what do you think you're up to, may I inquire?'

Kit peered through the window but could see nothing through the opaque glass. Reluctantly, she braced herself for another cold blast and opened it once again, stretching out to see where the voice was coming from. Her hair tumbled forward over her shoulders and tickled her chin.

'I said, Kit McLaughlin, what do you think you are up to?'

From immediately below her window, Sammy looked back up at her. His hair was thick with dust and a layer of dried mud and wisps of hay sat on his shoulders.

'Oh, Jesus!' Kit gasped, closing the window with a loud bang.

She grabbed her coat and dashed out of the room, down the steep, narrow stairs and out into the yard.

'I am truly sorry, Sammy, I was cleaning the rug you so kindly gave to us and, and...and...'

As she spoke, Kit was struggling to suppress a giggle. She always considered that Sammy's early morning wisps of hair looked funny enough before being combed and settled, but now - littered with the dust and the hay and all - he reminded her of the scarecrow old man Murphy put up in his top field one spring. Her smile was as much inspired by the fate of the scarecrow – stripped naked by a passing tinker – as by Sammy's appearance, but nevertheless she knew better than to set it free and distracted herself by brushing the mud from his shoulders and easing the dust from his thinning, grey hair.

'Oh don't fuss so, it's only a little dirt.' He mumbled. 'But you might want to take that smile from your face, if you know what's good for you!'

As Kit finally let loose a giggle, Sammy caught her hand in his, and squeezed it, pausing for just a second before letting go. Her hand felt as warm as her smile despite the cold air.

'Oh, let me wash that shirt for you, Sammy,' she pleaded. 'And I'll brush down your coat if you could just take it off for-'

'I said, don't fuss girl.'

Sammy smiled and put his arm around her shoulder.

'Come on inside and we'll have a cup of scalding hot milk to set us up before we start on the horses. Dr. Vozkovsky will be around to collect his chestnut mare later this morning - she's sound, is she?'

'Oh she's sound alright,' laughed Kit. 'Sound enough to bite my backside as I picked her hooves out last night!'

'It's good that the swelling's gone down on her hind leg – let's hope she's not left you with one on your hindquarters instead!'

'I'll be right as rain, no worry.'

'You did well to heal the mare, Kit.'

'I knew a few days of rest with my daddy's poultice recipe would cure her. And with her fresh studs and new shoes, she'll pull the doctor's carriage safely through any snow, you mark my words.'

'I'm sure he'll be delighted. He's a man of few words, the doctor, but he's a good man at that.'

'Where does he come from?' Asked Kit. 'He has a strange way of talking – and he dresses very odd, even for a gentleman.'

'Woltek? Oh, he's from a country called Poland – a long way from Ireland, and even further from Boston.'

Sammy nodded, knowingly. 'He told me there was a revolution there some fifteen years ago - to overthrow the Russians governing his country. His father, an army general, was instrumental in the uprising and when it failed, the family had to run for their lives.'

'But why did they come to Boston?' Kit asked.

'I believe they just kept on running until they found somewhere they felt secure. Just a year after they reached their safe haven, Woltek's father died of TB and his mother followed soon after – they say with a broken heart.'

'That's so sad. It seems death has no preference as to who or where it stalks, rich or poor, Irish or not.'

Her face brimmed with sadness, but within a moment a positive thought struck her and she was her bubbly, naturally optimistic self once more.

'I'm hoping that my letter will have arrived at Father Maloney's and he'll have told my dada all that's been happening here. I do so hope I get a letter back – I'm very worried about them back home, and Maeve too. Still, I have a feeling in my heart that all's well!'

They turned and walked towards Sammy's office as the wind made one last effort to blow them sideways. Closing the door behind them, Sammy headed straight for the stove. Grasping a short poker, he prodded the blazing logs to set them burning even faster. As the deep ochre glow turned to red, he placed a small black pot full of milk on the edge of the stove and took a shaker full of sugar from the shelf, sprinkled a generous amount into the milk and watched as Kit breathed in deeply.

'Mmm, that smells good.' Drooled Kit. The wind outside battled so hard against the windows, they rattled as though they were shaking from the cold. 'Deary me, that wind's fierce today - is the doctor coming here on foot?'

'No, I loaned him Polka, she drive's well and is as reliable as any.'

'That's very kind of you Samuel Hobson,' smiled Kit. 'Polka's in great demand and I suspect you could have earned a good deal more from her elsewhere.'

'I daresay, but he's a good man, Woltek,' replied Sammy. 'He does a great deal for the poorer citizens of Boston when he could easily earn fat fees by simply attending on rich clients. I like to do what I can for him.'

As he spoke, Sammy ladled the milk into mugs, careful not to spill any. Eagerly awaiting the creamy brew, Kit pulled the sleeves of her coat down as far past her wrists as they would go so she could cup her tin mug between the palms of her hands without scalding her fingers.

'Here, get this down you – then it's time for you to muck out those two mares while I get the fire stoked up. I've got a feeling we'll be having a busy day today, so I'd best get some coffee on the boil in here for the customers while they're waiting on their horses.'

'Oh that tastes good, it's settling my tummy down a treat,' said Kit. 'Thank you.'

She paused, thoughtfully.

'Sammy have you ever noticed just how many gentlemen wait here, in these rooms – especially on a cold day like today?'

'It's a popular spot, for sure,' he shrugged, sipping his milk contentedly.

'But many of them come here just for the company, and the warmth,' said Kit. 'Yesterday we shod five horses all day and yet at times there were a dozen or so visitors in here congregated around your stove.'

'I suppose it's better than them standing in McGinty's bar across the way, wasting their hard-earned cash on liquor.'

'Oh, I agree,' said Kit enthusiastically. 'And I've been thinking, maybe they'd be prepared to pay for the privilege?'

'I don't need the money Kit, I'm not a greedy or ambitious man. Enough is as good as a feast, so they say.'

Samuel smiled at Kit who was deep in thought.

'Well, maybe if you don't need the money, it could be saved up, saved towards paying for things for the poor – after your expenses, of course. Medicines, and the like?'

Samuel nodded.

'Well, it's worth a thought.'

'It would be a better use of space, turning these rooms into a meeting place,' said Kit enthusiastically. 'It could be somewhere for them to buy hot drinks or perhaps a small glass of beer before going home?'

A smooth deep voice seemed to come from nowhere.

'And do you think their money is better spent on drink than medicines' Said Dr. Vozkovsky.

Kit spun round, flushed and embarrassed.

'That's not what I meant... I was just thinking out loud and-'

'I am sorry, I didn't mean to startle you,' he smiled. 'It may well be an idea, Samuel, if you're prepared to consider it. At least consumption can be rationed and we can help to keep them out of the profiteering Mr. McGinty's bar.'

'As you say, it's worth a thought - not that I need the extra work.'

'I could help,' said Kit, 'and perhaps the doctor could take care of the money? Organising what it's to be spent on, and such'

'Perhaps.' Smiled Vozkovsky. 'In the meantime I have a rather tired horse awaiting you in the yard.'

'And I have a fresh horse for you, complete with new and expertly fitted shoes,' replied Sammy jovially. 'Kit, go fetch the doctor's horse – and stop blushing so!'

Kit was glad of the opportunity to escape. Dr. Vozkovsky was perhaps some ten or twelve years older than her and, though clearly a man of great compassion, Kit found him both intimidating and enthralling. She had no idea where Poland was, or why such a man would choose to come to a new land when it was plain that his own country was prosperous and sophisticated enough for a comparatively young man to train as a doctor and travel the world. But she was very glad he had.

In the yard she found Polka standing quietly, still harnessed to the small carriage and now with a fine layer of snowflakes settling on her top-line. Once she had unhitched her, Kit quickly took her through to a stall deep with dull, yellow straw. She brushed off the snow and mud before tossing a patched brown rug across Polka's back. The amenable mare had worked up quite a sweat pulling the carriage, despite the inclement weather, and the last thing Kit wanted was a horse with a chill. She gently stroked the mare's muzzle, and felt her warm, damp breath tickle her cold fingers.

'Oh you're a good girl, Polka,' Kit mumbled as she carried on brushing off the mare's legs. 'A good, good girl.'

'I think Sammy would say the same for you too, Kit.'

Kit dropped the grooming brush as Vozkovsky's deep voice surprised her once again. It landed right at his feet.

'Oh, Doctor, I... I'm.... sorry....'

'Please, it is I who should be apologising. I didn't mean to humiliate you in front of Samuel. It seems to me you have hit upon an excellent idea – a kind of assurance for the poorer that their needs will be attended to if they contribute a small amount each week through something they clearly enjoy.'

Kit bent down to pick up the brush just as the doctor dipped his knees to do the same thing. With their faces just inches apart, Kit could feel his breath on her cheeks. He gently brushed the curls back from her face, revealing her pretty, clear-blue eyes.

'You'll develop a squint if your hair's always in your eyes, you know.'

He touched her forehead softly with the back of his forefinger, looked wistfully at her for a second. The moment passed and he stood up, quickly regaining his composure.

'You have a beautiful glow to your cheeks young lady. It must be all this fresh air that makes you so healthy.'

'Huh!' Scoffed Kit as she returned to her grooming duties. 'If you could see me first thing, with my puffing and puking you'd not be saying that!'

'Are you a sickly person? I mean, do you often have nauseous bouts?'

'Not usually, but at the moment I'm a bit poorly until I get going. As a rule I'm as tough as one of Jimmy Carmichael's oxen.'

'So it's just in the mornings, this biliousness?'

Kit was brushing Polka's mane vigorously as if to prove her strength and health.

'Billi.. what?'

'Sickness.'

'Yes that's right, doctor, it's just until I get myself going.'

She carried on with the task in hand, oblivious to the doctor's concern.

'Kit, forgive me, but is there a possibility that you could be with child?'

Kit was astonished and with a toss of her head, burst into laughter; but in that very instant she knew he was right. All at once it fell into place; the absence of the curse these past months, her gently swelling breasts, the queasiness. She'd seen it a dozen times in others, even remembered her own mother blossoming when she carried Eugene. She grabbed her belly with both hands as she leaned back against the stable wall.

'Oh Mary, mother of Jesus.' She mumbled quietly to herself. There were no tears, no self-pity, just bewilderment at this new twist in her life.

'I think it would be a good idea if you come to see me, Kit.' He placed a hand on her shoulder and squeezed it gently. 'Perhaps tomorrow morning - I'll send a message to Sammy asking if you could come and look at Polka's leg, or some such excuse. There's no need for him to know - until we're sure. What do you say?'

Kit nodded silently.

'This is difficult for me to ask, Kit and I mean no offence but do you... do you know who the father might be?'

She looked defiantly at him.

'That's for me to know and no one else!'

'Of course, I just thought if there was a chance that he might support you and ...'

'The baby's daddy is far from here, but until I can return to him I'll support my baby myself, thank you doctor.'

'As you wish. I hope to see you tomorrow morning then - and try to take things a little easier. Drink plenty of freshly drawn water and avoid fatty foods - and alcohol.'

'I've never so much as sipped a single drop! Not even for medicinal purposes.' Said Kit indignantly. 'Now, I have a mare to shoe so if... if you're ready, I'll hitch your horse and -'

'I can do that. Why don't you take a few minutes to consider things, your position.'

'My position, doctor, is that I have work to do. I have to earn the money to support myself and... and to put aside enough money so I can go back to Ireland and my family. Now, if you don't mind.'

'But you will come and see me tomorrow?'

'I cannot afford to-'

'You owe a duty to your unborn child,' he said, hurt rather than offended, 'but you will owe not a cent to me. I shall expect you around midday. Sammy will hear nothing of this from me.'

'So be it, then - tomorrow, at noon. Good day, doctor.'

Kit hurried off to the back yard, her head ablaze. It was enough of a struggle already in this big city, but the responsibility of another life was terrifying. Dennis and Noel earned a pittance but with Kit's money, it was just enough. But what if she lost her job - and their home over the stables? Samuel might send them packing! Everything depended on Kit; soon another child - Ruarie's child - would join that list of dependents.

And then for the first time she considered just whose child it was she was carrying within her. It had to be born out of the love she and Ruarie had shared so briefly. As a warm sensation washed over her, suddenly things that had troubled her before faded into insignificance. She had a fresh priority, an incredible duty to perform. But she knew that no matter how seemingly impossible or dangerous, one day she would return to Ireland with her baby. She would go back to her daddy, and her baby's daddy. They would be a family again.

Chapter 14

Betsy sprinkled a handful of baking soda into the tepid water and glanced over her shoulder. Nell, the laundry-maid, was in the yard hanging four freshly washed cotton sheets and a set of hand-embroidered antimacassars out to dry. Betsy quickly snatched another handful of the crystals and plunged them into the side pocket of her skirt. The laundry was not her regular task, and with no money to buy baking soda herself she couldn't let the opportunity pass her by to give her teeth their first brush up for two weeks at Mrs. Prewett's expense.

Running her hand through the water Betsy decided it was not hot enough. She took the huge kettle from the range and began pouring liberally. There was just one more set of linen to be laundered - the tenth that day. Betsy spread her fingers and looked at her hands. They were pink and raw, but at least her nails were beautifully white and clean.

'You've no time to stand around admiring yourself, my girl,' boomed a coarse voice from the basement doorway. 'Here, wash these for Duncan.'

Betsy caught a pair of heavily darned black trousers and a matching waistcoat that had lost all but one of its buttons. Jeannie Prewett ran the shabby guesthouse, and was Betsy's boss, landlady and tormentor. The dismal lodgings she ran with her boyfriend Duncan Marshall had provided the destitute girl with work, a much-needed job to replace the one the Jenisons had snatched away from her. She knew none of the fine households would take her on without references so though all the washing and cleaning meant hard work and long hours, she was thankful that she had a roof over her head and money in her pocket after weeks of wandering the streets.

'And be sure you boil them up with ivy leaves – that'll keep them good'n black.'

'But I was just finishing down here before-'

'Before I pack you off to the steamies? Is that where you want to do the washing next time, with all the local whores?'

Jeannie placed her podgy hands on her ample hips and tilted her head to one side as she spoke.

'No, no, that's fine. I'll do them right after these last sheets.'

'And then you can clean the hearth in the parlour – polish the grate and fill the coal scuttle.' Jeannie grinned. 'Let me know when you're all done. Duncan's got an errand he wants you to run for him.'

Betsy winced.

'Yes, ma'am.'

She knew this would be another wager to be placed; where or with whom she didn't dare imagine, but she knew it would undoubtedly be in some alleyway or a backstreet even worse than the one she lived in. Maybe if she spent long enough on the washing, he'd do his own dirty work, she considered? She took the last pair of sheets and plunged them down to the bottom of the tin bath. Grabbing the laundry dolly with both hands, she began to rotate the sheets in the water.

'You'll need to add some carbolic to that lot,' said Nell, drying her hands on her pinny. 'There's some nasty stains on 'em. Lord knows what they are but-'

'I don't care to think of that, thank you. Pass the carbolic will you please?'

Betsy's pale skin and blue-black hair exaggerated the dark circles that were beginning to form beneath her eyes. With the back of her hand, she brushed back a strand of hair then fiddled with the hairgrips that had released it.

'Nits again.' Observed Nell, as she slowly, precisely turned the handle of the mangle.

Betsy ignored her, picked up the washboard and began grating the red, strong-smelling soap into the water.

'You know what we need,' said Nell, 'is a husband. Someone with a nice little home, who wants a woman to bear him sons and look after him.'

'Mmm, one with a job that pays a decent wage.'

'And long hours.'

'Long hours?' Inquired Betsy.

'Yes, hard work and lots of it – that ways, he'll sleep when he goes to bed at night instead of, well, you know what.' Nell laughed.

'I do not know, you hussy!' Laughed Betsy. 'I'm a good girl I am.'

'Yes, I heard you're good - from Charlie Munroe, and Elijah Holmes, and-'

'Don't you go believing their lies!' Replied Betsy, indignantly.

'Oh I would never take the word of a man,' assured Nell, 'but I do believe my own eyes; a knee-trembler, young lady, with a man like Charlie? You deserve the clap, you surely do.'

With the washboard in one hand and the carbolic in the other, Betsy swung round and caught Nell clean across the back of her head with the washboard. As she fell back against the mangle, Betsy pressed home her advantage and forced the soap under Nell's chin.

'I ought to be washing your mouth out with this soap, not closing it. '

Betsy's face was contorted by rage. It was a side to the new laundry maid Nell had not seen before and it frightened her.

'It was said only in jest, Betsy, just in jest I promise.'

Betsy released her grip and backed away, tossing the board and soap on the floor. She headed for the door.

'You can finish that lot. I've had enough.'

She wiped her hands on her pinny, then undid the ties and tossed it on the floor.

'And you can clear the grate out 'n all if I've got to run round town for Duncan.'

Nell didn't reply, she knew she had no choice. She could tell Jeannie, of course, but as likes as not that would mean a damned good beating from Betsy. No, better to get on with it and then head for the kitchen before that night's soup was gone.

Betsy slammed the door behind her as she flew up the stone steps until she reached the street. Tucked inside her woolly glove she could feel the note rubbing against the two pennies Duncan had given her for his latest wager. She was to go to see a man by the name of Willy Lock, at an address she'd been to before on the other side of Lime Street. The streets were getting dark now and the impressive sight of gas lamps flickering into life thrilled her as always. She picked her way through the debris of the now faded day, rubbish that turned entire streets into gutters. But she knew the trash she would encounter in Pike Lane would be of the human kind.

The air was damp, and heavy with the odour of destitute city-dwellers, nightwalkers whose best hope was that a sheltered doorway might offer refuge. Despite the imminent advent of spring there was a mighty chill in the air, particularly where three or more roads met, encouraging the wind to gather strength as it screamed round the street corners. But Betsy didn't cower down into her shawl. She knew that to survive in these streets she must stride confidently, chin high in the air. Fifteen minutes later, she'd completed her task and handed the wager to a toothless man who stood just a little too close to her, his trouser pocket bulging with what she could only hope was money.

She scuttled quickly away. The race was on to get back to the guesthouse before Nell and the other workers had devoured the handful of diced vegetables and dumplings from the soup. Quickly past the Hen and Chicken public house, then down Boothby Street to the crossroads with Horton Road. When she heard the first yells, she mistook it simply for the wind that by now seemed to be almost at gale force. It pinned her skirts to her thighs and shins like trousers. With one hand she held her bonnet tightly in place, while the other wrestled with her shawl. But when she caught the orchestrated gasps and grunts from at least five or six men, her attention quickly focused on the small crowd ahead. She stopped immediately, assessing the situation; they could be villains, drunks or a bunch of randy sailors, she considered, but as she looked on she could see exactly what was happening. It was a street-fight with a crowd of spectators and gamblers urging on the two combatants. One of the men was at least three inches smaller than the other. His hair was dark and he was more heavily built than his

adversary. His shirt was torn open at the left shoulder and down the front, exposing his bristly chest and the veins that stood proud in his neck. His face was contorted with concentration as he tightened his grip on his opponent's head. Betsy could sense this was his moment of truth; defeat now loomed for the other warrior.

Once more, the dark-haired pugilist wrenched his adversary's head hard to the left, and then to the right in a final bid to force him into submission. The weaker man's legs were beginning to give way, his strength seeping from like an estuary emptying with the tide. In a moment she was filled with admiration for this champion, someone who could look after himself and be afraid of no one. She walked closer, so close that she could smell the scent of his body, sense the heat exuded by his limbs. His hair shone with sweat and was matted at the nape of his broad neck, sticking to his skin like sheaths of dark leather. He must have felt the man in his grip begin to weaken and limpness take hold of his rival's legs. As the strain on his face lessened, he looked beyond his victim and as his clear green eyes explored the crowd, they widened and fixed on Betsy. She was mesmerised by the clarity of their beauty. A sudden movement caught her eye; one of the spectators was rushing towards the pair, a chunk of brick held high above his head.

'Look out!' Screamed Betsy, her eyes alerting him to the approaching danger.

In a second, the defeated man lay on the ground where he had been tossed unceremoniously and straddled across his belly with a bloodied nose was his unconscious, unlucky partner, still clutching the offending brick. The crowd began to disperse, a few patting the victor's head as they left, pressing the odd shiny penny into his sweaty hand.

A scowling old man kicked the two on the ground, urging them to get up and move on before they learned what a real kicking felt like from the local constabulary. But it was in vain, they were out cold, and as he walked away he moaned to himself about the bet he had lost.

Finally, Betsy was alone with the champion, her champion.

'You saved me from another beating there, my girl. I am in your debt,' His Irish brogue surprised her. 'O'Rourke's my name, Liam O'Rourke.'

'And I'm Betsy Brown.' She smiled broadly, taking a ragged handkerchief from her pocket. 'You could do with a wash and brush up, just look at you.'

She dabbed gently at the corner of his mouth where blood was pooling before slowly ebbing down his chin.

'Tis just me teeth, don't worry – I've plenty more of 'em!

'You seem to know what you're about, Mr. O'Rourke.'

He grasped her hand and held it tightly in his.

'Well, there was a time when I could earn a few shillings from fighting but there are far too many of the Irish prepared to suffer for just a penny. The hunger in Ireland is not good for my business, that's for sure.'

'They're Irish, these fellas then?'

'No as it happens, they're English – some of 'em are not too fond of the Irish, y'know. Not that I've done anyone any harm...'

Betsy stepped over the two men and began searching through their pockets.

'Then we might as well see what this pair can offer,' she said in a matter of fact way.

'Oh no, I'm not into robbing the nearly dead,' he replied, surprised at her candor.

'It's not robbery – it's the victor's spoils, that's what it is.' Said Betsy, laughing.

'I'm sorry, Betsy, you're a good girl for saving me. I didn't mean -'

'Don't you worry, I've... 'ello, what's this?'

She smiled, as she fingered something of interest in one of the pockets then pulled out a chunky coin.

'Oh, look, a florin – silver, I think.'

She bit hard on the edge of the coin, before continuing her search. A good few coppers jingled in her hand by the time every pocket was turned inside out.

'Come on, let's take you home and get you cleaned up.'

'Well, there's a small problem there you see – I don't have a home, least not here, not in this country.'

Betsy grinned, slipped her hands either side of his broad chest then slid them down until she reached his braces. One by one she pulled them up, first the right and then the left, rubbing each shoulder gently as she released the suspenders with a twang.

'You'd best be coming back with me then.'

‘And where might that be?’

She drew closer still and ran her forefinger along the outline of his top lip.

‘Somewhere you can learn me all about the Irish – and I’ll tell you about the toffs and their wicked ways.’

The warm sunshine cascading through the windows of the orangery confirmed the long awaited arrival of spring. April had been as wet and cold as winter, and early May little better. Maeve slipped the green leather bookmark in place, stood up and set her book down on the side table to her right. Made by the acclaimed furniture maker Mr. George Hepplewhite, the mahogany piece was typical of everything at Harington Hall: tasteful, expensive and pedantically well looked after. With a perfectly manicured hand, she smoothed the layers of deep rose-pink taffeta silk that formed the youthful shape of the dress she had chosen for today. The warmth of the room was causing her cheeks to match the shade of her dress – very unfashionable, she considered, as she opened the double doors and walked through to the library. Once she reached the ornately carved Adam fireplace, she pulled the gold-tasseled rope that hung to one side. Seconds later the door from the hallway opened.

‘Yes, Miss Mary?’ Inquired Daniels the butler, haughtily.

‘Send someone to air the orangery, will you. It’s fiercely hot and humid in there Daniels.’ Maeve’s tone was authoritative, her pronunciation impeccable. She knew Daniels disliked her but she really didn’t care. He would never dare to upset her, none of the servants at Harington hall would. They’d all seen what happened to Betsy.

She picked up the embroidery frame beside her and examined her handiwork.

‘Oh, and bring some tea, will you?’

Daniels nodded and turned to leave the room, as Charles Jenison entered.

‘I thought you were studying... botany or some such monotony, was it not this afternoon?’ Jenison checked his pocket watch. ‘It is scarcely 2pm, and you have finished already?’

‘I have been studying the flora and reading in the orangery, Papa Charles, but the heat made me quite faint.’

‘You need a brandy, not bloody tea. Daniels, fetch a couple of brandies.’

Daniels inclined his head in affirmation, and left, quietly closing the door behind him.

'I fear I must decline your most considerate advices,' replied Maeve, sitting herself in a straight-backed chair. 'Other than a little wine with water, I am repulsed by the very scent of such beverages, even if advised for medicinal purposes.'

She picked up a needle threaded from a skane of blue silk and began to weave the fine point in and out of the fabric. Charles watched intently, as she flexed her long, slender fingers with each movement. He absorbed every detail; how the cream coloured lace of her cuffs made the back of her hands look so white, the marquise stones in the small gold ring on her right hand dancing in the light, just like her eyes. He walked behind her and stood close to the chair, so close he could smell her hair.

'I am not an over-bearing man, Mary, ' he said, placing his hands on her shoulders. 'I have never found it necessary to impose my will on another human being, nor do I expect to have to do so in my own home. '

He slowly squeezed Maeve's slender shoulders, pressing his thumbs firmly into her malleable flesh. She lifted her head and as she sat back, she felt the small, neat bun at the nape of her neck lodge against his body. Her breathing was slow, shallow, controlled. She had suspected for a long time that Charles Jenison's affections were not purely paternal so this came as no surprise.

'Compliance is something I have come to expect, Mary.'

She stood up slowly. His hands fell to his sides as he stood silently waiting. For a moment he was unsure of himself, wondering if he had crossed a forbidden boundary. Maeve turned to face him, her head bowed, her expression concealed. With his forefinger beneath her chin he gently lifted her face towards him. Her beautiful eyes now fixed on him, her child-like pink lips pursed almost in a smile. How he wanted to kiss her there and then. As she began to speak, her breath was sweet on his face.

'Just six months ago I was adrift in this world, unable then as now to recall my real family, my old life. Yet now I am enveloped in the bosom of a loving man, and his wife. ' She spoke in little more than a whisper. 'I am, sir, forever in your debt.'

She looked directly into his eyes sensing her power. Here she was, a slip of an Irish girl, beguiling a man rich enough to buy half of Ireland and old enough to be her father. Her father...

'Perhaps a little fresh air would be better for your lightheadedness than brandy.'

He stroked her cheek with the back of his finger.

'Come, let us take a walk through the gardens and down to the lake. The boathouse is the perfect place to... relax.'

Daniels's quiet knock preceded his arrival with the brandies. Jenison downed first his, then Maeve's without pausing.

'What time did Lady Jenison instruct you to send the carriage, Daniels?'

'It is to arrive at Lady Erskin's for 4pm, sir.' Daniels picked up the tray with the empty glasses. 'Will that be all sir?'

Daniels was dismissed but not before he shot a glance at Maeve. He knew precisely what was going on but Maeve didn't care. Not even the thought of the pain that this man's indiscretions might cause Mama Sophie could stop her now. In her short life Maeve had been passed over by the boy she loved, rejected by her father and nearly murdered by a man who was supposed to be taking care of her. Things were going to be different from now on. She was firmly in control, of her life, and any man in it.

There were no pretences. They walked in silence through the formal gardens, across the open lawns and down to the lake. There was no polite conversation, no discussions on the weather or talk of the wild birds that soared above them in the warm spring air. They both knew where they were going, and why.

A pleasant, musty smell wafted out of the timber boathouse as Jenison opened the French doors. It was dark inside but Maeve could make out numerous freshly plumped blue cushions, scattered lavishly about the cane furniture. In the far corner was a chaise longue; upholstered in deep green velour, it seemed to have seen better days. How many times had he brought women here before, she wondered, as she stepped into the darkness?

Candlelight broke the dim spell of the room as Maeve faced the wall, silently unfastening the covered buttons of her bodice. Jenison lit a second candle, his eyes absorbing every button, every hook, every ribbon as the web of clothing was slowly unraveled.

Feeling a hand on her bare shoulder, Maeve turned slowly to face the man who was about to make love to her. As her bodice fell to the floor, he was already unlacing her corsets, then her chemise. She could see in his eyes the flickering light of the candles. All he could see was that she was naked to the waist.

He stood mesmerized, his eyes fixed on her nipples as they perked in the cooler air. His breathing was faster, louder now, as she took his right hand and placed it on her left breast. He cupped it to absorb the fullness of her pale flesh. In a moment, they tumbled on to the chaise longue, engrossed in a penetrating, open-mouthed kiss. He released his belt as she loosed her skirts. Then his mouth explored her breasts as he probed hungrily beneath her petticoats. The scent of this man was now strong in her nostrils; menthol, brandy, rosewater and sweat. And then she could smell her own sexuality mingling with his.

Tired though he was, Joseph's heart pounded with happiness: He was on his way home to Eugene and he had much to be thankful for. He was safe and well and after almost four weeks working away on the roads for the Board of Works, there was money in his pouch, food in his bag and the sun was warm against his skin. It was Joseph's favourite season; the days were beating the night in the fight for light, hedgerows were creeping into bloom and everywhere, signs of wildlife coming alive brought a sense of fresh optimism to the countryside. If things fell into place for him, there might even be a chance of planting an extra late crop of corn – just a few rows perhaps. The copse he and Eugene cleared last summer was well fertilised from seasons of rotting leaves and once they cleared the stones - and if he could afford the seed – an extra crop might see them having an easier winter next time around.

The sun was low in the sky now, but with barely an hour and a half to go of his journey, there was almost a spring in his step. Home was like a magnet to Joseph as it was to all Irishmen, and his heart beat with a new vigour as every stride drew him closer. As he spotted the wood anemone's peeping through the pale green grass he thought of Maeve and how she loved to pick wild flowers just as her mother had done. He missed his girls terribly and after placing his usual Sunday flowers on Carmel's grave, his first chore would be to visit the priest and see if there was word from either of them. Half of him shuddered at the thought they could be dead, yet in his heart he knew they were not. He surmised that Kit would be hard at work somewhere and Maeve... Well, Maeve would be bitter and full of hatred but he could bear the silence if it kept her alive.

Forging stoically ahead, Joseph spotted a fellow traveller. As the sun crept behind a cloud, he could just make him out in the shadowy light. A disheveled looking character, his head was hung low as he peered distractedly into the hedgerows as though searching for something. Joseph couldn't call to mind why, but he thought there was something familiar about the man. Perhaps hunger shaped the contours of every face the same way, he considered, as he tucked his bag beneath his long, worn vest-coat. Joseph didn't take his eyes off the figure as they drew closer to one another. There were desperate folk about, and the sight of a bag with even the slightest bulge could be just too much for some

to resist turning to violence. Although he was not a strong man now, Joseph was ready to fight for what was his. It was the last thing he wanted to have to do, but he would do what was necessary to defend his family. Warily, he called out to the stranger:

'It's a fine evening.'

The stranger ignored him and continued to scour the hedgerows at the side of the pitted track. He was now just a few yards away.

'I said, it's a fine evening, for sure.'

Still there was no response yet the man must have heard Joseph's greeting - they were now just feet apart.

Joseph decided to walk past and ignore him, but then he considered the possibility of being attacked from behind. It could all be a trick, a ploy to catch him off-guard, then molest him with the element of surprise and make off with his bag. No, he couldn't let that happen – an axe to the back of his skull, or a log smashed against his ear. He reached out and caught the man by the shoulder. There was little beneath the tattered smock other than skin and bone, and as a gaunt face turned and looked up at Joseph, he realised it was the face of a lad, probably no older than Kit. The boy's cheeks were sunken, his face skeletal with a soft down covering his skin. This was something Joseph had seen before in extreme cases of starvation. He fixed his eyes, little more than half open, on Joseph as he spoke for the first time.

'Shoots - green'uns. ' He mumbled. 'I'm searching for green shoots and birds eggs.'

The boy's right hand reached into his pocket and retrieved a handful of pale green and white stalks. His left hand nursed a small, unbroken blue egg that Joseph guessed had fallen from a nearby nest.

'You've done well to beat the rats to that little gem,' smiled Joseph. 'What's your name lad?'

'Ruarie.' Came the quiet reply.

Joseph gasped, straightening himself up to take a better look at this sorry soul.

'Ruarie O'Connor? Good lord, it is you Ruarie. Where are your family, son?'

'All passed.' Ruarie's lips barely moved, his vacant expression unchanged.

'Here, sit a while.' Said Joseph, easing the lad on to a grassy bank. He rummaged in the bag beneath his coat until he found a small potato, no bigger than a pebble, still cloaked in its earthy skin.

'Here, chew this slowly, very slowly - just a small mouthful to begin with, mind, or your belly will be groaning with the shock of it.'

Ruarie took the potato in his hand.

'I buried them all; Daddy first - under a heap of rocks. He was too long to dig a hole for. But then the dogs came - they'd dragged him away by his anklebones before I could chase them off. So when the others died I put them in a ditch, together. Then I put a good layer of God's earth over them.'

He paused, deep in thought.

'Dogs gave up after a few inches of digging - too tired.'

'Come on, lad, eat up.' Said Joseph. 'Is there no one left at home, no other family at all that you can turn to?'

'Just me.' He looked at Joseph for the first time and his dry eyes began to glaze over. 'Why me? Why didn't I die too? I must have been the greedy one with fat to spare. That'll be it.'

'It's just luck, Ruarie. You're skin and bone, no more no less. And if you don't eat some of that you'll be a-gonna too.'

Ruarie chiseled at the gnarled potato skin with a mouth full of loose teeth. His tongue was dry and struggled to loosen the powdery flesh. Joseph passed him a flask of water with a tiny nip added to it.

'Just slowly, now, one or two sips.'

Gradually Ruarie managed to nibble away a few small shreds of food but Joseph's relief was outweighed by his concern: What could he do next? He had just about enough inspiration and provisions to eek out some sort of existence for himself and Eugene, but another mouth? Yet how could he leave the poor boy to die by the side of the lane? Their families had known one another well, shared many moments - celebrations and sadness. This famine was forcing hard decisions.

Joseph stood up and looked long and hard at the poor soul before him: he knew what he must do.

The rhythmic sound of the knife on soft wood was soothing. It reminded Eugene of happier times, days when he had a whole family. At least now he had an older brother of sorts. He'd had such a time with James whilst his father was away, working – but this! To have Ruarie O'Connor living there, well, it was too good for words.

'How are you gonna catch a rabbit with such a simple trap?' Eugene smiled. 'Do you not think that after all these years, they have the sense to see danger?'

'Sure they should know – they've seen plenty of their brothers snared,' said Ruarie quietly as he continued his whittling, 'but they're stupid beasts – they've memories shorter than their fur.'

'So stupid there are few of them left,' said Joseph, 'but if anyone can trick one into the pot it's Ruarie, to be sure. Now Geney, there's weeding to be done in the old spinney – and make sure you pick up any of the stones that have come through the soil.'

Eugene's face screwed up and he winced at this command.

'Weeding's girl's work! Why can't I-'

'And do you see any girls here waiting to do this important task?'

Joseph pretended to peer to the right and then to the left, behind the tree where they sat. Ruarie smiled at Joseph's mischief, a rare sight for both of them, whilst Eugene hoisted himself to his feet and sulkily made off in the direction of the cleared spinney. After just a few silent strides, he stopped and turned.

'Just so long as I get the chance to go and set the snare with Ruarie, that's all I ask, daddy, please...'

'If your work is done when Ruarie is ready, then of course you may go.'

'But not Tori.' Quipped Ruarie quickly.

'But I thought you liked Tori – have you changed your mind?' Pleaded Eugene, dismayed.

'Of course I've not changed my mind, she's a grand dog but she'll scare the prey – or eat it! Now go do as your father says or I'll be off without you.'

Joseph understood why Ruarie now found it hard to share his life with a dog. He'd seen animals do some terrible things and despite the affection Tori showed everyone, Ruarie kept his distance. Joseph looked at the energetic bitch as she scampered after Eugene; he had faced many difficult decisions in the past

months but one of the hardest decisions had been to keep Tori through the harsh winter. He'd sometimes wondered whether or not he would really have got rid of her if James had not arrived at that precise moment. Yes, they struggled to sustain their own frail bodies, and giving food to an animal seemed almost inconceivable – especially an animal that brought nothing to the table in return. But in the struggle for survival, Joseph understood how important it was to feed his son's heart and mind as well as his body. Having taken his two sisters away from him, he knew getting rid of Tori would be as disastrous as eating the seed corn he had spent more than half of his wages on. Thankfully, neither had been necessary.

He watched as a grateful if skinny dog roamed between the few rows of root vegetables in search of a stick that was shortening every time it was retrieved.

'Good morning, Mr. McLaughin.'

The clipped tone of the voice came from the west side of the cabin. A plump man, scarcely as tall as Eugene, stood bolt upright, clutching a perfectly polished cane by its ornate, silver top.

'My name is Corbett, Alexander Corbett, and I am Lord Edgerley's new land agent.'

Joseph did not flinch, though his heart beat ferociously.

'Mr. Corbett.' Joseph nodded his acknowledgement. 'Can I inquire what happened to Mr. Potts?'

'Potts is no longer in Lord Edgerley's employ,' said Corbett unemotionally; clearly he knew precisely why Potts was out and he was in.

'Now that is a shame, Potts was a good man.'

'Yes, I can see you might well say that. Having examined the estate records it is quite plain that there has been gross mismanagement of the rents – in fact, I have observed scarcely any revenue has been collected from your holding for almost two years Mr. McLaughlin. Is there a reason for this?'

'Lord Edgerley agreed to-'

'I repeat: Is there a reason for the lack of any payments of rent from this holding?'

'More than half of the holding was returned free of tenants, sir, and that is partly the -'

'I am aware that some... unusual arrangements were put in place some time ago but according to my reckoning, there are still at least two payments that are inexcusably overdue. I am here to discuss the arrangements for regularising these matters, or to make other plans.'

'Sir, I will speak with Lord-'

'You will speak with me, McLaughlin, in whom Lord Edgerley has entrusted this matter. Now, what are your proposals?'

'I have a small corn crop that we will harvest in the autumn.'

'That will possibly take care of the additional monies that will fall due between now and then. My task at the present time is to realise debts already outstanding. Now, for the last time, what are your proposals?'

Joseph was astounded. In all his dealings with his landlord, he had found him to be the exception to the English rule. They had an agreement, a verbal understanding that with half the land returned to the estate, the rent would be waived until such reasonable time as Joseph could afford to pay when his crops were returning a surplus. It now seemed his true character was on show. Joseph walked into the cabin, emerging seconds later with the small brown pouch he had guarded since his return. He tossed it at Corbett, its contents jangling as it soared through the air.

'Give that to your master. It's all I have.'

Corbett emptied the contents into his left hand, counting derisively.

'A token, at least, but no more than that.' He poured the coins back into the pouch and buried it deep in the chest pocket of his worn but elegantly tailored coat. 'I will consult with his Lordship.'

Corbett strode off and remounted the bay gelding he had tethered to a tree.

'What does it mean, Joseph?'

'It means, Ruarie, that we have harder times ahead than even I had imagined.'

Chapter 15

'Come on, old man – we're late! There's work to be done.'

Noel tugged teasingly at his father's sleeve with his right hand, clutching their daily ration of bread and pickles in the other. Kit called out from the kitchen:

'Don't eat that lunch before midday, d'ya hear? You'll be starved before the day has even started if you do.'

'We'll be fine – if I can only get this father of mine out of the door. Will you hurry now, please, dah?'

Dennis coughed violently into a dirty hand, tweaked his runny nose and let out a deep sigh.

'This country is killing me, Noel, sure as I live and breath – not that I'll be doing *that* for much longer, and there's a certainty.'

'At least you're not working in all that terrible marsh mud, Dennis,' said Kit as she breezed into the room. Though heavily pregnant, her energetic enthusiasm was unchanged.

'I thank the Lord every day that you've both found work on the railways. Now stop your wailing and be on your way. I've work to do downstairs, and it has to be done before I go to the doctor's for checking on the baby. Then there's the sweeping in here and-'

'Oh Kit, you never stop for a moment,' said Noel. 'We're goin', don't worry - out from under your feet. 'Till tonight then.'

He gave her a fleeting kiss on the left cheek and was gone. It was she who had approached the Irish foreman of the railway construction company when he first came into The Green Club for a drink and a few jokes with his fellow countrymen. He'd heard – like many others – of the increasingly popular club where you not only enjoyed a small measure or two of good, cheap beer, but also shared in a medical fund when you needed it. Kit had pleaded with him to take Dennis and Noel on to the payroll. It was hard, dirty work but the pay was a little better than reclaiming the mud flats and, just as important, it was safer.

She watched them as they made their way down the rickety staircase and across the yard. It was true; Dennis was a broken man, with limbs like sticks and a stoop to his body that curved his back. But Noeli was thriving. This new country seemed to suit him well and he now looked like a young man instead of a boy. His neck had grown strong and thick with the physical effort of trying to do enough work to compensate for the abysmal efforts of his father. His face was seldom without a grimy covering across the downy stubble that grew thicker by the day. Whatever life threw at Noeli, it seemed, he handled it.

Kit smiled as she rubbed the sides of her engorged belly. It was early in the day but already, she ached with the weight that imbalanced her body and strained against her spine. But she never tired of feeling those ripples of life inside her as

her unborn child kicked and danced. She would find herself stopping to look at her reflection as she passed O'Grady's fine shop window, and what she saw delighted her. Moulding her clothing close to her precious cargo, she tried to imagine what this little person was going to look like when she – he – stopped hiding from her. Always a girl with a natural glow to her cheeks and a jaunty bounce to her stride, pregnancy had made Kit all the more beautiful. Her eyes and hair shone, her skin was radiant and her body was now beautifully rounded where it had once been emaciated. But Kit did not dream of a baby that looked like her; nor even her mother, father or Maeve. All she wanted was a child that resembled her dear Ruarie. There had not been a day since she left Balygall that he had been out of her thoughts and dreams. The warmth of his body, the scent of his love still coursed through her and was just as real inside her as the pulse of her baby.

After one last gentle rub of her side where seconds earlier a small heel had been protruding, Kit made her way across the yard. There was already a delivery from McNally's grocery store sitting on the step outside what had been Samuel's office and waiting room. Now this whole area had been combined with the forge and two of the loose boxes and turned into a comfortable bar and meeting place. And very successful it was too. For \$1.50 a week more than a hundred and fifty 'members' – mainly Irish – were allowed to buy up to four small ales each evening at a special price. More importantly they also received the guarantee of basic medical care for themselves and their family of up to six dependants.

The popularity of 'The Green Club' extended beyond just the members. Samuel was delighted with the companionship and profits it brought him, Kit found it a far easier task pulling beer rather than nails from horse shoes and Woltek Vozkovsky was elated to be able to fund manage and implement the brilliant scheme that, thanks to Kit's ingenuity, was improving the health of so many poor, local people. The chance to get to know Kit better, spend time with her as business colleague, doctor and friend, was an added bonus. With Kit's confinement fast approaching, Woltek kept a close watch over his favourite patient, forbidding her to sweep too vigorously, or carry anything more than a few glasses at a time. He would bring her creamy milk and fresh fruit or vegetables every day, and would ensure she ate a portion of red meat for strength and protein at least twice a week.

Today was set to be a busy one for Kit. She was determined to clean right through the family's rooms and the Green Club, before the restrictions the last weeks of her confinement and the baby's arrival would surely impose. She was fiercely independent and determined to pay their way and not rely on Samuel's generosity, though he insisted there was no need. Samuel held Kit deep in his heart and she could do no wrong in his eyes. He rarely spoke of kin and knowing Samuel had never married, Kit was conscious that the mutual affection and respect they had for each other sprang in part from a shared need for some form of family life. He was an extraordinarily kind and giving man, yet determined and

strong. In many ways, he reminded Kit of her own father, though it was a melancholy comparison she resisted. Joseph was irreplaceable in her head and her heart. But her relationship with Samuel gave her strength and provided a foil to those dark, cold moments that always come when you least expect them.

By midday she had beaten the rugs, mopped and cleaned the floors, and washed the clothes and bedding. After a short break for a crisp, red apple and a beaker of warm milk, she went downstairs to the club to start work again. She rubbed the small of her back as the bulge in front tightened with a taut twinge. It wouldn't be long now, she considered, with equal measures of anticipation and anxiety!

Kit threw open the windows to air the place and drive out the stink of ale and began to wipe the wooden tables down. Suddenly a distant, crashing noise rumbled in through the open windows. It was strong enough to make the cavity in her chest vibrate. She stopped what she was doing and stood in the open doorway, listening as suddenly a whole string of at least five more explosions echoed the first and growled through the city. The silence that followed was as worrying as the bangs. For what seemed like an age, Boston came to a halt.

'Lord what can that be?' Asked Samuel, as he joined her in worried amazement.

A woman hurrying past called to them across the courtyard in a worried voice.

'It's coming from South End – where the new railway's going.'

In that moment, the colour quite literally drained from Kit's face.

'Oh no, that's where... It can't be -'

'I'll go and find out,' said Samuel, 'now you're not to worry yourself.'

'No Sammy, I have to go. I got them the work on the railways – if there's anything gone wrong, it's all my fault.'

'But Kit, the baby-'

'I'll make my way down there slowly. I'm sure they'll be fine ... they'll be fine... but I have to go. Now.'

Grabbing her shawl, Kit hurried off alone as Samuel hurried back inside to find his hat and coat and hurry after her. Neither of them knew precisely the area where Noel and Dennis had been working but Kit knew she would find them. By now throngs of people were headed in the same direction and she knew her best option was to follow everyone else.

It was obvious that she was drawing near to the seat of the explosions; the air was heavy with despair, and was so thickly laden with dust it looked like a foggy November day in the hills of Balygall. She began to cough and quickly wrapped her shawl around her face to keep out the irritating dust. After a walk that became more foreboding with every step, she knew she was close; so close she could hear the calls for help and the barked orders of the rescuers. And then she heard the screams.

Linking her hands under her belly to support the precious load she carried, Kit quickened her pace. Her search would be fruitless, she told herself. Dennis and Noeli would have sneaked an early nibble of their lunch somewhere far away from all this. They'd be unaware that Kit was frantic with worry and would laugh when she told them how she'd been unable to run but had waddled and lumbered along the crowded streets in the company of half the Irish population of Boston. But the sight of a mule pulling an open cart laden with injured men stopped her in her tracks. Some sat up, dust congealing in their open wounds, others lay motionless, several had missing limbs.

'They'll be the lucky ones, ' said an old woman with a trembling voice. 'Mark my words, this is another black day for the Irish.'

As she turned the corner of Brake Street Kit found herself in the middle of a horrific tableau. A dreadful scene, swathed in a dust cloud, unfolded in slow motion before her very eyes. Men cloaked in shrouds of varying grey lay on the ground, some moving, some clearly dead. Many were little more than children, young boys who would never grow up to be men. Kit walked amongst them, calling out, over and over again:

'Noel! Noeli? It's Kit, where are you? Dennis? Answer me, wont you! Please... answer me.'

To her left was a crumpled heap that at first looked like an old discarded sack but a foot jutted out from beneath it. Moving closer, Kit could tell it was a young lad. As he lay on his side, she saw he was about the same size as Noel, probably the same sort of age. She hesitated, afraid to go any closer, to look and perhaps find what she dreaded.

'Noeli?' Her words were little more than a whisper. The boy did not move. As gently as her shaking hands would allow, she slowly turned the boy on to his back. His eyes were open, unblinking, his face distorted with pain. Two huge gashes ran from his forehead right down to his chin. Half his right ear was missing. It was not Noel. Kit gently closed his eyes and suppressed a sob that came from relief as much as sadness.

Just behind her, she thought she heard a voice call her name, so softly it could have been a breathless sigh. As she spun round to see from whence it came, her

reprieve was over. There, with a uniformed man kneeling beside him was Noel, his severed legs oozing blood.

'Oh Lord, Noeli, ' She cried as she hurried to his side. 'I'm here, I'm here.'

She slipped her arm under his shoulders and cupped his head in the crook of her arm. His face and upper body were virtually unscathed, with just a small scratch to his cheek but blood was coursing from what remained of his legs, his broken, frail body. The uniformed man stood up and turned to walk away.

'And where do you think you're going, sir? This lad needs help. Fetch a doctor please!'

Kit tore the shawl from her shoulders, rolled it into a ball and propped Noel's head on it. She stood up and began ripping strips from the under-skirt she had saved up for the past two months to buy, ready to wrap them around as tightly as she could to stem the bleeding. The uniformed man whispered in her ear.

'There's no helping him, missy. He's lost all but a few cups of his life's blood. Others that can be saved need help.'

Undeterred, she pulled the shredded trouser legs away from the bloodied stumps and stared at what remained. She was amazed at how cleanly they were severed, as if someone had sliced through them, one just above the knee, the other clean through the middle of his shin. She'd watched Woltek applying a tourniquet just the week before when a worker had rushed into The Green Club after nigh on severing his hand. Applying the makeshift bandages as tightly as she dared, Kit kept talking to Noel who was slowly slipping into a deep sleep.

'Come on, Noel, we'll make you well again, just hold on now. IS THERE A DOCTOR HERE?' She screamed. Where was Woltek? Why wasn't he here?

'Am I going to die Kit?' Noel asked quietly and calmly.

'Not on your life, laddy, not while I have a breath left in my own body. '

But Kit knew it was hopeless. She lifted his head once more, taking the shawl and wrapping it around his shivering shoulders like a mother cosseting a newborn baby. She stroked his head, wiping a tiny trickle of blood from his cheek and held him as close as her own baby's presence would allow. All she could do was be there with him, soothing and praying. Then a thought struck her. She looked around her.

'Noel, do you know where that father of yours is?'

'He left before the explosion.' Noel coughed, wincing as small droplets of blood caught in the corner of his mouth and on his chin. He tried to smile.

'I never before thought of him as a lucky man.'

'Where did he go – I thought you were both working here?'

'Don't be angry with him, Kit. He has to have a drink to get him through the day.'

'You mean... he's in a *bar* somewhere?'

The adrenaline was subsiding and as Noel coughed again, he yelped like a wounded animal; the movement sent shock waves of pain through what was left of his body. His face was as grey as the dust, his breathing shallow. As his eyes began to close, Kit squeezed the limp body closer to her, silent tears washing clean, straight lines down her dust-covered face.

'Oh don't be crying for me, my Kitty. I'm on my way to my mammy and my brothers.'

Scarcely able to hear what he was saying, she put her ear closer to his lips.

'I've had a grand time with you in this new country, Kit, a grand time. I couldn't have asked for more.'

He lifted his head just enough to place a soft kiss on Kit's neck. The kiss was as light as a butterfly, his lips scarcely brushing against her skin before they were gone. A gentle smile curled the corners of his lips and Noel's lifeless head fell back against her arm.

'Let me help you there, miss,' said a firm, deep voice. Kit looked up and through her tears she saw two men. The taller of the two took her by the arm and helped her to stand whilst the other lowered Noel carefully back to the ground.

'Was he family, miss?' Asked the first man.

'He was, yes, family.' Kit sobbed.

'What of his father?'

The sadness turned to rage within Kit.

'I'll deal with that, just as soon as I can find him.'

She took one last look at Noel as the men began to shroud him in a torn, patched blanket.

'Don't you worry, Noel, I'll see your father knows just what a brave man his son was.'

The thick, cloying dust cloud was beginning to settle as Kit made her way from the pandemonium. Swathed once more in her now bloodied shawl, she set off with a heavy heart but fire in her belly. Street by street she paced in and out of the bars she knew would have tempted Dennis O'Doherty, yearning to give him the piece of her mind the good for nothing deserved. Every bar had its own quota of the red-nosed, unkempt men who existed rather than lived, their entire lives little more than a haze of bad, cheap alcohol. She thought of the families at home, the little ones going hungry, without shoes and warm clothing so their daddy could forget his woes for a short while. The sight sickened her and she thanked the Lord that The Green Club ensured families did not suffer, and their men-folk didn't drink away all of those hard-earned wages.

Every place and every drinker began to look, smell and sound the same. It became one blurred montage of despair until she walked into O'Reilly's bar on Temple Street, just a few blocks from home. Leaning heavily against a pillar at the far end of the bar, she watched as a man laughed, slapping a fellow drunk hard on the back and sending him reeling. Her heart began to race.

The drunk took a deep draw from the glass of ale before him, the Adam's apple in his scrawny neck bobbing delightedly at the experience. He put the empty glass down hard on the bar, wiped his mouth and nose with his sleeve and waved the other arm at the tubby, mustachioed barman.

'Another of your fine ales, when you have the time sir!'

But this was not Dennis; it was Gerald Flynn.

'I said another ale, sir – are you deaf!'

Flynn tottered sideways as he barked his order for a third time, colliding with the same man he had already sent flying once.

'Will you watch what you are doing, ' spluttered the drunk, 'or do I have to make sure you learn a lesson?'

The sight of two men scarcely able to stand challenging one another to a fight would almost be laughable if Kit had not been so desperate to speak with Flynn. She pushed her way through the crowd, man by man, until she was close enough to catch Flynn by the collar of his dark green overcoat. He spun round angrily.

'And are you wanting a face full of knuckles too? Hey?'

He stopped dead, shocked to see it was a woman who had collared him. In an effort to focus so there was just the one woman instead of the two before him, he squinted and closed his left eye. Ever the opportunist, his opponent used the distraction to his advantage and sidled off to another part of the bar.

‘Mr. Flynn, it’s me, Kit McLaughlin.’

Kit was so excited she could scarcely speak. If Flynn was here then Maeve must be too. She had let go of his collar and was now gripping each arm firmly with her hands, half to steady him and half to ensure he did not disappear.

‘You and your wife travelled from Ballygall with my sister, Maeve. Is she here – in Boston? Please tell me – is she here?’

Flynn was flummoxed. Not in his wildest dreams had he ever imagined he would stumble across anyone he knew from the old country, not in this huge place, this vast city. And the last person he’d expected to meet was the daughter of the man who had paid for his passage: the man who’s other daughter he had left lying in a gutter. Jesus, he had purposely made for Boston instead of New York, to avoid the destination planned by both parties. He had to think on his feet, but just standing on them was difficult enough with the amount of ale he’d consumed. He began to weep.

‘Oh sweet Mary Mother of God, don’t speak of my poor late wife,’ he sobbed. ‘Just to hear her name cuts through to my heart and opens the same old wound.’

‘She’s... dead?’

A sense of dread began to grip Kit. Her bowels tightened, her stomach knotted.

‘She never made it to these blessed shores, these bountiful lands, these-’

‘And Maeve? Mr. Flynn, what of my sister?’

As his wails grew louder, Kit grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him.

‘What? Tell me – what of my sister?’

‘Twas the fever – took both of them, both of those beautiful, kind ladies who meant so much to me. Scarcely a week left until we were due to dock, and a terrible fever swept through the hold; dropped like flies they did.’

Kit let go of Flynn, stepped back and looked him square in the eyes. She recalled her own dire experiences on board ship; he must be speaking the truth.

'No, it can't be.'

Somberly, he lowered his head.

'It's no comfort for you I know, but they didn't suffer for long. In fact, I can vouch safe, they knew nothing at all about it.'

Kit's mouth opened as if to cry out, but no sound came. Instead she turned and walked silently away, out of the bar and into the street. She continued walking, her eyes unseeing, until a carriage drew alongside her.

'I've been searching for you everywhere, Kit.' Woltek jumped down and ran to her side. 'Did you find Noel and Dennis? I... we've been frantic.'

As Kit looked up at Woltek's kind, worried face she began to weep, burying her head in his shoulder as his arms engulfed her.

'Whatever has happened Kit, you must feel no guilt, take no blame. Noel and Dennis owe you a debt of gratitude for all you have done.'

Still he waited patiently until she could speak. He stroked her hair, reassured her as best he could until her sobs began to subside.

Kit stood tall, her eyes lifted to meet his. But no words would come.

'Is Noel...'

Kit nodded.

'And Dennis?'

Kit shook her head as she wiped her tears with the back of her bloodstained hand.

'And you were here, looking for Dennis?'

She nodded once more.

'Did you find him?'

'No – but I...'

Kit tried to control herself; she was desperate to share this burden with someone, but couldn't speak the words.

'I found the man who travelled here with Maeve, my sister. She's...'

'In your own good time, Kit.'

Woltek rubbed his hand up and down the small of her back, a look on his face that was showed both professional and personal concern. Kit drew a deep breath; after a determined sigh, she told him her terrible news in one burst.

'She's dead! Woltek, my little sister Maeve is dead.'

Peering through the half open door at all the commotion, Dennis stood transfixed. From the shadows in the far corner of the bar, he had watched Kit's misery unfold as Gerald Flynn had told her of the loss of both Maeve and his own wife. As the scene unfolded before his very eyes, he steeled himself to be unmoved by her tears, her loss; t'was fitting the daughter of the man who had ruined his life should herself taste the bitter pill of loss. In that moment a plan ignited in Dennis's addled brain and he slipped away with a purpose. An idea that would gnaw away at him night and day until he could fulfill it was beginning to ferment. He shuffled along the busy street, and for once resisted the lure of the many watering holes on his way. He had plans to make.

As Dennis trundled off unnoticed, Kit collapsed into Woltek's arms, suddenly gripped by a gut-wrenching pain that seared through her body.

Kit's stomach felt as though it had turned to rock. Preoccupied with the huge sense of loss she had just absorbed, the pain and the sudden change to her body caught her unawares. As she hung in Woltek's arms, a warm, wet sensation gushed down her thighs.

'Oh Lord, I've peed!' She whispered, embarrassed and confused. For the first in her life, she felt out of control of her own body; another force was driving her, one that was impossible to resist.

Woltek placed one hand on her stomach, moved it slowly from side to side.

'Kit, your water's are starting to flow because your baby is coming. We need to get you into the carriage and to the clinic – now.'

Flummoxed by the sheer effort of clambering up the awkward iron steps into the open carriage, she slumped across the seat. Her face crumpled as the muscles in her neck tensed with another wave of tightening pain. Watching her closely, Woltek loosed the reins, and removed the brake ready to set off.

'Don't fight it, Kit. You must go with it, not fight it.'

He cracked the whip and the horse set off at a brisk trot but he knew it was easily a twenty minutes drive to his clinic, especially with the throngs still milling about after the accident.

'But Dennis? He doesn't know ... he could be dead himself – Woltek you have to find him.'

'I'm sure he's safe, Kit, you mustn't worry. Just try and relax.'

'Ooohh, I'm in agony.' She groaned. 'God wouldn't mean me to go through this – something must be wrong.'

'Believe me Kit, I've attended the birth of many babies and have yet to meet a mother who didn't agree with you.'

Kit writhed and rolled gently in her seat as the pains began to surge through her in an almost continual wave.

'Oh Woltek – I think I...I... '

She grunted as her stomach hardened once more, but this time with a strong, different urge.

'Mary mother of Jesus, I need a privy!'

'Kit, whatever you do, don't give in to the need to push – believe me, it's not a privy you're needing. Hold on just a few more moments, we're almost at Samuels. We'll welcome your baby into the world there.'

Woltek drove the carriage right into the courtyard, where less than a year ago Kit had pleaded with Samuel for a job. Now it was Woltek who was assailing a worried looking Samuel as he hollered for help.

'Quickly, now! Help me get her out of the carriage,' Woltek urged. 'If you can get her inside, I'll go and set up somewhere clean for the baby to be delivered.'

'Oh my word, there's never been a baby here - other than a foal,' jabbered Samuel, all of a dither.

Between the two men they levered the virtually immobile mother-to-be out of the carriage and into Samuel's strong arms.

'Don't drop me, whatever you do,' said Kit, trying to force a smile.

'There's nothing of you, my girl – light as a feather even though I'm truly carrying two of you!'

Woltek hurried into Samuel's home, brushed everything from the large oak table with his arm, then sloshed it down with a solution of vinegar and water.

'Where are your clean towels and bed-sheets, Sam?'

'In the dresser by the window – bottom drawer,' replied Kit, still in Samuel's arms.

As they came through the door, Samuel's face was a picture of paternal concern. Woltek threw a crisp white sheet over the table and stacked a pile of small, white towels on the side.

'Right, come on Kit, let's get you comfortable.'

'Comfortable? You're joking for sure. Aaaaah!'

Samuel lowered his charge as slowly and gently as he could manage. As her backside landed on the table, Woltek cupped her back in his arms and guided her into a semi-reclining position, her head supported by the towels.

'Sam, can you go and fetch my bag from the carriage please.'

'Of course, of course.'

Samuel shuffled out as fast as he could, only too pleased to be out of sight of the agonising mystery that was about to be performed in his very own kitchen.

'It's no good, Woltek,' Kit gasped. 'I have to go!'

Clutching the underside of her thighs, she lifted her weight on to her elbows and pushed her chin into her chest, groaning and grunting for all she was worth. Woltek moved to the foot of the table, lifted to one side the skirts and tattered petticoats that had provided the bandages for Noeli's wounds.

'It's your baby that's coming, Kit - I can see his head. Oh my, he has a fine head of hair! Now, push hard when the desire is there, but rest between. It wont be long, I promise.'

As he spoke, Kit's womb hardened again for the penultimate time. In one huge burst a tiny head appeared, it's warmth touching the silky soft insides of Kit's thighs.

'That's it, Kit, that's really good. Now, wait, wait.'

As Kit braced for another burst of the irresistible desire to push, Woltek supported the tiny head in one hand and cleared its airways with the other. As

soon as he felt Kit's body arch again, he held the baby with both hands, ready, waiting.

'Just once more and he'll be with us, gently now, gently...'

Woltek carefully rotated Kit's baby's body with his right hand as finally the shoulders and then the rest of this tiny, new person joined them.

'Oh, I do apologise to our new little friend – he's a she. Kit you have a beautiful baby daughter.'

Kit let out a gasp of delight and her daughter spontaneously spluttered into life. Unaided, she opened her mouth and her lungs to announce her arrival to the world. Woltek took one of the towels and wrapped the baby in it, whilst using another to cover Kit's legs before pulling her skirts down to cover her dignity.

Samuel appeared in the doorway, unable to believe his tear-laden eyes.

'In the time it took me to walk from here to the carriage and back again, the two of you have brought another person into the world.' He whispered, disbelievingly. 'Just a moment ago, there were three of us in my home, and now there are four – and no one else came in through my door.'

Kit was elated, her child was safely delivered, and she'd survived!

'Is she beautiful? Can I see her please, Woltek?'

Woltek gently handed the tiny bundle into Kit's waiting embrace.

'At last,' she said. 'We meet at last, little one.'

She peered down at the tiny face and was immediately certain that not only did she recognise her child, but also her child recognised her. She traced the contour of her tiny nose, down to her pouting, almost translucent pink lips that formed a small, perfect 'o'. With the very tip of her forefinger, Kit explored every facet of her profile and button chin. She was perfect, absolutely perfect, but best of all she had beautiful sandy blonde hair.

'She has your colour, Kit – your lovely rosy blonde hair,' cooed Samuel.

Kit looked at her baby, and at the tarnished curtain-hoop she still wore on her finger.

'No Sam, it's her father's hair that crowns my little princess.'

Kit kissed the tip of her forefinger and pressed it gently on her baby's lips.

'Dia is Muire duit, Bridie. Dia is muire duit.'

Chapter 16

The past year had been good for Cormac Mulcahy, very good indeed. Whilst the forty-niners were slogging their guts out for tiny gold nuggets, he was raking it in and scarcely having to lift a finger. Gouge Eye was a rough kind of town, just as its name suggested. What could loosely be called sidewalks were in reality trampled old packing cases and cigar boxes that turned to sludge at the first sign of rain. In the past couple of years a few stores had sprung up including Taylor's Barn, a small general store that was flanked on either side by a lodging house and a bar – Mulcahy's Saloon. It was nothing fancy, with just a simple bar made of rough, unplanned timber, and a handful of rickety tables and chairs. But the shelves behind the bar were full of liquor and behind a rope curtain in the lobby out the back, there were two well-used beds with girls to match; Mulcahy's saloon was thus a popular part of the Gouge Eye scene.

Mulcahy wasn't high on intelligence and even lower on morals but he had an eye for the main chance. By necessity he'd used a chunk of his spoils from the Mexican convent to buy his way out of the army and the God-forsaken, arid country that had provided him with such a windfall. With some of the remaining booty he'd bought a covered wagon, stacked it high with liquor and crossed the border into the land of promise, wisely heading west just when the gold rush was at its peak. In tow, he had two Mexican whores who'd seen better days but were eager to get away to America – get away to anywhere. It was a good move for all concerned.

Prospecting for gold in California was comparatively easy, with little expertise or specialist equipment required. Instead of being buried deep beneath the earth's surface, in California the gold nuggets were right under your nose, ripe for the picking. With just a sieve and a shovel, plus a strong back and a hunger for a better life, men were earning more in a day than they could in a month back east. But if there was gold a-plenty, there was a dire shortage of just about everything else. Luxuries like fresh eggs could cost a dollar a piece but, with more money than they knew what to do with, the forty-niners were happy to pay. Mulcahy decided to provide the two most lucrative deficiencies – women and booze. It also left the door wide open for him to fleece his inebriated customers and he would often relieve them of any little 'extras' they might have tucked away in their pockets. Luckily for Mulcahy, these simple prospectors often kept their gold about their person, reluctant to trust it to one of the banks in nearby towns or leave it in their tents.

Mulcahy had agreed a very competitive six-month rental for the bar with Mr. Taylor, paying the entrepreneurial man up front for the building he had built at the

same time as his store. Having engaged a Canadian barman named Jed, Mulcahy's favoured position was when he was ensconced comfortably in a deeply padded chair, the only upholstered piece of furniture in the bar. Positioned suitably close to the action, he could scrutinize not only the takings and Jed's nimble fingers, but he could also usher in and out the paying customers so eager to sample his back-room Mexican entertainment.

Life was good and Mulcahy's fortune grew as fast as his waistline. His hair was now thinner than the side-burns that framed his bulging jowls and he had lost all but one of his front teeth. He didn't care about his looks though - he could afford to buy any woman he wanted so why waste money on clothes or fancy finery to try and trap 'em for nothing? As the end of the six-month lease drew closer, Mr. Taylor was convinced his prospering tenant would be eager to renew and was envisaging a substantial increase in the rental he would charge.

But Mulcahy had other ideas. Shrewd as ever, he could see the gold was becoming thin on the ground, and whilst newcomers still flocked to the town, they had nothing like the spare cash of their predecessors. No, strike quick and hard then move on, that was his chosen policy. The time had come to get out and seek richer pastures on the east coast where men would pay well for good whiskey and double the price for whores. New York was where he was heading to, New York or maybe Boston.

Betsy Brown rolled back on to her side of the hard, dirty bed. Tufts of horsehair were forcing their way through the threadbare mattress cover, but she didn't care. Once again Liam had sated her sexual appetite and she was in that wonderful, warm world that arrived with an orgasm.

'You're an animal, Liam, a right beast.' She stroked the side of his bare chest with the back of her forefinger, tracing every contour of rippling muscle. 'I better be getting up I suppose.'

As she kissed his chest, Liam folded his arms behind his head and relished the Adonis-worship that always followed sex with Betsy. She gently caressed one of his nipples with her lips as it peeked out from the carpet of dark chest hair that joined seamlessly with the curls beneath his armpits.

'Work's just bearable now I have you.' She cooed.

'Well, we need the money. I've scarcely had a fight for three weeks and there's no work in the docks. Things are going from bad to worse, and what's more, there's more Irish arriving on every boat. D'ya know, it's not going to get any better for a while yet.'

'Yeah, but they're a weak, sickly bunch.' Said Betsy, her hand dropping to his lower regions. 'Not like you, my strong little soldier.'

'Hey, not so much of the little – and there's a thought; perhaps I should take the Queen's shilling?'

Betsy sat bolt upright, her ample breasts shaking with the sudden effort.

'Don't you ever say things like that, Liam – d'ya here! I aint 'avin' you go off to fight some war and get killed just to get a belly full of grub. No, I've got other ideas.'

She sat astride him, riding the cock already hardening inside his unbuttoned pants.

'And do you suppose we can make money like this – I can't sell my body for a fight, and I'm certainly not going to be able to sell it for a fuck, except to you maybe!'

Betsy leaned forward, pressing his elbows down hard with her hands. She looked deeply into his perfect, green eyes and felt another surge of passion arising between her legs.

'Fucking's for free, my lovely. We'll just make sure some other bastard pays our way – some rich bastard with more money than he knows what to do with, and one who's not too smart 'n all.'

'And how are we going to find such a generous man and persuade him we have a greater need for his money?'

'Don't you worry, I know who and I know how; we just need to work out...when.'

Liam freed his arms and grasped Betsy by the shoulders, forcing her down hard, her welcoming thighs absorbing him yet again. As she bobbed up and down, Liam considered he was a very lucky man; a roof over his head, food in his belly and regular fun with a woman who not only enjoyed a fuck, but also had a wicked little brain in her head.

Chapter 17

Maeve didn't flinch as Charles Jenison squeezed her shoulders.

'You are so dedicated, Mary. I admire you greatly, truly I do.'

She put down the pen having meticulously completed two pages of beautifully written entries in her journal. As she turned, still seated in her chair, she found herself looking up at the man she now took to her bed at every opportunity.

'I am indebted to you, Papa Charles – and I constantly strive to find every possible way to... express my gratitude.'

Jenison struggled to resist the temptation to take her there and then, in the library – on the desk, perhaps, or better still the floor. As Maeve took in his lascivious look, she could almost taste the power she had over the man. Though she saw Jenison as a weak man, she also recognized that he was extremely useful. Though he was nothing in comparison to her father, she knew this man would never send her away. As she peered up into his eyes, they shared a moment of intimacy she had never experienced before; could he actually be falling in love with her, she considered?

'Perhaps I will take a walk down to the lake this afternoon.' She said softly. 'Should you wish to join me...'

With Maeve's words still lingering in the air, the door flew open and Sophie breezed in. She was dressed in a beautiful mink-coloured silk dress and Maeve thought at once how beautiful she looked. The bodice was tight and demure, the skirts full and capably lifted at the front by two slender hands, ensuring they did not catch the elegant toes of the lady of the house. Her hair was swept up into a chignon with two or three Grecian curls escaping purposefully at the nape of her neck and down her pale porcelain like skin. She sparkled in a way her husband had not seen since before the days of miscarriages and stillbirths. Maeve, he considered, had reignited a maternal flame in Sophie that he thought had been all but extinguished. As an added bonus, since Maeve's arrival Sophie had been happier and more receptive as a lover. The dual impact of these two women in his life put him in a dream position, with two lovers under the same roof. Now his dalliances elsewhere were few and far between.

'Ah, there you both are! I should have guessed I would find you together,' she smiled. 'You two have become quite as inseparable these last months, it is so delightful to behold.'

'You look well, my love, the English spring air must be suiting you.'

Jenison took her hand and led her to a fireside chair. 'Mary and I were discussing her studies. She is progressing admirably.'

'Oh yes,' exclaimed Sophie, clasping her hands together, 'an exceptional pupil, according to Mr. Carmichael. In fact he has used the word protégé on more than one occasion.'

'He is too kind. I am most fortunate to have such an esteemed tutor – and such generous benefactors.' Maeve lowered her head. 'I just wish I could recall...'

'Oh Mary, please don't be sad.' Sophie was only too aware that her newfound happiness hung by the thinnest of threads. If Mary's memory of her real family should return, she could be lost to them forever. 'We are a family now and I hope that is how it will always be.'

She looked up at her husband, eyes pleading. He stood with one arm resting on the grand mantelpiece, unresponsive.

'Mary, Papa Charles and I have something to say to you, don't we Charles?'

Jenison glanced from Sophie to Maeve. His life was immensely enjoyable at present and he was keen to ensure it continued, but what Sophie had proposed was a huge and drastic step.

'Charles?'

He looked into his wife's eyes and saw a streak of determination there he had never seen before. He began to consider his position. What harm could it do, he thought to himself? They had no heirs, and were unlikely to produce one now. He, for one, would never take another wife or knowingly produce a child, so where was the harm in it?

'We have been discussing your – our – future.'

He paused, looked across at Sophie. ' '

We have decided... rather, we would like to... ' '

'We wish to become your true, legal parents, Mary.' Sophie could wait no longer.

'Guardians,' interjected Jenison.

Maeve was taken aback by the proposal. It was not something she had foreseen even with her vivid imagination. Could it really be that her cuckoo status was to be regularised by something permanent? And was this what she *really* wanted – a future as an English lady?

'Please, Mary, please say you will.' Sophie pleaded.

'I... but...'

Lost for words Maeve stared into Sophie's pleading eyes.

'I cannot think of anything more wonderful,' she replied, turning to Charles. 'If you will have me, that is.'

She lowered her head coyly, but in a moment Sophie had wrapped her arms about her and was kissing her face, deliriously happy.

'At last,' she wept, 'we are a true family, Charles. We have our perfect little girl.'

Chapter 18

The longest day of the year brought more rain, but Eugene didn't care. He was on an adventure with the three most important beings in his life right now – his father, Ruarie and Tori. They'd set out soon after dawn, a little before 5am, each one carrying something precious. Eugene's main responsibility was, of course, Tori so he carried with him a sturdy length of rope in case the cheeky hound should decide to wander off or get into mischief. Joseph had their prized shovel on his shoulder; one of the last remaining tools of a once comprehensive set of useful implements, it had several small holes clean through the thin metal, but it was still blessed with a strong wooden handle, refashioned by Ruarie. It was he who was entrusted with their food and water, probably the most important chattels of all, as they would require sustenance not only for the work that lay ahead, but also to ensure they could make it home afterwards.

Unbeknown to the others, Ruarie also had hidden about him all of his spare clothing, including the fancy if well-worn tapestry vest he treasured above all else. Joseph had given it to him as a gift just the past winter, and it seemed like only yesterday that Joseph himself wore it at the ceilidh just before Kit went away. In reality he knew that was now another world, and probably not just geographically. Ruarie was well aware Joseph feared his girls were lost to him forever. By now if it had been humanly possible, Kit would surely have written to the priest as had been agreed. How he wanted to tell Joseph of his love for Kit, so they could share the sadness, the longing. But he had promised Kit he would not speak of it, and a promise was a promise.

Nothing had been heard of the O'Dohertys either and tales reached them from itinerants and neighbours that the coffin ships were claiming thousands of Irish lives before even docking at the American ports. Once there, the weakened migrants were falling victim to the fever in their droves, often never stepping on to dry land after weeks of tortuous sea-travel. He considered that perhaps he would one day go to America and see the place for himself, perhaps seek out what news he could on Kit; his head told him she must be dead, but his heart cried out that she could still be alive. But for now, that was all a long way in the future. Today he needed all his reserves of strength and determination to cope with a task of equal emotional turmoil. They were going back to the cabin where Ruarie's family had lived. And died.

'Strange, Joseph,' puffed Ruarie, 'before all of this I'd have thought nothing of hiking across the hills to yours or the O'Dohertys. Indeed, many a time I'd be out early to catch a rabbit or a fish, be done with all my chores and still run errands before breakfast.' He paused as the memories coursed through him. 'Ah, my mother's cooking – she...'

'She was a good woman and one of the finest cooks in Ballygall, to be sure,' chimed in Joseph quickly. 'You are improving, mind - with a real knack of brewing hips to the perfect moment so they shed their sweetness.'

Joseph patted him on the back as the two reminisced. He surprised himself at how even the saddest of times were becoming a little easier to bear. Keeping each other's spirits from flagging meant the misery was shared, he thought to himself. And he just had to look at Eugene to see how life went on regardless. Almost half as tall again as when the girls left, though slender as a sapling, he had just as much energy as Tori.

They were only a few minutes away from the crest of a hillock that would give them a clear view of Ruarie's home, the little cabin that had become a graveyard. The rugged terrain remained beautiful despite the disappearance of much of the ground cover. In the harsh days of winter, local folk had trawled across valleys and hills, scavenging for anything from roots to thistle heads – anything that might just be edible. Now the gentle bloom of early summer began to tip the scales of nature in favour of the land once more. Fresh shoots were appearing and young leaves of the palest shade of green began to unfurl from the thorny thickets.

After scrambling across a patch of loose, flinty stones they finally made the summit and gazed down at the slopes that fell away before them.

'Daddy,' said Eugene, as he sidled up to his father's father side. 'What is it we are going to be doing at Ruarie's home again?'

'We are going to make sure his family are all ... resting peacefully, where Ruarie laid them. And then we will see whether there's any possessions remaining that can be salvaged. You, of course, will have an important part to play.'

Ruarie smiled as he listened to the old man's manipulation of Eugene's sense of responsibility.

'I know, I know – it's my job to find Ruarie's old snares out in the valley. And if there are any bones resting in them...'

'Just make sure they're all from animals!' Remarked Joseph.

'To be sure, and then I can throw them to Tori,' laughed Eugene.

'That'll keep her out of mischief!' Agreed Ruarie.

They laughed together as they headed down the slope, each one of them oblivious to the macabre humour the famine had bestowed on them.

Chapter 19

The glass in the windows was thick enough without the liberal coating of smoke, dust and dirt that visitors to the Club added over the course of a busy evening. Kit rubbed hard and methodically with her cloth; gradually the sunshine began to filter through the grime. Now she could see outside, where Bridie slept in the basinet style pram Sam had bestowed upon her. She was an active little girl, already trying to crawl about the place, but she still liked her morning snooze, especially if it was a fine day and Kit could let her sleep in the open air. Today was such a day and Kit could see the tiny patchwork coverlet rising and falling as the little girl that meant so much to her slept away her morning.

The windows done, Kit looked about her. She wanted everything to be pristine because Samuel was returning from a short trip out of town to visit family. With help from Kit and a stream of casual, but trustworthy workers, Samuel now had more time to do the things he wanted to do, rather than the things he needed to do. Yet Kit was surprised as this was the first time he had taken leave to go and stay a day or two with his brother Jim and Carol, his wife. Samuel rarely spoke of his relatives; Kit presumed it was because the very word 'family' was an open wound to her. A kind and gentle man, Samuel was the very essence of what it meant to be a true Christian although both he and Kit had become remiss in their church attendances of late, what with the Green Room, and the baby.

As she busied herself, she reflected how different the Green Room looked when the sunshine streamed in through the windows. In the evening the place was often full to bursting with men, mostly Irish, who had become accustomed to paying their weekly dues to enjoy the camaraderie and cheap beer with the justification of securing medical support for their families. Most now went home to those families as soon as the Club closed at its customary eight o'clock threshold, though there were the odd few who still fell out of McGinty's bar across the street in the small hours.

Despite these late night stragglers, McGinty was unhappy at the numbers of his customers who now frequented the Green Club, and only the Club. The time was approaching when business would have dropped off to such a degree that he would have to consider selling up. Only the thought of all those extra customers joining the club prevented him doing so right away, but he was a businessman and he knew hard decisions had to be made.

Kit went outside into the courtyard to shake out her dusters and refresh the pail of water. As a sudden breeze sent a flurry of dust into her face Kit sneezed twice – loudly.

‘You should be watching out for yourself, Kit, autumn’s bite is almost in the air and a chill at this time of year is not a pleasant experience.’

She hadn’t heard Woltek approach but was delighted to see him, particularly with a pristine, white handkerchief in his hand.

‘What a beautiful morning though, isn’t it? And you don’t need to fret over me – it’s just a bit of dust tickling me, not a chill.’

A most unrefined blast from her nose was then caught in the crisp cotton. She looked across to the bassinette, relieved to see the cover still rising and falling to the gentle rhythm of Bridie’s breathing.

‘Ooooh, I’ll have Bridie awake at this rate,’ she joked.

‘You’ll have them awake in New York, let alone over there. And how is our little lady today?’

‘If you mean Bridie, she’s fine and as bonny as any little girl ever was.’

‘And if I mean you?’

‘Did you?’

She tilted her head slightly to one side. Woltek just smiled.

As she tweaked her nostrils she considered what she should do with the large square of neatly hemmed linen. To return the now soggy item seemed rude, but to pocket it seemed like stealing.

‘I could wash this... have it clean and pressed by this evening?’

He wrapped his hands around hers, gently, firmly.

‘Keep it - my pleasure. It’s never swaddled such a beautiful nose before.’

‘Yes, I can see that,’ she said cheekily, staring at his generously sized nose. ‘It’s plain why you choose such large kerchiefs –plain as the nose on your face!’

While Kit giggled at her cheeky words, he reached down to the bucket and grabbed a wrung out but damp cloth. Realizing his intentions, Kit tried to turn tail and run, but Woltek, was too quick for her. Grinning from ear to ear, he grabbed

her arm and spun her round to face him square on. As he rubbed the damp cloth across her face, Bridie slept on blissfully unaware.

'That's for not having more respect for those older and wiser than yourself,' he laughed as Kit tugged the cloth from his grip and waggled her finger at him.

'If you've nothing better to do and no patients to attend to, you can make yourself very useful by wiping down the counter,' she said, folding the cloth neatly. 'Me, I cannot abide the smell of beer.'

'And you think I can?'

'You're a man aren't you? Even my own dada couldn't resist that aroma from time to time. Not that he was a drinker, so to speak. Just...'

Her reminiscing took the edge off the moment. With no news from home, or any response to her letter, she feared what remained of her family had gone the way of so many of the poor Irish farmers in the famine. She would hear talk of it in the Green Room - so many losing so much. But she pulled herself together; there was much to be done and feeling sorry for herself would get her nowhere.

Kit bent down and rinsed the cloth out once again, knocking the pail over as she stood up. The water swept across the yard with a whoosh, dribbling amongst the cobbles and out onto the street beyond. A passer by stopped suddenly as a puddle began to form at his feet. In his hand was a copy of the Boston Pilot.

'Oh dear, I'm sorry to have caused you any inconvenience,' said Kit, trying hard not to grin at the look of disdain on the man's face. 'D'ya think I might see your Pilot, sir, to read the notices about Irish people, families - missing and found?'

'Take it,' he said tossing it into her hands. 'I've no need for it, not now.'

The paper was folded back, and Kit realised that the man's pained expression had come as a result of bad news. The Pilot was open on a page that listed migrant families still missing following arduous journeys to America, and those known to be lost. Next to this list was another even sadder roll call; further commentary about those lost to the famine in Ireland. A small entry was circled in pencil - an entry about the Purcell family, from Connemara: missing now presumed lost. How sad, thought Kit; the poor man had to discover his family was gone in such an impersonal way.

Her eyes skipped up and down the list. No McLaughlins, thank God. Next she checked the list of those who were safe and had published a notice to say so - Maeve, perhaps, might be one of them. But there was nothing. And then she saw a name further down the list, a name that sent her stomach lurching. O'CONNOR - Ballygall; all believed lost. She stood in stunned silence, twirling the copper

hoop on her finger, staring at the words that brought an end to her hopes of a future in Ireland with Ruarie.

'Kit? Kit are you all right? You're-.' Woltek touched her shoulder gently.

'It's a friend – an old friend. He... his family... the famine's taken them all.'

She folded the newspaper methodically, tucked it into the pocket in her pinny.

'I'll never get this place done if I don't get a move on,' she said as she turned and headed back inside. 'There's the floors to be swept and washed, cloths to launder and-'

Woltek, following close behind, caught her by the wrist.

'Please.' He murmured as she turned to face him. Kit's eyes fell, focused on the ground. 'Trust me – I want to share everything with you.'

She looked up at the now familiar face and saw a look of genuine concern. Almost afraid to invest her love and trust in another human being, she hesitated. But as he drew her closer to him, she dissolved into his arms. As they closed around her slight, warm frame, her head tucked just beneath his chin. He felt the warmth of her breath through his shirt and the smell of her hair teased his senses. He stroked her hair with his right hand, teasing it gently from the crown down to the tips of the honey-coloured curls.

Slowly, he eased himself apart from her, inch by inch. He placed his forefinger beneath her chin, lifted her head gently towards him. Her eyes still smarted with tears, her cheeks moist. He hesitated, unsure what to do, what to say. But before either of them could speak, Kit placed her mouth squarely on Woltek's, her arms drawing him in. But what Woltek did not see was Kit slipping the copper hoop from her finger, then secreting it into her pocket. Closing her eyes, she felt his lips respond, his tongue parting her lips. He did not understand what had prompted the explosion of passion he had dreamed of for so long, neither did he care. Kit was in his arms and that was all that mattered. He was too happy to notice the sad figure that stared from McGinty's bar across the street. Half sodden with booze, Dennis O'Doherty watched as the only other person in his life found happiness: Something he knew had been taken from him forever – and something he could never forgive.

Chapter 20

The snatched breaths of the two figures huddled beneath the hedgerow hung like autumn dew in the still of the evening. After walking for more nearly four hours Liam and Betsy were exhausted – and very damp. They had secured a ride part

of the way from a carrier who, fortuitously, was also able to pick them up on his return the following morning for an extra copper. He had brought them to within ten miles of their destination - her former place of work, and now their target for some rich pickings. Betsy said the final stage of the journey had to be done on foot, to ensure they remained unseen. So as the harsh winter light faded on the early evening, the two of them had picked their way through gorse and across fields and spinneys until they reached the grand country house that was their destination – and their destiny.

The mellow brick walls of the imposing house looked daunting in the moonlight, impregnable because of their sheer scale, and the social exclusion they represented to Liam and Betsy.

‘What d’ya think then,’ Asked Betsy. ‘Something special huh?’

‘Oh it’s a grand place and no mistake.’ Liam’s voice was full of awe. ‘How are we to get in there?’

‘You silly old bugger, have you no brains in your head?’ She smirked. ‘I worked in that very place for ten whole years of me life – and I have no intention of them being wasted ones. Now, pay attention. See them lights up there?’

She pointed to the top corner of the east wing.

‘Them there’s the rooms the servants sleep in. Once the candles are all gone out, there’s no one gonna hear us – the master’ll be sodden with brandy and she’ll have taken one of her special draughts to get her off to sleep.’

‘And the servants?’

‘Ol’ Daniels snores so loud no one in the servant’s quarters hears a thing once they’ve stuffed rags in their ears to drown out his roaring.’

‘But if they raise the alarm, we’re stuck miles from-’

‘They wont. Mark my words. No one’ll make a sound.’

Betsy’s gaze was fixed straight ahead on the house as Liam shot her a sideways glance. He had never done anything this dishonest in his life but her confidence was inspiring - and just a shade disturbing. He watched as she touched her pocket again.

‘What’ve you got there, Betsy? In yer pocket?’

‘Nothing for you to worry about! Now, no one’ll hear us come or go; we’ll be away from here and long gone before they notice anything’s missing. And just to be

sure, we'll bury the big stuff back there. Then if we were to get stopped they can't prove a thing. We can come back for the gold and stuff whenever it pleases us. In a fine carriage, perhaps!

The pair chuckled at the thought of arriving in style along with a spade and pick, then settled down to watch the lights in the rooms gradually dim then disappear as each candle in the house took its turn to die.

Betsy could feel the cold night air seeping into her very bones and by the time the last light was snuffed out, Liam was almost nodding off.

'Come on, now – it's time!' Whispered Betsy, already on her feet.

She stooped low and began to move quickly in the direction of the main house with Liam close behind her. By the time they reached the east side, Liam had caught her up and was breathing deeply, partly through exertion, partly nervous excitement. Betsy took his hand and led him around the back to a hefty wooden door. To the left of it a steep set of stone steps disappeared down to the basement and a series of doors to storerooms and coal-sheds. At the far end another sturdy timber door with blackened hinges and a rusty latch was hidden in the shadows, but Betsy knew exactly where it was. She slipped the latch up, wincing as it groaned in the night air. She paused, feeling Liam's nervous breath on her neck as she whispered over her shoulder.

'This leads up to the laundry room - there's a trap door that leads through to the pantry.'

'What if it's locked?' Asked Liam apprehensively.

Betsy turned and cheekily kissed him on the nose.

'It won't be, trust me.'

She was as good as her word and minutes later they were creeping through the basement kitchens, then on their way upstairs to the ground floor. Years of dusting the same treasures day in day out were imprinted on Betsy's mind and she had briefed Liam in great detail about just what they should take and where to find it. As she led him through to the master's study, she squeezed his hand before turning to leave.

'Right, you carry on filling that sack. I'm going upstairs.'

Liam grasped her wrist, pulling her close to him as he spoke in an agitated whisper.

'You never said we'd separate –what if someone wakes up?'

'You don't think I can cope without you, my big man?' She teased. 'Trust me, I know just what I'm doing.'

Before Liam could question her again, Betsy had pulled herself free and was padding quietly up the main staircase. She was heading straight for her former mistress's chamber and in particular the walnut dressing table. It was there she knew a fine collection of gold and jewels would be stowed in a casket made from a latticework of silver filigree. Lady Jenison's diamonds and rubies were legendary, inherited from her mother and grandmother before her. It had been a bone of contention between her and her husband that she refused to part with any of them. There had been times when a decent injection of funds would have allowed Charles to make a killing on the markets but his only liquid assets were the casks of brandy and fine wines he had inherited with the capital-sapping country estates in England and Ireland. Yet Sophie remained adamant; the collection was to be passed on to the next generation, just as her own dear mother had stipulated in her will.

Betsy turned the diamond-cut glass doorknob slowly, waiting for the slight squeak it always made. Once inside, as she peered cautiously around the room, she could make out the shape of her former employer, fast asleep in her four-poster bed on a substantial pile of silk pillows. By the window, she saw the dressing table where the casket was kept. She moved quickly, silently across the room, past the foot of the bed and the connecting door that lead to Charles Jenison's adjoining bedroom. Slow burning coals and embers still glowed grey-gold in the grate, and Betsy smirked as she recalled Lady Sophie's year round insistence on the fire being lit to take the chill off her room before retiring.

Outside, the seven-eighths moon was flanked in the clear skies by a carpet of blinking stars. Still early in the season, the absence of any clouds meant a frost was already freezing the damp earth into a crisp frost. As Betsy reached the dressing table, the moonlight pouring through the window cast a hint of a moon shadow on the rugs behind her.

Betsy picked up the casket slowly, reverently. At last she held hers and Liam's future in her own hands. But there were other things to be attended to before she could move forward: Revenge. From her pocket she took out the sheathed knife she had secreted the entire journey. The dagger felt good in her hand, its curved, serrated blade ready and waiting as she moved to the bedside. She could smell the sleep on Sophie's shallow breaths as she raised the knife, then paused for a second. As she stared at the sinister shape, its teeth shining in the cold light, she knew this was the point of no return, the decisive moment of her life. Without further hesitation she slit the sleeping woman's throat from the left ear to the right.

As a dying gurgle struggled from her severed windpipe, Sophie's eyes flashed open. And then she was gone. Betsy calmly wiped the blade on the silk pillows before turning to the connecting door. Nothing was going to stop her now; she knew exactly what she had to do. As she reached down to turn the doorknob, it suddenly, silently opened away from her and then standing before her was a sleepy Charles Jenison.

'Betsy?' He whispered, confused by sleep and the unexpected. Before he could say another word, Betsy had plunged the dagger into his gut and pulled it firmly through his body up to the base of his sternum. Lungs and gut ripped open, he fell to the floor in a pool of his own blood. Betsy listened for an inkling of movement anywhere else in the house: not a sound. Now, it was time for the real prize; the little hussy who had turned the Jenisons against her.

She wiped the blade once more and slipped it back into the leather sheath, ready to go into her pocket. Then she paused; a sound at the door. She pinned her body flat against a wall, absorbed in the shadows she hoped would keep her safe. Through the opened door a shadowy figure appeared. It could only be that Irish whore, no one else would be on this floor of the house at this time of night.

Betsy raised her knife for a third time, ready to finish what she'd set out to do. She waited, poised and her arm – and the blade - now at shoulder height. This was the moment Betsy had been waiting for and she stepped silently out of the shadows. The shadowy figure stepped into the room and turned, as if magnetically drawn towards her. She tightened her grip, primed, expectant. But it was Liam who now stood before her, clutching a sack that bulged with treasures. As his eyes quickly adjusted to the deeper darkness of this corner of the room, he spotted Charles Jenison's bloodied body slumped on the floor. Betsy stepped back, lowering the knife and hiding it between the folds of her skirt as Liam spotted the second corpse still oozing blood across the bed.

'What have you done? You stupid bitch – what have you done.'

Liam jumped back; even he was astonished at the sight that met his eyes.

'She heard me – jumped me. I had to do it.'

'You're lying.'

'Liam I'm telling you – she heard me and called to him, I had to get rid of them. Do you think they'd not have handed us over to a life of prison and beatings? Is that what you'd have wanted?'

Liam shook his head. He'd seen plenty of dead bodies before, but *this*? A rustling noise came from the hallway.

‘Mama? Mama, did you call?’ Maeve’s voice was soft, faltering from sleep and confusion,

Liam pushed Betsy into the room and behind the door. Obscured from view, he held his hand firmly over her mouth. As Maeve peered through the darkness of the doorway into the bedroom, her eyes fell on Charles Jenison’s dead body.

‘Oh Jesus!’

As she rushed towards him, Liam silently pulled Betsy out through the door and into the hall. He slipped the key from the inside to the outside and locked Maeve inside the chamber of horrors.

‘You fool!’ Betsy spoke in a harsh whisper as they rushed back to the stairs and out of the door. ‘The jewels are still in that room!’

‘And so are two dead bodies – murdered by some villains who broke in and surprised them, or at least that’s what the peelers are going to believe. Now let’s get out of here while we still have a chance.’

As they dived down the stairs, through the pantry and headed for the back door, the sound of Maeve rattling the door, then banging against it for help, echoed in their ears. They were outside now, just a hundred yards or so from a clean getaway through the gardens and into the undergrowth but as they passed the coal cellars and ran through the courtyard, Maeve flung open the window and screamed for help.

Liam and Betsy’s footsteps crunched across the frosty gravel towards safety, but suddenly a shape loomed before them, slowly drawing closer. A small, hand-held lantern swung in the wind as Quigley peered through the darkness, trying to make out just what was going on. Up most of the night in a stable with a foaling mare, he thought he had heard shouting coming from the main house. The voice was faint but unmistakably a woman’s tone and he was concerned for his mistress. As he rounded the corner, the sound of Betsy and Liam’s footsteps on the gravel caught his attention. Deviating from his intended route, he now stood just feet away from the two intruders.

Holding the lamp aloft, he stretched his arm out and swung the lantern forward to cast light on them. In an instant, he recognized the harsh features of Betsy, the girl he had not seen for more than a year. As he looked her up and down, even in the half-light he could see she stood drenched in blood; from the sleeves of her coat to the hem of her petticoats, she was swathed in an angry red stain.

‘Betsy? What are you...’

As Quigley squinted to try and make out who was with her, Betsy lunged at him with the knife. Instinctively, Quigley recoiled, the lamplight flashing up and illuminating his face, the face of the honest man who had twice helped Liam struggle back up from the gutter. Quigley's features were indelibly imprinted on Liam's memory. Furious, he grabbed Betsy about her waist, lifting her clean off the ground and he wrestled the knife from her grasp.

'You stupid pig of an Irishman - don't you understand, he knows who I am? He has to die! Give me that knife, if you won't finish this yourself.'

As she scrambled back to her feet, Liam did something he had never done before; he struck her, hard and square across the cheek with the back of his hand. Many a man had been sent reeling from such a blow from Liam's hand but never a woman. Despite knowing it was well deserved, he still felt ashamed.

'You will never call me names – nor bring my judgment into question, d'ya hear? This is a good man and he deserves better than a knife in the gut, now pick yourself up and let's be away from this place.'

Still smarting, Betsy held her face with one hand, pointing at Quigley with the other. Tears welled in her eyes as she contemplated what lay before her: Years of running and hiding, or the gallows.

'You'd choose to protect an old man, someone you don't even know, over me? ME?'

Liam took hold of her hand and dragged her from the courtyard, away towards the undergrowth and woodland beyond. Not a single word passed between them. He turned back to look over his shoulder at Quigley, raised his hand as if in a salute then broke into a run, with Betsy right beside him.

As Quigley watched them go, a nauseous dizziness swept over him as he realised how close he had come to death. But the wailing and shouts from the freshly lit house, quickly brought back his sense of duty. He retraced his steps and headed back towards his original destination. How he wished he'd not deviated, but how thankful he was that he had followed the lessons of the Bible all his life and not shrunk from extending a helping hand to a stranger.

Chapter 21

There was little warmth in the sun as it struggled to find its way out from behind the high cloud cover. Joseph sat in silence with Ruarie on a bank, each one nibbling on a tiny piece of corn-meal cake while Eugene chased Tori round and round the outside of the O'Connor's cabin. It had been an arduous morning, but

was a good job done. Ruarie was now comfortable that his family was truly resting peacefully beneath their very own soil. A crudely made, wooden cross now marked the spot where their bodies lay, just where Ruarie had interred them. And now they had a decent depth of soil above as well as below them.

‘Joseph I cannot thank you and Geney enough for everything you have done for me,’ started Ruarie with difficulty. Oblivious to what the young lad was building towards, Joseph dismissed the comment with a simple wave of his hand.

‘Tis no more than any man would have done for his neighbour. You will always have a home with the McLaughlins.’

Joseph patted Ruarie on the shoulder, a shoulder that at last was beginning to build some muscle tissue about the boney sinew.

‘And the McLaughlins will always be welcome wherever I may be,’ said Ruarie. ‘But I have to go, Joseph. Make my own way in life. There’s nothing here for me now, so to survive I have to find work. You have given me the strength not just to continue, but also to be independent. You understand, don’t you?’

Eugene appeared silently before them, his face now full of sadness.

‘Oh, no - now you’re to leave me too, Ruarie?’

Eugene’s sunken eyes were sad, but resigned. He had become accustomed to loss as a way of life. Ruarie ruffled the hair on his head as though he were a sad little puppy.

‘I’ll never leave you Geney, I am just going away for a while to find work – like your father did, d’ya remember?’

‘You’ll come back?’

Ruarie nodded.

‘Or one day you’ll come find me, little fellow, with that mad dog of yours!’

As Eugene hugged his friend, he little realized just how soon that time might be.

Kit always found something very precious about the warm, still moments before night gave way to morning. Even in the city, there was always a flurry of birds quick to spot the approaching dawn and ready to begin singing to chivvy the whole process along. As she lay tucked beneath her blanket, nothing pleased her more than to watch as the thin, pale sunlight crossed the floor and spread across Bridie’s beautiful face. Tucked up in the bed beside her, serene in her slumbers,

Kit marveled at the tiny little person she had created; she and Ruarie. How she wished she could tell him, share this marvel with boy she'd loved. But she knew it was never to be. If Ruarie had only seen his daughter before he had died, if she had been able to tell him once more how much she loved him, then he would understand how that love had trickled through to their very own child. If this had been possible, she considered, then perhaps she might be rid of the sense of betrayal she'd felt since falling slowly, deeply in love with Woltek.

The sweet smell of sleep hung on Bridie's lips as Kit gently traced her profile with her forefinger. There was something magical about watching a child sleeping. It was as though everything in the world was at peace, every moment made of a small girl's dreams. Bridie had never known the sadness and hardships that Kit had endured, and Kit intended to ensure it stayed that way. When she was old enough to understand the harsh decisions that had been made, Kit would tell Bridie about her father. Then, and only then, would she feel able to tell Woltek of all that had befallen her in the past. Much as she yearned to share everything with him, she was not yet ready.

Tip-toeing around the room, Kit washed and dressed before the now ritual warming of some milk to go with bread for their breakfast. There was work to be done, as always, but at least she could let Bridie sleep on until the last minute. Once they'd eaten and supped, Kit's day began in earnest. There were plenty of chores to be attended to with the club now so popular they were turning away new members. Indeed, McGinty's bar across the way was reputed to be up for sale because its owner had lost so much trade to the Green Club.

Before long, Bridie was awake and playfully shadowing Kit as she set about her daily routine. Methodically, she worked her way through the jobs one by one, delighted to be doing so. After the early morning clean and tidy, the next job of the day was to count the takings, sort the change and let Sammy and Woltek do their sums. But as she went to the cupboard where the cash box was kept, she found the door unlocked and the cash box gone. Kit searched everywhere - behind the kegs, the glasses and even the laundry basket. It was no mistake. The small wooden box with a tiny padlock was gone, complete with almost two whole day's takings. As Bridie toddled towards her troubled mother, arms extended, Kit swept her up and hugged her, anxious not to transfer her worries to her daughter.

'Now you've not been playing with anything you shouldn't have you, young lady?'

Kit rubbed her own nose against the tiny button in the centre of Bridie's beautiful face, as an infectious giggle erupted from her little girl. With Bridie perched on her hip, she dashed upstairs to the rooms they had once all shared, and where Dennis now brooded alone but for a bottle of cheap cheer. She had an uneasy feeling deep in her gut. After Noeli's death, Dennis had seemed numb, unavailable to grieve or seemingly even to care.

At first everything in the room looked normal, neat and tidy. Then she noticed the missing bag - the worn and tattered hessian bag that had travelled from Ballygall to Boston. It had sat in pride of place above the small log-burning stove, a symbol of their determination and survival, a reminder of what they'd been through to get this far. With that gone - and the money too - Kit knew Dennis was off and away. For the first time she prayed to herself that he was heading for a binge around the local bars, but something told her he had other plans and was gone for good.

Chapter 22

Algernon McGrew sat comfortably behind a desk piled high with dusty tomes and rolls of parchment scrolls; any visitor could be forgiven for thinking he was a professor of archaeology or ancient artifacts. Equally cluttered were the shelves in his small, leather-bound office with thick glass jars, pieces of pottery and contorted, unidentified slithers of metal. But the ancient world was no more than a hobby, a pastime for the pedantic lawyer and family solicitor. With a family fortune lost to an older n'er do well brother, poor Algie had been forced to return to the occupation for which he had studied as a young man. He'd dedicated himself to the law and all its foibles with the enthusiasm of a prima ballerina told to don jackboots and dig out a sewer. He sighed heavily; another day, another case, another fee to keep the wolf from the door – and perhaps enough left over to contribute to his excavation fund. Two years and still he had only enough money for a one-way ticket to Egypt. Even he, with his obsession with pharaohs and formaldehyde did not have the stomach to spend the rest of his life in the sordid streets of Cairo.

A quiet tap on the door returned him to Victoriana and Liverpool.

'Yes?' He mumbled, fumbling through the ledger in front of him as he tried to make sense of the ledgers.

'Your noon appointment is waiting on you, Mr. McGrew.'

McGrew looked up at his clerk, Joe Richardson, and wrinkled his nose as though a base smell had just entered the room. Athletic if not fair of face, young Richardson still had a lot to learn about hygiene, thought McGrew.

'Did you advise me of this appointment – there is nothing, according to my schedule, until I meet with the lawyers for Mr. Carradine and Mr. Lennon tomorrow afternoon?'

Richardson moved closer to his employer, full of apprehension. He leaned forward and pointed to an entry on the open page before him. McGrew tried hard not to breathe in as he peered over the top of his pince-nez spectacles.

'Ah, of course; the fortuitous Miss Jenison. Show her in, Richardson, show her in.'

McGrew was too long in the tooth by now to harbour feelings of envy for those more fortunate, but the young, Miss Jenison, so very recently legally adopted, certainly seemed to have more luck than most, he considered. No sooner had she found herself a new family, than they were - most cruelly - taken away from her. One nasty bump to the head, and within a few years, she had a small fortune to her name, and hers alone. Not that he imagined anything untoward, no indeed, this was a fine young woman to behold, by all accounts.

The door quickly closed then opened again and Maeve entered, a silk handkerchief clutched close to her reddened eyes, though with Richardson's proximity its value lay in the relief provided by the lavender scent it was impregnated with. With a nervous nod of his head, Richardson withdrew before his malodorous presence and lack of social skills embarrassed his employer.

'Miss Jenison, please - be seated.' Cowed McGrew, lifting his crooked form from the chair only by great effort. 'This must be a sad, sad time for you.'

Maeve swept across the room and settled pertly in the chair, quiet, confident.

'Thank you for your sentiments, Mr. McGrew.' She poised on the very edge of the chair, her dark, taffeta skirts arranging themselves perfectly about her. 'To lose a parent is a great sadness, to lose my entire family so soon after...'

She raised the handkerchief to her face again, lowering her head to shield her expression from prying eyes. McGrew grunted sympathetically, though he sensed something almost pre-rehearsed about her grief.

'Please, do not distress yourself, Miss Jenison, we have merely one or two formalities to attend to and you will be free to grieve in private for your loss.'

Maeve nodded, touching each eye gently with the corner of her handkerchief before returning her hands to sit neatly in her lap. Her chin low, her face broadly shielded by her black bonnet, she was for all intents and purposes a thoroughly forlorn young woman.

'I understand that it is considered to be only a matter of time before the perpetrators of these evil deeds are brought to justice.'

Maeve nodded again, her voice little more than a shallow whisper full of sadness.

'I believe so, Mr. McGrew. Apparently my driver, Mr. Quigley, has spoken with the constabulary. He saw two people flee the scene.'

'No doubt these strangers will be dealt with swiftly and severely when they are brought before the Court.'

'These were not strangers, apparently. Mr. Quigley recognised one of them – a former employee at Haringdon Hall.'

McGrew shook his head:

'That is an outrageous turn up for the book, biting the hand that feeds you. Dreadful, dreadful – and her accomplice?'

'Mr. Quigley was unsure – the light was dim and he was most distressed to find them skulking around the grounds. At the time, he was unaware of the tragedy that had unfolded within, lest he might have been more circumspect in his observations.'

The elderly solicitor nodded, but behaved impeccably as his role befitted; solicitor, executor, trustee – this estate should pay him well over the coming months, years even.

'Dreadful. Nevertheless, we should move on. Now, you are of course familiar with the estates in England and in Ireland?'

Maeve acknowledged the assumption humbly as befitting one so saddened.

'Whilst I have never visited the family lands in Ireland, I am aware of the extent of those estates and the ones at Haringdon.'

'And of course there is a minor holding in Barbados.'

'Bar..?'

'A former sugar plantation that had been in the late Mrs. Jenison's family for a number of generations, though sadly no longer as profitable as it was.' McGrew was reading from the papers in front of him. 'It is however free of all encumbrances and the house has-'

'We shall dispose of it.' Said Maeve quickly.

McGrew was surprised both by the instruction and the sudden determination of the young girl who had seemed so remote and troubled by her grief.

'If that is your decision but perhaps a little time will-'

'I have no time for owning lands on foreign shores. This... Empire is built on the sweat of others and that is something I wish to have no part of.'

'And the estates in Ireland? The same action?'

Maeve is silent. For the first time, McGrew senses a genuine sense of mourning has overcome her.

'The estates in Ireland will be retained.'

'Of course, if that is your wish.' McGrew began to scribble.

'What is the position ... the current situation of the Irish holdings?' Asked Maeve, trying not to appear too interested.

'The house is closed down and secured as it has been for two years now. With the famine and the pestilence, Lord Charles had not cared to hunt there and deemed it appropriate to ensure there was no possibility of intrusion. He did not hold a very high opinion of the Irish, so an agent was engaged to oversee things as and when required. I believe the cropping promises to be moderately successful this season.'

After a long silence, McGrew raised his eyes from his paperwork and tried to analyze the young woman's expression. Her bonnet still partly obscured her face, but he could nevertheless sense a mind in furious activity.

'Tell the agent Mr...'

'Mr. Vicars.'

'Tell Mr. Vicars to instruct the opening of the house and make ready for my arrival. I wish to visit my estates in Ireland.'

.....

The return journey from the Valley of Thorns was far more exhausting than the outward bound one. Joseph and Eugene had followed the news that a charity was distributing corn meal to the needy from a nearby village. It was a long and fruitless walk that had transpired to be pure rumour. But their journey had not been entirely wasted as they'd been told on good authority that a Board of Works project was about to commence just forty miles west of Ballygall, with plenty of work a for those who could prove they needed it – and strong enough to complete the tasks in hand.

Ruarie had been gone for five maybe six months now, pursuing his own need of an independent life. Geney felt the loss greatly. With no news of his sisters, Ruarie had been a sorely needed foil to his father's silent pessimism. They'd survived the harshest, hungriest times but could surely now look forward to a more promising future? The coming months should see nature rekindle Ireland's countryside, providing some sustenance until the crops came in. Yet still, his father refused to share his son's optimism.

It was little more than a mile now to their cabin, but they were both tired and very hungry. Even Tori had lost the spring from her step.

'Just Craigen Rock to go and it'll all be downhill from on in, lad.'

Joseph squeezed his son's shoulder, urging him on to the final leg of their trek. Craigen rock behind them, they half walked, half stumbled down the valley towards home; the very word warmed his heart. During their journey, they'd come across many tumbled cottages and the sadness haunted him for many miles as he thought of the poor souls evicted from their humble homes. Several still showed signs of their former occupiers trying to spend the night amidst the ruins, or in nearby ditches, with nothing more than branches and matting to give them shelter. But that was somehow better than leaving the place all together – a feeling Joseph truly empathised with. It was a sad sight, but Joseph knew others were less fortunate. Once a cottage had been tumbled, many landlords insisted their other tenants refused food, help or shelter to their former neighbours, ensuring the dispossessed were moved on and off his lands entirely. Joseph thanked the Lord that he had been blessed with a landlord who was more benevolent than most.

The final stretch now before them, Joseph and Geney's pace increased with their enthusiasm. The thought of a peat fire and something warm in their bellies fired them on - there might even be a faint wisp of smoke still twirling from the chimney, creeping up from the fire they'd left smouldering when they left before dawn. Tori pelted on ahead, as eager as her master to relax in warm, familiar surroundings.

But as they turned through the last spinney, the sight that met Joseph's eyes was very different to the one that he'd anticipated. True, there was smoke, but it was more than a wisp and it sprang from a pile of smoldering, broken timber. All that remained of the home where four generations of McLaughlins had lived and died was a freestanding archway that had once been arched above the door into the cabin.

Joseph fell to his knees as Eugene ran up to the ruin, chasing Tori as she whined and pawed at the debris. He edged gingerly through the arch struggling to get his bearings in what was a place of such happiness. Where they'd lived their entire lives was now a pile of rubble, the contents smashed, stolen or strewn about

outside. The pot that had hung above the fire was gone, and the straw mattresses burnt. The dresser that had been his mother's pride and joy, her marriage dowry, was nowhere to be seen; burnt or stolen, it didn't seem to matter. Everything was lost. Their narrow strip of corn had been harrowed, the small store of potatoes and turnips plundered. He looked back to where his broken father knelt silently. In that moment Eugene left his childhood behind. He walked back to Joseph, took him by the elbow and got him to his feet. Brushing the mud from his father's clothes, Eugene spoke quietly, confidently.

'Let's go say goodbye to mammy – just for now, hey? It's Sunday and she'll be expecting us.'

Joseph looked up and into the eyes of his boy. He nodded his head and with support from his son, stumbled up to the hillside grave as Eugene picked a handful of wild flowers on the way.

'We'll do like Ruarie - seek out a new life until we can rebuild the old one. That's what she would have wanted us to do, now isn't it?' Said Eugene, placing the tiny bunch of flowers beneath the wooden cross. It's a warmer time of year - perfect for a few nights under the stars.'

Eugene left Joseph sitting quietly beside the grave of the mother he'd never known and headed back to what remained of their home. Fruitless though he guessed it would be, he had to check once again if there was anything that could be salvaged. His mind in another time, he kicked about in the ruins as Tori scratched around beside him. Suddenly, she dug frantically and with something firmly gripped in her mouth, held her head up to her master, ready for praise and perhaps a pat on the head. Clapsed between her teeth was a small bowl, the one favored by Maeve, though now chipped and with a small split in the side. It still had a faint rim of cornmeal broth clinging to it. The bowl wasn't much, but at least it was something, a piece of home to take with them, a string of memories attached to it. Eugene ruffled the fur around Tori's neck, congratulating her warmly, as she deserved.

'Well done girl. This is the first step. It won't be the last but at least it's a good omen to set us off on our way.'

Sonny's hands grappled with the ropes as the cargo swung haphazardly from the quayside towards the hull of the *Magenta*. The scrawny shell of a man assisting him might just as well not have been there for all the impact his labours had on the job in hand. Though just a boy and short in stature, Sonny was strong and as he thrust all his not inconsiderable strength behind the task, slowly but surely, the bundle caught in the nets began to steady. He heaved a sigh of relief and gradually lowered the precious consignment until it settled comfortably on the

deck, ready for shifting below to the hold. How much better it was, he thought, to be loading inert cargo than human misery. Most believed that the worst years of the famine migrations were over but Sonny took nothing for granted. The weather and crops may have been improving but mother earth could be cruel and it wouldn't be out of character for her to inflict one more whipping on the poor Irish, just when they least expected it. Those that had survived the terrible years of want and starvation were now so weakened, in mind and body, that a fine balance was all that kept them from sinking below the mortality line and joining their family and friends. Sonny paused for a moment, contemplating the poor souls he'd seen depart this earth from the decks of the ships he'd worked on.

'Enough of your slacking, lad, there's plenty willing to take your job if you're weary of it!'

As the first mate's bawdy voice bellowed across the deck, Sonny and his shipmate sprung to it, lowering the cargo accurately and swiftly into the beckoning hold.

'It's all but done, now – just two more to go and we're fully laden.'

On the quayside people were going about their business. Liverpool dockers and labourers desperate to earn a bob or two from their toil and sweat, mixed with a plethora of chancers; some were from Ireland, others from closer to home, some as far afield as the Indies. The one thing they all had in common was a desperate need for money as they waited for any opportunity to make or steal some. As he looked about him, Sonny could spot the dangerous ones a mile off, a frantic almost reckless way about them. There were two, either side of the remaining cargo, sniffing, waiting, but the cargo agent's henchman was having none of it and the would-be thieves were soon sent packing. Just a few hours, then tides and God willing, they'd be on their way to the Americas once again, thought Sonny.

In blustery winds, Sonny scampered up the mast and made good the ropes as he gazed for a last time across to the quayside. Amidst the hurly burly of the bustling docks, he noticed a man lingering near a smaller vessel - the Peter Rule. The ship was set ready for the shorter crossing to Ireland, and judging by how high it sat in the water, was far from fully laden. Few people and even fewer exports headed across the Irish Sea these days. As Sonny watched, the man seemed to be negotiating, pleading with the crew. From his weakened stance, it was unlikely he was seeking work – and even less likely he'd secure any. The man's hand went deep into the bag he was carrying. It was a large, hessian bag with a dark, fleur de Lys motif. Sonny blinked and dug deep in his memory – there was something about this man and his baggage that rang bells, but for the life of him he could not recall why.

Within moments, the stranger had handed over enough to persuade the crew to allow him on board and he was waved up the rickety gangplank. Immediately he was on board he walked across the deck to the bow of the ship where he stood transfixed, staring out across the water as though something in the distance was drawing him back. As Sonny's eyes honed in on the familiar figure, it came back to him. He remembered the dreadful crossing – probably the worst he'd ever experienced, the pathetic people and the horrific fate they were to meet after they'd survived the perils of the Atlantic, the fever and the pitiful rations. In his mind's eye, he could see the man now as clearly as that day several years ago. He'd watched from the deck as he'd struggled to drag his dying wife from the waters. And then Sonny remembered the feel of the cat on his back – the sting of the punishment from his captain for assisting the family to jump overboard before they were pushed. As his mind raced back through those bleak moments, a powerful gust of easterly wind tugged at the partly unfurled sail and whipped it about face. The rope that Sonny had just slackened pulled taut and ripped downwards, taking his left arm with it. Knocked off balance, he plunged almost upside down.

He let out a scream, part fear, part pain, as his feet struggled for purchase on the ropes or the mast. As he fought with his right hand to free himself from the rope, the blustery wind subsided. The sail dropped back and the tension in the rope finally released Sonny's arm from its rugged grip. But it was too late and as he tumbled the twenty or so feet to the deck below, the only thought in Sonny's mind was how lucky he was to have righted himself, and to be hurtling towards a landing on his feet, and not his head. But it would prove to be a mixed blessing.

Chapter 23

It was a day that had started much like any other but heavens, how it had changed in the past few minutes. Kit closed her eyes tightly. There, before her, bended on one knee was the man she had come to love, asking her to agree to become his wife. She scarcely dared open her eyes again in case it was just another of the vivid dreams that either tormented or embroidered her nights. But when she finally dared to look, there was no mistaking it.

'I don't know what to say, Woltek,' she gasped.

'A yes would be a good start.' He replied, smiling.

'Do you really need to be told? Of course – yes. YES!'

Woltek sprang to his feet and pulled her close to him. Gently, he placed his lips on hers. As she slipped her hands about his neck, he abandoned caution and kissed her passionately. Her feet quite literally didn't touch the floor as he swung her round.

'I'll never let you go again,' he said. 'Never.'

Engrossed in one another, neither noticed when Sammy appeared in the doorway, carrying a large stack of towels destined for the laundry.

'Well, if this is what you call working hard, it's no surprise that the club is looking a little lack lustre this morning!' Joked Sammy. He had seen an attachment forming between Kit and Woltek, probably realizing before even they had, and had long considered it only a matter of time before there would be a happy announcement. Now, it seemed, he had interrupted it.

'Samuel, Kit has agreed to be my wife – you are the first person we have told.'

As Woltek squeezed Kit's hand, her smile dimmed momentarily.

'What is it? Kit?'

Sammy mumbled his congratulations and made a tactful exit.

'It's... it's... my family; daddy, Eugene.'

Kit spoke quietly, her eyes cast downwards as she struggled to find the right words.

'They may not even know I'm alive - or that Maeve's dead. I cannot marry without at least trying to find them and tell them all's well.'

'Of course you must. We will arrange for you and Bridie to visit home as soon as possible. Then, when you return we can be married.'

'But won't you come too, Woltek?'

'This is a journey you should make alone, Kit.' Though Woltek spoke firmly, Kit could sense the reluctance in his words. 'Besides, there's too much to be done here; with few doctors prepared to work for our meagre rates, who will care for the members and their families if I'm not here? Over the coming five months, at least six more babies will be delivered into this little world of ours. It's my duty to do my best for them.'

Kit nodded, she understood his reasoning, and more importantly, she also understood why he was prompting her to make the trip without him. She knew this was something she had to accomplish for herself, by herself. Though she was certain Ruarie had perished with his entire family, before she committed to a life with another man, she had to be certain. Nevertheless she didn't relish the thought of making the onerous crossing, and she worried both about leaving Bridie behind, and taking her with her.

'I will ensure you have a comfortable, safe passage, on a sturdy ship - with a cabin just for the two of you. You'll want for nothing and will arrive rested and ready for your reunion.' Woltek paused, nervously breaking eye contact with Kit. 'Who knows who you might find... there will be a great deal for you to tell. To everyone.'

His manner was gracious, his anxiety well hidden. It was the moment he had put off for so long, the decision he knew only Kit could make. And it wasn't just about the journey.

Kit had no excuse now, no reason not to confide in her future husband. Bridie had been told about her father, and now she must tell Woltek. She lifted his chin with the tip of her forefinger and kissed him gently on the mouth.

'Please, come sit with me in the courtyard.'

As they walked hand in hand across the shady yard to the side of the old barn, Paul McGinty strutted across from his bar and through the main gate. The bright summer sun behind him, he stopped and leaned against the gatepost when he saw Woltek and Kit approaching.

'Oh now that's so cosy, doc.'

A smile dancing on his chapped, ulcerated lips, McGinty chewed noisily on the tobacco that darkened the handful of remaining teeth into a deep golden brown.

'You and the little lady still find some time for one another then, despite the busy time you are having with the bar?'

'What do you want McGinty?' Woltek's voice was calm, controlled.

'I'm wanting to break some good news to Sammy and all of his happy band of missionaries.'

'Did I hear my name mentioned – or was it just the squawk of a noisy old crow?'

Sammy reappeared, ready for the usual whining and bickering that McGinty always seemed to bring with him.

'Well then I'll give you the good news without delay.'

'And what might that news be?' asked Kit.

'That I have sold the bar – yes, I'm no longer going to have to fret over your cheap beer or your evangelical clap-trap.'

'And who has been foolish enough to pay good money for your dirty pit?' Retorted Sammy.

'Well, just a moment and you'll be meeting him for yourself.'

For a second the thought flashed through Kit's optimistic mind that maybe someone had bought it with new ideas, maybe it would cease to be a bar at all. Tearooms and coffee houses were growing in popularity and would make a real contribution to the neighbourhood. But her hopes were misplaced. As McGinty spat out a dollop of regurgitated tobacco, a short, pot-bellied figure loomed from behind him. Encircled by the brilliant sunshine, his shape was little more than a silhouette, the brightness obscuring his face.

Kit raised her hand to her forehead, screening her eyes from the brilliance of the sun. At first she could see no distinguishing features, but as he took a few teetering steps towards her, he became not only visible, but also recognizable.

'Morning to you all.' Grinned Mulcahy. 'Cormac Mulcahy's the name.'

Just a few steps away from her stood the one man Kit had hoped she would never see again. Dressed now in expensive if gaudy clothes, he was every bit as repulsive as the horrific memories she had tried so hard to leave behind. His presence sent a shiver of revulsion, and also fear, down her spine.

'Samuel Hobson.' Replied Sam, warily. 'And what is it you're thinking of doing with the premises, may I ask?'

'Much the same as I've been doing these past years,' he grinned. 'Making pots of money.'

As Mulcahy drew hard on the cigar stump wedged between his thumb and forefinger, he looked across at Kit. A glow of recognition appeared in his eyes, and a smile on his lips.

'It can't be... or is it?' He drew a step closer, peering into Kit's now translucently pale face. 'Well, I do believe it's the little sea-faring Bridget! Well I'll be damned!'

Kit's spine seemed to melt like warm butter but somehow she forced herself to confront this demon.

'I'm sure you will be damned, if you manage your bar in the fashion of the Coral Rose!'

Woltek placed a protective arm around Kit's shoulder. Sensing all was not well, Bridie hurried to her mother's side, hugging and hiding amidst her skirts. Mulcahy chuckled.

'Now there's a strange coincidence, huh? If I'm not mistaken that little lady would be about ... oh, nearly four years of age?'

He paused, scratched his head.

'I'm not so great with the numbers, but Doc – you'd be able to work this one out, perhaps? Born... what - half a dozen months or so after the ship docked? Seems to me there's a chance that littlun's got more than a hint of sea-legs to her, hey?'

Kit lunged forward and caught Mulcahy squarely across the cheek with the back of her hand.

'You disgust me!' she screamed.

Shocked at what was unfolding, Woltek grabbed Kit and pulled her away. As Bridie began to sob, Kit scooped her daughter up in her arms, cradling her head close to her breast.

'Don't you think for one moment that anyone so pure and beautiful as my daughter could have anything to do with you, Mulcahy.' The intensity of her voice grew stronger with every word. 'Her father is dead so she'll never get to meet him – and neither will you, because if there's one thing in this world that's certain, it's that when you leave it, you'll not be going to the same place as him.'

Woltek's arm tightened about her shoulders, but as he led her away, Kit turned to Mulcahy and made the sign of the cross.

'May God rest his soul,' she said quietly. 'And may yours burn in hell.'

There was something in the air, something Eugene couldn't quite put his boney finger on. It wasn't spring, though happily that was blooming beautifully all around him. It certainly wasn't the imminent promise of a big meal, or even a night sleeping somewhere other than in a damp ditch or a dug out hovel. No, other than the rare night they dared to bed down in an abandoned or remote farm building, he'd become accustomed to his dreams being illuminated by the faint glow of a makeshift fire as he lay beside his daddy with the sky as a canopy. This had become their way of life, or a way of death, since their cabin had been tumbled. Time had simply rolled over their heads, with Eugene's only focus the day-to-day task of keeping his father alive and moving. He had imagined it would grow harder with each passing day, but in fact had become easier. He viewed it

in a matter of fact way, just a new way of life, another step on the journey. And heavens, wasn't most of Ireland trekking down the same desperate path? They were fortunate to have each other's companionship and love.

As the man of the family now, Eugene had by necessity become cheekily resourceful and adept at making the best of even the poorest situations. He'd be loathe to consider himself a successful beggar, but he was a persuasive force when it came to eliciting food or shelter in return for work, or a beguiling smile in return for just about anything that might ease their lives or hunger pangs. But despite the hardships, he had almost without exception managed to slip into a routine of an hour or two of slumber, interspersed with regular checks on his daddy. If his breathing was shallow, or his body temperature chilled, he would encourage Tori to share her warmth and curl up beside him.

Life was harder than they could ever have imagined when his father set about making plans for the family's survival. There was no land to squeeze a small harvest from; no house to close the door on the harsh world; no family to share the joys and the fears. He'd long since lost track of how many miles they might have covered, but he never lost sight of his goal; to settle, put down roots with whoever remained of his family and he intended to do that where generations of McLaughlins had farmed before. Though they wandered like hapless itinerants, they were never far from what Eugene still considered home, the place where their cabin had stood, and where his mother still lay, buried on the hillside looking down at their home. Though the ritual of placing wild flowers on her grave every Sunday had slipped, Eugene and his father returned as often as they could. It was a terrible torment, though, seeing the grass and weeds growing up where walls once stood. Yet it somehow made Eugene all the more determined.

Even as he looked at the frail, feeble shell of a man that had replaced his proud father, Eugene's spirit was warmed by an inexplicable but growing glimmer of optimism. That glowing germ of hope seemed to get brighter with each day, and when he stumbled on a huddle of intriguing old outbuildings, he was convinced he had been right again.

Eugene cajoled and half dragged Joseph through the rubble-strewn approach to the long disused buildings. A soft covering of rain made the mossy half-buried stones harder to navigate a path through and they made slow progress for the final twenty yards. But step-by-step they drew closer to one of the dilapidated wooden buildings which had a sturdy manger still standing proudly in a dark corner. Eugene silently prayed for straw or even dried leaves inside the manger, the perfect bed to warm his father through the night.

When Joseph pleaded for a moment's rest, just short of their goal, Eugene settled him down on a plinth of three grey stones. Perhaps he sat now where a stable had once stood, considered Eugene, or maybe a pigsty. Oh how he longed for that pungent whiff of pig dung, the acrid smell that as a small lad

would turn his stomach and send him running to hide his face in his sisters' skirts. Would that he could be that close to his sisters now! He'd protect them and ensure neither of them need fear anything, ever again. It was he who had brought his daddy safely through endless days of trouble and nights of dread; he who had kept body and soul together. And, of this he was determined, it would be he who drew the family together once again.

He raised his father to his feet, a comforting hand on his elbow as he urged him on to take the final few steps. Optimism once again washed over Eugene as he looked around him. He sensed this could be a very good place, a badly needed pause in their travels. Then, from out of the darkness came a harsh, intimidating voice.

'One more step and I'll set the dogs on you!'

Maeve didn't lift her eyes to receive Daniels. The butler was far from her favourite person but she had no intention of replacing him. It was just too pleasurable to watch him squirm as he was forced to subjugate himself to his new mistress, a mistress he had made it plain, in the past, he considered grossly inappropriate. But times were hard and a man of Daniel's age would struggle to find suitable alternative employment. No, they both understood that he would have to sacrifice his pride and serve the slip of a girl that, in his eyes, could not hold a candle to his former employers.

Without a word, he held a silver salver towards the straight-backed chair where Maeve sat, reading the handsome bible that had accompanied her all the way from Ballygall, and eased her transit into her present grand surroundings. Slipping an embroidered bookmark between the pages before closing the tome, she reached out and took a single letter and a silver letter opener from the small tray. After slipping the blade beneath the sealed folds, she replaced the knife and began to unfold a crisp short letter.

'Thank you, Daniels. That will be all.'

A cursory bow and Daniels was gone leaving Maeve absorbed in the letter from the solicitor Algernon McGrew. She frowned as she read that Lord Charles's sister and only living relative, Mrs. Prudence Pemberton, was visiting briefly from India and expressly requested an opportunity to meet with Maeve at Haringdon Hall. Her ship was due to leave port for the clipper route imminently and would arrive, winds and God willing, in approximately sixty or so days. McGrew was to wire her without delay to confirm Maeve was disposed to meet with her soon after her arrival. Mrs. Pemberton had, he informed Maeve, considerable business

to attend to in the short time allotted to her visit, before returning to her husband, and the military fortress in Lucknow, India.

Sixty days, considered Maeve, before she would know Mrs. Pemberton's intentions. But in her heart she knew she didn't have to wait that long. This would undoubtedly signal the beginning of a battle royal for the Jenison's inheritance. And she was ready for it.

Chapter 24

The musty smell was both haunting and comforting; stale straw soured by the presence of resting animals. Ruarie's senses absorbed the sights and smells, and as he breathed in deeply, memories of home flooded back. The beds made of straw, the peat fires, his mother's stew-pot bubbling away above the fire; all gone forever. But he was alive, alive and - compared to most - living in heaven. A roof over his head and work that paid him with enough food - potatoes, turnips and a little cornmeal - to keep him alive. But though food could banish the pangs of hunger, it never shifted the memories.

He looked across to the opposite corner of the barn. Beneath the byre where hunters once munched on hay, the solitary figure of Joseph McLaughlin rested in a manger. Here was the man he had failed to recognise from behind, the man Ruarie thought was there to steal his home or anything that wasn't nailed to the floor. What he had now amounted to fairly little, but it was his and he was shocked by the power of his threats to Joseph and Eugene as he struggled to protect his territory. But no harm had been done, and indeed a great deal of good came from the chance meeting and they had often laughed at their first encounter, with the invisible dogs Ruarie had threatened to set on them; why, even Tori could have seen *them* off, joked Eugene!

Joseph's form was as ghostly as any Ruarie had seen; so thin and wan, it was hardly surprising he'd failed to recognize him. But even in these past few days, their strength had begun to grow, particularly Eugene's. They had needed little persuading to stay; like so many others, they had endured an itinerant winter with little food and the early spring had brought little respite. Plentiful rains brought with them a chill that drilled through to the marrow of Joseph's weakened frame. This was the man who had saved Ruarie's life, and now he was able to reciprocate. Whatever he had they could share, and though it wasn't much, to them it was a beggars banquet.

From beneath a scrap of woolen blanket that had once sat across the hindquarters of a hunter, Geney's bright face appeared, followed moments later by the black, wet nose of a hungry dog. Geney grabbed Tori and held her close, raising a finger to his lips to ensure she didn't bark. He raised his eyes to Ruarie.

'He didn't sleep so well. We'll just let him rest a while.' Whispered Geney.

Ruarie nodded in agreement and beckoned the lad to come with him. He was in awe of Eugene, and how much the lad had changed. In the year that had passed, he had matured into a grown man. But his youthful charm was still there, the charm that had kept the two of them alive.

Outside, an almost luminous haze floated just above the ground as the sun struggled to draw the morning dew from the soil. The warmth on their backs felt good as the two young men basked in the renewal a brand new spring day can bring. Beneath a lofty oak tree, they sat facing a steaming pot of potatoes and cabbage. The makeshift cooker where the pot hung was once the pit for the estate farrier's use. It was here the busy man would hot-shoe the hunters and carriage horses brought into work whenever the master was in the country. The yard had long since been replaced elsewhere on the estate by a finer, brick-built range of buildings, but this suited them just fine.

As Tori scuttled about the yard, Ruarie ladled a generous helping of broth into a small oval bowl. He thought how good the pale translucence of the potatoes looked against the rough brick-orange of the terracotta. Fishing through the pot he found a small piece of knucklebone and tossed it towards Tori who scampered off, settling beneath the pale leaves of a small elderflower bush to enjoy her feast.

The smell of the broth tickled Eugene's nose, his mouth watering at the prospect of his first meal of the day. It was the fifth day in a row when he had enjoyed not one but two meals; the first upon rising, and another before bedtime. Ruarie would take great care to gently mash the vegetables against the side of Eugene's bowl, then sift out anything coarse or less than tender. It was sheer bliss for the lad as the food passed his lips, especially now the pains from his slowly expanding stomach had subsided as he ate.

For Ruarie, to watch not just the colour but also the life flood back into the cheeks of these two gentle people was the most rewarding thing he had ever orchestrated. In Geney, he saw a hint of his beloved Kit. The eyes, the line of the jaw – but then, there was always something that drew him back to the memories of the love now surely lost forever.

Ruarie spoke softly when the time came to break the silence.

'Today promises to be a big day.'

Ruarie's words were lost on Eugene as he concentrated on the food.

'The agent is to visit here.' Continued Ruarie.

'When?' Asked Eugene casually, more interested in the food before him.

'Today, so the housekeeper at the big house tells me.'

'We'll keep well out of the way, Ruarie.'

'You must. One glimpse of you and your daddy and we'll all be for the road once more. I don't suppose he'll go poking around these old buildings, but you never know.'

'There's no fear of him spotting us when he comes by! What do you think is the purpose of his visit, this agent fella?'

'Who knows,' said Ruarie.

His eyes gazed through the mist at the boarded up house across the spinney, the house the estate manager had vacated when he had been released from his employment. The kindly man's instructions before he left were to close down the household, leaving just a skeleton staff in the main house. Ruarie had fallen on his feet when he was told that, as the humble farm labourer, he would receive food and a roof over his head in payment for keeping a foot on this far corner of the property, seeing off any vagrants. The two carriage horses and three hunters had been turned away with their shoes off and the lands left fallow the past few seasons. With the livestock all gone but for a couple of old milking cows and the runts from the pig litters, there was no laboring work as such, but Ruarie kept busy keeping down the weeds and ensuring pathways and tracks were clear. But now he feared what news a new agent would bring.

Ruarie took Eugene by the shoulder as he spoke.

'Let's hope it's to make ready for a winter of house parties and chasing foxes! We should all do very nicely out of the food the guests do not finish, and if there's to be hunting, then there'll be a need for a farrier to tend the horses.'

Eugene immediately found himself on the bright side of the possibilities.

'And by then daddy will be back to his old self, hey? We'll all be here, daddy shoeing horses, and us working together – like the old days!'

'To be sure,' Ruarie reassured him. But his face told a different story. He knew things could go either way with this agent fella. There could be a pleasant change in the handling of the estate, and the people who worked upon it. Or it could mean a swift goodbye those who had been employed on the property and hoped – needed – for it to continue. It could even be preparation for a sale; estates in Ireland changed hands frequently, and for little money nowadays. His gut feeling was things were likely to get worse, not better.

'Y'know, I'll wager there's tools tucked away here somewhere.' Smiled Eugene optimistically. 'We'll need to find those because Daddy gave his finest rasp and all to Kit.'

Ruarie sighed at the mention of her name. Losing their homes didn't compare to losing Kit, but as he disappeared into his own melancholy thoughts, a weak voice surprised him.

'And were you going to keep this all to yourselves, then?' Said Joseph, his back towards the morning sun. As Eugene looked up and smiled, the sun gave a halo-like effect that encircled his father's head and shoulders.

Joseph stooped with the weakness in his legs, and crouched down beside the pot. Still in his prime, he was old and weary beyond his years. He ladled a bowl of broth and sipped it slowly, wiping his moistened whiskers with the back of his hand.

'Today's the day we're going to tackle that beard of yours,' smiled Ruarie.

Eugene jumped up, energized as much by the sight of his father's smile as the food. He tugged at a stubborn piece of straw caught up in his father's hair.

'And maybe we'll trim these curls away so you don't look like a scare-crow every morning!'

Joseph delighted in being the victim of his son's cheekiness. Not wanting to dampen his cheery ways, he chose his words carefully.

'Did I hear you say there's to be changes in the estate?'

Ruarie shrugged but before he could speak Eugene had steered things towards the positive.

'Oh, you'll maybe soon be tending to horses once again! There's a couple of fine looking hunters in the lower meadow, you know. I can almost smell the burning horn of their hooves now. And so can Tori, can't you girl? Better than any knuckle bone, huh?'

He ruffled her neck as she rolled on the ground and nipped at his fingers.

'I'm not sure that I'll be able,' said Joseph, shaking his head. 'It's no mean feat raising and holding high the legs of a stubborn horse!'

'Don't you worry, dah - I'll be your your arms; you can teach me all you know, and we'll be Joseph and Eugene McLaughlin, the farrier family of Ballygall!'

Chapter 25

The stench from the gutters was strong even for the west side of Liverpool's Kirby district. But the pungent surroundings had no impact on Liam; his nose was too full of blood. His opponent dripped with sweat as well, and blood oozed from cuts to his eyes and nose as the small crowd of drunks egged them on, eager to extract as much pain and excitement for the money they had bet on this low-life street fight. Liam balked as jibes of being too old or too scared to fight came thick and fast, but as he launched another pathetic punch in the general direction of his opponent's head, it failed to find its way home.

Holding Liam's vest and shirt, Betsy scoffed loudly at his shortcomings. Drunker than many and more vocal than most, Betsy was a very different woman now to the fresh-faced slip of a girl who had worked in the Jenison household. Her hair hung in rat's tails either side of her drawn, pockmarked face. Her eyes were blood-shot and yellowed by the cheap gin she consumed on a daily basis. Worst of all, her previously trim midriff bulged not only from a lack of work and an excess of alcohol, but also from the early stages of pregnancy – a condition that both of them were still in denial about.

'You lazy, fat good-for-nothing,' she railed at him. 'You should be done with this young bullock by now, where's your strength and your pride, hey, Irishman?'

Liam's head swam as another punch smacked into his left ear. He swayed and his legs began to buckle – first the left, then the right. Seconds later he was slumped beside the rotting rubbish in the gutter.

The crowd began to disperse, some happily pocketing their winnings, others angry at the speed with which the once renowned Irish bare-knuckle fighter had been defeated. Liam's opponent gave him one last kick in the gut for good measure before heading off to the next scrap with his winnings. Betsy staggered and lurched towards the heap on the ground.

'And to think I once believed I could depend on you.'

She looked down in disgust at the prone figure that barely moved. In less than a year they'd got through every penny they'd made from the spoils of their lethal raid on the Jenison's. Everything was gone – except the engraved watch Liam had taken such a shine to. And now, Betsy decided, its time had also come. With nothing left of their relationship or their ill-gotten gains, she began to rummage through the pockets of his well-worn veston until she found it – the gold pocket watch, certainly the jewel in the crown of their plunder. She would sell it and salvage a little more time before heading for the workhouse – or the cemetery.

The moment she looked down at the tempting little sparkler in her hand, all seemed right with the world again - until the sound of running feet and a loud, rattling noise stopped her in her tracks. As she was about to turn and saunter away from Liam and into a new life, a harsh voice stopped her in her tracks.

'Stop whatever it is you are doing there, hussy,' shouted Godfrey Carmichael, a burly six-footer of a peeler. As he approached, he shook his rattle to attract the support of fellow law enforcers in the vicinity. Betsy froze; she knew the reputation of this band of metropolitan lawmen. But it was too late to run so she just stood where she was, tucking the watch from view in the folds of her skirts.

'Come on, now sir. I was just on me way home when this brute tried to accost me. Only the assistance of a big-hearted gent saved me from his wicked purpose, I tell you!'

Reeling back from her foul gin-laden breath, he looked Betsy up and down. He'd come across her type all too often before and knew to keep his distance. But as he stepped back, a glimmer of something shiny caught his eye.

'What's that in your hand, there?' He asked as she struggled to balance on her shaky legs. 'Show me!'

With a forceful tug the peeler whipped the watch from her grasp.

'And how did you come by such an elegant timepiece may I ask?'

Carmichael was already opening the watch and examining not the face or its action, but the engraved lid. He began to read out loud.

'...to a fine son and heir on the occasion of his 21st birthday - Lord Charles Jen-'

He looked up at Betsy and grabbed her wrist. There was not a soul in the northwest of England that hadn't heard of the vicious slaughter of Charles Jenison and his poor wife just a year ago. Carmichael sounded his rattle again, this time more urgently, anxious for support.

Feigning shock, Betsy covered her mouth with her chaffed hand.

'But I just found it, sir - in the gutter it was, over there. I was going hand it to you just as you asked me for it, honest, sir.'

But Carmichael was an astute man, and one with a good memory when it came to the job he loved.

'And you would be Betsy Brown, perhaps?'

Betsy lifted her chin and stared back at him.

‘And what if I am?’

‘You were identified by a member of the Jenison household as one of those responsible for the murders of Lord and Lady Jenison.’

‘That’s a lie!’ She screamed. ‘All lies.’

‘You’ll be for the hangman, and no doubt about it!’

Already the thunder of fast approaching heavy boots could be heard through the streets. Carmichael had Betsy’s elbow firmly in his grasp as he led her away, leaving Liam O’Rourke on the ground, not a spark of life visible.

‘You can’t take me and leave that bastard there? He put me up to it – he did for ‘em both, not me!’

The peelers didn’t flinch. To beat or kill a ne’er do well or a simple peasant was one thing; to attack and kill a member of the aristocracy, as Betsy Brown was known to have done, now this was something that could not be ignored. And now she was lying about some poor unfortunate soul, trying to lay the blame elsewhere. Carmichael looked down at the bloated shape stretched out on the cobbles. He turned to the two peelers and told them to leave him be.

‘Let the poor fella get on with his life as best he can.’ Said Carmichael. ‘Wont be a long process, I don’t suppose.’

The clumsy posy of pink clover and buttercups were the first fresh flowers to grace the grass-covered grave for many months. Long-dead wisps of wild flowers and ferns from the regular visits of months gone by had been swept up by the early summer winds and scattered across the hills.

‘Well my love, you’ve been sorely neglected of late.’ Joseph sat on his haunches, stroking the grave as though it were his wife’s own face. ‘Can you forgive me, Carmel?’

Eugene stooped down beside his father and slipped his arm around his back.

‘She understands, dah. Mam sees all that’s going on and she’d be more pleased than anyone that you’re back working again.’

Short of wiping out the years of loss, these last few months had been as close to heaven as they could have wished for. Since the agent brought news that the estate owner required the house to be opened up in readiness for a visit, the

place had come alive again. Extra staff had been engaged in the house, and with the horses brought slowly back into work, Eugene and Joseph's presence had been legitimized. With his son's help, the old farrier had begun trimming the horses' feet ready for shoes and the sense of normality that having work and a purpose in life brings had begun to ripple through their lives.

As he watched them at the graveside, Ruarie was touched by the tenderness between father and son. But it accentuated the hole left by the sorely missed O'Connor family. He turned away from their sorrow, and wandered down the hill towards an even sadder scene. The ruins of the cabin were now beginning to disappear beneath nature's foot. Bindweed and ivy had clawed their way up the last remaining post of the doorway, the lintel that had rested above it long gone. Moss in various shades of green and yellow crept over the stones, clinging on as though it had every right to be there. But Ruarie's eyes saw more than the scene that now confronted him. His head was awash with distant memories – family gatherings and ceilidhs, with everyone dancing to the fiddler, the jigs getting wilder and faster as the poteen flowed. He looked down and remembered how straw would be trodden underfoot, trampled into the sticky soil that now ran red with the blood of those he had known and loved. So long ago, but for Ruarie, Kit's presence would always be here at this now desolate but much loved place. He knew he would return again and again, but for now, he headed back up to where Joseph and Eugene still stood, heads bowed in silent prayer. So engrossed was he in his own thoughts that he didn't notice the shadow of a figure edging out from the trees beyond the ruins of the cabin.

Eugene slipped a reassuring arm about his father's shoulder and coaxed him towards the track and the long walk that would take them back to their sanctuary with Ruarie. He too failed to notice the wiry man who could now just be seen, tucked behind the tall hawthorn; the man whose face was as determined as Eugene's. But while Eugene had a passionate obligation to his father's salvation, this man, who would cautiously trail the threesome as they made their way home, did not. This man was Dennis O'Doherty, someone only too familiar with the McLaughlin family's tradition of laying flowers on their matriarch's grave on a Sunday.

When Dennis first arrived back in Ballygall to find the old McLaughlin home in ruins, his gloating soon subsided as he realised any survivors had long since moved on. But when he spotted the withering flowers on Carmel's grave, he knew they would inevitably be back. It had only been a matter of time for Dennis, and he had been content to wait out the days, and weeks. Now his patience had paid off.

Kit and Bridie were long since in bed when Woltek and Samuel decided to round off the evening with a small whiskey. Never much of a drinking man, it had

however been Samuel's idea to 'pop a cork and dirty a glass or two' and as they perched side by side at the rough-hewn oak bar, the silence was a comfortable one.

The atmosphere in the Green Club had been noticeably subdued the past week thanks to Kit's looming voyage. Even the club's drinking members feared for her safety; without her perky, never-to-be-defeated nature, even the cheap beer would not taste as good, according to one regular. But it was the two men now perched at the bar who would miss her most; the man she would spend the rest of her life with, and in the absence of her own father, the man who would give away her hand in marriage.

The first few sips of whisky had a wonderfully soothing effect and encouraged them into a further glass. Or two. Several times, it seemed as though Samuel had something he wanted to say. Each time he tried, he struggled to find the voice to express himself in spite – or because - of the whisky. A perennial bachelor and self-sufficient loner until Kit swept into his life, opening up to another man was not an easy thing for him to do. However, this time he was determined and finally, he grasped the nettle.

'Woltek, my boy, do you not think it would be a good deal better for Kit and the little one if you were to travel with them back to Ireland? I mean-'

'I've told you before, there is too much to be done here.' Woltek knocked back the dregs of his third whisky. 'I also believe it is important that Kit makes this journey - and any subsequent decisions - for herself.'

'My you are one stubborn young man!' said Samuel, covering his glass as Woltek tried to top it up with a further measure.

'And you are a stubborn old man – come on, drink with me!'

Sammy cautiously lifted his hand, determined to bring Woltek round to his way of thinking.

'What if she needs your help? It's a hell of a journey for a young woman to make, let alone with a child – and who knows what she might find at the other end of it.'

'It is precisely for that reason that she must undertake this journey herself – without me, my influence or even my support. She knows whatever she determines, I will abide by her decision.'

'Decisions? You make it sound as though Kit has some sort of choice looming?' Samuel cannot disguise the shock in his voice. 'I understood that this exploration was to try and find what remains of her family, if anything, prior to your wedding?'

His mind in another place, Woltek shrugs as he swirls another good measure of whisky around his glass. Sammy shuffles in his seat then slams his glass down beside Woltek's.

'Ah, go on then – a large measure if you please.'

His glass now opaque with smudged fingermarks, Sammy downed the generous measure in one. He leaned in, ready to impart a truth or two to Woltek, man to man; a truth he'd scarcely had the courage to accept himself for many years.

'I am a man of few words, unlike your lovely wife to be.' He joked. 'I've always lived by the rules of keeping myself to myself, but welcoming others into my life should the time seem right. Meeting you, and later Kit, were such times and I have to confess, the friendship we three have forged has probably brought as much joy into my life as it has to both of yours.'

With the alcohol now buzzing through his brain, Woltek struggled to absorb whatever it was Sammy was trying so laboriously to tell him. But he knew he had to make an effort, sensing the significance of what Sammy was about to share.

'I've never been a family man – had none of my own, and I've very little to do with any relatives still walking this earth. Perhaps I've been wrong, but – well, it's too late to change an old man now.'

'What you are trying to tell me, Samuel? Please, speak freely.'

'You sound more like a doctor, than a friend!'

The straight-talking doctor placed a reassuring hand on Samuel's shoulder.

'To you, I am both – but always, a friend first.'

Samuel began to talk of his boyhood; of his parents, and Melvin, a sickly runt of a cousin that came to live with them after his own parents were killed. Life was harsh but they scratched out an honest living - until Samuel's own father also died and the only way to keep body and soul together was to take in 'lodgers', as his mother called them. So Samuel quit school and trained as a farrier at Alderman's Hotel livery yard where he worked hard and discovered he had a real way with the beasts. Though he never forgot their horses, travellers came and went, and to him the faces all merged into one. Until the niece of the hotel manager, Abigail Fingleton arrived from the mid-west to live with her uncle. At seventeen, a year older than Sam, she was everything he wasn't; educated, assured, and absolutely beautiful. To his delight, they fell in love and planned to marry. Despite Abigail's protests, Samuel took a better-paid job in Boston, convincing her a brief, few months apart would mean they could then look forward to spending the rest of their lives together in comfort.

Samuel took another slug of whisky, looked deep into his friend's eyes.

'The weeks turned into months, then a year ... What I'm trying to tell you is no matter how certain you are about someone you love, there can be no certainty about the world they live in.'

'Kit has promised to be my wife, Samuel. Are you suggesting I doubt her commitment.'

'I cannot imagine Kit breaking a promise, any promise.' Samuel paused and took a long, sad breath. 'But neither could I have imagined my lovely Abigail marrying Melvin.'

As Samuel stopped speaking, his eyes welled with tears. He reached out and laid his hand on Woltek's.

'Never take anything for granted, son. And never let go of the one you love. Never.'

Chapter 26

Rain, rain, rain; the mixed blessing that made the emerald Irish landscape so scintillatingly beautiful could also be a curse. How Joseph prayed the rain would subside. The deluge first fell on them two days ago and things could not possibly get any greener, he considered. Nevertheless, he was a contented man. For the first time in almost four long years he knew he and his son were safe. There was food and work for them as well as shelter, and the companionship of a fine young man. To lie inside a warm, dry barn at night and listen to the rain tripping across the roof was a long-forgotten pleasure. He had enjoyed the experience of slowly beginning to work again and his strength was building daily. His self-esteem was growing too, as he could see he was once again able to provide for his family through his own skills and sweat. And above all else, there was a family, the greatest blessing he could have wished for.

With Joseph's arms now developing some of their lost muscle power, while Eugene worked the bellows, he was capable of filing down the soon to be shod hooves of his equine clients. As the rain beat down outside, a fine chestnut mare waited patiently as, head bowed low, Joseph inspected her feet, facing her, shoulder to shoulder. He raised the hoof into the lap of the leather apron he had been given and painstakingly began to shape the horn.

Soon he had applied the finishing touches, and the foot was at last ready for the scorching hot metal shoe. The task completed, he moved onto the next foot and made two or three rasps to the left, then the same to the right. The curled slithers

of horn tumbled to the ground, where Tori's tongue was ready and waiting to snap up the eagerly awaited delicacy. Finally, the time to secure the searing hot shoes had come. Like a perfectionist joiner satisfied with his preparatory work, Joseph stepped back and admired his handiwork. For the next part of the process, Joseph still relied on Eugene or Ruarie for support. Maintaining such an awkward stance whilst also keeping an occasionally reluctant horse's leg extended in an unwieldy position was still beyond Joseph's capabilities. But he knew this would improve along with the horses' familiarity, and eventually a calmer, more manageable compromise would fall into place for both parties.

With the chestnut mare done, Joseph moved on to the second horse of the morning. This fine animal required a refit of a front shoe he'd secured just weeks earlier. As he worked, his back began to ache, but he would not indulge it with rubbing or stretching. He was doing the job he had learned as a boy and no one was going to take this away from him. Geney pumped the bellows at double speed, knowing the shoe was only moments away from the hot coals. As he pumped, he hummed a song, one of the ditties played and sung over and over again at the ceilidhs that he had enjoyed with his family as a youngster.

With the front nearside hoof planted squarely in his lap, Joseph looked knowledgeably at the mess he was faced with. The shoe had been ripped off, but fortunately Eugene found the discarded and now rusted shoe after tramping from corner to corner of the field. But when the shoe had ripped free, it had tugged two sizeable chunks of splayed hoof horn with it, leaving split and jagged lumps extending like the buck teeth of a goat. Joseph sighed, how he hated to see horses' feet in such a mess.

Slowly, methodically, he tended to the hoof ensuring he did not pain the animal nor restrict on the future growth. As he worked, Eugene giggled at Tori skidding and rolling over. The excitement as she caught a chunk of horn he'd tossed in her direction was just too much, and as she chomped it down almost whole, her little body wriggled and writhed with delight

'Just get on with that pumping, son,' encouraged Joseph, 'we've work a plenty to do here.'

Eugene dutifully obliged, and as Joseph smiled to himself, another large chunk of horn fell to the ground. Mindful of the delicate balance between farrier and customer, Tori edged slowly forward, niftily slipping between the two front legs to grab her spoils before settling in peace beside Joseph. Then suddenly, without warning, she began to growl. Just a whimper at first, a low moan, but it quickly grew louder, more intense.

'Stop your bleating, Tori.' Carped Joseph.

As he spoke, Tori jumped up and barked fiercely. The gelding he was tending braced itself to rear, its residual front leg lifting almost a foot from the ground. Joseph quickly latched onto the one in his lap and with its balance thrown, he grounded the animal with scarcely any call on his limited strength.

'Whoa, whoa, lad, there's a good fella.'

He spoke softly, using his breath to whistle soft calls close to the nervous animal's nostrils.

Unaware, Eugene continued to hum as he pumped the bellows.

'Geney, get your dog will you - I have a job and a half with this animal, so I don't need the two of them upsetting each other.'

As Eugene reached out to grab his dog, she sprang away from Joseph's side, and crouched, barking, growling, at someone to the right of Joseph's shoulder. The lad looked up; the sight that now tormented his dog would soon torment his sleep forever. With a spade held high above his head, Dennis O'Doherty was poised to land the working end of the hefty tool right on Joseph's head.

Pitching forward, Eugene screamed – at his father, his dog, but mostly at O'Doherty. Tori sprang and caught the attacker's threadbare sleeve in her teeth and though it was too late to avert the first blow entirely, it shifted O'Doherty's tenuous grasp on the handle. Instead of a piercing blow, the metal fell flat on the top of Joseph's head, sending him reeling to the ground. O'Doherty raised his arms for a second attack, but the horse spun about and, front legs flailing in the air, and knocked him clean off his feet.

Eugene lifted Joseph's head and placed it on his lap.

'Daddy! Daddy, speak to me!'

There was not a mark on Joseph, but his half-closed eyes were vacant, unseeing.

'It's all right, daddy, I'm here. You'll be fine, I promise you.'

Ruarie ran into the yard, dropped to his knees beside Eugene and began to scrutinize Joseph's scalp.

'There's no blood,' said Eugene.

'Not on the outside,' murmured Ruarie. 'Hold him still.'

Carefully easing Joseph's head to one side, Ruarie saw a trickle of blood oozing from his right ear.

O'Doherty clasped his hands together, raised himself up onto his knees and began to pray.

'Let me die, Lord, so I can join Noreen and my little ones at last.'

The familiar voice stirred something in Eugene as he stared at his father's attacker.

'Mr. O'Doherty? Is that you? Is our Kit back here in Ireland?'

Dennis steeled himself, his jaw steadfast, unwavering.

'You'll see neither of those girls of yours again. They're lost to you now just as my own family is lost to me. Every one of them!'

'Be off with you!' Screamed Eugene. 'You wicked old man – go!'

Joseph raised his head an inch or so from the ground, turned towards the source of the voice.

'Eugene? Where are you boy? I can't see you, son.'

The dream was so comforting, and when a noise awoke Eugene from it he was immediately disappointed. He had been dreaming of Maeve and her gentle ways. He loved and missed both of his sisters, but Maeve had been the closest thing to a mother he had ever known. Snuggling up on her lap, with a belly full of her fine cooking, and a heart full of love as she gently rocked back and forth, was the best place in the world. He stretched and yawned, trying to place what the noise was that had stirred him from his happy dream world. As he peered outside everything seemed perfectly normal with only nature's morning ritual disturbing the peace.

From outside in the yard, the fine wisp of smoke creeping from the fluted chimneystack was scarcely noticeable. Inside, however, the roaring peat fire that Eugene kept in day and night had transformed the old gardener's sheds into a haven. Where the vegetables and wild game were once clamped between slatted shelves and slowly smoked over cedar and oak chippings, now a pot simmered above a fierce fire. The racked shelving had been laid on its side and filled with straw, then a blanket thrown over the top to make a soft mattress. It was here

that Joseph had lain for three weeks now, neither better nor worse; equally, he seemed to be neither alive nor dead. His head was propped up on a smooth log, with a concave dip smoothly whittled into it. With a bundle of rags on either side to ensure his head moved neither to the left or the right, his unseeing eyes stared at the roof above him.

The angle at which his father's head was positioned enabled Eugene to trickle a little broth and some fresh water between his lips, an hourly task he willingly undertook. He coaxed, cajoled and implored his father to accept the feeble amounts of sustenance, fearing Joseph had lost both the will and the ability to live. How much longer he could continue, neither of them knew. But both were aware, it could not be for much longer.

A sudden rattle from the door and it flew open, startling Eugene so he spilled not only what was in the ladle, but also half of what was in the bowl. As he licked the dribbles from his sleeve, Ruarie appeared, flustered and all of a dither. He blurted out his words.

'Eugene! Joseph! I... I... there's news, incredible news.'

Eugene realised that the sound that had intruded on his dreams had been the long-forgotten rumble of carriage wheels and the dull thud of horses' hooves on the driveway that was now largely overrun with grass.

'Geney, the agent's brought someone back with him from the port – the owner of the estate.'

'The owner!' Geney jumped to his feet. 'Will he be wanting to visit his gardener's sheds, do you suppose? Jesus wept, we should be moving daddy right now! It'll not do for the master to think his workers are slacking instead of working.'

Eugene scampered across to the fire and began to extinguish it with pounding feet. Unnoticed by the preoccupied lad, a second figure swept into the room, and a refined woman's voice spoke softly.

'Come on, Eugene – there's no need for a fuss, now is there?'

He immediately felt a sense of familiarity as he listened to the voice, but couldn't understand why; how could he possibly recognise a soft, British voice, after all Lady Edgerly's had a hoarse rasp to it and he knew no other English ladies.

As he turned to face the direction of the voice, he saw silhouetted against the doorway the figure of a fine lady, clothed in a dress of emerald green silk. The matching bonnet shaded her face, but he could see an outline of shiny dark hair framing pale skin. With a waistline nipped in by fashion, not hunger, and the finest lace fringing her cuffs and neckline, this was a real lady, rich as well as

beautiful. He watched her chest rise as she sighed and took a deep breath before she stepped forward into the light. Eugene gasped.

'It's me, Eugene. Your sister, Maeve.'

Eugene was transfixed, unable to take in what he had just heard with his own ears, saw with his own eyes; his sister? She was dead – he'd known that for years and had it confirmed three weeks back. But it was her. Like a startled bird, Eugene surged forward into her arms.

'I thought you were dead – gone forever. Where have you been – why are you so... changed?'

'Fortune smiled upon me but I was unable to come back – until now.'

Eugene turned and looked across at his father.

'I pray you're not too late, Maeve, not too late to help save our Daddy.'

Chapter 27

The dawn light was still hiding in awe of the full moon as Kit slipped silently from her bed and began to dress herself. As soon as she moved, Bridie was up and pattering along the floor behind her, as eager as Kit not to miss a second of the day. Never far from her mother's side, she was instantly wide awake and ready to grasp the day. She jumped along the floor, springing over and behind her mother's moon shadow in the otherwise quiet building. Kit hushed her daughter, reminding her that Sammy would still be asleep and he needed that extra hour or two each morning. But seeing the despondent look on that beautiful, chastised face, she took Bridie by the hand and reassured her that if she could just sit quietly for a while, she would be rewarded with a cup of hot milk and cinnamon.

Bridie happily obliged and for the second time in her life, Kit set about packing a bag for a journey. It would be another huge undertaking and one she had mixed feelings about making. But whatever the traumas of the voyage itself, and the fear of what she might find at the end of it, this was something that she had to face. The life she had carved out for herself and Bridie, the joy of Sammy's paternal friendship, the relationship with Woltek that promised so much – she recognised that none of this could be fulfilled unless she knew and understood exactly what had happened to her family. It didn't bode well; news coming from Ireland was still bleak and there was little hope of a happy ending to this voyage of discovery. But whatever life now threw at her, Kit believed she was prepared for it. She had learned a great deal these past few years and not just about herself. In Ireland, her world had been insular and she had rarely met people unknown to her or her family. The fickle actions of strangers had thus held no

great surprise for her. But Dennis, whom she knew and had believed she could trust, had shocked her to the core when he made off with the Green Club takings. She tried to feel sympathy for him, to understand his need for a fresh start, but nevertheless he had let her down badly. Stealing was unforgivable, and stealing what was intended to help his fellow poor Irishmen was inexcusable. But still he was in her prayers and each night she forgave him and called upon God to welcome him back to the sanctuary of the Catholic Church.

As she carefully put another layer of warm clothes into the bag, Bridie sat quietly and watched. She was perched on a small stool that Sammy had painted a cheery shade of yellow. Once a milking stool, he had told her it might just as well be a throne for his little princess as it was no use for milking horses! Sammy and his stories always made her chuckle. But today she was not smiling. Instead she chewed her lip and watched her mother closely, sensing her anxiety as children always can.

'How many days, mama, until we go to find grandpa?'

'Oh not long, not long at all. We're just now waiting on Woltek to make the arrangements and then we'll be off on our grand adventure. You just wait - when you see the Ballygall hedgerows in summer bloom, it's a sight like no other.'

Smoothing the creases from Bridie's newly pressed best dress as she took it from the dresser, Kit somehow managing to speak positively to her daughter, despite her inner turmoil. When she decided to return to Ireland, she had, for a brief moment, considered leaving Bridie behind. But she quickly dismissed the thought, unable to contemplate being parted from her for even a day let alone months. No, this was something they would accomplish together, just the two of them. Her daughter had a right to see the land that was truly her home, her birthright. And there was no better time than summer to see it. If all went to plan, they would set sail in just days and after less than two months at sea they would be walking the Ballygall hills once more.

'Right Bridie McLaughlin, it's time for us to take that bottle of embrocation to the O'Dooleys.'

Bridie winced.

'Do I *have* to come too?'

'Oh Bridie, are my little helper.' Kit swept her up in her arms and nuzzled noses with her. 'I know, the smell is bad there, but it's not for a lack of cleanliness. Poor Mr. O'Dooley has a medical problem and it's up to us to help Woltek to help the poor man. Agreed?'

Nodding reluctantly, Bridie wrinkled up her nose and whispered:

'Smells like the meat market.'

'It does too – even on a cold day at that!' Laughed Kit. 'Come go on, then. Hop back into bed for a while. I'll be back before you know it, you just be a good girl for your uncle Sammy.'

'I am a good girl, mummy!'

'Of course you are.'

'Can I have something for being a good girl mummy?'

'Like a treat?'

'Yes, sort of.' Bridie tipped her head on one side and looked seriously up at her mother. 'I'd very much like a brother.'

Kit laughed and gave her a hug.

'Perhaps one day – but for now, you can just pretend that Sammy is your brother.'

'Oh he's too old – and slow! I want someone to *play* with!'

Still smiling, Kit kissed Bridie's forehead then creaked her way down the old wooden staircase. Sammy's snoring seemed to permeate the very walls of the building. Sometimes the noise was so loud he would wake himself even from the deep slumber that followed a hard day's work. He was not getting any younger, but still relished being able to undertake the chores and tasks many a younger man would struggle with. Nevertheless he would be the first to admit that Kit not only worked like a Trojan but was also instrumental in growing the popularity and success of the Green Club. When she went back to Ireland, he knew he would miss her in many, many ways.

The membership of the club had now grown to such an extent that really, they should take on no more members. Yet Sammy, Kit and Woltek agreed, it was a sorely needed service that should be extended to as many as possible and not made into an exclusive niche for the fortunate few. There were numerous examples of families who had benefitted from a reduction in the alcohol consumption of the man of the house, and in more ways than one. Not only did the men drink and spend less, they were also stronger and healthier. Factor in the affordable health care the club gave the families and the conclusions were plain for all to see.

But there were those who saw the club's benevolence as a curse, including Cormac Mulcahy. And by the time Kit and Bridie were downstairs, he was moving with stealth towards the club, ready to do something about it.

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Fire began to lick the stairs that Kit had so recently tiptoed down. Like a river bursting its banks, the fire began as a small trickle, but moved quickly through the dry timbers until it took a hold. Suddenly the flames had the strength to flare up some four or five feet into the air. Licking the walls that were only too ready to join the fireball, it spread throughout the ground floor in minutes.

Upstairs, Sammy's snoring slowly, insidiously transformed into a series of coughs; at first, a tickly irritation but soon a choking, gasping rasp from deep in his chest. Still half asleep and already affected by the noxious smoke he had been inhaling, Sammy rolled on to his side and dropped his feet to the floor. Immediately, the temperature of the floorboards set alarm bells ringing in his head. Whilst they exuded a warm welcome in the better months of the year, this morning they positively roasted his toes. To dispel the early morning darkness, he lit the lamp by his bedside and as the veil of sleep left his eyes, the horrifying realisation dawned on him; the room was fast filling with smoke and the crackle of fire was immediately below him.

'Mary mother of God, what's happening?' He gasped, and then began to bang on the adjoining wall. 'Kit! Kit – where are you? Are you alright?'

Kit was out back, behind the main run of buildings, gathering more logs for the fire and a bucket of coal for the stove while Bridie sat quietly inside sipping her milk. With a scarf swathed about her neck and ears, the first she realized something was very wrong was when the smell of smoke on the chill morning air. She spun round and was horrified to see flames and smoke engulfing the building where she had left just minutes earlier Bridie. Dropping the copper coalscuttle, she dived towards the building.

Upstairs, Sammy rushed towards the window and clawed the curtains apart. What met his eyes made him gasp as the final minutes of the night were transformed into an early dawn; but it was a false dawn and he could see the reason why. Across the cobbled yard, smoke was seeping beneath the doors from the ground floor of the club, the windows glowed a bloody red from flames within and as a plume of smoke spiraled up from beneath Sammy's window, the reason for the hot floorboards was now plainly evident. The whole building was on fire - but how? Every night meticulous final checks were made after closing, ensuring every ember was contained or extinguished, and any pipes or tobacco safely stowed beneath sand or water. That had been undertaken many hours ago; it was unimaginable that such a roaring fire had simmered for six or seven hours before rampaging through everywhere.

Outside, people had begun to gather and formed human chains. As they tossed buckets of water at the building in a futile attempt to stem the flames, Sammy threw open the window and pointed frantically to the rooms next to his.

'Get the fire-cart – and someone get a ladder, Kit and Bridie are trapped inside there!' He shouted.

Sammy knew it was his fellow Irishmen that generally manned the cart. They would not waste a second in coming to the aid of the Green Club, but he feared it was not going to be quick enough. As flames crept up to the sill below Kit's window, he could wait no longer and hauled his considerable bulk out through the window and on to a narrow ledge, where he teetered precariously. He stared down at the people milling around below him, then forced himself to look straight ahead, and slowly edged his way along the ledge towards Kit's window.

From outside the yard, two young men scurried in carrying a short, feeble ladder. Only half of the original dozen rungs remained and those were sparingly secured. But right now, it was all there was and as the crowd of anxious faces dizzied back and forth, not knowing what to do or how to help, the Murphy brothers hurried to angle the ladder against the part of the wall where Sammy was headed. As they tried to control the wobbling structure, glass from the ground floor window exploded out into the yard, cutting their hands and faces. The rampaging flames were now hungrily drinking the night air, the heat forcing everyone back from the attempted rescue; everyone except Cormac Mulcahy. As Sammy finally reached the window and forced it open, Mulcahy pushed others out of his way as he headed straight for the ladder.

'Stand clear, I'll tend to this,' he shouted, puffing on an expensive cigar. He gripped the sides of the ladder and held it steady though Samuel had now disappeared into the smoke filled room where he stumbled around blindly in a frantic search.

'Kit? Kit!' He yelled, trying in vain to shield his face from the smoke that was now swamping his eyes and lungs. Within moments he was certain the room was empty, and began to pull himself back out through the window. But his strength was not as firm as his resolve and it was a struggle he seemed to be losing. Unbeknown to Sammy, Kit was almost directly beneath him, frantically fighting her way through dense smoke to find Bridie.

'Bridie? Where are you?' Kit coughed as she crawled about the room. 'Don't be frightened – come to mummy.'

Desperate and on the point of giving up, Kit heard a tiny whimper from the corner near the cast iron stove. She found her way across the room, by touch and a sixth sense, and finally found Bridie curled up in a huddle, hiding, with her skirts

pulled up over her head. Kit grabbed the pot of water she had drawn ready for making coffee, and tossed it over Bridie's clothes then picked her up and swung her across her back.

'Hold tight to mummy's back – and don't take your skirts away from your face. We'll be out in no time, just you see.'

Suddenly, accompanied by the clanging of a bell and excited shouts, the fire cart arrived and the crowd instinctively pulled back to afford it easy access. A small crew rushed into action and began to unroll the wide grey hose while two strong pairs of hands began to pump, hard and fast. Seconds later, the first gush of water appeared and was quickly spurting into the room beneath Sammy's sleeping quarters. As the commotion hit full throttle, Kit appeared in the doorway, clutching a lifeless Bridie to her chest. As the wave of fresh air and back-spray swept over her, she fell to her knees and clawed at Bridie's skirts; her little face was tinged with soot from the smoke, with her skin scarlet red in places.

Unseen by Kit, Sammy reappeared at the window and stared straight down into Mulcahy's grinning face below.

'Some careless customer seems to have cost you dearly, my friend.' Mulcahy inclined his head back to ensure Sammy could hear him clearly. 'A stray match, or a good cigar perhaps – that's all it takes. So careless of your customers, my friend.'

With his words still tormenting Sammy's ears, Mulcahy pushed the ladder to one side and watched as it fell to the ground before slipping away through the crowd as Woltek fought his way to the front. As soon as he found Kit frantically tending to Bridie, he took the small child in his arms, listening for her breathing, and searching for a pulse.

'Is she alright?' Pleaded Kit, as she watched him, terrified. 'Tell me – TELL ME!'

Woltek didn't answer, but instead pressed his mouth over Bridie's and blew several short, sharp gasps into her tiny lungs. After massaging her chest for a few seconds, he repeated the process. All the while, Kit stood stone still in petrified silence. And then a tiny splutter, followed by a rasping cry from a terrified but very much alive little girl. As she dived into Kit's waiting arms, Woltek looked up and saw Sammy leaning out of the window directly above them.

'Take her away from the smoke, Kit.' He urged, but Kit was transfixed now by the danger Sammy was in. Woltek cupped his hands and shouted up to the frightened old man. 'Samuel, get right out on to the ledge and shut the window behind you. Now, Sammy, before-'

As Woltek spoke, an explosion from within the room blew what remained of the glass out of the frames. As the debris rained down, Woltek leaned over Kit and Bridie to shelter them from the fallout, then quickly led them away as panic swept through the yard.

The blaze now roared up to the roof at the far end of the building, and with the old hay barn just behind it, Woltek knew it could only be a matter of moments before the whole, tinder-dry lot went up. Sammy was edging gingerly back past his own bedroom window and along the ledge towards the only part of the yard not yet burning out of control; the old bothy. Partly built of stone in the traditional Irish style, its roof was weak, but it offered an escape route.

‘Quickly, turn the hose over there!’ Woltek called to the fire fighters, as he pointed to Sammy’s precarious course.

The fire fighters turned the hose on to the walls beneath Sammy’s feet as Woltek grabbed the half-broken ladder and turned it over and over in the pools of water that were now forming in the yard. Satisfied it was suitably doused, he took off his coat and soaked that too before putting it back on and yelling to the man beside him to give him his coat, and doing precisely the same again.

‘What are you doing?’ Asked the indignant tubby man as his coat was plunged into the puddles.

‘I’m praying this baptism saves me – and Sammy - from one of fire.’

With the spare coat in one hand, he grabbed the ladder with the other and ran to the bothy. He raised the ladder high above his head and onto the dilapidated roof. Grasping an exposed rafter with both hands, he slipped his right foot into a shallow foothold and propelled himself onto the roof itself. Like a crab slowly making its way across a slippery rock, Woltek edged towards Sammy.

As the ledge Samuel stood on began to burn, he was trapped; unable to go forward or back he climbed back through a trap-hatch that led to the landing inside. Horrified that Sammy had gone back inside the burning buildings, Woltek inched his way along the ledge to the trap-hatch that now swung back and forth, wide-open as a crow’s gullet beckoning a worm.

‘Sammy, I’m coming for you now but we must be quick.’

He lowered himself in through the trap door, landing hard on his feet, his coat sleeve half-covering his face. All around him, he could see the floorboards were about to succumb to the fire, but that was all he could see in the smoke-filled room. Realising the entire building must surely collapse into flames soon, he was about to give up when his foot struck something solid on the floor in front of him.

He dropped to his knees and by touch, satisfied himself that it was Sammy. He swathed the semi-conscious man in the damp coat.

‘Come on, Samuel, this is no time for napping!’ Encouraged Woltek. ‘A quick descent and I’ll buy you a pint of your best beer.’

Half carrying, half dragging Sammy, Woltek staggered back the way they had come. The opening was silhouetted by the flaming sky outside as Woltek dragged a chair directly beneath it and hauled Sammy on to it.

‘Pull yourself up, Sammy!’ He urged as he pushed his bulk from below.

One final push and Sammy was out, back on the ledge. Clinging on to the post beside him, he leaned back down and hoisted Sammy up beside him. Immediately below, a ladder was edging closer towards them, a sturdy firefighter guiding it. But just as salvation seemed to be at hand, a loud crack and a roar from behind made them both turn and look up. From the apex of the roof a huge, fiery timber had broken free and was rolling down straight for them.

As he watched it roll closer, Woltek felt a sense of peace; there was nothing more that he could do and his part of the struggle was over. Everything was now in the hands of God. He closed his eyes in resignation and awaited their fate.

Ernest Quigley’s hand was firm as he skillfully brushed the dry mud from the bay mare’s coat. This was his first visit to Ireland, and his former master’s estates, in a long time but nothing much had changed, just grown worse. The fields were still wet, and the horses undernourished, though not as badly as the people. He tried to keep his mind on the job in hand but it was hard. He’d seen dreadful hardships in Liverpool in recent, tough years; Englishmen who existed, not lived, way below the breadline. But the destitution and desperation he witnessed on the journey from the docks to Kilcannon House were too shocking for words. As he had dutifully driven the carriage with his new mistress Mary, it did not seem to matter whether they travelled down city streets or country lanes; everywhere was littered with the dead or the dying. Hands were extended for alms or a crust, voices silent, with sunken, lifeless eyes unable to plead for help.

The wet weather that showed no pity for the impoverished Irish people was now playing havoc with Quigley’s best mare. With the stables in disrepair and scant bedding, he’d been forced to leave her stood up in the yard by day and turn her out into a muddy field at night. But today when he’d brought her in for her morning feed, the sludge that had sucked her down to her hocks had sown the first seeds of mud fever. Tenderly, he had washed her legs down, and left them to dry naturally in the morning breeze before powdering them with a remedy he had used successfully numerous times before. The task completed, he began to

cast a careful eye over the rest of her nicely rounded shape, looking for any potential problem areas.

He set to work on her back, picking the biggest clods of mud free with his thumb and forefinger as the mare munched happily on an old tin bowl half-full with oats and chaff. But a large lump of mud in her mane defeated his brush and needed to be tackled properly, so he went to fetch the metal currycomb from the tack box he'd tucked away in the corner of the coach house.

Inside the coach house the light was poor. Dense ivy and years of grime thwarted the path of light through the remaining small panes of glass. At one time a fine building, it saddened Quigley to see it so poorly maintained. But he had a shrewd idea this would not be the case for too much longer. He had noticed that despite the fact that she had never visited Ireland before, his young mistress had a strong rapport with the place and its people, particularly the young farm worker, Ruarie. It suited him very well, as a quiet time in Ireland was a good way to wind down before he would inevitably step down from the role that now taxed his old bones. A small savings pot and the use of a cottage on the estate, if he were lucky, would see him out.

Quigley knew that his mistress had already sent word back to the lawyers on the mainland and he suspected it was to confirm she would be staying longer than originally intended. If he were correct, then it would mean she would be unable to attend the meeting arranged with her late guardian's sister. Now the thought of that did make Quigley chuckle to himself as he imagined Mrs. Pemberton's face when she heard the news. He didn't envy the solicitor having to tell her she'd been denied her chance to assail Miss Mary, and Quigley had no doubt about what she'd had in mind for the meeting. As the only living relative of Lord and Lady Jenison, she had been in line for a grand inheritance. Until now; now Miss Mary had everything bar the title.

Still smiling to himself, he strode back into the yard to find the mare agitated, striking her hoof and threatening to rear. His smile was quickly replaced with a curious frown as he saw the reason for her distress; her feed bowl was gone. Looking about the yard for it, he tried to imagine what gust of wind, or flick of a hoof could have shifted the old tin bowl so far and so quietly. Then in the far corner, beneath an elderflower bush powering up for its summer bloom, he saw something move. Taking two steps forward, he stooped to focus his eyes. He looked closely, and saw cowered over what remained of the oats and chaff was something resembling a human being.

Quigley caught his breath at the sorry spectacle, shocked and saddened. But Ruarie rushed past him, grabbing the hungry thief by the wrists.

'Stop that, stop it now!' He yelled. Thrusting his fingers inside the peasant's mouth, he dragged out what remained of the undigested fodder.

Quigley watched indignantly as Ruarie snatched the bowl away and tossed it back at the mare's feet.

'I'm sure my mare can afford to share her feed,' he grumbled, 'if it's to save a man's life, sir.'

'Saving his life is what I'm trying to do. That will shred his guts, empty as they've probably been for weeks on end.'

Ruarie turned to the cowering man.

'Come, follow me – I have something far better for you to eat than that, and just the place for you to sleep.'

Unsteadily, the sorry shape trundled after him, past the coach house, out through the yard and across to the old gardener's sheds. The wisp of smoke no longer graced the chimney, but inside a straw bed still beckoned.

'Set yourself down, my friend. I'll return with some peat for the fire and broth for your belly.'

When Ruarie reappeared from the shed, Quigley was waiting for him.

'I am sorry, sir, I misjudged you.' Said Quigley humbly. 'You are a young man of great compassion, but I have to ask; is it proper for a man such as yourself to be extending such... hospitality, when the estate owner is in residence? After all-'

'I have no doubt that my mistress would be in agreement with my actions, if she had the time to consider them,' smiled Ruarie. 'But I'm sure you are aware, she has been a busy lady since she arrived two weeks ago.'

Quigley acknowledged the wisdom of his words. He had scarcely seen anything of Miss Mary since they first arrived. He also sensed this lad perhaps knew more than he was letting on.

When Ruarie made his way to the far wing of the house and up into the servants' quarters, he found Eugene precisely where he had expected, where he had been spending most of his days and nights for these past weeks, sitting at his father's bedside. After those first weeks of nursing Joseph in the old stables, the comparatively fine surroundings of the servants' quarters in a real, brick-built house were a most welcome turn of events, and the fact that Maeve sat on the other side of the bed was probably the best medicine, not only for Joseph, but for all of them. She stroked her father's forehead with a soft cloth impregnated with

lavender oils, while Joseph lay as still as death beneath a fine woolen blanket. It was a sight to behold and though he had witnessed it dozens of times now these past weeks, the beauty of it always brought a lump to Ruarie's throat. At times, he could see Kit so strongly in Maeve's neat features, and her gentle touch and kind ways with her father were sometimes almost too much to bear.

Maeve slowly became aware of Ruarie's presence and turned her head towards him. As she flashed a beautiful smile at him, for a moment Ruarie forgot why he was there. Then, remembering the poor soul he'd found in the stables, he quietly took Geney by the arm and asked him to take a bowl of broth to the garden sheds.

'Sit with him for a while,' he said. 'Jus to ensure our guest doesn't bolt it down too quickly.'

He told Eugene that there were rugs and covers folded into the manger, and he should arrange a bed of sorts for their visitor. Ruarie could have done all this himself, but he knew it was good for Eugene to occasionally get out of this room of interminable waiting. He had long since realized that no matter how much love and care was lavished on Joseph, he was never going to come back to them.

Eugene obeyed, albeit reluctantly.

'Stretch your legs and take Tori for a walk.' Smiled Maeve. 'Daddy will be fine here with me.'

Alone now, Maeve turned to Ruarie and patted the small bucket chair beside her.

'Please, daddy wants you to be near, I know. Sit a while, do.'

He eased himself into the over-stuffed seat, and shook his head in disbelief.

'What is it?' she whispered.

'It's all so strange, Maeve – like a tinker's tale. I mean, one minute we're thinking you're dead and the next, here you are, all dressed in finery and owning the grandest house in the county.'

'I was very nearly dead! If it hadn't been for dear Quigley...'

'He's a fine man, Mr. Quigley, that's for sure.'

Maeve glanced down at her father then looked back into Ruarie's eyes.

'I have felt so alone. After the robbery and ... what with daddy so poorly, and Kit gone.'

An awkward moment followed at the mention of Kit's name and Maeve quickly dropped her eyes from Ruarie back to her father. As she slipped her hand on top of Joseph's, for the first time in weeks his eyes flickered open, then closed again.

'Daddy? Daddy, it's Maeve, please – open your eyes again daddy. For me.'

Joseph's eyes remained tightly shut as his chest lifted with one huge, wheezing breath. Maeve turned to Ruarie and whispered urgently.

'Go and fetch Geney.'

Joseph's shallow breaths rattled through his chest, like pebbles on a beach tumbling back to sea. Sweat began to glisten on his brow yet his skin had a deathly grey pallor to it.

'Daddy, d'ya hear me? Wake up, won't you. Please, wake up!'

Maeve grasped his hand and rubbed it vigorously between her own two small hands, desperately trying to urge some life back into him. But nothing would rouse him. All the promise of her new found fortune now lay on its deathbed alongside Joseph. Too late, she had decided that his punishment had gone on long enough. Too late, she was finally ready to share her life with him again. Too late, the changes to her life that fate had brought about were to be of no benefit to her father.

Guilt swept over her at the sight of his frail, broken form. While she had lived in the bosom of newfound wealth and comfort, he had struggled to keep together body and soul; his own, her brother's, and the man she loved. Ruarie had told her of Joseph's kindness on the many walks they had enjoyed together through the gardens. She had felt his compassion as they sat beside Joseph's bed, and slowly dared to dream that this had turned into something more as, hour after hour, they had watched Joseph together.

During those long, quiet hours, Ruarie had told her how Joseph had taken him into the family and treated him as one of his own and how they had prayed together for the safe return of Kit and Maeve. He told her how O'Doherty's news of the loss of the girls had shattered him as much as the blow to his skull. Though it had only reinforced what they'd already feared, it was a deathblow for Joseph, leaving scant reason to fight on.

Ruarie had long since given up hope of ever seeing Kit again, so the joy of discovering that Maeve was not only alive but in good health was a blessing he had never dared to expect. For Maeve, joy now mingled with despair. Once again, she was with the men she loved – her brother, her father, and Ruarie. But her father was dying. In a moment, she would use all her newfound wealth to

barter for Joseph's life, not hesitate for a second to give everything she possessed just to spend one more day with the daddy she remembered. But it was not going to happen. She leant her head down on his barely moving chest.

'I'm so sorry daddy; please forgive me? Don't leave me; don't go.'

The clatter of feet on the wooden staircase jolted her back to reality. She sat up, and clasped Joseph's right hand between hers as Eugene and Ruarie raced back into the room. As Ruarie stood silently behind Maeve, Geney fell to his knees and clutched at his father's other hand.

'Please stay, daddy, you cannot go – not now we have our Maeve back with us again.'

As he spoke, Joseph's chest rose, then sunk for the last time. The once troubled face melted into a peaceful, dreamlike expression. Though he never regained consciousness, there was not a doubt in Ruarie's mind that Joseph died knowing his family was at his side.

With a rare glimmer of warm sunshine skirting across her face, Maeve was poised, proud but sad, between her two lads as she said goodbye to her daddy. Geney was now nearly as tall as Ruarie and as each of them tossed a handful of soil into the hole that claimed Joseph's plain wooden coffin, she felt as secure as she had ever felt. The labourer, who Maeve had already paid to fill in the grave, set about his work as the Priest led the small party away. Eugene and Ruarie each took one of Maeve's arms and slowly followed the Priest back down from the hillside plot where Joseph was finally at peace with Carmel.

'He is now with the Lord,' mumbled the priest, as he crossed himself and Maeve discreetly handed him a small purse. Moments later, he was up on his ageing dappled mare and on his way, the sound of mud sucking back to earth from the hooves lingering in the air.

As Ruarie began to make ready to head back to the house, Maeve gently put her hand on his arm and drew him to a halt.

'Wait a while,' said Maeve. 'There's no need to hurry away. Quigley has the carriage waiting and-'

'But there is.' Said Ruarie, his voice calm and resigned. 'It's three days now since your father passed; it's time now for me to move back to the old stables. There's nothing for me to do in ... I mean, it's not my place to-'

'But of course it's your place – it's your home now, our home.'

Maeve looked from Ruarie to Eugene. Neither lad could return her look. 'What is this – what's the matter with you both? We have a chance for a fresh start now! All of us - together.'

'All that finery, Maeve – it's not our way.' Eugene spoke softly, glancing across to Ruarie for reassurance as he spoke. Clearly the two had already discussed this moment. 'We're just grand staying in the old stables, if it's all the same to you, that is...'

Maeve was shocked to hear Eugene speak to her as though she were his employer, not his sister. Stunned and speechless, she watched as Ruarie headed off up the track while Eugene waited, politely, to accompany Maeve back to the horse and carriage that awaited her on the crest of the hill. It was clear the new life she had hoped for was not yet within her grasp; but what wasn't clear to her was whether she would have the strength to face the choices that now confronted her.

Chapter 28

The autumn breeze that gusted into the harbour across a choppy sea was deliciously refreshing. But for Kit it also brought with it less than happy memories as she stood on the deck of the 'Christina', toying with the copper curtain hoop in her pocket. She was a sturdy vessel, comfortably equipped with accommodation for forty or so passengers in private cabins. Instead of desperate souls in steerage, a cargo provided the ballast needed to steady the ship.

Sammy stood on the quayside looking sadly across at Kit. Beside him, with Bridie in his arms, was Woltek. Still smarting from their burns and the sprains from the miraculous escape from the fire six weeks ago, none of them should have been there. But Woltek had finally convinced Kit to continue with her plans to go back to Ireland even though Bridie was still too poorly to travel with her. Knowing her daughter was safe in his keeping, Kit had eventually agreed. The upheaval of the long voyage and then an arduous hike across Ireland were the last thing her little angel needed right now. She knew that with Sammy also sharing Woltek's home until the club could be rebuilt, there were two pairs of hands to spoil her. But for Kit, even at this late time of year the journey had to be made before she could marry Woltek and if she were honest to herself, the last thing she wanted was to be in Boston when Cormac Mulcahy went on trial for his terrible deed.

As the ropes were cast off, tears welled in Kit's eyes but, scared as she was, she knew she had to be strong for Bridie's sake. She knew the crossing to Ireland should take between six and eight weeks, but the landing couldn't come a day too soon for Kit. By late autumn she would be walking on the hallowed grounds of her own dear country and though she loved America, nothing could ever take the place of Ireland.

Kit watched the Boston sky-line disappear from view and convinced herself once again that she was doing the right thing, going to Ireland. Alone. Whilst she accepted that rumours and reports were sometimes wildly inaccurate, she was reconciled to the fact now that there was little chance any of her family had survived. But for now, all she could do was wait, hope, until those distant shores came into view and she found out for herself.

Maeve rang the bell above the fireplace just once before returning to sit at the small oak desk that had seen better days; the two pedestals were stacked with finely honed drawers each with meticulously crafted dovetailed joints, but the embossed leather of the desktop was badly scored and curling away at the edges. Years of dampness and dereliction had curled more than the edges of the estate, much like Ireland herself.

Whilst the piles of papers covered much of the damage, it was more than they could do for Maeve's expression. In front of her lay maps, deeds of title, shares certificates and debentures; all in all, a mind-befuddling array taken from the papers handed to her upon inheriting the Jenison estates.

Elbows resting on the edge of the desk, Maeve sunk forward and buried her weary eyes in her hands. As she rubbed her forehead with her fingertips, she looked once again at the letters she had just written and signed. After just a moment's hesitation, she placed each one inside an envelope and sealed it with the Jenison family crest as she had watched Charles and Sophie do many times.

Just as she finished the last one, a man resembling a tinker more than a butler hobbled into the room. Maeve had been perfectly happy to leave her butler in England and make use of the impoverished local labour, and this little man had proved himself to be a keen if inexperienced aide.

'Can you please arrange for Mr. Quigley to take these letters for posting back to England?'

'No problem, Miss - no worries at all.'

Maeve sighed as she considered how poorly she had thought this through. Of course, she'd never planned to inherit the estate, how could she? But since it was thrust upon her all she had contemplated were the opportunities it could provide, and not the burdens. After several years of living in almost decadent splendor, she now found that those she loved did not share her relaxed approach to this new position in life. And why should they feel at ease with her? She spoke with a strange voice, wore fine clothes, and was even lauded by those of great status. In short, she was a fraud; her life was a lie and nothing good could ever

be built on lies, her father had taught her. But then, what did he know? He had lived a short and painful life, riddled with struggle and disappointments. Now she, Maeve McLaughlin, had it in her grasp to make her family's world pain-free and full of comfort; so why wasn't it going according to plan?

When she had first set eyes on that make shift census and stumbled on the name Ruarie O'Connor, so diligently – and honestly – included by the agent on the estate lists, she had felt compelled to leave England immediately. Only the legal requirements of the solicitor and the need to comply with the custom of a long period of mourning slowed her down. But after the initial euphoria, the situation curdled with Ruarie and Eugene's lack of acceptance. Now, she had made up her mind.

She slid open the top right hand drawer, checked the contents, then closed it and locked it again. She slipped the small key into the pouch she secreted in the folds of her ample skirts. With an almost Latin swirl, she swathed herself in the copper-brown crochet shawl and strutted purposefully through the French windows, down the steps of the terrace and out across the lawns. The grass was sopping wet beneath her feet, but it didn't matter. Neither did it matter that her skirts soaked up the loose raindrops from the grass until they hung lank and heavy. Her footsteps quickly increased from a breezy walk to a run. Through the gardens, past the rose beds decimated by the hungry deer, beneath the oak trees almost ready to shed their green acorns. The new cobbled stable yard and buildings were on her right now, but still she hurried on until she saw the broken timber roof of the old gardener's sheds and the former stable yard.

Just two months had passed but how long ago, it seemed, since she had first arrived to find her brother, her father and the man she loved. But her father had died without knowing she had returned to seek his forgiveness. And now, she feared she might lose Ruarie and Eugene. The inert wedge that wealth can force between friends and family can be a demon to shift.

A rattling sound from one of the sheds startled her. It came from inside the building where she'd first found Ruarie and Geney beside her father and as she hurried inside, a sense of déjà vu crept over her. But the culprit was just Tori, tugging aimlessly at a length of rope dangling from an old manger in the corner. The old trough had been cleverly paneled now and topped with well-worn timbers to make a sort of dresser. Two bowls stood proudly at the back, and in front of them in a small basket were three potatoes, proudly arranged on a bed of straw. She smiled at Eugene's handiwork, then looked down at the other end of the small building where two beds stood side by side. Cobbled together from the virtually derelict furniture from the estate manager's cottage, they were Eugene's pride and joy – even though the beds had required some on going repair work as their body-weights increased.

'He's learning well, that young brother of yours.' Ruarie's soft voice gave away none of the anguish he was feeling. 'And so am I.'

Maeve opened her mouth to speak, but Ruarie was determined to say first what he had to say, something he had been planning now for some weeks.

'I have no right to come between you and your family, Maeve. You should be happily sharing your good fortune with Eugene, and not have him held back by my thinking – which is probably wrong anyway.'

'No, Ruarie, you are right. I-'

'I've never been one to take charity unless I had no choice, nor to come between family. And I'm thinking that now is the time for me to go and –'

'Don't you dare, Ruarie O'Connor!' Exclaimed Eugene. As he spoke, Maeve noticed for the first time that the pitch of her brother's voice had dropped; he was fast becoming a man, and from his tone a determined one like his father. 'If there is one thing I have learned these past years, it is to value family – and Ruarie, you *are* family. I, for one, won't let anything divide my family again, ever.'

'In ainm Dé!' Said Maeve. Her voice fell back into the lyrical tones that she had not spoken for many years. She turned to her brother and Ruarie, pleading with her voice and her eyes. 'In the name of God, please, listen to me. It is *I* who has been in need of learning – I who has not listened to the words of those I love. But I have just now sent word to the lawyers in England that I want no part of this place.'

Ruarie and Eugene are speechless, but Maeve was in full flow.

'When we buried daddy, I knew you were right.' She waved her arms in the direction of the big house beyond. 'All this is not for us, it's not what the McLaughlins or the O'Connors need. Our future lies back in the hills of Ballygall. That's where we belong.'

'But Maeve,' asked Eugene cautiously. 'Have you thought about where we will live – *how* we will live? Everything has changed now, you know.'

'Indeed it has. I have purchased from Lord Edgerley the two hundred acres that surround mammy and daddy's graves. Every tree, every rock, every ditch for almost as far as you can see from that point now belongs to us. The three of us.'

'But from there you can see...' Ruarie hardly dared to speak.

'... the valley of thorns; yes, the land we three now own includes the ground the O'Connor family farmed these past fifty years.'

Eugene's expression broke immediately into one of joy, but, to Maeve's dismay, Ruarie's face remained unchanged. Though she had always loved him, she found Ruarie a difficult person to read, to understand or predict. Unsure of herself, she took a small step forwards him and reached out with both hands.

'We're going home.'

As Eugene grasped her right hand tightly, Ruarie looked down at her left, then back at Maeve.

'You have given everything up, but for our lands? Everything?'

Maeve nodded, unsure whether Ruarie's voice was indifferent or incredulous. There was a long pause before he spoke again.

'I am indebted to you.'

'No, you are not. It is I who owe you everything – my family; and my own redemption.'

Ruarie took her hand and drew all three of them together in a warm embrace.

'Then yes, we are all going home.'

Relieved she had finally managed to set aside the long years they'd spent apart, Maeve relished the embrace and even though the small key jingling in her pocket tugged at her conscience, nothing could spoil this moment.

The quiet weeks on board a steady ship with so much time to think were a mixed blessing for Kit. She tried hard to relax into shipboard life this time around but although she was shown respect and was well cared for, she never really felt secure. But at least the journey had given her time to contemplate and prepare for whatever she might find when she arrived back home.

The weather on the journey had been kind, and as the ship drew near to port, the clear view of the Irish shores was breathtaking. Kit's original plan had been to stay overnight in Kilalla and then find transport to take her back to Ballygall. But the famine and deprivation that had already begun to bite at the time of her departure had now ravaged the once prosperous small port. It was almost unrecognisable from the bustling place it had once been. All but a few of the small scurries and larger fishing boats were gone, broken up and sold for

firewood; some were even being used as shelters for the evicted local population who had been forced into a transient way of life.

Fewer cargo ships now came into port and those that did often provoked a fight for the work of unloading and accommodating the freight. Some of the best-paid work was guarding the few precious shipments piled up on the dockside ready to leave. A look of desperation was carved on the weathered faces of both the protectors and the despairing men who had nothing to lose. While they planned reckless attempts to steal or plunder cargo, the thought of an axe handle or the sharp steel of a knife was no deterrent compared to the hunger that was their only alternative.

She looked at a lad perched on the lip of a stack of corn sacks. He was small of stature, but his bearing was aggressive and when anyone came within striking distance of his wooden cane, he lashed out and drove them away. Kit looked closely at the diminutive figure and sensed something familiar. His right leg was deformed, twisted at the ankle so his foot was skewed at an awkward angle; the left was not much better. But there was a twinkle in his eye that reminded her of someone, somewhere; for the life of her she could not recall just who that might be. As she pondered, the cane cut through the air with a swish and a crack, landing on the back of a man trying to scavenge a handful of corn from one of the split sacks the lad was protecting. There was nothing worse, thought Kit, than to see Irishman turn on Irishman.

'Be off with you, thief!' The lad shouted. 'Or I shall call a peeler and have you thrown in prison.'

As soon as she heard his voice, she knew the disheveled cripple was Sonny, the lad who had risked his own life to save hers.

'Sonny? Is that you?' As she approached him, he recoiled like a wounded animal. 'What happened to you – you're no longer sailing?'

'When did you last see a cripple shin up the mast, huh?' He mocked. 'They left me on the quayside with two broken ankles and a few nips of grog. I'm no good to them... no good to anyone.'

'That's not true, you're God's child and he loves us all.'

Kit rummaged in her purse and took out some coins.

'Take this and –'

'If it's all the same to you,' said Sonny proudly, 'I take charity from no one!'

'It was not alms I'm offering. I have a journey to make – back to Ballygall. That money was for you to secure me a reliable driver.'

Sonny looked at Kit, his proud demeanor punctured.

'Wait over there, in the ticket office. Just give me a few minutes!'

Sonny hobbled off, his makeshift cane tapping the ground like a rapid heartbeat as it kept up with his eager pace. Kit found the ticket office and waited inside until just ten minutes or so later, a carriage drew up outside. She hurried back to where the driver, a wizened looking man as old and boney as his horse, nipped from a small flask. Beside him sat Sonny, steadfastly refusing to share the poteen, and instead checking the stiff, wooden brake handle, and the worn leather reins.

Kit climbed inside the carriage and bounced on one of the two padded seats. They were upholstered in once fine, but now cracked, leather but there was still enough spring in them to cushion the bumpy roads ahead.

'Not bad at all, Sonny, well done.' Smiled Kit as she climbed back outside to find Sonny sitting alone.

'But... where's the driver gone – I need to be on my way?'

Pulling himself up to his full sixty inches of height, Sonny proudly tapped his chest.

'You're looking at him! Come on now, let's get you inside. We've no time to waste.'

'But-'

'Are you wanting to get to Ballygall this year?' He chirped, with a cheeky smile.

Kit shook her head and climbed back inside, from where she could hear Sonny making encouraging sounds to the already weary horse.

'Are you listening to me, you stubborn mare!'

Sonny made the same clicking sound he'd heard the owner make on the way there, but to no effect. Kit could hear the swish of the leather reins on the horse's back as Sonny jangled them in time with his clicking and his cajoling. Finally, Kit stuck her head out of the window to check whether Sonny really knew what he was doing, but as she did so, Sonny land a thwack from his walking stick on the recalcitrant mare's hind quarters.

The mare immediately shot from standstill to canter, throwing Kit back inside as Sonny desperately tried to gather up the reins and bring the horse back under control. Dockers leapt out of the way as the speeding carriage cut a swathe through rubbish and cargo alike, racing ahead down the narrow, bumpy street.

‘Sonny, pulls the reins back towards your shoulders!’ Cried Kit.

‘I’m trying to do just that – but they’re too long!’

‘Then run them up through your fingers to shorten them - and lean back!’

Turning a deaf ear to the unseemly turn of phrase Sonny was now using on the mare, Kit sensed the carriage beginning to slow. As they drew to a halt, she was up and out of the carriage and beside Sonny in a matter of seconds.

‘Can you not drive a carriage?’ She exclaimed, angrily.

‘Can you not sail a ship?’ He retorted between gasps for breath.

Kit laughed out loud at his cheek, then in one smooth movement took the reins from him and set the mare into a steady walk.

‘It’s going to be a long journey, but at least we’ve one another for company.’

‘How long?’ Asked Sonny. ‘I promised Mr. McInerney I’d return his horse and carriage safely by the Sabbath.’

‘Then it’s a good thing I’m driving if we’re to get there and back at all!’

‘If it’s not back in time for early morning Mass, he’ll beat me to within an inch of my very soul!’

Kit turned to face an anxious Sonny, smiled warmly.

‘We’ll be back in time. You probably saved my life, Sonny - I’ll not be risking yours, you can be sure of that.’

By the time they edged near to Ballygall, they were at ease with one another. Sonny had told her of his many adventures at sea, and Kit had regaled him with tales of life in Boston, and the Green Club in particular. Nevertheless, it had been a long, wearisome journey and at times, Kit could scarcely bring herself to look at the tortuous sights that littered the landscape. The craggy, rolling hills and lush valleys still echoed to the sound of tumbling streams and the screech of crows,

but there was scarcely an intact cabin - let alone a village - to be seen. As they passed numerous tumbled cottages, the ditches bore testimony to the former tenants' misery with primitive scalpeens, roofed over with fallen timbers, that had in turn been smashed on the orders of the evicting landlord. It was as if the countryside had been cleansed of its natural population, with starvation as effective a weapon as the soldier's muskets.

As evening drew in, they arrived in the small town of Two Castles and found a lodging house with a room available, and a covered barn for the horse, where Sonny insisted on sleeping to ensure the beast was not stolen – or eaten! The accommodation was very different to those that might have been offered by the castles that gave the place its name, but the owner, a dour woman known only as 'Mrs. P' refused any payment when Kit invited her to share their supper of cured pork, bread and apples.

By late afternoon the next day the hills were so familiar Kit could scarcely sit still. Looming up before them were the outskirts of the village of Ballygall, just a few miles from Kit's home. But the excitement turned to dismay when she realised that the cabins and cottages here were also in ruins, the village deserted and overgrown.

Pulling on the reins, she drew the carriage to a halt and jumped down.

'Ill not be a moment, Sonny, don't worry,' she called back as she ran up a bank then through a small thicket that looked as though it had once formed part of a manicured hedge. Sonny shrugged, his time was his own – Kit could take as long as she pleased. He looked up to where she had disappeared and saw a stone tower just visible through the trees. The minutes passed and Sonny began to fidget. Just when he had decided the time had come to clamber down and go find her, Kit finally reappeared. Her face was a pale and empty canvass.

'Did ya find what you're looking for in there, Kit?'

'No.' She whispered as climbed back inside. 'The church is locked and empty with Father O'Leary buried in the churchyard.'

Kit coaxed the horse back into life, and didn't look back. They were now just a few miles from her home and she could almost taste it in the air. But the track they'd followed as it slowly grew more rutted and overgrown finally disappeared. She stopped the carriage again and turned to Sonny.

'It's not fair to try and take the horse and carriage any further,' she said, resigned now to walking. 'There'll be potholes every second step of the way, I've no doubt of that. You just wait here - I can walk from here, and you can wait with the horse. I'll be no more than two days?'

'I can walk with you, it'll just take me a while to-'

'No Sonny, you'll do a better job making sure things are safe here.' Kit patted the horse's neck as she slipped the tack off and walked her towards a cluster of bushes. 'Just tether her here and let her graze. The hedging will act as a wind-break and there's food still in the basket to keep you going.'

'But what if you get lost?'

'I may have been away for some while,' Kit assured him, 'but I'll never forget how to find my way back to Ballygall.'

Eager to get on her way, Kit strode off, and as Sonny's outline grew smaller on the horizon behind her, a warm glow edged her cheeks, caused more by her surroundings than the physical challenges of the hike. She knew she would lose the evening light before reaching the cabin, even on this fine autumn day. But the thought of a night beneath the canopy of an Irish sky was not in the least bit daunting to her. It promised to be a dry night, and although she was alone, she had the expectation of an exciting day ahead to keep her warm. Though nothing bode well from what she had seen or heard of the area so far, something inside her told her tomorrow would be a day to remember.

The office of Algernon McGrew was as spick and span as it had ever been, with books tidied away, letters filed, and desks dusted. On his blotter was a single sheet of paper with the Jenison blood-red seal shining like a whore's lamp – and with just as much promise for McGrew. When he had first read Maeve's letter setting out her intentions to forgo the entire estate, for just a small settlement of £500, McGrew saw a comfortable retirement looming. The late Lord Jenison's only surviving relative, Mrs. Prudence Pemberton, had engaged him to resolve what she described as the 'crisis' for the Jenison name, with the promise of a substantial fee upon successfully persuading the little usurper to relinquish the Jenison wealth and estates. Never had he done so little work for so large a remuneration, he sniggered to himself. No more wills and testaments to draft, no more court papers to attend to, and no more of the malodorous Joe Richardson.

As he considered this joyous thought, the door opened and Richardson escorted Mrs. Pemberton into the room. She swept in with all the airs and superiority one expected of an officer's wife.

'You have news?' She exclaimed excitedly before even taking her seat.

McGrew gave Richardson one of his piercing looks and without a moment's hesitation, the man was out of the door.

'I have indeed, Mrs. Pemberton. I can advise you that I have succeeded in negotiating an agreement with your late brother's ward.' As he hands to her the letter signed and sealed by Maeve, he sat back in his chair, rolling one thumb around the other in a relaxed, self-satisfied manner. Mrs. Pemberton considered to be above his station but kept her feelings to herself as she read with delight that this lowly solicitor had indeed shamed the hussy who had looked to steal her rightful inheritance into relinquishing any claim. She looked up at McGrew, but despite her elation, her face was poker straight.

'And the substantial collection of jewels my sister-in-law possessed?'

'I believe the thugs stole the jewels. It was in Lady Jenison's chambers that the whole deplorable... incident occurred; it was there that Miss Mary discovered the former maid in the process of stealing the jewels, having murdered-'

'Yes – well, spare me the details. And you have released the funds she has demanded?'

'I have indeed, according to your instructions; the funds you placed at my disposal have been provided.' McGrew clears his throat. 'One thousand pounds - oh, and the use of an estate cottage and a small pension for one of the elderly staff, a Mr. Quigley.'

And cheap at twice the price, considered McGrew; all parties to the agreement were satisfied - and he got a double bonus thanks to the gullible Mrs. Pemberton. Yes, she could look down her snooty nose at him as much as she liked; Algernon McGrew was ready to retire in the style to which he would very quickly become accustomed.

There was something magical about being woken by bird-song. The gentle sound broke the stillness as the first hints of dawn filtered through the partially roofed shell of the building where she had finally spent the night, too tired to make the final trek down to her family's home before darkness fell. She watched silently as fine wisps of white cloud danced across the sky. The breeze that chased them away was a warm one, and for once the autumn chill kept its distance.

Kit looked about her and thought of the O'Reilly family who had once lived there; Peter and Margaret, and their six or was it seven children? They had been a big, close family, so typically Irish, but by the looks of it they were now long gone, forgotten. The O'Reilly's had lived here on this very same small conacre for decades – three generations at least. In just four years or so it seemed they had disappeared.

These lands were littered with a patchwork of small plots of land, each with its own humble hut or cabin. They could not offer much in the way of farming, but many had sustained families from season to season, generation to generation. Rows of vegetables, potatoes mainly, were tended, and occasionally some corn as a cash crop for the rent. But now stonewalls crumbled and everything had begun to merge into one mellifluous landscape. During her long walk the previous afternoon, the absence of familiar landmarks meant the scenery had changed so dramatically that from time to time Kit had to stop to get her bearings. But she knew that now she was almost there and a mixture of excitement and trepidation enveloped her.

As the dawn lights coaxed the hills awake, Kit went down to the stream to wash. It was just down from where a pig shed once stood, handy for fetching the water for the pig and for the family, Peter O'Reilly had once joked. After splashing her face into life, she sipped the cool water from cupped hands and thanked the lord the pig had moved on. This morning, she would return to the place where she had grown up. Apprehensive yet poised and ready for the truth, she knew there could be no turning back now.

From the direction she approached, the first landmark Kit saw in the distance was the small hilltop sanctuary where her mother was buried. Leaving the shade of a tall elm tree behind, she picked a handful of wild flowers as she walked slowly towards the place where she knew the grave with a carved wooden cross awaited. As she drew nearer, things were not as she had imagined; the autumn grass and wilting nettles she'd expected to see standing guard were not there. Instead, the area that surrounded the grave was neatly scythed and trimmed. Shielding her eyes against the low sunshine, Kit slowly focused on the heart of the family plot. She stopped dead; there were now two crosses.

Kit began to run, tripping and stumbling as she sprinted across the uneven scrubby land, up towards the grave. Panting, she stood where she'd stood a hundred times before with her daddy at her side. Her eyes stung from her own sweat, but as she peered down there was no mistaking the name burned into the second wooden cross; Joseph McLaughlin. No date, no detail, just those stark letters. Her head began to swim as she absorbed the knowledge that there was to be no happy ending. Stooping down, slowly then frantically she began to search the ground near the graves. She pulled the longer grass aside, scratching at the earth with her bare hands; could there be another, third grave – Eugene's? But there was nothing, no sign of her brother in the soil. As she looked again at the stark wooden cross and her father's name, she recognized her brother's hand; the shape of the letters, the knotted leather that bound together the two parts of the cross. But the relief in realising that he had been alive and buried their father was short-lived; her little brother would not have been able to survive alone for long. And when his time had come, it would have been a lonely death with no one to return him to his parents.

She thought she was prepared for this, but no amount of planning could have equipped Kit for this moment. This was the end of her quest. She sat down between the two graves, wrapped an arm about her father's cross and laid her head on the warm soil of her mother's grave and waited for the tears to come.

The low autumn sun was showing signs of real warmth by the time Kit finally walked away from the graves. Her father had chosen this elevated point for Carmel's grave so she would be 'closest to heaven' but as Kit looked down the valley and across what was once her whole world, it all felt a very long way from paradise. Most of the familiar places, the neighbours, even the hedgerows, were gone; those that remained were decimated beyond recognition.

On their small holding, there was nothing left of the cultivated fields but she could still make out a crooked outline of the vegetable patch she had laboriously tended since her childhood. As she squinted in the fading light, it seemed as though one section was free of weeds. She began to make her way slowly down the hill towards it, and to the ruins of the cabin beyond. She'd come this far, and wasn't going back to Boston without saying goodbye to what remained of her home.

By the time she was half way there, Kit could see quite clearly that someone had, in fact, cleared one section of the vegetable patch. A few rows of vegetables had been amateurishly set out, with spring cabbage and turnips clambering through the stony soil in uneven rows interspersed with patches of weeds. The makeshift style mirrored the cross and Kit dared to wonder if Eugene had survived – stayed on the family lands, his haphazard approach to cultivation providing enough to keep him alive? Her pace quickened and as she looked across at the skeletal cabin, she realized that rather than ruins, it was in fact a work in progress. And then, in the middle of what would have been the doorway, she spotted a pair of legs, the slender legs of a man perched on a makeshift wooden stool. Kit could not see the head or shoulders but the repetitive bang of a hammer now rang in Kit's ears.

'Eugene..? is that you, Geney?'

The hammering stopped; so did Kit.

Her breathing pounded in her ears as she awaited a reply but none came. Instead, one foot and then the other slowly stepped down from the stool and on to the ground. Out of the darkness, stepped the one person she thought she would never see again. Suddenly she was swamped in darkness and as she fell to the ground, just one word passed her lips, the name she had whispered in her sleep a thousand times.

It wasn't a dream; as Kit opened her eyes, he was still there, with her head on his lap, his face wet with tears. She whispered his name again. Hugging him, holding him close to her, felt the most natural thing in the world to do. He'd changed so much - become stronger, more rugged, yet he was still the same to her. The boy she had fallen in love with.

'I don't understand, Ruarie - why are you here? And what of Eugene - is he-'

'He's fit and well - if a little unhappy at having to tackle what he still regards as 'women's weeding work'. You'll see him very soon.'

'He's coming here?' Kit sprung to her feet.

'In just a short while...'. As he stood himself up beside her, Kit was too elated to notice the dampening of Ruarie's spirits. 'You'll see him, very soon.'

Clutching his hand, Kit pulled him into the cabin. The dresser was long gone, but the magic of those four walls still held something very special for Kit. Perched on stools, they faced one another as Kit begged him to tell her everything that had happened since she had left, interrupting him with carefully chosen snippets of her own at every opportunity.

'And where is he now - my little brother?' Asked Kit excitedly.

'They- he went for some supplies; a bed is needed, so there's nails and the like. Should be here any while now.'

'That's a long walk to make, and then to return carrying such heavy things?'

Ruarie paused before answering.

'The journey's not too long by horse and cart.'

'Oh, he's caught himself a ride with someone, hey?' Smiled Kit.

'You could say that, I suppose...'

The distant clank of a harness and the clatter of wheels on stones filtered in through the door-less opening. As the sound drew closer, the excitement was almost too much to bear for Kit.

'That must be him!' Squealed Kit as she leapt to her feet, knocking the stool sideways in her haste to get out of the cabin.

'Kit wait. There's something you must know - Kit!'

But she was gone, his voice scarcely penetrating her euphoria. She wriggled like a child as she watched a liver chestnut mare cautiously tug a smart little cart along the last stretch of the makeshift track up to the cabin. In all the excitement, Kit had failed to notice the roughly hewn pathway that skewed through the wastelands right to their very door. Waiting impatiently in that same doorway, she could just make out two figures in the cart, one she was sure was a grown-up Eugene, but the other person was harder to make out, tucked away behind him amidst sacks and what looked like some kind of desk or dresser. When the cart was just thirty or forty yards away, Eugene turned the horse to his left, into a hammerhead standing area.

'Eugene! Oh, Geney, is it really you?'

With Ruarie right behind her, Kit was running towards the cart before Eugene could even turn his head. By the time he realised just who this whirlwind was, Kit was dragging him down from the cart and leaping into his arms.

'You're alive; alive!' She blurted out. 'I can scarcely believe it Geney; oh, hold me tight!'

Opening her eyes and looking over Eugene's shoulder at Ruarie, Kit dismissed a twinge of unease as she saw the somber look on his face. What could possibly be wrong – her brother and Ruarie were both alive.

'Life sometimes presents us with such wonderful surprises!' She chirped into Eugene's ear before releasing him from her embrace. Tears washed her cheeks once again as she absorbed the fine lad now standing before her, then the unexpected voice of a woman made her heart skip a beat with its familiar, gentle tone.

'So it does, Kit.'

Smiling down at Kit from the back of the cart was Maeve.

'Oh Lord Jesus – am I dreaming? Maeve is it you?'

With Eugene just a step behind her, Kit ran to the back of the cart. Clutching raised skirts with both hands, an excited Maeve was picking her way tentatively through the chattels to reach her. Waiting eagerly, Kit to the right and Eugene to the left, each reached out a hand to help their sister step down to earth. As Maeve dropped the skirts and reached for their hands, Kit knew in an instant what Ruarie had been trying to tell her. Maeve was several months pregnant; the glow on her cheeks and the bulge about her waistline confirmed this fact. The

fleeting look between Maeve and Ruarie left no doubt in Kit's mind as to just who the father was.

Chapter 29

The chattering stopped immediately; the only sounds in the cabin were the embers of the peat fire dying quietly. Kit's words had silenced all their voices.

'I know it's too soon, and I'm sorry, but I must go. My driver is waiting – I never thought I'd find...'

Kit's eyes fell to the floor, sensing immediately the hurt she was causing. She wanted to shout, scream: '*do you not think I am hurt? Am I not the one most disappointed, betrayed?*' But she didn't; instead she slipped her arm around her brother's sulky shoulders and squeezed him close.

'I'm sorry, Geney.'

'So we're to lose you again, after we've only just found one another?'

'We'll never lose one another again,' she replied.

'Will you not even stay for the wedding celebrations?' Pleaded Eugene.

'If I do not return to America on the ship I'd planned for, then I would probably have to spend the winter here, and I have things... people to attend to across the water.'

Maeve raised herself slowly from the stool then reached down to Ruarie for the now empty stew bowl they had just shared. As she took the bowl from him, the tips of their fingers touched; she paused, smiling, just for a split second. Her face glowed as though a surge of energy had just pulsed through her. Kit recognised that feeling, and her stomach lurched at the stone that now lodged in its pit. She looked away while Ruarie, crouched on his haunches, stared at the dull orange glow of the embers that were slowly turning a dense, crumbling black.

'So,' said Kit brightly as she turned to Ruarie. 'You and Maeve have moved back to Thorn Valley; how proud your mammy and daddy would have been. And to think my little brother is to be an uncle!'

Ruarie nodded silently as he poked the fire with a stick. The air in the cabin was heavy with mixed emotions: remorse, betrayal, sadness – and joy. To all intents and purposes, Maeve was oblivious to the tension as she busied herself. But then, she had become the consummate actress these past years.

'I suppose we'd best be setting off, Ruarie, it'll be midnight before we reach the cottage at this rate! Geney, we'll go on foot so you can look after the mare tonight and be ready good and early to take Kit back to her meeting point in the morning.'

'Are you sure? It's a fair walk... in your condition and-'

'I'll be fine, Kitty. Oh, if only you didn't have to leave so soon, but we'll all be together again one day before too long - to celebrate the baby's arrival, maybe?'

Doing his best to perk up, Eugene headed outside to tend to the horse, quickly followed by Kit. As they removed the last of the tack from the grazing horse, Ruarie also came out of the cabin.

'Are you all right there?' He mumbled, his eyes fixed squarely on Kit. Even in the low light of the looming dusk, she could see the sadness in his eyes.

'Sure we're all done,' replied Eugene, 'I just need to put this away.'

'I tried to tell you,' whispered Ruarie.

Kit nodded as she turned back to the cart, feigning a sudden interest in the last of its contents.

'Lucky they collected some more blankets or I'd be shivering tonight!'

But Ruarie wasn't fooled for a moment. As he stood behind her, he looked at the loose curls that tickled the nape of her white neck. Remembering the tender skin where he had once buried his face, he reached out to her, each hand just inches from her arms. Sensing his nearness, Kit turned and thrust a rough woolen blanket into his hands.

'There you go. You can make yourself useful and take that inside.'

But Ruarie didn't move.

'If I'd known... We were told you were lost – gone forever.' Pleaded Ruarie.

'I understand, truly I do. Let's go inside, now, Maeve is waiting.'

As Kit strode back to the cabin, Ruarie grabbed her wrist and pulled her back.

'Is there someone, Kit? Someone waiting for you in America?'

Kit hesitated for a moment.

*Yes, there's someone waiting – a bonny daughter who looks just like her daddy!
And there's a loving man waiting to marry me, but no man could ever match you
in my eyes Ruarie O'Connor.*

She looked into his desperately sad eyes and from somewhere found the words to ease his pain.

'There is, and that person means more to me than anyone else in the world.'

'Then I'm glad for you – for you both.'

Ruarie's words were scarcely audible. But with an imperceptible nod, Kit turned away and walked back into the cabin.

Kit shook her brother's shoulder. The cabin was bathed in morning darkness but for a glimmer from the newly rejuvenated flames from last night's fire.

'Will you leave that dreamy sleep behind, Eugene McLaughlin!' Chided Kit.

Eugene rolled onto his back and drew a ragged blanket back up to his chin.

'Go away, you're a wicked dream,' he mumbled. 'Leave me in peace.'

'I'm no dream, ' she whispered. 'Come on, now, I need a strong lad to drive me to the top of the hills this morning. Am I to go and search elsewhere – or can you assist me?'

First one eye, then the other squinted into focus and captured Kit's smiling face. Slipping his arms about her neck, Eugene embraced her fiercely.

'I'm never letting go of you again, Kit.'

'Aah, come on now.' Kit gently consoled her brother. 'The bond between us has already proved that great seas and continents cannot keep us from one another. But right now, there are others waiting for me too, you know.'

Eugene nodded, then rolled the blanket up tightly about his ears.

'But you said you had to meet your driver by the time the sun was at its highest? That's more than four hours away, Kit – for a drive of little more than an hour? And I could sleep on, just for...'

'You could sleep your whole life away, Eugene McLaughlin! If you spent a little more time in the lazy beds, instead of being lazy in your *own* bed...'

The teasing worked, along with the drink of hot sweet water Kit had prepared from the last dregs of a honey pot she had brought with her from Boston. Within minutes, brother and sister were breaching the dawn light together to tack up ready for the journey. But when Eugene led the horse towards the cart, Kit spotted something.

'Bring him round again, Geney – trot him up. I think he's lame on that front leg.'

'Oh no, he can't be!' Groaned Eugene as he trotted the horse towards his sister, now stooping down to concentrate on its paces.

The rhythmic clip-clop of the beast sounded regular to the untrained ear, but Kit could see the horse was reluctant to put its weight on the nearside front leg.

'Yes, he's lame.' She sighed. 'Come on, we'd best get walking, and quickly.'

Within moments they were scurrying up the gently sloping hills on their way to the peak as the rendezvous drew ominously close. At the shoulder of the hill, Kit glanced back down the valley. It was irresistible, her last chance to catch a glimpse of 'home' before she set sail for 'home'. Then the sound that she had mistaken once before as the cry of a buzzard pierced the air again with the plaintive cry of her name. Eugene continued his hike up to the summit of the hill, unaware of the faint call. But Kit could not ignore it. She bit her lip and caught Eugene's arm.

'I think we should stop, for a minute or so.'

Eugene followed her gaze, frowned as he saw Ruarie hurrying towards them.

'Have we left something behind, d'ya think?'

Kit dismissed his concern with a wave of her hand.

'Perhaps, I'll go and see. I hurried you out of that bed of yours so quickly, I think you're still half asleep so just rest awhile.'

Half walking, half stumbling down the rugged hill, Kit moved steadily closer to Ruarie, her eyes never leaving his.

'Go home, Ruarie. For all of our sakes, please go home.'

Ruarie's pale face and dark eyes betrayed his sleepless night but to Kit, it was still a beautiful sight. The memory of looking into those beautiful eyes had

haunted the darkest of nights; her heart told her she still loved him, but her head told her she had to let him go.

'I had to come, to try to explain again,' murmured Ruarie. 'After all we've been ... oh, it's a vicious blow life has dealt us! I can't-'

'Yes you can. Whatever you set your mind to do, Ruarie, you can do it. And you will - for Maeve, your child and for yourself. I have something for you – a token of our past, to take you into your new future.'

She reached both hands behind her head, undid the knot of a fine piece of pink silk ribbon that hung round her neck, tucked inside her dress. Holding it out to Ruarie, he saw the tarnished copper curtain hoop he had handed her at more or less this same spot, many years ago. Pressing it into his hand, she kissed his forehead gently. He was desolate, but he understood; her love, their futures, and life's fickle ways.

'Dia is Muire duit.' She said quietly.

Rhythmically, Maeve rocked back and forth as the sun rose in its heaven. The small wooden chair on rockers was Maeve's one indulgence, purchased for tuppence from the curate of their neighbouring parish, with a small, blue cushion embroidered by herself tucked behind her head. The chair looked remarkably like the one her own mother loved to sit in before Ireland - and her family - was torn apart.

During the night, she had sensed Ruarie's troubled mood as he lay awake beside her; she had not been surprised when she felt him leave their bed before the dawn light crept through the skies. This was not the first time in her life that she had waited silently in her bed, watching the door open then close as a lover slipped out into the pre-dawn light for a secret assignation. This morning it was Ruarie, the last time it had been Kit.

Was it only yesterday that Kit had come back into their lives? Only one day since everything Maeve had struggled to achieve had been turned upside down? She had given up everything to keep Ruarie; her wealth, position, and the security they would bring. She had bought the land that she knew he loved, and the land her family had lived on; enough to make a sparse living, and ensure male prides remained intact. And after all, Eugene would be seeking a wife before long, and she needed to ensure he had a future to offer when the time was right.

Her hands slipped down to her thickening waistline and the child that grew within her. She knew that this, above all else, was the best chance that Ruarie would stay by her side. Their lives would at last be played out how she'd always dreamed, but just in case things didn't always go to plan, she had a small secret. She walked to the rickety old oak desk that now served as her dresser, with pots arranged on the two long shelves affixed to the wall above it. From her pocket, she took out the small silver key and unlocked the top drawer. Inside, was Lady Sophie's filigree jewel box, and as she lifted the ornate lid, the darkness inside the drawer could not obscure the brilliance of the stones. She touched the sapphire ring, then the emerald and diamond necklace with its elegant and hugely valuable matching earrings. Along with rows of pearls and clusters of precious stones, these jewels would ensure that whatever life threw at her, she would never again be at the mercy of Irish fortune. Or men.

Maeve took one last look at them before locking the drawer again, whispering the same prayer to herself that she offered up every morning and every night:

'Mary, mother of Jesus, please keep those that I love in your heart, and in my arms.'

The horse picked its way through the potholes and the gullies in the muddy streets of the port with expertise. Sonny sat beside Kit, his cane at the ready for his return to the ground. They had made it back to the port in time for the return trip to Boston, and to ensure Mr. McInerney's cart was at the ready for Mass the following morning.

As Kit drew the horse to a halt at the quayside, Sonny had already spotted an incensed McInerney staring at Kit in the driver's position. As she handed Sonny a few more coins, he quickly began to clamber down to pay and pacify the man.

'I'll just be putting my bag on to the ship, and I'll be back, Sonny. Wait for me here a while.'

Sonny nodded and watched as with bold strides, Kit paced quickly across the gangplank and headed straight for an officer on the deck. Seconds later they had both disappeared from view, probably stowing her baggage, thought Sonny. His journey with Kit might be over, but hers was just beginning, he considered. But at least he had made himself a small sum, enough to keep him fed and watered and a roof over his head for a week or two. These days, it was a lucky man who could see any further ahead than that, let alone a cripple with no prospects. Not halfway through his teens yet and already drifting down life's sewer, he considered. Then a loud whistle shook him from his melancholia. He looked up to see Kit beckoning him from the ship.

'Come on board – there's something I want to show you.'

Sonny looked up the steep gangplank as he slowly hobbled closer. This would be the first time he'd boarded a ship in many years - something he had thought would never come his way again. Tormenting it would be, yes, but with Kit waiting on deck for him, he could not resist the opportunity.

'She's a fine ship,' said Kit as Sonny's shining eyes took in the newly swabbed decks and the immaculate rigging.

'That she is,' nodded Sonny in agreement. 'The finest.'

'Even the steerage quarters arrangements for the voyage are well arranged, with space for just twenty people, each of them with a designated area for sleeping, with proper bedding and adequate food and water guaranteed.'

Sonny simply nodded once more, it mattered little to him the conditions of the passengers in steerage. And then Kit held out a ticket.

'I want you to come with me, Sonny. Back to America.'

Shocked, Sonny pushed Kit's hand away proudly.

'I've told you before, I'll not take charity, and if it's all the same to you I'll take my chances with life here in Ireland.'

'It's not charity! You'll be working all hours, helping to get the Club back on its feet. It's hard work, for little pay, but you'll have a future.' Kit gripped his arm reassuringly and looked down at his twisted limbs. 'And there's a doctor friend of mine who might be able to help you.'

Sonny looked at Kit, then back to the squalor of the docks, helpless people scratching about to find enough just to keep body and soul together.

'As long as the landing arrangements are better than yours, Kit, then you have a deal.'

With the ropes cast off, the breeze began to tug them out towards the open seas. While Sonny looked up enviously at the sailors prowling about the rigging, Kit stared back at the hills that were steadily growing further out of reach.

'This doctor friend of yours, he's good at repairs, is he?' Asked Sonny, tapping his cane against first his right ankle, then the left.

She turned to look at Sonny, saw the look of trust and anticipation on his face.

'I hope so,' murmured Kit. 'Because there's a lot of fixing to be done.'

As a seagull tried to land on the rails of the ship, Kit watched Sonny tease it with his cane, first nudging it away, then allowing it to flutter back again close to landfall, only to be spooked once more. As he laughed, it reminded her of Eugene playing with Tori as a small boy.

'Have you no family left at all Sonny?'

'None.' He replied in a matter-of-fact way.

'No brothers - or sisters?'

Sonny shook his head but there was not a hint of self-pity about him. Much like Kit, life had been a series of challenges for him, challenges he'd survived through his own lust for life and the excitement of the next experience. She slipped her arm through his and squeezed it tight.

'Do you know, I have someone in America who I think is going to love meeting you. She's just dying for a big brother to look after her.'

The End.