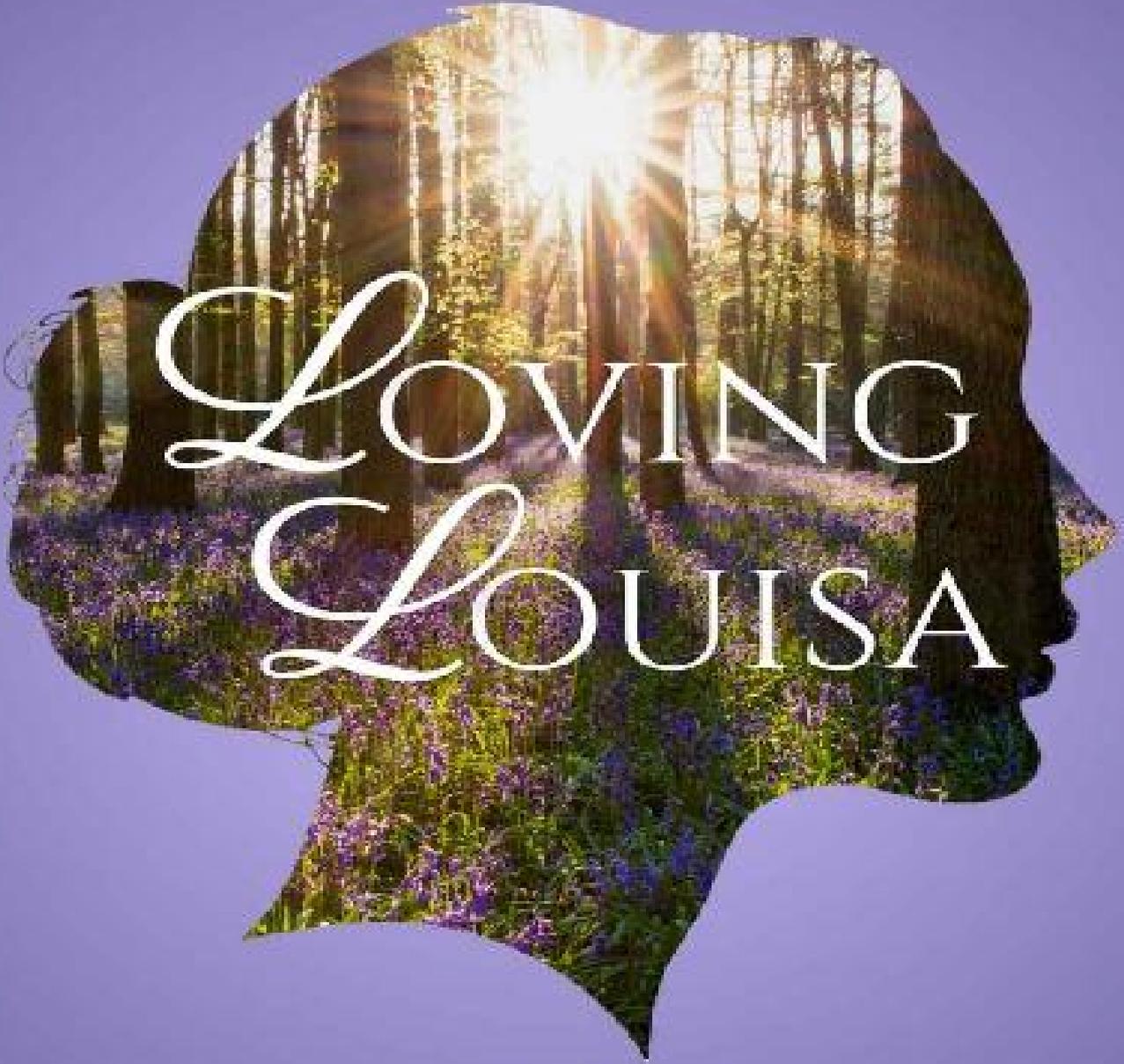


MEGAN ELDER EVANS



LOVING  
LOUISA

BOOK ONE

REBIRTHS AND REDEMPTIONS

# LOVING LOUISA



MEGAN ELDER EVANS

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, names, incidents, places, and dialogue are either products of the author's imagination, and are not to be construed as real, or are used fictitiously.

*For my dad, from whom I inherited my ability to spin a yarn.*

*Also, for my husband, on whom I based the character of Liam.*

# Pronunciation Guide, Translations, and Notes

## Pronunciations and Translations

Note: Pronunciations are in the Munster dialect

*Maidin mhaith* (ma-jin vah): Good morning

*Maidin Mhaith! Dia dhuit ar maidin* (jee-uh g[w]itch air ma-jin): Good morning (formal and more traditional greeting)

*Céili/ céilíthe* (kay-lee/ kay-lees): Singular and plural forms of an Irish social dance.

*a chara* (ah hara): friend

Liam (Lee-um)

Aisling (Ash-lin)

Rian (Ree-un)

Diarmuid (Dear-mud)

Aoife (Eef-uh)

Faolan (Fay-uh-lun)

**Liam's Churn Image:** If you find yourself wondering why I did not say Liam's invention looked like a bicycle without wheels, the bicycle as we know it was not invented until around 1867, though experts debate who was really the first to invent the bicycle. Art by Megan Elder Evans.

**“St. Brigid and the Christ Child”:** This story is my retelling of the legend of St. Brigid and the Christ Child. There are actually several versions of this legend in the Irish oral tradition. For further reading on this interesting folk tale, its origins, and its variations, I highly recommend the article entitled “The Legend of St. Bridget and the Christ Child” by Anita Booth, at [celticonationsmagazine.com](http://celticonationsmagazine.com).

# Chapter 1

December 22, 1806

Wexford, County Wexford, Ireland

“**B**loody pirates,” Louisa muttered as she snuck across the deck of the ship, ducking behind barrels and crates to avoid being spotted by her captors. Rope burns ringed her wrists, but she thanked the clumsy hands of the man who had bound her to a support column in the brig. If he had not tied such a flimsy knot, she would still be trapped in the hold. The day before, she had been knocked unconscious and hauled onto this filthy ship, then trapped below deck with a handkerchief of questionable cleanliness stuffed in her mouth.

She glanced up at the overcast night sky and prayed it would conceal her escape as she hurled herself barefoot down the gangplank, shoes clutched in her hand. She sighed as her stockinged feet touched the concrete wharf, but a weight settled in her chest where she should have felt relief. In the name of all that was holy, was she doomed to endure criminals for the rest of her days? She thought her life had been scrubbed clean when her grandfather, Lucius, had been killed while attempting to murder her friend Nora Gaultney. His crimes had led directly to her father’s execution and her brother’s conviction for the roles they played in Lucius’ decades-long illegal slave trade and revenge plot against the Gaultney family. Well, perhaps saying her life had been scrubbed clean was a bit liberal. At least her family’s criminality had ceased to infiltrate every aspect of her life.

She wished she had never overheard the Irishman Owen Cotter’s conversation with her father about his role in transporting slaves. What had she been thinking, coming forward to testify against the man? Her testimony had not only helped convict Owen Cotter, it had provided more evidence

against her father and brother. She fingered the locket hanging around her neck—the one her brother Patrick had given her for her birthday the year before. Her heart ached at the thought of him, miserable and alone in a prison cell for the next twenty years. Her father, Graham, had not been a kind man, and he had willingly chosen to join Louisa's grandfather in his nefarious trade. Patrick had been coerced, threatened with disinheritance and homelessness if he failed to comply. Yet, Louisa could not deny Patrick had still chosen, even if grudgingly, to be a pawn in Grandfather Lucius's schemes.

She had often wondered if, given the same choice, she would have chosen the less honorable option, yet deep down, she knew the answer. The moment she sat on the stand to testify against Owen Cotter—and, by extension, her father and brother—she knew she would have chosen to maintain her virtue. And look at where her honorable intentions had gotten her. Kidnapped by Owen Cotter's brother, Seamus.

There was no doubt in her mind Seamus was a dirty Irish pirate, like his brother, acting under the guise of an honorable merchant ship captain. She was thankful he and his crew had kept their filthy paws—and other appendages—to themselves, but the details of her abduction would make little difference to society. The name Easom was enough to make Louisa a spinster for life, destined to depend upon the charity of others. What man would ever want to marry the granddaughter of a man as vile and murderous as Lucius Bale Easom?

She threw a glance over her shoulder as she reached the end of the quay and wrapped her arms around her chest. She tucked her bare fingers in her armpits, the only part of her unaffected by the frigid air biting through her silk dress. The cloudy sky blocked the nearly full moon's rays, hiding her from the crew's view. With any luck, they would not know she had escaped the hold until she was long gone from this place. Wherever this place was. She stopped in the cobblestone street, her eyes darting in every direction. Hardly a soul was about, and nearly every window was dark.

What time was it? It had to be well past midnight—perhaps nearing dawn. Even the night revelers found in so many cities and towns were missing, and the only lighted windows belonged to the bakery and the public house at the inn.

Louisa's stomach grumbled. She had not eaten since breakfast the day before—before her testimony—and she had no money to buy food, let alone pay for a room at the inn. If only Nora were here. She would know what to do. Louisa chastised herself for the thought. Nora was not here, and Louisa could not depend on Nora's charity forever. Her regrettable family ties did not earn her that much kindness.

Louisa headed down the main street toward the inn, looking for any sign that might tell her where she was and trying to ignore her rumbling stomach. With any luck, the inn's owner would take pity on her and give her at least a cup of tea and a piece of bread. She stopped just beyond the squares of window light cast over the walk, debating how best to approach the proprietor. She had never begged for anything in her life. Not even a doll from her parents. Begging showed weakness, and the Easoms, her father had always said, did not come from weak stock. She gritted her teeth. A fat lot of good that lesson did her now. If she had ever been allowed to beg for anything, she might have learned how to do it properly. Yet here she stood, shivering on the stoop of the people who would either take pity on her or send her back out into the cold, hungry and—for the moment—homeless.

One deep breath in, she took a step forward, then stopped. A cart led by a single horse clattered along the street, its driver bundled up so that only his eyes were exposed to the night air.

He reined in the horse, bringing the carriage to a stop, and climbed down. Louisa stepped back further into the shadows, but her movement had caught his notice.

He removed his tweed cap and lowered his scarf, revealing the lower part of his face. Louisa's heart stumbled as the light of the street lantern illuminated the gold flecks in his green eyes. His dark hair swept over his brow, framing his

straight nose and almond-shaped eyes. Good heavens! She had never seen a more beautiful man in all her life.

“*Maidin mhaith.*” He held his cap in his hands and gave a quick bow, then opened the door to the pub and gestured for her to enter.

She took a step back and shook her head. “No. Thank you.” The thought of begging for food and a place to stay had already soured her stomach. She did not need an extra witness to her humiliation.

The man’s eyes hardened and roved over her. Louisa ran her fingers through her matted hair, knowing she must look as if she had spent all night on the floor—which she had. She glanced down at her skirt. Stains from rat droppings that had littered the brig dotted one side of her skirt.

“You’re English.”

Louisa’s gut lurched at the man’s accent. Ireland! She should have known Seamus Cotter would take her to this backwater of the British Isles. No one would ever think to look for her here. She took a steadying breath and straightened her shoulders, determined to make it clear she was not a weak little English girl, but a woman to be respected. “Yes, I am English,” she said, a touch of snark she had not intended in her tone.

The man bristled and stepped forward, letting the pub door swing closed. “Might I ask what a lass such as yourself is doing alone outside a pub this early in the morn’? And refusing to go in, at that?”

Louisa fought the urge to step back. The man towered over her, but more than his height, the fact he was Irish made her nerves quake. She had read from the papers in England what the working class of Ireland were capable of—their murders of the English gentry and other supporters of the crown.

Strength. She had to show strength. She squared her shoulders, refusing to be victimized by another Irishman.

“There is no point in entering a business until I have earned money.” At least he would not think to rob her, now.

His eyes narrowed, and she shrank under his glare. “Listen, lass. I don’t know why you came here, but people in this town don’t take kindly to women what sell themselves. This is a respectable town full of good Christians.”

Louisa’s jaw dropped. “I am not a prostitute! I am a lady. And based on what I have seen so far in my journey here, this town has its fair share of hell-bound men.”

Outrage lit in the man’s eyes. “What—” he began, but she cut him off, her courage surging. Half a second’s thought told her to close her mouth, but she had been thoroughly insulted, and she would not begin her regrettable stay in Ireland battling false assumptions about her virtue.

She planted her fists on her hips. “I will have you know, despite my disheveled appearance, I come from a highly respected family in England, and it is purely by misfortune that I am here. A situation I seek to rectify as soon as the sun rises.” She pointed back the way she had come for emphasis.

The malice in the man’s eyes disappeared, and he gave a small bow. “I apologize, miss. I did not mean to offend you. If you would allow me, I would gladly buy you breakfast.” He nodded toward the pub. “I’m here to make a delivery, anyway.”

Louisa blinked. Had he really offered to buy her food? After the way she had spoken to him? Perhaps not all Irishmen were like Seamus and his crew of foul-mouthed miscreants. “Thank you. I would—”

“Oy! *Maidin mhaith*, O’Shea!” a bristling voice cut through the chilly air.

Louisa trembled at Seamus’s voice. A stocky figure ambled toward them from the direction of the quay, a wobble in his gait, no doubt from drinking more of the whisky stashed in the ship’s hull.

“*Maidin Mhaith! Dia dhuit ar maidin*, Seamus,” the man, called back.

Sweat broke out over Louisa's neck and her stomach twisted. She understood not a word as the two men continued their cheerful exchange, but it was obvious this stranger and Seamus were on good terms. Any man who was friendly with Seamus Cotter could only be a danger to her. She scanned the street for a place to hide. A narrow alley ran between the inn and bakery. She took a small step back, then another, holding her breath and praying neither man noticed her departure. When she had passed far enough from the street lantern's glow, she dodged down the alley, hiding just beyond the wall of the pub to keep an eye on Seamus. Had he seen her? Where would she run if he headed to her hiding spot?

Her heart pounded as Seamus waved a farewell to the man and continued down the street toward her. Louisa ducked further down the alley and crouched against the damp wall behind a stack of crates.

*Please, don't see me.* She clenched her eyes shut and offered a silent prayer.

Footsteps echoed down the street, growing louder before fading. When she was confident Seamus was well out of sight, she crept to the edge of the alley.

"There you are."

Fear rippled through her.

The handsome man offered a warm smile. "I wondered where you'd snuck off to. Don't mind Seamus. He's a little rough around the edges, but harmless."

Harmless? Hardly. Seamus and his crew had kept their hands to themselves, but that did not make Seamus harmless. Louisa bit her tongue. She needed to be careful what she said and to whom if she had any hope of avoiding recapture.

"Come on, now. How about that breakfast?"

Her stomach growled in reply, but she could not afford the risk. What a shame, too. Part of her had already seen this man as a knight in shining armor, if only because of his roguish good looks and generosity.

She steeled her nerves, guilt from what she was about to say already building. “No, thank you. I only keep company with gentlemen, and I shall find such to help me.” She gave a curt nod and headed down the street, opposite the way Seamus had gone.

“Grand. Have it your way. Blasted pompous English,” the man grumbled.

She hung her head. He had only tried to show her kindness, and she had rejected and insulted him. Even if Seamus was his friend, this man did not deserve such treatment. But she had to protect herself, and if that meant dismissing anyone who was friendly with her enemy, then that was what she would do.

## Chapter 2

Liam O'Shea shook his head as he propped open the door to O'Brien's pub. The English lass's insult had chased away all concern for her well-being and curiosity regarding why she was alone on the streets of Wexford at so early an hour. He might not be a member of the gentry, but he was as much a gentleman as any of those puffed-up pigeons.

He grabbed a small palette piled with blocks of freshly churned butter and wheels of cheddar from the cart and carried it inside. His best friend, Devin O'Brien, stood at the end of the bar, loading the till with enough money to make change for the day's first customers. Back in the kitchen, Devin's father, James, slid loaves of soda bread into the oven and turned potatoes in a large skillet over the cast-iron stove.

Devin shut the till. "Good morning, Liam." He nodded toward the door. "Who was that pretty lass you were talking to?"

Liam set the palette on the bar counter. "Just some pompous Brit."

Pompous but striking. With her flaxen hair, hanging loose in waves around her shoulders, her fair face sprinkled with freckles, wide doe eyes like two silver shillings, full lips, and an emerald dress, she had looked like a fairy, the sort that might seduce him to follow her to Tír na nÓg.

"Bit odd, her being out alone this early. I wonder what she was doing?"

Liam shrugged. He tried pretending she was no concern of his, but he had heard her stomach grumble, and he knew she had arrived under questionable circumstances. He had been fooling himself to think he did not care. If he was being honest, he more than cared. He wanted to know her story, but there was no use when the woman wanted nothing to do with him, and he had too much responsibility to be chasing a lass who refused his help.

“What she’s doing is her own business,” Liam said. He headed back out to his cart, Devin following behind, and they grabbed the two large milk cans.

Liam cast a glance up the street as he headed back into the pub. High Street was shrouded in darkness except for the halos of light from the streetlamps, one of which illuminated his mother, who was delivering her mending to Old Mrs. Buckley.

“Hey, boyo. You’re not looking for her, are you?” Devin winked as he ambled back into the pub.

“Of course not, though ‘tis clear you were.” Liam carried his milk can toward the kitchen.

“Not a chance,” Devin said. “You know my heart belongs to your cousin, Maggie.”

“And her heart belongs to no one.” Maggie had always been a wanderer at heart, dreaming of a life traveling from sea to sea, like the legendary pirate queen, Grace O’Malley.

“I’ll wear her down. One of these days, she’ll realize all she needs is right here.” Devin patted his chest. “And if to see the world is really what she wants, I’ll do all I can to make that happen.”

“You really are in love with her. Well, may the fates and luck be with you.”

“Luck is all well, but you could put in a good word for me.” Devin flipped over the chairs he had left hanging upside down on the table edges the night before.

“I’ll see what I can do.” Liam set the milk can on the floor in the corner furthest from the oven and tipped his hat to Devin’s father. “Good morning, Mr. O’Brien. How’s business?”

Mr. O’Brien heaved a sigh as he flipped the potatoes. “Fair enough, which I can say is better than most.”

Liam nodded his understanding. Owning a successful business was no small feat for an Irish Catholic with so many of Cromwell’s anti-Catholic laws still in effect. It was a

wonder Liam's family made a profit from their dairy farm, considering the rent of their land and to whom they were allowed to sell their products.

"Today will be a struggle, though," Mr. O'Brien continued. "Mary and Emma are sick with flu, and Grace is caring for them. So, 'tis only me and Devin to cook and serve the food, and to clean the inn and stable."

Liam hung his cap on a hook on the wall and shrugged off his coat. "Well, you were my last delivery. I can give you a hand."

James patted Liam on the arm. "Thank you, boyo, but your da will be needing you at the farm."

'Twas true, every hand helped, but none of his family were ill, and a third of the day's chores had already been done. "He can spare me. He has my brothers and Aisling."

James nodded. "I'd be grateful, but check with your ma."

"Check with me for what?" Fiona O'Shea sauntered into the pub's kitchen, a basket of mending in her arms, and she paused over the stove to warm her half-gloved fingers. A tall, plump woman only a few inches shorter than her son with flaming hair and emerald eyes, Liam's mother commanded the attention in every room she entered.

"Mr. O'Brien could use an extra pair of hands today. She and the girls are ill," Liam said.

Fiona's eyebrows drew downward, and her gaze travelled to Mr. O'Brien. "I hope it's nothing serious."

"Just a mild flu," James said, "but I wouldn't say no to the extra help if you and Diarmuid can spare Liam for the day."

"Of course, James. And anything else you need, you let me know." She pulled a pair of trousers out of her basket and handed them to Devin. "These are for Mr. Tiernan. He's still staying here, isn't he?"

“He is.” Devin took the trousers and headed out of the kitchen to deliver them to the old man’s room.

“You’re an angel, Fiona.” James opened a box on a nearby shelf and took out some coins. He handed them to Fiona. “For the delivery. And as thanks for letting us borrow Liam, take some soda bread and sausages.”

He took a large tea towel and tied up a loaf of bread and string of sausages. “Say hello to Diarmuid for me.”

“I will.” Fiona took the makeshift knapsack and laid it on top of her basket of mending. “Be sure to let me know if Mary and the girls need anything.”

With a wave, she was out the door. Liam rolled his sleeves up and surveyed the kitchen. He had never washed laundry before, so he would leave that to Devin and James, but he could cook. His mother had made sure each of her children possessed at least the most basic culinary education.

He grabbed a spatula and tossed a handful of sausages in the large cast iron pan. “Let me handle the breakfast, Mr. O’Brien. I’ll see your guests are fed right.”

The pork sausages sizzled, releasing their aroma of allspice and sage, and Liam breathed in the scent. There was nothing better on a cold December morning than the smell of frying sausages.

## Chapter 3

Shades of gold and pink stained the sky as the sun peeked over the horizon. The scent of frying sausages floated on the icy breeze, and Louisa's stomach grumbled. She cast a glance back at the pub. The handsome stranger's horse and cart were being led around the corner of the building to the stables by a stable hand. Clearly, the man she had undoubtedly offended was staying for a while, and Louisa regretted even more her caustic insults. There was no way she could walk into the pub and beg for even a scrap of bread now.

Why had she made an enemy out of the first friendly stranger she met? She would not have needed to tell him her name or anything else in order to accept his charity. Still, there was the danger that he would tell Seamus of his encounter with the bedraggled English girl. Then Seamus would surely track her down more easily.

She shook her shoulders and walked on, one foot in front of the other, her arms wrapped tight around her middle. There was no sense in dwelling on it. She would find someone trustworthy—perhaps a fellow Englishman, or an English sympathizer—to help her.

Ahead, a steeple rose over the town's damp roofs. Winter here was so much like her hometown, Abergreen. Former hometown, now. Louisa was thankful Nora Gaultney had taken her in after her mother had thrown her out with only the clothes on her back. She had known her mother, Marcia, would be angry at her decision to testify for the prosecution at her father's and brother's trials, but she had never anticipated the violence that would accompany her mother's anger. She could still feel the ghost of Marcia's rapid slaps across her cheek when she thought about that day. At least she had had a warm house and even warmer friends to give her shelter, unlike now.

Louisa shivered and reassured herself that soon she would find shelter from the cold as she headed toward the church at the end of the street. If she was truly fortunate, the

building would belong to the Church of Ireland. She knew the Irish-Catholics' feelings about the English, and they were hardly benevolent.

“*Maidin mhaith, Fiona,*” a woman standing in the bakery's doorway called.

Louisa turned her head and spied a tall red-haired woman exiting the pub, a large basket in her arms. She returned the greeting to the woman at the bakery and headed in Louisa's direction.

Panic rose in her chest. The townspeople were waking and going about their day, and the sky was lightening by the second. The sooner she got to the church, the sooner she could hide her disheveled appearance before the streets became crowded. She dreaded the thought of anyone else seeing her and thinking her a woman of ill-repute.

She sped her pace and cringed at the clatter her boots made on the cobblestones, but she could not help the noise if she wanted a quick escape.

Just as she passed the haberdasher's shop, the toe of her boot caught on the uneven edge of a stone. She threw her hands out to the side to regain her balance, but too late. Pain ricocheted through her palms and elbows as she collided with the street.

“Oh, *musha, musha!*” A voice called. Footsteps hurried toward her, and the next moment, the woman from the pub had set her basket down beside Louisa.

“*An bhfuil tú ceart go leor?*”

Before Louisa could utter a syllable, the woman had gripped Louisa's arm and pulled her to her feet.

“I'm sorry, I don't speak Irish,” Louisa muttered.

“Oh, you're English.” The woman's eyebrows rose in mild surprise. “My goodness, you are a little waif of a thing, and in such a fine dress, too. But you look like you've been through quite an ordeal. What are you doing out here all alone?”

Louisa brushed her hands over her skirt and offered a weak smile. She had a feeling that question would plague her until she managed to get home, and she knew she would have to answer it. Only how much of her story was safe to tell? There was no way of knowing how many people were on friendly terms with Seamus Cotter. Still, this woman seemed kind, and she showed enough concern that Louisa might be able to trust her with at least part of the truth.

“Thank you for helping me up,” Louisa said as she brushed at her skirt. “I arrived here by mistake earlier this morning. I was hoping someone at the church might help me.” She nodded her head toward the steeple at the end of the street.

“You arrived here by mistake? How does that happen?” The woman’s eyebrows knit in curiosity.

“Umm.” Louisa fidgeted her fingers. From a nearby building, Seamus Cotter emerged and began heading back up the street in her direction. His eyes met hers, and his mouth set in a hard line. He would not come after her with witnesses around, would he? “Umm.” Her limbs trembled and a shiver that had nothing to do with the frigid air traveled down her spine.

The woman’s lips arched into a frown. “Dear, are you all right?”

Louisa took a breath and broke her gaze with Seamus, turning it instead to this woman whose face was all concern now. Louisa had no choice. She had to trust this woman if she ever hoped to make it home alive.

“No, ma’am. I’m not fine. I was kidnapped in London and brought here against my will. I only just escaped my abductor.”

“Lord, preserve us!” The woman held a hand to her chest. “We must tell our magistrate. Who is the man? Did he hurt you?”

Louisa shook her head. “I am afraid to say his name. I know not who his friends are, nor who I can trust. My only desire is to get home.”

The woman nodded. “I understand, dear, but you can trust me. I assure you, my family and I do not befriend men who would treat a lady so. You will come home with me, and we will sort out how to get you back to England.” She bent over her basket, dug out a man’s coat, and slung it around Louisa’s shoulders. “Here, you can wear this. It belongs to Mr. Cobb, but he has given it to me for mending. I’m Fiona O’Shea, by the way.”

Louisa tucked her arms into the sleeves and fastened the brass buttons. “I am Louisa Ea—Gaultney.” She prayed Fiona did not catch the lie. She was not sure how far news of her family’s scandal had spread, but she would not risk this kind woman turning her out because she was related to murderers and traffickers. “What town is this, by the way?”

“Wexford, in County Wexford. I’m sure you already pieced together you’re in Ireland. And I’m happy to make your acquaintance, Louisa. If you don’t mind, I have a few more deliveries to make,” Fiona nodded to her basket, “and then we can be on our way home. Oh, here.” Fiona unfolded the makeshift knapsack lying on the top of the basket. A loaf of bread sat nestled inside. Fiona tore off a chunk and handed it to Louisa. “You must be starving after your ordeal.”

Louisa nodded and closed her fingers around the soft, dense bread that still radiated heat, her thanks strangled by the lump that had formed in her throat. Never had a stranger shown her such kindness. Her stomach twisted with guilt for thinking so negatively of the Irish. Seamus and his crew aside, of the two Irish folk she had encountered so far, both had offered her charity. If only she could apologize to the man for her unkindness. She would obviously be in Wexford for the foreseeable future. Perhaps she would get the chance.

She tore off a bite of bread and followed Fiona through the streets, renewed energy in her step and warmth spreading through her.

## Chapter 4

Louisa cringed with each step she took. Her feet throbbed in her boots, and blisters had formed on the backs of her ankles despite her sturdy stockings. It was well past midmorning by the time Fiona had delivered the clothes she had mended and picked up the wash she did for one of the local gentry.

Fiona set her basket down and massaged her lower back. “Oh, this thing gets heavier every week. That, or I’m getting weaker,” she said.

“I can carry it for a while,” Louisa offered, though she doubted she really could carry the load very far. So did Fiona, apparently.

The woman gave her a patronizing yet not unkind smile. “That’s all right, dear. My neighbor, Mr. O’Donnell, is just ahead. We can ask him for a ride. He looks nearly done with his business.” She nodded toward a stocky man near Fiona’s age, who stood beside an empty horse-drawn cart.

Fiona again took up her basket and headed toward the man. “Good morning, Noah. I trust you had a successful morning,” she called loud enough for the entire street to hear.

The middle-aged man turned and smiled, taking in Louisa. “Aye, I sold the whole lot of wool I had left from the spring’s sheering.”

Fiona nudged Louisa with her elbow. “Noah O’Donnell raises sheep for their wool, and some for their meat. Noah, this is Miss Louisa Gaultney, newly arrived from England. She’s going to be staying with my family for a time.”

O’Donnell gave Louisa a vigorous handshake. “A pleasure to meet you, Miss Gaultney. You won’t meet a more charitable family in all of Ireland than the O’Sheas. Give you the shirts off their backs, they will.”

Louisa smiled. “That is certainly proving itself true. I am fortunate to have met Mrs. O’Shea when I did.”

“Do not discount your own charity, Noah. You and Aoífe have always been quick to lend a helping hand,” Fiona said. “In fact, I would ask a favor of you now. Liam is staying in town today to help James and Devin—Mary and the girls are ill—so that puts me without our cart, seeing as Liam needs it to get home.”

O’Donnell held up a hand. “Say no more. I’d be happy to give you and Miss Gaultney a lift.” He pulled a wooden crate from the cart to use as a step, then helped Fiona and Louisa into the cart.

When they had settled themselves on the rough worn planks, Fiona’s basket nestled between them, O’Donnell whipped the reins, and they rolled through Wexford. So much of the town was like Abergreen. The architecture and layout were nearly indistinguishable, but once they passed beyond the close-knit buildings, the landscape transformed into another world.

A sea of vibrant green hills stretched in every direction as they drove further from the coastal cliffs and rocky shore on which Wexford had been built. It was no wonder Ireland was called the Emerald Isle. Even in December, the grass retained its color.

“Is it always so green?” Louisa asked.

Fiona laughed. “Heavens, yes, always. Even when we get snow, which is rare. In fact, the freezing rain we get more often only seems to intensify the color. If you despise green, then you are in the wrong country.”

“In the wrong country I might be, but green is my favorite color.”

“You should see our blessed land in spring, then.”

Louisa gave a noncommittal smile. Part of her wondered what breathtaking beauty awakened at winter’s end, yet she said a silent prayer she would be back in England soon. The longer she was here, the greater the chance she would never get home, and the greater the danger Seamus posed.



Nearly half an hour later, O'Donnell pulled the cart to a stop at a wooden gate set in a low stone wall. Beyond the wall sat a two-story stone cottage with a thatched roof. Ivy bursting with pale yellow flowers surrounded the door and lower windows, covering much of the whitewashed stone exterior. A dirt path wound from the gate to the door, ending in a large stone slab at the threshold. Bare shrubs dotted the yard, and nearer the cottage stood two crabapple trees, some of their lush red fruit still clinging to the otherwise bare branches. Several more bare trees dotted the fields beyond.

Smoke snaked out of the cottage's chimney, carrying with it the scent of an ancient and decayed forest. The smell was strange, but not altogether unpleasant.

"Welcome home," Fiona said. "It's not like the fine houses you are used to, I'm sure, but you will find it's clean and cozy."

Louisa warmed at the word home, despite the icy wind biting through her clothes. Her parents had looked down on those who lived in more modest dwellings, but she had always harbored a secret desire to live in a cottage like this one. There was something safe and inviting about the simplicity of the

construction, and the overgrown ivy clinging to the old stones gave off a majestic air, much like the cottages of so many fairy tales.

“I think it’s perfect,” Louisa said as O’Donnell helped her and Fiona out of the cart.

Fiona’s cheeks flushed and she smiled.

As they neared the cottage, Louisa eyed the crabapples, her mouth salivating.

“Do your apples always remain on the tree this late in the season?” Her home in Abergreen had had a crabapple tree, but its fruit had always fallen by mid-autumn.

“We had a warmer than usual autumn this year, though I expect those to fall off their branches any day. I’ve made a lovely batch of jam from this year’s harvest, if you’d care for some.”

Louisa nodded. “That would be lovely.”

Fiona opened the door, and Louisa stopped several steps away. Male voices laughing and talking in their Irish brogue rolled out, and the panic Louisa had felt earlier that morning returned.

Fiona beckoned her forward. “Come, dear. Don’t you worry. Not a soul will mistreat you here.”

Louisa took a steadying breath. Of course they wouldn’t. If the rest of the family were anything like Fiona, they would welcome her as readily as Fiona had.

She stepped over the threshold, and the voices fell silent. A girl about Louisa’s age but at least a full head taller, with flame red hair like Fiona’s and a curvy figure, sat beside the hearth, mending a pair of trousers. Two identical boys with dark hair sat at the wooden table near the hearth, a backgammon board between them. Louisa guessed they were a few years younger than their sister. A dark-haired man with a short beard and a receding hairline—Fiona’s husband—stood up from the table. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and his eyes darted from Louisa to his wife as if unsure what to do. The man clearly was not used to strangers in his home.

Louisa swallowed against the air that had become solid in her throat, and forced what she hoped was a genial smile.

“Diarmuid,” Fiona addressed her husband in English, “this is Miss Louisa Gaultney, and she will be staying with us for a time. Louisa, this is my husband, Diarmuid O’Shea, our sons, Rory and Rian, and our daughter, Aisling. We have one other son, our eldest, Liam, but he is helping our friends the O’Brien’s.” She set her loaded basket on the table. “I hope you can do without him today,” she said to Diarmuid. “Mary and Emma are ill, and Grace is caring for them.”

“Aye, the boys and I can manage his chores.” Diarmuid stroked his beard, and his eyes flicked to Louisa for a second. “Can I have a word, dear?” he said to his wife, and he and Fiona bustled into an adjoining room. Their voices lowered to barely audible whispers.

Louisa folded her arms across her middle and shifted from one foot to the other, unsure what to do. There was no doubt Fiona and Diarmuid were talking about her, but would Diarmuid object to her staying with them? The cottage was probably just large enough for their needs, if that. What if her staying here was a burden they could not afford? She did not intend to stay here without contributing to the household, but what if they did not give her the chance? A cold chill ran down her spine at the thought of being on the street again, within Seamus Cotter’s reach.

“So, what is your story?” one of the twins asked.

“Don’t be rude, Rory,” Aisling said.

“I’m not being rude. I’m curious. Surely there is no harm in that. Do you agree, Miss Gaultney?” Rory pinned her with a prying stare.

Louisa opened her mouth, trying to formulate an answer, but only a feeble “umm” came out. How would she even begin to answer Rory’s question? And should she? She knew the answer immediately. No.

“Well, it is quite clear you’re English,” the other twin, Rian, said, “otherwise Ma wouldn’t have spoken English to us

in front of you. And from your dress, you are from the upper class—the gentry, even.”

Rian was partially right. While her father had made a fortune in his illicit dealings with Grandfather, her family had lived firmly within a solicitor’s income to avoid unwanted attention.

“Have you ever been to Ireland before?” Rory asked.

“No,” Louisa managed. Her eyes darted to the room Fiona and Diarmuid had entered. If only Fiona would come back and save her from this inquisition.

She met Aisling’s gaze. The girl had told Rory not to be rude. Perhaps she would call off her brothers, but Aisling’s gaze had only filled with curiosity.

“What made you come to Wexford, of all places? Why not Dublin or Galway or Cork? That’s where most of the English are,” Rory said.

“No more questions. Let the poor lass be.” Fiona bustled back into the room, Diarmuid on her heels, the concern and curiosity of before now replaced with pity.

Louisa’s gut twisted with shame. Fiona had pitied her, but hers had been akin to the pity one feels for a lost, defenseless lamb. Diarmuid’s was of a wholly different nature. Though neither Seamus nor any of his crew had touched her, Louisa was ruined, and Diarmuid knew it. At least Fiona had spared her having to repeat her story in front of the family. There was only so much humiliation and shame a woman could endure in a single day.

Fiona pulled the tea towel holding the bread and sausages from her mending basket. “Now, ‘tis nigh on lunch time, and James gave us some of this lovely soda bread and sausages.”

While she set to frying up potatoes with the sausages, she ordered the twins to set the table. Louisa was thankful for that. It gave them something to do other than ogle her. Aisling, though, continued to study her, the trousers she had been darning forgotten.

Fiona tapped her daughter on the shoulder. “Aisling, why don’t you take Louisa upstairs and show her around?” She turned to Louisa. “You can share Aisling’s bed. ‘Tis big enough for two. You should be comfortable enough, though our beds are likely not nearly as soft as what you have back home.”

Louisa gave her thanks, assuring Fiona the bed would be just fine, and followed Aisling up a narrow set of stairs. The second floor consisted of four small rooms, divided by a narrow landing.

Aisling pointed to their left. “That’s Ma and Da’s room, and Liam’s, and over here,” she walked toward two doors on the right, “is Rory and Rian’s, and this is mine. I suppose ‘tis our room now.”

Louisa followed her into the room. It was small but clean and tidy. A bed just big enough for two sat in the middle, a patchwork quilt spread across it. A small table with a single drawer sat to one side. On the opposite wall stood a wardrobe that had seen better days. A few framed needlework flowers graced the plastered walls on either side of a small window that overlooked the back garden and pasture.

“This is quite cozy.” Louisa smiled at Aisling. “Thank you for sharing it with me. I hope I won’t be too much of an inconvenience.” Louisa had always had a room to herself, even when she had lived with Nora. She could only imagine how she might feel if she had to share a bed with a stranger suddenly thrust upon her.

Aisling returned the smile, clearly pleased with Louisa’s assessment. “‘Tis no inconvenience at all. ‘Twill be like having a sister.” Her eyes traveled up and down Louisa. “Your dress is lovely. I wish I had one as fine. Is it silk?”

Louisa nodded, and her cheeks warmed. She had given little thought to the fineness of her clothes, but now, as Aisling stood before her in a simple wool dress and apron, it occurred to Louisa that Aisling might only ever dream of owning something so fine.

“Do you care very much for fashion?” Louisa asked.

Color rose in the girl's cheeks. "I adore it. I can draw my own patterns, not just simple work clothes, but the type you wear to céilíthe, too. Would you like to see some I've made?"

"I would love to." Louisa did not know what céilíthe were, and she did not want to show her ignorance by asking.

Aisling practically bounced to the wardrobe and pulled out a simple empire waist dress of blush pink muslin edged with white lace.

"I wear this one to mass."

Louisa fingered the soft muslin. The stitches were nearly perfect, and the cut of the dress the type that was flattering on any shape. Aisling certainly had a fine eye for fashion and the talent to see her visions made real. "It is lovely, like something one might purchase in London."

Aisling's blush deepened. "Really?"

"Most certainly."

"I wish I could make more like this, or even dresses for céilíthe, but material is expensive, and Ma says we cannot spend money frivolously."

"Well, you certainly have a talent for designing women's clothing. You might have a future in it if the right opportunities present themselves."

"I've not given any real thought to making a living as a seamstress," Aisling said as she slipped the dress back into the wardrobe. "I mean, I have wished to have me own shop like me Aunt Cara, but I never dared to think it possible."

Louisa gave a consoling smile. She knew what it was to dream with no hope of it becoming reality. In the fallout of her father's and brother's arrests, she had dreamed of still making her debut in society. But what decent man would ever consider marrying a young woman from such a horrible family? She was completely ruined and destined to spend her life as a spinster.

Aisling shoved the few dresses in the wardrobe to one side. “You can put your clothes here.”

Louisa’s face flushed. “I do not have any other clothes. Not here with me, I mean.”

“Oh, well, when they arrive, this is where you can put them.”

Louisa nodded. There was no point mentioning that no clothes would be arriving. Aisling would learn soon enough.

The scent of sausages wafted up from the kitchen below. “It smells like lunch is nearly ready. Perhaps we should go down,” Louisa said, desperate to escape the conversation that was serving only to remind her she was at the mercy of strangers.



Lunch was a quiet affair, with everyone too hungry to say much. Louisa also suspected Fiona had forbidden anyone from questioning their guest during the meal. Still, the rest of the O’Sheas were sure to know her story before the day was out. When lunch was finished, the men pushed away from the table and pulled on their caps.

At the door leading out toward the pastures, Rory and Rian turned to face Louisa. “We’re terribly sorry for prying into your business, Miss,” Rory said.

“Ma told us about your circumstances,” Rian said. “We meant no disrespect, and we certainly didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable. We hope you can forgive us.”

Louisa offered a reassuring smile despite the twisting in her stomach that was growing all too familiar. “Of course. I took no offense. If our roles had been reversed, I would have been just as curious.” Though she would have had the grace not to voice her questions.

The boys returned her smile then followed their father out the back door toward the barn, chatting in Gaelic as they went. Fiona and Aisling gathered the dishes from the table.

“Is there anything I can help with?” Louisa stacked her tin plate on top of the others at the end of the table.

“Not a thing. Just you rest, dear. We have everything in hand,” Fiona said.

Part of Louisa wanted nothing more than to rest. She had spent the whole night awake, waiting for Seamus or his crew to assault her, and the morning on her feet, save for the wagon ride. Now that she had the chance to relax, her body and mind refused to let her. She was not a guest in her friend’s house where servants were paid to see to her every need. The O’Sheas had no servants, and Louisa could not bring herself to let them wait on her.

She stood from her chair. “Please, I would like very much to help. It is the least I can do. Besides, I am still too on edge after my ordeal to rest now, anyway.”

Fiona set a metal basin on the table beside the dishes and gave her a pitying smile. “I suppose I know how you feel. When my mind is worried, I have to work or else go mad.” She loaded the dishes into the basin. “We need some water for the washtub. Do you think you could fetch some from the well out back?”

Louisa had never fetched water before—her mother had never allowed her near a well for fear she would fall in—but she was not about to admit her lack of experience. She took the water pail Fiona handed her, exited the house and crossed the garden to the well, noting how similar it was to her family's. A crank and pulley system for raising and lowering the bucket sat above the low stone wall that belied the depth it contained.

She set the bucket down beside the well and peered in as she lifted one side of the hinged lid. It was deeper than she thought it would be. Were it not for the ripples reflecting the muted light of the overcast sky, she would have thought the well a bottomless pit.

She latched the bucket onto the hook at the end of the rope and lowered it into the well with the crank. When she heard the tiny splash, she peered in, making sure the bucket was on its side and filling with water. She gave a satisfied smile at the ease with which she had completed her first chore. Well, almost completed. There was still the matter of getting the water back to the cottage.

She grabbed the crank and pushed, but the handle stood fast, giving no sign of budging. She tried both hands next and gritted her teeth as she shoved all her weight against the crank. Every muscle in her arms and back strained against the weight of the bucket. Her uncalloused hands slipped on the smooth metal handle, and she cursed her pampered upbringing. Not one part of her life had given her the calluses she was fast realizing she needed. She tightened her grip and cranked slowly, muttering unladylike curses as her upper arms and shoulders burned with the effort. Never had she imagined how useless her education in embroidery, playing the pianoforte, and reading and writing would be.

She paused and leaned over to check her progress. The bucket still dangled far below. She rolled her eyes, huffed a breath, and gritted her teeth as she renewed her efforts. Finally, at the moment her muscles threatened to give out, the bucket rose above the lip of the well.

“Finally!”

Louisa took a deep breath and allowed her muscles a partial reprieve as she held the crank handle still to prevent the bucket from careening back into the well's depths. Now she only needed to grab the bucket and carry it back to the house. It had seemed a simple enough task at the outset, but now she eyed the full bucket warily.

How would she grab hold of the water while still holding the crank in place? She could certainly stretch far enough, but it had taken both her arms to get the water up. Surely it would take both to retrieve it. Still, she had to try. She tightened her grip on the crank, and with one hand she reached and took hold of the bucket's handle.

So far, so good. She let go of the crank and reached out her other hand, but too late. The weight of the water was too much for her, and she lurched forward against the side of the well as the bucket threatened to topple her over the low stone wall. She let go, and the crank whirred as the bucket careened back to the bottom.

Louisa shouted a curse as she slammed her fists against the stone. "Ow!" She stumbled back, clutching her now throbbing hands against her chest. It had taken her what felt like an hour to get the water. There was no way she had the strength left to try again. She sat down, her back against the well and knees drawn to her chest, and hung her head. She would try again. She refused to fail at what should be a simple task. Her muscles only needed time to recover.

Leaves rustled, and she willed her body to relax as she raised her head. Aisling crossed the garden. "Ma sent me to see if you need help."

Louisa nodded. Shame at her failure writhed in her stomach, but she was not about to pretend she could manage the task on her own. She was already useless. She did not need to be prideful, too.

As if the full bucket weighed no more than a feather, Aisling cranked the water back up. "I figured you had never lifted anything heavy before, you being a genteel lady and all. No offense, but your arms are a bit scrawny."

“No offense taken.” Louisa marveled at Aisling’s strength and the girl’s muscular build. Add her height to the mix, and it was no wonder she managed the chore with such deftness. “How old are you, if you do not mind me asking?”

“I just turned sixteen last month. How old are you?”

“Eighteen, and unlike you, completely useless, I am quickly discovering.” Louisa walked alongside Aisling as they made their way back through the garden. “Your family has been so generous to me, and it seems I cannot even earn my keep with such a simple task.”

Aisling scuffed her toes along the dirt path. “Yes, Ma told me of your circumstances, though you need not worry about earning your keep.”

“I can’t stay here without contributing somehow.” She did not know how long she would be welcome in the O’Sheas’ home, but she would not be a layabout, sponging off of their generosity.

Aisling’s gaze darted around the garden. “Well, if you insist, you could try your hand at turning the compost. That isn’t too difficult.”

“How do I do that?” Louisa would do anything to prove she could contribute to the household, even if it meant getting dirty.

Aisling pointed to a pile of dirt in the opposite rear corner of the garden. “That’s the compost. All you do is take the scraps from our meals and throw them on top. Then, take a shovel and turn the soil so the new waste gets mixed toward the bottom, and what’s on the bottom gets moved to the top. The worms do the rest.”

“Worms?” Louisa’s nose wrinkled. She had always hated the slimy little things, ever since Patrick had slipped one down the back of her dress when they were children. She shook off her disgust. Turning the compost could not be that bad, and she imagined the worms would be burrowed deep enough in the pile that she might not come close to a single one.

“I think I can handle that.” She followed Aisling back to the house for the shovel and tray of lunch scraps, not that there were many, and headed back to the compost. She tossed the scraps on top of the short but wide heap then scooped the shovel’s blade into the center.

One attempt to lift the shovel revealed the job was harder than it seemed, though not impossible. She pressed down on the handle to apply leverage, and the blade shot up like the cork out of a champagne bottle. Bits of compost exploded upward before raining down on her.

She shook her head and brushed her sleeves to dislodge the damp soil and sighed at the stains. Still, it was only dirt. Her dress would come clean.

She took up the shovel again, determined to finish the job, and aimed for the edge of the pile. Perhaps it would be better to work her way toward the center. Her theory proved true as she dug around the edge. Then, as she leaned further, a cold drop of rain hit her cheek.

A curtain of rain slid across the pasture, but still far enough away she could work a bit longer. She plunged the shovel into a spot closer to the center, only not as deep as her first attempt.

Lift. Turn. Lift. Turn. Raindrops hit her face and left their marks on the silk of her dress. Just one more turn to finish burying the scraps. The blade went in and the wall of rain came down, soaking Louisa through and creating a pool of mud.

A gust of wind blasted Louisa off-balance, and she threw the shovel down. Rain sprayed her like a thousand icy bullets, and she brought one arm up to shield her face as she lifted the hem of her skirt with the other. One hurried step later, her feet slid out from under her, and she fell backward into the compost.

Worms wiggled to the surface as she lay half-submerged in the soil, her dress coated in black mud.

“Ew! Ew, ew, ew, ew, ew!” She scrambled to her feet, trying to avoid touching the worms while not tumbling into their domain again. This was a nightmare! There was no possible way she was wearing a fine silk dress covered in mud amid a downpour. At any moment, she would wake up, cozy and warm, in her bed back in England.

The back door to the cottage burst open, and Fiona bustled out, holding a wool blanket over her head. She grabbed Louisa’s hands and pulled her up, then stretched the blanket over both their heads, not that it did Louisa much good. She was already soaked through to her petticoats.

“Oh, you poor thing.” Fiona shepherded Louisa into the warm, dry cottage and up the stairs into Fiona and Mr. O’Shea’s bedroom.

Fiona pulled a brown and beige plaid skirt and short gown from her wardrobe and laid them over the bed. “Let’s get you out of that dress before you freeze to death.” She made quick work of helping Louisa shimmy out of her mud-soaked dress.

Louisa turned away, unable to look at the only possession she had in this place, now thoroughly ruined.

“Don’t worry, dear,” Fiona said. “I am sure we can get your gown as good as new.” She held up the skirt of the ensemble she had laid out and helped Louisa into it.

Louisa shivered, and her teeth chattered, but at least she was out of her soiled clothes. She said as much as she pulled on the short gown that, like the skirt, was much too large for her petite frame.

“I know ‘tis not the most fashionable—we are just simple farmers—but we will get your dress cleaned and dried in no time.” Fiona stood back, the pity in her eyes mingling with a half-smirk on her lips. “My, I believe I’m a bit bigger than I thought. Mind you, I never thought I was thin. I haven’t been since before I had me Liam. If only Aisling had something to fit you, but the lass is taller than me. You’d be tripping all over the hem.” Fiona patted Louisa’s shoulder. “Still, ‘tis only us. You need not worry about society seeing

you this way. I'll give you a moment to adjust things to your liking, then you come down and sit by the fire to let your hair dry. Don't want you to catch your death from a wet head."

With that, Fiona gathered up Louisa's silk gown and left the room, leaving Louisa to stare at her reflection in the narrow mirror that stood in the corner.

Her blonde hair hung limp and wet around her shoulders. The brown plaid drained her complexion of its usual rosiness, and her usually silver eyes had dulled to a muted flint gray. Fiona had cinched the skirt as much as possible, but to ill effect. The skirt was a tent on her narrow hips, and the top billowed out below her bust, while the neckline sagged, revealing more of her humble chest than Louisa liked. Perhaps Fiona or Aisling had an extra scarf she could tuck around her shoulders.

Louisa sighed, holding back the tears she had not shed in months. Was everything she possessed to be taken from her?

Her family—as horrible as they had been, aside from her brother Patrick—had dissolved before her eyes, taking her future of an advantageous marriage and introduction into society along with it.

Now she was in Ireland, homeless, without her own clothes, with no way to return home, and her dignity stripped from her.

Stupid. Weak. Useless. That was what she was. How would she ever get home when she lacked the skills to earn money, and how would she ever earn her keep with the O'Sheas if she could not even fetch water or turn soil?

She shivered as a damp strand of hair fell over her décolletage, and Fiona's words came back to her. Louisa needed to come down and dry her hair to avoid "catching her death." She shook her head. Perhaps death would be better. The afterlife could not possibly treat her any worse than life had so far. Her mind had barely begun to wander down that dark road when Aisling stepped into the room.

“Are you coming down, Louisa?” Aisling asked.

Louisa forced the morbid thoughts from her head, frightened that she would even consider something so drastic, and met Aisling’s gaze. She could not do that. Not to herself, not to these kind people, not to the few friends she had back home.

She forced a smile and stepped into the hall. “Of course.”

## Chapter 5

The storm had cleared, and the sun was long set by the time Liam headed to the stables behind the public house. He had finally left James and Devin O'Brien to serve the stew and bread during the dinner rush after they insisted they could manage the rest of the evening. Overhead, the milky way stretched across the sky like a streak of glittering snow, giving light, along with the nearly full moon, to his drive home.

Mollie, his family's cob horse, tossed her mane and stamped her feet. Liam rubbed the bridge of her nose. "I know, girl. 'Tis been a long day. Let's go home."

Liam stretched his lower back and wiggled his toes. He could hardly wait until he could kick off his shoes and give his feet a good massage. What a day it had been. He had always thought running a dairy farm was hard work, but it had never taken a toll on his body the way cooking and waiting tables all day had. Still, he was glad to have helped feed the hungry sailors, laborers, and merchants of Wexford. No country in the world beat the Irish for hospitality, and everyone in need of a meal and a place to rest would be sure to get just that. Except the English lass from that morning.

Liam knew he should have put her from his mind, but his conscience refused. Each time the bell on the pub door had rung, Liam turned toward the entrance or emerged from the kitchen to see if the lass had returned. Certainly, she had been arrogant and belittling, but his mother and father had raised him to always choose the higher ground and give aid when needed. Perhaps it was all the better for him that she had not returned. As well as offering a free meal, he might have thrown in a few verbal barbs of his own.

It took half an hour to reach home, though his unrelenting thoughts about the English lass sped the time. Liam guided Mollie past the cottage to the barn and led her into her stall. He promised her he would brush her down later, after he ate and rested. Then he crossed the small bit of pasture separating the barn from the cottage and opened the back door.

His steps faltered on the threshold. There before him at the kitchen table sat the arrogant British lass, clumsily chopping celery and being swallowed whole by his mother's dress. His shock at finding her in his home quickly dispersed, and a smirk crept onto his lips. *Oh, how are the mighty fallen?*

His grin widened as she looked up at him, still chopping, and her eyes widened. The knife slipped across her fingertip and blood welled up, staining the celery stalk. Her shoulders tensed and her face paled as she stared down at the blood dripping from her finger.

Liam's smirk slipped, and he was at the lass's side before she could keel over. A faint "oh" escaped his mother as she, too, realized what had happened.

"Here, let me help," he said before his mother could take a step in the lass's direction. He grabbed a tea towel from a nearby basket, and pinched it around her fingertip. After several seconds, he loosened his grip, letting the towel fall open. Blood oozed out, but the flow had slowed. No serious damage had been done. The lass's finger would heal as if nothing had happened.

He met her gaze, and a shock of heat ran through him. How could her eyes change color so quickly? One moment, they had been as dark as a tempest-tossed sea, and the next a brilliant silver. And, Heaven help him, both shades rattled his knees.

He cleared his throat. "The cut is not too deep." He pinched the towel over the cut again. "Here, hold this a moment."

She did as he bid, and he dipped the dangling end of the towel in a tin cup of water, then wrung it out so it was just damp.

"You can release the pressure," he said.

The towel fell open to reveal that the bleeding had ceased. He cradled her hand in his and heat sizzled through him at the silkiness of her touch. How rough his hands must feel in comparison.

He gently wiped the dampened towel over her finger, careful not to disturb the cut as he cleaned the rest of the blood. Then he took up a scrap of cheesecloth and wrapped her finger several times.

“Thank you.” Her words were barely audible.

Liam nodded and took up the knife to wash it. As he rinsed the blade clean, he caught his mother’s smirk and he sighed. She was always badgering him about settling down with a nice lass. Well, that lass would not be this arrogant Brit. He would have wondered how she ended up in his home, but there was no doubt his mother had picked her up like a stray puppy—the same way they had acquired the dogs that guarded their cattle. The more intriguing question was how had this young woman, who had been so finely dressed this morning, ended up in his mother’s clothes?

He returned to the cutting board, and the woman held out her hand as if to take the knife.

“I will chop the rest of the vegetables. You can relax,” Liam said. At the pace she had been chopping, they would be lucky to have the soup ready by morning.

The woman hung her head as if in defeat, then defiance sparked in her eyes and she brought her head up. “I would like to finish what I started, if you please. I will be more careful not to injure myself again.” She held her hand out for the knife.

Liam fingered the knife’s hilt. He did not want to insult her—he had already done that once today when he’d accused her of being a woman of ill repute—and his mother would not stand for him telling a woman to sit down and stay out of the way. Nor could Liam treat a woman in such a manner.

He sighed. “Very well. But at least let me teach you to chop properly.”

He took a celery stalk and laid it on the cutting board. “When you chop, keep your fingertips tucked under, like this.” He cupped his hand, letting the very tips of his fingers rest on the stalk. “Keep the tip of the blade down on the board, and as

you chop, walk your fingers back away from the blade, like this.” He demonstrated, chopping the entire stalk in a matter of seconds.

“Give it a try.” He handed her the knife and slid the cutting board and a new stalk of celery toward her.

She still chopped slowly, but at least she was less likely to injure herself again. Liam took up another knife and set to dicing the potatoes, then the onions, finishing at the same time as the woman.

“You are so much quicker than me,” she said, eyeing his mountain of vegetables.

“I’ve done my fair share of work in the kitchen. It gets easier with practice.” Not that she would get the chance to become an expert. Her people were no doubt already searching for their lost damsel.

He scooped up the celery, adding it to the potatoes and onions, and slid them into the cast iron cauldron hanging over the hearth.

Fiona gave the soup a stir and turned to the woman. “Louisa, dear, I imagine your dress is dry by now.”

So, that was her name. Louisa. It was not a name often heard in Ireland, but it rolled off the tongue.

Louisa gave a quick nod, fetched her dress from the parlor where Fiona had hung it in front of the fireplace, and climbed the stairs to the bedrooms.

“So, Ma, what is the story on her?” Liam asked when he was sure Louisa was out of hearing range.

Normally, Liam avoided asking his mother about anyone. His mother was not what one would call a gossip, but when asked such a broad question, she could always be counted on to deliver a biography that omitted no detail.

Fiona shrugged. “There isn’t much to say.”

Liam blinked. “Not much? I’d have thought you’d wrestled every detail of her life from her.” He chuckled,

expecting his siblings to join in, but solemn faces stared back at him.

Fiona shook her head. “The poor dear’s name is Louisa Gaultney. She’s from England, though where exactly I don’t know. I saw her wandering about the High Street this morning, near O’Brien’s. All I learned was that she had been kidnapped and brought here, though she wouldn’t say by whom or on what ship. I didn’t press for details. The poor lass has been through enough. I suspect she doesn’t know who she can trust, or how much. She’s likely thinking anybody could be her abductor’s family or friend.”

Liam rubbed a finger along his bottom lip, summoning up his memory of the morning. Louisa had mentioned arriving with an unsavory crew, and though her gown was of fine quality, it had been crumpled and soiled in places. Then there was the fact she had no money.

His heart softened. He had judged her to be arrogant and stubborn—and she might prove to be that—but perhaps that arrogance, that air of superiority, had been a defense mechanism. A show of strength to disguise fear. He had never given a moment’s thought to what being abducted might be like, but he could imagine the terror Louisa must have felt, and he could not blame her for the way she had behaved.

## Chapter 6

Louisa shivered and took deep, slow breaths as she climbed the stairs to the second floor, her silk dress slung over her shoulder. This was just perfect. She had found herself in the house of the devastatingly handsome stranger she had so thoroughly insulted that morning. Worse yet was the fact that he had been so friendly with her abductor, Seamus Cotter. Such a friendship was so at odds with the kindness Liam had shown her—first offering to buy her breakfast, and now caring for her wound.

She supposed it was possible that Seamus showed the people of Wexford the version of himself he wanted them to see, putting on different personalities like one puts on clothes. Still, how could she know for sure that Liam—that the O’Shea family—would not hand her over to him the moment they learned he had abducted her? Or even if they did not help Seamus, would they turn her out if they discovered she was the granddaughter of a murderer and enslaver?

There were simply too many ifs for her comfort. Whatever happened, she had to make sure the O’Sheas did not discover who she really was.

Her heart weighed heavy in her chest. Fiona and her family had shown her nothing but kindness. They had opened their home to her, though she was a stranger and English, yet she was already repaying their charity with lies and secrets. It was not right, but what could she do? There was only one way to ease her conscience, and that was to find something she was good at to earn her keep until she found a way home. There had to be some chore she could accomplish. What did it say about her upbringing and education that a working man had more skills in the kitchen than she?

Louisa slipped out of Fiona’s too-large skirt and short dress and pulled on her own, leaving the stays loosely tied. Without help, she could not hope to tighten them herself.

When she had finished, she returned downstairs. The scent of simmering celery, onion, and potatoes met her at the

landing. How could such simple ingredients smell so delicious?

The family sat at the table, steaming bowls in front of them, and as she entered the room, the men stood as they would for a lady at a high society dinner.

Aisling smiled and patted the empty spot on the bench between her and Liam. Louisa clambered onto the bench, hiking her skirts higher than was proper to take her seat. Liam scooted a few inches away from her, and her cheeks flushed. Had he glimpsed her undergarments? She had tried to be careful not to expose too much. Or perhaps she stunk. Her dress was clean now, but she had not had a proper bath in three days, thanks to Seamus.

As Diarmuid led the family in saying grace on their meal, she bent her head toward her armpit, giving it a quiet sniff. She did not smell particularly fresh, but she still smelled far better than the men she had sailed with. She told herself Liam was simply giving her more room so as not to crowd her.

The family dipped their spoons into their soup or took bites of soda bread and fell into a discussion of the day's news.

"Another ship left for America today. The Brennans, Boyds, and Kavanaghs were on it," Liam said. Disappointment laced his tone.

Diarmuid shook his head and sighed. "God speed them. I hope they find fortune in their new home."

"If any more families leave, Father Patrick will hardly have anyone left in his congregation," Rian said through a mouthful of bread.

Fiona shook a finger at him. "How many times do I tell you not to speak with your mouth full? And, yes, it is a shame we lose so many of our friends. It is all these cursed laws against us, just for the way we worship. I'd have half a mind to go on the next boat meself if we couldn't provide for ourselves."

Louisa's ears perked. Laws against them? She cleared her throat. "Pardon me, but am I to understand you are

Catholic?” She knew Catholics far outnumbered Protestants in Ireland, but part of her had hoped the O’Sheas were at least Presbyterians, if not members of the Church of Ireland.

Liam cast an appraising eye on her. “Is that a problem?”

Heat flushed her neck up to her ears. “No, not at all.” She had read the British papers that demonized Catholics, but she knew better than to believe them. Her own family had taught her that some of the worst evil doers lurked each Sunday in the pews of the Abergreen parish of the Church of England.

She dipped her head and brought a spoonful of soup to her mouth, avoiding the eyes of the family. To her relief, she did not have to wait long for the conversation to resume.

“I heard Parliament voted on our emancipation a few days ago. We will be as free as anyone else in the kingdom soon enough,” Rory said.

Rian slapped the table. “It is high time that devil Cromwell’s laws were reversed.”

“True enough, but you’ll be waiting a bit longer.” Liam lay his spoon beside his now empty bowl. “There was no vote. Parliament wouldn’t even allow the discussion in session.”

“Matty O’Rourke said they voted for our emancipation, and he’s never wrong about the news. You know his da hears about everything running the post.”

Liam shook his head. “He is wrong this time. James O’Brien—who can read better than any of us—read the *Dublin Journal* article about it. There was no vote.”

Rian’s shoulders slumped. “That’s a disappointment.”

“I wish we could read,” Rory said. “‘Twould be nice to learn what’s happening in the world for ourselves.”

Louisa stared around the table at the downcast faces. How could such a successful family be illiterate? She laid her spoon down a little more loudly than intended. “Do you mean

none of you can read?" All eyes were back on her again, and she shrunk slightly.

"Aye." Diarmuid nodded. If he had taken offense to her question, he did not show it. "Fiona, meself, and Liam can read a little, but no better than a child in his first year of schooling."

"We had meant to learn more," Fiona said, "but Letitia Crowley, who was teaching us out of her home—a hedge school, you know—got found out what she was doing by her protestant neighbors. The McCanns." Fiona made a face as if smelling something malodorous. "'Twas they that ratted her out to the constables. Poor Letitia was so scared for her freedom, she fled in the night as soon as she learned they were coming for her."

Questions flew around Louisa's head. "Forgive my ignorance, but I don't understand. What is a hedge school, and why would the authorities care if she was running one?"

A unified sigh sounded around the table, and Diarmuid's shoulders stiffened. "I guess there is a lot you don't know about Ireland. For starters, when Oliver Cromwell invaded our land nigh on a century and a half ago, he enacted countless laws to control and enslave us Catholics. Some of them have been repealed, like our right to worship as we wish, but when Letitia's school was discovered, educating Catholics was still illegal."

"Poor Letitia." Fiona shook her head. "'Twas only two months later that we were finally granted the right to learn again, but Letitia never came back. Heard she went to America. And since then, there have been no Catholics in Wexford educated enough who are willing to teach, and nobody with enough courage or care to start up a school for us. The law may have changed, but there is still enough prejudice that people feel it too dangerous to start a school."

Louisa took a breath to release the pressure building in her chest. She knew even England had its fair share of the population that were illiterate. It was not until this moment that she considered those without an education would actually

want one. Such an assumption was ignorant in hindsight, but she did not have time to linger on the thought before another sparked. Her heart lightened. She might be useless when it came to domestic chores, but here, finally, was a chance to repay the O'Sheas' generosity. For what use was her academic—albeit basic—education if she could not use it to bless others?

She sat up straight on the bench and smiled. "I can teach you to read. And do arithmetic, too, if you have need."

Silence met her words for a moment, all eyes trained on her in varying degrees of surprise.

"Do you mean it?" Aisling's eyes widened with hope.

"I do." Louisa met Fiona's gaze. "You have been so kind to me already. Please, let me repay your hospitality by teaching you. This is the one useful thing I know how to do." She held up her bandaged finger and gave a sheepish smile.

Fiona blinked her moistened eyes and nodded. "Aye, we would appreciate that. We already know arithmetic—'tis not nearly as difficult a subject to learn—but the reading lessons we will gladly accept. Do you agree, dear?"

Diarmuid scratched at the underside of his beard as his gaze met Louisa's. "Aye, and do you think you might also teach us to write?"

Louisa smiled. "Certainly. No course in reading would be effective without learning to write as well."

Diarmuid's lips spread wide in a smile. "Well, when shall we have our first lesson? I'm eager to put to paper everything that's up here." He tapped his temple.

"Me Diarmuid is a great storyteller," Fiona said. "He knows all the local folklore, of course, and he comes up with his own stories, too."

"I would love to hear one," Louisa said.

"Then you shall." Diarmuid tapped the edge of the table. "After dinner, you can give us our first lesson, and I shall give you a story."



A roaring fire crackled in the small parlor's hearth, providing the only light in the room. Louisa breathed in the earthy perfume of the burning peat, letting the scent of ancient moss calm her nerves. It was too bad her relaxed state had not inspired her to know on what to focus her first lesson.

"I must confess, I don't know where I should begin," she said. She met Fiona's eyes. "How much do you already know?"

Fiona gave her a gentle smile. "Why don't you start from the beginning? Diarmuid, Liam, and I could use some refreshing."

That suited Louisa. She took the fireplace poker and drew the letter *m* in the pile of ashes she had smoothed into a makeshift tablet at the edge of the hearth.

"This is the letter M. It says *mmm*. Now you say it."

Heat flushed her cheeks. These people were not children, yet the way she had been taught to read was the only way she knew.

If the O'Sheas felt they were being spoken down to, they did not show it. They repeated the sound without hesitation, and the eagerness on Aisling, Rory, and Rian's faces as they leaned closer bolstered Louisa's confidence.

She wrote another letter beside the first. "This is the letter A. It says *aaa*."

Again, the family repeated the sound.

"Good." She wrote one more letter. "This is S. It says *sss*."

Again, they repeated the sound.

"Very good." Louisa smoothed the ashes to give herself a fresh writing surface. "Combining these letters in various ways can give you different words. For instance—" She redrew the letters in reverse order. "This is the name Sam." She sounded out each letter, then read out the word. "Now you try, one at a time."

Rory went first, followed by Rian, then Aisling.

Louisa beamed at the success of her lesson until it came Liam's turn.

His eyes met hers, a condescending smirk on his lips, and he repeated the sounds. The low timber of his voice reverberated through her, waking parts of her that had long laid dormant. His tone was so at odds with the forced tolerance, possibly even disdain, he clearly felt for her.

She cleared her throat when Diarmuid and Fiona had taken their turns repeating the sounds. "Yes, very good. Now, we will practice writing the sounds." She handed each family member a twig she had collected after dinner, then demonstrated the proper way to write each letter. They each took turns copying the letters in the ashes. Fastest of all was Liam. When he had finished, he met Louisa's gaze, his churlish glare from moments before replaced with curiosity.

Louisa's breath halted. She sat pinned to her seat by those green eyes until finally Diarmuid's voice broke the spell.

“Not bad.” He nodded his approval at the ashes. “We all seem to be catching on quite quick.”

Louisa nodded, refusing to let her gaze wander back to Liam. “Yes, I believe tomorrow we might try for a more challenging lesson. As for this one, we are finished.” She nodded to Diarmuid to signal it was his turn to take over the rest of the evening.

“I believe it is my turn, then.” Diarmuid rubbed his hands together. “And what story shall I tell? The tale of Fionn MacCumhaill, perhaps?”

“No, we’ve heard that one too many times,” Rian said.

Diarmuid nodded. “Perhaps then, the tale of St. Patrick.”

“That one is too boring,” Aisling said.

“That’s sacrilegious, that is,” Rory said in a mock scolding tone.

Aisling shrugged. “Anyone who knows anything knows the real St. Patrick was nothing near as special as the myths say. All the saints’ stories are a bore.”

Louisa stifled a smirk. She had heard her own share of lore surrounding famous men and women of the church, and most tended to lull her into daydreaming about far more entertaining things.

“All right, no saint stories, then.” Diarmuid rubbed his beard, humming. Then he straightened. “You know, Miss Gaultney, you remind me of a tale I heard in my youth told me by my grandma. ‘Tis a story I have never shared with my children, though I don’t know why I haven’t thought to share it before now, for ‘tis one I have never forgotten. Would you like to hear it?”

All heads nodded, and bodies leaned in closer, Louisa’s most of all.

Diarmuid rested his elbows on his knees and leaned in, his gaze catching every eye before he began.

“Long ago, nigh on five hundred years back in the city of Kinsale, where my people come from, there lived a fair young maiden, the most beautiful to behold.”

# The Banshee of Kinsale

By Diarmuid O'Shea

Long ago, nigh on five hundred years back, in the city of Kinsale, where my people come from, there lived a fair young maiden, the most beautiful to behold. Some say she was a wee cherub that fell from the heavens as a babe, for she had hair the color of pale gold, eyes like polished silver, skin like alabaster, and the sweetest disposition.

Well, it was no surprise that as soon as she came of age to be married, she found no shortage of suitors, young or old, vying for her hand, despite the fact she was from a poor family and had no dowry. But this young maiden already had her heart set on Conor McCarty, the eldest son of Lord Ronan McCarty. Of course, the McCarty's were dead set against their son marrying the maiden, for her family were poor tenant farmers. But that good lad Conor didn't care. He declared life would not be worth living if he couldn't spend it with his golden-haired angel.

So, against Lord and Lady McCarty's wishes, Conor and his fair bride-to-be set out one night for Dublin to elope. But 'twas an awful night to be setting out for such a journey.

A mighty tempest arose, and poor Conor got turned around, for neither he, the maiden, nor his horse could see ten steps in front of them. As it happened, they found themselves out on the Old Head of Kinsale, skirting along the cliffs, but not knowing it for all the rain pelting their faces.

The maiden was soaking wet through her skirts, and she begged her lover to turn around. They would go to Dublin another night when the weather was better. Conor quickly agreed, but as he turned the horse to head back the way they had come, that poor steed lost its footing.

"Jump!" Conor yelled to his love, and she leaped from the saddle to land on the muddy earth. But poor Conor, he went down over the edge of the cliffs with his horse, and the

maiden knew not what happened until the storm let up, so terrified and shaking was she to move a muscle.

Well, when the storm finally moved on, leaving a starry sky in its wake, the maid crept to the edge of the cliffs, but there was nothing to see but waves crashing over the rocks below. Hope kindled in her breast that maybe Conor had fallen somewhere else and was resting nearby, so she called out, “Conor! Conor!” For nigh on an hour, she called his name, but he never answered.

Finally, near sunrise, she crept to the cliff’s edge again and searched for the body of her Conor, but he was lost to the sea. Grief clenched her heart like a vice, and she let out a wail so unearthly it reached the ears of the Faerie King, Midhir.

“*Musha!* What creature makes such a sorrowful noise?” said he. So, he up and left his kingdom in County Longford and flew as fast as his feet would carry him—which is very fast, owing to his magical ability to run the whole length of Ireland in just a couple of hours.

Well, when he reached the Old Head and spied the young maiden standing at the cliff’s edge, wailing as if her heart had broken a thousand times over, he stopped, his breath taken by her beauty, even amid her sorrow. He wished to speak to her, but he knew his words would be drowned by her cries, so he stood back and waited.

Then, just as the sun peeked over the horizon, the maiden quieted, her voice spent, and she took a step forward, as if she meant to throw herself over the cliff. Midhir could not let her do such a thing, for he knew it would bring on damnation to her soul, so he took her by the arm and gently pulled her back.

“Dear lass,” said he, “what has put you in such a state?”

The maiden turned her silver eyes, full of tears, on him. “The man I was to marry has fallen to his death, and I shall never be happy again.” Then she buried her face in her hands and began her ethereal keening again.

Well, the faerie king felt his heart twist in his chest, and he knew he must do something to help her.

“Dear maiden,” said he, “weep no more for your lost love. I am Midhir, the Faerie King. Tell me your wish so that I may grant it and ease your sorrow, for a woman as beautiful as the angels should not mar her cheeks with such tears.”

At these words, the maiden stared wide-eyed at the Faerie King. “You are Midhir? And you would grant me a wish?”

Midhir nodded.

“Then,” said she, “I wish my Conor back from the dead.”

At these words, Midhir’s heart filled with pity. “I am sorry,” said he, “but your Conor has gone to the otherworld. Not even I have the power to pull him back.”

At this, the maiden closed her eyes and was silent a moment. “Then,” said she, “I wish to help those who are to be left behind by their loved ones, so that their sorrow is never so great as mine.”

“A fair and noble thing you wish,” said Midhir. “I shall make you a banshee, blessed with the knowledge of who shall die and when, so you may use your cry to forewarn the family and give them time to prepare their hearts for their loss.”

The young maiden held her head high, ready for the change about to be brought upon her.

Midhir stooped to the earth and scooped up the still damp soil. In the blink of an eye, the soil transformed into a fine silver dust, and Midhir blew it over the maiden.

In an instant, the pain in her heart eased while the knowledge of every death to come filled her before receding to the recesses of her mind. All except knowledge of her own death.

“Wait,” said she as the Faerie King turned to leave. “How long will I live like this?”

Midhir gave her a kind smile. “Until you no longer wish to be a banshee, then you may be with your love again.” With that, he departed.

These past five centuries, the fair maiden has gone from house to house in all of County Cork, warning of deaths soon to come so that none may be so shaken by the passing of their loved ones as she was by the death of her Conor McCarty.

And that is the story of the Banshee of Kinsale.

## Chapter 7

Louisa lay beside Aisling, staring at the crossbeams in the ceiling. Her brain hummed with Diarmuid's comment that she had reminded him of the banshee in his grandmother's story. In what way? Was she so plagued with sorrow that she wore it like an ornament, proudly displayed on her bodice? Or had he simply meant her appearance? By his description, Louisa might very well have been the maiden.

Then Liam crept into her thoughts. She had stared at her shoes throughout the story, but that had done little to disperse the chill Liam's cool emerald gaze sent down her spine. The tremor he inspired only increased during the too frequent game of look-away they played throughout Diarmuid's tale.

Perhaps a short walk in the cold night air would clear her head enough to invite sleep. She slid out of bed, careful not to wake Aisling, then stopped short as she tiptoed by the window toward the wardrobe. Across the field, the light spilled from the open window in the side of the old stone barn, banishing the surrounding darkness, along with any chance of a restful night's sleep.

She should get back in bed, close her eyes, and will herself to sleep, but *should* and *could* carried two very different meanings. Besides, what if something nefarious was going on down there? What work—legitimate work—did farmers do in the middle of the night?

Louisa knew little about farm life, but she was certain farmers slept until at least close to dawn. Something out of the ordinary was going on down at the barn, and Louisa shuddered at the possibilities.

What if Seamus Cotter had told Liam about her, and this was some sort of midnight rendezvous to plot how best to deliver Louisa back into Seamus's hands? It would certainly explain all the searching, dark-humored looks Liam kept giving her throughout the evening. Her own grandfather had carried out some of his most nefarious deeds under cover of night.

Louisa steeled herself and grabbed the only winter coat from the wardrobe. She had to know what was happening in that barn. Her safety might well depend on it.

Quieter than a mouse, she tiptoed down the stairs and out of the house. The icy wind bit at her flesh beneath the nightdress Aisling had given her. At least her slippers treaded quietly across the grass. With the lightness of her step and the howling wind, whoever was in the barn would not hear her approach.

Her teeth chattered, and she clutched the coat closed more tightly as she reached the window of the barn. Like all the others, it sat a full head above her, and she raised up on her toes to see in, but to ill effect. All she glimpsed was the ceiling. She gripped the ice-cold ledge and pulled herself up higher, stretching out her neck until she was balancing fully on the very tips of her toes.

At first, the barn appeared empty. Then a long, lean shadow stretched across the stone floor, followed by its owner. Liam stopped at a workbench and secured a strip of leather onto a hook mounted at the bench's end, then took a knife from his belt. Back and forth, he stroked the blade along the leather, stropping it until the blade gleamed.

Louisa nodded to herself. Stropping was a common enough activity for any man. She had seen her brother Patrick do it enough times to his razors before shaving. And Liam appeared to be alone. At least he was not plotting her demise. Not at this moment, anyway.

She lowered back down onto her heels and stepped away, careful not to make a sound. Before she had turned to head back toward the cottage, something cold and smooth fell with a slap on her head and slithered down her shoulders. She screamed and jumped back, colliding with a stack of empty crates, sending them clattering to the ground. Liam was sure to have heard, but she did not care. She clutched at her neck, shoulders, and back—feeling anywhere for evidence of a snake bite—and she spun on the spot, her eyes searching wildly for the devilish creature.

The barn door slammed open, and the next second, Liam raced around the corner. “Miss Gaultney? What are you doing out here?” He lowered the knife he had been holding over his head, and his eyebrows drew together.

Heat flushed Louisa’s face, and her limbs trembled. She took a shaky step back and tripped over a fallen crate.

“Careful!” Liam caught her wrist and pulled her toward him, steadying her.

Louisa’s heart pounded in her chest, and she wanted nothing more in that moment than to sink into the damp earth. She had failed at spying, and now she had made a mess Liam would have to clean up.

She pulled back, and Liam released his grip, his fingertips brushing her wrist. Tingles shot through her arm and a fraction of her dread at being caught evaporated. But only a fraction, and for a fleeting moment.

Liam cleared his throat. “Are you all right?”

Louisa took a breath to steady her still quaking nerves. “I-I think so.” She stared at the ground, avoiding those piercing green eyes.

“Good.” He shifted his weight and crossed his arms. “Then I’ll ask you again. What are you doing out here in the middle of the night?”

Louisa rubbed the back of her neck, the sensation of the cold, slippery snake still lingering. Her gaze darted across the ground, searching for any trace of the creature.

“A snake fell on me.”

Liam’s eyebrows shot up then creased in confusion. “A what?”

“A—a snake. Right here.” She touched her head.

Liam’s lips curled in a smirk, and he covered it with his hand as he looked away.

A stone settled in her stomach. He was laughing at her. She could have been bitten. She could have been dying, and he was laughing.

He let his hand drop, the smile fully formed now. “There be no snakes in Ireland, lass.”

Louisa blinked. “I know what I felt. An adder fell on me when I was a child. One does not forget a terrifying sensation like that.”

Soberness replaced Liam’s smirk, and he gave a solemn nod. “I’m sure it was terrifying, but ‘twasn’t a snake that fell on you here. I can assure you of that. Ireland doesn’t have snakes, and never has, despite our fanciful tales about Saint Patrick and his snake-banishing powers.” He took a step toward the barn door. “Wait here.”

He disappeared and returned a moment later, lantern in hand. “Let us find the real culprit, shall we?” He held the lantern low and paced the side of the barn, then retraced his steps, holding the lantern high along the eave of the roof. “Ah-ha! Here it is.”

He gave a firm tug on something long and thin entwined in the roof’s thatching, then held it out to Louisa.

“A rope?” She reached trembling fingers out and stroked it. A rope. Not a snake. The damp cold, paired with the relative newness of the cord, gave it a similar feeling to that of a snake’s body. “But where did it come from?”

Liam examined the length of rope. “It’s frayed at this end, like it’s been chewed through. My brothers are quite the pranksters. No doubt they caught a rat and tied it to the roof—albeit not very well, since I was able to yank the rope loose—and the rat chose this moment to free itself.”

Louisa shuddered at the thought of a rat landing on her. “I think I would prefer a snake. Why would anyone tie a rat to the roof?”

Liam shook his head, his smirk returning, and he coiled the rope. “There is no making sense of the shenanigans me idiot brothers get up to. But, now that we know ‘twas not a snake, would you finally like to tell me why you were out here in the first place? Or is that to be an ongoing mystery?”

Louisa gave an annoyed huff. She might as well tell him. She had already made a fool of herself.

“I couldn’t sleep, so I decided to go for a walk, and I saw the light.” She gestured to the window.

“So you decided to snoop.”

Louisa’s cheeks flushed, and she crossed her arms over her middle, dropping her gaze to the ground.

Liam chuckled. “Ah, I don’t mean to embarrass you. I would have done the same. So, did you see anything of interest?”

Louisa shook her head. “I could not see much of anything.”

“Would you like to?”

Louisa snapped her head up. He was inviting her to see what he had been doing? Despite her curiosity and what appeared to be a genuine invitation, she could not be sure this was not some carefully laid trap. Then, again, he could not have known she’d be awake to see the barn light, nor planned on her coming down alone. And even if he wished to harm her, Fiona and the rest of the family would surely hear her screams. And if he had no intention of harming her, would he take offense to her refusing his invitation? She shifted side to side, trying to decide.

“I would not wish to intrude,” she finally said. He most likely would not harm her, but she still was not sure she wanted to follow him.

“You won’t be. Come on.” He nodded toward the front of the barn and headed inside.

Louisa hung back. It was one thing for a man and woman to be out of doors unchaperoned, but quite another to be alone behind closed doors, even if those doors hung on a barn.

A stiff breeze kicked up, biting through her coat, and she made up her mind. Better to be warm in a barn than endure a freezing walk back to the cottage. In the barn, stalls housing goats and cows lined either side, except for the cob horse she had seen pulling Liam’s cart that morning. In the loft above were stacks of hay. The back of the barn was empty but for a worktable, several wood shelves housing various tools, and a closed door.

“It seems we suffer the same affliction tonight,” Liam said as he motioned her to the back. “I come out here when I cannot sleep and need to work things out in me mind.”

“And what is it you are puzzling out?” She ran her fingers along the stropping leather, studying the section that had been worn slick from use.

“You, actually.”

Louisa’s eyes snapped to meet Liam’s and that all too familiar heat flushed her face. “Me?”

Liam’s gaze steadied on her, but where earlier in the evening she had been unable to read him, now his eyes shown with an almost friendly curiosity. “Aye. Ma told me about your kidnapping. Why haven’t you told anybody who it was? He belongs in jail, not running about free.”

Louisa bit her bottom lip and shrugged as she glanced back down at the strap of leather. Part of her wanted to tell him it was Seamus. If Seamus got the chance, she knew he would try to finish what he had started. Men like that—devious men like her grandfather—always did. But he and Liam had been too friendly with each other that morning. Liam might be ready to jump to her defense and have her abductor locked away now, but what if he turned on her in defense of his friend and fellow countryman?

Liam crossed his arms when she did not answer. “I think I know why you’ve bitten your tongue on that. You don’t trust any of us.”

Louisa opened her mouth to deny his accusation, then closed it. She forced herself to meet his eyes. Now was not the time for denial or cowardice. “I do not mean to offend you, but you’re right. I don’t trust anyone. I’m grateful for your family’s kindness, it’s just...” She paused. How to explain without causing more offense?

As if reading her thoughts, Liam took a step closer and leaned his hip against the workbench. “Go on.”

Louisa sighed. “Well, can you blame me for not trusting anyone? I am in a land of strangers who—let’s admit it—don’t think too kindly of the English. How am I to know who would

take my side and who would take his? I do not know who his friends are, or if they would remain loyal to him upon learning of his crime. Who is to say I would not be putting myself in more danger by naming my abductor?"

Liam folded his arms across his chest. "I see your point, but I have to disagree. I think you put yourself in more danger by keeping silent."

Louisa pressed her lips together, her mind made up. She could tell no one here about Seamus. What she needed to do was get a letter to Nora.

Liam sighed. "I suppose there'll be no changing your mind?"

Louisa shook her head, then looked about for anything to change the subject. "The barn is very clean. I've never been on a farm before, so I expected—" She cut herself off. There was no way she could finish that sentence without sounding condescending.

Liam laughed. "You expected cow pats everywhere and hay strewn about."

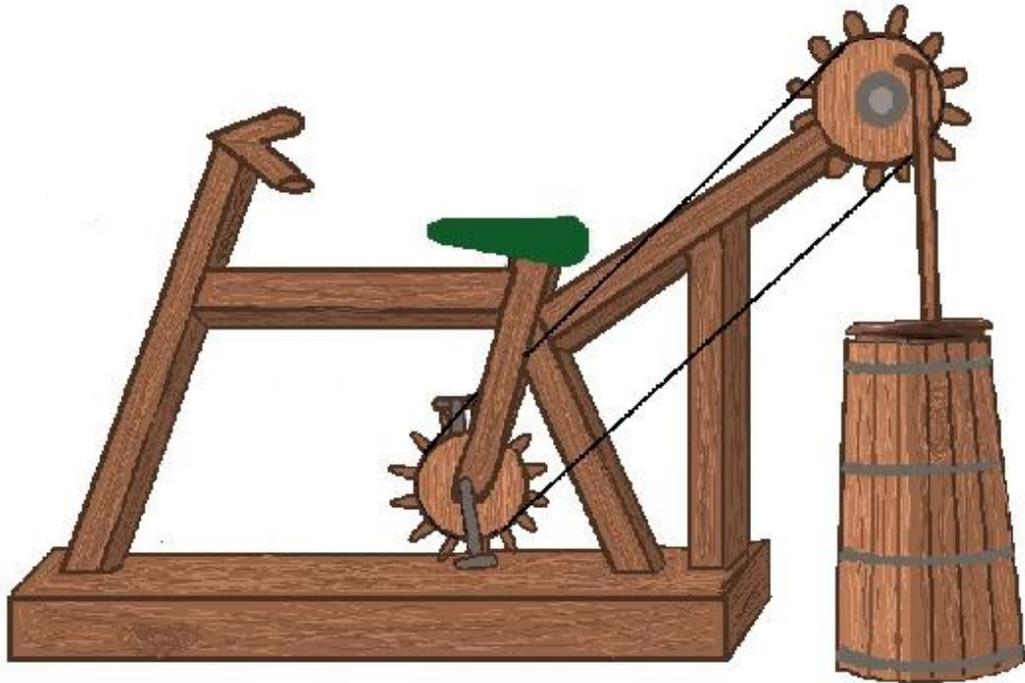
Louisa gave a sheepish grin. Yet, oddly enough, his laughter set her at ease.

"Like I said, I've never been to a farm."

"Well, we pride ourselves on having the cleanest dairy in County Wexford, even if we can't produce as much as other farms. But that is going to change soon. Come and have a look." He beckoned to the door at the back of the barn, a gleam in his eye. He threw open the door in one fluid motion to reveal a storage shed attached to the barn.

Louisa peered in and her eyebrows drew together. A wood panel on four wheels sat in the middle of the small room, and a wooden contraption standing as high as Louisa's shoulders sat on top. Set upon two wood blocks, the contraption was constructed of a series of beams of varying length nailed together. At the bottom of the center, vertical beam was a pegged wheel with metal rods and plates on either side. Encasing that wheel and extending up diagonally to another just like it was a leather belt punctured with large peg holes. And at

the very end of the contraption—Louisa blinked—was that a butter churn? The pole of the dasher was unlike any she had ever seen. At first glance, it was a normal dasher, but at the top, one end of a short thick dowel had been fastened at a ninety-degree angle to the dasher's pole, and the other end fastened to the top wheel.



Liam stood, hands on hips, beaming. “Well, what do you think?”

Louisa circled the contraption. “It’s...it’s very.... What is it?”

“Can you not tell?” He winked. He was teasing her, and she gave him a small smile. “This is the butter churn of the future. You sit here.” He climbed onto the cushion affixed to the top of the middle vertical beam and place a foot on each of the metal plates below. “Then you put your feet on the pedals and grab the handles for support.” He gripped a horizontal rod on the first vertical beam. “Then you pedal your feet.”

The pedals rotated as he pressed his feet down, and the churn dasher raised and lowered as the top wheel spun, the pegs and leather belt blurring the faster Liam pedaled.

“I finally finished the leather belt tonight,” he said as he climbed back down and inspected the notched belt, a satisfied smile on his lips. “There is no cream in there right now, but my hope is that my machine will produce butter twice as fast as it would take to do by hand.”

Louisa’s eyes widened. “That’s impressive. However did you think of such a machine?”

Liam combed his fingers through his hair, brushing it back. “Have you heard the phrase, necessity is the mother of invention? Ma’s got the rheumatism. ‘Tis especially bad in her hands, not that she likes to admit it. Lately, most of the churning has fallen to Aisling, but there is only so much butter one person can churn. I came out here night after night trying to find a solution, but ‘twas not until I met an Englishman by the name of Mr. James Fussell a year ago that I finally got the idea to build this.”

Louisa nodded, though she hadn’t the first clue who this Mr. Fussell was.

“See,” Liam continued, and walked to the churn. He tapped the wheel and strap. “Fussell developed his design for a roller chain a few years back, and he was here in Wexford, on his way back to Somerset. He showed it to me. Told me about how it works. Well, I knew I couldn’t afford one of his chains, but I knew I had skill enough to make something similar. So that was what I did. The engineering took the longest. I must have built, tore down, and rebuilt this thing twenty different ways.”

Twenty times? Louisa could hardly imagine the patience it must have taken for him not to give up. “It seems the twenty-first time was the charm.”

“Aye, thank the saints. I was about ready to give up.” He stood back, studying his creation.

“I’m sure your mother will appreciate your hard work.”

Liam nodded. “There is only one test left.” He ducked out of the storage room-turned workshop, returning a moment later with a can of cream, and poured it into the churn. Then he climbed on the seat and cast a glance at the watch he pulled from his trousers pocket.

“Say a prayer.” He pedaled, slow at first, then faster until the dasher’s pole shifted back and forth in a blur as the wheel pumped it up and down in an elliptical motion. Minutes later, he stopped.

“Do me a favor?” He wiped the sweat from his brow. “Take a peek.”

Louisa lifted the lid of the churn and peered in, holding a lantern close to give her light. Her lips spread in a wide grin and she met Liam’s eyes. “‘Tis butter!”

“Thank the Lord!” Liam leaped down from his seat and caught Louisa up by the waist and spun her around. “Look at that! It really works! And in half the time.”

Louisa laughed, her cheeks flushing from the thrill of the moment as the warmth of his body seeped into her, his sinuous arms floating her off the floor as if she weighed no more than a feather.

Then, as suddenly as the excitement had come, it was gone. Liam cleared his throat and set Louisa down. He stepped back, his eyes focused on the floor, and he mussed his hair. The childlike grin that had been on his face moments before was gone.

“My apologies. I got carried away.”

Louisa nodded, thankful she was not the one feeling embarrassed for once. Still, she did not like the thought of Liam suffering that emotional affliction, and she raced to alleviate it.

“You have every reason to be excited. I would not doubt if you went down in history as a brilliant inventor.”

“I don’t know about that, but this machine will certainly change my family’s fortune and save Ma’s poor hands.” He stroked his calloused fingers along the wood frame of his contraption.

A fluttering sensation rose in Louisa’s chest and she fought the urge to draw closer to him. How would those fingers feel running along her arm? She shook the thought from her head, surprised at the sensations he elicited. But how could she not be drawn to him? The man was brilliant, and she had never

witnessed such love and devotion from a man toward his mother. Add to that the fact his family were good people. Liam O'Shea was exactly the sort of man she had always hoped to marry. But it was pure foolishness to even think of a future with him. She barely knew him, and he believed her a Gaultney. How would she even begin to come back from that lie?

Liam pulled out his pocket watch again. "'Tis nearly two in the morning. If either of us is going to be productive today, we ought to get some shuteye."

After Liam had locked the storage room, they crossed the pasture back to the cottage. Their slow strides crunched the newly formed frost on the grass, and their breaths puffed out clouds of steam. When they reached the back door, Liam stopped, his hand on the doorknob.

"Listen. The churn is a surprise for Ma. Will you promise not to breathe a word of it?"

"Of course. Your secret is safe with me," she said. Unbidden warmth spread through her despite the cold, starting in her chest and spreading down her spine to her fingers and toes. There was something thrilling about being this man's confidant, even if it was only to keep a churn hidden.

Louisa climbed the stairs, Liam following, their steps light and quick to avoid waking the family. She tiptoed quickly to Aisling's door, then stopped as a sensation of being watched crept over her. She turned.

Liam stood at his bedroom door, eyes on her, a gentle smile on his lips.

"Goodnight, Louisa," he whispered.

"Goodnight," she said. She thanked the darkness that hid the blush rising in her cheeks, then slipped into Aisling's room, easing the door shut behind her swiftly and quietly.

She would have a good night's rest now. She was safe and warm, and, for the moment, in no danger of being handed over to Seamus. Perhaps her time waiting here until she found a way home would not be as bad as she feared after all.



Moonlight cascading through the small window of the landing cast an ethereal glow on Louisa's flaxen hair as she disappeared into Aisling's bedroom, as if she were a fairy beckoning Liam to follow.

*Calm yourself, boyo*, he told himself as his heart urged him to call to her. To spend the rest of the night until dawn in her company. Their conversation in the barn had been brief, but it had given him a glimpse of a Louisa so much at odds with the woman he had met the morning before. The woman he had thought arrogant and too proud to accept help, he now knew to be humble and frightened. He could hardly hold against her the pride and insults that had been born of self-preservation and defense.

He entered his room and flopped down on the bed, their conversation in the barn replaying in his head. If only she would trust them—trust him—enough to name her abductor. That deviant deserved to be locked away, but as long as Louisa refused to speak up, she would remain in danger. There was only one thing to do. He would have to get her home. Until then, he hoped she eventually trust him enough to protect her.

## Chapter 8

Louisa slid out of bed, testing the chilly floor with her toes before putting her heels down. Despite sleeping only a few hours, she had awoken with an abundance of energy, a determination to churn butter—it could not be that hard, right?—and a plan to get home. Liam’s ingenuity was infectious. Yesterday had been a catastrophe, yet now she felt a small fraction of the self-worth she had not felt since—well, she wasn’t sure when she last felt worthy of anything. Her family had certainly never given her much chance to develop confidence in herself. She was a female whose job was to keep quiet and not draw unwanted attention to the family. But that was in the past. She had a new life now, no matter how uncertain, and she was determined to make the most of it.

She threw on her dress and bounded down the stairs, the smell of frying sausages carrying her to the kitchen.

Fiona tossed her a smile. “You’re in a far happier mood than when we met yesterday. I trust you slept well.”

“Well enough.” Louisa sat down beside Aisling as Fiona placed a plate of sausages and a bowl of porridge in front of her. She dipped her spoon in, bringing up a mound of warm oats drizzled with honey. “This looks delicious.”

Fiona beamed then put her hands on her hips. “Ach! Where are those men? Their breakfast will be stone cold if they don’t come soon.”

“‘Twill be all right, Ma. Nobody ever died from eating cold porridge,” Aisling said.

“That’s because no one wants to eat cold, congealed oats in the first place. And I cannot keep it on the heat. ‘Twill burn.” Fiona peered out the window and nodded. “Grand.”

Fiona finished filling four plates and bowls with breakfast as the men filed in and sat down. Louisa took in Liam’s scent of damp earth after rain as he took his place beside her. The memory of last night, him sharing his

invention with her, came back to her, and tingles ran down her spine.

“Did you finally get some sleep?” he asked.

“A little. You?”

He shrugged. “‘Bout an hour’s worth. Work starts early on a farm.”

“What’s all this?” Fiona sat down, her eyes wide with concern. “Was the bed not comfortable? Did Aisling take up too much room?” She tossed her daughter a reproofing look.

Louisa shook her head. “I had plenty of room, and the bed was quite soft. My mind simply would not quiet.”

That seemed to satisfy Fiona, but the rest of the table stared between Louisa and Liam. Smirks spread on the twins’ lips and they exchanged knowing glances.

“How do you know she couldn’t sleep?” Rory asked, wiggling his eyebrows.

Louisa’s cheeks burned hotter than her porridge. She was already ruined by society’s standards, but she did not need the O’Sheas thinking her a woman of loose morals.

“Mind yourself.” Liam leveled a glare at his brother. “Nothing improper happened. We crossed paths last night.”

Louisa sighed inwardly. He was not about to discuss the details of her embarrassment, even if it had resulted from the twins’ decision to tie a rat to the roof of the barn. If it had not been for them, the rat would not have chewed through the rope and leaped onto her in the middle of the night. And she would never have sent a tower of crates crashing down.

Liam fell back into eating his breakfast.

Fiona nodded. “I had hoped you’d sleep soundly, but I cannot blame you. I suppose today we ought to come up with a plan to get you home. Then maybe you might get a proper rest tonight, knowing all’s in hand.”

Louisa took up her napkin and dabbed at her mouth. “Actually, I have already come up with a plan. It came to me

just before I drifted off. I think it best if I write to my friends back home for aid.”

“Why don’t you write to your family?” Aisling asked.

Louisa pressed her lips together and her shoulders slumped forward as she fought the urge to leave the room, something she had too often done as a child. She forced herself to look at Aisling, accepting the fact that not all secrets could be kept.

“I am an orphan.” She let the silence and the crackling hearth fire punctuate her sentence as she decided how much to explain. “Prior to my abduction, I was living off the charity of my friend Nora. I hate to depend so much on others, but I fear it will take too long to earn enough money myself to secure passage to England.”

There were those pitying stares again, and a lump formed in her throat.

“I think that is the best course of action,” Diarmuid said, offering a consoling smile. “The wisest people are those who ask for help.”

“I can take you into town to post your letter, if you don’t mind going on a delivery with me,” Liam said. “Mrs. Sheehan ordered extra milk for her egnog.”

Louisa’s heart gave a little leap at the thought of riding alongside Liam in the family’s cart, just the two of them. No chaperone. She pinched her thigh under the table and chastised herself for the thought. A woman in her position had no business entertaining the thought of going anywhere alone with a man who was not her kin.

Aisling bounced on her seat. “Oh, is Mrs. Sheehan making egnog for the céilí?”

“Aye,” Liam nodded. “Like always.”

“What is a céilí?” Louisa asked. Aisling had mentioned the term the day before, but Louisa had not wanted to ask. Now that there seemed to be one in her future, she needed to know, no matter how ignorant she might appear.

“‘Tis like a ball, but much less formal,” Rian said through a mouth full of porridge. “The Millers host it every year.”

“And ‘tis a grand affair. Us poor Catholics wouldn’t be able to put together such a fancy céilí without the Millers’ wealth and resources,” Rory said, acid in his tone. “That’s the benefit of having English blood and being Protestant in this country.”

“Now, no need for that attitude, boyo,” Diarmuid said. He pointed his spoon at Rory and gave him a sharp look. “The Millers have been kind to all of us. There be no need for grinding our teeth at people who done no wrong. Their ancestry may well have given them a leg up, but Old Man Miller and his sons work just as hard as anyone. Besides, you seem to forget our guest is Protestant.”

“Sorry, miss. I didn’t mean to offend you,” Rory muttered. He lowered his gaze to his plate and stabbed at a sausage.

“I did not take offense,” Louisa said. Whether Rory heard her, she could not tell, for Rory only popped another piece of sausage in his mouth, and silence fell over the table.

After a moment, Liam cleared his throat. “The morning chores are done. We can leave as soon as you’re ready.”

Louisa pushed her dishes away. “I’m ready to go as soon as I’ve helped clean up.”

“Don’t worry yourself about that.” Fiona rose and began collecting empty plates and bowls. “I need some things from town, by the way. Be a couple of dears and pick them up for me? I’d go meself, but I have a chore list as long as a county road.”

“What is it you need?” Liam asked.

“Some fabric and notions for ladies’ clothes from your Aunt Cara’s shop. Miss Louisa will ruin that beautiful silk dress if she keeps wearing it. Enough for three dresses ought to do. Two for everyday wear and a nicer material for a

Sunday dress. Oh, and she'll be needing her own night shift, too. And you might see if you can find her a warm coat."

Liam pulled at his earlobe, the edges of his mouth turning down.

"Don't worry." Fiona laughed at the worry on her son's face. "You won't be needing to pick out the material yourself. Cara will help you. Louisa, feel free to choose the colors and patterns you like. Cara knows our usual budget and will steer you to the right fabrics. And she's me sister, so you can count on her to treat you as one of the family." Fiona gave a wink.

Louisa nodded. She did not wish to offend Fiona by refusing her generosity, but the thought of the O'Sheas spending their hard-earned money on clothes for her sank like a stone in her stomach. Even the most inexpensive fabrics still cost a fair sum.

"Is there anything else?" Liam asked. The unease had left his face.

"No." Fiona grabbed up the stack of bowls. "Wait. Yes, actually. My second butter churn is missing. I've searched high and low. I hate to spend the money, knowing 'twill turn up eventually, but in the meantime, I need an extra one to keep up with our orders."

Louisa exchanged glances with Liam, and he gave her a wink. Her stomach fluttered, and it took every ounce of control to keep from smiling.

"I'll see if I can find one decently priced," Liam said. He turned to Louisa. "Are you ready?"

"Just a moment." Now was the perfect time to propose how she could help pull her weight around here. Giving reading and writing lessons was certainly beneficial in the long run, but it would not earn the O'Sheas any extra income. Churning butter would. How hard could it be?

"Fiona," she said, "I've been giving some thought to how I can earn my keep—"

"Oh, don't worry about that, dear," Fiona cut in.

“But I want to. I don’t know when I will be able to return home, so while I am here, I want to do my part. I do not wish to be a financial burden. Please, let me help.”

Fiona opened her mouth as if to protest, then closed it and gave a gentle nod. “What is it you have a mind to do?”

“I thought I might churn butter. It seems straightforward enough, and I could help you produce more to sell.”

Fiona smiled. “I think that is a grand plan, and we can always use an extra pair of hands. Bless you.”

Liam moved to the coat rack by the door, and Aisling whispered something into his ear. He gave a nod and shrugged on his coat.

“Well, if that’s settled,” Liam said as he held Aisling’s coat open for Louisa, “we’d best get going.”

As Louisa slipped her arms into the sleeves, a wave of tingles rushed through her. She was going into Kinsale, with a handsome man, without a chaperone. Oh, how the gossiping tongues of London would flap if they knew. She laughed inwardly. Being in a single man’s company without a guardian was nothing compared to what had already been said about her. Still, a certain amount of propriety was to be expected. The only thing keeping her from caring about her reputation here was the fact that, eventually, she would return home, and her time in Ireland would be but an increasingly fond memory.



Liam helped Louisa up onto the seat of the cart he had already loaded with Mrs. Sheehan's order. Then he climbed up beside her and gave Mollie's reins a gentle whip. As the cart lunged forward, Louisa scooted closer to him. A pleasant tremor ran through him at the touch of her thigh against his, and he shook his shoulders. If she sat any further from the edge of her seat, she would be in his lap. A look of concentration furrowed her brow, and she gripped the bench on either side of her knees, as if terrified she might fall. She must have only ever ridden in carriages with proper sides and doors. No wonder she had scooted closer.

"So, churning butter?" he said, hoping to distract her.

Louisa shrugged a shoulder. "It does not seem that difficult."

"It takes muscle."

Her eyebrows drew together. "Are you implying I lack muscles?" She flexed her bicep, causing no discernable rise in her coat sleeve. A smile broke out and she laughed.

Liam joined in her laughter. Up to this moment, Louisa had waffled between frightened and reserved, and though she was clearly kind and desired to show her appreciation at every turn, her personality had been, well, boring. He liked this

lighter side to her. There was something irresistible about a woman who could laugh at herself.

Louisa's shoulders relaxed. "I expect every job to have at least some difficulty, but churning butter seems not to require much prior knowledge or special skill."

"Aye, that much is true," Liam said. Louisa could take on the task easily enough, but she did not know the aching pain that awaited her arms and back, and the blisters she was sure to rub into her tender, uncalloused hands. He wanted to warn her but changed the subject instead. He did not wish to demean her.

"So, what will be tonight's reading lesson?"

Louisa drummed her fingers on the bench. After a minute, she finally answered. "I will teach the letters *E*, *O*, *N*, and *T*."

"I look forward to it." He gave her a genuine smile. Ahead, the rooftops of Wexford came into view, but only he noticed.

Louisa kept her head turned toward him, studying him. "Your parents mentioned you started learning to read. How much do you remember?"

He shrugged. "Not much. I know the vowels and most of the consonants. I can read a few single syllable words, but that's it. 'Tis the same for Ma and Da." He huffed a half laugh. "We're lucky to know how to spell our names."

Louisa pursed her lips as if in thought. "Well, if I prove to be a good teacher, you all will do much more than that. I hope."

Liam resisted patting her arm, puzzling over his instinct for such familiarity. "I have the utmost confidence in you."

Louisa gave a faint smile, and they rode in silence until they reached the post office.

The bell above the door jingled as they entered. The postmaster—a short, lanky man graying at his temples—stood

from his chair in the corner where he had been napping.

“Morning, O’Rourke,” Liam said.

O’Rourke returned the greeting, and his brow furrowed. “What can I do for you?”

Liam and his family rarely set foot in the post office. Being illiterate, they rarely needed to send correspondence, and their customers always placed orders directly, which he and his father took down in their own shorthand code.

Liam nodded his head toward Louisa. “This lady needs to send a letter to England.”

O’Rourke’s eyes flitted over her briefly. “Can she write?”

“She can,” Louisa said, her chin raised in indignation.

Liam bit back a smirk. O’Rourke had never been known for his positive view of women. Watching one stand up to him—especially a woman as petite as Louisa—was refreshing. O’Rourke’s demeaning treatment of his own wife made most women cower in his presence, afraid of being accused of sentimentality or stupidity. O’Rourke clearly had not been prepared for this petite lass to fire back. He leaned back, his brows raised for a moment before he resumed his business-as-usual look.

“Very well.” He addressed her. “Will you be needing to write your letter here, or do you have it already?”

“I will need stationery for three letters, if it does not cost too much?” She directed the question at Liam. “I do not know if my friend will be at her home in Abergreen or in London, and I wish to send a letter to our mutual friend, Clarissa, in case Nora receives neither of my letters.”

“Of course.” Liam dug enough money out of his pocket to cover the stationery and postage, and O’Rourke laid the paper on the counter along with a quill and ink well.

Louisa made quick work of her letters. Each note contained only a few lines, just enough information for her friends to find her, Liam guessed. Then she folded the letters

and sealed them with wax. When it had dried, she carefully penned the addresses of the destinations.

She had such a delicate script, and for a moment, Liam imagined her penning a letter to him, her dainty hand penning *Dearest Liam*. He dismissed the indulgent thought. He hardly knew Louisa Gaultney, and here he was, imagining tender correspondences.

He turned to examine a rack of magazines by the window. One day, he would know enough to read the articles instead of simply examining the illustrations, wishing he did not have to rely on others to read them to him.

“I’m finished, Mr. O’Rourke.” Louisa slid her letters, splayed like a fan, across the counter, and O’Rourke lifted himself from his chair.

Liam scanned the letters, then he did a double take at Louisa’s name on the return address. While he was far from being literate, he was pretty sure Gaultney did not begin with an *E*. Why would she write a different name? Had she lied? He opened his mouth to ask, then thought better of it. Her trust in him was already fragile. Questioning her about her name might only make her put back up the shield she had begun to lower. Perhaps in time she would tell the truth.

O’Rourke placed the letters in a box. “I should tell you, your letters won’t go to England ‘til after St. Stephen’s Day. ‘Tis when the next ship contracted to take post will sail.”

Louisa’s brow furrowed. “St. Stephen’s Day?”

“The day after Christmas. ‘Tis an Irish holiday,” Liam said, and Louisa’s face relaxed, though disappointment touched her eyes.

“I suppose I can wait a few more days,” she said. “I cannot imagine any sailor would fancy being away from home at Christmas.” She dipped a small curtsey, thanking O’Rourke, then headed for the door.

Once outside, she took a breath and released it slowly.

“Are you all right?” Liam placed a hand on her shoulder.

She gave a quick nod, though she made no move to brush his hand away. Still, Liam let his hand fall to his side.

“I’m fine. I just... I don’t know. I guess in all the chaos that is my life, I forgot about Christmas being so near.”

Liam helped her up into the cart. “Will this be your first Christmas away from your family?” He settled on the bench and clicked his tongue, signaling Mollie to walk. Louisa had mentioned she was an orphan, and the way she had spoken of her friends led him to assume she had not been on her own very long.

“Yes,” she said. “My mother always made sure Christmas was a grand affair. It was always about extravagance more than family or Christ for her. But my brother did his best to make this time of year special for me. He always felt my birthday got overshadowed by the holiday, so he made it a point to give me a special gift each year. It was his way of making me feel important. I will miss him the most this year.”

Liam’s heart twinged. “It sounds as if you two were close.”

She gave a small nod and pulled an oval filagree locket hanging on a thin gold chain from beneath her scarf. Louisa opened the clasp, revealing two miniature pencil sketches inside.

“That’s my brother, Patrick. He gave me this locket for my birthday last year. He drew our portraits himself.” A thin sheen of tears welled in her eyes and she blinked, clearing any evidence that she had not had her emotions under control.

“He looks like a very loving brother. If you don’t mind me asking, what happened to your family?” He knew he was pushing his luck, but the unshed tears in her eyes prompted the question. He could not feign indifference when she was clearly distressed. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her.

She clutched it, wringing the soft square of cotton in her hands. “It’s too painful to talk about.”

Liam shifted in his seat. He half-expected she would not wish to discuss her family, but that did not lessen the uncomfortable silence that hovered between them. He sighed when he pulled Mollie to a stop outside of Mrs. Sheehan's confectionary shop, thankful he finally had something to say.

"I'll only be a minute." He climbed down from the wagon and grabbed two milk canisters. Louisa dabbed at her eyes with the handkerchief, and Liam's stomach knotted. He could not leave her like this, crying alone, even for a few minutes. He set the canisters down and came to her side.

"You mentioned your birthday always got overshadowed by Christmas. When is it?" The question might well break her even more, but perhaps he could bring her some joy.

She sniffed and her lower lip trembled. "It was yesterday."

Liam's eyes widened. Yesterday. The same day she had escaped her abductor, alone and frightened in a new land, far from home. What could he possibly say that would make her feel better? He gave a nod and rounded the cart. This conversation was only growing more painful with each second, and he was not about to draw it out any longer.

"Oy, O'Shea!" a voice called from up the street.

Seamus Cotter meandered toward them, one hand in his pocket, the other waving. A grin lit his bearded face.

"Hello, Seamus. Bit busy at the moment." He hefted the canisters, tightening his grip so as not to drop them.

"I won't keep you." Seamus's gaze slid to Louisa. "I only wanted to know who the pretty little lass is."

Liam groaned inwardly. Grand. The last man on earth Liam would ever want to introduce Louisa—or any lady—to was staring her down like a fine cut of lamb. Still, to ignore the question would be the height of rudeness. Seamus was one of his family's best customers, providing a third of their orders of cheese and butter.

“This is Miss Louisa Gaultney, from England. She is staying with my family. Louisa, this is Seamus Cotter.”

Seamus’s smirk grew broader. Liam stiffened, torn between delivering Mrs. Sheehan’s order on time and protecting Louisa from whatever advances or prying questions Seamus might inflict. He cleared his throat.

“I’ll be right back,” he said pointedly at Seamus, then let himself into Mrs. Sheehan’s shop. If he was lucky, the woman would let him get back to Louisa as quickly as possible.



A lump grew in Louisa’s throat as she watched the confectionary door swing shut behind Liam. *Come back. Don’t leave me with him.* Her heart hammered a frenetic beat against her ribs. Surely Seamus would not snatch her here, when Liam was mere steps away and returning soon.

Seamus leaned against the cart, arms folded on the edge of the bench seat. His grin spread into a leer, revealing yellow teeth. “So, Miss *Gaultney*, is it? Be you so ashamed of your family that you had to use a false name?”

Louisa dug her fingernails into the wood bench and gritted her teeth. “Leave me be, before I go to the magistrate and tell him of your crimes.”

He let out a throaty chuckle, quiet but deep. “You won’t be telling the magistrate anything, lass. If you had any intention of going to him, you would’ve already, and I’d be in the clink. Yet, here I am.” He spread his arms out, gesturing to the street.

Louisa kept her eyes trained on Mollie’s mane, refusing to meet Seamus’s gaze. “You are quite bold to assume I won’t report you.”

“I’m not assuming. I know. You would have had me arrested if you thought you would get justice, but these are my people, and you know it. Besides, if you went to the magistrate, you’d have to admit your real name and the reason I took you.” He reached out and stroked a finger along her knuckles.

Ice ran through Louisa’s veins, and she pulled her hand back.

“What would the O’Sheas think of you then? They are good Catholics not in the habit of mixing with criminals and their spawn.”

She met his gaze, heat blazing in her face at his insult. “They are not so opposed to *criminals* as you think. After all, you and Liam seemed to be rather friendly yesterday morning.” She cringed as the last words left her lips. She had known the O’Sheas only twenty-four hours, yet she knew they were not the sort to turn a blind eye to crime.

Seamus shrugged. “Liam would be civil to his enemies—if he has any. Besides, our relationship is one of business. I buy butter and cheese for my crew from his farm.”

Louisa said nothing as her mind spun with what-ifs. She could throw caution to the wind and trust the O’Sheas with the truth, tell them everything, hoping they would forgive her for her lies and help her see Seamus locked away. Their

pity for her might extend as far as understanding why she kept the truth of her family secret.

Seamus's eyes narrowed. "I see those wheels turning, lass. Now you are thinking you'll tell Liam all about our adventures, but I'll warn you." He held up a finger. "A fair portion of their income comes from my orders. Imagine the burden you would place on them if I could no longer buy from them." He raised a second finger. "Plus, Liam has been burned by women of bad stock before. Right now, he thinks you a damsel in distress, but if he learns the sort of family you come from, he'll want no more to do with you than a flea in his shirt. I know Liam well enough to tell you that much."

Louisa raised her chin, staring down her nose at Seamus, affecting a confidence she lacked completely. "Why should I believe a word that passes your lying lips?"

"I think the better question is, can you afford not to believe me?"

Louisa swallowed the truth of that statement like a seagull trying to choke down a whale. She had no idea what to believe about the O'Sheas, and until she knew them better—if she ever got the chance to know them better—she had to keep her secrets.

Seamus smiled and gave her hand a firm squeeze, reading her thoughts again. "There's a good lass. Don't you worry. You keep me secret, and I'll keep yours. We're square."

Louisa jerked her hand back and gave a tiny nod as the door to Mrs. Sheehan's shop opened with a jingle of the bell. What choice did she have? To give any other answer would only provoke Seamus. By agreeing to this strange sort of truce, she hoped she was being afforded some protection, or at least a reprieve, while Seamus knew nothing of her plans.

She took a shaking breath and forced a smile as Liam returned to the cart carrying two packages, one smaller than the other, and climbed onto the seat.

"All right?" he asked.

Before she could answer, Seamus rapped his knuckles on the cart. “Of course she’s all right. With Seamus Cotter for company, how could she not be?” He flashed a cheery grin and tipped his cap. “It was lovely to meet you, Miss Gaultney. I’ll be seeing you.” His eyes met Liam’s on that last statement, yet Louisa knew it had been meant for her. A shock of cold tingles, like tiny fingers of ice, cascaded over her body.

“He’s a bit rough around the edges, but he’s one of our best customers,” Liam said.

Louisa gave a noncommittal nod. That was at least one of Seamus’s claims proved true. She eyed the two boxes neatly tied with red ribbon. “What are those?” She was eager to change the subject, to restore the easy conversation with which they had begun their journey.

Liam tapped the lid of the first box. “This is a Christmas cake Ma had ordered. Ma’s cakes are some of the best around, but she is addicted to Mrs. Sheehan’s.”

He set it in the cart, wedging it in the center of four empty milk cans.

“And this one,” he held up the smaller box as if it were a trophy, “is for you. Happy belated birthday.”

Butterflies flitted in Louisa’s chest, and she felt herself melting into the seat as she took the small box. “Thank you. You shouldn’t have.” She fingered the ribbon.

“I wanted to.” He nodded to the box. “Open it.”

She tugged at the ribbon, letting it slither onto her lap, and lifted the lid. Liam leaned toward her. Whatever it was, he was obviously eager to see her reaction.

Inside the box sat four dark chocolate truffles nestled in paper. She picked one up and took a bite, letting the blend of bitter tang and sweetness melt over her tongue. A soft moan escaped her lips as she closed her eyes, savoring the flavor. She had only tasted chocolate this smooth once before, when her parents’ French chef had made chocolates for her brother’s wedding reception. The reception that never happened because Nora had abandoned Patrick at the altar. After learning of her

grandfather's death and her father and brother's arrests that same day, Louisa had hidden in her bedroom with the tray of chocolates, compulsively eating them until she was nauseated.

"Good?" Liam's voice snapped her back to the present.

"Delicious." She popped the rest of the truffle in her mouth and offered the box to him.

He smiled, a gleam in his eye, and shook his head. "They're all for you. I don't much care for chocolate. Now, I believe we have a few more errands to run. Are you ready to do some shopping?"

"Always." Shopping had always been a favorite activity, even if she couldn't afford the finest gowns and accessories.

Liam winked. "I'm glad, because I am going to need your help at my aunt's shop. I dare not attempt to choose fabrics for your new clothes."

Louisa popped another chocolate into her mouth. "Surely you do not have such terrible taste in fashion."

"In men's clothing, I'm decent. But I confess I don't know the difference between cotton and muslin."

Louisa bit her bottom lip to hide her smile. "Muslin is cotton."

"You see?" Liam raised a hand. "I'm hopeless."

"Then it is most fortunate I am here, if for nothing more than to save you embarrassment."

Liam tugged on the reins, pulling Mollie to a stop in front of Aunt Cara's dress shop. "I suppose I shall have to let you do all the talking, then."

Louisa schooled her face into mock seriousness. "I think that best." She stepped down from the cart, clinging to the side, before Liam could help her. She knew she should wait for him, but how often did a young woman in her newly impoverished situation get to shop for fabric for new dresses, even the least expensive? She would enjoy this day, and not even her encounter with Seamus would ruin it.

## Chapter 9

The legs of the old, well-worn chair groaned as Liam sat down, content to stay out of the way as Louisa chose her fabrics. Most of Aunt Cara Fitz Stephen's customers purchased full ensembles ready to be worn, but for her family, she sold the uncut fabric and notions at a discount. That was one perk of having a seamstress for an aunt. Rather than follow in her older sister Fiona's footsteps and marry a laborer, Aunt Cara had opted to marry a merchant. It had been over ten years since Uncle John had passed from consumption, and Liam often wondered if Aunt Cara would ever marry again. She and Uncle John had been deeply in love, and though he had died before they had been married two years, they had formed the sort of bond often found only between those happy couples who had been married for decades. Liam could only hope he would one day find a love as deep and abiding as the one Aunt Cara had had, and the one his parents shared.

"Now, Miss Gaultney," Aunt Cara said as she guided Louisa around the shop, "any fabric you see out here on the floor I have available in back on the bolt." She swept her hand toward one side of the shop. "Over there are the silks, and over here are the muslins. And if you see nothing that strikes your fancy on the mannequins, I have a book of swatches you can choose from." She led Louisa to the back counter separating the front of the shop from the back room, and hefted a thick, leather-bound book onto the counter.

Louisa nodded and circled the mannequins draped in muslin gowns and skirts. "This one is quite pretty." She touched the edge of one with white flowers and snaking vines.

Aunt Cara nodded her approval. "That one is quite popular. I am not surprised at your choosing it. Though, I must say, you will look exceptionally angelic in it, what with your fair hair and complexion. It should have quite an effect on your eyes, too. Don't you agree, Liam?" She had pulled the dress from the mannequin and draped it in front of Louisa.

Liam's heart thumped in his throat and his mouth grew dry. The light from the window cascaded over Louisa, casting her golden locks in an ethereal glow. Angelic was an understatement. Divine was the more apt descriptor.

Aunt Cara chuckled and tossed the dress back over the mannequin. "My, I dare say you've rendered me nephew speechless."

Color rose in Louisa's cheeks and she headed to the book of swatches, turning her back on Liam.

He gave his aunt a scolding look, but Aunt Cara only smirked and pointed a finger at him—her way of saying she knew his mind. She might know what he was thinking—her perceptiveness was what made her such a good saleswoman—but she did not need to embarrass Louisa.

He rose from his chair with a sardonic smile and motioned for her to follow him to the furthest corner of the shop. He steeled himself for the ribbing his aunt would give him as he puzzled out the best way to phrase his request.

"Listen." He bent his head close to her ear. "The Christmas Eve céilí is coming up, and Aisling wants to customize a dress for Louisa for the occasion. I've agreed to pay for a pre-made gown, but Aisling wants it to be a surprise."

Aunt Cara nodded. "What sort of fabric and style did you have in mind?"

Liam shrugged. "I was hoping you would do the choosing. I can't afford silk, so a nice quality muslin will have to do." He smiled at himself for his use of the word muslin, especially considering he had only just learned its meaning that morning."

Aunt Cara patted his shoulder. "I'll do for you, never you worry." She headed back to Louisa. "Well, Miss Gaultney, have you chosen what you want for your day dresses?"

As Louisa showed Aunt Cara two fabrics she had picked out, Liam wandered among the silk gowns. Such fine material his mother and sister could never hope to afford. Even

Aunt Cara did not wear silk—as far as he knew—despite her having her own shop. He remembered the way Aisling had stared at Louisa’s gown, and his heart sank at knowing he could never afford such finery. Not for his mother, nor his sister, nor whatever woman he ended up marrying. Not that it would really matter. The woman he married would be from a humble family like his own. She would not be an upper-class lass like Louisa. For what woman used to silk, fine houses, and time to devote to earning an education would ever want a farmer for a husband?

“Liam!”

He startled and spun to face his aunt. She and Louisa stared at him. Aunt Cara’s hands were planted on her hips.

“Have you come back to us now?”

Liam rubbed the back of his neck. How long had they been trying to get his attention? He gave a small nod.

Cara relaxed her stance. “I was saying, if you have other errands, feel free to run them. Miss Gaultney needs to pick out notions and undergarments, and I still need to cut the material. It will take at least twenty minutes to finish up here.”

Liam ran his fingers through his hair. He did still need to buy another butter churn, and the last place he needed to be was in a ladies’ shop, sitting awkwardly in a corner while his aunt and Louisa discussed petticoats and whatever other undergarments ladies wore.

“Aye. I’ll come back for you, then.” He gave a quick bow to Louisa and ducked out into the street. Sea air blew in from the bay, and he gulped it in, allowing the weight of his thoughts to drift away. Out here in the open air he could think straight, free his mind of any foolish notions of marrying fine ladies, and focus his attention on his duties.

## Chapter 10

Louisa sighed as the low stone wall bordering the O'Shea farm came into view. A blustery wind had plagued them on their drive back, and her nose and cheeks were nearly frozen despite the scarf she had wrapped around her face. In minutes, she would be back in the cottage, warming herself by the hearth.

The cottage door swung open as they pulled into the yard, and Aisling bounded out. "Did you get the material?" She did not wait for an answer but climbed up into the back of the cart and grabbed the wood crate Aunt Cara had packed with Louisa's new fabrics, nightdress, front-lacing corset, ribbons, and a mysterious package Cara had wrapped in paper with only "For me sister" as an explanation.

It was likely nothing of real importance. Yet Louisa wondered what would require such discreet packaging when her own undergarments had been laid with her other things in the box.

Aisling pried off the lid and lifted the robin's egg blue material out. "Oh, this is beautiful! I cannot wait to get started."

Louisa laughed. The girl really was enthusiastic, and Louisa wondered why Aisling didn't help in her aunt's shop. There was no denying her passion for fashion, and it seemed almost a tragedy the girl's life revolved around the work of a dairy farm.

Liam shooed his sister away and hauled the box from the cart. "You might wait 'til I get it inside before tearing everything out."

Aisling flicked a dismissive wave as she headed back into the cottage.

Louisa had barely finished removing her coat when Aisling came from the parlor, sewing basket in hand. Then Aisling was at Louisa's side, measuring every inch of her. On a fresh piece of paper, Aisling had sketched out the rough form

of a woman, and now she wrote each of Louisa's measurements—bust, waist, hip, inseam—beside its corresponding part of the sketch.

“Aisling, dear.” Fiona gave an exasperated sigh. “You might let the lass relax first.”

“I don't mind,” Louisa said. In truth, she was as excited to have new clothes as Aisling was to make them, even though guilt over where the money for fabric came from plagued her.

“Hear that, Ma? She doesn't mind. Besides, I'm already done.” Aisling stuffed the paper and measuring tape back in the sewing basket, then dragged the crate of fabric into the parlor. “I'm going to get started right away.”

Fiona shook her head and grinned. “I expected no less. That girl has been looking out the window all day, waiting for you to return. Any chance she gets to do a bit of sewing or embroidery, and all else falls to the wayside.”

“Her enthusiasm is admirable,” Louisa said. “I wonder what she'd be like if she had the chance to work in your sister's shop.” Perhaps a little encouragement from an outsider would help Aisling get closer to her dream.

Fiona busied herself washing a batch of kale and laying it aside to dry. “Aye, she'd love nothing more than that, as well would Cara, but we need Aisling here. There is too much work, and I cannot spare her for even one day a week.”

Louisa nodded and let the issue drop. She knew her place, and it was not meddling in the affairs of families she would only be with for a short while.

“Oh, Liam. Your father and brothers are mending the wall east of the barn,” Fiona said as Liam carried in the new churn.

“Aye, 'bout time. 'Tis been needing mending nigh on two weeks.” Liam set down the churn and slipped out through the back door.

Fiona inspected the new churn and gave an approving nod. “So, what did you think of me sister's shop? I trust you

found some things you liked.”

Louisa hummed her agreement, unsure what to say. As much as she had tried to convince herself it was only practical to let the O’Sheas provide her with clothes—they wouldn’t offer unless they could afford it, right?—knowing she was costing them money they might not usually spend weighed heavy like a stone in her gut. “‘Tis a fine shop. I was quite impressed at the embroidery,” she finally managed.

“Cara has a fine eye and a steady hand for detail. I used to help her, before I had the twins, but now I barely have time to do the extra mending I take on for the older people in town who can’t do their own. Either their sight has gone or their hands are too shaky to avoid stabbing themselves with a needle. But Aisling has learned embroidery. Her work rivals some of the best in the trade.”

“I’d very much like to see it.” Louisa had no doubt Aisling’s embroidery would be exceptional after seeing the girl’s dresses.

“I expect you will. Aisling is sure to put some little embellishment on at least one of your dresses. Well, are you ready to learn how to make butter?” Fiona hefted over a can of milk that sat beside the back door.

Louisa nodded and peered into the can as Fiona set the lid aside.

“First,” Fiona said as she took a ladle from a drawer of kitchen utensils, “you must scoop the cream into the churn.” She pressed the bottom of the ladle into the golden cream, tipping it slightly so the liquid seeped into the small bowl. Then she brought it back up and poured the cream into the bottom of the churn. “You must be careful to get just the cream and leave the milk behind.” She handed the utensil to Louisa. “Give it a try.”

Louisa copied Fiona, collecting the thick, rich cream and transferring it to the churn, careful not to spill one precious drop.

Fiona nodded her approval, and Louisa continued until only faint wisps of cream swirled on top of the milk. She smiled, pleased that she had done this much without making a mess of the job.

“Well done,” Fiona said. “That was the easy part.” She placed the dasher in the churn’s barrel and set on the lid. “The churning itself is not difficult, but it gives your muscles quite the workout, especially if you’re not used to it.” She grabbed the top of the dasher with both hands and spread her feet wide, standing close to the base of the churn. “You can stand or sit, whichever is comfortable. All you need to do is pump the dasher up and down. It’ll take a while before the butter forms, but once it does, you’ll feel it harder to press the dasher into it.” She let go of the wood dowel. “Any questions?”

Louisa took hold of the dasher and pumped. “It seems simple enough.”

Up, down, up, down, up, down. A few minutes passed. Louisa smiled to herself. What had Liam and Fiona been on about? She had been dashing the cream for at least five minutes and hardly broken a sweat.

Fiona glanced up from her growing pile of kale and chopped potatoes. “You need to pick up the pace a bit. It’ll never be butter at that rate.”

Louisa pumped faster. “Like this?”

Fiona nodded.

Almost as soon as she had increased her speed, heat built in her upper arms and back. Seconds later, the heat had built into a searing pain. Louisa swore she could feel the muscle fibers tearing into millions of tiny shreds.

She let go of the dasher and shook her arms and shoulders.

“You’re hurting already?” Fiona failed to hide her grin.

“Not too bad,” Louisa lied. She was not about to seem weak, not any more than her failed attempt to draw water from the well and her lovely compost incident had already made her out to be.

Fiona chuckled and threw a handful of potatoes into the cast iron cauldron she had set on the table.

Louisa resumed churning, determined to finish the job, no matter the pain, without complaint. Immediately her muscles tensed, the searing pain resuming, this time spreading up her shoulder blades into her neck and down her spine. Minutes later, her arms shook with the effort, begging her to stop. She took a breath and pushed it out as she plunged the dasher down, a new heat building on her palms.

Wonderful! She would have blisters before the job was done. And when would she be done? In all the discomfort, it was impossible to tell if the cream was solidifying, or if the pain in her muscles had made it increasingly difficult to lift and push the dasher.

Louisa glanced at the clock on top of the dresser that held the dishes. Fifteen minutes had passed. “How long does it take before the butter forms?”

Fiona glanced at the clock. Her eyebrows rose. “Oh, it should already be done.” She bustled over to the churn and lifted the lid. She gave a nod and grabbed a mesh spoon, and scooped a yellow, fist-sized clump out. “You did a good job. Look at that.” She laid the golden butter on a piece of parchment paper and wrapped it.

Louisa raised an eyebrow. “That’s it?” Only a small ball of butter to show for her effort?

“Aye, and the buttermilk. We bottle that up and sell it, too.”

Louisa peered into the churn. A tart-smelling milk sat at the bottom. So that was what buttermilk smelled like. She had only ever had breads and pastries baked with it. How interesting that something with such a peculiar odor could add such a savory flavor.

Fiona spooned the buttermilk out, depositing it into an empty milk canister, then opened another milk can. “What do you say? You up for more churning?”

Louisa's palms and fingers burned where blisters were forming, but she could not say no. Churning had been her idea, and, like it or not, her delicate hands would blister.

"Of course." She skimmed the cream off the top of the new can of milk and got to work, gritting her teeth as the dasher resumed its own work tenderizing her hands. Can after can, she skimmed and churned—five in all. By the time Louisa had finished, Fiona had set the table for dinner.

Louisa stretched her back, willing the aches away to no avail. It had taken just under an hour to churn butter from the five six-gallon milk cans. It was no wonder Liam had invented his churning machine, and the sooner he gifted it to his mother, the better.

Fiona scooped a portion of the fresh butter onto a plate and set it beside a warm loaf of soda bread. "I must say, I had me doubts about you churning the lot. You should be proud of yourself. Sit and rest a bit. I'm sure your back needs a break about now."

Louisa flopped down on the bench at the table. Blisters covered her fingers and the edges of her palms. "I don't think I fully appreciated before how grueling this work would be. Do you and Aisling churn that much every day?"

Fiona shook her head, a small smile playing on her lips. "Oh, no. That was just from our ten cans this morning. The cows get milked three times a day. Dawn, noon, and evening. And these wee little cans are nothing compared to what we usually store the milk in. Those hold twenty-five gallons. It takes every ounce of muscle me boys have to lift them."

Louisa's eyes widened as she calculated the weight of the twenty-five-gallon cans. Two hundred pounds! She had spotted several of the cans standing against the wall in the barn the night before, but she had hardly given them a thought, even when Liam had hefted one over to his churn. It was little wonder the Irish were known for being built for hard labor. None of the gentlemen she had known back home could have handled two-hundred-pound loads. But then, didn't a lack of

physical strength and muscular definition separate the *gentlemen* and *gentlewomen* from the rest of hardworking society?

Louisa laid her hands out on the table, blistered palms up, and shook her head, a bemused grin on her face. A few days ago, she would have been repulsed at the idea of having the slightest blemish on her skin. A lady of breeding did not get blisters, especially not ones related to hard work. But now, being torn away from everything that had made her Miss Louisa Easom—daughter of the highly respected, until recently, solicitor and barrister Graham Easom—she found something appealing about those repulsive, fluid-filled sacks, half of which were broken open and oozing. Pride at knowing these wounds resulted from honest work swelled her chest.

Fiona opened the back door and rang the bell to call the men in for dinner. A few minutes later, they tromped in, sweat soaking their collars despite the cold.

Diarmuid settled himself in his chair at the head of the table with a groan. “Well, the wall is mended. With luck, ‘twill stand for a hundred years.”

“Let’s hope so,” Fiona said. “We have enough to do without fixing knocked-down walls.” She set a dish of colcannon in front of her husband then filled six more bowls and set them around the table. “Aisling, supper’s on,” she called into the parlor. “Best leave that sewing for now, else your potatoes get cold.”

A muffled “In a minute” came from behind the closed parlor door, and moments later, Aisling emerged, a broad smile on her face.

“You’re going to love your new dresses,” she said as she slid onto the bench beside Louisa.

“Found material you like, did you?” Diarmuid shoveled a spoonful of colcannon into his mouth.

“I did.”

“She has excellent taste. I couldn’t have picked better fabric meself,” Aisling said.

“I’m glad you have a few projects to work on.” Diarmuid met Louisa’s eye. “Aisling is never happier than when she’s knee deep in fabric. Are you not hungry?” He gestured to her plate.

Louisa opened her mouth to reply, but Fiona cut her off.

“She’s waiting for grace to be said, like a good Christian.” Fiona narrowed her eyes at her husband.

Diarmuid gave a haughty sniff and laid his spoon down. “Not waiting for grace doesn’t make a bad Christian.” He folded his hands and gave the blessing on their meal, then dove back into his bowl.

Louisa took up her own spoon gingerly and grimaced. The slightest scrape of the handle on her fingers and palm sent a jolt of pain through her. There was no sense in switching hands, for her left was as bad as her right.

“Your hands hurt,” Liam said. It was not a question.

“I’m all right.” Louisa winced as she brought a spoonful of buttery potatoes and kale to her lips.

“Let me see.” He took the wrist of her other hand and turned her palm up, exposing the red welts.

A wave of tingles spread through her, easing her pain for the briefest of moments.

“‘Tisn’t too bad. ‘Twill heal quickly, but I’ve got something that will help.” He reached into his trousers pocket and pulled out a small, round tin. He pried off the lid and dipped his finger into what looked like candle wax. “This is a blend of beeswax and lard. Good for working hands.”

The scent of lavender met her nose as he caressed the salve onto her palms and fingers.

“It smells lovely.”

Liam nodded. “Fresh pressed lavender oil helps ease the burning.”

Tingles ran through her body at his gentle touch. Warmth grew in her chest, and she prayed it was not showing in her cheeks. If the touch of his calloused hands elicited this response, she could only imagine what effect his lips pressed against hers would have.

She blinked and pulled back. Where had that thought come from?

“I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?” Liam released her hand.

“No,” she mumbled. “My hand is only sore.”

“Aye. Well, the good news is, eventually you’ll build up enough callouses that you’ll stop blistering.”

Louisa grimaced. She could not imagine her hands permanently covered in thick, rough patches of skin. Perhaps she would be back home before any significant damage was done.

A dull ache settled in her chest at the thought, but whether it was at the prospect of going back to a home that was not truly hers or leaving this family that had so quickly welcomed her as if she were one of their own, she knew not.



Aisling placed a fresh block of turf on the fire in the parlor as Louisa pushed the ashes back, erasing the new letters and words she had taught. The O'Sheas were proving to be quick learners, but none were as eager as Diarmuid. Rather than writing his words in the ashes, he had used a pencil and the back of an old half-crumpled piece of paper. The sooner he got used to writing these words on paper, the easier it would be to pen his stories, he claimed.

Louisa settled back in her seat. What sort of tale would Diarmuid tell tonight? His story of the banshee had captivated her, yet she hoped tonight's tale and its characters would bear no resemblance to her.

Diarmuid rubbed his knees. "Well, now. What tale should I tell tonight? Should I tell you a story of high adventure? Perhaps of Oisín, Niamh, and the land of eternal youth? Or perhaps a tale a bit closer to our time. One from the county of me birth?"

"Oh! I love the stories from your childhood, Da," Aisling said. "They're always so romantic."

Rian chortled. "Romantic? What about that banshee story last night did you find romantic?"

Aisling crossed her arms. "Not all romantic stories end in a happily ever after. Some are tragically romantic."

Rian rolled his eyes. "I'd rather hear a story of a rollicking good time with the fae than one of a woman screeching for eternity."

Aisling conceded the point with a nod, then faced her father. "The story will at least have a happy ending, won't it, Da?"

Diarmuid touched the side of his nose and gave a wink. "Listen, and you'll find out."

Louisa straightened her shoulders, joining Aisling in her hopes. After last night's gloomy tale, a happy ending would be a welcome change.

Diarmuid rolled his shoulders back and cleared his throat. “Tonight, I shall tell you of the fae, a fiddle, and fate.”

# The Fairy Fiddle

By Diarmuid O'Shea

When I was but a wee lad living in County Cork, there was a man by the name of Killian O'Toole in our village who worked day and night. Worked his fingers to the bone, he did, doing odd jobs besides tending his own potato fields. And for all that work, he could just barely make rent.

Now, Killian O'Toole, he never made time for fun. When there was a céilí, he was never there, for he'd be on his way home from a job or fast asleep in his bed. And quite a disappointment that was to all the young lasses looking to marry. For Killian was one of the best looking and hardest working men in the county, and everyone knew he'd be a loyal and good provider. But the lasses' hopes and prayers were to no avail, owing to the fact he never had time for courting.

Well, one night, Killian was walking home later than usual. Must have been nigh on two in the morning, for that's the hour when these sorts of things happen. Well, he came to this crossroads, and what did he see but another traveler, this one wearing some of the finest clothes anyone ever saw. A velvet suit as dark blue as the midnight sky and flecked with bits of gold and silver. His lapel and sleeves were trimmed in silver cord, he wore jewels on every finger, and a large white feather stuck out of his velvet hat.

As Killian neared the center of the crossroads, this finely dressed traveler raised his hat and gave a nod. "Hello, there, Killian. We've been waiting for you," he said.

Now, Killian had never seen this fellow before, and there was no reason this man should know his name but for one reason. The fancy traveler was one of the good people, a fairy. And by the man's commanding presence and fine clothes, Killian was willing to bet he was a lord of the fae.

Killian stopped right where he was, for he knew crossing paths with a fairy could either be the best or the worst thing that ever happened to you.

The fairy snapped his fingers. “Come along, now. Best not to make us wait any longer.” And he stepped off the road into the field.

Killian stood there, scratching his head. Where the devil was the fairy going, walking out into an empty pasture? Then, as if his feet wanted to know the answer, Killian followed against his better judgement.

“Lord and the Saints, preserve me,” he muttered, for he knew not what end awaited him.

Killian followed for several minutes, and not once did the fairy look back to make sure the poor mortal was following. Probably because the fairy knew good and well Killian’s feet had given him no choice. Neither did the fairy speak until several more minutes had passed.

“Ah, here we are.” The fairy stopped and pointed ahead of them.

“Where?” Killian said, but he didn’t need to wait for the answer, for suddenly there was a large, round mound Killian could have sworn hadn’t been there a minute ago. In the center of the mound was an open doorway with light streaming out into the darkness.

The fairy lord gave him a hearty thump on the shoulder and gestured toward the opening. “After you.”

Killian knew better than to say no, so in he went, heart pounding against his ribs and sweat beading his brow. Down a long tunnel, deep into the earth, he and the fairy descended until they came into a great hall lined with marble columns. Tapestries hung on the walls, tables were laden with food and drink—every kind you could imagine—and in the center was a wide dance floor empty of dancers.

The fairy smiled at his fellow fae, who sat round the tables, and raised his hands. “I have found our fiddle player!” he said, and the crowd cheered.

Killian’s jaw dropped. “But I’ve never played fiddle,” he protested. Surely this was a trick—some practical joke that would soon end. The good people would not be so cruel as to

lure him down into their realm just to humiliate him, would they?

But the fairy either did not hear him or he ignored his words. For the next thing Killian knew, a fiddle made of the finest gold and a bow to match was thrust into his hands.

The fairy gave him a wink. “Just feel the beat of the bodhran and play.”

“Just feel the beat and play?” Killian muttered. But what choice did he have? All eyes were on him, and there was no chance he’d escape. So, he gave a nod and readied the bow.

The fairy band played—bodhran booming, flute whistling, banjo thrumming. Fairies started dancing reels. Killian tapped his foot to the beat and took a breath.

*Here goes nothing*, he thought, and he clenched his teeth as he drew the bow across the strings. One loud, long *scree* pierced the air. Killian winced and tried to hand the fiddle back, but the fairy lord who had brought him had disappeared into the crowd, and no one else would take the cursed instrument from his hands.

“Give it another go, boyo!” the fairy playing the banjo shouted, and the heads of nearby dancers nodded encouragingly.

Killian pushed out a deep breath and brought the fiddle back to his shoulder, readying the bow as he clenched his eyes shut. This time, as he brought the bow down, something different happened. A vibration ran through his bow arm, and he started sawing that fiddle like a woodcutter, as the fingers of his other hand danced wildly on the strings. A finer tune nobody ever heard before, and every soul in the great hall was up and jigging around to the merry tune. It didn’t take long before Killian was out there in the middle of the crowd, dancing and playing, never tiring or running short of breath.

Then came the first hint of dawn, and the music stopped. The fairies all bid farewell to Killian, and Killian held the golden fiddle out to the fairy lord who had rejoined his

side. “Thank you,” he said. “I cannot remember the last time I had such fun.”

The fairy nodded. “Aye, I know that. We’ve been watching you walk that road night after night. We thought it was about time you had some fun.”

“Well, ‘twas a fine time, and to think I didn’t know I could play at all.” Killian held the instrument out, a twinge of sadness in his chest at the thought of giving up something so fine and valuable.

The fairy pushed the fiddle back toward Killian. “I’ll tell you what. You keep it, as long as you promise to play at least once a week for your village. As long as you do that, you’ll always have the gift of music, as will your children and theirs after, for generations to come.”

Well, Killian was so pleased to have such a fine gift, he thanked the fairy lord, promising he would play every week at the pub, and at every céilí, too.

It wasn’t long after that Killian met his bride-to-be, and they settled down quite comfortably with the extra income his fiddle playing earned—people loved his playing so much, they hired him for all their special occasions—and Killian and his bride started their own little family. And when he grew old and could no longer play, he handed that fiddle down to his son. As far as I know, Killian’s grandson has it now, and he’s the finest fiddle player County Cork has ever known.

# Chapter 11

Dec 24, 1806

The scent of Fiona's apple pies wafted through the cottage as Louisa rose from the bed. She could not remember the last time she took a mid-afternoon nap, but she was glad she had given into Fiona's demands. The whole family had. The Christmas Eve céilí would start in a few hours, and after rising with the sun to complete their chores, a nap was the only way to ensure everyone had energy for the festivities.

The bedroom door creaked open, and Aisling strode in, a grin on her face, clutching a box under one arm. "Grand! I hoped you'd not dressed yet. I have something for you. Liam secretly bought it from Aunt Cara, and I made a few alterations. Go on and open it." Aisling laid the box on the bed and wrung her hands as if trying to keep from unveiling the contents herself.

A secret purchase? Louisa remembered the mysterious package Cara had claimed was for Fiona, and she tossed the lid aside.

Her breath caught. "Oh, Aisling. It's beautiful." She lifted out a white, long-sleeved empire waist gown. Embroidered red roses ran along the low neckline, down the sleeves, and along the hemline of the skirt. A red ribbon wrapped around the waist and tied in a large bow at the back.

"Roses are my favorite flower," Aisling said. "It took me every spare moment I had to finish in time."

Louisa brought one of the embroidered flowers close to her face, tracing the threads with her eyes. "These stitches are perfect. I'm amazed you managed it all so quickly."

Aisling shrugged. "It was fairly easy to find the time, what with you helping with the chores. Liam even took up some of my responsibilities."

“I owe the both of you a great deal of gratitude, then. And I’m impressed by Liam’s taste in gowns after his speech that morning. He told me he knew nothing of women’s fashion.”

Aisling chuckled. “All he did was pay for it. ‘Twas Aunt Cara who picked it out.”

Louisa’s stomach roiled at the knowledge that Liam had spent his own coin on something so unnecessary to everyday life, and for her. She knew she ought not to read anything more than kindness into the gesture, yet hope that there might be more flickered like a flame in her core. She shrugged off the feeling. Liam was attractive and kind, to be sure, but her unbidden hopes were no doubt born of the despair that comes from knowing one is destined for spinsterhood.

She slipped on the dress and went to the mirror, gathering her hair in a simple bun and leaving a few ringlets hanging down to frame her face. Then she stood back to examine herself in the mirror. Her hair was not styled as finely as it would be for such an affair back home, but she supposed it was sufficient for a working class céilí.

Aisling stood smiling behind her, adorned in her Sunday dress. A pang of guilt replaced Louisa’s joy at having something so new and fine paid for by the O’Sheas while the rest of the family donned the same clothes they always wore on such occasions.

“It looks even better on you.” Aisling’s cheeks flushed with pride.

“You are a very talented seamstress. So, where exactly is the céilí?” Louisa asked in a feeble effort to take her mind off the stone settling in her stomach.

Aisling moved to the wardrobe, taking out her own coat and handing Louisa the one Liam had picked up for her in town. Louisa sighed as she draped it over her arm. At least this coat had been purchased second-hand.

“It’s at the Miller’s old barn, just outside of Wexford. They have a new one they use now to hold their grain, but they keep the old place empty for céilithe and other grand occasions. We’re fortunate they’re so tolerant of us Catholics, being that they’re Protestant. None of us have barns big enough to host, nor a place to put our livestock and tools to make a splendid transformation, but the Millers do. They have always been good to everyone. They’ve always said Christmas is every believer’s holiday,” Aisling said as she stepped into the hall.

Louisa followed, grinning at how much Aisling sounded like Fiona—sharing far more information than Louisa had asked for. Then she stopped as Liam stepped out of his bedroom.

He wore a navy blue bespoke and stark white cravat. His dark hair was combed back from his face, setting off his green eyes in even more contrast than usual.

Louisa’s heart gave a leap, and she could not help thinking how much Liam resembled the fairy lord from Diarmuid’s story. Goodness, the man rivaled even the most popular men in England. No, he was better, for none of the men of the upper class had near the amount of muscle pressing against the seams of their sleeves and waistcoats. Unbidden heat rose from her neck to her cheeks, and she forced herself to look away.

Liam cleared his throat. “You look lovely, Miss Gaultney.” He gave a small bow, and the whole of Louisa’s body flamed at this display of gentlemanly regard. Lord, help her! She’d never want to leave Ireland if he kept charming her with his manners and genuine kindness.

“Doesn’t she?” Aisling said.

Louisa hoped her smile did not give away her desire to move closer to him. “Yes, I must thank you, Liam, for the part you played in giving me such a fine gown.”

“You’re most welcome.” Liam gave another small bow, and Louisa bit the inside of her lip hard. He really needed to stop doing that.

“‘Tis time to go!” Fiona shouted from downstairs.

Louisa headed down, taking one of three baskets that each held an apple pie, and as the crisp winter air bit at her nose, she sighed. As if the heavens knew it was Christmas Eve, the clouds that had threatened rain all day had cleared, allowing the stars and a full moon to light their way.

Liam offered his hand to help her into the cart with the rest of the family. “Right fortunate of us to have such a beautiful night, and with no wind, too. ‘Twill make for a magical evening.”

Louisa met his gaze, his emerald eyes soft and luminescent in the moonlight. Her limbs threatened to turn to soup, and she gave a small nod and stepped quickly up into the cart, unsure how much longer her knees would hold out. “Magical” might not be the right descriptor, but it would certainly be a miracle if she managed to keep herself from fawning over Liam all night. She cast her gaze upward for a moment and took a steadying breath, renewing her prayer for help from on High.



“There it is.” Fiona turned on her seat at the front of the cart, her face beaming, and she pointed ahead of them.

Louisa leaned to the side to peer around Fiona and Diarmuid and her jaw dropped.

“A beautiful sight, is it not?” Aisling nudged Louisa in the ribs.

Louisa let out a breathy laugh as Diarmuid brought Mollie and their cart to a stop alongside the other guests’ carts and hackneys. She stepped down onto the soft grass, holding tight to the pie basket, and took in every detail of the sight before her.

Aisling had called the venue a barn, and perhaps it had been at one time, but the large stone building with slate roof towering above the landscape was anything but a barn now. Rather than barn doors, a pair of fine oak doors opened wide. Stained glass windows had been installed, and candlelight danced across the reds, blues, greens, yellows, and violets of the various flora and fauna depicted in the panes.

Louisa’s eyes grew wider as she entered the barn-turned-ballroom. A fireplace constructed of river stone, and large enough to stand in, had been built into one side of the barn. On the other side had been added another set of oak doors leading out to a terrace. A brass chandelier, polished to a high shine and set with dozens of blazing candles, hung from the rafters. The hayloft had been converted into a balcony where musicians sat tuning their instruments. Paintings hung along every available stretch of wall. If it had not been for the hodgepodge of mismatched benches and chairs filling the perimeter, Louisa would have sworn she was in the ballroom of an ancient castle.

“Not at all what you were imagining, is it?” Fiona chuckled. “Come on. All the food goes out here,” Fiona said, and she headed out the side doors.

Louisa followed, her steps faltering as she stepped onto the terrace where a large white canvas tent had been erected. Tables already laden with breads, ale, eggnog, cakes, and covered dishes lined the longest side, while on the side nearest

the rear of the barn stood three cast iron cook stoves loaded with steaming pots, the canvas rolled up to allow steam and smoke to escape.

“What? How?” Louisa stammered at the sight of this outdoor kitchen.

Fiona sighed. “The Millers are blessed. What I wouldn’t give to have one of these beauties in me own kitchen. ‘Twould make me life a lot easier, that’s certain. Did you have a stove in your home?”

Louisa nodded and turned to a woman approaching them. Tall and slender, with graying hair pulled up into a bun and tucked under a bonnet, she reminded Louisa of a governess she once had.

“Mary, I’m so glad to see you’re feeling better,” Fiona said. “Where should we put these apple pies?” She gestured to the baskets she, Louisa, and Aisling held.

“There’s room in the last oven, but you might need to stack them.” Mary nodded her head toward the end of the row of stoves. Several pastry cooling racks leaned up against the stove, and Louisa assumed they were meant to be placed between pies in the oven, though how they would manage not to crush the delicate crusts in the process was yet to be seen.

Mary finished straightening a stack of mismatched plates, then stretched out her hand for Louisa’s. “You must be Miss Gaultney.”

Louisa swallowed and forced a smile. Who was this woman? She wasn’t sure she liked the idea of a complete stranger knowing her name.

“Yes, I’m Louisa.” She took the woman’s hand.

Mary leaned in as if to divulge a secret. “Word travels fast around here.” She gave a wink and pulled back. “I’m Mary O’Brien. My husband and I own O’Brien’s pub and inn, and we’re great friends of the O’Sheas.”

“Mary and I might as well be sisters for all the time we spent together when we were girls. Our mothers took turns caring for us while they worked,” Fiona said. “And now our

girls are the best of friends, though I'll admit they don't get together as much as we did."

Louisa nodded and placed her pie in the warm oven. Knowing the O'Briens were on such good terms with the O'Sheas alleviated some of her unease. Still, how many others already knew who she was? Perhaps it would be better if they all knew her story already. She would have less explaining to do, and she might get to enjoy the evening.

When they had finished unloading the pies, Fiona dismissed Aisling to find her friends and ushered Louisa back into the barn.

"I want you to meet my kin," Fiona said as they neared a group standing near the fireplace. "They're fishermen, me Da and brothers, and me sister Sinead and sister-in-law Siobhan help with processing the fish. Of course, you have already met Cara."

Curious gazes turned to Louisa, and her stomach knotted as Fiona launched into a flurry of rapid introductions. Louisa smiled, throwing out the occasional "Pleased to meet you," while trying desperately to remember everyone's names.

How many relations did Fiona have? Parents, sisters, brothers, in-laws, and nieces and nephews combined, there had to be at least fifteen of them. And that was only Fiona's family. From what Louisa understood, Diarmuid's relations still lived in Cork. As Fiona led Louisa around the barn, delving deeper into the introductions that now extended to friends and neighbors, more men and women joined the throng. Fiona's fingers pointed wildly as she named each newcomer and the children who were already chasing each other around the dance floor.

Then, when it seemed all of Wexford had arrived, a man Louisa had learned to be Mr. Miller stood on the dais at the rear of the room and blew hard into a flute. The crowd quieted and turned to face him as he welcomed them. Then he called upon the priest to offer a prayer to start the céilí off right.

Father Patrick O'Connell took Mr. Miller's place on the dais. "Please bow your heads, even those Protestants among us." He gave the Miller family a wink, and several genial glances were cast their way.

Aisling leaned into Louisa's ear. "You'd think more Protestants would come, being that the Millers are of their ilk, but they are outnumbered by us Catholics year after year. I secretly think they want to be Catholic, considering how open they are to letting our priest do the praying and preaching every Christmas Eve."

Louisa gave a brief nod of acknowledgement and bowed her head. Father Patrick's prayer was not wholly different from one she might hear from her own priest. As a quiet reverence settled over the crowd with "Our most gracious Heavenly Father," Louisa wondered if she was at a social event or a Sunday service.

"Lord, we thank thee for giving us the opportunity to celebrate the miracle of thy birth," the priest went on, "and to come together with our dearest family and friends. Bless us, oh Lord, and these thy gifts which we are about to receive through thy bounty, through Christ our Lord, Amen."

"Amen," the crowd echoed. Then the reverence dissipated, replaced with a boisterous *whoop* that pierced the night, and the band launched into their first song—a jig, much to Louisa's dismay. In England, tradition called for a series of minuets and allemandes before the more common dances. Yet the band had skipped right to the energetic tunes, and the dance floor filled with people. Young children to grandparents jigged, kicking their legs out and stepping to the vigorous beat of the bodhran, flute, fiddle, uilleann pipes, and banjo.

"Will there be any slower dances?" Louisa asked.

Aisling gave her a sympathetic smile. "Fraid not. But there's always food and gossip if dancing isn't your preference." She nodded her head toward the terrace, where Fiona was moving along the queue, filling her plate, her jaw moving rapidly and her body swaying to either side, making

sure the women she was talking to could hear every word over the noise.

Louisa's stomach grumbled. It had been hours since she had eaten anything, and the feast would give her a chance to sit and observe for a while before she attempted to socialize.

After making herself a plate, she settled herself in a small circle of chairs and a bench with Mary and James, Fiona, Diarmuid, and Liam. Aisling joined a throng of girls and fell into the ongoing conversation as if she had been there all along.

Hot tears formed at the edges of Louisa's eyes and she struggled to dispel the tightening in her chest. Right now, she should be laughing and talking with Nora and Clarissa back home in England. Instead, she was surrounded by strangers, barred from every inside joke and from every conversation, for nearly everyone had fallen into speaking Gaelic.

She brought a slice of apple pie to her lips and savored the warm, sweet juices and earthy cinnamon and cloves. She could at least allow herself to enjoy this. In fact, she could enjoy more than this. The old Louisa—the Louisa who cowered under her parents' thumbs and glares would have wallowed in self-pity. But she was not that Louisa anymore, and she was determined to enjoy this night as much as possible.

She took another bite, allowing herself to smile as she chewed, and watched the dancers. Rory and Rian each jigged arm-in-arm with two girls near their age, and Louisa blinked in disbelief. Girls that young had not been permitted to dance with boys at the balls she had attended. In fact, girls that young were not permitted to attend balls at all. But she was not in England, and this was no gentry class ball. It was a céilí. A dance for the entire community, not just its privileged and of-age members.

A loud guffaw rang out, and Louisa jumped. James banged his fist on the edge of the bench and snorted into his pint of ale over what she could only assume was a joke.

Diarmuid grinned, clearly satisfied that he had sent his friend into a fit of laughter.

A hand slapped James' back, and Louisa's gaze followed it to a blond-haired man about Liam's age. When had he joined them? And who was he? She thought she had met everyone during Fiona's introductions, but he must have arrived after the prayer.

A lopsided grin pulled at his lips, and his honey-brown eyes slid to Liam. He elbowed Liam in the ribs. "Are you going to introduce me to your houseguest?" he said in English.

Liam's brow furrowed a moment in confusion, then his mouth quirked up in a smile. "You mean Ma didn't introduce you already? I was pretty sure she covered the whole crowd."

Louisa laughed. "She would have if not for the late-comers."

"Aye," Liam's friend said, "and for those of us who were helping Mrs. Miller carry over the hams from the house."

"It is probably better that Fiona did not introduce us during her roll call. I fear I would not have remembered your name." Louisa was thankful she even remembered Mary's and James' names.

"Well, let me introduce meself since Liam is perfectly content to let formalities slide. I'm Devin O'Brien." He pointed to Mary and James. "You've already met me Ma and Da. Me sisters are already dancing, but I imagine you'll meet them later, if you haven't already."

Louisa gave a small nod. "A pleasure to meet you, Devin. I'm Louisa Gaultney."

She dug her fork into her pie and took another bite, letting an awkward silence fill the space between them. What was a woman to say to a man she just met? To discuss the weather or food was too ordinary, yet to ask how long he and Liam had been friends or about Devin's interests seemed too intimate a topic.

"Will you be dancing this evening, Miss Gaultney?" Devin asked.

She swallowed a half-chewed bit of apple in a rush to avoid any more unnecessary silence. “No, I’m afraid I don’t know any of your dances.” Louisa cast a glance at the dancers. One couple’s feet moved so quickly they had blurred. Compared to such expert dancers, she would look as if she had fins for feet.

Devin’s glance followed hers. “Ach, it doesn’t have to be as complicated as that. Aoife and Cormac are champion dancers. Irish dancing can be as simple or complicated as you want it to be. Isn’t that right, Liam?”

A muscle worked in Liam’s jaw, and suspicion crept into his eyes. “That’s right,” he said slowly, as if sending an unspoken warning to Devin, and Louisa hoped Devin took the hint. Were she back in England, she would gladly accept an invitation to dance, but here, faced with unfamiliar jigs and reels, she was content to keep her bottom firmly planted on her chair. There was no need to make a fool of herself.

Devin stood up and cupped his hands around his mouth. “Oy! Maggie! Come over here.”

Maggie O’Leary, one of the many cousins Fiona had introduced, gave her head a shake, her black curls bouncing around her face, but she came anyway.

“You know, a gentleman would walk up to a lady and speak to her in a more civilized tone,” Maggie said with her arms crossed. A teasing smile played on her lips.

“A gentleman would sit on his fat, useless bum all day collecting rent from us poor folk, too. I’d think you’d be glad I was no gentleman.”

Maggie rolled her blue eyes, her grin growing wider. “What do you want, O’Brien?”

Devin aimed a thumb at Louisa. “Miss Gaultney here says she doesn’t know our dances. What say you help me teach her?”

“I don’t see why you need me. One of your sisters would do just fine.”

“Name one man who wants to dance with his sister when he could have a fierce beauty like you on his arm.”

“Fierce?” An eyebrow shot up.

Devin shrugged. “I dared not make the mistake of calling you a fair maiden, again. I’ve not forgotten the day you handed me my own hind end for that one.”

Maggie chuckled. “I suppose I did, but you try entirely too hard, Devin O’Brien.”

“Or perhaps you just enjoy making it hard for me to court you. I’ll tell you, I’m getting right discouraged.”

Maggie put her hands on her hips. “And what exactly do you expect me to do about it?”

Devin extended his hand. “Dance with me.”

Maggie’s gaze traced Devin, then she took his hand.

“Liam, Louisa. You coming?” Devin called over his shoulder as he and Maggie headed to the dance floor.

Louisa’s stomach tightened. “I don’t suppose he will forget about us and let us be.”

Liam shook his head with an exasperated sigh. He rose from the bench and held out his hand. “Would you care to join me? I promise I’ll not let you look a fool.”

“I suppose I should at least try.”

Louisa took his hand, and her legs trembled beneath her, though from anticipation of the dance or from Liam’s touch, she knew not.

Devin and Maggie stood at the edge of the dance floor. “Well, now that you’re here, we can start the lesson. We’ll teach you a real easy set of steps even a wee child can do. Start on your right foot.”

Together, Maggie and Devin led Louisa through the movements, and with each step the flutters in her stomach abated.

A new song began, and Devin nodded toward the crowd already in motion. “Ready to jump in?”

Heat rose in Louisa’s cheeks. “I think I’ll stay here for now.”

Devin hiked a shoulder. “Suit yourself.” He and Maggie disappeared into the crowd.

Louisa took a breath. “All right. Let me see if I’ve really got this.” She chanced a glance at Liam.

He gave her an encouraging smile and began doing the same steps she had just learned.

“You make it look so easy,” Louisa said.

“I’ve been dancing since I was a wee lad, but it really is easy, once your legs get used to it. ‘Tis all about muscle memory. Go on.”

Right. Muscle memory. And rhythm, which she wasn’t sure she had beyond the slower steps of the minuet. Well, it was better to try now, while only Liam was paying her any attention.

She closed her eyes a moment, feeling the low boom of the bodhran and the rhythm of the fiddles and flutes. Then, one foot after the other, she repeated the routine, slow at first, then faster until she kept pace with the song.

“Begorrah! You’re a natural,” Liam said.

Louisa opened her eyes to see an amazed smile on his face. “Truly?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you. Come on. You’re good enough to be out there with the rest of them.” He took her hand and led her to where Devin and Maggie were twirling arm in arm, moving as if they were one.

Louisa yearned to dance like them, but she could not bring herself to ask Liam. What if he thought her improper or, worse, that she wished for a courtship?

Her desire must have shown on her face, though, for the next moment, Liam wrapped his arm around her waist.

Heat sizzled through her at his touch, but she schooled her face to remain neutral. His hip rested against hers, and lightning rushed through her body.

*Keep it together.* She bit her lower lip in concentration, recalling the series of steps to take her mind off the fact that their bodies were touching when they most certainly should not. This was highly improper. What would her friends and neighbors back in England say if they saw her wrapped in a man's arm, pulled taught against his side?

She banished the thought as Liam spun her out, still holding her hand with his other. It mattered not what her friends would think. They were not here, and chances were that no one at the céilí would ever take a trip to England, least of all to her hometown. She could afford to let herself enjoy the evening.

She glanced around as she prepared to repeat the routine. No one else seemed to adhere to the same set of steps, and many, it was obvious, were improvising, letting their bodies do what felt natural. If they could dance so freely, surely she could, too.

She released Liam's hand and chanced a forward kick, careful not to reveal her undergarments, then a knee lift followed by rapid side steps.

"Hey, now. You can't dance like that without me." Liam took her outstretched hand and spun her back to him. Her free hand met his chest and her breath came hard, their faces inches apart. Her lips spread in an uncontrollable smile as he spun her back out again.

"Follow me lead." Liam took a series of rapid steps and a hop, gesturing for her to do the same, then came toward her again, wrapping an arm about her waist.

As if they were of one mind, they repeated the steps, jiggling away from each other before coming together again. They were midway through the song now, and Louisa moved as if she had always known the Irish jigs and reels, as if the music was part of her. Perhaps it was somewhere down her

ancestral line. After all, she knew little about her grandfather Lucius's mother's line.

The song ended, and she sucked in a series of deep breaths as her heart hammered in her chest. She had never danced so vigorously in her life.

"It gets the blood pumping, doesn't it?" Liam said.

"It certainly does." Louisa took another breath and turned at a gentle tap on her shoulder. A man about her own age, perhaps a year or two older, bowed.

"You dance beautifully, Miss Gaultney. I wonder if I might have the next dance?" He gave a nod of greeting to Liam. "Unless the two of you are still dancing."

Liam gave a shrug and took a step back.

Louisa's grin slipped. She had enjoyed dancing so close to Liam, as if they were a couple, but she reminded herself they were no such thing. They weren't even friends. She recovered her smile and returned the bow to the man.

"I would love to."

The next song began, and four songs later—each danced with a new partner—she gave a small curtsy and headed toward the refreshments, gulping air as if it were water as she tried to slow the pounding in her chest.

A loud whoop rang out behind her. Two men sat at a small table, several pints of ale between them. A crowd of men surrounded them, cheering their preferred competitor as the two men downed one pint after another as fast as possible.

Louisa shook her head. She'd be surprised if one of them did not vomit or pass out.

"Some men can be quite childish, can't they?"

Louisa froze, her attention snapping to the man who now stepped in front of her. Her blood chilled, despite the sweat she had worked up.

Seamus Cotter. When had he arrived? Surely, she would have noticed him during the prayer.

“Pardon me, Mr. Cotter.” She made to skirt around him, but he held his arm out, looping it around her waist and walking her back toward the dancers.

“Now, you wouldn’t want to be rude and refuse me a dance when you danced with a bunch of strangers. Not when we’re such old friends.”

“I doubt anyone would believe us *old friends* when we just met the other day outside the confectionary.” She had half a mind to pull away, but they were already amidst the fray again. She would dance one casual reel, to avoid drawing any unwanted attention, and then she would extricate herself from Seamus.

“Ah, yes. Our first meeting. Am I to understand you have not forgotten our little bargain?” He pulled her close and whispered the question in her ear.

Louisa spun out of his grasp. “Of course, I haven’t forgotten.” How could she, when every night she relived the terror of her abduction, the fear she had held that Seamus would slit her throat if he got her alone? She cast a glance around for Liam, Devin, Fiona—any familiar face.

Seamus stepped closer, taking her hand. “Good, because remember what’ll happen if you go back on your word.”

A shudder ran through her, and she searched for Liam again, this time spotting him standing near the dais, talking to Devin. She willed him to meet her eyes, to see her distress, but whatever he and Devin were discussing had his full attention.

Finally, the song ended. Louisa jerked her hand from Seamus’s grasp and rushed for the terrace and the refreshments, not daring to see if Seamus followed. Even if he did, he would not say something to her there, where he would be more easily overheard, and she resolved to spend the remainder of the evening stuffing her mouth and sitting with the women too old or disinclined to dance if it meant Seamus kept his distance.



“The poor lass.” Devin blew out a breath, pity lining his features. “And she refuses to say who abducted her?”

Liam nodded. He had finished telling Devin how Louisa had come to stay with them, a story the family had agreed to share with as few people as possible. The O’Briens were practically family, so Liam saw no harm in telling his best friend. It wasn’t like Devin had been her abductor. “She doesn’t know who she can trust, though she seems to be more comfortable with us than at first.”

“She looks to be enjoying herself, too.”

Liam gave a noncommittal “hmm” as his eye caught Seamus’s arm wrapping playfully around Louisa’s waist as the two danced. His gut burned, and he locked his knees, fighting the overwhelming desire to march over to Seamus and punch him square in the jaw. He chided himself. He had no right to feel so possessive of Louisa. She was merely a guest in their home, and free to enjoy the company of whomever she liked, even if that person was a greasy merchant sailor whose only interest in women was a brief good time.

He forced himself to look away from the dancers.

“I saw the two of you out front of Mrs. Sheehan’s shop yesterday morn’ when I was tossing out the breakfast scraps,” Devin said. A gleam entered his eye. “I saw you give her a treat.”

Liam shrugged. He knew where Devin’s mind was heading, and he was not about to let the man romanticize a simple act of kindness.

“‘Twas nothing.”

Devin raised an eyebrow. “It didn’t look like nothing.”

Liam stuffed his hands in his pockets and met Devin’s teasing gaze. “Her birthday was the day before yesterday—the day she arrived. I felt bad her birthday had been so traumatic, so I bought her a few truffles, to do something nice.”

Maggie returned from the terrace with a glass of eggnog. “Nice? Like getting her that fine gown she be wearing?” Maggie had clearly overheard their conversation, for the same gleam in Devin’s eyes sparkled in hers.

“Don’t go assuming things. She arrived with only the clothes on her back. Any half-decent person would have done the same.”

Devin schooled his face into mock-seriousness. “Sure, but a fine dress like that doesn’t come cheap. Even dairy farmers have their limits.”

Liam crossed his arms. “What exactly are you on about?” He knew exactly what Devin was on about, but he was not about to make it easy for him or Maggie.

“I think your motives have more to do with attraction than simple goodwill, *a chara*.”

Liam’s jaw tightened. Louisa was practically a stranger, yet Devin dared to see romance where there was none. “It’s Christmas, a time of giving. That’s all.”

His gut tightened the moment the words left his lips. He had spoken a half-truth at best. Louisa was beautiful, but a woman’s looks were hardly enough to encourage genuine affection. Even the limited conversations he and Louisa had

shared could do little more than set a foundation for the most basic of friendships, right?

Devin and Maggie exchanged skeptical glances.

Liam shrugged. “All right. I’ll admit I find her attractive, but there’s no future with her. She’s a high-born English lady, and I’m a humble Irish farmer. So, let it go, will you?”

Devin and Maggie conceded.

“All right, boyo. You win. Not another word about it from me.” Devin gave a lazy slap to Liam’s shoulder.

“Much appreciated.” Liam’s shoulders relaxed, and he scanned the dance floor for Louisa. The reel had ended, and she was nowhere in sight. He spun on his heel, scanning the rest of the barn, his chest tightening until he finally spotted her heading toward the terrace alone. No Seamus in sight. Liam sighed, relieved that Seamus was no longer at her side—only because the man was no longer in her company. Not because he wished for her unwavering attention.



Louisa trailed the plates and trays of fudges, tarts, pies, and cakes, filling her plate with a piece of each. Small pieces, lest anyone think her a glutton, though she doubted anyone would truly fault her for indulging. This was a Christmas Eve celebration after all, and how could anyone choose just one dessert?

“Have a sweet tooth, do you?” A young man near Louisa’s age sidled up beside her, took a slice of gingerbread, and set it delicately on top of Louisa’s already overfull plate. “My mother made this one. Best flavor and softest texture in three counties.”

Louisa nodded her thanks. “I’ll be sure to try hers first.” She studied his face a moment, trying to remember to which family he belonged.

“I’m Faolan Miller. You’re our English visitor, right?”

“That’s right. Louisa Gaultney.” Louisa sighed inwardly. All she wanted was to get her food, sit down, and not talk to anyone. Obviously, the universe had other plans. If she had to converse, though, she might as well shift the focus away from herself. “Miller? Are you of the Millers who provided this lovely venue?”

Faolan gave a small bow. “I am. ‘Tis a pleasure to meet you. So, how do you like our little celebration?”

Louisa filled a glass with eggnog and took a sip before answering, noting the peculiar taste, one she had not encountered before.

“I like it very much, though it is quite different from what I’m used to back home. Our balls in England are held indoors, and we never begin with something as vigorous and joyful as a jig.”

She took another sip of eggnog. A tingling sensation ran over her tongue and throat.

Faolan chuckled. “I would imagine so. The English, at least the upper classes, seem to take themselves too seriously. No offense.” He added it as a casual afterthought.

Louisa opened her mouth to protest, then closed it. Faolan had a point. From a working-class Irish perspective, the English gentry probably were a bunch of stuff-shirts who wouldn't know fun if it walked up and yanked off their cravats and ribbons. She nodded and took another sip, not wishing to argue the point. Not that she had much energy for it. The dancing must have taken more out of her than she realized, for she found her head swimming slightly. She must be dehydrated. The sooner she sat down, the better.

She turned toward where Fiona and Diarmuid still sat, and Faolan walked with her.

“So, what part of England are you from?”

“Abergreen.” She stumbled as her mistake met her ears, and her stomach lurched. She forced a smile—there was no walking back from that admission—and she hoped he would simply nod and move on to a new topic. Instead, Faolan's eyebrows rose.

“Really? I have cousins in Abergreen. Do you know the Hennings, by chance?”

Louisa fought a grimace. Of course, she knew the Hennings. In a town as small as Abergreen, everyone knew each other, and she had purchased more than one treacle tart from them while wandering High Street on her free afternoons.

She willed her rising pulse to slow. “I don't believe so.”

Faolan shrugged, disappointment clear on his face. “Well, they write to us quite frequently. In their last letter, about a month back, they told us about that nasty business with a Gaultney. At least, I believe Gaultney was the name. That wasn't you, was it?”

Snakes writhed in Louisa's stomach, and she struggled against the urge to run. “No, it was my cousin.”

*Good heavens. Shut your mouth, Louisa!* She prayed this lie would not lead to more, and that Faolan would not write about all of this in his next correspondence to his

relatives. The last thing she needed was for it to be known that Gaultney was not her name.

She brought the eggnog to her lips and pushed forward on weakening legs. She was almost to the O'Sheas.

"Whoa, there. You want to take it easy with that stuff. Mrs. Sheehan is known for having a liberal hand with the whiskey when it comes to her Christmas Eve nog."

"Whiskey?" Louisa stared at the scant amount left in her glass. She had never had whiskey before. Still, she should have guessed the eggnog's contents the moment it met her tongue. How naïve could she be?

She glanced back up, and movement at the edge of the dining tent caught her eye. Seamus stood leaning against a chair, a pint of ale brought halfway to his lips, his eyes piercing her over the rim. Her stomach lurched. She needed to be careful to say as little as possible until she sobered. And she needed to get back to the safety of the O'Sheas.

"Pardon me." She smiled at Faolan. "I'm afraid Mrs. Sheehan's nog has hit me rather hard, and I'm quite unused to the effects of liquor. It was a pleasure meeting you." She gave a small bow of her head, then heel-toed her way to the O'Sheas. She gripped the edge of the table as she lowered herself onto a chair, not daring to look up, and she closed her eyes as a male figure approached and took a seat beside her.

"Are you all right, Louisa?" Liam's voice fell over her like a warm blanket. "You look a little pale."

"I'm only tired, and a little sauced. No one warned me about Mrs. Sheehan's nog."

Liam bit his lower lip in a smirk. "She does like to load it up with whiskey. How much did you drink?"

Louisa lifted her glass, letting the candlelight illuminate the last bit. "Enough." Though how much damage enough would do, she could only guess. She prayed that what little she had said to Faolan did not become her undoing.



Louisa lifted her head from the arm of her chair as the music ceased and the flutist blasted three ear piercing notes. The dizziness had long since departed, leaving grogginess in its wake. Her first time drinking whiskey-laced eggnog would be her last. At the center of the dance floor, dancers stood still as statues and everyone else milling about stopped and turned to face Mr. Miller, who once again stood on the dais.

He held his hands up, signaling for all to listen, though there was no need, for the entire crowd had grown silent—reverent, even. “*Mo chairde*. My friends. It is nigh on midnight,” he said. “Please make your way out to the amphitheater for the Christmas Eve Mass.”

Amphitheater? Louisa had seen nothing of the sort. She followed the O’Sheas toward the exit, grabbing her coat and slipping it on as she did, then joined the queue making its way around the backside of the barn. She blinked at the array of hay bales stacked to resemble an amphitheater with a bonfire not too distant, then climbed to the top row with the O’Sheas.

An outdoor sermon in the middle of the night? In her eighteen years, Louisa had never witnessed anything like this midnight mass. The glow of the bonfire illuminated Father

Patrick as he delivered his sermon to a reverent and silent audience, while the stars and full, silver moon gleamed overhead. Louisa could not help feeling as if she had been transported back in time to the very night of Christ's birth.

As with the evening's opening prayer, though, the reverence broke the moment the last "amen" was said. In a flurry of movement, people tore down the amphitheater, extinguished the bonfire, and made their way back to the barn to collect their dishes and sweep up.

Louisa stifled a yawn as she settled herself beside Aisling and Fiona on a lounge as the men finished hauling away a load of dishes and food scraps. Nearly everything was cleaned up, yet few families had left, though she noted Seamus had disappeared, and she sighed her relief.

"I don't understand," Louisa said. "Why are so many people still hanging about?" She would have thought everyone would have returned home to sleep by now.

Aisling stretched her arms overhead with a yawn. "They're waiting for Da. He always tells a Christmas story of some sort every year."

Louisa straightened and blinked away her drowsiness. She had only heard two of Diarmuid's stories, but the promise of another was enough to revive some of her energy.

The O'Shea men returned, and the other guests came over and settled down around the large fireplace. Even Father Patrick had remained.

"So, Diarmuid, what is the story this year?" Father Patrick abandoned his priestly posture and stretched out on his side on the floor, one hand propped under his head.

Diarmuid sat down on a chair that had been dragged in front of the fire and gave a smile. "I think I'll tell the Irish version of the birth of Jesus, for our English guest." He winked at Louisa. "I take it you have not heard the tale of St. Brigid on the night of our Lord's birth. 'Tis a tale me da told me, and his da told him, on back for generations."

Louisa shook her head. Who was St. Brigid? She had never heard the name, let alone in connection to the nativity.

Diarmuid's eyes gleamed. "Then you're in for a real treat. No offense to the good book or Christ himself, but our version is a bit more entertaining."

"And inventive." Father Patrick gave a low chuckle as he ran the beads of his rosary between his fingers.

Louisa leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. She did not want to miss a word of what promised to be, at the very least, an interesting tale.

# St. Brigid and the Christ Child

By Diarmuid O'Shea

Now, you know that Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem for the census, and that there was no room for them at the inn, but what you might not know is that 'twas not the innkeeper who told Mary and Joseph they could stay in the stable. When poor, tired Mary and Joseph got to the inn, they went into the pub and asked for a room. Well, the innkeeper couldn't be bothered with a pregnant woman and her husband. He already had his hands full with other guests and all the meals he had to serve, so he dismissed them and went back to work.

But the barmaid—ah, she was something special. Brigid was her name, and the likes of which that town of Bethlehem had never seen before—all red hair and eyes of emerald green, and a heart as big as the ocean.

Well, her heart pained at the sorrow and worry on poor Mary's face. Brigid had never been with child herself, but she could imagine the fear Mary might be feeling, being so near delivering her babe, and having no place to rest. So, Brigid set down the drinks she was serving and marched right up to the blessed mother-to-be and her husband.

"You poor souls," she said. "You must have a place to stay. I'm sorry I cannot offer you a proper room, but if you follow me, I'll set you up right."

"Thank you," Mary and Joseph said, and they followed Brigid around the back of the inn to the stables.

The animals were all locked in their stalls for the night, and the piles of hay on the floor seemed clean enough. At least there was no sign of rats. Still, 'twas not what the mother of our savior deserved, and Brigid knew it.

"Don't you worry, now, blessed woman," Brigid said. "I'll be back in two shakes of a lamb's tail, and I'll make you as comfortable as if you were laying in the finest bed."

So, off Brigid went back to the inn, and gathered up every spare blanket and pillow she could find. Then hauled them back to the stables, she did, and went to work making as fine a bed out of that straw as anyone ever did. She laid out the blankets, five in total, until she was sure not one scratchy bit of hay would poke through, saving the sixth and finest blanket for Mary to snuggle under. Then Brigid piled on the pillows for Mary and Joseph to recline like royalty.

Right grateful they were for her efforts, too, and Brigid's heart swelled at knowing she had done what little she could for her savior's mother. Before she left to get back to her duties, she brought them some food.

"Now, when that baby starts coming," Brigid said, "You come and get me." She pointed a finger at Joseph so he knew she was serious.

Joseph nodded, but he and Mary exchanged perplexed glances. How could this woman possibly know when the baby would come when even they did not know with any certainty if He would come this night or the next?

Well, hours passed, and it got late into the night. Mary lay deep in a peaceful slumber when suddenly she was jolted out of it with the first pain.

"Joseph! Joseph!" she cried. "The barmaid. Get her, quick. 'Tis time!"

Off like a shot, Joseph went back to the inn, pounding on every door until he found Brigid. It did not take her any time at all to get back to the stables, for she knew the Lord would be coming into the world this night. He had told her so in a dream the night before, so Brigid had stayed in her day clothes, shoes still on, ready for the moment she'd be called on to help birth the blessed babe.

So, when she arrived at that stable, she was ready, and good thing, too, because the baby Jesus wasn't wasting any time. Mary was already pushing.

"I'm here, Mary," Brigid said. She knelt at the blessed virgin's feet on the stone floor—Mary hadn't wanted to ruin

that fine makeshift bed—and held out her hands. Just in time, too, for the baby Jesus came out on the next push, peaceful and smiling as if being born was the easiest thing in the world.

“Now, rest yourself, and I’ll take care of everything,” Brigid said, and she gave a gentle smack to the Lord’s bottom, to clear his throat and get him to cry, you know. But He didn’t cry. No, instead, He looked right up at Brigid with his big, brown eyes and gave her the sweetest smile.

Ah, didn’t that just melt sweet Brigid’s heart? Well, she grabbed a blanket she had brought fresh from her room when Joseph came for her, and she swaddled her savior in it, then handed him to his blessed mother.

“He’s a fine babe, Mary,” Brigid said. “He’ll be getting hungry now. You best feed Him.”

Well, Mary had never been a mother before, nor had she ever trained as a midwife. She looked up at Brigid, concern in her eyes.

“I know not how to nurse me baby,” Mary said.

Brigid gave a knowing nod. “‘Tis simple enough.” And she helped Mary put the babe to her breast. When the baby Jesus had had his fill, Brigid took him from Mary so she could rest, and carried him, swaddled tight in the blanket and sound asleep, to the door of the stable. There, she looked up into the clear night sky at that bright new star and sighed.

*‘Tis a blessed night*, she thought, and the whole world would soon know it.

Now, before you go telling me that our St. Brigid wouldn’t even be born for four and a half centuries, let me say this. I cannot explain her appearance in Bethlehem. Maybe ‘twas our St. Brigid somehow appearing in the past. Maybe ‘twas the ancient Celtic goddess Brigid, acknowledging one greater than her. No one really knows, nor does it matter, for ‘tis just a story, and you never know what wildly inventive tale will come out of an Irishman’s mouth, especially if he be an O’Shea.

## Chapter 12

December 25, 1806

The full moon hung low in the sky, and somewhere in the hedge below Liam's window a wren twittered and trilled. Liam blinked the sleep from his eyes and sat up, fumbling for the small box no bigger than a deck of playing cards he had hidden beneath the edge of his mattress. He brought it to the window and lifted the lid, letting the moon's beams illuminate the brooch within. It was only brass—not the silver or gold he was sure Louisa was used to—but the enameled painting of bluebells in the brooch's center was a masterpiece, its rendering true to the life it had been copied from.

From his bureau, he removed a square of cloth and a ribbon he had pilfered from Aisling's basket of fabric scraps, and he laid them out on the bed to wrap the box. He brought up one side of the fabric and stopped. Was it really wise to give Louisa the brooch? Doing so had seemed a good idea a couple of days before. He had been on his way to buy the new churn when he passed the jewelry shop and a display of brooches caught his eye. He had already gotten a Christmas gift for each of his family members, and the thought of Louisa receiving nothing on Christmas Day made his heart clench.

Yet, he had already given her the chocolates for her birthday and the dress for the céilí. What if giving her the brooch sent the wrong message—that his feelings for her were amorous? He did not wish to cause her any unease if she thought a lowly farmer was trying to court her. More than that, though, he wasn't sure he could handle the embarrassment of rejection. Still, he had bought it for her. It would be a shame to stuff it back under his mattress and forget about it.

He ran his fingers through his hair. He could always wrap it and decide later whether to give it to her. At the very least, if he decided not to give it to her today, he could save it as a parting gift whenever she departed for England. He finished wrapping the box and tucked it back under his

mattress as a weight settled in his chest at the thought of her leaving. He had only known the lass three days, and that first day had been a rocky start. Why should he care so much about her leaving? That had been the plan all along—to get her home, back to her people. So why was the idea of marching down to the postmaster’s office and setting fire to Louisa’s letters so tempting?

He shook the thought from his head and changed into his work clothes. There were chores to be done, and he would not spend his morning mooning over a woman he had no future with.



The familiar scents of clove, cinnamon, baking ham, and brandy Louisa had always associated with Christmas perfumed the air of the O’Shea cottage. But that was where the similarities to her family’s Christmas’s ended. Despite the grand decorations and large orders of food for various dishes, Christmas had always been a quiet, reserved day for her small family. There had been no aunts, uncles, or cousins to join in the feast, and Grandfather Lucius was the only grandparent in attendance. Except for the large, formal Christmas dinner, they

had always spent the day much as they would any other when her father was at home. Louisa and her brother would keep each other entertained as children. Then, as they grew older, each spent the day alone until the appointed hour for the feast and gift exchange. But Christmas with the O'Sheas was proving wholly different.

Inside the cottage, there was hardly enough room to move without brushing against an arm or hip of one of the other women. Gran Cahill—the old woman had insisted Louisa call her Gran—sat in the far corner of the kitchen mashing potatoes for the colcannon. Aisling bustled around the table, helping Louisa spread Gran's holly-embroidered tablecloths on the O'Sheas' table and the table the Cahills had brought with them. Then she set out the plates and dinnerware.

Fiona busied herself over the spiced beef, checking its doneness, while Aunt Cara turned the roasting ham on the spit over the fire. Fiona's other sister, Sinead—whom Louisa had only met briefly the night before, set the plum puddings in the oven while Maggie worked on the brandy butter they would eventually drizzle over the puddings. And Siobhan, Fiona's sister-in-law, turned the roasting parsnips, carrots, and mushrooms.

From outside came a steady succession of *tings* as the men ribbed each other in a lively game of horseshoes, while Rian, Rory, and their five male cousins played an uneven game of hurling. Louisa stood at the window, her arms crossed over her middle. It was Liam's turn to throw the horseshoes. He reared his arm back, then flung the first shoe, sending it flying low across the grass before connecting with the metal stake.

Louisa grinned, thankful she could admire Liam's strength without him noticing. Liam tossed his remaining horseshoes, all hitting home just as the first had. Then he straightened and turned toward the window. His eyes met Louisa's, and he gave her a wink.

Louisa stepped back, unable to stop her grin from spreading. A small part of her enjoyed knowing she had been caught.

Aisling joined her at the window. “Liam always beats everyone. It’s a wonder my uncles ever want to play against him. Have you ever played?”

“No, but it doesn’t look very difficult.”

“‘Tis not difficult at all. All you need is good aim and a strong arm.” Aisling flexed her biceps, her face screwed up in mock concentration. Then she burst into a giggle. “You could give it a try.”

Louisa raised an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t want to intrude. It seems, for all the differences in our customs, that one thing remains the same. The men play while the women do all the work.”

“For now.” Aisling wiggled her eyebrows. “They’ll do the cleaning up after dinner while we rest or play horseshoes.”

Louisa blinked. “Really? The men do the cleaning up?” Louisa had never heard of such a thing. Men doing women’s work. Then again, she had grown up with servants doing a great majority of the chores. Perhaps things were different among the working classes, not just here in Ireland, but in England, too.

As if reading her thoughts, Aisling said, “We’re lucky Gran is such a strong matriarch. She’s always insisted the workload be even between the men and women of her family, and me brothers and cousins don’t know any different. I only hope I can marry a man with those same values one day.”

Louisa nodded. “I’m sure your family is not the only one to insist on shared responsibilities,” though Louisa was hard pressed to think of any family she knew where the men did their share of the domestic duties. She glanced at Liam again, and her ribs squeezed her heart. If only she could find a man such as him. A man as charitable and honest as he was strong and intelligent.

“Oy! Time for dinner,” Fiona called out the door to the men, her voice jarring Louisa out of her thoughts.

The men filed in and stood around the table, holding out chairs for their wives and sisters. The bench Aisling, Liam

and Louisa usually sat on had been replaced by three chairs. Liam pulled two out at once, nodding a smile at Louisa. A thrill ran through her as she lowered herself onto the seat while Liam tucked it beneath her.

He was only being gentlemanly, treating her the same as his sister, yet she could not keep the warmth in her cheeks from spreading when Liam took his seat beside her. As she bowed her head for the blessing, she took a breath, saying her own silent prayer that she could keep her heart under control.



Louisa had no idea how all twenty of the Cahills and O'Sheas fit in the parlor after dinner. With Gran and Grandda Cahill reclining on the worn settee, and Fiona and the aunts sitting on chairs, the rest of the party sat on the floor around the fireplace that had been decked with holly and candles. Beside the fireplace stood a pile of gifts wrapped in everything from fabric scraps to burlap to paper.

“All right, whose turn is it this year to hand out the gifts?” Grandda asked. He stretched his legs out over the footstool in front of him.

“I believe ‘tis Uncle Oran’s turn. Ma did it last year,” Rian said.

Several heads nodded, and Oran rose from his seat beside his four sons, a serene smile on his face.

Louisa settled back against the wall next to Aisling. How on earth did they keep track of whose turn it was with so many of them?

Aisling leaned into her ear, seeming to read her mind for the second time that day. “Only Gran and Grandda’s children pass out the gifts. They rotate in order of birth. So, being the oldest, Ma went last year. Now ‘tis Uncle Oran’s turn. Then Uncle Shane, Uncle Cullin, Aunt Sinead, and Aunt Cara.”

Louisa nodded. Why did Aisling and Fiona so often go into so much detail about who people were, as if she needed to know all the particulars of their lives? They couldn’t possibly expect her to remember who was born first, who was married to whom, and who their children were. It was a marvel that she could remember Uncle Shane and Uncle Cullin had yet to marry, and that Aunt Cara had been widowed before she had been married two years. Though, now that she considered it, remembering singularities like those was easy. She could at least attempt to learn all their names, half of which she still couldn’t recall. She straightened up, determined to commit everyone’s names to memory as Oran picked up the first gift, but Louisa had little time to connect names to faces. Before the receiver of the gift had peeled back the first corner of wrapping, Oran had already delivered the next parcel.

Gift after gift was handed out, each one small and inexpensive—some even handmade—and each was met with a gleeful smile and a hearty embrace. Quite the feat, considering the correlation of the size of the room to the number of people.

Louisa’s heart warmed at the love filling this small home. So, this was what it was like to be with so much family, sharing what little they had to give with each other, with little regard for what one would get out of the exchange. It was not unlike the love she and her brother Patrick had shared.

Her chest heaved in a single, silent, tearless sob she prayed went unnoticed. Here she was, surrounded by love and warmth and an overabundance of delicious food while Patrick sat in a cold prison cell. Had her mother even thought to send her son a gift, or at least visit? Louisa hoped she had, but the woman had been so ashamed and publicly humiliated that Louisa would not doubt if her mother had completely cut herself off from all things denoting the scandalized name of Easom.

Louisa lowered her head, fidgeting her fingers in her lap as guilt wracked her for testifying against her own brother. But it was not her fault he was in prison. She had to remember that. Even without her testimony, he would have been convicted, and Patrick did not hold any ill feelings toward her. He had said as much when he had embraced her in the brief moment after his conviction, before being hauled off to prison.

Her chest tightened, and she struggled for breath as she fought to push down the guilt and loneliness working its way to her eyes. Tears threatened to spill over, and she breathed a sigh of relief as Liam stood, calling for everyone's attention.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Oran," he said. "But there is one gift that would not fit in the parlor, and I must insist on presenting it myself."

Liam gave Louisa a small wink before turning to his mother.

"Ma, will you follow me?"

"Follow you?" She lifted herself from her chair with a groan. "What kind of gift is it that you couldn't bring it in the house?"

Liam gave a cunning grin. "You'll have to follow me to see."

The family all filed out of the cottage and trailed Liam and Fiona across the pasture to the barn.

*Finally!* Louisa smiled, and she sped her pace. She did not want to miss Fiona's reaction to the churn that would surely change her life.

Liam led them to the back of the barn and slipped into the storage room. A moment later, wheels squealed, and the door opened as Liam pushed his butter churn contraption through. A thick red ribbon was tied into a bow over the tarp Liam had used as wrapping.

Liam stood back, fists on his hips, and his chest puffed out. Fiona took a corner of the tarp and gave one sharp tug, bringing the tarp to the floor. A mix of *ahs*, *ohs*, and stunned silence fell.

“Merry Christmas, Ma.”

Fiona blinked and gave a confused smile. “Thank you, Liam. But what is it, exactly?” She leaned forward, her eyes narrowing. “And is that me missing churn?”

Liam laughed, and Louisa could not help snickering along with Liam’s father and siblings.

“Before you get angry, Ma, let me demonstrate.” Just as he had only a few nights ago, Liam climbed onto the pedal-powered churn, explaining his inspiration and how it worked.

Fiona nodded her approval, then rubbed her temple. “‘Tis a fine machine, Liam. Thank you. I don’t much care for churning out here, though. We’ll have to make room in the cottage.”

“We will, Ma. First thing tomorrow,” Liam said.

His grin widened as his aunts, uncles, and cousins began taking turns on the churn. It was a full half hour before everyone finally left the barn, and yet another half hour until Diarmuid shut the door after wishing all the Cahills good night.

“Well, that’s another joyful Christmas to be remembered,” Diarmuid said as he stifled a yawn.

The family all nodded through their own yawns. Eyelids drooped and shoulders sagged as all at once the pressure of playing host evaporated into the night.

Louisa stretched against the exhaustion that hung over her. She wasn’t ready to turn in yet. Though she had enjoyed

every moment of Christmas dinner and the merriment that followed, the crush of so many bodies and voices for the last five hours had drained her mental faculties. She would need a few minutes alone before subjecting herself to Aisling's nightly chatter.

“You all go on up. I'll make sure there is peat for the morning.”

Her words met no resistance. Everyone was too tired to insist their house guest go to bed. As footsteps trudged up the stairs, Louisa took a peat brick from the metal bin beside the kitchen's hearth and laid it on top of the dying embers. Then she took the spade and dug beneath it, burying the peat in the hot ashes to ensure the embers continued to smolder through the night. It was the only way to make sure the cottage stayed warm and the breakfast fire easily rekindled.

Her task now done, she sat back on the hearthrug and admired the soft red glow. Moments like this, when she was alone and all was quiet, had been few since her arrival, and she cherished every second afforded her to decompress after a long day. She closed her eyes, allowing only her ears to enjoy the popping of embers. And shuffling footsteps.

Her eyes flew open and she pushed up from the rug. Liam stood at the base of the stairs, his hands in his pockets, his green eyes trained on her with an intensity she had never seen in them before. Heat flooded her body. Her heart beat a rapid staccato, and her belly tightened in a way she had rarely felt before meeting Liam. Her breathing grew shallow as she struggled against the sensation, for she knew what it was, and she could not allow her heart to become aware of it.

“Liam,” she managed in a breathy whisper.

“I did not mean to startle you.” Liam pressed his lips together, and the intensity left his gaze, replaced by one of bashfulness as he closed the space between them.

Louisa folded her hands in front of her, unsure what to do. “You didn't startle me.”

Liam cleared his throat, his gaze darting around the cottage, landing everywhere but on her.

“Um...I, uh...I wanted to make sure you were all right. I couldn't help noticing when we were all exchanging gifts you looked rather sad, and I would hate for you to feel left out.”

“I wasn't feeling left—” The sentence died on her lips as Liam brought his hands out of his pockets, clutching a small, wrapped box in one of them.

He handed it to her and gave an apologetic shrug. “‘Tis not much, but I thought of you when I saw it.”

Her heart thumped like a bodhran in her ears. Goodness! Had Liam heard? She pulled off the wrapping and opened the box. Her breath caught, and she lifted out a small brooch with an enameled painting of bluebells at its center. A lump formed in her throat as she stroked the accessory. There was no way Liam could have known bluebells were her favorite flower, yet he had thought of her the instant he spotted the brooch. First chocolate truffles, and now this. Was Liam trying to shake her resolve to return home?

She brought her gaze up to meet his. The heat from his body, so close to hers, sent a fresh wave of ripples through her.

“Thank you. It's beautiful,” she said, more breathy than she had intended.

Liam smiled and sighed as if he had been holding his breath, and Louisa could not help wondering at the meaning. Was it simple relief that she liked his gift, or did something more linger? And how did she feel? Her body clearly wanted more than friendship, but did her heart? Could she even afford to encourage affection, if Liam had any notions of courting her? Even if she wasn't going to return to England, getting romantically involved would mean revealing her past, and that could never happen.

“I'm glad you like it,” Liam's voice broke into her thoughts. “I'll leave you to finish having time to yourself. Good night, and Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas.” Louisa gave a small bow of her head, then turned back to the smoldering ashes in the hearth as Liam climbed the stairs. If she was not careful, the smoldering flame in her own heart would fan into a raging inferno.



Liam climbed the stairs to his room, a warmth growing in his core at the memory of the tender look on Louisa’s face, then stopped when he reached the landing.

Rory and Rian stood in front of his bedroom door, mischievous grins plastered on their faces.

“Oh, it’s such a beautiful brooch, Liam,” Rory said in a falsetto. “I love it, and I love you!”

“And I love you, Louisa,” Rian lowered his voice to a deep bass and took Rory’s hands in his in mock affection. Liam rolled his eyes. Rian knew perfectly well they all had the same baritone timbre.

“Knock it off. Let me in my room.” Liam did not need to explain himself to these two imps.

“Oh, kiss me!” Rory said in his falsetto. In unison, Rory and Rian turned their backs to Liam and wrapped their arms around themselves, caressing their own shoulders and making wet kissing noises.

Liam shook his head and pushed them out of the way. “All right, you’ve had your fun. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll not say a word of this to Louisa. There be no need to make her feel uncomfortable or made fun of.” He fixed the twins with a glare and their expressions sobered.

“We’re just having a bit of fun with you,” Rian said. “We wouldn’t dare do anything to embarrass her. We have too much respect for her.”

Liam choked on a laugh. “You have more respect for a woman you’ve known four days than your own brother?”

“Not more,” Rory said. “Just a different kind. Besides, we want her to feel part of the family.”

Liam sighed and shook his head. “You’re a couple of eejits, the both of you. She won’t be with us forever, so don’t get too attached to the lass.”

He slipped past his brothers, shutting the door behind him, and kicked off his shoes before flopping onto his bed. Behind his closed eyes, the image of Louisa, tears threatening to surface during the family gift exchange, imprinted on his lids, and his heart gave a small lurch.

*Don’t be an eejit yourself. She’ll go back to England, eventually, and forget all about you.*

# Chapter 13

December 30, 1806

Louisa stretched her back as she stood in the barn's doorway. The cows she had finished milking roamed the pasture and nibbled at the dew-laden grass. The sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon, the lavender sky giving way to shades of amber and pink. Somewhere beyond that horizon, her letters were making their way to Abergreen and London, and the sooner Nora learned of her plight, the sooner Louisa could return home and leave behind all her muddled feelings for Liam. No, not just Liam. The whole family had carved out a place for themselves in her heart, and she feared the longer she stayed, the deeper her affection would be for them all.

Movement outside the cottage caught her eye—the men heading out to the fields to begin their work. Louisa sighed. She ought to be relieved that Liam had spent the last five days avoiding her. Yet her disappointment at seeing him only at dinner intensified her longing to be near him. It did not help that the distance he kept between them had only worsened since Sunday, when she had worn the brooch to Mass. Rory and Rian had complimented it then spent the remainder of the service snickering and smirking at Liam. If this was how the rest of her time here would be, she wasn't sure staying with the O'Sheas was for the best.

She ducked back into the barn to grab the can of milk she had collected and headed for the cottage. A quarter of the way across the field, she paused. A rapid pattering of hooves echoed in the air, growing louder with every second.

Louisa craned her neck toward the road that passed in front of the cottage and shook her head. The O'Sheas' two horses were stabled, but the pounding of hooves was too loud for it to be a neighbor coming up the road.

She turned, her eyes searching in the dim light for the pounding that now came from behind. Her eyes widened and a

feeble scream escaped as one of the cows she had milked earlier bellowed and charged her. In the shadows of the field, the black Kerry cow had taken on the look of a hornless demon, its eyes wild with rage.

Louisa dropped the can of cream and grabbed up her skirts. Panic sped her feet into a full sprint toward the cottage, but she was still well under half-way across the field. The cow would stampede her before she reached the garden gate.

There was only one thing to do. She cast a glance over her shoulder. The cow was just out of arm's reach. If she timed her move just right, she might have a chance before the cow realized what she had done.

Another glance. It was now or never. Louisa darted to the side and sprinted back toward the barn, running so close to her pursuer that she nearly brushed its side. She pumped her legs as hard as she could and prayed it was enough as she heard the cow bellow.

An eternity stretched on until she finally reached the barn. The cow was only a few hoofbeats away. Louisa's heart pounded in her throat as her eyes darted around the barn, seeking the safest place.

The loft!

She lunged for the ladder and scrambled up. The cow gave another angry bellow, and the ladder clattered to the ground as Louisa's hands found purchase on the edge of the loft.

"Help!" Her scream stuck in her throat, emerging as barely more than a whisper.

Beneath her, the cow snorted and pawed the ground, waiting for her to fall.

Louisa's fingernails dug into the wood, and her muscles strained as she tried to pull her dangling body up to safety. She took a deep breath, praying this time her scream would be loud enough.

"HELP! HELP ME!" Her screams reverberated off the walls, and she willed her puny arms to lift her out of danger.

“Louisa, hold on!”

She dared a glance over her shoulder. Liam, Diarmuid, Rory, and Rian stood at the entrance to the barn, each with a lasso in hand.

“Hurry! I can’t hold on much longer.” Her sweaty fingers slipped on the wood, and she tightened her grip as she clenched her teeth, willing all her strength into her hands.

Shuffling feet and hooves mixed with angry bellows, then Diarmuid, Rian, and Rory guided the cow beneath her, back toward the cattle stalls.

“She’s secured!” Diarmuid called.

“Louisa,” Liam said, “I’m going to bring the ladder to you.”

“Please hurry.” Sweat rolled into her eyes and every muscle in her body trembled with fatigue.

Liam righted the ladder and slid it in front of her, the top resting against the edge of the loft. Louisa planted her feet on the nearest rung, testing its sturdiness, then took a deep breath. Her heart pounded in her chest and her knees threatened to give out, but she could do this. She had to do this.

She took another deep breath, then lowered one foot down, then the other, slowly. Her legs and arms shook, and the ladder vibrated with the effort to calm her nerves.

Halfway down, two strong hands gripped her waist and lifted her the rest of the way to the ground. Louisa’s heart tumbled in her chest as she turned, wishing those hands would remain on her waist a little longer.

Liam’s eyes were wide, and he held her close to him as if she were a porcelain doll. “Are you all right?”

Louisa’s breath caught, and she nodded. Maybe Liam holding her wasn’t such a good thing after all. Her trembling knees were rapidly turning to jelly. She pulled away and brushed her skirts. “I’m not hurt.”

“Are you sure?” His eyes roved over her, looking for any sign of injury.

Louisa nodded. “I’m shaken up, naturally, but unharmed.” She forced a smile, as if nearly being knocked down and trampled by a cow in a rage was no big deal.

Diarmuid joined her and laid a hand on her shoulder. “You should go back to the cottage and rest a while. I’ve a bottle of whiskey in the parlor. Maybe take a swig to calm your nerves.”

“Or the whole bottle,” Rian said. There was no trace of humor in his voice. Apparently, there were some things even Rian would not joke about.

Louisa gave a quick nod and headed out of the barn.

“Miss Gaultney,” Diarmuid called after her. She turned to meet all their worried eyes. Their mouths set in hard frowns. “I’m terribly sorry. Rest assured, ‘twill not happen again.”

Louisa managed what she hoped was a forgiving smile, though there was nothing to forgive. Who would have ever thought a docile dairy cow would become so enraged, and only a half hour after being milked, the same as always? Whatever the cause, she hoped it did not happen again, for all their sakes.



Liam cupped his hand over his mouth and shook his head. “I don’t understand it. What would make Brigid attack Louisa?”

Brigid tossed her head and rammed the sides of her stall with her body. They had left her lassoed and tied the ends of the three ropes to the nearest columns surrounding her stall.

Diarmuid rubbed his forehead. “I wish I knew. ‘Tis worrisome, to be sure. I dread to think what would’ve happened to Miss Gaultney if we hadn’t arrived in time.”

“Or if she’d not been so fast,” Rian said.

“To be sure.” Rory elbowed Rian. “We ought to enter her in the next county race.”

“‘Tis no time for jokes, Rory,” Liam said through gritted teeth. “She could’ve been killed.”

Rory bent his head, thoroughly chastised. “Well, what do we do now?”

“We need to find out if Brigid’s been bitten. Could be rabies.” Diarmuid pulled on his beard in thought. They all glanced at the cow, still stomping and snorting.

“For now,” Diarmuid continued, “we’ll wait until she calms down to examine her. Until we figure out what’s

happened, no one is to enter Brigid's stall alone, and she can't be milked."

"Da, she could get an infection and die before we figure out what's wrong," Rian said.

Diarmuid sighed. "I fear we may have to put her down, anyway. We need to protect the rest of the herd now. Liam, you put down traps. See if we can't kill off whatever rodents have infected Brigid. Rian, Rory, you get back to your chores. I'll tell your ma what's happened."

Liam gathered the rat traps from the shelves and laid them out, though he doubted it would stop whatever was affecting Brigid. He had never heard of rabies causing cattle to attack at random in a full-blown rage, let alone remain in a rage once the situation had been diffused.

He finished laying the traps and approached Brigid's stall. He craned his neck, looking for any evidence of bite marks, but it was no use. Brigid would not still.

"Ah, Brigid, old lass. Do you know what you almost did? I like Louisa an awful lot. It'd be nice if you'd not kill her."



Louisa awoke to the sound of dishes clattering and voices murmuring downstairs. How long had she slept? The incident with Brigid had certainly drained her of every ounce of energy she had, but not enough to make her sleep until noon.

She descended the stairs to meet concerned faces at the bottom. Fiona lay a crock of soup in the center of the table and gave Louisa a motherly smile.

“How are you feeling, dear? You look pale.”

Louisa ran fingers through her loose tresses. “I’m fine. Only a little shaken.”

Fiona seemed to accept her answer. “Well, I’m sure a nice, hot lunch will help settle your nerves.” She ladled a hearty scoop of potato soup into Louisa’s bowl, and Louisa settled herself at the table.

The buttery and creamy liquid seeped over her tongue and down her throat, melting the last bit of fear she had not been aware still lingered.

“I suppose we’ll not be getting a reading lesson tonight,” Aisling said. She cast Louisa a questioning look.

Louisa blinked. Did they think her so weak, even after the long hours she worked alongside them, all because a cow had nearly trampled her?

“Of course, I will still teach you tonight. I am not injured, so I see no reason I cannot.” Only lazy or overly sentimental females would allow such an incident to ruin their entire day. She would prove to the O’Sheas she was made of stuff just as tough as they, and no rabid cow would prove otherwise.

## Chapter 14

The barn was dark except for the light from Louisa's lantern the next morning when she entered to milk the cows. Brigid lay in her stall, still tethered to the wooden beams that held up the loft above. An ear flicked occasionally. She seemed calm enough now, but Louisa knew better than to try milking her. The last thing she wanted was a repeat of yesterday's scene. Still, Louisa's heart pained for the cow. Aisling had mentioned last night that Brigid would develop an infection if she wasn't milked, and if they could not get close enough to treat her, Brigid would have to be put down.

"I'm so sorry, old girl."

Brigid flicked her tail in response but made no move to rise.

Louisa sighed and began milking the other cows. One after the other, the milking went on as it did any other morning. The cows all stood calmly for her, then walked outside as Louisa moved to the next stall. At least whatever was affecting Brigid had not spread to the others.

She opened the last stall and stepped in, empty bucket in hand. "All right, Dorcha. It's just you, now."

Dorcha tossed her head and backed away.

"Come now, silly girl. We do this every morning." Louisa took another step forward and Dorcha backed into the corner, a warning snort issuing from her nostrils. Louisa stepped back and shut the stall. "Not you, too. Tell me this is a fluke." Brigid's illness could not possibly be spreading, could it? As far as she knew, rabies did not spread from cow to cow. Was the same rodent biting the herd?

The sun had risen, now, and light streamed in through the barn windows. Louisa leaned over the stall gate, her eyes tracing as much of Dorcha's body as she could see. There did not appear to be any bites, but only a thorough examination could determine that, and she was not about to be attacked by another cow.

Male voices floated on the morning breeze outside, and Liam and Diarmuid passed the barn door.

“Liam. Mr. O’Shea!” Louisa called.

They entered the barn, concern written across their faces.

“Is something the matter, Miss Gaultney?” Diarmuid said. “Is it Brigid?”

Louisa shook her head. “It’s Dorcha. She won’t let me milk her. She acts as if she’s terrified of me. I know I haven’t been milking her long, but she’s never behaved this way toward me.”

Diarmuid gave a solemn nod and called Rory and Rian out of the field. Moments later, they had joined Liam in holding a trembling and moaning Dorcha still as Diarmuid searched for any wounds. When he had finished, he stepped out of the stall, shaking his head and rubbing the back of his neck. “Not a scratch or bite on her.”

“What’s that? Not a bite on who?” Fiona had entered the barn with Aisling to collect the cream for churning.

“Dorcha won’t be milked,” Diarmuid said.

Fiona’s widened eyes flitted to the cow trembling in the corner. “But she’s not acting like Brigid. So it must be a different reason.” The last statement came out as a question.

“I can’t say. Could be the same illness, but with different symptoms.”

As the family theorized about what they feared was affecting the herd—everything from rabies to ingesting poisonous mushrooms or other flora—Louisa went back over to Brigid’s stall. The cow lay completely motionless now, not an ear or tail flicking. Not a single muscle twitching. No sign of breathing. She turned her head and caught Liam’s eye. She motioned him over then pointed at Brigid. Her gut writhed with the fear that the cow was already dead, but she dared not declare such bad news. She was hardly an expert on cattle.

Liam opened the stall and knelt beside Brigid, gingerly laying a hand on her ribcage, then he peered into her still open eyes. “Da!” he called, and the family bustled over. He met his father’s gaze, still crouched beside Brigid. “She’s gone.”

Fiona brought a hand to her mouth. “What does this mean, Diarmuid? Rent is due in two days, and we’re still short. We can’t afford to be down two cows.”

Louisa’s heart plummeted into her stomach. This was the first she had heard of their financial troubles, and the guilt she had felt over the money they had spent to provide her new clothes came back full force.

Diarmuid put his balled fists on his hips and glanced up at the ceiling, his eyes seeming to search for the answers amongst the cobwebs and wood beams. “We will have to start selling our butter, cheese, and milk at the market in town every day to get new customers, and hope it’s enough to pay the rent and buy at least one new cow. Maybe you and Aisling can take in more mending and embroidery, too. See if Cara has any work for you. The boys and I will have to prioritize the cows and help with the milking and making the cheese. Anything that doesn’t help directly with earning money or tending the garden will have to wait.”

The backs of Louisa’s eyes burned at this speech. There had to be something she could do. These people had given her so much, she could not stand idly by and watch their lives fall apart.

“I can help, too. I’ll churn twice as much butter and go to the market to sell so you all don’t have to worry about neglecting things here. I’m skilled at sewing and embroidery, too. And I can sell my silk dress and the one I wore at the céilí. They are too fine for farm work, anyway.”

Fiona gave her a trembling smile. “We’ll gladly accept your offer to work more, but we won’t be letting you sell your clothes, dear. That silk gown is too fine, and the other dresses were gifts. We want you to keep them.”

“At least let me sell the silk dress. It means nothing to me. I can get another just like it when I get home. Perhaps

Cara would buy it or take it on consignment.” Louisa would keep the dresses they had made her. It would not do to dispose of something Aisling had worked so hard on, but the silk dress was Louisa’s to do with what she wished. It had been made for her before her grandfather had been killed, before her father’s and brother’s crimes were made known, and the dress she had been wearing when she was kidnapped. There were no fond memories attached to that garment. It ought to bring at least some comfort, if not happiness, to someone.

Fiona nodded. “Aye, if that is really what you want to do, we can’t stop you. But I don’t want you worrying about us. We’ll find our way out of this storm. ‘Tis not your responsibility to help us.”

Louisa sighed. “I know it isn’t, but I want to help.”

Fiona nodded. “We greatly appreciate it.” A moment passed between them. Fiona’s eyes glistened, and Louisa had to look away or risk shedding the tears she had already been fighting to hold back.

“Well, I suppose I’ll collect the cream and start churning. The butter won’t get made just standing here.” Louisa went to the cans of milk along the back wall and began scooping out the cream as the rest of the family dispersed to go about their own chores. As she bent over the cans, she closed her eyes and took in a deep breath, thankful the family had let her do even this much. Leaving in order to be one less mouth to feed was not an option until Nora received her letter and sent help, so to do even this much was enough to lessen her guilt. She only prayed Nora received her letter soon so she would not be a burden on the O’Sheas much longer.

# Chapter 15

January 1, 1807

Every muscle in Louisa's back, legs, and arms burned as she descended the stairs to breakfast, one aching step at a time. Cloth bandages covered the blisters on her fingers, and though Fiona had insisted Louisa sleep in, she had awoken at the same early hour, only to lie in bed until the first hint of sunrise. She knew better than to argue with Fiona on matters of rest. If she had attempted to go about the milking this morning, Fiona would have sent her right back to bed. The matronly woman had threatened as much the night before.

Still, despite the aching soreness wracking her body, an energy she had never felt before coursed through her. For once in her life, she was doing something meaningful. Of course, teaching the O'Sheas to read and write had its merits, but those lessons would only help them when their literacy skills were much improved. This hard labor—churning, mending, milking—was helping them now, and the idea that had come to her two nights before was already proving to be even more beneficial.

Using Liam's chain churn, as the family called it, produced ten pounds of butter in less than an hour. An impressive feat, to be sure, but it was no more than she, Fiona, and Aisling could make in half a day with three traditional churns. With Fiona and Aisling taking on extra mending and embroidery, though, there would be little time for them to churn, and they needed to make as much sellable product as possible. So, Louisa had taken the other two churns, set one on either side of the chain churn's seat, and set out to do the work of three women.

Rian and Rory had frozen mid-step when they saw her operating all three churns at once, her legs cycling and her arms pumping up and down. Then they had doubled over with laughter. She looked like a featherless bird, they had said. Even Liam, who had followed them into the barn, had barely

contained his smirk. But they were no longer laughing an hour later when she had produced eighteen pounds of butter.

Louisa stretched her neck and gave a satisfied sigh. If today was as successful as yesterday, she could make just as much, if not more, and sell it all at market tomorrow.

She reached the bottom of the stairs and stopped. Liam, Aisling, Rian, and Rory sat around the kitchen table, quiet and still as stone. Muffled voices came from behind the closed parlor door. Louisa took her seat between Liam and Aisling, too wary to speak or even smile.

“‘Tis Mr. Lynam, our landlord’s agent, come to collect the rent,” Aisling whispered.

Louisa gave a small nod and strained her ears. To her surprise, Mr. Lynam and the O’Sheas conversed in English, making polite small talk until Mr. Lynam finally cleared his throat.

“Well, I have other tenants to see,” Mr. Lynam’s brusque voice came more clearly than before. “I’ll have the rent now. You got my notice about the increase?”

A torturous moment of silence stretched out until Diarmuid finally spoke. “Yes, we got the notice, but, umm, the thing is, we only have part of the rent to pay. One of our cows died, and another is ill, bringing our herd to six. If you’ll let us, we can pay you ten and a half pounds now—that’s seventy-five percent of the rent—and the rest at a later date, if you’ll let us.”

Mr. Lynam cleared his throat. “The lease states rent must be paid on time, Diarmuid. If I gave you an extension, everyone would want one. It sets a bad precedent.”

“I understand what I ask is no small matter,” Diarmuid’s voice pleaded, “but I’ve been renting this land for over twenty years. This is the only time I’ve failed to pay in full. Surely, Mr. Lynam, you could make this one exception. No one outside these walls needs to know. I’ll swear on me gran’s grave not a soul here will breathe a word of it, and we’ll finish paying you what’s owed.”

Another heavy silence punctuated the thickening air of the cottage. “All right, Diarmuid,” Mr. Lynam said. “I’ll give you two weeks to get the rest, and I’ll be back on the fifteenth.”

Fiona and Diarmuid thanked him, and everyone around the table released a collective sigh. A surge of pain washed over Louisa. She had not realized she had been tensing her muscles.

Mr. Lynam strode out of the cottage, hardly casting a glance at anyone else. When the door behind him was shut, Louisa glanced around the table at the still somber faces. “This is good, right? It should not take too long to make up the other twenty-five percent.”

Diarmuid shook his head, and Fiona sighed.

“If it were only that simple,” Fiona said. “It takes us a full year to earn the rent, and that’s with eight healthy cows. ‘Twill be a miracle if we can earn what we owe in two weeks.”

Louisa’s shoulders slumped, and she looked down at the table. A miracle? What was the point of them asking for an extension if they had so little faith that they could meet their obligation? Perhaps they had hoped for a couple of months rather than weeks. It did not matter what they had hoped for. She had made a promise to help, and she did not intend to give up on them, nor let them face eviction.

She twisted her apron in her hands, summoning the courage to pry—albeit with good intentions—into their personal affairs. “I hope you will forgive me for asking, and I hope you will not think me rude, but how much more do you need?”

She brought her gaze up to meet Fiona’s but found the entire family staring at her. She swallowed the lump in her throat, hoping their guarded expressions did not turn to irritation.

“Three and a half pounds,” Diarmuid said.

Louisa’s eyebrows rose. That was a large sum. How had the O’Sheas ever managed to support themselves at such a

high rate? It was little wonder, now, why Aisling had said her mother seldom allowed for the purchase of new fabric or clothes unless it was a necessity. The guilt that had become all too familiar surged more strongly than before, and she fingered the gold filigree locket about her neck. The one Patrick had given her. If she could find out how much her necklace was worth, then she might pay at least a portion of the rent. Tomorrow, she was to sell the O'Sheas' goods at the market in Wexford. Perhaps she could find a few minutes to slip off to a jeweler under the pretense of checking the post. It was too soon to hope for Nora's reply, but feigned anticipation and ignorance of how quickly the post moved could be just the excuse she needed.

# Chapter 16

January 2, 1807

Liam handed a harried-looking young mother her change from the sixpence she had used to purchase a pound of butter and a bottle of milk. He tried to thank her, but his words were lost to her retreating back as she chased after her three children. The morning had gone better than he had expected. He had already sold half of the goods he, Fiona, and Louisa had brought with them, and he had taken four large orders from new customers. If each morning went as this had, they just might make up what was left of the rent. He wished they had always sold at market instead of by word of mouth and long-established customers, but work on the farm was plenty, and available hands few. Just a little over a week ago, he would never have thought Louisa would be a blessing to them, but the added help she gave was a boon to the family.

Devin peered over Liam's shoulder into the money box. "Not too shabby."

"Not too shabby at all." Liam smiled for what felt like the first time since Christmas. "I wonder how Ma and Louisa are faring."

As soon as they had set up their stand at the market, Fiona and Louisa set off for Aunt Cara's shop to inquire about doing some of her embroidery. Louisa had even made a sign advertising their mending and embroidery services to post on the town's notice board.

"I'm sure the good Lord is smiling on them, the same as he finally seems to be smiling on me." Devin gave a conspiratorial wink. "I think Maggie is finally taking a liking to me. As more than a dance partner, I mean."

Liam drummed his fingers on the table. "That's so?" He couldn't deny that his cousin had seemed more flirtatious with Devin as of late. "Perhaps she's finally realized she may never get the chance to leave Wexford."

“Or maybe she has a reason not to leave.” Devin wiggled his eyebrows and gave a self-satisfied smirk. “Same as your lass, I’d imagine.”

Liam stared at his friend. “My lass? I hope you aren’t referring to Miss Gaultney. She no sooner wants to stay in Ireland than a fish on a hook. The first chance she gets, she’ll be on a ship bound for England.” His heart clenched at his own words. When she had first arrived, he wanted nothing more than for her to get back to England as quickly as possible, but now the thought of her leaving left his gut twisting. Still, she would be happier in England, away from the troubles of her poor Irish rescuers and the back-breaking chores. No matter how eager she seemed to help, he knew she was merely counting down the days until she could return home.

Devin shook his head. “I doubt that. You said she arrived with not a penny on her. I doubt she’ll be jumping aboard a boat anytime soon.”

Liam sighed. “Aye, she’s stuck here until her friends come for her.” If her friends came for her. What if they never received her letters? It was not uncommon for ships to sink in the rough Irish Sea.

“The little English lass is eager to get home, eh, O’Shea?” Seamus Cotter sidled up to the table. “I could help with that. I imagine, having lost one cow and having another nearing the grave, it can’t be easy to have one more mouth to feed.”

Liam’s jaw tightened, and he crossed his arms. Had news of his family’s troubles traveled so fast already? And how dare the man assume they could not afford to keep Louisa under their roof? “Miss Gaultney pulls her weight. ‘Tis because of her hard work we have so much to sell today.”

Seamus raised his hands in defense. “I did not mean to accuse her of being a lay-about, nor to assume you couldn’t afford her keep. Still, if the lass wants to go home, I can take her to Liverpool. I’ll even hire a coach to take her home from there, and all free of cost to you. You know I can afford it.”

Liam cast a glance at Devin, who shrugged a shoulder. “‘Tis a good offer,” Devin said.

“Aye, too good.” Liam studied Seamus’s face. “What do you get out of it?” Liam was no fool. No man like Seamus offered to take a woman as beautiful as Louisa anywhere without expecting something in return, and Liam worried Louisa would pay the *something*. Then a darker thought crept in. What if Seamus had had something to do with her arrival? They had arrived the same morning. Before he could chase that line of thought any further, Seamus answered.

“What I get out of it is that my preferred butter and cheese supplier stays in business. My men are used to O’Shea’s high-quality products. In fact, if you can manage, I’ll double my order to make sure your business stays afloat until you can replace your lost cattle.” Seamus gave a genuine smile.

Liam could not deny Seamus’s logic, yet something niggled in the back of Liam’s brain. Seamus had never proven himself a bad guy. Everyone knew he kept company with the harlots who worked the wharfs, but he had never heard of the man bringing harm to anyone, man or woman. And Seamus had always been one of their best customers, so why did every nerve in Liam’s body scream for him to dismiss Seamus’s offer?

Liam rubbed his stubbled chin. No matter his own feelings, he could not deny Louisa the chance to return home sooner than her friends could provide. “I’ll tell her of your offer, but ‘twill be her decision.”

Seamus crossed his arms. “Why should it be her decision to make? You are the one paying for her keep. She should do as you deem fit.”

“I have to disagree. She’s not a stray dog who has outstayed her welcome. She’s a woman with feelings and her own mind. The decision will be hers.”

Seamus gave a curt nod. “Have it your way, then. I leave in four days. In the meantime, put me down for twice my usual order, and I’ll take a pound of butter and a quart of milk

today.” He slapped the money down on the table and took his purchases. “Let me know your answer by Monday,” he called over his shoulder as he walked away.

Liam gave a hard smile, his brain already imagining Louisa’s excitement at going home earlier than expected. His stomach twisted and tightened, and he prayed she would have sense enough to wait until her friends came for her.



Liam drove the cart home in silence as Fiona and Louisa chatted excitedly about the new mending and embroidery jobs they had received. He was happy to let them talk. It gave him time to think about what he would say, if he would say anything, about Seamus’s offer. Of course he would mention it. If he kept silent and Louisa ran into Seamus, he might ask her for her decision, and she might become angry with Liam for not telling her about Seamus’s offer. Then again, she might be thankful if Liam did not mention it. No matter how much he tried to rationalize away his suspicions, he could not help wondering if Seamus had been involved in her kidnapping. He doubted Seamus would do such a thing, but one of his men might have snuck her aboard. Seamus

could be trying to cover for the man instead of handing him over to the law. That would be just as bad. But that was only a suspicion. Only Louisa knew who had abducted her, and though she had settled in comfortably with his family, she still did not fully trust them enough to divulge her secrets.

At dinner, Liam ate his stew quietly, despite the optimistic chatter that floated around the table. Today had been a productive day for everyone, and hope that they might make up the remainder of the rent had begun to manifest.

“How about you, Liam?” Diarmuid’s voice broke through Liam’s reticence. “Ma said you sold out of everything you brought. Might be good to bring extra tomorrow. See how much more sells.”

Liam nodded. “Aye, we can do that.” He felt his family’s gazes shift to him, and silence filled the space.

“Everything all right?” Fiona asked. “You were right quiet coming home. Is something on your mind?”

Liam took in a breath and laid his spoon down. He rubbed his forehead, piecing together in his mind the exact words he would say, then faced Louisa. There was no way around it. He would tell her of the offer and let her decide.

“I saw Seamus Cotter today. He leaves on Tuesday for Liverpool, and he said he’d be willing to take you there for free. He even promised to rent you a carriage to get you home.”

The words hung heavy in the air between them. Louisa stared open-mouthed, and a hint of something flashed in her eyes—simple surprise or apprehension, he could not tell.

Diarmuid cleared his throat. “‘Tis a good offer.”

“Aye,” Fiona said, though her expression was less than encouraging.

For once, Rory and Rian were speechless. The lads who had always had an opinion about everything picked at their food, their eyes darting from their parents back to Louisa.

Aisling slapped her hand on the table. “Well, I think it’s a terrible idea. She wouldn’t even have a proper lady’s companion to escort her. She’d be all alone on a ship full of foul-mouthed sailors.”

Fiona conceded the point, and Rory and Rian nodded their agreement.

“It may not be proper,” Diarmuid said. “Still, the offer was made for Louisa. ‘Tis for her to decide. What say you?” His gaze fell on Louisa.

She twisted her fingers in her lap and bit her lip.

*Say you’ll wait.* Liam held his breath, fighting the urge to speak the words.

“I need time to think it over,” Louisa said.

Time to think it over? Liam pressed his lips together to keep from asking her what there was to consider. She either felt comfortable going with Seamus, or she didn’t. What was so hard about that? He cast a side glance at her, trying to read her expression, but her face was frustratingly stoic.

Even as the family settled around the hearth in the parlor after dinner for another of Diarmuid’s stories, Louisa seemed to have put the offer from her mind, and it took every ounce of self-control for Liam not to demand she make up her mind then and there. He had to keep calm and trust she would decide soon. Pushing her now might only make her choose to go with Seamus after all. Despite his conflicting feelings about the lass, Liam knew he could not endure her leaving with another man.

# The Man Who Married a Merrow

By Diarmuid O'Shea

You know about the merrows, I trust. Tricky, sometimes even deadly, creatures they can be. But really, they're no different from us. The only real difference is that they live in the sea and have tails. And magic. But as for being good or bad, they are just like us. Some choose to live peacefully while others try to cause as much trouble as they can.

Well, one day, some years ago, a terrible storm blew up from the Atlantic, tossing everything it caught in its winds and waves on the shores of County Wexford. Gulls, fish, boats—some with their sailors, some without. Nothing was safe from the storm unless it lay deep in the ocean or was locked away behind sturdy walls on land. And a poor merrow lass learned that lesson the hard way.

This merrow had always been fascinated by storms, ever since she was a wee lass, so when she saw the waves above her churning and frothing like cream being made into butter, she swam toward the surface. Surely, she thought, a little peek above the water wouldn't hurt. She was a strong swimmer, after all. She'd only take a quick peek and go back home.

Well, just as her pretty, black hair broke the surface of the water, a great wave crashed over her, and she was caught in a current and carried a few miles south of Wexford. No matter how hard she fought, she couldn't break the current's grasp, and she finally gave up and let it toss her out of the ocean onto a small beach.

Exhausted from her fight, she fainted, and it wasn't until the sun's rays warmed her fair green skin that she awoke. She sat up, determined to swim back home, but when she caught sight of her body, she froze stiff as ice. Where was her tail? Her long, iridescent green tail and fin were gone, replaced with two slender legs the color of alabaster. Her torso and arms, too, had changed to match her legs. No longer was her skin the fair green hue of sea foam. No longer was she a

merrow. She was human, and stark naked as a newborn babe. She patted the top of her head in a panic. The red cap her people wore to shift into human form, then back into their merrow forms, was gone.

“Oh, I’m a right eejit!” she cried. “Why did I have to go to the surface?” She held her face in her hands and cried. But sitting around weeping for herself would do no good, and she knew that. So, she stood up and brushed off as much sand as she could, then walked along the beach, combing the sandy shore for any sign of bright red. Halfway down, something crimson flashed, and she ran toward it.

“My cap!” she said. “It has to be.” As she neared the red object, she dove to grab it.

“Ah-hah! Huh?” She tugged on the red fabric, which was a mere tattered ribbon tied to the end of a net. Her heart dropped into the pit of her stomach, but she did not have time to cry, for a cool breeze came up, chilling her to her bones. She was still naked and needed to find something to cover her body. So, she snatched up the net and wrapped it about herself until her entire chest and torso were concealed beneath the netting.

Well, you can imagine how heavy that net must have been, especially for all the water it had absorbed, and not knowing exactly where she was, she decided to sit down and have a think. If she walked along the shore for a while, maybe she would eventually find her cap, or at least come to a town where she might find some kind person who would help her gain some proper clothes.

But she had not considered her next step for more than a few minutes when she heard the crunching of sand. She stood and turned, ready to defend herself if need be. The next minute, a tall, handsome man with flaming red hair came around one of the boulders lining the beach.

“Faith and begorrah!” He slapped his forehead in shock. “Where the devil did you come from, lass? And what are you doing wearing my net?”

He strode toward her, and she stumbled back and fell on the sand.

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry, miss,” he said and stretched out his hand to her. “I didn’t mean to frighten you. Just surprised, I was.”

He bent down and gripped her under her arms to help her up. When she was squarely standing on her legs, which were still a bit wobbly, being new and all, the man looked her over. Then, realizing she wore not a stitch of clothing aside from his net, he turned away, his ears turning as red as his hair.

“Pardon me, miss. I did not mean to stare, but I would like to help you, if you’ll let me.”

The merrow looked him over. He seemed harmless enough. She had heard about these human men, how many of them preyed on helpless women, yet this one had been only helpful to her, and bashful at seeing her in such a state.

She gave a cautious nod.

The man slipped off his coat, then pulled it around her shoulders. When she had slipped her arms into the sleeves and fastened it, he finally faced her.

“I’m Sean,” he said.

The merrow opened her mouth to speak her name, then closed it. She had never used her voice out of the water, and she certainly had never spoken any language but her own, though she knew the Gaelic tongue, having learned it from her many brothers and sisters who had ventured on land in their younger days. Perhaps it would be better to remain mute until she had time to experiment with her voice. Then again, this man had shared his name with her. It would be rude of her to leave him with nothing to call her.

She cleared her throat, testing the timber of her voice. “M-M-Maren. My name is Maren,” she finally managed.

Sean repeated her name as if testing the sound of it. He gave her a warm smile. “Well, Maren, ‘tis a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I take it you’re not from around here. Your accent is not one I’ve heard before.”

Maren shook her head. “No, I suppose you wouldn’t. My home is quite far from here.”

“Well, as long as that home don’t be in the sea, you’re most welcome to stay with me and me ma.” Sean gestured to a path up the beach.

Maren gave a nervous chuckle. “Why should you be worried I’m from the sea?”

A dark look entered Sean’s eyes despite the smile still on his lips. “Have you not heard of the merrows? A fearsome, cruel bunch they be. The womenfolk love to lure poor Irish sailors to their deaths by singing beautiful songs to them. Me great-grandda fell over the side of his fishing boat and drowned trying to swim to one of their kind what was singing to him.” He gave a pitying shake of his head. “That’s why I fish right here from the shore, where it’s safe. No trips out to sea for me.”

Maren’s heart pounded at an alarming rate. She had never heard her people spoken of with so much hatred, not even by her fellow sea creatures. And she had certainly never heard of her kind luring people to their deaths. Sure, sailors had drowned near where merrows had sung their songs, but it had never been a result of any merrow trying to bring harm. The blasted sailors just happened to be too close when her people rose to the surface to deliver their prayers. That was what the songs were. Prayers to the god of the wind and seas to keep conditions favorable for the life below the waves. But poor Maren didn’t dare argue the point with Sean, for if she did, she would give herself away as a merrow. And who knew what the man might do to her if he knew the truth?

“That’s terrible,” she said. “It must have pained your great-gran to lose him like that.”

“Aye, I suppose it did, though I did not know her. She died when I was a wee babe.” He pointed up a steep but short hill. “There’s home.”

Maren followed his pointed finger. At the top of the hill, set a little way back, stood a stone cottage with a thatched roof. A plump woman stood outside pinning various items,

much like the coat Sean had draped around Maren, to a clothesline.

“Oy! Ma!” Sean called, and the woman turned.

Her eyes grew large as she took in Maren’s form. “Musha! What in Heaven’s name?” The woman’s eyes traced Maren from her tangled black mane to the coat and net she wore to her bare feet. “Where did you find her?” She fixed Sean with a curious glare.

“Down on the beach, tangled up in me fishing net. Though I don’t rightly know how she came to be there.” He scratched the back of his head and faced Maren. “I suppose in all my talking, I never asked you how you came to be on the beach.”

Sean and his mother fixed their gazes on Maren, waiting for her story. Maren took a breath. The truth, at least part of it, was better than lying, she supposed.

“I was out at sea and got caught in that great storm. It carried me such a far distance, I must have fainted in my terror, and when I woke up, I was down there on the beach.”

“And your clothes? What happened to them?” Sean’s mother raised a suspicious eyebrow. “Did the storm make off with them, too?”

Maren bit her lip and nodded. “Yes, ma’am. Must have. ‘Twas a strong storm.”

“Your red cap, too?” Sean’s mother’s eyes narrowed.

“Ma! She’s a normal woman, just like any other,” Sean said, “and she needs our help.”

“She’s too pretty to be a normal lass.”

Maren’s cheeks flushed. She did not know whether to be flattered or fearful. Instead, she settled for a sheepish grin. “I assure you, ma’am, I’m not a merrow. I’m simply a woman who has been carried far from home, and I’m sure me family thinks me dead, or will soon. But I don’t expect any charity from you. I’ll be on my way.”

She made to take off Sean's coat, and his mother rolled her eyes and sighed. "Leave it on for now, child, and come on in. We'll find you something proper to wear."

With that, Sean's ma led Maren into the little cottage, and fixed her up with an old dress of hers, a bowl of stew, and some ale. As she watched Maren wolf down the stew as if she hadn't eaten in days, the old woman's heart softened, and she invited Maren to stay until she could find her way home.

Well, time passed, and each day at dawn, Maren walked up and down that beach looking for her red cap. For weeks she searched and prayed, but in all that time, she never found it, and at the same time, her gratitude for Sean's kindness grew into love. She even found herself caring for Sean's ma, though the old woman was still suspicious of her. Then, when Maren had been staying with them a full year, she and Sean were married, and what a happy day. Every soul in town was at the church to celebrate the marriage, and soon after that, Maren found she was with child.

Now, you might expect Maren would be joyful at having a wee babe with the man she loved, but you'd be wrong. For throughout her nine months, she fretted in secret. What if the babe was born with green skin and fins? Despite her love for her husband, and despite the kindness he had always shown her, Maren never forgot the fear and hate her husband held for the merrows. Oh, what would he say, what would he do, if his baby came out flipping and flopping, looking for all the world like a fish?

Then, one day in May, the first labor pains came, and hours later, Maren had given birth to a baby girl with copper hair and eyes as green as sea glass. "Oh, thank God in Heaven," she breathed as she took her baby in her arms. Two legs and ten toes, and not a fin or gill in sight. The babe was human.

Or so she thought. For the next three years, the little family lived happily by the sea. Little Aine, as they had named the girl, was the apple of her father's eye. A right sweet little angel, but she knew her own mind. One day, as the family

prepared to take the fish Sean had caught to market, little Aine sat on the floor and crossed her arms.

“I’m not going to market. It’s boring,” she said.

Well, Sean and Maren couldn’t blame her for not wanting to go. She wasn’t a baby content with sitting in one spot with her blocks anymore. She wanted to run and play, and a busy market was no place for that.

“I’ll stay here with her, dear,” Maren said to her husband. “It’ll be easier to sell without us having to chase after her.”

Sean agreed, so he and his ma loaded up the cart and headed off.

All was well at home for a while. Aine played with her toys and helped Maren with the chores, but then, near sunset, as Maren was preparing a pie for dinner, little Aine slipped out of the house. And where do you think she went, but down to that beach?

Now, fearing that Aine might still be a merrow, Maren had always kept her daughter away from the sea, never letting even the smallest wave touch her toes. Even bath times were kept short, just in case too much time in the soapy water brought out the merrow in the girl’s blood. But as Aine grew, so did her curiosity.

Well, about the time Maren looked out the window at the orange and red sky, she spotted Aine down by the water.

“Oh, no!” she cried, and she ran out of the cottage as fast as she could, down to the beach. “Aine, what do you think you’re doing?” She reached to grab her daughter out of the surf and froze. Little Aine’s legs had become a single long tail.

“Look, Ma,” the little lass said, and she splashed the water with her new fin. “I’m a merrow!” The glee on her face sent a shock of fear through her mother’s heart. But something else, too. Something akin to homesickness. It had been four years since Maren had swum in the sea. Four years since she had worn her merrow form. But how was her daughter able to transform into a merrow with no red cap?

As she watched her daughter splash about in the waves, the setting sun caught the lass's hair, and Maren's eyes widened. Aine's red hair! The lass did not need a cap. She was born with it, and being half human, she only needed the ocean's water to transform. How curious. But Maren did not have long to think on this. For the next second, Aine had raced further out into the water.

"Aine, come back!" Maren called over and over until her daughter returned.

"Ma, look at what I found," Aine said, and she raised her little hand out of the water. In it she clasped a red cap.

Maren's jaw dropped and she grabbed the cap. After four years, she had given up on ever seeing it again, yet here 'twas returned to her on the same day her daughter had learned of her true heritage.

Tears clung to Maren's eyelashes, and she stepped into the water as she placed the cap on her head. As soon as she did, the alabaster skin she had grown used to turned the pale green she had known most of her life, and her legs joined into one long tail.

"Ma! You're a merrow, too!" Aine smiled. "Swim with me."

Well, how could Maren say no? So, she and little Aine splashed and frolicked in the sea, and it was not until a scream pierced the air that Maren stopped.

She turned toward the sound, and up on the hill between the beach and the cottage stood Sean and his ma. Maren's mother-in-law held her hands over her cheeks, her mouth open and letting fly one horrendous scream after another. But all Sean did was stand there, his eyes wide in confusion, then fear, before narrowing into two angry slits.

Maren took off her red cap, changing back into a human on the instant, and ran to her husband. "Sean, I can explain," she cried.

But Sean would not hear her. His face contorted in disgust, and he stepped back, holding his hands out in front of

him to prevent her from coming any closer. “Stay away from me, you deceitful sea snake.” The words dripped with contempt, and Maren fell to her knees, tears stinging her eyes. She begged and pleaded for her husband to listen to her, but he only shook his head and refused to hear a word.

Then his mother, who had finally quit screaming, ran forward with the largest kitchen knife they owned, aiming for Maren.

Well, Maren did not much care what happened to her, but what would happen to her little Aine if she died? So, as fast as she could, Maren raced down to the beach, and as soon as she was in the water, she secured her cap to her head, grabbed Aine by the hand, and fled out to sea.

Now, I don't rightly know what happened to Maren and Aine after that, but I can tell you Sean was right sorry. At first, he was angry and ashamed a merrow had ever tricked him, but after a few weeks, he came to miss Maren and their little daughter. Cried every night, he did, pleading with God to bring his wife and daughter back to him. Then, one day, with not a word to his old ma, he packed up his things and left. Became a sailor, he did, sailing the seas from Dublin to Liverpool, to the Americas, in hopes he would find his wife and child, and bring them home. I don't know if he ever found them. For all I know, he's still going from ship to ship, working and searching, wishing he had listened to his wife, given her the chance to tell her truth and live out their days happily and together. I hope for his sake he has found her, for 'tis a miserable life to be alone, knowing you gave up the one thing that truly matters.

## Chapter 17

Liam's jaw worked throughout Diarmuid's story. How could Louisa sit there so casually, enjoying the tale as if she had not been presented with an enormous gift moments before? At dinner, when his da had asked her if she wished to return home on Seamus's ship, she had been hesitant to answer. Liam even thought he had seen a flash of fear in her eyes, but the next second it had disappeared, replaced by stoicism. And now she acted as if the offer had never been made at all, as if this temporary life of a farm lass was business as usual. Just like the merrow from Da's story had pretended all was well. Louisa was keeping secrets, but Liam was finished letting her keep them. It was time he got the full truth out of her.

The rest of the family had already started up the stairs, and Louisa had volunteered to put another peat brick in the kitchen hearth.

"Louisa, might I have a word with you?" Liam said when she had finished. He headed back into the parlor.

Louisa nodded and followed him. The unease he had seen earlier returned, as if she suspected what he wished to discuss. He would have to be careful not to cause Louisa to pull back into the shell from which she had finally emerged. He only hoped by now his family had earned enough of her trust for her to divulge her secrets.

Louisa crossed her arms as she entered the parlor, and Liam shut the door, leaving it cracked just enough to let her know he had only good intentions.

"What did you wish to discuss?" she asked. She shifted her weight from foot to foot.

"I wanted to know if you had decided. About going with Seamus."

Louisa wrung her hands and glanced away. "No, I haven't. If that is all, I'll bid you goodnight."

Liam stuck his arm out, blocking her way out of the parlor as she reached to open the door. He had expected her to hedge, but not outright dismiss him. “That’s not all. It seems to me a pretty easy decision. You either want to go home now, or you don’t. Surely, you would rather be home playing the pianoforte, or attending balls, or whatever it is you wealthy lasses do all day, rather than slaving away on a farm.”

Louisa blinked, her eyes widening. “It’s not that simple.”

Liam huffed a half laugh. “Not that simple? It seems rather simple to me. A man offers you free passage back to England, even offers to hire a carriage to take you right to your doorstep, and your answer is ‘let me think about it?’” A muscle in his jaw twitched—a tick he only experienced when he became angry—and he took a breath. Why was he getting so angry? He had started this conversation intending to be calm and compassionate. What was it about this woman that made him behave like an irrational, jealous, lovesick teenager?

“Just tell me this.” He took another breath, though it did little good. Heat had crept into his neck and showed no sign of abating. “Tell me why ‘tis so difficult to make a decision.”

Louisa opened her mouth, then closed it, gritting her teeth as her eyebrows drew together. “I do not have to answer to you. I make my own decisions when I am ready to make them. Now, goodnight, Liam.” She reached for the doorknob, and Liam slammed the door shut.

He recognized his mistake instantly, but he didn’t care. With every passing second, he was becoming more convinced Seamus—or his crew—was involved in her abduction, and he would have the truth, even if Louisa hated him for it. “Maybe I should just hand you over to Seamus. Then you’ll not have to decide at all.”

Louisa’s chest rose in a sharp intake of breath, and her face paled. “Fine. I will wait for my friends to come. Now you have your answer.” Her gaze flicked to the door, as if she expected him to open it.

Liam stood firm, staring at her until her eyes met his. Her decision alone was not good enough. He wanted the reason. “Why don’t you want to go with Seamus?”

“It isn’t proper for a lady to travel without a chaperone, especially on board a ship full of men.” Louisa lifted her chin in mock confidence.

Liam took a step toward her. “You and I have been unchaperoned. We’re unchaperoned right now. What’s the difference?”

Louisa’s breaths came quick now, but her eyes never left his. “I know you.”

Liam shook his head. “I am just as much a stranger to you as Seamus. You’ve lived here for, what, a week and a half? What do you really know about me? In the end, Seamus and I are no different.”

Louisa squared her shoulders. “I will not argue the point with you, Liam. I have given you my decision. Now, I must bid you good night.”

She darted around him and flung the door open, but he was on her heels in two steps.

“You know what I think it really is?” he said. She stopped and turned to face him. He stepped toward her, fixing his gaze on her silver eyes that had gone slate. He fought the urge to pull her to him, to not let her go until she told him the whole truth of her abduction. “You don’t trust me enough to tell me the truth. You don’t trust me family. After all we’ve done for you, I would have thought we’d proven our loyalty.” He patted his chest. “I thought I’d proven my worthiness to protect you.” His heart gave a lurch as she only stared at him, her pink lips set into a frown. How he wanted to take her in his arms, to press his lips against hers. To show her how deep his loyalty to her ran, despite how short a time he had known her.

He took a step back, letting his shoulders drop, and he held his hands out in front of him, palms up, like a priest praying in supplication. “Please, Louisa. Tell me the truth.”

Louisa's lip quivered, and she wrapped her arms tight around her middle. She closed her eyes a moment, taking in a deep, shuddering breath before bringing her teary gaze back to his. "Seamus Cotter is the man who abducted me. Please do not ask me to say more than that."

Liam's breath halted, followed by a white-hot flash of anger. He had suspected Seamus had something to do with her abduction, but he never thought he was the blackguard. A dozen sins Seamus might have committed against her flew through his mind, but he would respect her request. He would not ask what horrors she had suffered. What he would do was see that Seamus never took a breath of sea air again. Whatever the blackguard had planned to do to Louisa once he had her on board, Liam would make sure Seamus never succeeded.

He spun on his heel and ran up the stairs, taking two steps at a time and shouting for his father and brothers. Before this night was through, Seamus would account for his crimes.



Louisa gave an involuntary jump, and she raced up the stairs. "Liam! Stop. What are you going to do?"

But he didn't answer her. The bedroom doors flew open, and the family emerged onto the landing in various states of undress.

"What the devil is going on?" Diarmuid asked as he pushed one of his suspenders back up on his shoulder.

Liam's shoulders rose and fell with each labored breath. He was like an enraged bull, ready to pummel anyone who crossed him. "'Twas Seamus who abducted Louisa." He ducked into his room and reemerged with a hunting knife and a hurling stick.

Louisa's blood ran cold as her heart battered her ribcage. This was not happening. What had she done? Surely Liam would not kill Seamus.

Fiona's hands flew to her cheeks and she shrieked. "Liam, put those away. Is that really necessary?"

Liam slid the knife into the sheath he had hooked to his belt and swung the hurley. "If Seamus is half as intelligent as he pretends to be, he won't give me reason to use them. Are you with me?" he asked Diarmuid and his brothers.

In the seconds it had taken Liam to grab his weapons, his father and brothers had retrieved their coats and shoes. "Aye," they said in unison as they stuffed their feet into their shoes. As they headed down the stairs, Louisa shook herself out of her stupor.

"Liam, wait." She beat him to the door and grabbed his arm. As much as Seamus deserved to answer for what he did, Louisa would never forgive herself if Liam took the man's life. "Don't do this now, please. Wait until you're calm. Seamus doesn't know I've said anything. You can deal with him in the morning."

The rage in Liam's eyes drained away. He removed her hand from his arm and held it, his touch gentle but as firm as his gaze. "I promise, I won't do anything foolish. Da and me brothers will see to that." With that, he released her hand and marched out the door, Diarmuid, Rian, and Rory close behind.

Louisa gripped the doorframe, her fingernails digging into the wood as the men disappeared into the night. Her head swam and her stomach flopped, threatening to bring back up her dinner, and she broke out in a cold sweat. This was not happening. This was a nightmare from which she would soon awake.

Fiona gave a soft tug on her arm. "Come, dear. Let's get you into the parlor."

The parlor, where all this trouble started. Louisa gave a sardonic laugh as she let Fiona guide her to the small settle.

"Aisling, fetch a cup and your da's whiskey," Fiona said. Aisling disappeared into the main room, then reappeared a minute later with a teacup containing an amber liquid. Fiona handed Louisa the cup. "This will help to settle your nerves, dear. Try not to worry. Diarmuid won't let Liam do anything rash."

Louisa nodded. Liam's actions were only half her worry. Seamus had promised to keep her secret so long as she kept his. Her stomach clenched, and she brought the cup to her lips, dreading the nightmare soon to unfold. She only took a small sip, but it was enough to send fire down her throat, and she handed the cup back as she gave a spluttering cough.

Fiona knocked back the rest of the whiskey and shook her head. "I can't understand it. Seamus Cotter? We've known him since he was a lad, when he and his brother Owen came to Wexford to live with their grandparents." She fixed Louisa with a stare, her mouth pulling into a frown. "What would make him kidnap such a sweet lass like you?"

There it was. The question she had been dreading. She knew she would have to answer it eventually, but not tonight. Her mental faculties were spent, and she buried her face in her hands, taking a moment to breathe before she stood. "I'm sorry. I'm terribly exhausted."

"Of course, dear." Fiona patted her on the shoulder.

Aisling made to follow Louisa, but Fiona called her back. It was just as well. Louisa was sure they would discuss

her refusal to explain Seamus's motive, but she did not care. All she wanted right now was to be alone. She climbed into bed after changing into her nightdress and closed her eyes, listening to the wind softly rattle the windowpanes.

The whiskey had done little to calm her nerves, and she pulled her knees into her stomach to quell the nausea settling in. The image of Liam's face full of righteous anger swam behind her eyelids. She was silly to have thought he might ever betray her to Seamus, but how long would his protective feelings last once he discovered why Seamus had abducted her? Once he learned who her family was and what they had done? Would all the O'Sheas still treat her as a friend, or would they turn their anger on her for her deceit? What a mess! There was only one comfort Louisa could count on now, and that was the hope that soon Nora Gaultney would rescue her before this nightmare became a living hell and all Ireland learned of her secret.

## Chapter 18

*I'm going to beat Seamus to a bloody pulp!* Liam marched toward O'Brien's pub, his father, brothers, and the magistrate, Ronan O'Doyle, following in his wake. After waking Seamus's landlady and discovering the scoundrel was not in his rooms, they headed for the next likely place.

"Now, boyo," Ronan said, "I know you're angry, but calm yourself down. I'd like to arrest only one man tonight."

"Aye, you don't have to worry about me. I'm in complete control of meself." Liam took a deep breath. Well, he wasn't yet, but he would have to get in control. Men in fits of anger made mistakes, and he could not afford to let Seamus slip away or make more of a spectacle than was necessary. Louisa had been tormented enough by that man already. The less attention Liam brought to her, the better he would feel.

As they passed Mrs. Sheehan's confectionary, the memory of when he had bought Louisa truffles for her birthday came back. Seamus had approached them then, pretending he had never met Louisa before.

Liam clenched his fists. The nerve Seamus had, pretending to be meeting Louisa for the first time. Now he wondered what Seamus had said to her while he was making his delivery. Liam did not doubt Seamus had threatened Louisa into staying silent. He had dismissed the strained look on her face at the time as a reaction to the cold or simply being left to converse with a man she had just met. Now he was sure that look had been barely veiled fear.

As they neared the pub, the door swung open, and a group of men stumbled out, slurring their 'goodnights' as they went their separate ways. A few Liam recognized as Seamus's crew.

He forced a smile and hid the hurley behind him. "Oy! Is Seamus in there?"

One of the men turned and raised a hand in greeting. "At the bar, boyo! And he's in a particularly good mood

tonight. Buying drinks for the house.”

Liam nodded his thanks, and his smile slipped into a vengeful smirk. Seamus wouldn't be in a good mood for much longer.

Liam tightened his grip on the hurley as he entered the pub, and the rollicking tune ceased when the fiddler caught sight of the stick and the knife on Liam's hip. Several heads turned toward them.

“Play on, boys,” Ronan said. “Don't mind us.”

When the band had started back up, Liam said, “Rian and Rory, you go to the right. Da, you head to the left. Ronan and I will head straight for Seamus.”

Behind the bar, James and Devin stood filling glasses, wary looks in their eyes. Liam gave an apologetic shrug, but kept his face stony, his eyes set on Seamus's back.

“Now, you let me do the talking, boyo,” Ronan said in his ear.

Liam only nodded, unwilling to promise anything.

“Evening, James.” Ronan nodded to James and Devin. “Our business will not take long.”

Devin gave Liam a questioning look, but Liam would not explain. Not now, with so many onlookers and eavesdroppers. He would not do Louisa the dishonor. No, this arrest would be quick and quiet.

Ronan cleared his throat and approached Seamus. “Mr. Cotter, you must come with us.”

Seamus set his drink down and turned on his seat. The joke he had been telling to the crewmen sitting with him died on his lips as his eyes travelled from Ronan to Liam and the hurley resting against his shoulder.

Seamus rolled his shoulders, leaning against the bar with feigned easiness. “What for, O'Doyle?”

Liam's jaw clenched. “You know bloody well what this is about,” he said through clenched teeth.

Ronan patted Liam's elbow and shot him a warning look. "There's no need to cause a scene, Seamus. Come now, or I'll have to arrest you in front of all your boys."

Seamus's face darkened, and the five crewmen who sat around him rose from their stools, tightening their fists.

Liam held the hurley as if ready to swing, and Ronan signaled Diarmuid, Rory, and Rian to come forward, surrounding Seamus and his men.

"Gentlemen, I have a job to do." Ronan fixed the men with a glare and pulled a pistol from the holster on his waistband.

Liam's gaze darted to the weapon. Seamus ought to be thankful Liam did not have a gun of his own, or this whole affair might be playing out very differently.

"If any of you interfere, you'll be in a heap of trouble," Ronan said. "As it is, I already have enough reason to arrest you all for accessory to Seamus's crimes."

The men exchanged glances, then grabbed their ales and muttered their apologies to Seamus as they dispersed.

Seamus's lips pursed, and he slid silently off his barstool. Ronan and Liam each took him by an arm and led him outside. Devin ordered the patrons to get back to their own business as he followed them out.

Once outside, Ronan took a set of wrist cuffs from his coat pocket and secured Seamus's hands. "Seamus Cotter, you are being placed under arrest for the abduction of Louisa Gaultney. You are to be held at the jail until the appointed time of your grand jury hearing, at which point any further charges that are deemed applicable will be addressed. Do you understand all I've said?"

Seamus nodded, a muscle twitching in his cheek.

At Ronan's request, Diarmuid accompanied him to the jail, while Rian and Rory headed back into the pub.

"Why waste a perfectly good opportunity?" Rory smirked.

Liam shook his head. He ought to send his brothers straight home, but after this evening, he had half a mind to join them. Besides, James would make sure the boys only got watered down ale.

Devin still stood outside, staring at Liam and combing his fingers through his hair. “Some turn of events. And it was only this morning he was offering to take her home.”

Liam rubbed the back of his neck. A thousand thoughts ran through his head, all of them failing to manifest into speech. Not that he needed to say anything. From the look on Devin’s face, he had the same thought Liam had. If Louisa had boarded Seamus’s ship, would she have made it home? From the dark look in Seamus’s eyes upon his arrest, Liam doubted taking her safely back to England had ever been the plan.

Devin crossed his arms. “Did Miss Gaultney say why he had taken her?”

“Nay. I didn’t ask, and she didn’t volunteer that information. I wish I knew, but I don’t dare ask. I have already pressed her too hard. She only confessed it was Seamus because I refused to give her any peace until she told me why she would rather wait for her friends.” He held his head in his hands, shame washing over him. He had been cruel in his methods, and he would not blame Louisa if she hated him for it.

“Well, I suppose we’ll all find out soon enough the why,” Devin said. “It’s bound to come up at the grand jury.”

“If she agrees to testify,” Liam said.

“Why wouldn’t she?”

Liam sighed. “She did not want to tell me about Seamus, and I forced it out of her. I don’t know why she would risk him going free, but I suspect there is something she doesn’t want anyone to know, and if she keeps quiet, it might stay that way.”

“But if she doesn’t testify, and Seamus goes free, she won’t be safe,” Devin said.

Liam was touched by his friend's concern. Still, all the concern and support in the world would mean nothing if Louisa did not trust them enough to divulge her secrets. But dare he push her anymore? He had done enough damage to their friendship, and now he only wanted to concern himself with mending what he had broken.

# Chapter 19

January 3, 1807

Louisa sagged against the gate of Grainne's stall. The cow had refused to be milked, and Dorcha lay in the next stall, moaning. Her udders were hard and swollen from the infection that had set in from going too long without milking. Three cows down. How would the O'Sheas ever make rent now?

"Morning, Louisa." Liam's voice floated across the barn.

Louisa closed her eyes a moment before facing him. Though she had gone to bed before he returned home the night before, she had failed to fall asleep. In one way, that was a blessing, for she overheard the brief conversation between him and Fiona. Seamus, she learned, had refused to speak, and for that she was thankful, if not a bit baffled. They had made a bargain that they would keep each other's secrets, and now she had broken that confidence. If she was lucky, she could return to England before all of Ireland discovered the truth of her family. She took a breath, pushing her fears aside, and turned to Liam.

"Grainne won't let me near her," she said, hoping Liam would not change the subject.

Liam joined her at the gate and rapped his fist against it. "Here, cow. Come."

Grainne only stared back, trembling in the corner she had backed herself into.

Liam rubbed a finger between his eyebrows and shook his head. "I wish I knew what was happening. Seems the world is going upside down."

Louisa pressed her lips together, choosing her words carefully. "I'm so sorry this is happening to your family." Her gut twisted. The illness affecting the cows was not her fault, but now, with Seamus's arrest, they had lost one of their

biggest customers. She knew she should not blame herself for that. After all, Seamus had brought his fate upon himself. Yet she could not silence the inner voice telling her that if she had kept her mouth shut, the O'Sheas might have had a chance to overcome this hard time.

"I'm sorry, too, but don't go blaming yourself," Liam said, as if reading her thoughts.

Louisa nodded and picked up her nearly full milk can. "I should get back to the cottage."

Liam placed a hand, warm and gentle, on her arm. His green eyes reflected the morning light coming in through the barn door. "Louisa, I wish you would tell me why he did it. I think you would feel better if you let someone else share your pain."

Louisa swallowed the lump forming in her throat. How she wanted to tell him everything, but the fear of what he would think of her rendered her silent. "I don't know why he took me," she finally said. She wrapped her arms tight around the milk can and headed for the barn door.

"I think you do, Louisa." Liam's voice was mild, patient. Such a contrast from the night before. He withdrew the can from her grasp and set it down, then took her hands in his. Her heart flopped at his touch, and lightning sizzled through her. "The prosecutor is going to ask you at the grand jury. You would feel a lot better if you got whatever it is off your chest now, rather than for the first time in front of all those people. Whatever it is, it can't be worse than what he did to you. You can trust me. You can tell me anything. Or do you still not trust me?"

Louisa's lip quivered and she hung her head. She could not let him see the tears she worked so hard to hold at bay. "Trust has nothing to do with it. I know why he took me, and..." She gritted her teeth. Hot tears pressed at the backs of her eyes. "I feel so much shame. Please, don't ask me to explain."

She took back up the milk can and hurried out of the barn before Liam could utter another word. She knew for

Seamus to be convicted she would have to reveal her secrets, including the lies she had told. If she didn't testify, Seamus would go free, and this time, she was sure he would not fail to complete his revenge. She turned her face to the cloudy sky. Had she been born under a bad sign? Or was the Easom name cursed? Whatever the cause of her life's continued upheaval, she had suffered enough, and it was time for the universe to turn its malice on someone more worthy.

## Chapter 20

January 5, 1807

The next two days passed as if Louisa was suspended in a whirlwind. Each chore Louisa undertook seemed to stretch on for hours even as everyone and everything else rushed by. She had taught the nightly reading lessons, though how she had managed it was a mystery. Her brain was in a constant fog, and Diarmuid's stories had become background noise to her increasingly intrusive thoughts. No matter how hard she tried, she could not banish her dread of the upcoming trial. And now the day of the grand jury had arrived.

Louisa climbed into the O'Sheas' cart. In an hour, she would be in the courthouse, facing the man whose very existence threatened her future. Yet, now that the moment she had been dreading was nearly here, relief mingled with the little anxiety that remained. Somehow, waiting for this day had been worse, and part of her was glad her story would finally be told. Everyone would know her family's despicable history, and they would undoubtedly judge her accordingly, but perhaps it would be better this way. Her life was already in ruins in England and parts of Scotland. Probably Wales, too. Why not make her ruination in the British Isles thorough? At least then she would know who her true friends were. Anyone who knew the ugly truth and still cared to associate with her would be worth the effort of having a relationship.

The cart tilted slightly as Liam climbed in and settled down beside her, resting his hands on his outstretched legs. "Are you ready?"

Louisa gave a nonchalant shrug. "I suppose, though I have little choice."

"You always have a choice. You don't have to testify." Liam's gaze steadied on hers, warm and inviting, and Louisa fought the urge to lean into him, to feel the heat of his body against her.

“If I don’t testify, he will walk free. Maybe not today, but surely at the trial.” That was if the grand jury granted a true bill. What if they didn’t? What if the all-male jury sympathized with their countryman and set him free? A chill ran down her spine. She had to be prepared for that outcome and pray the jury were honorable men.

Liam nodded. “I hope you know we’re here for you, no matter what.” He gave her a small smile.

*We shall see.* Louisa sighed, hoping they still felt the same way in a few hours.

The rest of the family settled themselves, and Diarmuid whipped the reins, urging Mollie toward Wexford. The courthouse sat across from the quay. Carts and carriages rolled up and down the dirt street, carrying goods and passengers to the waiting ships. Strange to think the last time she had been at the quay, she had escaped from Seamus. Now, she was back again to relive the nightmare. She climbed down from the cart and looked up at the courthouse’s stone façade, a pair of gabled roofs, and columns lining the entrance. People flowed through the doors, no doubt having nothing better to do today than watch criminals brought before the bar.

She sucked in a deep breath and entered the building, taking in every detail of this place where she would be judged as much as Seamus. The spectator gallery spread from the main floor to the balcony, and the judge’s bench and the witness chair sat at the front of the room. A row of chairs sat empty in the juror’s box, and just in front of the gallery stood two sets of tables and chairs.

A tall man with a paunch sporting a white wig turned and smiled at Louisa as she made her way through the gallery. “Miss Gaultney, I presume?” A quick nod from Diarmuid as the family filtered into the first row confirmed his assumption.

“Please, come sit here, Miss Gaultney.” He gestured to one of two chairs at the table where he stood. “I’m Mr. Furlong, the prosecutor.” He extended a large, pink hand, and Louisa shook it. “You have nothing to worry about. This

appears to be an open and shut case, so as long as you tell the truth, we should have no problem proceeding to trial.

Louisa nodded and eyed the witness chair. “Mr. Furlong, must I sit here? Mr. Cotter frightens me, and I’m not sure I can sit so close to where he will be questioned.”

Mr. Furlong smiled and patted her shoulder. “Not to worry, lass. This is just the grand jury. He will not be giving his account of events here today. All that will happen is you, Mr. Liam O’Shea, and Mrs. O’Shea, and anyone else who met you that morning will give testimony to show that Mr. Cotter was your abductor. However, if you would feel more comfortable sitting with the O’Sheas in the gallery, you are certainly welcome to do so.”

Louisa rose from the chair and settled down at the end of the row beside Fiona. The woman put her arm around Louisa’s shoulders and gave her a squeeze. It was not exactly a hug, but Louisa would take it. Anything to calm her nerves.

The next moment, she was on her feet again as the judge entered and took his seat, followed by the jury, all well-off gentlemen who could afford a few hours away from their business affairs to do their civic duty. Finally, Seamus entered, his hands cuffed in front of him and flanked by a guard who led him to the table opposite Mr. Furlong. Only there was no attorney to represent Seamus. Instead, the guard sat beside him.

The judge banged his gavel, calling the grand jury to order. “Mr. Bolger,” he said to the clerk, “please read the charges.”

Mr. Bolger stood and cleared his throat. “Mr. Seamus Cotter of Wexford, County Wexford, Ireland is charged with the abduction of Miss Louisa Gaultney, of Abergreen, England, and of transporting Miss Gaultney against her will to Wexford, County Wexford, Ireland.”

“Thank you, Mr. Bolger,” Judge Cosgrove said. “Mr. Furlong, you may call your first witness.”

Mr. Furlong rose from his seat and called Liam to the witness stand. As Liam rose and made his way down the row of seats past Louisa, he gave her a wink, though his mouth set in a hard line.

“Mr. O’Shea,” Mr. Furlong said after Liam had declared his oath to speak the truth, “when did you first meet Miss Gaultney?”

“I met her the morning of December 22. Just two weeks ago,” Liam said.

“And how did she seem to you?”

Liam’s brow wrinkled. “She seemed anxious, a bit on edge.”

“Did she say where she had come from in your first meeting?”

“Not specifically, but she had indicated she was from England and that she had no money.”

Mr. Furlong nodded, folding his hands behind his back. “And when did you learn of her abduction?”

“‘Twas not until I returned home later that evening. Me ma had met Miss Gaultney and brought her to our home.” Liam gave Louisa a small smile, and Louisa warmed at the memory of how he had cared for her finger after cutting it.

“Did Miss Gaultney identify her abductor then, on the twenty-second of December?”

“Nay. ‘Twas not until the other night, the second of January, that she finally named him.”

“And who did she say abducted her?”

“Seamus Cotter.” Liam cast an icy glare at Seamus.

If Seamus felt anything, he did not show it. Instead, he sat stock still, his face—or what little of it Louisa could see—impassive.

“And what did you do, then, upon learning Seamus Cotter had abducted Miss Gaultney?” Mr. Furlong asked.

“Me da, brothers, and I went for the magistrate, Mr. Ronan O’Doyle, to arrest Seamus.”

“Upon his arrest, did Mr. Cotter admit to abducting Miss Gaultney?”

“Nay, the blackguard kept his mouth shut.”

A mixture of gasps and snickers echoed through the gallery.

“Please refrain from using defamatory names, Mr. O’Shea,” Judge Cosgrove said.

Liam apologized, though the smirk on his face said he felt anything but repentant.

“Mr. O’Shea,” said Mr. Furlong, “I have one more question. Did Miss Gaultney tell you why Mr. Cotter had abducted her?”

Liam shook his head, his eyes meeting Louisa’s, and her stomach twisted. “Nay.”

“Thank you, Mr. O’Shea. No further questions.”

Liam returned to his seat, and Fiona rose from hers to take her place on the witness stand. Mr. Furlong asked the same questions of her that he had asked Liam, with her answers differing only slightly. She had met Louisa that same morning, but, unlike with Liam, Louisa had quickly told Fiona of her kidnapping and intention to find shelter until she could return home. But, no, she never said why Seamus had abducted her. Satisfied with her answers, Mr. Furlong dismissed Fiona and called several more witnesses: the rest of the O’Sheas, as well as Devin and James O’Brien. Each time Mr. Furlong asked for Seamus’s motive, Louisa’s ribcage gave a tight squeeze. Soon, he would ask her, and she would have to answer.

“I next call to the stand Miss Louisa Gaultney,” Mr. Furlong’s voice rang through the silent courtroom.

Louisa took a shaky breath and rose from her seat. *You will be fine. Speak the truth. The fallout will tell you who your true friends are.* But did she really want to know? What if the

O'Sheas turned their backs on her, as she had feared all along? She entered the witness box on shaking legs and lowered herself onto the seat.

In the gallery, the O'Sheas gave encouraging nods. Mr. Furlong gave her a smile and a wink. "Are you all right?" he asked so only she could hear him.

She exhaled and straightened her shoulders. "I am." She was not. But there was no going back now.

"Miss Gaultney, you allege that Mr. Cotter abducted you. Is that correct?" Mr. Furlong began without preamble.

"Yes, sir," Louisa said. So far, so easy.

"And on what date were you abducted?"

"It was on the twenty-first of December."

"1806?"

"Yes, sir." She knew Mr. Furlong had to establish these minute details, but she wished they would get to the most important questions, to get this grand jury over with.

"From where were you abducted?"

Louisa pinched her skirt to keep from fidgeting. "I was taken from London. Outside the Old Bailey."

"Had Mr. Cotter been in attendance at the Old Bailey, or merely outside it?"

Louisa shook her head. "I don't know for sure. I could not say either way." That was true. She had not seen him sitting in the gallery at his brother's trial, but then again, she had not known Owen Cotter had a brother.

"Miss Gaultney, would you please tell the court in as much detail as you can what you were doing just prior to your abduction, and the manner in which you were abducted?"

Louisa licked her lips and reminded herself not to let slip why she had been at the Old Bailey in the first place. "I had stepped outside for some fresh air. There were a lot of people mingling outside, so I went around to the side of the building, just inside the alleyway. I was facing the street when

someone threw a sack over my head. I could not see anything. And then someone wrapped their arms around me and held a hand over my mouth, and dragged backward, further into the alley.” She took a breath. She was entering dangerous territory now. If she was not careful, she would reveal secrets she hoped to keep hidden. “Then, the person took the sack off my head, and I saw it was Mr. Seamus Cotter who had grabbed me. I think he wanted me to see him because next he knocked me in the head with something hard. I did not see what it was. When I awoke I was in the hull of a ship.”

Mr. Furlong’s mouth had pulled into a frown. Louisa chanced a glance at the O’Sheas. Fiona and Aisling held their gloved hands to their mouths, and Liam, his father, and brothers directed their scowls at Seamus’s back.

“And did Mr. Cotter say anything to you prior to knocking you out?”

Louisa’s heart gave a leap. She had sworn an oath to tell the truth, and she knew from watching her father’s trial that lies only made matters worse. “He said I would pay for testifying against his brother, Owen Cotter.”

Gasps spread through the courtroom, and Louisa lowered her gaze to her lap. Had she made herself the enemy? How many of these people had known and cared for Owen? She stiffened her muscles, waiting for Mr. Furlong to ask why she testified against Owen Cotter. Waiting for the truth of her family and the fact she had lied about her name to turn the entire courtroom against her. But the next words out of Mr. Furlong’s mouth surprised her.

“Do you know the name of the ship you were transported on, Miss Gaultney?”

She raised her head with a sigh. “Yes, it was the *Mighty Fortune*.”

“And on what day did you arrive here in Wexford?”

“The twenty-second of December.”

Mr. Furlong gave a nod. “Thank you, Miss Gaultney. I have no further questions, your Honor.”

Louisa allowed a small smile as she rose from the witness chair. Her testimony had not gone nearly as bad as she had expected.

Seamus leaped up from his seat and slammed his bound hands on the table in front of him. Fire raged in his eyes. “If you are going to question her, then question her thoroughly. Ask her why she, such an innocent little lass, was testifying at my brother’s trial. Ask her!”

“Her testimony at another man’s trial does not have any bearing on this grand jury,” Mr. Furlong said, but his voice was drowned out by the twenty men who had stood from their seats in the gallery, shouting and demanding answers.

“It is not germane to this hearing,” Mr. Furlong shouted to Judge Cosgrove.

Judge Cosgrove banged his gavel and bellowed. “Order! There will be order in this courtroom.”

Seamus’s men ignored the judge and shouted louder, declaring the hearing unfair. How could the jury make their decision with only half the information?

Louisa’s heart rose into her throat, and perspiration beaded on her brow as she stood in the witness box. Her legs warred over whether to resume her seat or return to the gallery.

“I’m sorry, Miss Gaultney. At risk of a riot, I must ask you to remain on the stand,” Judge Cosgrove said.

As if on command, Louisa’s knees gave out, and she plopped back down on the witness chair. Seamus’s men cheered then quieted, though they remained standing.

“In the interest of obtaining all relevant information,” Judge Cosgrove said, “I will ask my questions of Miss Gaultney. Once I have finished, the jury will deliberate. This court is meant to uphold and carry out the law, not become a sideshow attraction. Any further outbursts from the gallery or the defendant will result in a prison stay of no fewer than three days for contempt of court. Now,” he directed his attention to Louisa, “Miss Gaultney, what was the nature of your testimony at Mr. Owen Cotter’s trial?”

Louisa bit her lip. “I had knowledge of crimes he had committed.”

“What was the nature of the crimes, and how did you come to that knowledge?”

Louisa swallowed the lump forming in her throat. “He was involved in illegal slave smuggling, and I knew of it because I had both overheard conversations and seen letters discussing the smuggling operation.”

“Ask her who Owen was smuggling for!” came a shout from the gallery. A court guard made his way through the crowd and hauled the man out.

Louisa met Judge Cosgrove’s tired face. “And do you know who Owen Cotter was working for in this smuggling operation?”

Louisa gave a nod. Her heart pounded against her ribs, and she rubbed her sweaty palms on her skirt. “Yes, sir. It was my grandfather and father.”

More gasps rippled through the courtroom. The O’Sheas all stared wide-eyed.

“And what are their names? Have they been prosecuted for smuggling slaves?”

Louisa struggled to breathe. Here was the moment she had dreaded. There would be no hiding her family history now, no hiding the fact she had lied about her name, that she had deceived the O’Sheas.

“My grandfather was killed while being pursued by an officer of the Royal Navy. My father was convicted and hanged, and my brother sentenced to twenty years in prison.” She paused, unable to bring herself to answer Judge Cosgrove’s other question.

“And their names?” he pressed.

All eyes were on her. A suspenseful silence impregnated the air. Louisa swallowed the lump that had reformed in her throat. “My father is Graham Easom, my brother Patrick Easom, and my grandfather Lucius Bale.”

A shriek echoed in the gallery. Louisa looked up to see a woman turn and whisper to the Miller boy she had spoken to at the Christmas Eve céilí, the one who had asked her about her connection to Nora Gaultney and “that nasty business,” as he had called it. Several of the men on the grand jury leaned into their neighbors’ ears, their eyes trained intently on Louisa. There was no doubt many of them had heard of the trial that filled the London newspapers. Whispers filled the air, and Louisa caught words among the commotion: “Indian boys,” “murder,” “in all the English papers.”

Louisa’s face flushed hot as she caught the O’Sheas’ horrified stares.

“Miss Gaultney.” Judge Cosgrove brought her attention back to him. His brow furrowed. “I have heard of Lucius Bale and his son and grandson’s involvement, so I will not ask you any more questions regarding them. However, I have one more question, as a matter of clarification for our purposes here today. Is your name truly Louisa Gaultney?”

A tremor of fear and shame quaked Louisa’s body, and the backs of her eyes burned with the tears threatening to spill forth. She shook her head and faced the O’Sheas. “My name is Louisa Easom, and I am so terribly sorry for deceiving you.” The tears spilled forth, and she buried her face in her hands as her sobs shook her body.

A gentle hand touched her shoulder—she looked up to discover it was Mr. Furlong—and Judge Cosgrove dismissed her from the stand. Louisa stood and rushed from the courtroom, her face burning with humiliation and tears. She did not stop when she reached the steps outside, but kept running across the street and down the quay.

“Louisa!” Liam called after her. His boots pounded on the wooden planks of the wharf.

Men shouted at Louisa as she nearly collided with them and the loads they hauled, and Liam called out again, begging her to stop. She would run out of solid ground eventually, and before that, Liam would surely reach her. There was no sense in running any longer. She stopped, her

heart pounding furiously as she struggled to catch her breath and quell her tears.

In seconds, Liam had caught up to her, and he doubled over, gulping air as if it were water. When he had finally caught his breath, he straightened and held his hands out as if preparing to grab her should she run again.

“Louisa, I—” His brow furrowed, and he shook his head. The next second he closed the distance between them. He slipped his hands around her waist and pulled her close, tucking her slight frame into his solid, muscular one. A tremor of heat ran through Louisa’s body as he stroked a hand in small circles on her back, and a fresh wave of tears poured down her cheeks, staining Liam’s shirt. But this time, instead of crying tears of distress, they were born of relief that she still had at least one friend in Ireland.

## Chapter 21

Liam fought the urge to kiss Louisa's forehead as he breathed in the rose fragrance of her hair. He wanted to tell her he understood, that she had nothing to be ashamed of, but his brain failed to produce the right words. What could he possibly say to a woman who was hurting this badly? English society had deemed her ruined. She had been held captive—possibly even abused—by Seamus. And now she had been humiliated all over again in a new country. There was nothing he could say that would ease her sorrow. He could only hold her. And he would keep her in his arms for as long as she needed him to if it meant he could take even a fraction of her pain away.

He opened his eyes. His family bustled toward them, and he half expected Rian and Rory to sport smirks, but as they drew closer, concern lined their faces. He gave Louisa's shoulders a pat and pulled back. Her eyes were puffy and bloodshot, but she had ceased crying.

“Are you feeling a little better?”

Louisa gave a small nod.

“Good. Ma and Da are headed this way.”

Her muscles tensed and she pulled out of his arms. She turned to face the rest of the O'Sheas and wiped at her cheeks. “I'm so sorry I lied to you all,” she said through a trembling breath.

Fiona gave a sympathetic smile and pulled Louisa into an embrace, wrapping her arms tight around her. “Dear, you have nothing to apologize for. Everyone has something in their past they're not proud of, and besides, you are the innocent one.” Fiona stepped back and held her hand beneath Louisa's chin. “It's a wonder you're such a sweet, caring lass, considering all you've been exposed to.”

A wonder was right. Liam exchanged glances with his siblings. They clearly all had the same thought. It was no wonder Louisa had had such a difficult time trusting them.

How could she, when her entire life had been spent among criminals?

A throng of people filed out of the courthouse. Some shook their heads while others gossiped animatedly, no longer bothering to speak in the hushed tones they had in the courthouse.

“It appears the grand jury made a decision,” Liam said.

“Aye,” Diarmuid said. “Just before we left.” He nodded to Louisa. “They granted a true bill. ‘Twill go to trial, now.”

Louisa pressed her lips together. “And what plea did he make?”

Rory gave an aggravated huff. “Not guilty, the cowardly blackguard.”

Aisling crossed her arms and wrinkled her nose as if smelling something malodorous. “He knows he’s going to prison, with the evidence against him. Why didn’t he plead guilty?”

“He wants me thoroughly ruined in society. My character was already impugned in England and much of Scotland. Now the same will be true in Ireland, too. It is his revenge for breaking the deal I made with him.”

Liam’s brow creased. “What deal was that?”

“He promised to leave me alone if I promised not to reveal that he was my abductor. I made the deal because I wasn’t sure who I could trust, and I thought if he would keep his end of the bargain, I could return home in peace.”

“But he obviously didn’t plan on keeping that agreement,” Rian said. “I highly doubt you would’ve made it back to England alive if you had gone with him.”

“Rian! You should not say such things,” Fiona said.

“He’s not wrong,” Louisa said. “I know Seamus would have carried out his original plan if he’d had the chance.”

“But why make the offer to begin with?” Aisling said. “Surely he knew you’d never agree to get on his ship.”

Louisa shook her head. The same bewilderment that was on her face was on the rest of the family’s as well. Only Liam knew the answer.

“When Seamus approached me,” Liam said, “he did not ask me to propose it to Louisa. He wanted me to hand her over.” He met Louisa’s stunned gaze. “I would never have done that to you. In all honesty, I hated the idea of you on his boat.”

“I am greatly indebted to you, then.” Louisa gave a small smile.

Fiona patted Liam’s shoulder approvingly, then drew Louisa into another hug. “And now Seamus will pay for his crimes. As for you being ruined, I don’t know about the rest of Ireland, but I can guarantee my family does not think any less of you.”

Heads nodded in agreement. Liam’s heart swelled in his chest. He thought even more of Louisa for the courage she had shown. It could not be easy to look into the eyes of the man who victimized you and still testify to what he did.

Fiona released Louisa and smoothed her skirt. “Well, I suppose we’d best be getting home.”

“Not quite yet, dear,” Diarmuid said. “After this morning, I need to unwind with a drink, and I don’t mean in the privacy of our parlor.”

Liam nodded. It was not really a drink his father needed, but the company of his best friend, James O’Brien. Talking to your own kin after such an ordeal—a string of ordeals, really, with the cows getting sick and dying and not being able to make the rent, extension or not—was all well and good, but sometimes a man needed a friend to confide his feelings in.

“I bet Louisa could use a drink, too.” Diarmuid patted her on the shoulder.

Louisa gave a weak smile. “I’ve never much cared for alcohol, but perhaps it would take the edge off this day.”

She sighed and hung her head as Diarmuid headed toward the pub. Liam knew that look all too well. He had seen his sister give that look enough times over the years when pretending she was on board with what the rest of the family had decided. Louisa no more wanted to have a drink at the pub—or be anywhere public, if he had to guess—than she wanted to relive the grand jury.

When they reached the pub, Liam darted for the empty table in the dimmest corner. The Lovers’ Table it was often called because couples liked to steal kisses over their drinks, knowing that only someone bothering to pay attention would notice. Liam would not deny he had wanted so many times to feel Louisa’s lips against his, but stealing a few kisses was not his aim. Today, this table was for Louisa’s comfort. A hiding place amid a crowd of gossipers.

Louisa pressed herself into the corner, her fingernails tapping her pint of ale as she stared into the full mug. Several patrons at the surrounding tables bent their heads together, their eyes occasionally darting their way.

Liam glared at the men congregated at the nearest table. “Why don’t you mind your own business? The lady doesn’t need people gossiping right in front of her.”

The men mumbled and nodded their apologies to Louisa. Her gaze flicked up to them, acknowledging their apologies with a quick dip of her head before bringing her focus back to her pint.

“I’m sorry,” Liam said. “We should have gone straight home.” He cast a glance at his brothers, who sat at a table playing cards. Fiona and Aisling sat at the end of the bar chatting with Mary O’Brien and her eldest daughter, Grace. And Diarmuid sat beside his wife, watching James refill his mug. “I’ll take you home now, if you want.”

“You would strand everyone else here if you did that, and I don’t wish to make anyone leave before they are ready.”

She nodded to the family, all smiling and happy, the morning seemingly forgotten.

That was just like Louisa, to put everyone else ahead of herself, but right now Louisa's needs would take priority. "Wait here." Liam went to the kitchen and found Devin stirring a pot of stew.

"Devin, do me a favor and let me borrow one of your horses until tomorrow?"

"Sure. You can take Coal. Something wrong with Mollie?"

"Mollie's fine. Louisa's ready to go, and I can't say I blame her, what with everybody discussing her business right in front of her."

Devin nodded. "Aye, and I doubt your da will be ready to go before he's thoroughly drowned his sorrows."

"What do you mean?" When Liam had last glanced at his father, Diarmuid had looked cheerful enough.

Devin stepped closer, as if someone would hear them, though they were the only two in the kitchen. "Diarmuid told Da that now Seamus has been arrested, you've lost your best customer."

Liam nodded. "That's right. 'Tis no secret."

"He also mentioned you won't be able to make the rent. Apparently, Mr. Lynam gave you an extension?" Devin raised an eyebrow, as if unsure whether he had heard right.

Liam massaged his forehead and sighed. "Yes, Mr. Lynam gave us until the fifteenth. Though if word gets back to him that Da was running his mouth in here about it, he'll be knocking down our door with the eviction notice in hand. It was meant to be kept secret."

Devin nodded. "I had thought as much. That man never gives extensions."

"Nay, and he never will again." It was too much to hope that the people who overheard Diarmuid would keep the rent extension to themselves. The best the O'Sheas could hope

for now was that Mr. Lynam would at least wait to evict them until their deadline.

He gave Devin a pat on the shoulder. “Thanks for Coal.” He returned to the table to find Louisa still sitting in the same pose, her pint still full. “Let’s go home. Devin is loaning us his horse. The rest of the family can follow later.”

She looked up, then blushed as her eyes caught the gazes of the others around them. “Home?”

## Chapter 22

Home. Liam surely had not meant to imply it was her home in his use of the word, yet it evoked a warmth in Louisa she had not felt in a long time. At least, not where thoughts of home were concerned. She had always associated the word with a place one ate and slept. It had rarely been anything more than that, especially once Patrick had begun working for their father. Yet, now, after spending two weeks with the O'Sheas, the word had taken on a far deeper meaning.

They had taught her what a home ought to be. Not a place simply to rest one's head, but a place full of love—unconditional and unending. Now that they had shown their unconditional love for her, not minding the ilk she came from, the thought of going back to England made her feel as if two enormous hands were violently squeezing her chest.

“Here we are.” Liam's voice brought her back to the present. They rounded the side of the inn to the stables lining the back of the building. Liam entered the stall of a tall stallion, his black coat gleaming like polished obsidian.

“He's beautiful,” Louisa said, and she could not stop herself from stroking the bridge of the animal's nose. The stallion pressed his snout into her hand, then stepped closer to rest his head on her shoulder.

“Coal likes you.” Liam saddled the horse.

“Coal? Because he's black as coal?” She chuckled. “Not very imaginative, is it? But fitting,” she said, more to the horse than to Liam.

“He's friendly, too, and a steady ride.” Liam had finished tacking up Coal, and he held out his hands. “Shall I help you?”

A ripple of pleasure coursed through Louisa as Liam lifted her onto the saddle then climbed up behind her, bringing his arms around her to grip the reins. Coal's back undulated beneath them as they headed down the street, nudging Louisa against Liam's firm torso, and she could not help thinking of

their embrace on the quay. What if there had been more than friendship and compassion in the gesture? She chastised herself for even entertaining the thought. Just because Liam and his family had not cast her off like yesterday's dirty socks, that did not mean Liam wanted to marry her. Besides, as soon as Nora came for her, she would be gone, probably never to see Liam and the rest of the O'Sheas again.

She cast her mind about for something else to focus on, and as they passed the courthouse, she thought of Seamus. With the trial soon approaching, her name would only be sullied further, yet at least he would be locked away, unable to hurt her or abduct anyone else. Then her stomach sank with the remembrance that Seamus had been one of the O'Sheas' biggest customers.

She bit her lower lip, searching for the best way to phrase her question. She did not want Liam to think she was prying into his family's personal affairs. Then again, they had already discussed some of their finances with her. Surely there would be no harm in asking.

“Liam, I can't help but worry about your family, especially now that Seamus is going to prison. Be honest with me. What impact will losing his business have on your family?”

Liam's chest rose, pressing into her back, and the warm breath he exhaled tickled the hairs on the back of her neck. He finally answered after a long moment. “I'm afraid that if we ever had a chance of making up the rest of the rent, 'tis gone now. But please don't blame yourself. The O'Sheas are Irish, and there isn't a group of people on this earth more resilient than the Irish. If our people survived Cromwell, the O'Sheas can certainly survive whatever comes next.”

Louisa could only give a hum of agreement. Liam may not wish her to feel responsible for their hard luck, but try telling that to the guilt turning her gut to stone. As they plodded up High Street, Louisa glanced at the storefronts of bakeries, haberdasheries, dressmakers, tailors, and jewelers. Jewelers!

“Liam, stop a moment.” No sooner had Coal come to a stop than Louisa slid from the saddle, shouting that she would not be long as she darted back down the street. She entered the jewelry shop, the bell over the door giving a jingle. Here was her chance to help the O’Sheas. She reached behind her neck and unclasped the chain holding her locket.

“*Conas is féidir liom cabhrú leat?*” the man said.

“I’m sorry. Do you speak English?”

The man gave a slight bow. “Of course. How can I help you, miss?”

She held out the oval locket made of gold filigree that formed delicate vines and flowers, hung on a thin gold chain. “I wanted to see how much you might offer for this.” She hoped the jeweler was an honest man. If she was going to sell the one piece of jewelry her brother had given her that held any real meaning, she wanted to get every penny it was worth.

The jeweler fixed a spyglass over his eye and took the locket. He turned it over in his hand, then unclasped it to reveal the miniatures of Patrick and Louisa as children. A reminder of a time when they could just be children, before their grandfather had corrupted her brother.

“Oh, if this is genuine gold, I’d say ‘tis worth about three pounds.”

“She’s not selling.”

Louisa spun around. Liam crossed the floor in two strides and took the necklace back from the man. “I know what you’re thinking, and I’ll not let you do it.”

Louisa held out her hand, and Liam returned the locket to her. “This is my necklace. I can do with it what I like.”

“Your brother gave this to you. What will you have to remember him by if you sell it?”

“Patrick is in prison, not dead.” She was touched Liam did not want her selling the only possession that had ever mattered to her, but there was no way she would let him tell her what she could or could not do with her property.

Liam crossed his arms, his jaw set, though sympathy was in his eyes. “I won’t let you do it. Not for our sakes.”

“I’m the reason you’re in this mess. I know you said I shouldn’t blame myself, but I do. You’ve lost the income you would have earned from Seamus because of me.”

Liam wagged his finger. “None of that. Our troubles started with the cows getting sick, and you had nothing to do with that. As for Seamus, our losing his business was entirely his doing from the start. His choices, not yours.”

Louisa pressed her lips together and took a deep breath through her nose, trying to keep her rising temper under control. The man was as stubborn as he was gorgeous. “But you are paying the price because of what he did to me. I can help.” Why was she arguing with him as if she needed his permission to sell her necklace? “Listen, I know you won’t let me sell *my* necklace without a fight, so I’ll make a deal with you.”

Liam arched an eyebrow but said nothing.

“I will keep my necklace for now. If the need should arise for me to sell, then you will not stand in my way.” She did not wait for a response from Liam but turned to the jeweler. “Will you give me an offer in writing?”

The jeweler nodded and began filling out a form. Moments later, Louisa and Liam emerged onto the street, an offer of three pounds folded and tucked into the pocket of Louisa’s skirt. As Liam helped her back up into the saddle, she could not help noticing a bemused smirk on his lips.

“What?” she asked.

Liam shook his head and said nothing.

Louisa squinted at him. She did not believe for a moment he would keep quiet. She was too used to men always having the last word. “Do you mean you have nothing to say about what just happened?”

Liam’s smirk broke into a chuckle. “Not at all. You quite made your point about what you can do. I would never hear the end of it from Ma and Aisling if I got in your way.”

“They are wise women, indeed.” Louisa straightened in the saddle and held her chin high, affecting the air of a queen. Yet she knew, though Fiona and Aisling would stand up for her, they also would never want her selling the only reminder of her brother she had taken when she left her family home. If she was to save them from the streets, as they had saved her, she would have to conduct her business in secret.

## Chapter 23

January 14, 1807

“This is completely unnecessary!” Louisa stood by the cottage door as the O’Shea men carried out what they could fit in their cart. Inside, Fiona and Aisling continued packing smaller items inside baskets, pots, pans, and pillowcases. Over a week had passed since the grand jury, and one week since Seamus was convicted at his trial. In that time, the O’Sheas had only earned another half-pound to pay the rent.

Louisa waved the written offer she had gotten from the jeweler over her head. “He offered me three pounds. Three pounds can save your home. Why don’t you want my help?” The men only shook their heads and continued loading the cart.

Fiona handed a basket off to Rian. “Louisa, please understand. It’s not that we don’t want your help. It’s that it’d be a pointless sacrifice. Even if we had the rest of the rent plus next year’s, Mr. Lynam would never let us stay. We agreed no one would know he’d extended our deadline, and we broke that agreement. I assure you, come tomorrow, he will make an example of us. ‘Tis better we leave now with as much as we can than wait until he shows up with the town guards to evict us with only the clothes on our backs.”

Louisa opened her mouth to protest, but Fiona raised her hand. “Trust me, we know what will happen because we’ve seen it happen to others.”

Diarmuid came back into the cottage to grab a basket piled with quilts. “If you’re worried, you need not be.” He patted Louisa on the shoulder before hefting the basket. “We’ll make sure you still have a roof over your head and food in your belly until your people come for you.”

Fiona nodded. “And don’t you be thinking about leaving us to find another place to stay. We’ll not hear of it.”

Louisa blinked in astonishment. She could not believe they would not let her help them. “Alright, so I can’t help you save this home, but I can pay the rent on another one.” She wasn’t entirely sure why she was so intent on selling her locket and paying for a new place for them to rent when she would not be with them much longer. Perhaps it was because of the tremendous kindness they had shown, or that she feared no one else would take her in now that her history was widely known. Or perhaps she was unconsciously safeguarding herself. What if Nora never got her letter? No one would ever know where Louisa was unless she sent another. Or what if Nora had received her letter and ignored it? She knew that fear was unfounded. Nora was not the sort to leave a friend stranded, especially not after taking Louisa in when she had no obligation to do so. Louisa shook her head. Whatever drove her to be so insistent would not give her peace until she had helped the O’Sheas.

“Aisling, Liam, talk some sense into your parents.”

Liam grabbed up a small trunk filled with various family heirlooms and handmade gifts. “That particular cow is already dead.”

Louisa’s brow wrinkled in confusion. Then, as his meaning became clear, her shoulders slumped. She would not win this battle, and she may as well help load the cart. She grabbed a stack of folded skirts and dresses, and tucked them into the chest of drawers Liam and Diarmuid had hauled downstairs earlier.

“Where will you go?” Louisa asked. When she awoke that morning to milk the cows, she found the house in commotion, the cows already milked, and the butter, cheese, and milk packed on the cart for transport to market. She had not thought to ask if they had found a new home, and she wasn’t sure if it was her place to ask what they would do for income, especially if they had no set plans.

“Aisling, you, Diarmuid and I will stay with me sister Cara. She has enough room in her flat above the shop for us. And we’ll work for her, sewing and embroidering. When I say

we, I mean me and Aisling, though she'll gladly employ you, too, if you wish to work for her."

Louisa nodded. She most definitely would continue to do her part for the family.

"As for the boys," Fiona continued, "they'll be staying with me brothers, Shane and Cullin. They have plenty of room since they're still bachelors." Fiona cast her eyes up as if in mock exhaustion that they were still unmarried, though they were only in their early thirties. "Diarmuid, Liam, Rory and Rian will learn the fishing trade," Fiona continued. "Me brothers and brothers-in-law will teach them. And, of course, we'll pick up odd jobs where we can."

Louisa gave a weak nod as she watched Fiona pack a small crate with her prized tea set. It was nothing as fancy as what Louisa was used to, but still quite a treasure for someone of the O'Sheas' class.

"Oh, don't be giving me that pitying look." Fiona gave a hearty smile that failed to reach her eyes. "This sort of thing is a little too common among us Catholics and others of our class. Will you grab that churn?"

Louisa bent and scooped up the butter churn by the door. Liam's contraption had already been carted into town before dawn, along with the first load of beds and essential tools the men were sure to need.

Louisa headed outside into the chilly mid-morning air. Gray clouds threatened rain, and she hoped they would make it into Wexford and get everything unloaded before the sky opened on them. The universe could at least give that much to the O'Sheas after all it had taken from them. As she handed the churn to Rory, who was filling every available space with their things, she wondered if life was ever fair to anyone? Life had not been fair to Nora when she had lost her parents—though her life seemed to have turned out all right—and life certainly had not been fair in giving Louisa the deplorable family she had been born into. It seemed the universe was no respecter of persons. Still, why should such good people as the O'Sheas suffer so much?

With the cart packed, the O'Sheas and Louisa squeezed in. Diarmuid and Fiona sat on the driver's seat, and the rest of the family sat knees up and hip to hip along one narrow side of the cart that had been left empty. If they had been squeezed in any tighter, Louisa would be sitting in Liam's lap. The brief thought sent a ripple through her, and she hoped the heat she felt did not color her cheeks.

Diarmuid glanced over his shoulder to make sure everyone was settled. Then he rose his arms in a motion to flick the reins and stopped. He muttered a curse under his breath, and they all craned their necks to see what had elicited his response. Three men on horseback turned in at the gate. Mr. Lynam, the agent, rode between two Wexford guards.

"Rent's not due until tomorrow," Rian protested.

"Hush, boyo," Diarmuid said. "Not a word. You let me handle this."

Mr. Lynam pulled up alongside Diarmuid, his face stoic, though there was a hint of haughtiness in his eyes. "I'm here for the rest of the rent. I trust you have it."

Diarmuid squared his jaw. "You're a day early, and you came to evict us. Let's not pretend you expected to get the rest of the rent."

Mr. Lynam gave a smug smirk and eyed the cart. "I see you've wasted no time in robbing Lord Fitzgerald."

"These are our personal belongings we bought or made ourselves. Fitzgerald can make no claim on any of these things. All that rightfully belongs to that cheat remains," Diarmuid said.

Mr. Lynam eyed Diarmuid for a moment. "Be that as it may, I still need to collect some form of payment."

"For what?" A growl had entered Diarmuid's words, and Fiona touched his arm lightly, as if to calm a dog ready to attack. "You've already collected almost a full year's rent, and we've only lived here fourteen days of it. You'll not get another cent, nor will you take anything that rightly belongs to us."

“It will take time to find a new tenant, and time equals money.” Mr. Lynam surveyed the cart then ordered the guards to retrieve the tea set that sat in plain view as well as the chest of drawers, and the small trunk Fiona had packed with family heirlooms, stating something of value might be contained there.

“You can’t steal our things!” Aisling said. Fiona and Diarmuid shot her a warning look, and she hung her head. Louisa felt the girl shudder in an effort to hide her tears. Rory, Rian, and Liam all balled their fists, but said nothing.

“That is quite enough!” Louisa struggled up from her spot and planted her feet firmly where her bottom had been moments before. She stared Mr. Lynam and the guards down. “You will not steal a single thing from this cart. You will allow us to leave now, and you will not harass the O’Sheas any further.”

Mr. Lynam’s eyebrows rose with a wickedly amused grin. “That is a fine speech, and a bold one, coming from the grandchild of a man who was notorious for stealing people’s children.”

Louisa’s jaw tightened, and her eyes narrowed to slits. On any other day, she might have sat back down and curled into herself to cry, but not today. She had woken up ready to do anything to help the O’Sheas. If that meant putting the man who was bent on oppressing them in his place, that’s what she would do.

“You seem to know quite a bit about my family. Are you also aware of my grandfather’s other crimes?”

Mr. Lynam’s grin fell slightly, as if thinking.

“I refer, of course, to the many murders he committed,” Louisa said. It was her turn to adopt a malevolent grin, and it surprised her how easily it came to her. “My grandfather was quite adept at eliminating those who crossed him. I wonder if the old saying is true? That the apple never falls far from the tree.”

Someone in the cart gasped, but Louisa kept her gaze trained on Mr. Lynam, who had visibly shaken at her words. He quickly recovered and squared his shoulders. “Do you dare to threaten me, lass?” He hissed the last word. The guards shifted in their saddles, as if preparing to defend Mr. Lynam.

“It is no threat, sir, as I hardly know what I am capable of. Still, I will not sit idly by while these good people are further victimized by your Lord.... What did you say the name was?”

She remembered the name, but she had watched her grandfather’s interactions with his subordinates enough times to know how best to gain the upper hand in a conversation. She needed to keep Lynam on his toes. Plus, Lord Fitzgerald’s name had rung a bell. Lucius had had extensive dealings with a Lord Fitzgerald, who had property in Ireland. All she needed was to hear the man’s given name to know for sure.

“Lord Fitzgerald,” Mr. Lynam said through gritted teeth.

Louisa put a finger to her cheek in mock consideration. “Would that be Lord Theodore Archibald Fitzgerald?”

If Mr. Lynam was surprised at her knowing the man’s full name, he did not show it. “Yes.”

Louisa nodded, the shrewd smile back on her lips. “Ah, yes. I recall he purchased several kidnapped children from my grandfather. The prosecution looked into Lord Fitzgerald, but they never found enough evidence to arrest him. It would be a shame if someone here in Ireland, with significant ties to the gentry back in England, renewed interest in Lord Fitzgerald’s affairs.” She raised an eyebrow. “Don’t you agree?”

Mr. Lynam pursed his lips and ordered the guards to stand down. “Well played, Miss Easom. I have no doubt your apple fell quite close to its tree. Be on your way, then, O’Shea.”

Louisa plopped back down between Aisling and Liam. The thrill of satisfaction coursed so quickly through her veins she did not care that Mr. Lynam had insulted her character. She

had stood up to a man who could have had her taken into custody, and she had won.

As Diarmuid urged Mollie forward, the rest of the O'Sheas stared at her with a mixture of bewilderment and awe.

She shrugged and met Liam's gaze. "What? You wouldn't let me pay the rent. You had to know I was going to do something."

## Chapter 24

Liam stood at the worktable behind his grandparents' home, cleaning the fish his uncles had caught that morning. Moving their belongings into their new homes had been quick enough, given they'd had little furniture to move, but he still ground his teeth at the thought of Lord Fitzgerald becoming the new master of the items he and his family had not been able to bring. There simply was not enough room in their new dwellings for everything they could rightly call theirs. If his parents had planned better, they could have at least sold what they knew they could not bring.

He grabbed another cod from the barrel and slapped it down onto the work surface that was already slimed with fish oil and ichor. He slid his knife into the fish's belly and ran the blade through in a series of sawing motions. Then he pulled out the spine and guts and tossed them into the chum bucket at his feet. He wrinkled his nose at the stench. By the time he and the rest of the men headed out on the boats in the morning, the bucket would be ripe enough to draw fish from the Americas. He only hoped his own stomach would not contribute its own form of bait. The last time he had been on his uncles' boat on the Irish Sea, he had spent the trip huddled in a corner with his head over a bucket.

"Can I help you with anything?" Louisa had slipped out the back door of the cottage. "Your gran refuses to let your ma, Aisling, or me lift a finger, and your aunts and cousins seem to have things quite in hand."

Liam smiled at her use of the words *gran* and *ma*, so different from her manner of speech he had come to know so well. And if he didn't know better, he would have sworn she'd spoken with an Irish lilt. He flopped the fish he had just finished cleaning onto the tray full of other deboned and gutted cod. "These are ready to cook. Would you mind taking them in?"

She disappeared into the house and returned with a bucket of fresh water. "For your hands."

Liam thanked her and washed the grime from his hands, then rinsed down the knives and tabletop. When he had finished, he settled himself on the low stone retaining wall at the edge of the hill that sloped down toward the fisherman's wharfs and the Cahills' two fishing boats. The waves churned, and the clouds reflected the setting sun, glowing in hues of magenta and orange. "Will you join me?"

Louisa cast a tentative glance back at the cottage before lowering herself onto the wall beside Liam, leaving space between them.

"How are you fairing, with the move and all?" he asked.

Louisa's mouth quirked up in an amused smile. "I'm fairing well, though I ought to be asking you that question. My life was uprooted months ago, before Seamus. I'm quite used to moving around by now."

Liam studied her features, the way the sun setting in the west lit half her face while casting the other half in shadow. "Did you not continue living at home after your da and brother's arrests?" He was not sure he should even ask, but his curiosity had gotten the better of him, and now that her secrets were out, she seemed more open about her life.

Louisa sighed. "I left home the very next day. My mother threw an absolute fit when she found out I had agreed to testify against them. So, I grabbed what few things I needed, and I left. I went to Nora Gaultney's home, hoping she would take pity on me despite what my family had put her through, and she took me in. I was living with her in her London townhome when Seamus abducted me."

"You are fortunate to have such a generous friend."

Louisa bit her lip as she gazed out over the sea, as if searching for the ship that would take her home. "Yes, quite." She turned her attention back to him, her warm smile reappearing. "You did not answer my question. How are you holding up?"

Liam shrugged. "I'm grand. Life goes on."

Louisa arched a skeptical brow. “Truly? You have just had to walk away from the only home and trade you have ever known.”

Liam nodded. “‘Tis true my entire life has been turned on its head, but a part of me actually feels...” He hesitated, debating the word. “Free? Yes, free. Being a dairy farmer was a decent living, even with a farm as small as ours, but I never felt any real joy. ‘Twas just a living. But my butter churn—the chain churn—tinkering with tools, inventing things and ways to make our work easier, that has always excited me, and learning new skills. To be honest, catching and cleaning fish day in and day out is not ideal, but at least it will challenge me. I can learn how a fishing boat runs, the routine, the different jobs on board. I might even learn to sail.” He grinned. “I could sail away, see the world.”

Louisa smiled. “Where would you go, if you could go anywhere?” Her face had turned toward the sea, but her eyes were on him.

Liam dropped his eyes to the boats bobbing in their berths below. “America. The land of the free. I’ve heard an Irishman can make a good life for himself in America. What about you?”

Louisa shook her head. “I don’t know. I’m a pariah in England because of my family, and now everyone here knows who I am. I imagine I would have to go somewhere far away, somewhere my grandfather’s dealings did not reach, and where news of his sins would not follow me.” She took a deep breath. “I suppose that means much of this part of the world and Asia are not options.”

“Perhaps America would do you some good, too.”

Louisa shrugged. “Perhaps, if I were a man or knew someone in America. But a lone woman in a new land?” She wrapped her arms around her as if suddenly chilled. “I dread to think what might have become of me if not for your mother’s kindness.”

Liam nodded but remained silent. If it were in his power, he would take her to America. They could begin a new

life together. He chided himself. He would do better to abandon any fantasies of a future with Louisa. She would not have wanted to be a farmer's wife before—being an upper-class lady. She most certainly would not want to be his wife now that he had no stable occupation or income, let alone a home of his own.

The silence stretched between them like thread pulled taut, thinning and straining the fibers until Rory's voice snapped it in half.

“Oy! Supper's on!”

Louisa stood, smoothed her skirt, and headed in, declaring she was starving, all pretense of upper class decorum gone. Liam smirked and shook his head. If Louisa's friends did not come for her soon, she would surely be the end of him. His heart, most surely, would never survive her departure.

As he reached the door, Rory blocked his way. “Brother, why don't you ask her to marry you already?”

Liam pushed Rory's arm down and entered the cottage, his answer drowned out by the din of his family's mingled conversations. “Because fish don't marry birds.”



The dinner table had been cleared of dishes, the aunts, uncles, and cousins gone home. Liam settled himself at the end of the table near Louisa as Gran passed around paper and pencils she and Granda had bought from a stationery shop.

“Proper learning requires proper tools,” Gran had said at Fiona’s protest.

But Louisa had readily accepted the gift and dove into the lesson. They were reading entire paragraphs from the local English paper now, and writing brief letters to friends—though, admittedly, some of those friends could not read. As Liam wrote to Devin, who was literate, he found himself quickly moving on from the news of their move to recounting their encounter with Mr. Lynam. Louisa had been a fierce defender of his family—a bit warrior-like, in fact. A far cry from the frightened woman he had encountered only three and a half weeks ago.

Those few weeks ago, she had been, according to her own words, useless and limited in domestic skills. And she kept her true thoughts and feelings closed up tight within her. But now, she was vibrant, commanding, and could work as hard and as long as anyone in his family. Even her physical appearance had changed. Before, she had been pale—even sallow—but now pink tinged her cheeks, and a sprinkling of freckles graced her sun-kissed complexion. Her once birdlike arms filled out her sleeves, and when she hefted a heavy load, her shoulders and biceps pressed against the fabric. In a word, she was a diamond that had formed under pressure that would break the most strong-willed men and women Liam knew.

If this was the effect Ireland had had on her, he could only imagine what a new start in America would do, where there was far more opportunity for a better life. But America was not to be her destiny. In time, she would return to England, and Liam hoped it would not diminish her shine, but that her brilliance would only grow brighter, dazzling all who met her.

Of course, none of this Liam could write in his letter, for Louisa was in the habit of checking spellings and making corrections. He jotted a few sentences about having gotten settled and promised to fill Devin in on all the details when they next met. He laid down the pencil and pushed his letter toward Louisa, but she only collected them. She was tired, and since they had used paper, she could wait until the morning to read through them.

“Shall we have a story, Da?” Rian asked. He leaned back in his chair.

Diarmuid shook his head and pushed back from the table. “I don’t have a story in me tonight. I think I’ll be turning in.”

He gave Fiona a kiss, and shuffled out the door, headed for Cara’s flat above her shop. When the door had closed behind him, Fiona stood.

“I think it best we all be getting to our new homes,” she said. “It’s been a long day, and tomorrow we start our new work.”

There was no argument. There was only the scraping of chair legs against the rough wood floor and soft-spoken goodnights to Gran and Granda. As Liam stepped out into the chilly night air with his brothers, he wondered at his father’s mood. There had been plenty of times Diarmuid had been in a foul mood—angry over something not going to plan, or worried over rising costs of supplies and tools to keep the farm running—but he had always found the energy and inspiration to tell a story, and the telling of it had always lifted his mood. But Liam had never seen his father depressed, and he wondered how long it would take Diarmuid’s mood to return to the tempered one Liam had always known.

## Chapter 25

January 24, 1807

A gust of wind rattled the windows as rain splattered against the panes. Black clouds had obscured the morning sun, covering Wexford in an ethereal darkness. Louisa laid the reticule she had been embroidering with pink peonies on her lap. She could not ignore her clenching stomach or shaking fingers anymore.

“Do you think the men are all right?” she asked. The Cahills’ fishing boats were sturdy, but they were nowhere near the size of even the smallest ships. She struggled to push away the image of Liam, his brothers, and father being tossed about and sunk to the bottom of the sea like a bar of soap.

“I’m sure they are just fine,” Fiona said, though Louisa could see the worry in the woman’s eyes. Fiona did not believe her own words any more than the rest of them. “That peony is beautiful, Louisa.”

Louisa glanced down at her work, allowing Fiona the change of subject. If they did not address what was making them all nervous, perhaps the time, as well as the storm, would pass more quickly.

Cara leaned over to examine the reticule and nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, quite lifelike. I think this is your best work yet.”

“I’m glad you approve,” Louisa said. “It has been months since I have truly worked on embroidery. I used to do it all the time, simply to have something to do other than read.” She pressed her lips together, knowing how pathetic she had made her life sound.

“What was your life like growing up?” Aisling asked. “Was it full of parties and picnics and lessons in music and art? I’ve heard that is how the ladies of your class spend their time.”

Louisa knotted her thread, then snipped it and picked up a lighter shade of pink to begin another layer. “I did learn to play the pianoforte, and I took lessons in drawing, painting, sewing, and, of course, embroidery. But parties were few for me. I was too young for most gatherings. My family took regular picnics in the country, though.” A smile settled on her lips as memories of her childhood washed over her. “My brother and I would climb trees when I was a young girl, and swim in the pond where we frequently picnicked. And we would skate on the ice in winter. Patrick even taught me to fish, though Mother and Father disapproved.” She sighed, her throat growing thick with rising emotion. “I don’t miss much about my life growing up. Both of my parents were controlling and emotionally distant, but Patrick was always there for me. I miss him so much.”

Aisling laid her hand over Louisa’s. “I know how you feel, now that I hardly see my brothers except at dinner. And they are almost too tired to truly converse. Rory and Rian rarely tease anyone anymore.”

It was true. Louisa had noticed the difference in the men. They were up and on the boats hours before the women awoke, and when they returned in the late morning, they spent the rest of the day preparing their catch for storage in the barrels of saltwater. They hardly spared more than a few minutes to eat lunch at Shane and Cullin’s cottage before hauling the barrels of salted fish to market. Dinner most nights was held at Gran and Granda Cahill’s home. This was the only time the O’Sheas were all together, and it was a far quieter affair compared to those evenings before the O’Sheas’ eviction. Diarmuid’s stories had even grown shorter, or he had split the longer stories up over two or three nights, too tired to tell a full tale in one sitting. Not that Louisa minded.

She, Fiona, and Aisling were nearly as tired as the men. Somehow, sitting for most of the day, carrying out all manner of embroidery, darning, and sewing was more exhausting than being on one’s feet doing farm chores. Louisa had puzzled over why this new sedentary work should be so exhausting, only to realize the blame lay on a lack of balance. Where before her brain and body had been engaged in equal

measure throughout the day, now her mind received most of the stimulation. To correct this imbalance and gain enough energy to teach her nightly lessons, she had taken to going on short walks up the street, down to the wharf, or to the market, wherever the men might be in hopes she might exchange at least a brief hello with Liam.

She set down the reticule and crossed to the window. The rain pelted sideways in an impenetrable curtain. Liam and the others should have returned an hour ago, and her stomach clenched tighter as she peered out the window that overlooked the harbor. On an average day, this window provided a clear view of the fishing wharfs, but today the storm was like a stage curtain, determined to keep the audience in suspense.

Thunder clapped as lightning spread across the sky like spider legs, giving a brief glimpse of an empty harbor. Louisa's stomach clenched tighter. What if the men did not make it back? What if the storm sunk them into the depths of the sea? The thought of never again seeing Liam's warm smile and eyes as green as a stormy sea plunged her heart into the pit of her stomach. She wrapped her arms around her middle and closed her eyes in a silent prayer for his safe return.

A bang sounded, and Louisa jumped and spun around.

As if her prayer had summoned him, Liam stood in the doorway of the stairwell that led down to Cara's shop below. Water dripped from his hair into his eyes, and a puddle formed at his feet from the water cascading off his sodden coat.

Louisa started forward, her hands coming up to reach for him, and stopped. He was not hers to hold, as if she were a wife welcoming home her husband. She gave a silent sigh that no one noticed, as Fiona and Aisling threw down their own work to rush to his side.

Fiona took his face in her hands, as if to assure herself Liam was really there. "Oh, thank the Saints! We were so worried."

"We're all right, Ma. All of us." Liam shrugged off his coat, revealing thoroughly rain-soaked clothes beneath. His

white cotton shirt clung to his skin, outlining the curvature of his muscles.

Louisa ought to avert her gaze. He wasn't naked, yet the way his sopping clothes clung to his body did not leave much to the imagination. Heat spread through her as she struggled to pry her gaze off him, and she sat on the windowsill to steady herself. The longer she stood, the weaker her knees grew.

Liam looked at her, his eyes softening. "I assure you, we really are grand."

Louisa blinked and gave a small nod, thankful he had assumed she was overwhelmed with relief.

"Well, what happened out there?" Cara asked.

Liam ran his fingers through his dripping hair. "We saw the storm coming up from the south, and we turned about to come back, but we weren't fast enough. It caught up to us right as we were coming into the harbor. Instead of sailing straight on through to the wharfs, we had to follow the shoreline. 'Twould have been too dangerous to sail in the open waters. That's why it took us so long to get back."

"And Diarmuid and your brothers? Did they go with Shane and Cullin back to the cottage?" Fiona asked. She had calmed considerably now, though she had not retaken her seat, nor had Aisling.

Liam nodded. "I volunteered to come let you know we got back safe." He crossed his arms tight around his middle, shivering.

"Oh, my dear boy. Look at me, asking you about everyone else while you stand there catching your death," Fiona said. "Here, come by the fire." She nudged Liam over to the hearth and set a fresh peat brick in the lowering flames.

"I'll get you something dry to wear. I still have all of John's clothes. Perhaps something will fit you." Cara bustled out of the room.

"Louisa," Fiona said, "will you fetch Liam a cup of tea?"

Louisa rose from her seat and hurried into the kitchen, thankful for something to do, and even more thankful that Cara's apartment was that of a well-off merchant, with a proper kitchen set in its own room. In here, she would not have to fight the urge to stare at Liam or imagine what his body looked like under his wet clothes.

She took a breath as she dropped a scoop of tea leaves into a cup and poured water from the kettle, already hot from being kept on the stove, over the leaves. Then she laid the cup and saucer on a tray with one of the ginger biscuits Cara had bought from Mrs. Sheehan earlier that morning.

“Here is your te—”

She stumbled as she entered the sitting room. The tea sloshed up, a little spilling over the cup's rim. Her eyes widened, and her jaw dropped.

Liam stood shirtless in front of the fire, his back to her. The firelight cast an orange glow around him, and the mix of light and shadow accentuated the contours of his muscles as he stretched his back.

The china cup clinked, and Liam turned. His chest rose in a suspended breath, tightening his stomach, as his eyes met Louisa's, and she struggled to breathe past the lump forming in her throat.

Liam gave a sheepish smirk, as if attempting to hide his embarrassment at being caught in such a state of undress. Or perhaps she had misread his smirk and he was not embarrassed at all. She stood rooted to the spot, unable to move, unable to take her eyes off Liam's godlike form.

Cara bustled back into the room, a pile of neatly folded clothes in her arms. “Here you go, dear. These might be a little tight. John wasn't near as muscular as you, but they should still fit.” She handed his clothes over and ushered Liam into the bedroom Louisa and Aisling shared.

As the door closed, Louisa took a breath and laid the tea tray down on the small coffee table, her hands shaking worse than they had before. She sat down beside Aisling and

took another breath, exhaling slowly to calm her nerves. There was no point in hoping the others had missed the effect Liam had on her. The grins they fought to hide made it clear they had noticed. The only thing she could do now was play off her reaction as simple shock. After all, they could not expect a high-born lady to have seen a man in such a state of undress before. She had never even seen her father or brother with so little clothing on.

Aisling abandoned her attempt to hide her mirth and elbowed Louisa in the ribs. “Do the men you know in England have a physique like that?”

What little composure Louisa had managed vanished in an instant. The heat in her face flushed down her neck, and she let out a nervous giggle. “No, not at all.”

Fiona took back up the kid gloves she had been stitching by hand, the smirk gone now, replaced with a relaxed smile. “I would imagine not. Muscles are built through hard labor, not sitting at a desk or riding horses.” She cast a pointed glance at Louisa. “You have discovered that firsthand. Look at how toned your arms have become compared to the wee twigs they were when we first met.”

“This is true,” Louisa said. “Though, I must admit I’m losing some of my muscle now that our work has so drastically changed.”

Fiona nodded. “It certainly has not done much for me waistline, sitting around sewing most of the day.”

“I think Mrs. Sheehan’s ginger biscuits have more to do with that,” Cara said.

Fiona gave a haughty sniff. “Well, you don’t have to rush out and buy a new tin every time we run low. You know I have no self-control when it comes to her treats. If I didn’t know her better, I’d swear she was a witch, what with the hold her desserts have over me.”

Aisling gave a hum of agreement. “She certainly knows what she’s doing in the kitchen.”

The bedroom door opened, and Liam emerged wearing a pair of tight-fitting wool trousers, shirt, and waistcoat. Louisa focused on the peony she was stitching onto the reticule. At least he was fully clothed now, even if those clothes hugged him in the worst places.

“Who knows what she’s doing in the kitchen?” He sat beside Louisa on the settle and took a bite of the ginger biscuit, which Louisa now noticed had been splashed with tea when she had stumbled. Liam took up the cup and dipped the biscuit in, then took another bite.

“Mrs. Sheehan,” said Aisling. “That’s one of her biscuits you’re eating.”

Liam popped the rest of it in his mouth and downed the tea. “You’ll have no argument from me.”

“Why don’t you rest a bit?” Fiona said. The conspiratorial grin she had shared with Cara and Aisling was back.

“I ought to be getting back to the cottage. We transferred what few fish we caught to Uncle Oran’s place, and they need preserving.” Despite his words, he leaned forward, crossing his arms over his knees.

A gust of wind and rain hit the window, rattling the panes as lightning flashed and thunder clapped overhead. Louisa’s heart leaped into her throat. Another flash and boom of thunder reverberated through the walls and floor. Louisa jumped in her seat and grabbed Liam’s hand. The lightning was far too close for comfort. What if it struck the building? As hard as the rain was coming down, Louisa was not sure it would be enough to extinguish fire.

Liam wrapped his free arm around Louisa’s shoulders. After several minutes, the thunder abated and the rapid succession of nearby lightning strikes faded to a distant, periodic bloom of light. Louisa slouched her shoulders and realized Liam’s fingers made soft, slow circles over her arm. Tingles raced through her, and she met his eyes. Her breath stalled, her face inches from his. Liam’s hand ceased stroking her arm, and he pulled her closer. His breath, scented with

ginger and honey, danced over her lips, and his gaze dropped to her mouth.

Louisa's head swam as Liam brushed the tip of his nose against hers. Then he pulled back. Screams and shouts in the street below penetrated the windows. Somewhere in the distance, bells pealed in rapid succession. Liam rushed to the window and pushed it open, the women fast on his heels. He leaned his head out into the still pouring rain, then ducked back in.

"Fire. At O'Brien's." He rushed to put on his shoes and hurried out the door.

Fiona looked out the window. "Half of Wexford must be running to help." She wrung her hands. "Oh, I hope none of them are hurt." Worry lines stitched themselves across her forehead.

"What can we do to help?" Louisa asked. She did not know the O'Briens well, but they had shown nothing but kindness to her, and they were practically family to the O'Sheas.

"We can fetch the O'Brien women and make sure they are safe and warm." Cara bustled into her bedroom and emerged a moment later with three raincoats and a stack of thick quilts. "Come on."

After donning the raincoats, they filed down the stairs, through the shop, and out into the street. The worst of the storm had passed, and an icy drizzle hovered over the town. Men raced through the streets carrying buckets of water they had filled at the nearby well, and Louisa prayed that between the rain and their efforts the fire would be out soon.

"There they are!" Fiona shouted. She pointed to three women huddled together, and they weaved their way through the crowd over to the O'Brien women. Cara and Fiona tossed the quilts over Mary, Grace, and Emma's heads, then guided them back to Cara's apartment.

Once upstairs, Louisa helped arrange the chairs and settle closer to the fireplace, insisting the O'Brien women take

the seats closest to the blaze.

Mary gave an involuntary shudder as she sat. “I’m not sure I want to be near any fire right now.”

Fiona patted Mary’s shoulder. “There, there. The rain is still coming down fierce, and with half the town down there, I’m sure the fire will be put out in no time.”

Mary nodded. “Someone ought to tell James where we are. If he isn’t looking for us now, he will be.”

“I’ll go,” Louisa said, if for no other reason than she did not know what else to do. Cara, Fiona, and Aisling bustled about making tea and grabbing towels to dry the O’Brien women’s hair, leaving Louisa to stand there useless and not knowing what she could say or do.

She hurried back down into the street. Devin stood at the head of a line of men, receiving bucket after bucket of water, and throwing it on flames that had spread down the side of the building.

She held back. Devin’s face was contorted in a fierce rage as a man fighting in a great battle. She dared not get in the way or distract him, yet he needed to know his mother and sisters were safe.

A bucket was making its way down the line, and Louisa stepped between Devin and the last man as he prepared to hand the bucket off. Without a word, she took the bucket and spun on her heel, holding it out to Devin. His eyes met hers in momentary confusion.

“Your mother and sisters are at Cara’s.” She cocked her head toward the shop.

Devin gave a quick nod before taking the bucket and resuming his efforts to douse the fire. Her job done, Louisa raced back to Cara’s apartment. Rain soaked through her clothes now—she had forgotten to put back on her raincoat—and she rushed into her room to change. When she reemerged from the bedroom, the O’Brien women all leaned back in their seats, exhaustion and worry warring on their faces.

Fiona laid extra blankets across their shoulders, urging them to rest while they could. No one argued. Louisa did not blame them. Were she in a similar situation, Louisa imagined her body would give her no choice but to do the same.

After nearly an hour, a knock sounded on the door and Liam entered, James and Devin in tow. Soot smudged their faces, and rainwater ran down their foreheads and cheeks in black streaks.

Mary rose from her seat, wringing her hands. “Is the fire out?”

James nodded. Dark circles ringed his bloodshot eyes, no doubt a result of the smoke that had billowed from the building. Liam’s and Devin’s eyes, too, were red. “Aye, the fire is out, though we’ll not know how much damage was done until the storm clears.”

Mary shook her head, and relief mixed with frustration on her face. “What good is having a lightning rod on the roof if the lightning is just going to strike elsewhere?”

The room was silent except for the crackling of the fire. What could one possibly say to that? The O’Briens had their lives, at least, but somehow Louisa doubted that would bring them much comfort now, when emotions were still running high.

James sighed and ran his hands through his hair. Then he looked at Fiona and Cara. “Thank you for keeping my wife and girls safe.”

Fiona nodded. “‘Twas no problem. I know you would have done the same if our situations were reversed. Where will you go until you know the inn is safe again?”

“We’ll be staying with me mother,” James said. “She has the room, what with me younger siblings all grown and on their own.”

A collective sigh spread through the room, and after brief, exhausted goodbyes, the O’Briens filed out. When the last of them disappeared from the base of the stairs, Liam shut

the door and leaned against it for a moment. He heaved a sigh and trained his gaze on the wall above the fireplace.

“Could you tell at all how bad the damage was?” Fiona asked.

Liam shrugged as he turned to face the women. “It looks bad. The back corner of the building, in the alley between the pub and Mr. Cobb’s shop, is black from the ground to the roof, but the stables appear to be fine. There’s a hole in the inn’s roof where the lightning struck, and fire damage in the guest room below.” He wiped his brow then glanced at the soot that had come away on his hand.

“Were any of the guests hurt?” Aisling asked.

Liam shook his head. “I don’t believe so, though the old man who was staying in the room where the fire started was coughing something fierce by the time we got him out. He was too terrified to leave his room, and pieces of shingle and wood where the lightning blasted through were burning all around him. Everything was catching fire. That room took longer to put out than the outside of the building.”

“Do you mean you were in that room putting out the blaze?” Louisa asked. Sudden terror of what might have happened flooded her. Liam could easily have died. The roof could have collapsed on him, or the fire could have trapped him. A shudder ran through her and she reminded herself that Liam was safe. Wet and covered in soot and grime, but safe. And a hero. She had known Liam to be a good man, willing to help others in need. He had been helping the O’Briens the day she met him, but knowing he would risk his life to save a stranger, well, a man like that was certainly a rare find. She thought of Nora and her fiancé Rajesh—how Rajesh had risked his life to rescue Nora from Louisa’s grandfather—and she yearned to have a man like that.

“Aye,” Liam answered, but his eyes did not leave the spot on the wall behind the women.

“Thank the Lord and Saints you’re safe,” Fiona said. She pulled Liam to her and planted a kiss on his smudged cheek. When she released him, grime from Liam’s clothes had

transferred to hers. “Oh, look at me.” She wiped at her bodice as if her fingers could erase the soot stains. “And it seems you need another change of clothes.”

Liam shook his head. “Don’t bother, Ma. I’ll only get wet again when I go back out. I’m heading back to the cottage. I have dry clothes there, and Rory and Rian, and Uncle Shane and Cullin should be back now. They helped with the fire, too.”

The realization that Fiona had more than one family member potentially risking their lives widened the woman’s eyes. “Are they all safe? Did you see them heading home? What about your Da?”

Liam gave a tired nod, and he leaned against the door frame. “They’re safe, Ma. Da should be here any minute. He was helping to calm the horses in the stable. We’ll all see you at dinner tonight. For now, I need to go. I’ve had enough excitement for one day.”

With that, he turned and was gone, shutting the door behind him. Heaviness settled over Louisa’s limbs, and she sunk into the back of the settle. Liam had left without even a second glance at her. In fact, he had not made eye contact with her at all since their almost-kiss. Did he regret nearly becoming so intimate with her? Had he really been about to kiss her? Had it all been in her imagination?

Cara held the tin of ginger biscuits out to her, and Louisa forced her thoughts away as she took one. She could not dwell on what might or might not have almost happened. She was only here until Nora brought her back to England, and Liam was not interested in a relationship, anyway. He had never spoken of any affection for her beyond simple friendship, despite his actions speaking the opposite. Still, that did not matter. Without a declaration of love, there was no future with Liam.

## Chapter 26

The rain clouds dispersed, exposing the blue sky as Liam stepped out into the street. The pillar of smoke from the fire had dissipated, but now ash fell across the town like dirty snow. Devin stood in front of the pub, his hands in his pockets.

“What are you doing standing out here? I thought you were going to your gran’s house.” Liam said when he reached Devin. “You won’t be any use to your Da when the weather clears if you’re sick.” Liam gave a slight shiver as the wind kicked up, threatening to form a sheet of ice on his wet clothes.

Devin seemed impervious to the weather, not a good sign. Liam had heard of men dying because their bodies could no longer recognize how cold they were.

“Come on. I’ll walk with you to your gran’s house.” Liam tugged on Devin’s arm, but Devin stood firm.

“I bought a ring for Maggie. I was going to ask her to marry me,” he said. “It’s still in there.” He nodded at the ruined building. “I don’t know that I can ask her now.”

“If Maggie truly loves you, she’ll understand about the ring.” Liam pulled Devin’s arm, and he reluctantly came away.

“I know she would. I meant I don’t think I can ask her because I have nothing to offer her.” Devin swept his arm toward the pub, now behind them. “The damage is significant, maybe worse than we already know. ‘Tis anyone’s guess when me family will be back on our feet and in our own place. I can’t ask Maggie to marry me with no proper home to offer, and, as of now, no steady income. “‘Twouldn’t be right.”

Liam pressed his lips together. “I wish I had encouraging words for you, but you and I seem to have the same worries where females are concerned.”

Devin raised an eyebrow, a knowing look in his eyes. “What do you mean?”

Liam ran his hands through his hair and cast a glance up at the sky. After his speech a few weeks ago about not pursuing a relationship with Louisa, he knew Devin would give him a good ribbing.

“I nearly kissed Louisa, and in front of Ma, Aisling, and Aunt Cara.”

Devin’s steps faltered. “You what? Boyo, say that again.”

“There’s no need. You heard me right. I came this close to locking lips with the lass.” Liam brought his thumb and forefinger up, leaving barely any space between them. “I don’t know what I was thinking. ‘Twas as if the whole world fell away, and ‘twas just the two of us.”

Devin’s lips spread in a toothy grin. “What stopped you? You didn’t let your family being there make you nervous, did you?”

Liam shook his head. “‘Twas the alarm bell and the screams.”

Devin kicked a pebble, sending it bouncing across the cobblestones. “Seems the pub burning is ruining romance everywhere.” He gave a half-hearted chuckle. “Maybe ‘tis a sign for both of us we ought to give up on these women.”

“I doubt ‘tis a sign for you,” Liam said, “and if not a sign for me, ‘tis at least a reminder of what cannot be.”

“You give up too easily.”

“I can’t give up on something that was never possible. I can’t afford to entertain the thought of a future with Louisa because her being here is temporary.”

“Life is temporary, boyo. Make the most of it while you can.” Devin pointed his finger at Liam. “I’ve seen the way Louisa looks at you, and I bet all it would take is a declaration of love to persuade her to stay.”

“And what kind of future would she have here?” Liam stuffed his hands in the pockets of his coat, his shoulders

hunching. He would have preferred Devin teasing him instead of being encouraged to hope for what could never be.

Devin shrugged. “From what I’ve heard, a better one than she has waiting for her in England. Look, would she have as fine a wardrobe and home as she has in England? No, I’ll grant you that. But she’s an outcast in England. Bound for spinsterhood, or bound to marry a man who needs a wife but no other woman will have him. You know what men like that are like once the honeymoon is over. Face it, boyo. Neither outcome has to be very appealing to Louisa. Not when she can stay here with a man who loves her, and a family and community that accept her.”

Liam heaved a sigh. “I agree with you on that point, but...”

“But what?” Devin spread his arms.

Liam shook his head. “I don’t know.” Why didn’t he know? Why wouldn’t he let himself accept that there might be a chance for a life with Louisa? She had clearly wanted to be kissed. She would not have leaned into him, let him put his arm around her, if she did not hold some romantic feeling for him.

They reached Gran O’Brien’s cottage, and Devin gave him a slap on the back. “Think it over, boyo. You’ve finally met a lass you really like. Don’t be fool enough to let her get away.”

Liam gave a half wave as he continued on toward his uncles’ cottage. He certainly would think about Devin’s words. After all, what could it hurt to confess his feelings to Louisa? If her feelings were the same, as he suspected they were, perhaps he could persuade her to stay. And his aunts and uncles made a decent enough living at fishing. In a few months, Liam could earn enough to lease a cottage of his own. Nothing large. Maybe just big enough for him and Louisa, and whatever little baby O’Shea happened to come along.

Hope bloomed in his chest at the thought of him and Louisa starting a family. Yes, the chances of her returning his affection were far greater than not. He would confess his love

for her and accept her answer, whatever it may be. At least he would know for certain her feelings instead of always wondering what might have been.

## Chapter 27

“Ow!” Louisa mumbled a curse as she sucked the pinprick of blood from her finger. She hated using a thimble, and she had always been careful enough not to stab herself until now. Even without looking up from her work, she felt Fiona, Aisling, and Cara’s eyes roving over her, and she finally looked up to meet their gazes. She laid the reticule she had been embroidering in her lap and straightened her shoulders, affecting an almost haughty pose.

“May I ask what I’ve done to deserve a constant barrage of curious stares?” Louisa knew perfectly well why they were staring. They were neither blind nor absent from the room when Liam had almost kissed her—if that, in fact, was what he had been about to do.

Fiona and Cara shook their heads and continued their own work as if they had done no such thing. Aisling clearly did not care to pretend. She let the bodice she had been sewing fall into her lap and looked from her mother to Cara. “Oh, come on! We all saw it.” She faced Louisa, her eyes wide and her lips spreading in a grin. “If it hadn’t been for that blasted fire, Liam would have kissed you!”

Heat flushed Louisa’s cheeks, and her stomach worked itself into a knot. She had expected them to say something eventually, but her body had not. So much for remaining calm and nonchalant.

“I’m not sure at all that he was about to do any such thing, especially not with you all in the same room.”

Aisling punched her fists on her hips. “Then how would you explain him leaning in close to you? I doubt he was he trying to get a better look at your chin.”

“Aisling, you’re embarrassing her,” Fiona scolded while Cara burst into a fit of giggles. “A fat lot of help you are.” Fiona sent a glare to her sister.

Cara cleared her throat, schooling her face into seriousness. “Aisling, will you help me prepare the stew?”

Aisling opened her mouth as if to protest the need for two people to make a simple beef stew, but one look from Fiona closed it, and she followed Cara into the kitchen.

Louisa nodded her thanks to Fiona, but the woman only returned her nod with a sad smile, not of pity as she had the day they first met, but of something else Louisa could not identify. Disappointment, perhaps? Did Fiona find what almost happened to be a breach of propriety? It certainly would be in England among the gentry. Women did not lock lips with men to whom they were not properly engaged.

Then a more distressing thought occurred to her. What if the whole situation unfavorably colored Fiona's opinion of her? She was not a common tart, bent on rolling in the hay with every attractive man she fancied. Far from it. She had never even been kissed on the hand by a man, and she needed to make sure Fiona knew that.

She moved to Cara's empty chair beside Fiona.

"Fiona," she began and paused, debating what to say to put herself back in the woman's good graces. "I'm sorry for what nearly happened earlier...with Liam. Please know that I never intended to do anything improper, and I am not that sort of woman."

Fiona patted Louisa's knee, silencing her. "I know that, dear. I never thought you were. Don't you worry about it."

"But I do worry. You all have been so kind to me. You have done far more for me than I deserve, and I would never intentionally do anything to hurt any of you."

There was that sad smile again, and Fiona's eyes—the same green as Liam's—met hers. "I know you wouldn't hurt us on purpose, but I feel it's inevitable."

Louisa's eyebrows drew together in confusion. "I don't underst—"

"All I mean is that we will all miss you when you return to England." Fiona gave a half laugh and shrugged. "I'll admit, I've come to think of you as a second daughter. A silly

indulgence, and we will all have to face facts soon enough. Besides, I'm sure you miss your friends dearly."

"Yes, I have missed them very much." Louisa's gut clenched at the lie. In truth, she had hardly thought of them in weeks, and when she had, it had accompanied the painful reminder that she would eventually have to say goodbye to the O'Sheas, and to the rolling green hills and craggy coastline she had grown so fond of seeing.

It seemed the O'Sheas' hearts would not be the only ones to break when that day finally came. But would she really have to leave? Perhaps she could stay in Ireland, start a new life. She was certain Liam had been about to kiss her, and now more certain his feelings were of far more than friendship. But were they feelings of love—a desire to spend the rest of his life with her—or simple fancy, one that would pass in time? Her throat thickened at the thought that the almost-kiss resulted from the tension of the moment, knowing his time with her was growing shorter by the day. For surely Nora had received her letter by now and was on her way—or had sent someone—to rescue her.

She pushed the growing dread down. There was no sense in trying to guess at Liam's feelings, especially when his actions had only caused her confusion. The best thing to do now was to go about each day as she always had and wait. She would have to trust if Liam truly loved her, he would not let her leave without declaring so. And if he did not—the thickness in her throat threatened to cut off her air and she took a deep breath—well, that was a possibility she must accept.

## Chapter 28

January 25, 1807

Sunday morning dawned bright and clear, showing no evidence of yesterday's tempest in the clear blue sky. Liam smiled to himself and lagged behind his family, taking the weather as a good omen—not that he was superstitious. He did not need clear skies and an unusually warm sun for this time of year to encourage his plans. Louisa had seemed distracted during the Mass, but she had sat by his side, occasionally smiling at him and lowering her eyes the way shy lasses in love did. Now, as she walked beside Aisling, she turned her head every few minutes to glance back at him, her lips curving up each time. There was no sense in denying it any longer. He loved her, and he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, for richer—unlikely—or poorer. He hoped the latter would not be likely, either. All he wanted was a good, solid income to see their needs met.

As soon as they arrived at Gran and Granda's cottage for Sunday luncheon, he would ask Gran for his great-grandmother's Claddagh ring. As the eldest grandson, it was his birthright to offer the ring to the woman he wished to marry, provided Gran approved of the lady, and Liam had no doubt Gran would. She had commented many times on Louisa's humility and eagerness to help, two virtues Gran held in high regard. Then, once he had the ring in hand, he would go down on one knee in front of the whole family and propose to Louisa.

He picked up his pace, eager to get Gran alone before the rest of the family could distract her. His steps faltered as he rounded the corner onto Gran and Granda's street. A fine coach and team of four stood outside the small cottage.

Liam's stomach twisted, and his heart gave a lurch as if he'd been punched. As much as he wanted to pretend the carriage belonged to his grandparents' landlord, he knew the truth. Louisa's friend had arrived.

“Nora,” Louisa’s voice wedged itself into his ear. Then she yelled a more excited, “Nora!” Louisa ran ahead of the group as the carriage door swung open, and a dark-haired woman clad in a periwinkle and peach striped dress and bonnet stepped down. Liam’s feet turned to stone as he watched the two women run toward each.

“Louisa, thank goodness!” Nora embraced Louisa, joy and relief evident on her face. “I hoped we had the right house. We went to the farm you mentioned in your letter, only to find a completely different family living there. Then we went to the church—the Church of Ireland, that is—to ask where we might find you, and the rector knew not where you were, though, oddly enough, he seemed to know who you were. Then we met the Millers, who said you might be here, being that it’s Sunday. Oh, you can’t imagine our distress at not finding you right away.”

Louisa pulled out of the embrace as the O’Sheas came to a halt a little way from the women, all of them hovering on the walk to the cottage door.

“*Our* distress?” She turned her attention back to the carriage. Liam’s gaze followed as a middle-aged man and a blond woman near Louisa’s age stepped down from the carriage, followed by—Liam’s mouth fell open. A man near Liam’s height, perhaps taller, with brown skin and black curls bouncing around his head, emerged from the coach.

“Lord Armistead! Clarissa! Rajesh!” Louisa rushed forward to embrace her friends.

Liam’s gut twisted, and he took in every detail of this Rajesh. Who was he to Louisa? He thought back over what little Louisa had said of her friends, and he did not recall her mentioning anyone named Rajesh, let alone a man fitting his description. Was it possible he was a suitor she had failed to mention?

Liam stepped forward, and his movement caught Louisa’s eye.

Color rose in her cheeks, and she stepped back, letting the joy that had been there moments ago drain away. She

turned to face Liam and the rest of the family, and clasped her hands in front of her. “Um...let me introduce you to my friends. This is Nora Gaultney, her fiancé Rajesh Acharya-Armistead, Rajesh’s sister Clarissa Armistead, and their uncle, Lord Drake Armistead.”

Then she introduced each of the O’Sheas. They each gave polite nods, no one seeming to know what to say. The tightness in Liam’s stomach abated. At least he knew now Rajesh was not competition.

An awkward silence fell over the group, and Gran stepped forward. “Well, we’re glad you’re here, and there’s plenty to eat. We’d be pleased if you joined us.”

Louisa’s friends thanked Gran and filed into the house, but it was not until Gran insisted they sit wherever they pleased that they all sat at the end of the table surrounding Louisa. Liam sat at the other end of the table, watching the newcomers eat in relative silence except for the blond, Clarissa. She had taken it upon herself to speak for her friends.

Fiona brought a spoonful of stew to her lips, then asked, “Miss Gaultney, you must have been quite relieved when you received Louisa’s letter.”

Nora opened her mouth, but Clarissa answered. “Oh, she was. We all were.” Clarissa placed one hand over her chest, the other raised as if in supplication. “We were all simply beside ourselves when she went missing. Not a sign of her, and no one claimed to have seen her. Even my brother, Rajesh, could not find a single clue leading to her whereabouts, and he was, until recently, a Bow Street Runner. Quite adept at sniffing out criminals, he was. Thank goodness she found you all. Who knows what would have become of our dear Louisa, and she has had such a difficult time as it is, what with her grandfather’s death, her father’s execution, and her brother’s conviction—” Her eyes widened and she covered her mouth. “Oh, dear. Louisa, I’m so sorry. I imagine you haven’t told them.”

Louisa’s cheeks had grown pink, her face remaining calm, otherwise. “It is all right. They know everything.

Seamus Cotter—the brother of Owen Cotter—was the one who abducted me, and the whole truth came out at his trial.” Louisa turned to the rest of the family. “I feel, though, I must clarify. Rajesh and Lord Armistead helped take down my grandfather, and Nora was my grandfather’s prime target in his last criminal plot. It is a bit more complicated than that, but...” She shrugged.

The family all nodded their heads as if everything made perfect sense, though Liam was sure at least his mother and sister had a dozen questions they wished to ask.

“Oh, Louisa.” Nora laid a hand over Louisa’s. “The torment you must have gone through, to relive it all again.”

Louisa sighed. “In some strange way, it was cathartic. And Seamus is in prison, so all’s well that ends well.”

Nora nodded. “Let’s hope all that nasty business is behind you, and you can start anew.” Louisa’s friends all nodded their agreement. “Tomorrow, we can head back to England on Lord Armistead’s ship. Perhaps you can even get away from this part of the world for a while.”

Liam’s chest tightened at Nora’s words. Tomorrow. Louisa would leave him tomorrow. He watched Louisa for her reaction from the corner of his eye.

“So soon?” Louisa asked.

Lord Armistead winked. “When you are in command of your own ship, you can come and go as you please.”

Louisa nodded with a soft smile on her lips, and the pressure in Liam’s chest built. She was ready to go. Happy to go.

“I wonder, Nora, where you suggest I go to get away from this part of the world,” Louisa said.

A blush rose in Nora’s cheeks, and she clasped hands with Rajesh. The two shared a loving glance, the sort Liam had only ever dreamed about sharing with Louisa. A look of true love—two people completely smitten with each other. For a brief moment on the day of the fire, he thought he had experienced that with Louisa, but now he was not so sure.

Wouldn't he know with certainty if she had looked at him the way Nora looked at Rajesh now?

"Well," Nora said, "Rajesh and I.... Oh, Rajesh, you tell her. You've been too quiet."

"We will tell her together, my love." Rajesh took Nora's hands in his, and Liam's stomach twisted, though whether from feeling sick at the sappiness of the moment or jealousy that it was not he and Louisa holding hands, he was not sure.

Still looking into each other's eyes, Nora and Rajesh said in unison, "We are going to India to be married."

Shock struck Louisa's face, then quickly morphed into a wide smile. "India! How wonderful! I know you've always dreamed of going to your mother's home country. I am so happy for you."

Clarissa clapped her hands. "Isn't it exciting? And we are all going to Madras with them." She clasped her hands over her heart and turned her face to the ceiling, as if thanking God. "Oh, I've always wished to go to India."

Nora laughed. "Since when?"

"Since always." Clarissa put her hands on her hips in a rather dramatic pose.

"Or since you found out a certain Lord Wharton's son is taking a long holiday in Madras," Nora said. As if realizing none of the O'Sheas had spoken in several minutes, Nora turned to them. "My grandparents live in Madras, and I can't think of a better place to be married."

Fiona, Diarmuid, Gran and Granda gave polite nods, but Liam's siblings only continued to eat. It was as if they had already accepted Louisa's leaving and traveling halfway around the world.

"We would love for you to come with us, Louisa." It was Rajesh who spoke now.

"You would love India," Nora said. "And you need not worry about how my grandparents will treat you. Just because

you are Lucius Bale's granddaughter, they will not hold that against you."

"Louisa, you simply must come," Clarissa said, striking yet another pose, this time thrusting herself practically in Louisa's lap.

Louisa chuckled at Clarissa and gave her a gentle nudge. "Of course, I'll come."

A feeling like lead settled in Liam's gut, and he struggled against the urge to rush from the room. He stared down at his bowl, refusing to look up as the backs of his eyes burned. He seldom cried, and he would not do so now. Not in front of these strangers. Not in front of his family. Not in front of Louisa.

"Well, I suppose we ought to be on our way. We've intruded on your family time long enough," Lord Armistead said. He gave a bow to Gran. "Mrs. Cahill, lunch was delicious." He gave another bow to Fiona and Diarmuid. "Thank you so much for taking Louisa into your home. If there is ever anything any of us can do for you, do not hesitate to write. And to show our appreciation..." He dug into the pocket of his coat and pulled out a small purse and handed it to Diarmuid. "This should more than cover what it cost you to care for Miss Easom."

Diarmuid accepted the purse with a solemn nod. "Thank you, though 'twas no hardship at all."

Lord Armistead took a card from his pocket and laid it on the table. "I'm glad to hear it."

Liam cast a quick glance at Lord Armistead's address. It was too bad he would not be there long, otherwise Liam might write to him to bring Louisa back. That was, if she would even come back. Louisa pushed a little too eagerly away from the table to join her friends, and Liam doubted she ever wanted to set foot in Ireland again.

As Louisa stood, she paused, and Liam allowed himself to lift his gaze just enough to see her hands folded in front of her.

“Thank you for all you have done for me. I will never forget you, and I will miss you all greatly,” she said.

Fiona and Aisling rose from their seats, and they wrapped their arms around Louisa.

“You travel safe, now,” Fiona said, and she pulled back. A nasal quality had entered her voice, and Liam knew his mother was crying.

“Promise to write to us about India. Thanks to you, we can read and even write back,” Aisling said.

Louisa sniffed. “You can count on it.”

Then Rory and Rian rose from their seats and hugged her. “Stay out of trouble, lass,” Rory said.

Finally, Gran, Granda, and Diarmuid gave her quick, firm hugs, but Louisa did not follow her friends out the door.

“Liam.” Her voice was soft, barely above a whisper.

“Take care,” he said as he met her gaze, then brought his attention back to his bowl. He listened to Louisa’s steps fade as she left the cottage. No lingering where she had stood. No more words. When the door had closed behind her, Liam went to the window, a war waging within him. His heart urged him to chase after her, to declare his love and demand to know her feelings. Yet his brain told him to stand still and let her go. He took a deep breath. No, he would not chase her. If she loved him, she would have said as much.

## Chapter 29

Louisa's heart sank as the carriage lurched forward. She pulled back the curtain and took one last glance at the cottage. Perhaps she had read too many romances. She half expected to see Liam chasing after her, begging her not to leave, or at the very least standing in the street, a forlorn look etched on his face. But there was no one.

She let the curtain fall back in place and closed her eyes as she rested her head against the cushioned back of her seat.

"Do you feel all right, Louisa?" Nora said.

"Mm-hmm." Louisa nodded, her eyes still closed. "I'm only tired. Catholic Mass always spends my energy, what with all the kneeling one does."

Nora must have believed the lie, for she moved on to the next subject. "Is there anything you need to grab before we go to the inn?"

Louisa shook her head. "No, there is nothing."

Everything she cared to take with her, she already had on her person. Her locket the O'Sheas had refused to let her sell, the brooch Liam had bought her, and the robin's egg blue dress Aisling had made her. She thought of the silk dress she had arrived in, but she felt no desire to retrieve it. She would much rather Aisling keep it. She had looked at the silk with such longing; the girl deserved to have something she would not otherwise be able to afford. A few minor alterations and a bit of lace stitched to the hem would have it fitting Aisling as if the dress were made for her.

"At which inn are you staying?" Louisa knew it was not the O'Brien's place. The fire had made it uninhabitable until they could make the repairs.

"We are staying at the Whale and Wharf," Clarissa said. She shrugged. "I suppose it is aptly named. It sits across from the section of the quay where those malodorous whaling

ships come in, but they could have given it a better name. Something less...fisherman. Don't you agree?"

Lord Armistead gave a noncommittal, "hmm."

"I don't know about that. The name makes me wonder what sorts of tales the sailors come in with after months at sea," Nora said.

Tales. The word reverberated in Louisa's mind, drawing up images of Diarmuid sitting by the hearth each night. His stories had made her laugh and cry and sometimes tremble with fright. She thought of her and Liam's first meeting, the rocky start they'd had and their awkward midnight meeting. He had shown her such tenderness in her worst moment at the grand jury. She had only lived with the O'Sheas a month, but in that time she had learned what a family could be—what it should be. Nora, Clarissa, and Rajesh had always been exceedingly kind to her, but they were friends, and she could not depend on them for lifelong companionship. Not the sort a husband and children provided. Perhaps, one day, she would find another family like the O'Sheas who would accept her despite her past. Perhaps she would find a man to love her. A man she could build a family with where love was constant and unconditional.

She heaved a sigh. If only that man had been Liam O'Shea, but it was clear marriage to him was never to be in her future. If he had wanted her by his side for the rest of his life, he would have said something—done something—to stop her from leaving.



Silence filled the cottage like a cloud of smoke, smothering everyone in its fold as the clop-clop-clop of horse hooves and the crunch of gravel under carriage wheels faded. Liam still stood at the window, his eyes focused on a tiny spider weaving a web in the sill's corner. Rory and Rian picked half-heartedly at their food, neither of them bringing a bite to their mouths.

Aisling banged her fist on the table, and Liam looked up. Tears welled in his sister's narrowed eyes that pierced him to his core. "What are you doing, you eejit? You love her! Go after her!"

"And say what?" Liam splayed his hands in frustration. "Marry me, and live a life of uncertainty and back-breaking labor, never knowing if we can get a home of our own or afford the rent if we do?"

Aisling's stricken look tempered his outburst, and he shook his head. "I'm sorry, Aisling. Forgive me. But we must face facts. I must face facts. She's going back to the comfortable gentry life she came from, and then on a lavish trip to India. What do I have to offer her that can compete with that?"

"You have love to offer her. And she loves you. I know she does, even though she has never said as much."

“Aisling, love does not put food on the table or pay a midwife when the babes are born. Or pay for a doctor and medicine when those babes are ill.” Though Liam wished it did.

Aisling stood and came to him at the window. As much as Liam wanted to look away from her imploring eyes, he could not. “You have thought of marrying her. Don’t deny yourself a chance at happiness.”

Liam turned away. “I must. I won’t give Louisa the opportunity to marry me and have her live to regret it. I love her too much to do that.”

“Then you’re a coward!” Aisling spat at his back.

“Aisling!” Fiona chided.

“That’s quite enough,” Diarmuid said, his voice calm but stern.

Aisling stomped her foot. “That’s not enough. Liam, you act like you’re the only one losing someone you love. Did you even stop to think for a minute the rest of us might be hurting?”

Liam’s chest tightened. Aisling’s tears had started afresh and her voice wavered.

“Louisa grew to be like a sister, and now she’s leaving, and I’ll never see her again. And before you go saying I have plenty of friends, and they’ll help me feel better, don’t. I love my friends, but never once did I ever feel any of them were like a sister. Would you deny me that kind of companionship? And what about Ma and Da? Did you ever think to ask them how they feel about Louisa leaving?”

Liam shook his head and started toward the door. He could not listen to any more of this. They were all grieving, but he would not be made responsible for their heartache. They had all known this day would come.

Aisling grabbed his arm. “Don’t you walk away, Liam O’Shea. I’m not done with you.”

Liam jerked his arm from her grasp. “Yes, you are! What’s done is done, and there is no changing that.” His voice cracked, and tears pushed at the corners of his eyes. “And we all have to accept it.”

He yanked the door open, and it was not until he was three cottages away that he finally slowed his pace and took a deep breath. He leaned against a lamppost and wrapped his arm around it, clinging to it for support as his body shivered with the effort to force his tears back, to keep them from spilling over.

The memory of Louisa climbing into the carriage and driving off replayed in his mind, and he shook his head. She was leaving in the morning, and he had to accept that.

## Chapter 30

January 26, 1807

The sturdy walls of Louisa's cabin muffled the cry of seagulls flocking over the ship and shouts of sailors preparing to embark for Liverpool. Louisa lay on her side in her bunk and closed her eyes. As much as she hated being cooped up in the dim cabin when the ship had yet to set sail, the thought of being on deck was so much worse. She was not sure her heart could handle hearing the laborers on the wharf speak in that vibrant brogue she had come to love, or watch the green hills and rocky shoreline fade into the distance.

“Knock, knock,” Nora said as she gave a gentle tap on the already open cabin door. “We are setting sail in half an hour.”

Louisa nodded.

Nora sat on the edge of Louisa's bunk and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Was your time here terrible? It cannot have been easy living in such humble conditions, and with complete strangers.”

Louisa sighed and sat up, her back hunched to avoid hitting her head on the bunk above. “It was difficult at first, but, no, it was not terrible.”

“Did the O'Sheas treat you well? They seemed kind enough, but it is hard to tell one's character from only an hour.”

Warmth bloomed in Louisa's chest as she remembered her first morning in Wexford, scared and cold until Fiona rescued her. “They were—are—wonderful people. They took me in without a second thought, and they treated me like I was one of their own.” She pinched the fabric of her skirt. “I'm going to miss them.”

Silence stretched between them a moment, then Nora pointed to the brooch Louisa wore pinned to her bodice.

“That’s a beautiful piece. I do not recall you having that before.”

Louisa ran her fingers over the bluebells in the brooch’s center. “It was a Christmas gift from Liam. He did not wish me to feel left out. I admit, it is not the finest piece of jewelry I’ve ever owned, but...” She trailed off. The brooch meant more to her than any other possession in the world. She clamped her lips down, unable to voice the rest of her sentence. She was heading home to England. What sort of wretch would she be if she declared she wished to stay now after all the trouble Lord Armistead, Nora, Rajesh, and Clarissa had gone through to rescue her?

Nora leaned a little closer. “It is exquisite. Crafted by a fine hand, to be sure. It was awfully thoughtful of Mr. O’Shea to buy it for you.”

Louisa nodded.

“He seems a very kind man,” Nora said after a stretch of silence.

Louisa nodded again. “He is the kindest, most humble, and caring man I’ve ever known.”

Nora placed a hand on Louisa’s shoulder, and she leaned forward, catching Louisa’s downward gaze. Louisa could only stare at her own reflection in Nora’s glassy blue eyes.

“Do you love him?” Nora asked.

The pressure that had been building in Louisa’s chest loosened, and a sob erupted. “Yes,” she said before she could stop herself. Tears spilled down her cheeks.

Nora pulled Louisa into her arms, rocking her back and forth as if Louisa were a small child. When the tears ceased flowing, Louisa pulled away and rubbed at her moistened face.

Nora offered her a handkerchief and tucked an errant strand of hair behind Louisa’s ear. “My dear friend, if you love him, then why are you here?”

Louisa dabbed her cheeks and wiped at the onslaught of mucus coming from her nose. "I'm not certain his feelings are the same. I thought they might be, but after yesterday... I thought... He hardly even said goodbye." She choked on the last word.

Nora gave a consoling smile. "Louisa, you are my friend, and I would never forgive myself if I did not encourage you to find out for sure if he returns your feelings."

"But wouldn't he have said something if he did?"

Nora shrugged. "Men are silly creatures. What woman can truly know a man's mind unless he speaks it? I'll tell you what." Nora went to her portmanteau and pulled from it her reticule. She drew several pound notes and handed them to Louisa. "Take them," she insisted and placed them in Louisa's hand. "We do not sail for half an hour. Go to Liam and tell him how you feel. If he loves you, consider this my wedding present. If he doesn't, come back here, and we will go home."

Louisa's eyes widened at the folded notes in her hand. She tried to hand them back. "It's too much."

Nora held her hands up and leaned away. "I insist you keep it. Everyone deserves to find love, and I will not let my friend find it in a penniless state."

Louisa tucked the pound notes into her pocket and hugged Nora. "Thank you."

"Enough wasting time." Nora gave Louisa a gentle nudge. "You can write to me later and tell me everything. Now go."

A mixture of giddiness and anxiety welled in Louisa's chest, and she rushed from the ship, pausing only a moment on the dock to decide where she would check first. It was nearly noon. The fishing wharf was not far, and there was a good chance the Cahill's boats had returned from their morning fishing on the sea. She had limited time before her ship left, and with it her chance to go home if Liam did not return her love. She forced that possibility down as she raced through the crowds of men. She had to be optimistic.

The Cahill's boats floated in their berths at the fishermen's wharf, but a shout for anyone who might still be on board revealed the men had left. Shane and Cullen's cottage was her next stop, but she only met an empty house.

Louisa stood on the front step, biting her lip. Where would Liam be if not here or on the boat? He could be at the market, selling the fish, but that was past Cara's shop. Cara! Fiona would be there, working as usual. She was bound to know where her son was.

She lifted the hem of her skirts and ran for Cara's shop, not slowing her pace until she burst through the shop door. Cara jumped, nearly sticking a pin in a customer she was fitting with a dress. Fiona stood behind the counter with another customer. Her eyes widened as she took in Louisa's disheveled appearance, for Louisa's hair had come loose from her twist and now tumbled over her shoulders.

"I need to find Liam," Louisa said, not giving anyone the chance to ask why she wasn't on the ship.

Fiona blinked several times, as if processing what Louisa had said. "He's at the O'Brien's pub, helping them make repairs."

Louisa turned and rushed back into the street, shouting a thank you over her shoulder.

It was a short jaunt to the pub, and Louisa scanned the small crowd of men carrying burnt lumber and ruined furniture from the building. But where was Liam?

"Devin!" she called as she spotted him heading back into the pub. She halted inches from him and doubled over, hands on her knees and gulping air. "Devin, where is Liam?"

"He's inside. You stay here. I'll get him. I don't want you collapsing from any more running."

Devin disappeared inside, and Louisa straightened, her breaths coming more easily now. A moment later, Rory and Rian emerged, their eyes searching wildly for something before finding her.

“Louisa, you’re supposed to be headed home,” Rory said. “What are you doing here?”

Louisa waved them off, pretending to still be catching her breath. She had come to confess her feelings to Liam, not his brothers. A minute later, Liam emerged into the street, Diarmuid, Devin, and James following close behind.

A lump formed in Louisa’s throat as she noticed the crowd forming a ring around her. From the corner of her eye, she spotted Fiona, Aisling, and Cara bustling toward her. She had hoped to speak to Liam alone, but she doubted she would get that now. Perhaps it was for the best. If Liam did not reciprocate her feelings, she would have a sympathetic group of women to help her escape the crowd.

Liam stopped a few steps from Louisa. confusion and something else Louisa could not quite identify etched across his face.

“Louisa, what are you doing here?”

Louisa folded her hands in front of her, fidgeting her fingers. She licked her lips. *Come on, Louisa. Speak what’s on your heart.* “Because...because...I realized I’m already home.” Tears stung the corners of her eyes, but she fought them back. She would not become a blubbering mess now. “I love you, Liam. I love all of you.” She cast a glance around to the O’Sheas gathered around them. “But, Liam, I love you most of all, and I would very much like to stay, if you will have me.”

Liam’s chin quivered, and his eyes glossed over with unshed tears. He rubbed his chin and looked down at his shoes, and Louisa’s heart sank. She did not know what reaction she had expected, but this certainly was not it.

“Come on, you eejit!” Rian slapped Liam’s back.

Liam lifted his head and stepped closer. “Are you sure? I cannot give you the life you’re used to.”

Louisa allowed a small grain of hope to bloom. “I don’t need that life. I can be happy anywhere as long as I have you.”

“And you’re quite certain?”

“I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life.”

Liam nodded, and he wiped at his eyes, stepping closer. “Then I’d very much like you to stay and be my wife. I love you, Louisa.”

Her heart leaped in her chest and her own tears spilled over, rolling into the creases made by her ever widening smile.

“Kiss her, already!” someone in the crowd called.

“All right, all right.” Liam chuckled and waved off the chant before it could get fully started. “Come here, my love.” He scooped Louisa into his arms, lifting her off her feet a moment before gently placing her back down. The tips of his fingers tilted her chin up, and her lips met his in a gentle kiss, soft and warm.

Cheers erupted, and their kiss deepened. Louisa’s heart fluttered as Liam pulled her tight against him. He broke away from her lips, trailing kisses across her cheek to her ear.

“You know I won’t let you go now for all the money in the world,” he whispered.

“You won’t have to. I have fifty pounds in my pocket,” she whispered back.

Liam pulled away, his eyebrows rose, and a bemused smile formed.

Louisa let out a laugh and pulled the notes from her pocket. “A wedding gift from Nora.”

“Thank you, Nora!” Liam pulled Louisa into his arms again and rested his chin on her head. “And thank you for coming back to me. I swear, I’ll never let you go again.”

“And I’ll never let you let me go.”

## Author's Note

If you have ever wondered whether authors feel guilty for what we do to our characters, yes. Or at least I do. I cannot speak for other authors, but I genuinely feel guilt—sometimes I cry—when I inflict physical or emotional pain on my characters, even the side characters. And sometimes those side characters demand I make amends. Louisa is one such example.

Louisa Easom made her first appearance in the third book of *The Daughters of India* series, *Daughter of Two Worlds*. While no physical harm befell Louisa in that book, her family had certainly inflicted an abusive level of emotional trauma, hinted at in *Daughter of Two Worlds*, and when that novel ended as it did—with the death of her grandfather and arrests of her father and brother—I knew Louisa's life would not be made better. I knew if Louisa had been a real person in early 1800s England, she would have a social pariah, ruined by her family's criminal history. Poor Louisa. I could not leave her like that, forever miserable in the back of my brain. Nor would she allow me to move on. Louisa demanded she get a happily ever after.

So, I set to work on *Loving Louisa* in order to right the wrong I had done this imaginary person who lives only in my brain and on these pages. I hope you enjoyed her story, and if you find yourself curious about the past event alluded to in this book, I might direct you to *Daughter of Two Worlds*.

# Acknowledgements

And now it's time to thank all who made this book possible. I must thank my mother-in-law, Colleen. I am a mother of three young children, the eldest two of whom I homeschool, so I am rarely by myself. My writing time is usually restricted to the quiet hour or two after they go to sleep, before I drag myself to bed. Colleen, though, gives me extra time I normally would not have to write. While I head off to my local library or Starbucks with my laptop, she entertains my kids, and I am eternally grateful to her.

While I am in the habit of thanking people on an eternal scale, I must also thank my amazing husband. He understands how hard I work to care for and educate our children, and he knows how important my writing is. So, once a year, he sends me on a momcation to relax and get some serious writing done. To some this may seem a small sacrifice, but to me, it is huge!

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longer than me, and I am certain I will continue to learn even more as time goes on.

## About the Author



Megan Elder Evans is a writer of historical romance, literary fiction, and fantasy. She has at least five story ideas floating around her head at any given time, but since she does not have a clone she must focus on one project at a time.

She has a Master's degree in English from the University of Central Florida, and formerly taught composition and literature at Valencia College in Orlando before deciding to quit in order to raise her children. Now, she homeschools her two oldest and makes time each day to write.

She currently lives near Orlando, Florida with her husband and three children. In her spare time, she reads, goes to the gym so she can eat more cookies, and spends as much time outdoors with her family as possible.

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