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CULLEN'S CELTIC CABARET - BOOK 3

RIVERS OF WRATH



USA Today Bestselling Author

Jean Grainger

RIVERS OF WRATH

CULLEN'S CELTIC CABARET - BOOK 3




JEAN GRAINGER

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To Tadhg Sayegh,

*without whose dedicated expert knowledge of matters about
which I know nothing, this book would have been so much the
poorer.*

To climb the unreal path, we stray from the roadway
here,

We swim the rivers of wrath, we tunnel the hills of
fear.

Our feet at the torrent's brink, our eyes on the
clouds afar,

We fear the things we think, instead of the things
that are.

— JOHN BOYLE O'REILLY

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CHAPTER 1



BROCKLETON, CORK, JANUARY 1920

*P*ETER

MAY, looking pale but determined, dragged him away from his ring of friends just as everyone was getting ready to toast Nick and Celine for the tenth time that evening. The blushing newlyweds had decided to stay on at Brockleton for their honeymoon, and Nick's delighted father, the fifth baron de Simpré, had thrown this magnificent party in their honour. It was nearly midnight, and since six that evening, the ballroom had been ablaze with light, chandeliers flickering, gilded mirrors gleaming, the trunk of a small tree smouldering in the vast fireplace. Footmen kept everyone's glasses topped up with champagne, and even Nick's solemn ancestors, gazing down from the oil paintings on the walls, seemed to be enjoying themselves.

'Peter, come on. I want to show you something.'

'Can't you just tell me what it is?' he whispered back.

Usually he was too busy working to socialise, but the whole of the cabaret had been invited to stay on at Brockleton after Nick and Celine's winter wedding, and he was thrilled to have these few days to relax with his fellow actors. Friends like Two-Soups and Enzo and Ramon, who had fought with him and Nick in northern France. Friends like Aida, the sultry Spanish flamenco dancer, who glittered in her tight-fitting crimson dress. The male impressionist Millie, who had her arm around Nick's new wife, Celine. Gill, known to everyone now as Magus, the American magician, as smouldering and sinister as ever. Clive, the ventriloquist, who was making everyone laugh by trying to stop Timothy, his red-headed dummy, from drinking his champagne.

He thought they were all wonderful, even the chorus girls in their outrageously short dresses, giggling and flirting with the louche aristocrats, who'd decided that leaving Brockleton

right after the wedding, when there was so much entertainment to be had from the gorgeous, glamorous performers of Cullen's Celtic Cabaret, would be the height of foolishness.

The marriage of the heir to this entire estate and barony to Celine Ducat, cabaret singer, had taken place only four days ago, and a more romantic affair it would have been hard to imagine. Since then, word had got out among the gentry of Cork city and county that the party to end all parties was going to be held at Brockleton. So all day even more guests had been flooding in. Poor Armitage, the butler, used to just caring for the baron and the dowager baroness, looked frazzled, and Mrs Donnelly, the housekeeper, was stoic in the face of demands for more and more guest rooms to be made available. Nick had instructed them to employ as many people from the village as possible to ease the burden on the housekeeping and kitchen staff, but everyone was under pressure. Luckily Nick's father didn't seem to mind the extra cost or the crowds, even though everyone was eating and drinking him out of house and home.

'No, Peter, it can't wait. Come quick,' said May, her chin set at its usual determined angle.

She led him out of the ballroom into the imposing entrance hall and made him stand under the ornate stone gothic archway that spanned the vast front door, and finally he realised what she was after. The arch had an odd-looking gargoyle carved into the apex, and tied to it was a large sprig of waxy green leaves and plump white berries – mistletoe left over from New Year's Eve a few weeks ago. No one had yet got around to finding a ladder to take it down.

His young wife turned him to face her and stood on her toes to kiss him.

'I saw the mistletoe still up there and realised we hadn't had a special kiss to welcome in 1920,' she murmured, as across the entrance hall, the huge grandfather clock with the round brass pendulum began to chime the hour. 'We were too busy working on New Year's Eve to think of it. But 1920 is going to be our year, I can just feel it. And it's the year our baby will be born.'

‘Happy 1920, May,’ he said, then kissed her back. Over her shoulder, through the double doors across the hall, he could see Nick and Celine taking their places at the grand piano, and moments later Nick played the opening bars of their favourite love duet.

‘If you were the only girl in the world,’ sang the big, soft-hearted man in his rich tenor as his hands ran over the keys, ‘and I was the only boy...’

Peter’s best friend had been madly in love with Celine Ducat ever since they’d sung this duet together in the Aigle d’Or during the Great War. He’d been plain Nick Gerrity in those days, and the French girl was the bar owner’s daughter. It turned out that Nick was the Honourable Nicholas Vivian Shaw all along, and now Celine was a ‘lady’ herself.

‘Let’s go back to the party, May,’ he said distractedly.

His wife looked like she might be about to object but then thought better of it.

In the ballroom, Celine, leaning on the piano and gazing lovingly at Nick, took up her half of the song.

‘If I were the only girl in the world and you were the only boy...’

People were waltzing now, and Peter watched it all, soaking it in. He had never seen such decadence; after all these hours, the champagne was still flowing like water and plates of delicious titbits, tarts and pastries, kept arriving. It was all such a long way from the slums of Henrietta Street, from where he’d dragged himself up by a mixture of natural talent and sheer determination.

As soon as they re-entered the ballroom, May was corralled by three of the chorus girls, who were no doubt trying to convince her to let them drink champagne and stay up all night dancing. She’d hold firm, he knew that, and though he sometimes felt sorry for the girls – he couldn’t have borne such restrictions when he was their age – it was for the best.

It was May who made sure that in every town the priest and his housekeeper, as well as the local Reverend Mother, were given free seats for the show, and on that night, the costumes were the most modest and the more bawdy songs were off the programme. She was the reason his travelling cabaret ran so smoothly, no doubt about it. She intuitively knew what was best, and he'd learnt to trust her instincts. He wondered how it was all going to work when the baby came. It was hard to imagine her being able to give the same level of commitment to the show when she had a baby to care for.

His baby, as he had to keep reminding himself. Not just any baby boy or girl but *his* son or *his* daughter. Someone to have beside him in life, someone who might take over the cabaret one day.

As he accepted a lemonade instead of champagne from a footman, Aida came over.

'I see you finally got your kiss under the mistletoe, Peter,' she said, with one of her rare smiles.

He laughed; he hadn't realised they'd been noticed. 'Yes, May wanted to welcome in 1920 in the proper fashion, instead of being up to our ears in a cabaret show like we were on the actual New Year's Eve.'

She winked and clinked her water glass off his lemonade glass; neither of them drank alcohol. He'd seen enough of what drink could do growing up with his father and wanted no part of it. He didn't know why Aida didn't partake, but then a lot of women didn't.

'Happy belated New Year then. And what big plans have you for us all in 1920? Carnegie Hall? Royal performance for the king?' She laughed, and he loved the deep, throaty sound of it, made sweeter by the rarity.

'Not quite,' he said. 'But I do have plans. Touring England, Scotland and Wales, and eventually taking the show to America.' He stood a little closer to her, dropping his voice. 'But those are big dreams, and between you and me, I can't afford to do much yet.' Peter usually kept his financial cards close to his chest, even with Nick; he didn't like to worry his

performers, who needed to be relaxed and happy to give the show their best. But he knew he could be honest with Aida; she was unflappable.

‘If you plan it, it will happen,’ she said with certainty.

‘And would you like it? To go touring other countries? To see America?’

She shrugged, as self-contained as ever. ‘I am happy here, but of course it would be interesting. I never imagined ever leaving Valencia even, and leaving Spain altogether was...’ She searched for the word. ‘I know this, Nick told me it – inconceivable?’

He laughed. ‘Yes, I think that means that you could never have even thought about it?’

‘Yes, that,’ she confirmed.

‘But you’d come?’ He needed her; she was the star of the show in many ways.

‘If you ask me, I will come,’ she answered simply.

He grinned. ‘Consider yourself asked. You’re essential to the cabaret – May was only saying it to me the other day.’

‘And how is May feeling?’ Aida asked, her expression neutral.

Peter knew why she’d asked. On the day of the wedding, May had got very snappy at him for talking to Aida alone in the garden. But she’d apologised afterwards, and said it was because she felt exhausted and sick, and that she knew he and Aida were just good pals. That’s when she’d made the remark to Peter about Aida being essential.

‘Poor girl is not well,’ he said. ‘She’s tired and throwing up a lot in the mornings. For something that’s supposed to be so natural, it’s not easy, is it?’

‘I wouldn’t know, and I never plan on finding out,’ Aida said dryly.

‘Ah, you say that, but some day some fella will take your fancy and all your resolutions will go out the window.’ He

grinned and gave his friend a one-armed hug. At that exact moment, May reappeared, and he withdrew the arm hastily, not wanting a repeat of the wedding-day fiasco.

May didn't bat an eyelid. 'Hello there, Aida,' she said, without a trace of bitterness, and leant in to kiss the Spanish woman's cheek. 'It's a marvellous party, isn't it? I just had one of Mrs Mulcair's homemade sausage rolls, and I think I can die happy.'

'I had two,' Aida admitted.

May laughed. 'Well done. Good woman.'

The whole cabaret knew Aida was very conscious of her figure and ate little, and never fattening things like sausages.

'The sooner I get all the cast away from here, the better,' joked Peter, relieved May was so relaxed. 'Or we won't fit on stage.'

May laughed again, then covered her mouth to stifle a yawn. 'It's time I was tucked up. If I don't lie down, I'll fall down.'

'I'll take you up.' Peter immediately offered her his arm.

'Not at all.' She waved him away. 'You stay and enjoy the party – I'm sure it will go on till all hours. Besides, I've a letter from my mother to read, and it's very long by the feel of the envelope, so if I can't sleep, it will do the trick. No doubt Father O'Reilly's corns have turned to ulcers, or he's gone down with dengue fever, very common in suburban Dublin.' She rolled her eyes. May's mother spent her life worrying about the various ailments of the parish priest, and May had grown up hearing about his medical problems. 'Honestly, if I were Father O'Reilly, I'd be questioning my vocation with the many crosses he has to bear, or maybe his illnesses are all in his head. Now, goodnight, darling.'

'Well, if you're sure you don't need me to come...'

'Of course I'm sure.' She kissed his cheek. 'See you later.' Then turning to the Spanish woman, she added, 'I hope you enjoy the rest of the party, Aida.'

She really did seem to have got over her irrational jealousy of the Spanish beauty.

* * *

IT WAS four in the morning before Peter retired to bed.

He'd had a wonderful evening. He'd danced the tango several times with Aida to amuse the assembled aristocracy and sung a few sentimental songs with the chorus girl Peggy, who had a sweet soprano, accompanied by Nick on the piano, before Nick disappeared off to bed with Celine. After that he'd still felt wide awake and spent ages chatting with Enzo in the smaller of the two libraries.

Libraries weren't the cockney boy's natural habitat; he was hiding from the very aristocratic, very married and very amorous Florence Gamminston. Enzo had had a fling with Lady Gamminston in London when the cabaret was playing at the Acadia, and it turned out she'd known Nick from childhood, which was part of the reason his aristocratic past came to light. As a close neighbour of Nick's in Cork, she'd been at both the wedding and the party, and Enzo was worn out by her attentions.

'Just be honest and break it off with her,' suggested Peter, suddenly relieved that he was married and couldn't be chased any more.

'You think I ain't tried that?' Enzo sighed as he twirled a cut-glass whiskey tumbler half full of Midleton in his hand. He was reclining in a Queen Anne chair on the other side of the fireplace. He had his shirt sleeves rolled up due to the heat of the fire, and his muscles rippled visibly under his skin. Enzo's physique was a source of fascination to all women. The acrobat wasn't tall, but he was lean and nimble, and his strength was phenomenal.

'She's a demon. I mean, I like 'er – she's a right laugh, and, well, she's amazin' in bed, like something possessed, to be honest – but her old man 'as set a private detective on 'er. I don't like that, even though Florence says John Smith – well,

that's what 'e calls hisself anyway – is a decent skin and turns a blind eye.'

'Mm...might be safer for you and for us all if you put an end to it in that case.' The story about the detective was worrying. Peter knew Nick suspected that his own brother Wally had been shot by a jealous husband in a so-called hunting accident, and he didn't want a repeat of the same. These Anglo-Irish la-di-das could be trigger-happy because they knew they could literally get away with murder; the law of the land didn't seem to apply to them in Ireland. 'In fact, I'm asking you to knock it on the head, for all our sakes. We don't need that kind of hassle.'

Enzo was his friend, and Peter didn't like to make demands, but this situation could go very wrong if it wasn't called off soon. It could hurt the cabaret, and as the boss, Peter had a duty to make sure that didn't happen.

'If you say so, I will. I'll blame you.' Enzo nodded with a grin. 'You're right. She's a doll really, and I'm very fond of her, but nah, it's no good. I'll just have to be gentle.'

'Gentle but firm,' said Peter. 'With the emphasis on firm.'

Enzo stood and drained the glass. 'Right, I'm off to bed. I'm bunking in with Ramon tonight, so if Lady Muck comes creepin' about in the night lookin' for me, I won't be there. I'm absolutely jiggered.'

After Enzo left, Peter sat for a while, looking into the fire. He should go up, he knew, but solitude was a very rare commodity in his life. He was enjoying the peace and quiet and still wasn't ready for sleep.

His mind went back to the ballroom, when May was so nice to Aida. Now that he thought about it, he didn't know why he'd been so surprised. Apart from the odd lapse, like being catty when she'd caught them together at the wedding, May's attitude to Aida had much improved over the last couple of months. It had started around the time she'd gone to stay in Dublin and had come back all in favour of the rebels. Maybe the ongoing war against the English occupation of Ireland was what had distracted her from her jealousy.

Anyway, as she'd admitted at the wedding, she knew there was nothing between him and Aida but friendship.

Though now, sitting alone with his thoughts in the dark predawn, he wondered if that was entirely true. In another life, at another time, would he and Aida have made a match? Not according to the Spanish woman. She was so adamantly opposed to any kind of relationship, he doubted any man would be acceptable to her. He wondered what had happened to her to make her so against men. The thought of anyone hurting her stabbed at him like a physical pain.

The grandfather clock in the hall chimed four.

He stood up, stretching and yawning. He knew he'd better get to bed, to his lovely young wife. Who was pregnant. With *his* baby, he reminded himself once again.

CHAPTER 2



M^{AY}

SHE'D DRIFTED SLOWLY awake after Peter crept into bed beside her, and now she was on her knees, vomiting into the heavy porcelain toilet. Thank goodness they had a bathroom right beside their room or she wouldn't have made it in time. The baby was tiny yet, but this little person growing inside her was making their presence felt even so.

Her baby, *his* baby, Peter's baby... She said it over and over in her mind as she retched.

Two months ago a wicked, sinful thing had happened. In a moment of weakness, she had spent the night with Peter's gorgeous older brother, Eamonn. For her it had been a terrible mistake, and it would never happen again, but still she shuddered with guilt every time she thought about it.

Eamonn hadn't even been repentant.

I should regret it, I know I should, but I can't and I won't, he had written to her. *May, my love, when I die, it will be your name upon my lips, and I will carry you with me in my heart to my grave.*

She had to get rid of that letter. Burn it. She just never seemed to find the opportunity.

Lately she'd started to worry – would the looks of the baby give her away when it was born? Eamonn and Peter were nothing alike. Eamonn was big and dark; Peter was slight and

blond. Though it wasn't unusual for a child to look like an aunt or uncle, was it? Everyone said she herself was just like Auntie Marie, her father's sister, with her dimpled cheeks, brown eyes, pink mouth and rich blond curls; she was nothing at all like her own dull, shapeless mother. So if the child looked like Eamonn, surely nobody would think it odd.

Would Eamonn wonder, though? She'd lied to him that the child couldn't possibly be his – but what if he guessed when the baby came? Urgh! She hated this train of thought. She and Eamonn had agreed never to tell Peter about their night together; she needed to push the memory out of her mind. No good would come from dwelling on something that couldn't be undone. She would just have to make it up to Peter by being the best wife ever in the history of the world.

She trudged back to the bedroom. The gas lamp that was attached to the wall was at a low level, casting a glow over the room, and the grandmother clock on the mantle said it was five thirty in the morning.

Peter lay on his side, breathing rhythmically, his blond hair flopped over his forehead, his long lashes resting on his pale cheeks. He was so beautiful, with his high cheekbones and cupid's-bow mouth. She'd adored him from the first moment she'd set eyes on him, up on stage in the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin, playing the comic porter in Macbeth when he was only seventeen. And now both of them were twenty and had their own business, touring Ireland with Cullen's Celtic Cabaret. It was only a fit-up for now, the huge tent having to be struck, moved and raised again every weekend, but one day they would have made enough to build their own bricks-and-mortar theatre. That was her dream, and she knew she was right – it was a good plan. Peter had other ideas; he just loved touring all over the place. And of course she would be a good wife and go along with everything he wanted. Until he realised he was wrong and she was right.

She was about to creep into the huge bed again when she saw the letter her mother had written propped on the bedside locker. She'd been too tired to read it last night, but now she was wide awake, so she might as well. She turned up the gas

light a little more – it wouldn't be dawn for hours yet – and put a cardigan on to take the edge off the cold. This house was magnificent, no doubt about it, but it was freezing once the fires went out.

Sliding in between the stiff linen sheets, careful not to disturb Peter, she settled herself against the feather pillows, pulled the heavy eiderdown up to her neck, then eased open the envelope. It wasn't a long letter after all, just a single sheet; the envelope had been bulky because it contained a hessian bag of leaves, and May remembered her mother had said something in her last letter about sending her a tea to help with the nausea. She felt a pang of guilt. Her parents loved and missed her so much, and every detail of her and Peter's life was important to them. She should give them more time, even though their fussing over her drove her daft.

She turned the letter to the light, feeling comfort at seeing her mother's familiar loopy writing.

My darling May,

Your father and I are so, so happy. Oh, May. We've had a letter. From David. He's alive. He didn't say why he hasn't written before, or what happened, but he's alive, May. Your brother, our son, is still on this earth. It was all I prayed for, all I ever wanted, for you both to be safe and happy, and now our dream has come true.

His letter was...well, I don't know how to say it...a bit curt or something. Not like the way I remember him. But maybe he's somewhere official and can only give the bare facts. It just says he's alive, that he's coming home and that he'll leave Germany as soon as he can and arrive in Dublin directly. More than that he didn't say. I wish I could have more details. When exactly will he arrive? What has he been doing? Is he all right? Was he injured? But I suppose we just have to wait now and see when he will knock on our door.

Oh, May, it's a dream come true, and when he comes, you must come home as well – he will be longing to see you. I'm sorry this letter is so short, but I want to catch the post so I can get this to you as soon as possible.

All my love,

Mother

‘Peter, wake up, wake up!’ She no longer cared that he’d been asleep for less than an hour. ‘Such wonderful news! Oh, Peter, David’s alive...’

She shook him, but he groaned and turned over, burying his face in the pillow.

‘Peter, don’t go back to sleep. David is alive! Enzo was right all along – he said he wasn’t dead. I can’t believe I’d started not to believe him...’

Over two years ago, Enzo had told Peter that May’s older brother was a prisoner of war, not killed in action as was thought. There’d been no evidence for it, but Enzo was the seventh son of a seventh son, and sometimes he knew things there were no way of knowing. It had kept May’s hopes for her brother alive, though after the war, as time went by with no sign of David, even she’d begun to think Enzo must have made a mistake.

‘Peter, Peter, *wake up!*’

Finally he turned his head towards her, then opened his dark-blue eyes and leant up on one elbow, his normally neat hair standing on end.

‘Wh...wha...’ he began groggily.

She waved the letter at him joyfully. ‘David wrote to Mother and Father. He survived!’

‘Wha... Tha...’ He stopped and cleared his throat. ‘That’s great news, May. Was he in hospital? Was he badly injured? Is that what kept him?’

‘No idea. His letter was curt, according to Mother, but then if he didn’t draw flowers all around it or fill it with gushing, she’d think it was curt. But either way, he’s coming home. She and Father will want me to be there when he arrives, and I’m longing to see him. Could you spare me for a couple of weeks when he comes?’

‘Of course, take as long as you need. We’ll be fine.’

May leant over and kissed him. 'You're the best husband a girl could ever want. You know that, don't you?'

'Hmm...' he agreed, then put his head down and fell straight back to sleep.

May sat, rereading the letter, wondering now what had stopped David writing before. Maybe he'd lost his right arm or something like so many of the boys who had gone off so cheerfully to fight. Anyway, whatever was the matter with him, Olive would be only delighted to fuss over him.

As May put the letter aside, another worry crept into her mind. Peter had been so casual about suggesting she could go back to Dublin for a while. *We'll be fine*, he'd said. But who was 'we'?

He'd been half asleep, and probably he meant the cabaret, but she couldn't help wondering if 'we' was him and Aida. It had been horrible earlier that evening to see him with his arm around her, but she could never voice it, or even give the slightest indication of how she really felt.

She'd put a brave face on it. She'd promised God to make it up to her husband by being the best possible wife a man could have, and that meant not having a childish temper tantrum every time she spotted him with Aida.

Another dread wave of nausea forced her out of bed again, and she only just made it to the bathroom in time. She was reaping what she'd sowed, she knew that. God was punishing her for Eamonn, forcing her to share her body with another man's child, who was trying to kill her.

Crouching miserably over the toilet, she did her best to think of happier things.

Her darling brother, David, was coming home. What could be happier than that?

CHAPTER 3



*N*ICK

IT WAS NEARLY midday when Nick finally drifted awake to the sound of a robin chirping on the snowy windowsill. He rolled over in the bed, reaching out. To his disappointment, Celine's side of the bed was empty. It had been the miracle of miracles these last few nights, waking up beside her every morning, feeling her slender body against his, sliding his big arms around her. Shy and inexperienced, both of them found the physical side of things a bit stiff and awkward, but even just cuddling her made him feel like he was in heaven.

He contented himself now by inhaling the scent of her perfume from her pillow.

It had been nearly three years since he'd first seen Celine in the Aigle d'Or, waiting on tables. She had strawberry-blond hair and amber eyes with flecks of gold, and he'd thought she was beautiful. But it wasn't until she'd joined him on stage to sing a love duet that he'd fallen for her. And fallen hard. Everyone knew he was mad about her, but Celine just treated him as a friend. Until a couple of months ago, when he'd brought her to Brockleton, and out of the blue, she'd agreed to marry him.

Maybe it was the magnificent house that had won her over, but he didn't care any more. There was a time when he'd wanted her to love him for himself alone, but his grandmother had convinced him that was romantic nonsense. Some men

had handsome faces, some had brilliant minds, and some, like Nick, stood to inherit a vast estate. People said he was handsome, but he wasn't sure it was true. They were probably just being kind. But either way, to win in love, you had to play the hand you had.

He lay there for a while, hoping Celine would reappear, but she didn't. He knew he should get up. The other members of the cabaret were going back on the road tomorrow – they couldn't afford to take any more time off – and he wouldn't see them for a few weeks because he'd promised his father and grandmother to stay in Brockleton until the end of February, learning the ropes of how to manage the estate. His heart sank a little at the thought. He wasn't cut out to run Brockleton. He was made for the stage. He adored performing, loved playing the piano and especially singing. He had a rich tenor voice, and singing was the only time in his life he didn't stammer. It was as if when he was on stage, he was a different person altogether. Confident and debonair. Not his usual big, shy, clumsy self.

Still, he accepted that this estate and all its tenant farmers would become his duty when his father died, to say nothing of his seat in the House of Lords. It wasn't meant to be this way. Nick was surplus to requirements, an unwanted, unnecessary third son. Roger, a splendid boy, had been the heir, until he'd died in the war. Then there was Wally, the second son, but he'd been killed in a hunting accident – or, according to Florence, shot by a jealous husband after Cousin Harvey had dripped poison in the man's ear.

So Brockleton had come to Nick by tragic chance, and now he was stuck with it.

He got dressed and made his way downstairs. The young chorus girls were already up and full of beans, exploring the house and having snowball fights on the lawn. He'd been worried when he suggested the cabaret stay on for the party that his father might see it as a terrible imposition, but having the house full of young people, all being exuberant and full of fun, seemed to have given his father a new lease of life.

‘The place was dead long enough,’ the baron had declared, clapping his only remaining son on the back and assuring him he was delighted with everything.

The breakfast room was empty apart from Two-Soups and the girl who called herself Delilah but whose real name was Eileen; she was sitting very close to the red-headed Scotsman, almost leaning against him, and he was laughing at something she’d said.

Nick smiled approvingly. *Good girl, Delilah.* She was succeeding where the rest of them had failed to raise a smile out of the poor man. Two-Soups had been heartbroken by the loss of his fiancé in a road accident, and of course nobody could ever replace the lovely, warm-hearted Betty. But still, the Scottish comedian needed to start living again and not just save his jokes for the stage.

Leaving the pair to themselves, Nick helped himself to some scrambled eggs and bacon from the covered silver platters arranged along the sideboard and sat down in a corner near the French windows. Outside on the lawn, the snowball fight between the girls and some of the gentry was still in full swing. Peggy, the soprano who sometimes sang with Peter, was being chased around by some distant relative of Nick’s with no chin and weak blue eyes. Nick tried to remember the man’s name but couldn’t. Edgar? Edward? Something like that?

Celine wasn’t among them anyway. Where was she?

After finishing off his breakfast with a quick cup of tea, he set about looking for her properly.

In the games room, he found her father playing billiards with his own father. It was a tight game, and Remy Ducat, who was bent over the table, gave a Gallic shrug when Nick asked him if he’d seen his daughter and then cannoned his white ball off the other balls with absolute precision, to a cry of despair from the baron, who hated losing.

In the trophy room, Enzo and Ramon had already started on the brandy while admiring Walter’s collection of stuffed animals. They hadn’t seen Celine either. The ornate marble

clock hanging on the wall beside the snarling wolf's head was ticking up to two o'clock.

In the kitchen, Nick found Clive the ventriloquist entertaining Mrs Mulcair with Timothy; the carrot-headed dummy was making cheeky remarks about Anglo-Irish toffs. When Nick asked about his wife, neither Clive nor the cook knew, but Timothy piped up, 'Well, Toffy boy, when the cat's away, the Millie Mice can –' before Clive slapped him sharply on the head. Timothy looked sulky and said he wished he had a father like Uncle Two-Soups, who was much nicer than Clive.

It was actually quite funny the way Clive's dummy son looked so like Two-Soups, with his bright-red hair and freckles. If the puppet were a real boy, one could easily have thought the Scotsman was his uncle. Sometimes Two-Soups joined Clive on stage for the ventriloquist's act, and he and Timothy would get a great banter going between them and have the audience in stitches.

Leaving the kitchen, Nick contemplated Timothy's comment about 'Millie mice' and realised that he was right, that Celine must be with Millie.

Nick was hugely fond of Celine's best friend, but she did tend to hog his wife's company. It would be a bit of relief when she left with the rest of the cabaret tomorrow. Celine had hinted at asking her to stay to the end of February as well, but that wasn't going to happen because Peter wouldn't be able to spare her; it was bad enough the cabaret having to make do without Nick and Celine for a whole month.

He looked into both libraries but found only Peter, who was reading the newspapers and checking reviews of other acts in theatres round the country, seeing who he could poach for their show.

'Peter, have you seen Celine?'

His friend and manager glanced up with a smile. 'I saw her with Millie earlier, but then they disappeared off upstairs together. Maybe they're with May in our room. She's still in bed – she had some exciting news that kept her awake half the

night. Her brother, David, wasn't killed in action after all. She's very happy about it. Can't wait to see him.'

'That's super news.' He was thrilled for May. 'I'll go and see if they're with her then.'

He headed up the back stairs to the upper floor of the east wing, where most of the actors were staying, passing two suits of armour that used to terrify him as a child. The long scarlet and gold Axminster-carpeted corridor led to a small mullioned window at the far end, which let in beams of snowy light. He tapped on the first door, which he knew was May and Peter's bedroom. There was no answer; if Peter's wife was in there, she must be asleep. He wouldn't disturb her. He had one foot on the stairs to go down again when a faint cry echoed down the corridor.

Celine?

The hairs stood up on his neck. He turned back to listen.

He heard another faint cry, coming from the bedroom furthest away. A crash, like a piece of glass or china being knocked to the floor, and then a scream... Was there an intruder?

'I'm coming, Celine!' he yelled, racing down the corridor and flinging open the door of the furthest room.

The sight that met his eyes made no sense. No man at all. A broken vase on the floor, with hothouse flowers strewn across the carpet. On the four-poster bed, a tangle of bedsheets covered the bodies of Celine and Millie. Both were naked, sweating, and they were watching him with terror in their eyes.

'Nick...' Celine gasped. 'I...'

And then everything fell into place with a miserable thud. Celine and Millie were not just friends. They were lovers. *Stupid, stupid, useless Nick*. How could he not have realised? There were so many clues. Millie always around them, she and Celine deep in whispered conversations, Millie giving the younger woman advice.

The sounds he'd heard were not of violence but of passion. The passion that had been entirely absent on his wedding night, and every night since then.

Neither of the women spoke. He shut the door and stood there at the mullioned window for a few long seconds with his forehead pressed against the cold glass, staring out at the snow. Then he turned and walked back down the corridor and down the stairs.

* * *

'So, Nicholas, how are you finding marriage? Everything satisfactory, I hope?'

Hunched on the striped silk sofa in his grandmother's small, elegant drawing room on the third floor of the west wing, Nick simply shrugged. He couldn't bring himself to speak. His entire world had crashed down around his ears, and here he was supposed to make small talk and drink tea and eat cucumber sandwiches, because Alicia Shaw always retired to her rooms at four for afternoon tea. It was a ritual she never liked to miss.

'Nicholas, what is it, darling?'

How could he ever hold his head up again? Celine and Millie... He'd heard of women like this, who preferred the intimacy of other women, and of course there were men like that too, but could this actually be happening? His Celine? His wife? And how could Millie do this to him? She'd always supported Celine's decision to marry him – she'd encouraged it, for God's sake. He'd believed she was on his side. *Stupid, stupid, stupid...*

'Oh dear, Nicholas. Are things not going according to plan in the bedroom department?'

He almost smiled; her guess was so accurate. And how typical of Floss, as he'd always called her, to be so direct. Even if she had spent most of her life with the aristocracy, Alicia Shaw was still an American from Boston, who told it like it was.

‘Speak to me, Nicholas. A trouble shared, as people say.’

He shook his head. He didn’t want to share this trouble with anyone. He wasn’t even sure what he was doing here in Floss’s drawing room. It was just that throughout his childhood, when Harriet, his mother, was cold and absent and his father, Walter, always angry at him for his stammer and general uselessness, it was Floss, in her cool, calm way, who comforted him. She’d spotted his musical talent and engaged a tutor. She’d given him little treats, like sugared almonds, to bring with him to his awful boarding school; he would eat them quietly at night after a long, horrible day of being bullied and think of Floss and feel better.

Now his grandmother laughed, but kindly. ‘It’s like that, is it? Perhaps we need something a little stronger than tea.’

After setting down her delicate Dresden china teacup, she rose and went to the dresser, where she poured him a large whiskey with a drop of water and made herself a gin and tonic.

‘Tell me then,’ she said, returning to the couch and giving him the whiskey. ‘Is it that you can’t get up the courage? That’s very normal, Nicholas.’

‘N-n-no, n-n-not that.’ He stared miserably down into his glass.

‘Oh?’ She sounded puzzled. ‘Surely she doesn’t keep refusing you?’

‘N-n-no, n-n-not that.’

‘Then what is it, my dear? If you have the courage, and she is willing or at least not unwilling, then what has you looking so glum?’

He took a big gulp of whiskey and shuddered. ‘I d-d-don’t think she loves me that way, Floss.’ As he heard himself say the words, his heart broke so completely, he almost thought the crack must be audible. All this time he’d known Celine didn’t love him, not really, but then he’d got his hopes up. It made everything so much worse.

‘She tells you that?’ Floss asked gently.

‘Not in so many words, b-b-but...’

She sighed, clearly a bit exasperated. ‘Nicholas, I’ve said it before. I didn’t love your grandfather that way and he knew that, but I married him and stayed faithful to him, and I gave birth to an heir, your father, and if I hadn’t, you would never have been born and the world would have been a poorer place. As soon as babies come along, Celine will be more than happy. She is a lovely, affectionate girl and clearly adores you. She’s not one bit like Harriet – she will be a wonderful mother. So please don’t attach too much importance to romantic love. She doesn’t have to feel that way for your marriage to work.’

Nick smiled wryly as his heart broke again and again. ‘B-b-but she does feel it, Floss, that’s the p-p-problem. It’s just... it’s for someone else.’

‘There’s another man?’ Floss looked astonished. ‘But have you and she not been in each other’s pockets since 1917? Surely you would have known about this chap if he exists?’

‘It’s not a chap, Floss.’ He couldn’t believe he was telling Floss this; the whiskey must have loosened his tongue.

‘But what on earth does that mean, not a chap?’ She stared at him in bewilderment.

‘It’s M... It’s M... It’s M...’ He silently cursed his stammer. He normally was relaxed around Floss and didn’t stammer so much, but he was struggling now and couldn’t get out the name of the person who, up until now, he’d liked nearly as much as any woman he’d ever met, second only to Celine. ‘It’s M-M-M-M...’

She rose from the sofa and returned with a sheet of lavender-scented notepaper and a fountain pen.

He scribbled so fiercely, the nib tore the paper. *Millie.*

‘Millie?’ Floss held the sheet in her hands, looking at the word as if it was a puzzle to solve. And then nodded, her face clearing. ‘Ah. I see. Millie. That woman.’

He wondered if his grandmother even understood, if she knew what he’d seen was something that happened in the real world. They’d all heard of the gross indecency trial of Oscar

Wilde, so while the fact that men went with other men, though never discussed in polite society, was acknowledged as a real issue, he doubted it had ever occurred to his grandmother that there were women of that nature as well.

But then she said, 'My own sister was one of these women. I can't pretend to understand it. But there it is.'

Really? He'd never met any of his American relatives so had no idea who she meant, but still it was a relief not to have to explain it to her. He finally found himself able to speak. 'And so you see, it's hopeless,' he said miserably.

'Don't talk nonsense, Nicholas. Nothing is hopeless.'

'Isn't it?' He cheered up a little, a small child hoping to be comforted by this cool woman. He longed for her to say that it wasn't hopeless because girls grew out of such schoolgirl crushes, and that if he and Celine went on with the physical side of their marriage, she'd soon discover that a man's love, even the love of a clumsy oaf like Nick, was better than...well, whatever she had with Millie Leybourne.

Instead Floss said, 'My sister had a female lover but married a very rich man, a Boston millionaire, and had his children. Celine is married to you, and you as her husband merely have to put your foot down. This estate, this country, is entering into a turbulent period, and it needs steady hands at the wheel. Your father has a new lease of life since you returned, but he is getting old. You need a proper wife, someone strong by your side who will be your ally in all things, and a wife who keeps a lover in the same house as her husband is not the right partner for that. You must be firm with her, Nicholas. You must send this Millie woman away and focus on your marriage – and on fathering an heir.'

Nick shuddered and swallowed the big lump in his throat. His grandmother was advising him to break his wife's heart by sending Millie away from Brockleton. But if he did that, Celine would hate him. And then his marriage would end up like his parents', his mother boiling with years of unexpressed resentment, all of which poured out that fateful night when he'd overheard her ranting at his father for forcing himself

upon her and insisting on getting her pregnant for a third time – with their idiot, useless, stammering son, Nicholas Vivian Shaw.

And he *was* a useless idiot, as it turned out. He should never have brought Celine to Brockleton. He'd thought he could make her happy, but he'd just been bribing her into marrying him to make himself happy. She was only eighteen years old – how could she have resisted? And now his grandmother wanted him to punish his one true love by making her unhappy forever.

'I can't d-d-do it to her, Floss,' he said in a sad, quiet voice.

'Nicholas, you can't let Millie stay here.'

'She won't. None of us will. We'll go back on the road with the cabaret tomorrow. I never meant to come home for very long anyway, not until Father dies or becomes too ill to manage the estate. So I'm going back to being a cabaret singer, and I'm going to try and forget I was ever married to Celine and hope things can go back to the way they were. I liked them that way, when we were just friends.'

'Oh, my dear boy.' Her cool grey eyes filled with tears. 'Please don't go. I thought I had you home for good, darling. At least stay until the end of next month, as you promised your father.'

'I can't, Floss. It would break my heart to be here alone with Celine, watching her pining to get back to Millie.'

'And it will break your father's heart if you go again so soon.'

Nick bowed his head. He knew Walter Shaw was going to be heartbroken, and he was probably going to show it by roaring and shouting and threatening to cut Nick out of his will and leave Brockleton to the despicable Harvey Bathurst instead, who was next in line and hadn't been one bit pleased when Nick turned up alive.

'I'm sorry, Floss,' he said humbly. 'I've made such a mess of everything.'

She laughed then, a bit cynically. ‘Darling, look around you. The whole country is in turmoil. The Irish aristocracy has already made a mess of everything, the old world is about to fall apart, and who knows what the new world will look like? People like us just have to muddle through as best we can and hope history doesn’t judge us too harshly for our sins.’

‘Either way, it’s not the life I want. I’m sorry. Maybe if things with Celine were d-d-different, I could stay, b-b-but not now. I wish I never...’

‘Nicholas, my dear, one thing I’ve learnt in my long life is that nothing is permanent – nothing good but nothing bad either. Everything changes, and this relationship might change for the better or for the worse, but it won’t always be like this, I promise you that.’

He nodded, feeling slightly stronger, and they sat in companionable silence, sipping their tea and eating their cucumber sandwiches, as he’d done with her ever since he was a boy.

* * *

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, everyone was packed up and ready to go. They had a week of shows in Athlone to do, right in the centre of Ireland, so they needed to get cracking.

Monsieur Ducat had left for the ferry the night before, but there were other protracted goodbyes to make with the last few aristocratic stragglers, a tearful Florence being one and Nick’s chinless relative who had the crush on Peggy being another. Finally everyone was in the truck, packed together, sitting on boxes and suitcases. Peter had rented a lock-up garage in Ballinasloe, their last stop, to store their costumes and props and folded tent, so those would need to be collected, along with the caravans, which were parked in a rented field. Peter would bring the vans to their new location one at a time, using the truck.

He’d been delighted when Nick announced he and Celine were coming along, and not at all surprised. The cabaret was

the centre of Peter's life, so it was easy for him to assume all his performers felt the same way. Which, in many ways, Nick did. He was already anxious to get back on the road; singing on stage again might lift him out of his despair.

His father, on the other hand, was thoroughly disgusted that Nick was leaving so soon. As predicted, he threatened to cut off Nick's new allowance and disinherit him. He talked of honour and duty and responsibility and had called Nick feckless to be more concerned with some kind of a circus than his own seat, but Nick wasn't for changing. Walter lacked any kind of emotional intelligence and so thought threats and bullying – or failing that, bribery – were how one achieved what they wanted. And it might have worked, years ago, but not now. Nick might be a fool when it came to love, but the army, the war, his friends, the cabaret had all taught him to be his own man, so that he would be, regardless of what ranting his father did.

He wasn't that frightened child any more. He couldn't fix things with his wife. He'd not spoken to Celine or Millie since his discovery, despite both women making overtures to him to do so. But he understood his father better than before, and he wouldn't leave things badly with Walter if he could help it.

As Peter got the truck going with the starter handle, he stood before his father.

'Father, can we talk before I go?'

'Nothing to talk about,' Walter replied, in clipped tones.

The old Nick would have been crushed by his curtness, but not now.

'Look, I'm going either way, but we can part for now as friends or we can leave it like this, and I know I'd rather we were friends. I'm not abandoning you or Brockleton, but I do want to live my own life, and for me that's the cabaret. I'll come back, of course, for visits, and if you feel like this is all getting too much for you, then you must say it and we'll come up with a plan. But for now I'm going back.'

‘Bloody nonsense, singing and dancing...’ Walter grumbled, but Nick sensed a crack in his armour.

‘Maybe so, but it’s *my* bloody nonsense.’ Nick smiled and saw the ghost of a return smile play across his father’s lips. ‘And I love it.’

‘Well, at least set about giving me a grandson with that fill –’ He stopped himself. Nick had told him repeatedly he didn’t want his wife referred to as a horse. ‘With that girl.’

Nick didn’t reply, instead offering his hand, which his father took, and then on impulse drawing the older man in for a hug. The second one of their lives.

‘Take care of yourself, Son, and come home soon.’ The gruff delivery belied the obvious loneliness his father felt.

‘I will, I promise,’ he said.

Clambering into the back of the truck, he ignored the space Celine had left for him beside her and crammed himself in beside Peggy, studiously avoiding his wife’s forlorn gaze. He couldn’t face her. Or Millie, who was crushed into a different corner, and who looked almost as miserable as Celine.

CHAPTER 4



BARLEYCOVE BEACH, WEST CORK

M AY

MAY RETCHED into the bucket for the fourth time that morning, her head hanging over the side of the bed in the caravan. Calling this ‘morning’ sickness was a joke. It was supposed to be getting better by now, but instead as January wore on, it had turned into something more like ‘all day’ sickness. She felt worse than ever, she looked awful, her face had erupted in pimples, and she couldn’t even keep water down.

Peter was sympathetic and rubbed her back and brought her tea when he wasn’t working, which was rare enough. But he had neither the time nor the energy nor the skill to look after her and everyone else at the same time. She should be caring for him and keeping the show on the road – that was the way their relationship was supposed to work. But now she badly needed someone to care for her.

Celine was no good. She was moping around like a wet week; there was some kind of row going on between her and Nick. After only a week spent living together, the French girl had moved out of Nick’s caravan and back in with Millie, where she’d lived before the wedding, and when May asked Nick what was wrong, he’d shut up like a clam. Peter said the same happened when he tried to ask him.

There was no way she was going to beg Aida to care for her. And the chorus girls were too skittery, and besides, she was in charge of them. She couldn’t afford to look weak in their eyes; who knew what they’d get up to if they knew she wasn’t coping.

Maybe it would be better for everyone if she went home for a bit. David wouldn’t be back for a while. He’d written again to say he had some business to attend to first, again all very mysterious and no return address, so she’d told her parents she would come whenever he turned up. But perhaps it

would help to go home now. Indoor plumbing, her mother fussing over her, roaring fires and nice food were a lure.

But no, she couldn't bring herself to leave Peter alone with Aida Gonzalez. She was so afraid her husband would do to her what she'd done to him. Not that she deserved a faithful husband, she knew that.

The last wave of nausea passed. She hoped it was the end of it for a while, so she dragged herself off the bed, picked up the tin bucket, took it outside and hurled its contents into the ditch behind. She cleaned the bucket with a big handful of freezing wet grass, shivering with cold. Back in the caravan, she looked in the little mirror on the wall. She was white as a sheet and her skin was dreadful. Her dressing gown had come undone with the retching, so she tied it and brushed her hair, tying it back with a ribbon.

The door to the caravan opened.

'I thought you were busy all day?' she asked wearily.

'I am,' Peter said, 'but I came back here to check on you. How are you feeling?'

'Top of the world,' she replied, climbing back into the tiny bed and pulling up the bedclothes. 'Can't you see?' *Ugh*. She hated being cranky with him. She longed to be the perfect wife, to make up for everything. But she felt so ill.

He didn't reply, just stood watching her. 'Can I get you anything?'

She shook her head and dragged the blankets over herself; she only wanted to sleep now.

He came over then and pulled a chair up beside the bed.

'May, I'm really worried about you. You're so sick, and I can't do anything to help you, and now we're going to be moving again tomorrow. Do you think maybe you should go back to your mother's in Dublin? I know you said you'd wait until your brother turned up, but maybe it's best for you to go now?'

She turned and heaved herself up. She couldn't explain that the last thing she wanted was to leave him here by himself with Aida, and her stuck in Dublin maybe until she had this child, and then him and her mother plotting together to keep her in Dublin out of the way because she couldn't be travelling the country with a small baby.

'I'm sorry, Peter. I know I'm being useless to you, but I promise I'll feel better tomorrow.'

His eyes grew soft then, and he said, 'Ah, May, you poor thing. It's not about you being no use to me – it's about me being no use to you. So your mother –'

'No, I can't go home. I don't want to leave you.' Weakly, she started crying, and with a sigh, he put his arms around her and rocked her.

Someone knocked on the door.

'They never leave you alone, do they,' she muttered into his shoulder.

'I know it, but whoever it is, I'll get rid of them. They'll just have to wait.' He relinquished his hold of her and went to the door. She lay down on the bed, her arm over her eyes.

'Oh, hi, Magus. Sorry, I'm afraid May needs me, so unless it's an emergency...'

'The carpenter who was supposed to fix the coffin, he's made a terrible mess of it. Nobody is going to believe it's solid.' The magician sounded extremely stressed.

'Well, can't Two-Soups fix it?'

'It would have been Betty's birthday today, and he's gone to bed and won't get up. Delilah tried to get him to open his caravan door, but he won't, even for her.'

May waited for the inevitable, and sure enough, it came. 'May, I'll be back in a minute, all right?'

'Of course. Don't worry, take your time,' she called back faintly, then turned over in the bed again and drifted off into a restless, uncomfortable sleep.

Someone tugged at the bedclothes, trying to wake her. She moaned and shifted. ‘Peter, don’t...’

‘It’s not Peter, it’s me.’

With a gasp she rolled over, pulling the sheets up to her chest. ‘What are you doing here? What’s happening?’ The clothes she had given him before no longer strained across his shoulders but hung off him. He was unshaven, and his hair was as unkempt as when she’d made him kneel to let her cut it, all those weeks ago.

‘May,’ he said in a low, urgent voice, ‘something’s after happenin’.’

Outside came a rush of racing feet over the hard, frozen ground. Eamonn rushed to hold the door closed, but Aida whispered urgently through the keyhole, ‘May, it’s me. Open up.’

‘Let her in, Eamonn,’ May groaned, sitting up weakly, her head spinning.

The Spanish girl scrambled into the caravan, her expression scared but determined. ‘May, get dressed. You must get out of here. British soldiers have come looking for you and Peter – they’re searching the caravans in the next field. Oh, it’s you...’ She shot Eamonn a furious glare as he closed and locked the door behind her. ‘This is all your fault. You’ve brought them down on us, haven’t you, those men who turned up here and there. They’re your men, yes?’

Eamonn nodded; this was no time for denials. ‘And if they were all Volunteers, there wouldn’t be a problem, but one of them was an informer – I’ll kill him when I find him. Where’s my brother?’

‘Thank your lucky stars he was gone into town for a carpenter. I’ve sent one of the girls to warn him not to come back until the search is over,’ Aida snapped.

May slumped on the edge of the bed. She was so sick and dizzy, hardly able to take in what was being said. Three more IRA Volunteers had turned up last week to be put on the payroll. So one of them had betrayed her and Peter to the

English? This was a disaster. They were ruined. What would happen to the show if she and Peter were arrested? Everything they'd worked for would fall apart...

She retched feebly as the sickness came on her again.

'Hurry, get these on.' Aida was on her knees, pushing boots onto May's small feet and lacing them.

'Put this on, or you'll perish out there.' Eamonn draped her warm woollen coat around her, helping her get her arms into it and buttoning it up.

'I can't go with you,' she said weakly. 'I'm too sick, Eamonn. Leave me. Leave me here, Aida, please.'

'Come on, May, you can make it. Come on.' They pulled her to her feet, Eamonn and Aida, one on each side, guiding her towards the door.

She heard the crunch of heavy boots and a loud banging on the side of the caravan.

'Open up!' roared an angry voice.

May staggered forward and collapsed on the U-shaped seat, on the furthest side from the door, her stomach churning. 'Oh God, I'm going to be sick...'

Aida rushed to grab the bucket from beside the bed and shoved it at her. Then sat down beside her, and whispered, 'Say nothing. Just think of your and Peter's baby and keeping it safe. Say nothing. Don't give them your name. I promise you, everything is going to be all right.'

'Open up! Open up!' The door shook as fists hammered on it.

Eamonn pulled a pistol from his belt.

In an instant, Aida was on her feet, seizing it from him, throwing it under the bed. 'Don't you dare start a gunfight,' she hissed, and her Spanish eyes flashed.

'They've come for May,' he hissed. 'I won't let them take her to the Castle. Look at her – she'll never survive. They will beat her and torture her. She'll lose the baby for sure.'

‘Open up! Open up!’

‘And you think a gun will help? Use your head, you fool.’ With another glare, Aida unlocked the door and flung it open. May caught a glimpse of a tall British officer with a livid scar from his temple to his chin standing on the step, two privates behind him, rifles pointed at Aida.

‘What do you mean by this, to come barging in on my husband and I?’ Aida, with her carefully pronounced English, sounded cool and authoritative.

‘Are you Mrs Cullen?’

‘I am, and this man is my husband, Peter Cullen.’ Aida had her hands behind her back, and as she spoke, May saw her move the gold ring she always wore from her right hand to her left, to her wedding finger. Eamonn moved beside her, blocking May’s view.

‘You two have to come with us, Mrs Cullen, Mr Cullen.’

‘This is an outrage!’ yelled Eamonn, putting his arm around Aida. ‘My wife and I are law-abiding citizens.’

‘Mr Cullen, enough. I have orders to arrest both of you. Now will you come quietly or will we need to compel you to do so?’ replied the officer in his calm, bored English voice.

‘Where are you taking us?’ asked Aida, her voice cracking slightly.

‘That’s not information you need. Now, let’s go.’

‘Wait, wait,’ whispered May, retching helplessly. ‘Wait, no...’

‘Who’s that with you? Briggs, take a look inside.’

Eamonn and Aida had no option but to make way.

One of the privates, a spotty-faced youth hardly out of his teens, lowered his rifle and climbed in the caravan door, glaring at May. ‘Who are you?’ he demanded aggressively in a thick Scottish accent.

‘I... I...’ Vomit rose up her throat, and she groaned into the bucket, some of the vomit spattering his boots and the butt

of his rifle. He looked appalled and backed off.

‘This is Aida Gonzalez,’ said Aida coldly. ‘And as you can see, she’s not well. She’s in a delicate condition. She is expecting a child, and I’ve been minding her.’

The spotty youth jumped down from the caravan and spoke to his commanding officer. ‘There’s another lady in here with the Cullens, sir, a Mrs Aida Gonzalez. She doesn’t seem well – she’s being sick into a bucket.’

The officer replied in clipped tones. ‘God’s sake, Briggs, then leave the poor woman alone. There’s no Aida Gonzalez on the charge sheet. Now, Jones, bring the prisoners.’

The other armed soldier jumped into the caravan, grabbed Eamonn and the Spanish girl by an arm each and hustled them down the caravan steps into the snowy field, out of May’s line of sight.

‘I demand to know what we are being arrested for!’ she could hear Eamonn shouting indignantly.

‘You’ll find out soon enough,’ answered the bored officer. ‘Now I said I’d heard enough from you.’

‘Take your hands off my wife –’

There was the sound of a blow, and a shrill scream from Aida. ‘Don’t hit my husband!’ And then the sounds of violence and anger faded slowly across the field as the couple were led away.

Left alone in the caravan, May got sick one last time, then sat and sobbed, with her face in her hands. Eamonn had brought this disaster on them, so it was only right that he’d taken Peter’s identity to save his brother. But what was she going to tell her husband about Aida? The Spanish girl had shown such courage. She’d sacrificed herself for his wife and unborn child, and May hadn’t lifted a finger to stop her. Peter would be inconsolable, and he would despise May for letting it happen.

And the worst thing was, it made her resent the Spanish girl even more. Aida’s sacrifice was an act of pure, noble love, nothing like the selfish, needy desire May felt for Peter,

wanting him to stay with her, whatever happened, wanting him to be loyal to her even though she'd betrayed him.

The fact was, Aida Gonzalez was worth ten of May Cullen, and May couldn't help hating her for it.

CHAPTER 5



*P*ETER

HE WASN'T angry with May; of course he wasn't. She'd sat by while Aida was dragged away, but it would be unfair to blame her – she was sick and pregnant. And anyway, the whole thing was his own fault, letting Eamonn foist the Volunteers on the cabaret, putting everyone in terrible danger without even warning them. The authorities were crystal clear on the fate of those found to be assisting the rebels in any way.

And now Aida Gonzalez was in the hands of the English, and it made his blood run cold to think what might be happening to her. She thought she was so tough, but she was no match for their brutality. The war was being hard-fought every single day, and the British were like cornered rats and extremely dangerous.

He'd heard a story only yesterday how the soldiers based at Dublin Castle had dropped two bodies in the street, both dead, both tortured. Law and order had been replaced by a brutal and arbitrary type of martial law, with the British occupiers the sole dispenser of their version of justice. Their savagery was unprecedented, and now Aida was on her way to the heart of that savagery.

He had to find out where the English had taken them. The other performers would have to manage the cabaret between them while he went looking; May was in no fit state to be left in charge of anything.

He called a meeting of Nick, Enzo, Ramon and Two-Soups, backstage in the tent. The Volunteers who had been sleeping there had melted away after Eamonn warned them the soldiers were coming. The traitor had already fled, but he'd be dead by now. Collins was unequivocal on the subject of spies and informers. No mercy.

'I'm going to try and find out where they've taken my brother and Aida,' Peter announced to their worried faces. 'And I think I'll have to go to Dublin to find out.'

'Yes, and you should get a lawyer,' agreed Nick. 'They can't just hold her and Eamonn without charge.'

Peter was tempted to snap at his best friend to keep his stupid Anglo-Irish notions that the English believed in fair play to himself, but he held his temper. 'You're wrong, Nick. I'm afraid the rule of law is gone in this country, if it ever held at all.'

'I don't understand why they took Aida.' Ramon's voice shook. He was Aida's childhood friend. Their mothers were both renowned flamenco dancers, and Ramon had played flamenco guitar and Aida had danced for him since they were very young. 'Aida's done nothing. She knows nothing.'

Peter met Ramon's eyes unflinchingly. 'They took her because she pretended to be May, to protect my wife and our unborn child. And Eamonn pretended to be me.'

'*Ay, dios mio...*' Ramon ran his hands through his dark hair in despair. 'The foolish girl. Such courage. But why did they come for you and May at all?'

Peter hesitated, unwilling to betray Eamonn even now, but Enzo, who was lounging against a tent pole with his hands in his pockets, said, 'I'm just gonna say it. Them blokes that turn up, Irish boys, and we make out like they're part of the company, well, they've got to be the reason, right?'

Peter looked around at his friends. 'Enzo's right. This is all my responsibility. I was helping my brother in his fight against the British. I lied to you about his men – they're rebels on the

run. And I don't blame you if you just leave and don't want anything more to do with me or the show.'

Nobody said anything for a moment, but then Two-Soups draped his long arm around Peter's shoulders, and said, 'Peter, you were doing what you thought was right for your country, that's all. None of us here are Irish, but we've all seen what's happening out there in the towns, and even though maybe we'd have preferred to stay out of it, well, we can all see that anyone with Irish blood in their veins had to pick a side. There's no choice for you. It's either succumb or fight back. We Scots lost our battle for independence on Culloden Moor – maybe we'll get a crack at it again one day in the future. And the way the Irish are fighting, well, it gives my fellow countrymen hope, you know?'

It was by far the longest speech Two-Soups had made since Betty died, and Peter smiled at him gratefully.

Enzo sighed. 'E's right, mate. I 'ate to admit it, but what's been goin' on 'ere, it ain't right. People are terrified. And I know nobody back in England knows what it's like 'ere, 'cause if they did, they wouldn't stand over it neither. The Irish 'ave to stand up for themselves – they ain't got no choice.'

Ramon nodded grimly.

'The English are for the Irish like the Germans are for me. I understand and admire what your countrymen are doing here, Peter. But we must get Aida out of this prison. I am thinking maybe I write her father – he is an admiral in the Spanish navy. Rafael Narro. He lives in Madrid – I could write to the admiralty there.'

'What?' Peter was astonished. He had no idea Aida had a living father. She'd never spoken of him, and Peter had assumed he was dead. 'Why does she never talk about him?'

'But maybe it's no use. He is a bad man, not kind to her mother and married to another woman.'

Peter winced. He'd thought he and Aida could talk about anything, but she'd not trusted him enough to tell him the truth

about her birth. Did she think he'd look down on her for being illegitimate? That hurt.

'Fathers often regret their past behaviour to their children,' offered Nick. 'You should definitely write to him.'

'I will.' Ramon's mouth set in a hard line. 'Though she might kill me. She wants nothing to do with him.'

'We can worry about her reaction afterwards,' said Peter. 'Go to May and get some notepaper and the money for a foreign stamp, and have Millie drive you to the post office.' He checked his watch. He would have to leave soon for the train. 'I have to go. Nick, is there anything you can do for her? You have that relative, don't you, in the Castle? I think he mentioned it at the wedding?'

Nick grimaced. 'My c-c-cousin Harvey, yes. He's got a p-p-position there, and he's a friend of the Lord Lieutenant t-t-too, I think. But we don't get on.'

'But could you talk to him?' Peter didn't care if Harvey and Nick were friendly or not; the man was their only contact on the other side.

'I could try, b-b-but he and me, though, we're not... Well, to b-b-be honest, he hates me. I don't want to make things even worse for your b-b-brother and Aida. If Harvey knew I was interested in helping them, I don't know what he'd d-d-do to them.' Nick looked pale and alarmed.

Peter's heart sank. He'd been hoping blood might be thicker than water among the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, but it sounded like this Harvey wouldn't be much use after all. 'Well, if it would make things worse, then we'll leave it for now.' He turned up the collar of his coat. 'Meanwhile, all of you go on with the show. When Aida gets out, it's important she still has a show to come back to. We don't want her having to go back to Spain.'

'Maybe it's best for her, the way things are here,' said Ramon bleakly.

An icy hand touched Peter's heart at the thought of losing her. 'It won't come to that.'

* * *

THE TRAIN to Dublin was painfully slow thanks to the carnage created by the war. Sections of the railway lines and even bridges had been blown up, and the train often had to stop to wait for the rails to be fixed, or sometimes go another way entirely, but eventually he found himself nearing Dublin.

Now he had to find out where Aida and his brother were.

He would seek out Eamonn's rebel friends. He knew two of them who lived on Henrietta Street – he'd known them since he was a nipper – and Nolan's Pub was a place Eamonn mentioned as somewhere they went, so maybe that was as good a start as any.

The tram he caught from outside the station moved painfully slowly through the city, soldiers constantly stopping it and getting on to question people about their journeys. The police and army presence was becoming more oppressive every day as their positions were weakened all over the country.

As the packed carriage shunted to a halt near Westmoreland Street, he jumped off and made his way to Nolan's Pub. He thought he should really call to his ma, but she'd ask him about Eamonn. He hadn't the heart to tell her the truth, and she'd see through a lie; she always had done.

It was still early, so the bar was almost empty. He went to the barman, who was polishing glasses and eyeing him cautiously. He was a heavysset man, in his fifties, balding, with the body of a boxer and a broken nose to match.

There was no time for being coy, so Peter approached him.

'I'm looking for either Pat Dunlea or Jimmy O'Connell?'

The barman eyed him suspiciously, saying nothing. Collins had drilled into all the IRA that discretion was critical to success and that every effort at Irish freedom down through the centuries had been thwarted by paid spies and informers listening for snatches of conversation or intercepting written

information. The success so far was because everyone, from the top to the bottom of the organisation, was discreet; failure to be so put the entire operation in jeopardy and wasn't tolerated, offenders more often than not paying the price with their lives. It was harsh, but Eamonn had always believed it was for the greater good, and hopefully the traitor who betrayed Peter and May would face that punishment.

'I'm Eamonn Cullen's brother,' he said to the barman, hoping it would help.

'Wait there.' The man went through a door behind the bar, leaving it slightly ajar; Peter got the distinct impression he was being watched.

Then Jimmy O'Connell, one of a family of fifteen who grew up four doors down from the Cullens, appeared.

'Peter.'

'Hello, Jimmy.' He lowered his voice to a bare murmur. 'Is there somewhere we can talk?'

With a jerk of his head, Jimmy indicated Peter should go to the end of the bar and then followed him.

'Eamonn was picked up earlier from our cabaret, along with another of my performers, a woman the English believe is my wife. I need help.' Peter kept his voice barely audible, though the only other person in the long bar was a man right at the other end reading the paper, who hadn't even looked up.

At first Peter wondered if Jimmy had even heard him. But finally he asked, 'A drink?'

Peter shook his head. 'Not for me. I just need some help.'

Ignoring his refusal, Jimmy signalled for a Guinness, which the barman poured from a bottle on a shelf, then set before Peter.

'I don't drink...' Peter began, but Jimmy deliberately made eye contact with him and then let his gaze rest on the man with the paper.

'Thanks. *Sláinte,*' Peter replied, realising what was happening. The British had spies everywhere, and any strange

behaviour, like not drinking in a pub, would alert suspicion. He picked up the Guinness and did his best to drink it. It tasted foul in his opinion.

‘So you’re looking for a girl, are ya?’ Jimmy asked in a loud, jovial tone.

Peter played along. ‘Yeah, me sister,’ he said, lapsing easily into his old working-class Dublin accent, which he’d left behind so long ago. ‘Me ma sent me to look for her. She’s dead when me auld wan catches her.’

‘Is it *Kathleen*?’ Jimmy asked, leaning his elbow on the bar, emphasising the name.

‘Yeah, did ya see her?’

‘Me mott said she was talkin’ to her this mornin’.’ He spoke in a convivial, natural tone, at normal audibility, not theatrically loud but certainly within hearing range of the man reading the paper. ‘Said they were goin’ up ta’ Monto, to see Mrs Burgess.’

‘What’s takin’ them up there?’

‘She’s after breakin’ her leg, totally banjaxed she is. The women are givin’ her a dig out...’

‘Ah no, poor auld Mrs Burgess. What was she doin’? The cha-cha-cha?’ Peter laughed raucously.

‘Ah sure, you know Molly Burgess. After a few gins, she do be throwin’ some right quare shapes,’ said Jimmy, laughing along.

‘Grand so, I’ll check the Burgess’s then. Thanks.’ Peter swallowed the rest of the beer and put a coin on the counter.

‘I’ll see ya later so.’ Jimmy winked at him.

‘Righto.’ Peter tapped the bar and took his leave.

Instead of heading up to Montgomery Street, which everyone called Monto, where all the prostitutes of the city did their business, Peter ducked into a doorway, and sure enough, the man with the newspaper emerged moments later, looked up and down the street, then took off in the direction of Monto

in search of the imaginary Molly Burgess, where no doubt the prostitutes would laugh at him and hopefully send him in all different directions.

As soon as the man had crossed the road fifty yards away and turned onto Parliament Street, Peter went back into the pub.

‘Upstairs, fast.’ The barman lifted the flap of the bar, and Peter edged past his bulk into the barrel room behind and up a rickety set of stairs. There was a door at the top but no voices.

He didn’t knock, just opened it, and entered. To his astonishment, he instantly recognised the man sitting behind a battered table, his feet resting on a beer barrel, a hunk of bread and cheese on the table in front of him.

‘Well, well, well. Do they raise ye jackeens with any bit of manners at all up here in Dublin? Or do ye never knock around here?’ His lilting Cork accent was unmissable.

The big fellow cast a smiling glance at Jimmy, who was checking up and down the street by looking out the tiny window. A narrow-shouldered, thin man with a moustache and oiled-back hair sat on a stool in the corner, cleaning a gun.

‘I...I...’ Peter stammered, almost as bad as Nick.

He was very rarely lost for words, but this was so unexpected. Michael Collins was the man responsible for the blistering campaign of attacks on Crown forces in Ireland, and it was under his direction that the people of this country were beginning to believe they might, after eight hundred long years, finally drive the English out. If anyone could save Aida, it was him. Who would have thought Peter would strike gold at the first try? Eamonn’s name was clearly one to conjure with.

‘Ah, will you sit down, for God’s sake. You’re making me nervous,’ said the famous commander-in-chief of the IRA, pointing to the chair opposite him.

Peter took it and sat very straight, with his hands on his knees. ‘Mr Collins, my name is Peter Cullen. I’m Eamonn Cullen’s brother. I run a travelling cabaret and –’

‘I know well who you are, and thanks, by the way, for all you’re doing with my boys, keeping them out of dangerous hands. Much appreciated.’

‘My pleasure.’ Not strictly true, but he needed Collins on his side. ‘Unfortunately it’s led to a rather desperate situation.’ He swallowed, and in the silence that followed, Collins appraised him and raised his eyebrow sceptically.

The big man cut another slice of cheese. ‘’Tis a desperate situation we all find ourselves in, Peter, but as you know and I know from when we were small boys in school, no colonising power ever left the land they stole by being asked nicely. So we do what we have to do. Now, how can I help you?’

‘They arrested Eamonn and another member of the cabaret this morning. They think he’s me and that the other person, a Spanish lady called Aida Gonzalez, is my wife, May. So we have to find where they are and get them out.’

‘Well, we know where they are,’ Collins said calmly, putting the cheese on a slice of bread. ‘So that’s not a problem.’

‘Oh, thank God...’ He breathed again. ‘Where?’

‘In the Castle. We had a message out from one of our people there yesterday.’

‘Oh God...’ Peter felt all the blood drain from his face. Dublin Castle, the centre of the English administration, stood behind fortified gates on the top of Dame Street, and it was a place that had become increasingly sinister as this war wore on. People who went in there rarely came out.

‘It’s not ideal, right enough.’ Collins took a bite of his bread and cheese.

Not ideal? Was that some sort of joke? Peter fought the urge to shout, to roar, to wonder why Collins was still eating when he should be doing something about this, right this minute, summoning his men, blowing up walls, digging a tunnel... ‘So how are we planning to get them out?’

Collins shrugged as he slowly chewed his dinner. ‘We’re not.’

Peter's head snapped back in shock. Was Michael Collins refusing to help Eamonn, who had fought so hard for him? 'But my brother is one of your most loyal men...'

'That's why he'll understand.' Collins's voice remained steady, reasonable.

'But there must be a way. We can't do nothing! The girl who is pretending to be my wife, she's so brave, but they'll torture her, they'll hurt her.'

'Does she know anything about us?'

'No, that's exactly it – it's nothing to do with her. It's just my wife's pregnant, and she stepped in to save her.' He realised he sounded frustrated but didn't care.

'If she doesn't know anything, then she can't tell them anything, so that's good. She's pretending to be your wife, is she?'

'And Eamonn is pretending to be me.'

'Is he now? Interesting.' Collins cast a glance at the man in the corner.

'Joe, see what you can find out about Eamonn in there, and if he's still telling them he's his brother. It will suit us very well if they don't know who they have.'

'No, no, that's not the point. That's not what I came to you for!' Peter jumped up, clenching his fists in exasperation. 'Whatever about Eamonn – he knew what he was doing – but this woman is in danger because of her association with me. She's totally innocent, and I've put her in terrible danger by helping your men.' He realised he was beginning to sound hysterical and tried to lower his voice and speak more slowly. 'We...need...to...get...her...out.'

Collins stood as well then, and his towering bulk filled the small space, though when he answered Peter, his voice was calm as ever. He spoke as if to a child having a tantrum, a voice of reason.

'With all due respect, Peter, this girl did what she did of her own accord to help your pregnant wife. Why not just be

grateful for that, that no one is after May Cullen any more because they think they have her?’

‘Because... Because...’ Because he couldn’t bear to think of Aida suffering.

‘And even if it was a good idea to try to bust them out, do you think, if I had a way of getting my people out of that hellhole, I wouldn’t have cause to do it every day of the week? Do you think I’d rather not spend my days waiting to hear they’ve dumped one of my lads on the street, dead, or barely alive, so battered even his own mother couldn’t recognise him? Hmm?’ That questioning eyebrow again.

Peter could see in that moment why people risked life and limb, why they trusted this man. He was handsome, definitely, and powerful, but there was something else, a quiet integrity, wrapped around a core of steel.

‘But we have to help her. Look, if you won’t do it, I’ll –’

‘You’ll what?’ Collins leant back against the table, as relaxed as if they were discussing the weather. Peter’s head barely came up to his shoulder. ‘Go up there, is it, and tell them you’re Eamonn Cullen’s brother, that they have the wrong man? And the wrong woman for your wife?’ He paused and allowed the question to sink in.

‘Do that by all means, Peter, but your brother will have a bullet between his eyes quicker than you can say Cullen’s Celtic Cabaret. If that shower in there realise they have Eamonn Cullen in their grasp, he won’t last five minutes.’

‘I know that, I already thought of it, but, but...’ He grasped at a straw. ‘My wife’s father, Michael Gallagher, well, he is high up in the bank...’ He flinched as Collins and the man called Joe both laughed.

‘Michael “high up in the bank” Gallagher can’t get them out, Peter, no more than I can get them out.’ Collins was still chuckling, but his voice betrayed some sympathy; for such a feared and revered man, he had a very genial disposition.

‘So what should I do?’ He felt so foolish and helpless.

‘Go back to your wife, Peter, and carry on with your show. Isn’t that what they say in your business? The show must go on?’

‘Mick, we need to go...’ Jimmy intervened then; he must have seen something on the street.

Collins patted Peter’s arm sympathetically. ‘Good luck, Peter. Nice to meet you.’ Then the three men walked past him, up another flight of stairs and presumably out onto the roof, and were gone.

CHAPTER 6



NICK

‘PLEASE, Nick, Harvey Bathurst is our only hope of getting them out. He’s your next of kin – surely he’ll help you.’ Peter was distraught, nearly mad with fear and horror.

‘I don’t know if it’s a good idea, Peter...’

‘Nick, I’m *begging* you.’

So Nick had reluctantly agreed to give it a try, because it did seem to be the only way.

Steeling himself, he slipped the incriminating photos that Florence had given him, of Harvey fondling a young boy in a club, into his pocket and went to knock on the door of Millie’s caravan.

He didn’t want to be in a car with Millie – he was still too angry and broken-hearted to talk to her – but there was no other way to get to Cushing Hall across the country without spending pointless hours waiting for buses that most of the time didn’t run because everything was falling apart, people on strike, roads blown up.

Celine opened the door. When she saw him, she blushed and smiled. ‘Nick, how lovely to see you.’

His heart throbbed painfully. The way she said his name in that French accent of hers always melted him. But he tried to harden his heart. ‘Hello, Celine.’

It was no surprise to find her here.

When they'd first come back from Brockleton, she'd cornered him and begged to stay with him in his own caravan. She kept saying nothing had changed, she loved him, she would give him an heir, and she would remain faithful to him. Her thing with Millie was separate, not anything to do with him, it wouldn't harm their marriage, she would be a good wife to him, and he shouldn't think about it, just pretend he'd never seen what he saw that day.

For the first week, he'd tried to go along with the fantasy. They'd even made love again, several times, but each time it filled him with despair. Their wedding night and the days after had felt so perfect because he'd assumed her reticence was based on inexperience, but now he knew the truth, that she didn't feel the way about him that he did about her. It hurt more than anything that had ever happened to him, more even than that overheard conversation between his parents in 1917, when they'd discussed how useless he was.

He even started to wish he'd died in the war.

Celine tried her best to comfort him, to reassure him, but all her words sounded hollow. Millie was the one she loved, he knew that, not him. Millie was the one she wanted to go to bed with, to share this precious intimacy with. He tried to reconcile his misery with what Celine kept saying to him, that she could be a good wife, that she loved him, that she knew from the girls who worked at the Aigle d'Or that lots of married women didn't enjoy that side of things. And she and Nick, at least they were good friends...

It was cold comfort.

After a few days spent trying to coax him out of his constant helpless misery, Celine had quietly moved back in with Millie, though she never let anyone else know where her true affections lay. He was grateful to her for that, for not shaming him in front of everyone; he knew she told anyone who asked that they'd had a bad argument but she hoped it would soon blow over.

‘Are you coming in?’ she said now. ‘It’s just me. Millie has gone to the shops, so we can talk in private. Or do you want me to come to your caravan and we talk there?’ She was still wearing her wedding ring, he saw, an antique ruby that had been passed down through generations of de Simprés.

‘Actually, I haven’t come to talk. I’m looking for Millie.’

‘Oh?’ She looked anxious.

‘Oh, d-d-don’t worry, it’s not about’ – he sighed – ‘you know. But I need her to drive me to Cushing Hall. Peter just got home from Dublin. He’s terrified about his brother and Aida, and I’ve agreed to go and see Harvey.’

‘Harvey?’ Her eyes widened. She came down the steps of the caravan and took his hands. ‘Oh no, Nick, he is a bad man. Remember, he put you on such a bad horse. I know you said to me it was by accident, but I think maybe you will not be safe in his house.’

‘You could be right, but I have to do this.’ He couldn’t help enjoying her concern and didn’t pull his hands away.

‘I come with you...’

‘No, you can’t do that.’

‘Why not?’

‘You need to stay here and keep the show going. Peter can sing with you.’

They were down a singer at the moment. Peggy had a sweet soprano and could fill in for Celine when necessary, but chinless cousin Edgar had whirled her away to get married, and now they were on honeymoon in Rome. He couldn’t blame her. Edgar had an enormous estate in County Limerick and, like himself, was the sole heir. She’d never want for a thing, and Edgar was crazy about her. In the words of Enzo, Edgar was boxing well above his weight; Peggy was a beauty, and he was like the back of a bus. But she’d had a hard upbringing and could now look after her family and never see another poor day.

Everyone was getting what they wanted. Maybe that's what the best marriages were made of.

His reluctance to involve Celine in his trip to Cushing Hall wasn't just about the show, though. The less Celine had to do with Harvey, the better, as far as Nick was concerned. That's why he hadn't told her about Harvey's possible part in Wally's suspicious death, or about the photographs, and he'd even played down the thing with the horse. And it wasn't just that either. He didn't think he could stand being in that tiny car with her and Millie again, remembering that day when they'd first driven to Brockleton and he'd been so full of hope.

Celine's face fell. 'OK, Nick, but come home safely.'

Unable to stop himself, he stooped to kiss her cheek. 'I'll try, Celine.'

Before he could move away, she flung her arms around his neck and kissed him back, and for a moment, he closed his eyes and let it happen. 'I'm sorry you're so unhappy, Nick. I want so much to make you happy...' she whispered in his ear.

Unbearable. He stepped back, his heart breaking for the hundredth, thousandth time. 'When Millie comes b-b-back, send her over, will you? Explain what it's about.'

As he hurried off, she called after him, 'Nick, wait, I need to talk to you!' But he just walked faster. He wasn't feeling strong enough to hear whatever it was she wanted to tell him. Probably she and Millie were moving to France or something awful.

* * *

'So, do you think that revolting man is going to help you get Aida out if you ask him nicely? And Peter's brother?' Millie asked as they drove along the rutted roads. Outside the fields were flooded; the rain had been relentless for weeks, turning every place into a quagmire. Between the rain and the destruction, the normally beautiful bucolic Irish countryside was beginning to resemble the flat churned-up fields of France during the war. The spring had not sprung yet, and everything

was dripping and miserable. A bit like he felt. He remembered an old English master at school talking about something called pathetic fallacy, when the weather reflects one's mood. The boys in his class had just made fun of the man, making jokes about phalluses instead. He'd felt sorry for the master; he was just trying to do his job.

Nick didn't reply. He hadn't had a conversation with Millie since he'd come on her in bed with Celine, and he didn't really fancy starting one now. Also, he knew deep down – not even that deep down – that the answer to her question was no; he just didn't want to have to say it out loud. Peter was in such distress about Aida and his brother, it was an awful thing to witness, and Nick dreaded letting him down. Maybe the photographs would work, though. Or maybe Harvey would just laugh in his face and say the pictures were too blurry and dark to prove anything and, anyway, that he didn't care, he wasn't married, he had no one to answer to. And maybe then Nick would have made things worse.

Millie carried on talking, ignoring the fact that he was ignoring her. 'Because unless you have something over that disgusting man, I can't see him doing you any favours. That was an obvious attempt to get you killed when he put you up on that stallion. He was right there watching when the horse rolled on top of you and you were under the water. He could have got there before I did, but he didn't lift a finger to save you.'

Nick realised then that he'd never properly thanked Millie for what she'd done. If she hadn't dragged the horse away, Nick would have drowned, and it was enormously brave of her to do it – a frightened stallion is a very dangerous animal. 'Thank you for saving my life that d-d-day,' he mumbled ungraciously, without even looking at her.

'My pleasure.' She cast him a wry smile, then returned her attention to the road, which was in an even worse state than the last time they'd driven this way. Nick wished he'd learnt to drive, but there were always chauffeurs when he was growing up and then he'd gone away to war. If he could drive, he

wouldn't have to share this small space with the person who'd ended his world.

All the rage and resentment that had built up inside Nick's heart since that awful day, when he'd gone in one second from being the happiest man alive to the most miserable, came bursting out of him.

'I wish you hadn't saved me, Millie. I wish I'd d-d-died when I was happy, when I thought Celine wanted to marry me because she loved me, not b-b-because you encouraged her to d-d-do it. And I suppose you thought I'd let b-b-both of you live in B-B-Brockleton forever while you laughed at me behind my b-b-back for being so stupid that I couldn't see what was right under my nose. Oh God, I'm an idiot. I was just the third b-b-bloody wheel all along.' He stared furiously out of the window, blinking back the tears. He didn't want to start crying; that would give Millie and Celine something else to laugh about. This whole affair was not only heartbreaking, it was mortifying.

Millie didn't laugh, or even smile. She just drove on in silence, her eyes on the road. They passed through the little village of Dripsey and took the next turn, away from Brockleton in the direction of Cushing Hall.

As they drove by a cemetery where a little funeral was taking place, black-clad mourners under umbrellas, she cleared her throat. 'Nick, you're right. I did persuade Celine to marry you.'

He pressed his lips together, determined not to sob, and stared out at the rows of gravestones passing them by.

'But it was because I wanted Celine to be happy, just like you want her to be happy. Or you did, before you got so angry.'

He scowled out of the window at the wet countryside. She was being really unfair. He *did* want Celine to be happy. He hadn't gone around accusing her of anything; he'd just decided they had to go back to the cabaret early instead of playing happy families at Brockleton.

‘I thought you could make her happy, Nick. You are so kind and gentle...’

‘And rich,’ he muttered resentfully.

‘Yes, and rich, but is that so bad? Celine is so precious, and she’s had such a hard life. She deserves to be pampered. And I could never give her what you can give her, Nick. Not money, not that beautiful house, not marriage, not children. You talk about feeling like a third wheel? Imagine what I felt when she came walking down the aisle of the church, so happy, in her beautiful dress, and how much I wished it was me up on that altar waiting for her. But that can never be...’

Her voice faded away, and he glanced at her suspiciously. A tear trembled on her dark lashes, and it looked genuine. He said gruffly, ‘But you have the important stuff. She loves you.’

‘She does, but she loves you too, Nick. Maybe in a different way, but she adores you, and you can give her something I never can, Nick. Everyone is so happy you’re married. Everyone respects and celebrates your relationship. And when your children are born...’

‘Hah!’ he scoffed bitterly.

She glanced at him, surprised. ‘You don’t want to be a father?’

‘Of course I do, but how can I when she doesn’t...well, love me the way she loves you?’

This time Millie did laugh, sounding surprised. ‘Didn’t she... Obviously not.’ She shook her head. ‘Anyway, it’s none of my business, but I do suggest you stop always running away every time she tries to tell you something.’

‘I don’t run away,’ he said indignantly. But then he remembered Celine calling after him only that morning. *Nick, wait, I need to talk to you.* And if he was honest, it wasn’t the first time. Celine had tried to start a conversation lots of times over the last week or so, and he’d always managed to head it off, terrified of what she might say, like asking for a divorce. ‘Well, maybe I do,’ he said more humbly. ‘B-b-but anyway, what d-d-did she want to tell me?’

Millie tapped her elegant fingers on the wheel as she drove. 'That's not for me to say, Nick. You need to ask her yourself.'

He said gloomily, 'I suppose it's about a d-d-d-d-d-d...'

'If you're trying to say "divorce", then no, it's not.' She gave another one of those wry smiles as she turned through the ramshackle gates of Cushing Hall and bounced up its potholed driveway.

'Then what -'

'Ask her yourself, Nick,' she said, wearily this time, as they came to a halt.

In front of them, outside the steps of the house, a large maroon Rolls-Royce with round yellow headlights was drawn up, and Harvey Bathurst stood there, drawing on his gloves, as the footman stacked three leather suitcases in the boot. Despite the shabby condition of the hall, his exquisitely tailored cream suit, more suited to India than Ireland, screamed money and his expertly cut hair and clipped moustache told the world he was a man of consequence but also of some vanity.

Standing at the top of the steps, on either side of the front door, were two very rough-looking fellows, the type ready to start a fight as soon as look at you.

'Stay here,' he instructed Millie.

Eyeing the men warily, Nick climbed out of the car and approached his cousin, who had his back to the fountain, a rather meagre affair of a single mermaid spilling a trickle of water from a shell, as against the huge fountain at Brockleton, which depicted Neptune with sea nymphs all around, water gushing from stone jugs and horns into an enormous stone basin.

Nick was still not sure what he was going to say; maybe he'd start off with some meaningless conversation. 'Good afternoon, Harvey.'

'What do you want?' Harvey didn't bother with any niceties; that façade was reserved for when others were in

observance, it would seem.

‘Are you off somewhere nice?’

‘Dublin, as it happens. Dinner with the Lord Lieutenant and his daughter. How’s Brockleton? Still standing, I imagine?’

‘Well, yes.’ Nick was taken aback, particularly by the nonchalant way Harvey asked the question as he buttoned up his cream leather gloves. ‘I don’t think anyone will b-b-bother us at B-B-Brockleton.’

‘And they won’t bother us here either any more, thanks to these two splendid fellows.’ Harvey jerked his smooth chin towards the ruffians on the steps. ‘My house was threatened last night – I take it you heard? By my own tenants. Thankfully the English army officer dispatched a few of his finest men, and there are a few of my traitorous tenants today learning the consequences of revolt and the ringleaders are in prison.’

Nick felt sick at the thought of English thugs beating up and dragging off Harvey’s tenants. ‘No, I d-d-didn’t hear that.’

‘Really?’ sneered Harvey, throwing a suspicious glance towards Millie, who was still waiting in the car. ‘I thought you might be here to gloat, given your rebel connections.’

‘I d-d-don’t have any friends in the IRA, Harvey. I’m like my father – I’m not p-p-political.’

‘Everything in this cesspit is p-p-p-p-political, you fool,’ snapped Harvey, mocking his stammer, and Nick shrank inside. Suddenly he was ten again, crushed by a caustic teacher’s comment or a classmate’s laughter at his speech impediment. ‘You and your “Celtic” cabaret.’

‘But the cabaret isn’t p-p-p-p...’ – he made a massive effort – *political* either.’

‘Not what I heard, Nicholas. I heard the IRA were using the cabaret as a base and there were arrests made yesterday, with more to come. Now I’m afraid I must go.’ Harvey jumped into the back of the Rolls-Royce; the footman was in front behind the wheel.

‘Wait, stop.’ Nick grabbed the door, preventing his cousin from closing it. For better or worse, he had to do this for Peter, he had to ask. The photos were in his pocket. He would use them. He would just have to pray they were enough. ‘That’s why I’m here, about those arrests.’

‘Of course you are. Why should I care?’ snapped Harvey, jerking at the door.

Nick hung on to the handle. ‘Harvey, the soldiers took Ai – I mean, Mrs Cullen and her husband, but they’re...she’s... completely innocent...’

To Nick’s surprise, Harvey stopped trying to close the door and leant out of it instead, his eyebrows raised. ‘Mrs Cullen?’

Was that an unexpected hint of sympathy in his cousin’s voice, or at least a note of interest? ‘That’s right, and they’ve brought them to Dublin Castle...’

‘The beautiful Mrs Cullen?’

‘Well, yes...her.’ And May was beautiful, of course, though it was hard to remember that the past while; she’d looked so pale and sick and covered in red spots lately.

Harvey got out of the car. ‘I’ll be a few minutes, James,’ he said to the footman, then ran up the stairs and disappeared through the front door. Nick waited on the gravel below, not knowing whether to feel hopeful or not. Five minutes later, his cousin reappeared, sauntering down the steps with a casual air. ‘Well, you’re right, Nicholas, she was in the Castle.’

‘Was?’ Nick’s heart lifted, and he glanced at Millie, who was watching and listening with the window open. They’d released her already. He wouldn’t have to risk trying to blackmail Harvey after all...

‘Yes, was. I just checked with my people there. She’s dead. Tried to escape, so they had no option but to fire on them. Her and her husband. Sorry.’ Harvey jumped into the car and tapped the driver on the shoulder. ‘Let’s go. Goodbye, Nicholas.’ And he waved jauntily out the car window with his cream leather-gloved hand as the driver took a turn around the small fountain.

Nick stood, stunned with misery, still trying to make sense of what he'd just heard...

And then he felt an arm around him; it was Millie's. And while the ugly thugs on the steps ogled and grinned, he and Millie walked back to the car, their hearts full of grief for their friend, the beautiful foolhardy Spanish girl, and the handsome, brave Irishman.

CHAPTER 7



*M*_{AY}

FOR HOURS her husband had barely moved, as if grief had made him so fragile, he might break if he did. When Nick came back from Cushing Hall with the news of Aida's death, and Eamonn's too, he'd simply climbed into bed beside May and remained there, staring at the ceiling of the caravan, saying nothing, not touching her.

As he lay there beside her, May's sickness strangely eased. She managed to get up and walk around the caravan and cut herself a bit of bread. She made Peter some tea, which he refused to drink. She sat on the U-shaped seat for a while, with her own tea, thinking of Eamonn and praying for his soul, and of Aida, who had died in a war that had nothing whatsoever to do with her and had only done a kind thing to save May. As the time ticked by, her mind went to poor Bridie, who loved her son so much, and she stroked her pregnant belly.

And she wondered about Harvey. She'd seen him at the wedding, following Aida around with his eyes. Such an evil man. Nick had told them how he'd almost delighted in the news of their deaths. Harvey was enjoying this.

Aida gone, and Eamonn gone. Dead. Finished. In the darkest depths of her soul, a little voice urged May to let it stay that way, not to interfere, not to question it. Aida would never come between her and Peter again; no other man would lead her astray, or claim her baby as his...

But May refused to give in to such thoughts. Headstrong, determined, someone who went straight for what she wanted – she was all those things. But not evil. Harvey was evil. May was good, she knew she was, and now she was going to prove it to herself and God by doing a good thing to make up for the bad thing she'd done with Peter's brother.

Rising from her seat, she got dressed in her skirt and blouse, stockings and a cardigan and pulled on her woollen coat. Then she went over and sat down on the edge of the bed. 'Peter, I'm going out for a while.'

He said nothing.

'Peter?' She touched his shoulder. 'I'll be back soon.'

He still said nothing.

She took what she needed out of a drawer, left the caravan and walked across the wet and muddy ground. Her breath was visible in the night air, and the cold seemed to seep into her bones. It was dark but the moon was out, making stars of the snowdrops bordering the ditches. It would be spring soon.

Enzo and Ramon's caravan was parked in the far corner of the field.

Both of the lads were in, and Ramon was asleep on the bed. Like Peter, she knew he was grieving badly for Aida. Enzo was still up, drinking whiskey by candlelight. May sat down beside him on the U-shaped seat, and he poured her a very small glass and pushed it towards her.

'Medicinal,' he said gruffly.

'Thank you.' She spoke quietly so as not to disturb Ramon. She sipped it and shuddered and waited for her stomach to react. Nothing happened; she only felt a little warmer. The sickness had passed. 'Enzo, I wanted to ask you something.' Maybe this was foolish, crazy, but she didn't care.

'Wot?' Enzo leant back, plunging his hands in his wide-legged cotton trouser pockets. The candles on the shelf beside him flickered.

She took a deep breath. ‘So you know how my brother, David, is alive.’

‘Yeah, you said about it. I’m ’appy for ya.’

‘Thank you. Everyone was amazed when he wrote to them. My parents couldn’t believe it. It was a miracle.’

‘I’ll bet.’

She leant forwards, pointing at him. ‘But you weren’t surprised, were you? You knew all along he was alive.’

Enzo frowned and glanced towards the sleeping Ramon. ‘I don’ wanna be rude, May, but can we ’ave this fanciful little chat some other time? I don’t want to wake Ramon – he’s gutted over Aida. It took him half a bottle of this stuff to get to sleep.’

May lowered her voice again. ‘I’m not being fanciful. You know things, Enzo.’

He shrugged. ‘Look, just leave it, right?’

‘I sent a picture of David to Peter when he was in the trenches. I had this stupid naive idea he could show it around and find out if anyone recognised him and knew where he was. But what he did was he showed it to you, and you told him David was alive, a prisoner of war. And then the war came to an end and David didn’t come home, and even I started to believe he was dead, like everyone else did. But he isn’t, he’s alive. And so...’

She pulled a pack of cards out of her pocket. A while ago, Peter had decided to get some playing cards made up to sell, with Celine’s picture on them, and Aida’s as well, them posing in their costumes. But he’d only ever had one pack made, because when he’d shown it to May for her approval, she’d told him she thought the cards were cheap and tacky and the Church would close them down. But they weren’t cheap or tacky; it was because Aida looked so beautiful and she’d been jealous.

Now she laid down one of those cards with Aida’s picture on it; she was posing in her red flamenco dress, wearing long black gloves. ‘I’ve brought you a picture of Aida.’

‘Why?’ Enzo took another slug of whiskey, not looking at the card. ‘I know perfectly well what Aida looks like, don’t I?’

‘You know why.’

‘I don’t, May. And even if I did, what’s the point? Look, Nick’s told us his cousin says Aida is dead.’

‘But his cousin is an evil man. Maybe he was lying, so we wouldn’t try to find her. Enzo, please.’ She pushed the card further towards him. ‘Look at her.’

He turned his head away, his jaw tight. ‘No, I don’t like it, May. It makes me feel...bad or somethin’. I ’ate the feel of death comin’ off people – it makes me feel...not right.’

‘Please. Just this once. For me. For Aida. For Ramon.’

He was still for a long moment, his eyes fixed on Ramon sleeping in the single bunk at the other end of the van.

With a reluctant sigh, he brought his gaze back to the table.

He didn’t say anything for a long time. Then he took one hand out of his pocket, covered her image with it and half-closed his eyes. The candlelight played across his chiselled face and glinted off his thick, curly black hair. Peter had once said to May that he thought Enzo looked like a graveyard angel, and it was true; when the Londoner wasn’t messing around, he did have that sombre beauty.

Minutes passed, and May began to wonder if maybe she shouldn’t have spoken at all. Maybe Enzo was just trying to placate her. Maybe he thought she was cracked in the head – maybe she was. And anyway, nothing seemed to be happening...

He raised his head then and sat back, staring off into the middle distance.

May leant forward, holding her breath. ‘Well?’

‘She’s ’urt,’ said Enzo, in an odd, faraway voice. ‘She’s badly ’urt. So much pain.’

‘But...she’s alive?’

His dark gaze came to rest on hers. 'She is. She's alive. For now.'

'Thank you. Thank you so much, Enzo.'

She got up to go, to bring this gift to Peter. A gift of selfless love, like the love Aida had shown for Peter when she'd surrendered to torture and almost certain death to protect his unborn child. May would give her husband the knowledge that Aida was alive so he could at least attempt to rescue her.

Enzo looked up at her with a weak smile.

'Just don't tell anyone how you found out she was alive, May. Just make somethin' up. Except Peter, maybe, and Nick, 'cos they already know, but that's it, OK? The soldiers I was fightin' with in the war, they started to avoid me, 'cos it was like every time I did someone a favour, like sharin' my chocolate ration with 'em, or givin' 'em my last cigarette or helpin' 'em write home to their sweetheart or whatever, they'd go and get blown up or shot by a sniper. People ended up thinkin' I had some sort of power of life or death over them, but I don't. It's jus' a feelin' I get sometimes, and I don't have no control over it, OK?'

Like the others, Enzo never spoke about his life in the war. It was obvious it was something they all wanted to forget, so it must have been very important for him to tell her this.

'I won't say anything except to Peter and Nick, I promise.' She bent over him and kissed his cheek.

As she crossed the starlit field, she heard light footsteps running after her, and then Enzo caught her up and said breathlessly, 'I don't know why I'm sayin' this, May, but I want you to know... Well... I don't know why I'm telling you this...'

She stood facing him. 'What, Enzo?' she asked calmly, while her heart beat a rapid pulse. Whose death had he seen now? She began to understand why his fellow soldiers had started to avoid him.

He looked embarrassed. 'Look, I dunno, this is stupid.' He turned to go, but she caught his arm.

‘Just tell me, even if it does seem stupid. What?’

He shook his head. ‘I dunno...just, the father of your child, well, Peter, of course, I think he’s going to come out of this all right.’

She stared at him, confused. ‘Come out of what all right?’

He pushed his hands through his black curls, his face pale in the moonlight. ‘I dunno, really... It’s jus’ this feelin’, you know? I don’t even know what it means. I mean, Peter’s right here, ain’t he?’

‘Yes, he is.’

‘So of course he’s all right. Don’t mind me. I’m just an eejit, as you Irish say.’

She smiled at him. ‘You’re no eejit. You’re amazing. And thanks, Enzo. I know you find this hard, so thank you so much.’

She walked on through the starry night, and her heart felt lighter, even though she couldn’t help dreading the look of joy on Peter’s face when she told him Aida was alive. It was good to be doing the right thing. It made her feel like a good person for the first time in a long time.

Also, from what Enzo had said, she suspected Eamonn was also alive, and that made her happy as well. Happy for Peter, of course, because he loved his brother.

CHAPTER 8



A IDA

SHE'D BEEN in here for days. She wondered what on earth was going to happen to her. Would she be in prison forever? Nobody in authority had spoken to her since she arrived, apart from one low-ranking officer who took her name and address and her age. Then she was put in this tiny cell at the end of a long passageway and left.

There were five of them in here, though only two beds. There were three extra makeshift cots, but there was no room to pass between them when they were down, so they leant them up against the walls during the day and sat on the beds, which were narrow and hard.

Food – well, bread and water – was delivered twice a day, and they had a bucket to use as a toilet that was emptied each morning. They were never given any extra water to wash themselves. The other women smelled so bad that Aida assumed she must too.

That morning, after the bucket had been emptied and the food delivered, a soldier had come to the door and taken away fourteen-year-old Mary Sheehan, and now the other four of them just sat, waiting and waiting to see what would happen next.

Sometime mid-afternoon, judging by the angle of the thin ray of weak sun striking through the narrow slit in the wall

that did for a window, footsteps rang down the stone corridor of the old prison.

Eily Sheehan, Mary's older sister, held up her hand for silence. The gesture was unnecessary, as everyone was already quiet, listening; one could hear a pin drop. Then the heavy timber door opened and Mary was shoved in. The women rushed to her as she collapsed into Eily's arms.

'Are you all right? Did they hurt you?' Eily whispered, cradling Mary's head to her chest.

No words came; silent tears ran down the child's face. Mary Sheehan was barely into her teens, but she looked like a woman who'd lived four lifetimes already. Her brown hair was tangled and matted, and her face was dirty.

'You're all right now, you're all right,' Eily crooned, her arms around the waif-thin girl.

The rest of the group, Aida, Lottie Brannigan and Elenora Fitzgerald, waited helplessly as Eily led Mary to the bed and sat her down, sitting close beside her. The other three sat on the second bunk, facing them.

'What did they want?' Eily asked.

Mary gazed at her sister then, a hunted, haunted look in her young eyes.

'They said they knew that Da was shot during the Rising, that Gerard was in the IRA, and that if I told them where he was, they wouldn't go and get Ma and the small ones, but if I didn't, they would.' Her voice was a strangled whisper.

'And what did you do, Mary?'

'I didn't tell them a thing, even though they...' Her eyes filled with tears then, and Aida wondered what they'd done to her. She wasn't bloody or bruised, so it must have been worse than that. Eily was crying now too. 'But I'm scared. Tom's only three, and the twins are only eighteen months – what if they...'

'It's all right, Mary,' said the older woman who sat beside Aida. 'They won't do that. They know their own families

would be killed if they did such a thing. They're just saying that to frighten you.' Elenora Fitzgerald was a member of Cumann na mBan, the women's army, quite high up, Aida suspected, from the depth of her knowledge and her self-assurance. She was in her late forties, maybe fifty. Her iron-grey hair was as neatly pinned as it was possible to be in here, and she carried herself with a dignity and determination that was inspirational. She was the undisputed leader of their cell, and they looked to her for reassurance and guidance. She had been in the GPO Easter week and had nursed the wounded. She knew everyone on the Irish side of the war, it seemed.

More footsteps in the corridor.

'Dry your eyes, girls,' Elenora commanded. 'We do not let them see they can hurt us.' It was the same thing she'd said on the first day to Aida when Aida was shoved in here. 'They want to break us. They want us frightened and weeping. But we will not give them what they want. Our men are fighting hard, making huge sacrifices, and we are winning – we'll drive them off this island yet. But we need to stand strong, men and women, unflinching, ruthless, relentless. Don't let them see they can get to you – that's the most important thing.'

At the time, Aida had not considered her demeanour while in custody. The most important thing to her, the only thing she was interested in, was sticking to her story about being May.

But as the days wore on, she had begun to feel that Elenora was right, and she'd started to understand why Eamonn was fighting and why Peter had done such a foolish thing, letting Eamonn use the cabaret to hide his Volunteers, and even why he had done it without warning any of them what was happening. As they'd travelled around the country, she'd seen the fear in people's eyes, the burnt cottages, the checkpoints and aggression the people endured daily from the forces of occupation. And now Elenora was teaching her how and why it was happening. This might not be her fight, but it was the fight of her friends, the fight of a country she'd come to love, friends she'd come to think of as family and a country she was now thinking of as home.

During the long nights, Elenora and Lottie told them stories of the Volunteers and Cumann na mBan.

Lottie was down in Bolands Mills during the Rising, with de Valera, and she made the whole thing sound like the Bible stories Aida had learnt in school, David and Goliath, or Daniel in the lions' den. Elenora spoke of the deprivation people suffered during the lock-out strikes of 1913, when the workers, led by the mighty Jim Larkin, refused to work for the pittance they were being paid, and how they survived on close to nothing.

The way the older women told the story of Irish freedom, it sounded as if each generation had built on the efforts of the one before, going back centuries. And Elenora said they were the luckiest generation of all, that now was the time and they were the people to finally free the country of the tyranny of British colonisation. And all that was needed to win was to fight hard, stay strong and keep pushing – they were almost there.

The darkest hour is just before the dawn, said Elenora.

Aida had become so trusting of the others that she'd almost been going to tell them the truth about who she was, but when she said something about a secret, Lottie stopped her, whispering in her ear and pointing to the top corner of the cell where there was a hole in the plaster. 'Don't say anything that could help them, give them any information. We don't know who's listening.'

The door opened again, revealing the young officer who usually brought their food.

'Mrs Cullen,' he said in a flat voice.

Elenora gave Aida a small nod of encouragement, and Aida stood, pushed her shoulders back and took a deep breath. As she moved past her, Lottie squeezed her hand. That nod, that hand, gave her such power and strength.

She had stumbled into this fight by accident. She was not a political person and had grown up believing that the best thing to do was to stay out of trouble...but she was not that person

now. She might be a Spanish woman, but wasn't de Valera an American?

She walked past the young officer, not even glancing at him, her face a mask of dispassionate composure. She could almost feel the warmth of the women's approval on her back as he pulled the door closed and locked the others in again.

He walked ahead of her, and she followed on. The doors to her right each led to other cells, and she wondered if Eamonn was down there. She didn't regret lying to the soldiers that he was Peter. She no longer blamed Eamonn for what he had brought down on them, in the shape of the IRA, but she was so glad it wasn't Peter in here.

The soldier led her across a large atrium, and it was hard for her eyes to adjust to the bright light that flooded through the glass roof after a week spent in the shadowy dimness of the cell. Then he opened the door to a small windowless room, where a slim man in a splendid uniform stood. His buttons shone; his brown leather boots were polished to a high sheen. Everything about him was neat and tidy, from his short brown hair to his cropped moustache. He had cool grey eyes and looked her up and down with a small smile.

Oh, God help her. It was that creepy cold-eyed man from Nick's wedding. He would know who she was, know she'd been lying to the authorities...

'Well, Mrs Cullen, we meet again,' said Harvey Bathurst, in his clipped, aristocratic tones. 'A little bird told me you were here, and so I sent for you especially. I don't usually mix with the prisoners, but in your case, I felt I'd make an exception. This is quite a different place from the garden at Brockleton, is it not? And the ballroom where you danced that fabulous tango with your husband.' He gestured to a wooden chair, the only furniture in the room.

Aida sank onto the chair, unable to support herself on her trembling legs. Of course – what an insane piece of luck. This man had met her when she was sitting huddled on the bench with Peter, in the snow. Then he'd seen them dancing the tango together. He thought she was Peter's wife. She sent up a

prayer of thanks to her mother, Gabriella, for looking after her, and she touched the gold ring she was wearing on her wedding finger – her mother’s favourite ring.

‘Can I get you something to eat, a drink, Mrs Cullen?’

She nodded warily. She had no idea how to react to this man. Was he intending to help her, perhaps? After all, he knew she was a friend of his cousin. He’d met her at Nick’s wedding.

‘Very good. Get something for Mrs Cullen please, Smith,’ he instructed the soldier who’d fetched her. The young officer withdrew, leaving the door slightly ajar.

‘So as I recall, you run some sort of circus, Mrs Cullen?’ said Harvey, his voice light and conversational.

She nodded again. She’d barely spoken to him that night, and she would do the same now – then he might not hear the Spanish intonation in her voice. There seemed no point in correcting him and explaining it was a cabaret.

‘It sounds tremendous fun.’

‘Yes.’

‘Your husband thought it even better fun to hide the men who worked for his brother.’ He smiled.

For a moment she thought of denying it, but then she thought of Elenora and allowed herself a tiny smile. ‘He did,’ she said.

The blow knocked her off the chair and across the small room, and she banged her head on the stone wall. Before she had time to realise what was happening, he dragged her up by her hair and pinned her to the wall, his knee between hers, his body pressed hard against her. She wanted to scream but couldn’t – no sound came out.

‘Where is Eamonn Cullen?’ Harvey asked smoothly in her ear. ‘We know he’s back in the country from the loyal British subject who told us about you. I want to congratulate him in person on his return to Ireland.’

She didn't answer, and she didn't know if it was bravery or if she just couldn't make a sound come out of her mouth.

The grip on her hair tightened, and he banged her head off the wall once more. The pain was like an explosion inside her brain, and she struggled to see. She could feel hot liquid on the side of her face – was it her own blood?

'I've had a good night's sleep, a hearty breakfast, so I'm full of energy, May. You don't mind if I call you May, do you, and not Mrs Cullen? I suppose you are just a tart – all you circus types are – so it's all right. Now, we can do this all day if you want, but it might be a bit uncomfortable for you, so just tell me where your husband's brother is and I'll let you go back to your friends.'

His free hand ran down her arm, and then he lifted one of her hands, threading his fingers through hers, an oddly intimate gesture; he rubbed the ring on her wedding finger with his thumb.

'Listen to me, May. I'm told your husband is being...shall we say...foolishly uncooperative. I hear the last beating left him unconscious. Perhaps he will recover, perhaps not. Either way, if you want to save him from death, I suggest you tell me at once where his brother is.'

'I don't know...' she managed.

The punch to her abdomen winded her and forced her to double over. He released her hair, and she sank to the floor into the foetal position.

'Very well,' he said, with cheery resignation. 'That's your choice. I'll have you taken back to the cell to think on what I've said, but I'll be seeing you later and we can discuss this again, and again and again, until I find out what I need to know. So before we do that, are you sure there's nothing you can tell me? Save us both a lot of bother? Hmm?'

She looked up at him and smiled.

He drew his highly polished boot back as if he was about to kick the winning goal in a football match, and it connected

with her hipbone with a sickening crunch. She felt herself being lifted like a rag doll.

‘Smith? I’ll see you later, May, and then we really will have some fun. Despite the blood and bruises, you are still a very beautiful woman.’

Aida closed her eyes and shuddered in agony and fear and disgust, while Harvey Bathhurst laughed gaily. The young soldier came then and dragged her limp body across the well-lit hall, then down the corridor, and threw her back into the cell, where the women gathered around her, wiped the blood from her face and praised her for her strength and courage as she sobbed in their arms.

CHAPTER 9



*N*ICK

HE APPROACHED the sentries at the Dame Street gate of Dublin Castle and introduced himself by his correct name.

‘Vivian Nicholas Shaw, son of Sir Walter Shaw, Baron de Simpré.’ Mercifully he got it out without a stammer, perhaps because he felt he was playing a part, so it was like singing on stage at the cabaret.

‘How can I help you, sir?’ The sergeant was deferential, so clearly he believed him.

‘I need to see my cousin, Harvey Bathhurst.’

The sergeant nodded to a private, who patted Nick down for a weapon.

‘Standard procedure, sir. I apologise, but you know...’

‘Oh yes, c-c-c-can’t be too c-c-careful,’ Nick responded, and the stammer was revealed. If anything, though, it softened the soldiers. They lifted the barrier, and Nick walked through.

‘First door on the left, and up the stairs, second floor,’ the sergeant said as he walked away.

The sun was shining, and several uniformed officers as well as laypeople in suits walked purposefully to and fro across the huge parade yard. The Castle itself was medieval in origins, but many parts had been added over the years. There were a series of doors into buildings around the perimeter, and

Nick walked unchallenged through the one the sergeant had indicated.

He entered the Lord Lieutenant's administrative section and climbed the stairs to the second floor. There was no secretary in the outer office, being a Saturday afternoon, close to office closing time, but he was relieved to find his cousin standing at the window of his office, staring out, wearing his military uniform.

'Nicholas,' he said, with no surprise or enthusiasm.

'Hello, Harvey,' Nick replied, shutting the door behind him.

'And what is it this time?' Harvey turned and poured himself a whiskey from a cut-glass decanter on a gleaming sideboard. He didn't offer Nick one.

Nick stood, with his hands by his sides, clenching them, steeling himself. 'I want you to arrange the release of my friends, P-P-Peter and May C-C-Cullen.'

Harvey shot him an amused look, eyebrows arched. 'Their bodies, you mean? I can't do that, I'm afraid. They've been buried – and don't ask me where.' He gave an airy wave of his hand. 'Some communal grave, I suppose. Traitors like them deserve no headstone.'

'You're a liar and a b-b-blackguard, Harvey.'

The man feigned hurt astonishment. 'Those are harsh words to have for your cousin, Nicholas. Isn't blood thicker than water?'

'If it is, release my friends and I'll thank you and leave.'

'I've told you, they're –'

'They're alive.'

When Nick heard what Enzo said about Aida, he'd known straight away it was true. One night at the front, he and Peter had decided to go check out a singer in another bar, a young soldier, to see if he was worth bringing on board. They were all set to go, but at the last minute, Enzo had stopped them and convinced them to come with him to the Aigle d'Or instead.

And the place they were to go was bombed that night, flattened. And the young soldier, the singer, never got his chance.

‘I know the t-t-truth, Harvey, for a fact. So stop lying t-t-t-to me.’

He spoke with such conviction that Harvey hesitated...but then recovered and smiled mockingly. ‘Even if you are right, I truly don’t understand why you’re bothering me with this, young Nicholas, unless to incriminate yourself even further by showing you have inside information from your IRA friends? You’re lucky you’re my relative, or I’d have you arrested for that right now.’

Nick squared his big shoulders and stepped closer to his cousin, towering over him. To his surprise Harvey flinched back slightly. Nick had forgotten how large and muscular he’d become on the road; his hands were hard now from lots of physical work, not white and soft like Harvey’s.

‘Maybe this will help you understand,’ he said. And he took one of the four photographs of Harvey fondling the boy on his knee out of his inside jacket pocket and laid it on the sideboard beside the decanter of whiskey.

Harvey glanced at the photo, then looked again, frowning. A dark shadow crossed his face, but then he picked up the photo and tossed it into the fire. ‘Now then, that’s enough of that nonsense.’

Calmly, Nick laid down a second photograph.

With an impatient snort, Harvey tossed it into the fire as well. ‘It means nothing. You can barely see the faces. It could be someone else entirely.’

Nick laid down the third. And the fourth. And then he laid out several photos of Harvey kissing a very young girl. These photos were much clearer and more explicit than the one with the boy, which had been taken in a dark club. In the pictures with the girl, Harvey had his hands all over her and the child was clearly distressed.

Florence's jealous husband had set a private detective on her, but the man, who called himself John Smith, had developed a strong loyalty to Lady Gamminston. At her request he'd followed Harvey Bathhurst with his Box Brownie to an opium den in Cork, and that's where he'd snapped the pictures of the boy. He'd also developed a ruthless dislike for Nick's cousin and had gone on following him around off his own bat, which is where the photos of the girl came from.

Nick had gone to see Florence on his way to Dublin to find out if she had anything else on Harvey, something better than the blurred pictures from the opium den, and she'd given him these. Also she'd told him John Smith had spent a night drinking with Harvey's footman, which had turned up some very useful information. Apparently Harvey Bathhurst was not only romancing his friend the Lord Lieutenant's daughter, he was planning to ask her to marry him. She was a plain little thing, not to his taste at all, but since Harvey had lost his chance of inheriting Brockleton, the poor girl – or rather, her money – had become vital to Harvey's plans. He'd bought the ring only a few days ago.

'J-j-just to let you know, Harvey,' said Nick, 'if anything should happen to me or my friends, a copy of each one of these p-p-pictures is in an envelope waiting to be hand-delivered by p-p-persons unknown to the Lord Lieutenant, whose d-d-daughter, I believe, is of p-p-particular interest to you.'

Harvey went deathly white, then an ugly red. He stepped up very close to Nick, as if he wanted to hit him; Nick stood his ground, looking down at him from his height of six foot four. The uniformed man turned back to the sideboard and poured himself another whiskey, then gathered the photos and threw them into the fire as well.

'There's plenty more where those came from,' said Nick quietly. 'And I want your guarantee my friends can return to their place of work with no further harassment.'

'Harassment?' snarled Harvey. 'So the enforcing of the law is harassment these days, is it, Nicholas? Have you forgotten what class you're from, you ignorant dolt? You're

one of us, like it or not. You think your friends wouldn't burn Brockleton in a heartbeat, the same as Cushing Hall?'

Nick winced. Sometimes he wondered if that was true. But he'd seen enough to understand whose fault it was if, God forbid, it happened. 'I d-d-don't know. But I d-d-do know this. It's the likes of you, Harvey, that are setting the fires in this c-c-country and lighting the match and fanning the flames.'

'Oh, get out, you snivelling turncoat,' snarled his cousin, spit flying from under his perfectly cropped moustache. 'Get out and I'll send your friends to you. They're useless to us anyhow. We were going to throw them out now either way, let them crawl back to their circus, if they can still walk. I'm told the man Cullen doesn't know anything anyway, and as for Mrs Cullen...well, I hear she's not the beauty she once was, Nicholas, so frankly her gaoler has lost interest in her.'

Harvey turned and scrabbled angrily in a drawer, pulling out a release form, and Nick watched, his big heart thumping, as his cousin wrote in the names of May and Peter Cullen and signed it with a flamboyant scrawl.

'There.' Harvey slammed down the pen, which sputtered ink over the sideboard. 'The sorry pair will be thrown out onto Dame Street at midnight, and I advise you to be there to pick them up from the road. Come alone.'

He went to the door and called to a soldier outside, handing him the form, then came back to Nick, his usually cold grey eyes glinting with fury.

'And I'm telling you, Shaw, if one word – *one word* – gets out about these photographs and my marriage fails as a consequence, then I will personally destroy you. I will have you and your friends hung from the gates of Dublin Castle after weeks of torture...and nobody will save you.'

* * *

SEVEN HOURS later Nick stood in the shadow of a doorway, opposite the Palace Street gate. Harvey had told him to take up

position here in Dame Street at midnight, but he didn't know what he was looking for.

He could see no exit or entrance apart from the gate itself. It was the main entrance to the Castle off Dame Street, which was heavily manned because the escalation of military action had everyone jumpy. Canvas screens were erected to make sure nobody could see in through the gates and bars, and at least ten men stood sentry. The beating heart of British rule in Ireland, Dublin Castle was a place of fear and intimidation for the Irish. But he recalled being at a Christmas dinner there hosted by the Lord Lieutenant and his pale little daughter, younger than Nick, and Father Christmas had sat beneath the enormous Christmas tree and given out gifts to the boys and girls while their parents ate pheasant and quaffed champagne. Sons and daughters of the aristocracy, dining like little kings and queens. While Peter and his like almost starved outside the gates.

He felt uneasy just lurking. Standing around in Dublin these days could get you shot by either side. He wished there was a pub or something with a view of the gate, somewhere he could lurk less conspicuously, but this was where Harvey had told him to stand. Maybe his cousin had sent someone to kill him – maybe that's why he'd told Nick to wait here by himself and bring no one with him.

Not that Nick would have brought anyone else with him anyway. He didn't trust his cousin one iota, and he had no intention of putting any of his friends in danger. He'd telegraphed Peter to come right away, but he'd given him the address of a little hotel off Dame Street, where he'd booked two rooms, and said to wait for him there.

Three British soldiers walked past and gave him an odd look, but in his best plummy accent, he bid them a good evening. They nodded and walked on.

There was a time not so long ago that he and Peter and the others wore that uniform, and now the men who wore it were the enemy. Life was exhausting sometimes.

He decided to walk, figuring he could walk quickly down the other side of the street and then slowly up this side. There were people about, so he thought that looked less noticeable. But a policeman stopped him, taking out his notebook. 'Name?'

He had promised Harvey there would be no possible connection made to him; he couldn't use his real name. 'Nick Gerrity.'

'Occupation?'

'Singer.'

'Much money in that, is there?' the man asked, with a sneer on his face as he scribbled in his notebook, his accent local.

'Not yet. I'm up from Waterford, hoping to get a j-j-job in one of the theatres.' *Damn it.* He'd been trying to avoid words with hard consonants at the beginning, but this time the J had caught him out.

'A singer, are ya?' The policeman looked Nick up and down, his scepticism obvious.

'I am, yes.'

'And how did you get up here from Waterford – bus or train?'

Nick hesitated, in agony over which would be more difficult to say. 'B-b-b... No, I mean, t-t-t...'

'And how do you expect me to believe you're a singer when you can't even talk proper?'

snapped the policeman in disgust.

As he did, the three soldiers who had passed earlier stopped on their way back. 'All right here, Duggan?' one asked.

'This fella hanging around here for the past hour is a singer apparently, up from Waterford, going to make his fortune on the stage. B-b-but he has a b-b-bit of a stammer, so he's lying.'

'I'm n-n-n... I'm n-n-n...'

The soldiers laughed, and Nick blushed. But it was dark, so at least that.

‘Sing us a song then, mate,’ one of the Tommies mocked, and Nick knew to refuse could mean arrest. It was just a bit of banter now, and if he played along, they might just see him as a good sport and let him go. He knew only too well that life as a soldier was deathly dull most of the time, so any bit of diversion was welcome.

‘Somewhere in Ireland, far over the sea...’ he began, singing the opening lines of ‘Pretty Kitty Kelly’, a favourite with Tommies, and he could see the surprise on their faces. They had expected him to refuse or not be able to get a word out properly. ‘A sweet little cailín is waiting for me...’

His tenor voice as smooth as honey hung on the soft night air, and the men leant on their rifles to enjoy the song.

As it came to the chorus, he held out his hands, palms up, encouraging the men to join in, which they did with varying degrees of talent.

‘Pretty Kitty Kelly, she’s the only girl for me.

Pretty Kitty Kelly, she is all my eyes can see.

For there’s not a cailín sweeter in the land where shamrocks grow,

than my pretty Kitty Kelly, she’s my wild Irish rose.’

After he finished by leading them through a resounding double chorus, they laughed and clapped him on the shoulder.

‘At least you don’t stammer when you sing, mate,’ one of them said kindly. ‘Best of luck to ya.’

The three soldiers walked on, back towards the Castle, and the policeman put away his notebook. ‘Best get home. It’s not a good idea to be loitering around the streets.’ His tone held a note of benevolent warning.

‘Righto, officer, I will.’

He went around the corner, then doubled back; the policeman had gone. Up ahead, he could see the soldiers still

on duty at the palace gate and hear the gentle murmur of conversation. He couldn't just stand here. He strolled along really slowly. As he passed the gate again, on the opposite side of the road, the sentries noticed him. One of them made to approach him, but another, one of the men from earlier, pulled him back, then waved to Nick to come over, probably looking for another sing-song.

Nick pretended not to notice and walked very quickly around the back of the Castle along Castle Street, South Great George's Street and Exchequer Street, and slowed down again as he approached Palace Street and the gate of the Castle once more.

With thirty yards still to go, a small door in the wall of the Castle opened suddenly on his right and two figures fell out. He ran towards them in the shadow of the forbidding Castle walls.

The man was Eamonn Cullen, and he was bleeding and battered and bruised, his clothes ripped to shreds. 'Take her,' he gasped, and pushed the second figure into Nick's arms. She was unrecognisable, her face puffed up, eyes closed to slits, barely conscious, shocks of hair torn from her head. She slumped against him, unable to stand on her broken feet.

Eamonn then melted away like a cat into the night, into the shadows, somehow disappearing instantly from view.

Nick lifted Aida in his big strong arms and cradled her against him; he hoped he looked like a fond father carrying a tired child and that none of these enemies of Ireland would stop him as he walked the short way to the hotel room he'd booked in Dame Street. And as he walked, he cursed his own people, his own class, his own tribe, for what they'd done to his friends.

CHAPTER 10



A IDA

AS SHE SAT in the bathtub in the hotel, Peter poured warm water over her. Everything hurt, but he was so gentle. He washed her hair and told her not to worry about the clumps that had been pulled out, that it would grow back, that she was so beautiful, even if she was bald as an egg, she would still turn heads.

Her left eye was swollen closed, and her right was still blurry from when Harvey Bathhurst had banged her head against the stone wall; she prayed it wasn't permanent.

But the worst thing was her feet, the delicate bones of her feet – she could no longer walk.

The doctor would come in the morning. Peter had wanted to call him right away, but it was the middle of the night, and besides, what could he do now?

She knew her feet were broken beyond repair. She couldn't walk. It had happened the second time he had tortured her. Harvey had stood on them, and she could still remember the crunch of bone breaking. Afterwards in the cell, the women had made bandages with strips torn from their clothes.

When he came the third time, even the stoic Elenora had protested. And she had been so helpless with her broken feet, and he had...

Done that thing, that thing she'd sworn no man would ever do to her again, not since the landlord's son.

'Ah, Aida, my poor darling girl,' murmured Peter, and she realised she had been crying but didn't even know it. She had very little feeling in her face, and inside she was numb mostly. 'If I only knew who did this to you...'

He'd asked her for a name, but she'd told him she didn't know, and that her torturer had worn a mask. She would never tell Peter about Harvey Bathurst. Peter would kill him, and then the English would hang him. Besides, she knew from Nick, who had explained everything as he carried her to the hotel, that Harvey had promised to make sure Peter and May Cullen were left alone. If Peter killed Harvey, he would lose his chief protector.

Peter lifted her out of the warm water then and carried her to the bed, where he gently put one of his shirts on her. She couldn't raise her arms to put a nightie on, and his shirt opened all the way down. He pulled the blankets back and helped her get in under them, then sat in the chair beside the bed, watching her, as she tried to sleep...

She jerked awake, panicked, her eyes too swollen to see, but she knew she was back in the interrogation room. She had to run away from her tormentor. Everything hurt. She tried to get up, but her body would not follow her commands. She covered her head with her arms, fearing the next blow...

A man's hand touched her.

She flinched and gasped. Her heart beat wildly in her throat.

'Aida, you're here with me. It's Peter. I'll take care of you.'

She relaxed, relief flooding her bruised and broken body.

Until she started to drift off again and snapped awake, crying out in fear. It happened over and over, until finally Peter climbed in behind her and cradled her in his arms. She felt no fear of him. She knew he wouldn't hurt her. She could smell the pleasant scent of him and feel the beat of his heart

through his chest as she lay there, and the rhythm of it sent her finally to sleep.

When she woke, he was gone, but she could see a little now and knew she was in the hotel room. Nick had brought her here last night, and Peter had been here, waiting for them.

She reached over, excruciatingly painfully, to take the glass of water on the locker and saw a note. Her eyes tried to focus on the writing, but she couldn't read it. She gulped down the water and tried again. Her left eye was completely closed, and the words swam before her right.

It must have been Peter who left it, saying he would be back soon surely. She focused on her breathing, in and out slowly. She rested against the pillows and tried to calm herself.

Then the door opened. She could see shapes moving and heard the soothing tone of a woman's voice, clear and educated.

'Aida? Can you hear me, Aida?' A blurred face swam before her. 'Aida, it's Dr Kathleen Lynn.'

'I can't see you properly,' she said sadly.

'Don't worry, Aida, that's just because of the swelling. It'll go down over the next few days. Now I'm just going to examine you very gently, all right?'

Cool hands felt over her, beginning at her head where her hair had been torn out, then working down her body. She winced when the doctor touched her ribs, and whimpered as she examined her hand. A light shone into her right eye, and she felt it water.

'Can you open your mouth, Aida?'

She did and wondered if she'd lost any teeth; she had a recollection of blood in her mouth and spitting out pieces of sharp enamel.

It wasn't until the doctor began to gently press on her feet that Aida sobbed.

'I'm so sorry, Aida. How did they do this to you?'

‘He stood on me, over and over,’ she managed, though her voice was barely more than a whisper.

‘We’ll need to set the bones as best we can, and you have some ribs broken as well, and your wrist is fractured. A lot of soft tissue bruising. And you’ll need a good dentist to fix your teeth.’

Kathleen Lynn moved out of Aida’s field of vision and then returned, pulling up a chair beside the bed, taking her good hand. ‘This was a horrible ordeal, you poor woman. Aida, there are things happening these days that...are just beyond comprehension. I can’t imagine how any person could do this to anyone. But your suffering wasn’t for nothing. You have to believe that. Ireland owes you a great debt. You told Peter you didn’t talk, and we know you didn’t. Eamonn would have died if you did, but instead he’s safe and being looked after, as you will be. I am amazed by your courage for the cause. Peter tells me you’re not even Irish.’

‘It is my fight now, Dr Lynn,’ Aida said. Her voice was stronger than she felt. It hurt to talk, but she had spent too much time with Elenora to remain silent when she was told this was nothing to do with her. ‘I know I’m not Irish, but I’m with you all. We have to get rid of the English from this country. This is what they are capable of. We have to fight on, and I’m part of that now. They want to break us. They want us frightened and weeping. But we will not give them what they want.’

The vision in her right eye was already clearing a little; she could see the doctor was smiling. ‘And where did you learn to talk like that?’ asked Dr Lynn.

‘A woman called Elenora taught me,’ she answered with a small smile.

‘Ah, Elenora Fitzgerald... How is she?’

‘She’s still fighting, Dr Lynn. And she’s the bravest woman I’ve ever met.’

‘I suspect she would speak as highly of you, my dear,’ said the famous revolutionary doctor, as she set about bandaging

and splinting Aida's broken bones.

* * *

OVER THE FOLLOWING DAYS, Peter was the only person Aida would allow to look at her. Nick came every afternoon, sometimes with flowers or chocolates or cakes, but she didn't want to see him. She didn't want anyone except Peter to see her like this in the daylight. Everyone thought of her as beautiful; it was so much a part of who she was. Peter was the only person she trusted not to flinch when he looked at her.

She still hadn't even dared to look at herself. When Peter carried her to the bathroom, she always asked him to drape a scarf over the mirror in there. There was a hand mirror on the dressing table, she knew, but that had a cloth over it as well.

Slowly the swelling in her left eye went down enough for her to see out of it, and that was a relief. She wasn't going to be blind at least. Dr Lynn had bandaged her wrist and ribs, and they would heal. The doctor had also sent her to the hospital to set the bones in her feet. They wanted her to stay there after the surgery to recover, but she refused and had Peter return her to the hotel. The pain was intense at the beginning, but it had subsided, although it was impossible to know if her feet would ever be repaired enough to dance again.

The tap on the bedroom door was tentative and hesitant. Peter had gone down to the hotel restaurant to order her some soup, which was all she could eat, but surely whoever it was wouldn't just come in without being asked...

The door opened.

'Hello, Aida. I hope you don't mind me coming in. We met at Peter's wedding?' It was Mrs Cullen, Peter's mother.

Aida turned her battered face away, closing her eyes, pulling up the sheet, hoping the older woman would take the hint and not come any nearer.

She heard Bridie cross the room and sit in the chair at the side of the bed.

‘Peter says you’ve not been seeing anyone, so I’m sorry I barged in on you without asking. But I came to ask about my Eamonn? Peter says he was with you in prison? And I wanted to know, was he... I mean, was he... Did he look...’

‘As bad as I do? No, his face was fine and he could still walk.’ She kept her own face turned away. She would answer this woman, and she’d hopefully leave. ‘He was harmed, but he will be all right, I think.’

‘Oh, thank God, thank God...’ But the grief in Peter’s mother’s voice told a different story.

‘What is it, Mrs Cullen?’ asked Aida wearily, through her swollen lips. She didn’t want to talk to her or anyone, but the woman was clearly in pain, just as she was.

‘He’s gone to America, Aida. I didn’t get to say goodbye, and I just think...I’ll never see him again and...’ Bridie Cullen’s voice cracked with emotion.

‘Of course you will. He’ll come home when this is all over.’

‘Ara, we’re trying to get rid of the English for eight centuries, Aida.’

Aida hated to hear the sad resignation in her voice, the defeat. The complete opposite of how the women in the Castle spoke.

‘Don’t get me wrong, I’m proud of my boys, but we won’t do it this time either. They’re too strong, too ruthless...’

The overwhelming sense of loss in her voice affected Aida in the same way as when Dr Lynn had said this was not her fight. Forgetting about not showing her face, she let the sheet slip down, turned her body painfully and took Bridie’s fingers in her good hand.

‘Listen to me, Mrs Cullen. You – we – *will* do it this time. I know it as sure as I know my own name. The darkest hour is just before the dawn – I learnt that in Dublin Castle. I met women in there who are so determined, they wouldn’t break, no matter what was done to them. I didn’t either. I’ll be proud of myself for that to the day I die. I never said a word about

Eamonn or Peter or May or anything. They can shoot us, they can beat us, they can threaten us with all sorts, they can even kill us, but we are right and they are wrong and that is the truth, nothing can change it.'

She swallowed painfully; her throat was still hurting where that man had half-strangled her. His tastes were macabre, not just sexual but twisted, dark. The landlord's son all those years ago, who took her body in return for money to pay for her mother's funeral, was straightforward, gross but understandable. But Bathhurst, he was cold, chillingly so, and seemed to get enjoyment from causing pain. She'd been touched by pure evil with him, and his sinister presence would loom on the periphery of her imagination for the rest of her life. But she just couldn't let him in any further or he would win. She wouldn't allow that, so she carried on. Somehow convincing Bridie Cullen that this wasn't a waste felt critically important. She had been broken, ruined, inside and out, by Harvey Bathhurst; she was determined that it shouldn't be for nothing.

'This is your country, not theirs, Mrs Cullen. You never set foot in another country's land and claimed you owned it, but they did, all over the world, just as my home country did. I am ashamed of that. But the nations of those countries will rise up too, and when we all do it, Mrs Cullen, we will win. I might not have been born here, but I had no family, no friends, no future, and your son gave me all of that in the cabaret. I have Spanish blood in my veins, but my heart is Irish now. We'll drive the English back into the Irish Sea, and they'll rue the day they ever colonised and enslaved this land. Fifty-seven countries they invaded, one quarter of this entire globe under their boots, and their flag, that Butcher's Apron, will only come down when it is hauled down by ordinary people who have had enough of their tyranny.'

Mrs Cullen smiled, a small, sad thing.

'Ah, Aida, where did you learn such ideas? I've lived through too much. I saw what they did to us, and I wish I thought you were right, but I don't. I'll never see my boy again in this life.'

‘Stop that now.’ Aida was surprised at the force in her own voice. ‘I know it’s hard, but I know from your sons that you’re made of tough stuff – you’ve had to be – and you’re not going to lie down now, Bridie Cullen. None of us will. The more they abuse us, the more our resolve is stiffened. They brought the fight to Cullen’s Celtic Cabaret, and now we are all in it, Irish or not. And by God, if we are, then we’re going to win it.’

Bridie smiled then, a proper smile. ‘You think so?’

‘I know so, Mrs Cullen, I know so. Are you going to take this, them battering your son and exiling him? Are you going to have soldiers leering at your lovely girls, thinking they can grope them if the humour takes them, with no consequences? Or are you going to stand up and fight back? You Irish deserve to be happy and free, Mrs Cullen. Connie deserves to grow up in a world where she’s not a second-class citizen in her own country. And we can make it happen, or we can die trying, and I think it’s a cause worth fighting for.’

‘I’m going to have guns under my bed, so, am I?’ Mrs Cullen laughed.

‘If that’s what’s needed, yes,’ Aida said, without a hint of a joke, remembering the gun she’d thrown under May and Peter’s bed in the caravan, for a wild moment wishing she’d let Eamonn shoot the soldiers, whatever the consequences. ‘Your leader Collins is right about this – my friend Elenora told me – they can’t kill us all. Look at what’s happening down the country. The attacks on the police are driving them out of the rural barracks and into the towns because they’re terrified. Every day they’re being killed, their weapons stolen. And when they try to find the IRA, nobody saw anything. The men are living out in the wilds, relying on ordinary people for food and shelter, and they’re giving it, like Peter and May gave it at the cabaret. Willingly, because they can see it’s the only way to end this. There is an uprising now the likes of which we’ve never seen, an uprising not just of fighting men but of women, of children, of people not even born here, like me. We are all doing it, together in concert, and it’s working.’

‘Well, whoever you met in there, Aida,’ said Bridie, shaking her head in wonder, ‘they certainly convinced you.’

Aida brought the faces of Elenora, Lottie, Eily and Mary to her mind. ‘They did. And however long it takes, Eamonn will come home to a free country.’

‘Aida, do you know something?’ Bridie shook her head again. ‘I’d say if Collins had you on his team, the war would be over in a week and the English would be running home to their mothers.’

‘He does have me, and, every day, more and more like me. We will win this, Mrs Cullen, we will.’ She sank back on the pillows, exhausted now from talking, her hand to her sore, swollen throat that was ringed with the bruise marks of Harvey Bathurst’s fingers.

‘I didn’t bring you anything, I’m afraid,’ Bridie said, looking around her. ‘But my, look at all these lovely flowers that your friends have sent. And is Peter looking after you?’

‘He’s being very kind,’ Aida murmured.

‘He’s a good boy, always was. And I know he really... values you.’

Aida said nothing; she felt an overwhelming sadness. She didn’t think she was of any value to Peter Cullen any more. A dancer who couldn’t dance.

‘Would you not like a woman for company, though? To help you with washing and the bathroom? What if I send Maggie or Kathleen up to you?’

‘No.’

Bridie’s voice grew gentle. ‘Why, Aida? Why don’t you want to see anybody?’

Aida lay still, saying nothing.

‘I think I know what it is,’ said Bridie softly. ‘Because I was the same... Well, it wasn’t the same, I know, but when my husband beat me – and it was often and brutal – I used to be scared to go out. I was so ashamed that anyone would see me. And then one day, I had a black eye and a cut lip and all the

rest, the usual, but I had to go out as the children had nothing to eat. And so I decided I had nothing to be ashamed of. He was getting power, you see, from the fact that I was embarrassed. So I put on my coat and I walked out of the house. Everyone stared. Sure they knew what was happening – you can't keep a secret there – but I held my head high. And you know what? He was the one that was embarrassed. He was the one shamed. I didn't shrink down. I walked proud. And the looks of disgust, the bad remarks, were made to him, not to me.' Her voice grew stronger in the telling of her story. 'And one of his drinking pals, and a man I now know hated him, gave him an unmerciful hiding that night outside the pub. And everyone looked on and nobody stopped it. "How does that feel now, Kit Cullen?" they asked him. "Are you the big strong man now, eh?" He never hit me again after that. Well, not nearly so often anyway.'

They remained in silence for a moment.

Then Bridie got up and went to the dressing table on the other side of the bed, where the hand mirror rested, covered by a cloth, just its handle showing. As Aida watched, she picked it up and brought it and showed it to her.

Without raising her head from the pillow, Aida stared at her reflection. Shock turned to nausea. Her face, her beautiful face, was ruined forever. Not just swollen – one cheek was sunken in, and clumps of hair were missing.

Big, hot tears of shame rolled down her face.

Bridie Cullen gathered her gently to her, and Aida laid her head on her breast as she cried.

Peter's mother soothed her.

'It looks bad now, love, but you will heal and you'll be beautiful again. And what's more, those scars, the ones inside, have made you strong, and in turn you strengthened me to face whatever is coming with Eamonn. And now you and Peter and I will help – if I can – and I can strengthen you. I often looked a lot worse, and I recovered.'

CHAPTER 11



*P*ETER

PETER STARED at his friend doubtfully over his glass of orange juice. ‘I don’t understand. How did Harvey agree to this?’ The two of them were sitting in the bar of the little hotel where they were staying until Aida recovered enough to be moved back to the cabaret.

Nick shrugged, taking a sip of his Guinness. ‘I’d rather not say. Let’s j-j-just leave it at that, but you can just c-c-carry on as normal.’

‘How do I know they won’t pick me up, though?’

‘He g-g-gave me his word, and I’m inclined to b-b-believe him. Not because I trust him – I d-d-don’t, I can’t bear the man – but because it would be b-b-best for him not to.’

‘And so they will leave us alone? Why? Did you have something on him?’

‘I c-c-can’t say, I’m sorry.’

‘Mm...’ Peter shot Nick a quizzical look.

‘Look, Peter,’ said Nick, a bit impatiently. ‘I know it looks like I’m p-p-protecting a member of my class, my tribe, and all right, I am, but I’ve g-g-got my reasons. So just believe me, the cabaret is going to be just fine if we k-k-keep our noses clean from now on.’

‘Sure, fine, sorry for prying.’

This was hard. Nick was his friend, and a dear one, but his father was a peer of the British realm; Nick was on the other side, even if neither of them saw it that way. He'd used his influence to get Aida and Eamonn released, and Peter was forever in his debt for that, but now here he was protecting his cousin by refusing to admit to what leverage he'd used. And even suggesting they step back from the struggle.

But that wasn't going to happen. A year ago he hadn't wanted to get involved in the cause for freedom. But then May had started backing Eamonn, and now Aida was part of the fight too. She was the most ardent of them all, it turned out. Walking away now felt...well, cowardly and defeatist.

'I'm so grateful to you, Nick, truly, and obviously we can't shelter the Volunteers any more, not now we've been betrayed, but if you gave your word that we'd behave ourselves altogether, I'm afraid I'll have to make a liar out of you.' He watched as his friend processed what he'd said.

'I thought we'd all had more than enough of that in France,' Nick said finally. 'I thought we were going to stay out of it. I thought we were b-b-both in agreement that a b-b-bit of land isn't worth a drop of b-b-blood, let alone a whole life, that of a p-p-person.' The disillusionment and disappointment in his voice broke Peter's heart.

He knew Nick was right in a sense; they had all seen too much. But this struggle was about more than life and death. He didn't expect someone like Nick to understand it, and it wasn't personal. But it wasn't just that they were being ruled from afar, that another country had stolen their sovereignty; it was the fact that the English behaved so appallingly. Throughout Irish history it was the same, not just colonisation but brutality too. The perpetual effort of their nearest neighbour to eradicate Ireland as a distinctly different place to England. They'd managed to decimate the language, the culture, the customs. They tried to destroy everything that made the Irish who they were. The British needed to be driven out, and no diplomacy or political machinations could make that happen – violent resistance was the only way. As Collins had said that time Peter met him, no coloniser ever left because they were asked

nicely. It had to be this way, and though it was vicious and inhumane, the Irish were just defending their country.

‘I did think that, Nick, same as you. I genuinely believed that. But I’m going to be a father, and I can’t let my child grow up in a country where they can be picked up without any trial or discussion and taken into Dublin Castle and tortured. I can’t have him or her be a second-class citizen in their own country, I just can’t.’

‘But, Peter, this is all being made worse b-b-by the shootings, the attacks. B-b-before that –’

‘Before that, Nick, we were paid meagre wages while wealthy men profited from our labour. We were made tenants on our own land, and if we couldn’t pay the rent, the bailiff came and drove a wrecking ball through our house. We were forced to live in squalor. The infant mortality rate in Dublin is the highest in Europe and the third highest in the whole world. We were forbidden to educate our children properly. We couldn’t speak our language. I know you don’t understand, but though we live on the same island, we’re living in different worlds.’

Nick frowned and sighed. He rested his hands on his knees, his large bulk hunched on his chair. ‘And I come from a line of wealthy men profiting off their dispossessed Irish tenants.’

‘And I come from Henrietta Street,’ said Peter, with a slight smile. ‘And I can’t help that either.’

Nick lifted his hands from his knees and placed them on the table between them. ‘Let’s make a p-p-pact, Peter, that we won’t let it come between us. I never felt d-d-different to you before. We’ve b-b-been on the same side for so long, and we still are, but the b-b-blood that flows through my veins is the very blood you and your friends are now b-b-baying for. Not without reason, I’ll admit, but this is where we are. How will it end? Well, who knows. But let’s stay friends anyway, shall we?’

Peter felt a wave of affection for this big brawny man, who if life hadn’t taken a dire twist for them both at almost the

same time, he would never have met. He was from the poorest of the poor, and Nick from the richest of the rich, but life was very strange, and Nick was right – they were comrades now, forever, regardless of what happened.

They weren't tactile with each other normally, but Peter put his own hand on Nick's big, meaty one and gave it a quick but heartfelt squeeze.

Before either man had time to speak again, the door of the pub opened and Peter's sister Maggie appeared. She ran and hugged her brother, and he stood and returned the embrace.

'Nick, you remember Maggie, from the wedding? She's my annoying little sister with the mad red hair.' He grinned, poking her in the ribs.

But to be honest, even he could see she was no longer his little scrap of a sister with the wild hair and the rail-thin body. Moving out of Henrietta Street, having enough to eat and just the passage of time had made a woman of his sister, and a very beautiful one at that, he had to admit.

'I d-d-do, of course.' Nick blushed to the roots of his hair. 'Lovely to see you again, Miss Cullen.'

Maggie pealed with laughter. 'The last time anyone called me Miss Cullen was Sister Alphonsus up at the school when she caught me and Nettie Coughlan climbing over the convent wall. Maggie will do fine.'

Nick swallowed. 'Very well, nice to see you, M-M-Maggie.'

'And it's very nice to see you again too, Nick.' She winked, and Peter saw what was happening. His sister was a dreadful flirt and didn't like her brothers getting in the way of what she wanted.

Eamonn had told him how Maggie had gone mad at him when he'd had her loose-tongued boyfriend shipped out with a few bruises to remind him to never return. She'd been furious, and Eamonn had joked that he'd take his chances with any Auxie over facing down their fiery sister again.

'Right, what did you want me for?' he said in a loud voice.

Maggie shrugged cheekily. ‘Ma sent this for Aida. It’s a tincture and some stuff she got offa Batty Flanagan. She says it’s on it what to do with it.’ She handed him a crumpled paper bag.

‘From,’ Peter corrected her.

‘Wha?’ His sister was eyeing up Nick again with a coquettish smile, and clearly his correction was an unwelcome distraction.

“‘From” Batty Flanagan, not “offa”,’ Peter said.

Maggie grinned and winked at Nick, jerking her chin towards Peter. ‘Ja hear yer man, Nick? “From” not “offa”.’ She exaggerated Peter’s hard-won neutral accent, and Nick laughed.

‘I knew exactly what you m-m-meant,’ he said.

‘See, Nick knew, and he’s the lord around here. ’Tis only your hoity-toity ways that has you correctin’ me, and ’twas far from posh voices and all a that you were reared, Peter Cullen, so you’d do well to remember it.’

‘Go on, get home to Ma,’ Peter said wearily, just as Nick asked at the same time, ‘C-c-can I get you a drink, Maggie?’

Ignoring her brother’s dismissal, she gave Nick the full glow of her attention. ‘I’d love a lemonade please, Nick. Thank you very much.’

As Nick went up to the bar, Peter hissed at her, ‘What are you at?’

‘I’m at nothin’,’ she replied haughtily. ‘A nice respectable man offered to buy me a drink and I’m acceptin’, not that it’s any of your business.’

‘It is my bloody business, Maggie. He’s my friend, and he’s married. And you’re a kid, so just go home, will ya?’ Peter lapsed into his own accent once more.

‘I’m not a kid, and I heard you tell Ma ye’re down people for the show with all of this stuff, so Ma said I could join if you agreed.’

‘Well, I won’t agree, so that’s that.’ He knew Maggie had a great desire to join the cabaret. She was a good singer and a great dancer and could, like him, mimic anyone with natural comic timing, so she would be an asset, but she was too wild and impossible to manage.

‘Agree to what?’ Nick asked, returning with the lemonade.

‘Nothing,’ Peter said quickly.

But Maggie took the glass from Nick, holding his gaze for a second.

‘I want to join the cabaret. I can sing and dance, and I can take anyone off to a tee. I’m eighteen, and Ma says I can leave the button factory and go singing and dancing if I want to, but my brother here says no.’ She sipped her lemonade, her mischievous eyes glinting at them both.

‘Well, I think it would be a smashing idea,’ Nick said enthusiastically. ‘We won’t have Aida for a while, and Peggy has g-g-gone off and married Edgar, so we do need extra hands on d-d-deck, d-d-don’t we, Peter?’

‘See? So ye need me,’ Maggie said triumphantly.

‘We need someone, but not you,’ Peter replied bluntly.

‘You won’t find anyone as good as me, and the punters will love me, with me hair all done and me sparkly costume and my slender legs...’

‘She’s right, Peter,’ Nick pushed. ‘This is a really g-g-good idea.’

‘It is a good idea, and sure May will make sure I behave meself.’ Though she laughed as if that was the most preposterous suggestion she’d ever made. ‘She said I could join too.’

Peter’s heart sank; it was beginning to look like it was going to happen if May had agreed. It was impossible to stop Maggie when she had an idea in her head, and with Nick on board with it now as well, he might as well give in.

‘Fine,’ he said, not very gracefully. ‘But a toe – and I mean one baby toe – astray and you’re being packed off home,

right? It's a trial.'

Maggie jumped up and squealed, causing the other customers to look over at the lithe, copper-curled wild child as she hugged her brother and then Nick, planting a kiss on his cheek.

'Get out!' Peter ordered.

As she left, Nick gazed after her departing figure. 'She's t-t-turned out to be rather m-m-marvellous, hasn't she?' he said with a grin. 'I think she'll be fabulous.'

'She's a nightmare,' Peter replied resignedly. 'But yes, she'll be fabulous.'

CHAPTER 12



M_{AY}

MAY WAS FEELING MUCH HAPPIER, more alive. The sickness was gone, and she was enjoying being extremely busy and in charge of everything. They were in Bray, one of her favourite seaside towns and life was good. The article that had gone in the business magazine had generated such a lot of interest that journalists were still turning up to do reviews of the cabaret, and they were always full of praise.

She was also feeling like a good person, because last Thursday, a week ago today, Celine had come to her with a letter Nick had written. ‘May, Nick wrote to say Aida and Eamonn, they are free!’

‘Oh, Celine, that’s wonderful! He got them out?’

‘Isn’t it so clever of him? But poor Aida – I can’t believe how they treat her. Read here what Nick said...’ Celine had handed May the letter that Nick had written to her, her expression becoming mournful. ‘It’s horrible.’

Dear Celine,

Please let May know that she was right. Aida was alive after all and Eamonn as well, and I was able to get them released...

May wondered in amazement what strings Nick had pulled. It certainly was important to have someone ‘from the other side’ on your own side, so to speak.

...but the poor girl is seeing no one; she just sleeps in her hotel room. She looks nothing like herself. She is so broken and scarred and her hair all pulled out and teeth broken, and she can't even walk. Please don't be shocked when you see her.

May sighed. 'Oh dear, Celine. How awful. Poor Aida.' It was hard to imagine the Spanish girl not being beautiful any more. She crushed a tiny, cruel feeling of relief.

And Eamonn is gone to America, so he's safe for the foreseeable, thank God, so Peter is happy with that. No doubt we will be back in a few days, as soon as we can move poor wounded Aida.

Celine, when I get back, we will have that conversation you keep trying to have with me.

Regards,

Nick

May was a bit surprised about the 'regards'; it seemed a bit of a stiff way to talk to your new wife, even if they had had a big fight about something, but she supposed that was the aristocracy for you, very stiff upper lip.

She had handed the letter back to Celine, smiling. 'Thanks for bringing me this. That's wonderful news, and I'm delighted to hear it.'

As it happened, she'd known about Eamonn and Aida being released for the past hour. There had been a letter for her in the post office as well, this one addressed and written in Irish.

Dear May,

Aida and I were released, I don't know why. The lads are getting me away to America. But I will come home as soon as I can.

Eamonn

P.S. Nothing has changed for me. I don't expect you to do or say anything, but I want you to know. It never has and it never will.

May had folded his letter and hid it in the cover of her accounts book, along with the other letter that he'd left for her in the hotel and which she still hadn't thrown away, even though she'd tried to burn it at the time. She would get rid of them both when she got the chance. Honestly, she didn't want to keep them. Eamonn shouldn't be writing to her at all. And it was frustrating as well, because now that she knew about Aida, she wanted so much to tell Ramon, but she daren't, because it might mean him wanting to see the letter, and how could she explain its mysterious postscript?

So it had been a huge relief when Celine had arrived only an hour later with Nick's letter and the news could be told to everyone. Then Peter telegraphed the same news, so everyone was overjoyed and no questions asked.

Ramon's eyes had filled with tears when she told him; he'd just walked away, his relief private. Despite their bickering and frustration with each other, Ramon and Aida loved each other deeply. Everyone else had been in great form for the rest of the week, even though they were all having to work extra hard with Peter, Nick and Aida all out of commission.

Peter had written to her, telling her just how badly Aida was injured, and each word felt like an accusation. She knew it wasn't, but she was the reason the other woman had endured what sounded like horrific abuse. She'd placed her hand on her belly as she read. Aida hadn't just saved her – she'd saved the baby too. Peter was caring for her, lifting her, bathing her, and May suppressed the envy she felt rise within her as she forced images of Aida naked in her husband's arms from her mind. She owed Aida everything, and the least she could do, the very least, was give her the use of her husband for as long as she needed him. She would do it, and what's more, she'd do it with good grace.

Cullen's Celtic Cabaret was now in the County Wicklow seaside town of Bray, and the last four days had been very busy; they'd played to capacity every night, and they were in the black for once. There weren't quite enough different acts to stretch over six nights, even with everyone doing their best to fill in, but the dancing was so popular that May had moved

it to earlier in the week and now was thinking of putting on a second dance night on Saturday, so that would still be six days in a row and it would keep the money rolling in.

Celine was being very helpful, and Millie as well, organising the chorus girls and keeping everything under control with Aida not here. Millie had taken over as one of the male dancers, which people found very droll and amusing, and Clive the ventriloquist had turned out to be a dab hand at the waltz, though Timothy could be provoking, sitting on his arm and commenting loudly and rudely on Clive's female partners, which made everyone laugh except the poor woman Clive was dancing with.

There were no more IRA men to help erect the tent and strike it, as well as fifty other jobs,

but instead of putting money into the pockets of the landowners in Bray, she'd hired five good-looking boys to do the manual labour. And as it turned out, they actually paid for themselves by doubling up as dancers, trained to a reasonable standard by Millie. May charged for lessons during the day now, and the women loved the young lads and kept shelling out. The ladies brought their men too and wanted them taught how to dance so they could enjoy some diversion long after the cabaret was gone. All of it was money in the till, and slowly they were managing to build up a little cushion rather than spending everything they earned week by week. She was determined to have it all as smooth as a mouse's heart by the time Peter got back.

Without Aida to dance flamenco for him, Ramon had resumed a sort of dramatic comedy routine with Enzo, the Londoner striking all sorts of hilarious poses as Ramon played his flamenco guitar; apparently it was what they'd done in France before Aida came to join them. The audiences loved it and fell about laughing and clapping because it was clever as well as funny. She hardly liked to say so, but May thought it was more entertaining than Ramon and Aida together, and she suspected a lot of the people coming to see the show would agree. It was good to laugh in times like these, when people were surrounded by suffering and war.

Ramon had discovered the ukulele, thanks to Magus Magicus, the American magician, who had one he never used except to make birds fly out of it with a ripple of sound. Ramon had tuned it and taught it to himself. Nobody had ever seen a ukulele played before. It was like a tiny guitar, but it produced such a warm, summery sound, it made those in the audience feel good, and when Celine and Millie both sang with him, it was perfect.

May had asked Enzo to fill in as master of ceremonies. Peter was a bit bigger than him, so they'd had to do a quick job with safety pins on Peter's red tailcoat and silk trousers, but it had worked. Enzo wasn't in Peter's league, of course. Peter was so funny and charming; with him, the audiences were in wonderful spirits from the first moment, and he had all the men as well as women eating out of his hand. Enzo, on the other hand, with his English accent, was starting from a disadvantage; the audience members had heard too much of that accent. She could feel people bristling. Enzo agreed it was best he was seen and not heard, so Two-Soups took over. He was Scottish, and though there were plenty of them among the Crown forces too, it didn't seem to irk people the way Enzo's Cockney accent did.

It was Thursday today, and May was making her afternoon rounds, checking that all was in place for the evening's show. Both the women's and men's quarters – they were still crammed in together behind the stage – were fine. All the dresses and the suits neatly hung. Shoes on the rack and hats on the shelf. Props were placed in skips neatly pushed up to the wall, and the make-up station was clean and tidy, jars and bottles all with lids screwed back on and nothing spilled.

She inspected the seats in the auditorium, straightening the low benches for the children that were lined up in front so the adults could easily see over their heads. Giving everyone a good view was important but tricky. It had been her idea to place hatracks under the seats in the tent. It was infuriating for people to sit behind someone with a huge hat, so she'd asked Two-Soups to weld a little shelf under each seat for that purpose – welding was another skill Betty had taught him.

Two-Soups was so good and helpful. May hoped he was getting over his broken heart. He and Delilah were still getting on really well, though nothing more than a bit of flirting had happened yet, and it was nice to see the big Scotsman smile again.

She bent down to check the racks for hats that had been left behind. That was how she'd found the cap that she'd given to Eamonn, all that time ago.

After leaving the tent, she passed Two-Soups on her way back across the field. He was busy welding again, wearing an old gas mask from the war, wild orange sparks flying as he fused bent metal pipes to each other.

She approached with a smile. 'Should I ask?'

'It's a frame for a trampoline,' said Enzo, who sat on the ditch, smoking a cigarette. 'I'm gonna use it under the trapeze, and then when I flip Eliza, she'll know I can drop 'er without breakin' 'er neck.' Eliza was the chorus girl who was so devoted to Enzo, she allowed him to risk her life on a nightly basis, flinging her around like a doll. But she still hated the moment he pretended to drop her from the trapeze, then swung underneath her to catch her.

'Well, I think that's a very good idea,' said May, who always had her heart in her mouth when Enzo was doing that bit of his routine.

Two-Soups stopped welding and pulled off the gas mask; with his red hair on end and his face indented by the rim of the mask, he looked even more comical than usual. 'Gimme a fag, Enzo,' he said in his broad Scottish accent, stretching out his freckled hand.

'So, are you going to tell May?' Enzo grinned as he handed one over.

'Tell May what?' The Scotsman sat down on the grass and lit the cigarette with a spark from the welder.

Enzo laughed. 'Where you're goin' after the show tonight, ya big lummo.'

‘Who are you all of a sudden, my ma?’ Two-Soups took a drag, then flopped backwards on the grass with his long legs splayed out.

‘Don’t mind him, Two-Soups. You don’t have to tell anyone your business if you don’t want to,’ reassured May. She was curious, though. It wasn’t like the sorrowful Scotsman to go anywhere after the evening show except his caravan, where he lay and read books or just slept.

‘He’s only goin’ on a date with Delilah, May,’ explained Enzo. ‘Though wot she sees in this long string, we’ll never know, but no accountin’ for taste, I suppose.’

‘Really? That’s great. She’s a nice girl.’ She’d honestly thought Two-Soups would never get over Betty.

‘It’s his fault.’ Two-Soups jerked his thumb in Enzo’s direction. ‘Eliza was on and on at him to set me up with Delilah and said she wouldn’t do the “being dropped off the trapeze” thing if he didn’t make me, so I gave in for the sake of the show.’

‘But you do *want* to go?’ May didn’t want their grieving friend to be pushed into something against his will, and Enzo could be very persuasive. She looked around for a dry seat and found a wooden crate, which she pulled up to sit on and listen.

‘Aye, I dinna mind. She’s a nice wee lass.’

‘Oh, bloomin’ ’eck, I gotta go. You ain’t seen me.’ Enzo scrambled up the ditch and over into the field behind.

A stocky woman had appeared, marching up the field, a brown headscarf tied under her chin and a puddle-coloured coat buttoned up to the neck. She was too old even for Enzo, and definitely not glamorous enough, but she could well be a disgruntled mother. They’d had a few over the life of the cabaret.

‘Where’s that tramp of a monkey-man?’ the woman demanded.

May stood up from the crate. ‘I’m sorry, who are you looking for?’ she asked politely.

‘I don’t know what his name is, some fella that do be swingin’ from ropes and the like, a small wiry yoke...’

‘Do you mean Enzo Riccio?’

‘I don’t know what the blackguard’s name is, nor do I care, but you tell him from me that if he ever casts an eye – let alone any other bit of his anatomy – near my Noreen again, he better be prepared for me to chop it off him, do you hear me?’

May nodded, looking as serious as she could manage. ‘Of course, and it is duly noted.’

‘Right, well...be sure he notes it himself.’ She marched off as quickly as she’d arrived.

‘For a laddie that’s so astute, ye ken, he gets himself into some right scrapes,’ Two-Soups said lazily.

‘I know. We’re lucky we haven’t the priest down on us.’ May sighed, sitting down again. ‘Why does he do it?’

Two-Soups picked a bit of tobacco off his lip and smiled. ‘Och, I think he does it for the craic. He likes the chase, but once he hooks them, he loses interest. Sure the Lady Florence is still writing to him, and he never answers her.’

The Scotsman sat up and stubbed out his cigarette in the grass. All around them the wagons and trucks were parked, the green, white and orange striped tent resplendent in the bright spring sunshine. The rain had finally stopped, and everything was lush and green and bursting with new life.

‘Enzo told me Betty wanted me to move on wi’ my life,’ he said to May quietly.

‘I’m sure she would want that,’ she agreed soothingly. She wasn’t surprised that going out with another woman was such a hard step for Two-Soups to take.

‘No, not in a “I’m sure it’s what she’d want” kind of way.’ He stopped then and took a breath. ‘This is gonna sound pure daft, right?’

‘Go on,’ she said softly.

‘Me and Betty had this wee joke. She wrote to me once when I was in France, by letter, y’know, that she was having a wee cuddle with Cyril. I nearly went mad! Who was Cyril and why was he cuddlin’ my lass? It turns out Cyril was a wee collie pup, but the letter she wrote about him being born got lost, so I spent weeks worryin’ about who this Cyril was, imaginin’ all sorts.’

‘Jealousy is a horrible feeling,’ May said, thinking of her feelings towards Aida, which she was trying so hard to overcome now that the poor girl was disfigured.

‘So it became a sorta wee joke, just between us, nobody else knew, ye ken? And then last week, Delilah’s been so nice and we got chattin’ as usual, but I was nae interested – my heart’s broke, y’see. But then Enzo comes up to me and says that he had a dream about Betty and that she had a message for me, that I was to ask this wee lass out and that she and Cyril were fine. The wee dog died two days after she did, back in Scotland, and Betty’s da always said that the dog ken’d Betty was gone. And then Enzo said Betty said also that I needed to fatten up, to find someone who can cook, that I was gone too thin and Delilah is a fine cook.’

‘That’s true, she is.’ Delilah often baked things for the refreshment counter, from which they sold tea and cake in the interval.

‘I ken it sounds half cracked,’ added Two-Soups, flushing, ‘but I don’t know. We ne’er told no one about the Cyril thing, and it’s not a common name or anything.’

May said nothing. She’d made a promise to Enzo not to say anything about his having second sight. And she remembered Peter telling her how, after Betty died, he’d made a decision never to tell Two-Soups about Enzo having seen death in the air that night. It would be too heartbreaking for the big Scotsman to think that somehow Betty could have been saved. And who knew if that was true? If the car hadn’t knocked her down, then maybe it would have been something else, not as mercifully quick.

‘I’m glad for you, Two-Soups, I really am,’ said May frankly. ‘And I don’t know about messages from the next life, but what I knew of Betty in this one was that she adored you, and she would not want you to live life alone and lonely.’

‘Aye, she did adore me, right enough, and I her.’ He smiled sadly then. He climbed to his feet, struggled to put on the gas mask once more and resumed his welding.

May got up and walked on, the azure-blue Irish Sea glistening in the sunshine as she passed through a gateway into the next field, the one into which Enzo had disappeared. Here she found the acrobat contorting himself into the most incredible shape; he was balanced on his forearms, his head facing forward, but somehow he had bent his back in a C shape and had wound his feet around his elbows.

‘What on earth are you doing?’ She was fascinated and confused – bodies should not be able to do that.

Easily he unravelled himself and sprung back to a standing position.

‘Contortionism. It’s a new thing, innit? There was a Chinese mob in the Acadia when we were there, from Limehouse, they was, and they was able to fold themselves up all sorts of ways. Peter wanted ’em to come with us to Ireland, but they were settled in London and didn’t fancy movin’ again. Reckon I can do it, no bother, so I’m practisin’ ’cos I know Peter needs another act but it’s expensive to get new people.’

‘That would be wonderful, Enzo.’ It made her feel so proud, the way people would do anything for Peter, even tie themselves into literal knots like Enzo was doing. ‘But I have to warn you, don’t get yourself into too many knots with the girls or you’ll have the priest down on us. That woman you were running away from was threatening to cut off any bit of you that went near her daughter, so don’t say you haven’t been warned.’

Enzo shrugged and grinned, completely unperturbed and unrepentant, and went back to contorting himself into the most ridiculous shape, a figure of eight.

May went on down across the field and then out onto the road that led to the town, where she wanted to check in at the post office for any letters. The spring sun was warm on her face as she walked, and the birds chirruping and squawking in the lush branches made her smile. Her skin was clearing up, and though her skirts were definitely feeling tighter, she wasn't really showing much yet.

The post office came into view, but before she reached it, she passed a bakery. The tantalising aroma of fresh bread and scones wafted into the air. On an impulse, she stepped inside and waited for her turn.

The girl behind the counter was about fifteen or sixteen, May guessed, and was dressed in a grey dress, patched but clean, and her hair was covered completely in a kerchief, for hygiene, May imagined. There was a livid scar over one eye and the remains of some bruising around her jaw, as if she'd been in an accident.

She seemed lost for words when May approached. 'Oh, it's you? The lady from the show?' she managed.

May smiled. 'Yes, that's me, if you mean the cabaret.'

'I saw you last year – you were selling the tickets.'

'I'm surprised you remember me?'

'It's because you're so beautiful,' said the girl earnestly.

May was taken aback as well as flattered. It felt like a long time since someone had pointed out she was beautiful.

'Thank you.'

'I think you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.'

'Rosie, stop bothering the lady and ask how you can help her, for goodness' sake.' A woman, presumably the girl's mother, emerged from the back, flour all over her apron.

'I'm sorry, what would you like?' Rosie asked, blushing now.

'I'd like three scones please.' She would bring them down to Celine and Millie, who were still sharing a caravan while

Celine's silly argument with Nick rumbled on, and they could have a cup of tea together sitting outside in the sun. It would be a nice treat. May had found herself warming to Millie Leybourne, who for a long time she'd found rather cool and stand-offish. She had a sensible streak that appealed to May, whereas Celine was a bit muddle-headed. Hopefully Millie could talk some sense into the silly girl and get her back into Nick's bed. Goodness knew what the two of them had fought about; she and Nick always seemed to get on so well. Such a shame after that fairy-tale wedding.

'Of course.' Rosie took three floury raisin scones and placed them in some paper. May paid, and as she left, she asked the girl who was still staring at her, 'Have you seen the show?'

Rosie nodded, tugging her headscarf forward over her forehead; it had been on the verge of slipping back. 'Not this year, but I did last summer. My uncle gave me some money for my birthday – he's got a pub, and it was after the races, so he was feeling generous – so I saved it to buy a ticket. I couldn't afford it this time, but everyone is talking about it.'

'Rosie, let the poor lady get on with her day,' her mother called from the back. 'I'm sorry, she's a bit starstruck. We'll hope to see you all next year. Rosie tells me we need to save up to go, and we will manage it this time.'

'Thank you. It will be good to see you too. Well, goodbye, Rosie, it was really lovely to meet you.'

May strolled on up the street to the post office. Mrs Lehane, the postmistress, was outside spraying her flowers. She grew huge lupins in a variety of hues all over the small back garden, and it was a beautiful sight.

'Ah, May, 'tis yourself. Come in, come in. I have letters for ye. I'm waging war on the greenfly – soap sticks their horrible little legs together.' She laughed as she led May indoors and took up a position behind the counter. 'Don't I sound desperate? Sure poor old Mr Greenfly is only trying to live his life too, I suppose, but he can do it elsewhere.'

May smiled as Mrs Lehane passed over her post – a few bills but also a letter from her mother, addressed in Olive’s round, childish handwriting.

‘Is that scones from Daltons you have there with you?’ The postmistress sniffed the air appreciatively.

‘The bakery up the street?’ May wasn’t sure of the name of it.

‘Yes, that’s owned by Lily Dalton and her daughter, Rosie. Her husband was killed, God rest him, when Rosie was only a baby, and Lily’s been running that shop on her own since. She’s a great woman, which makes what happened to Rosie even worse.’

‘Oh?’ May put her head to one side as she slipped the letters into her coat pocket.

‘Yes, that girl loved dancing, jigs, reels, hornpipes. She was gifted, or she used to be before the English soldiers came and cut off all her hair and humiliated her in the street because she refused to tell them where her boyfriend was. She didn’t know, genuinely, but that didn’t stop them taking a shears to her head in the middle of the street while groping her, and they sliced open her poor face with the point of a blade and told her that her boyfriend wouldn’t want her after that so she might as well give him up. People knew that to intervene meant arrest, so nobody did anything.’

‘That’s so awful...’ Her heart swelled with compassion for the poor child.

‘Ah, don’t be thinking badly of us now. It’s just none of them dared risk the same thing happening to their own daughters. It happened out near Roundstone a few weeks back. They were laying into some poor young lad, and a man intervened, got himself shot dead for his trouble, just there and then in the street. Left a wife and six small ones.’

‘I understand. It’s the soldiers I’m so angry with, Mrs Lehane, not the people of Bray.’

She was still filled with rage as she left the post office, and when she passed the bakery again on her way out of town, she

went inside.

‘Mrs Lehane at the post office told me you like to dance?’ she asked the girl behind the counter.

Rosie dropped her eyes, fiddling with her headscarf, touching her scar. ‘Not now, but I used to...before...well...’

‘She told me that as well. It’s a disgrace what they did to you.’

‘Mam says my hair will grow back, even if the scar is still there,’ the girl said stoically, her face a mask, but May could see the pain there behind her eyes.

‘Would you like to come on dance night, as my guest?’ she asked gently.

The girl’s eyes lit up, but then her face fell again. ‘Oh, but dance night was last night, it said on the poster.’

‘We’re having a second one on Saturday, and I want you both to come, you and your mother.’

‘Oh, we can’t accept that...’ Lily Dalton began, coming out of the back, drying her hands.

‘Ah, Mammy, we can, please!’ Poor Rosie looked like she was about to burst into tears.

‘Mrs Cullen gave us free tickets – we’re not going to refuse them. Please, Mammy, we have to go. You’ve never even seen it, not even once, and it was wonderful last summer.’

‘Please, it’s not a problem. I’d like you to come and see the show if you want to.’ May smiled, and the woman relented.

‘Well, that’s very kind of you, thank you.’ The sincerity beamed out of her. ‘It’s been a while since I’ve seen my Rosie excited about anything, so how can I say no to such kindness.’ She thought for a moment. ‘Hold on there.’ She went into the back and emerged with a cardboard box. ‘Some biscuits with our compliments – perhaps the cast would like to share them after the show?’

‘Thank you, that’s lovely. I’m sure they’ll be demolished in a moment. I’ll see you tomorrow, then. Goodbye, Rosie.’

Climbing the hill in front of her, as she walked back to the cabaret field, was a donkey and cart with a load of straw and a few passengers sitting against the raised flap at the back; she could just about make out four heads. At the gate into the field where the caravans were, the cart stopped. The farmer came around and let down the flap, and two men got out, one over six foot tall and the other not much taller than May. Between them and the farmer and the red-headed young girl who was with them, they helped out a bent old woman who seemed unable to walk very well. The larger of the men put his arm around her to support her as the four of them moved slowly into the field.

May’s heart bounded with joy as she raced up the hill, clutching the bag of scones and the box of biscuits to her chest.

‘Peter! Peter!’

The smaller of the men turned, with his hand shielding his eyes against the sun as she ran to him, dropped the bag and box and hugged him.

He hugged her back, then stood gazing at her appreciatively, up and down. ‘It’s good to see you looking so well, May.’

She beamed. ‘You’re looking very well yourself.’

He was unshaven and his hair and clothes were full of straw from the cart, but he still looked gorgeous; she always almost forgot how handsome he was when she hadn’t seen him for a while.

‘And here’s Maggie! I almost didn’t recognise you, you’ve changed so much in the last year. And, Nick, welcome home.’ She turned to the big man with a wide smile. ‘Congratulations on rescuing...’

And that’s when she realised.

The little old woman who had been travelling with the other three in the cart wasn’t an old woman at all. She was

Aida.

May felt the colour drain from her face but immediately went into performance mode. Aida must feel bad enough without everyone staring and gawping at her.

‘Aida, welcome home. We’ve all missed you so much.’ May embraced her gently and found she meant every word.

* * *

IT TOOK MAY ONLY a short while to sort everyone out. Aida had her own caravan – she needed the storage space for her dresses – so it was just as she’d left it and only needed a quick dust, which May set Maggie to doing. She was delighted Peter had brought Maggie with him; the cabaret had been missing Peggy, and Maggie could take over her roles. In the meantime, the girl could act as Aida’s nurse and run errands for whatever she needed. ‘And you can sleep in with Millie,’ May told her.

‘But what about Celine, where will she sleep?’ Nick looked confused.

May cast a disapproving glance at him. ‘I think it’s about time you two remembered you were married, don’t you think? Time to make up your lovers’ quarrel, Nick.’

‘Oh...mm...’ The big man flushed.

Once Aida was settled in bed, and May had helped Maggie move in with Millie, and Celine was back in with Nick, and about time too – May was pleased with herself for forcing the issue – and everyone had been told that Aida was home but not to crowd her, that she didn’t want visitors except maybe for Ramon, and even him not for a few days, May made her way back to her own caravan.

Peter was sitting at the small bolted-down table, drinking a cup of tea. He glanced up when May came in and smiled. He looked even better now than he had before. Clean-shaven, his hair still wet, he smelled nice, something spicy, and wore dark flannel trousers and an open-necked grey shirt. ‘What do you think?’ he asked.

‘I think you look very handsome.’ She went over and kissed him.

‘I mean, about Aida. Do you think she’ll be all right?’ His face was full of concern. ‘Thanks for making her feel so welcome, May. That was kind.’

She sighed, unbuttoning her coat. ‘She is welcome back, and as for if she’ll be all right, well, I hope so, Peter. The bruises looked awful, yellow and purple, but they’ll fade, and her hair will grow back, and the cuts and breaks will heal. I know you said in your letters that she’s terrified about her feet, but it’s very early days, too early to tell.’

She hung the coat on a hook on the back of the door, then took her letters out of the pocket and brought them to the table, along with the box of biscuits. She poured herself a cup of tea, topped up his and put some of the biscuits on a plate. ‘Eat one of these – they’re delicious,’ she said. ‘The woman from the bakery, she’s called Lily Dalton, gave me them for free because I said she and her daughter Rosie could come to the second dance night. We’re having it on Saturday because I didn’t have enough acts to fill the whole week, and the dance night makes so much money for us.’

‘Fine.’ He pushed his hands through his mop of blond hair. ‘Though if Aida can’t dance again...’ His voice cracked.

May was tempted to point out they had many good dancers now because Aida had trained all the chorus girls and the men so well, and Maggie was going to be there soon, but she knew for once it wasn’t the success of the show Peter was thinking about. Usually he put the cabaret in front of everything, even her, but this time it was the person he was thinking of.

‘Don’t worry, Peter,’ she said coolly. ‘We’ve been keeping everything running, and we’ve been doing really well – I’ve even been putting money aside to pay Nick back, even though he says he doesn’t want it, but I don’t like to be in anyone’s debt.’

As she spoke, she opened the letter from her mother; she scanned it with a smile, then a frown, then read it aloud.

‘Dearest May.

Oh dear, where to begin? David is home, earlier than he said, and we’re so happy to see him. But, May, something is very wrong. He’s different, and not in the way you’d expect, a bit older or wiser or something. He’s completely different. He seems to find settling back very difficult. And oh, May, his poor face... He walks with a limp now, and he has to wear one of these masks – remember like Roddy Linehan had because a shell blew up in his face?

‘Well, poor David, his handsome face is ruined, gone perhaps. I don’t know – we’ve not seen the extent of his injuries.

‘Please come home, May, as soon as you possibly can. We need you. And your brother has been asking after you. Maybe seeing his lovely little sister will cheer him up.

‘It’s very urgent, May. Please come right away.

Mother.’

‘You’d better go then,’ Peter said when she’d finished. ‘It never rains that it pours. Is a peaceful life too much to ask for?’

‘It seems so,’ May replied reluctantly. Of course she had to go back to Dublin; her parents needed her, and she was dying to see her brother. She’d been his little shadow when they were young, and he was affectionate and teasing, exactly as a big brother should be. Was he really in as bad a state as Olive was making out? Her mother probably just expected him to be like the fresh-faced seventeen-year-old who went off to war, but May knew, from being around veterans, none of them were the same after what they endured. It would just take a little adjusting to get back to normal life.

‘I feel torn. They need me, but so do you, Peter.’ She found herself longing to hear him beg her to return quickly.

‘I’ll be fine. We’ll move on to Courtown on Sunday, and it will be fine. And once Aida recovers, that’s all that really matters.’

She hid her pain at his concern for her rival taking precedence over everything, even her. He didn't care about her brother or the impact his return would have, he wasn't thrilled with her for keeping everything going so well, he wasn't worried about her being tired by going up to Dublin – he just cared about Aida. And there was absolutely nothing May could do about it. Might as well talk about something else, she thought.

‘There are two free tickets for tomorrow night...’ She returned to the conversation about Lily Dalton and her daughter, Rosie, and the girl's treatment at the hands of the Black and Tans. ‘So be extra charming to the poor child and make sure she gets to dance with Enzo or even you – you're both so good and handsome.’

He smiled at her with genuine warmth. ‘I will, don't worry. And thank you, May, for all you do. You're a kind person – we're lucky to have you.’

It wasn't the great outpouring of love she'd longed for, but it was better than nothing.

CHAPTER 13



*N*ICK

HE WALKED around the field in the moonlight, alone, his breath creating silver puffs in the cool night air.

Peter and May's caravan was in darkness already, as was poor Aida's. Ramon and Enzo still had a light on, but they were probably playing cards or something. Two-Soups was out with Delilah, so Magus had the place to himself, a sinister red light burning behind the curtains, as if he was practising the dark arts in there. The three vans of chorus girls were all quiet; May always ordered them to bed early despite their protests.

As he watched, the light went off in Millie's caravan, where Maggie was now staying instead of Celine. He had to stop stalling and go back to his own caravan, where Celine was waiting, and talk to her. That's what Millie had told him to do on that drive to Cushing Hall, but he'd not had the chance until now.

He knew he should do it.

Instead he went into the tent, lit one of the tilly lamps on the stage and sat down at the piano, with his hands resting silently on the keys.

Beyond the canvas walls, an owl hooted. The distant crash of waves on the beach was the only other sound. Holiday towns went from so noisy in summer to deathly quiet off season, and it was something that never ceased to surprise

him. He'd lived such a sheltered life up to the war. His parents would never have considered taking him and his brothers to a funfair, or for a slide on a helter-skelter or a ride on a swing boat. He'd never tasted an ice cream from a vendor on the sand or had fish and chips out of newspaper. He might have been privileged in other ways, but on balance he'd have preferred a more normal childhood. Maybe if he'd had one, he would have read the signs better and not made such a monumental fool of himself over Celine.

He ran his hands over the notes, and the action comforted him, as it had when he was a little boy, hiding away in the music room on the third floor, playing music by Mozart, Schumann and Brahms on the Steinway grand as his grandmother sat quietly and listened.

Now he played a few of those remembered pieces from childhood, then moved on to some new songs that his grandmother had had sent over from America. One of them had been sung by a woman called Harp Devereaux, who had a band called Roaring Liberty.

Peter was very keen on going to America some day, and if they were going to cross the Atlantic, Nick knew he had better be familiar with what American audiences wanted.

From the box of music beside the piano, he took out the song that had gained Roaring Liberty their fame. It was called 'The Heart Will Know'. The lyrics and the music were unique and catchy, and he sang along quietly to the melody as his fingers easily found the keys.

'What the tongue can't say, the heart will know.

What the hands can't touch, what no one can show,
what I daren't speak, for fear you'd go,

I'm hoping, my love, that your heart will know.

'My thoughts are of you, as you pass your days.

When you are near or far away,

oh, how I long for the breeze of love to blow,

and that somehow, someday, your heart will know.

‘My dreams are vivid, your smile so sure.
Is it aimed at me? Whose love is pure?
I don’t know how I can make it so,
but somehow, someday, your heart will know.
‘Until that time, I wait all on my own.
No other one can claim your throne.
The king of my heart, but I can’t let it show,
until somehow, someday, your heart will know.’

He wasn’t surprised it was such a successful song. The heart would know. If only his heart had known Celine’s true nature, he might have saved himself a lot of bother and misery.

He began adding some ornamentation to the melody. It was written for violin and piano, but the cabaret didn’t have a violinist, so he had to improvise.

He was so absorbed in the task, he didn’t hear her come in, and he jumped when she put her hand on his shoulder.

‘Nick,’ she said quietly.

‘Oh, Celine, I...I...’ He felt himself blushing.

‘Please, don’t run away again, or say you must do something. I need to talk to you.’ She sounded tired and sad, not much different to how he felt himself.

His heart sank. He knew his marriage had no future, of course it didn’t, but listening to her say she couldn’t bear to share his bed tonight, that she was leaving, going away with Millie, going back to France, whatever her plan was, would be too hard. Or worse, maybe she’d say it would be best for him to go back to Brockleton, run his estate and allow her and Millie to stay with the cabaret. But this was his life. To find himself back in Brockleton, without her or his friends or the cabaret, would be unthinkable.

She was right, though; he had to face whatever she had to say.

He turned the piano stool around, then brought over another stool for her, the one that Magus used in his act. They both sat, facing each other on the dark stage.

‘First I must say this. Please let me speak and don’t stop me – just listen.’

He gave her a small smile. She wasn’t usually this forceful, so clearly this speech was planned. She was dressed up as well, wearing her red silk dress with the tiny white polka dots, and she had her hair pulled in a ponytail and tied with a red ribbon. She looked so lovely, he thought his heart might break.

‘Nick, I am so sorry. So, so, so sorry. Of all the people in the world I could not wish to hurt, it is you.’

The amber flecks in her eyes glinted in the light of the tilly lamp on the corner of the stage. He said nothing. There was nothing to say.

‘But what has happened cannot be undone. And now we must make a decision...or at least you must.’ She stopped and took a deep breath. ‘Nick, I love you, and I mean it, and I want to be your wife – not as second best to Millie, or because I can’t have her, but because I *want* to be with you – if you want me and are willing to be my husband. Millie and I have been talking about this while you were in Dublin helping Peter, and we agreed she will leave the cabaret as soon as she has enough money saved. So she will go and we will live our lives as we planned.’

A flicker of hope sparked in his cold, broken heart. But he immediately quenched it. Celine could never really be his, and anything less would hurt too much. He knew his grandmother would say that he was being silly, that she was offering him exactly what he wanted and he was going to reject it...

He opened his mouth to speak, but Celine held up her hand. ‘Please, Nick, let me finish. There is something else you should know before you decide what to do, and it is this.’ Her voice quivered as she exhaled a ragged breath.

‘I am pregnant.’

Nick heard the words, but for some reason, they just swirled around his head, refusing to arrange themselves into a coherent thought. Millie in America, Celine here, she was pregnant, the child was his – he knew that. He would be a father, Brockleton would have an heir, his father would be thrilled, Floss would be too, he wouldn't be the one to drop the ball and lose generations worth of tradition and land and titles and money...

He could be a family with Celine and their child. But Celine loved Millie, and that couldn't, wouldn't change. She would never love him like that. But maybe it was the best he could hope for. Maybe he was being foolish and Floss was right. It was so hard to know.

'Now it's your turn.' Celine gave a small laugh, but he could tell it was more from nerves than humour.

'I...I...' No words came, and he didn't know if it was the stammer or if he just had nothing to say. Nothing sensible anyway.

'Are you happy about the baby at least?' she asked tentatively.

'Yes, I suppose I am, b-b-b-b-b...' He sighed. The stammer was so much worse when he was stressed. 'B-b-b...'

'But you need some time to think about all of this?' she prompted gently.

He nodded, feeling so confused and foolish.

No amount of time would make this situation any better, though. He could probably find enough money for Millie to leave the cabaret straight away, though Peter wouldn't like that, but that didn't mean Celine would be his. But she was offering him as close to what he wanted as she could give. She would have his child, she would be his wife – that should be enough.

But it wasn't. It just wasn't.

'Please come to bed, Nick,' said Celine softly, laying her little hand on his big one. 'I know I was not...very...'

responsive before, and I know I must be better, and I want to be...truly. I'm so lonely without you.'

For a moment he let her fingers remain there, but then he pulled his hand away. 'I will, I p-p-promise. B-b-but first, I need to p-p-practise some more.'

She sighed, stood up, touched his shoulder, then walked away across the tent, lit only by the one tilly lamp flickering on the stage. After turning the piano stool around again, Nick went back to playing Harp Devereaux's famous song.

'What the tongue can't say, the heart will know.

What the hands can't touch, what no one can show,
what I daren't speak, for fear you'd go,

I'm hoping, my love, that your heart will know...'

He glanced up as he sang and saw her still standing in the entrance to the tent, half hidden by the canvas flap, the moon behind her, the light of the tilly lamp catching her tawny eyes.

'My dreams are vivid, your smile so sure.

Is it aimed at me? Whose love is pure?

I don't know how I can make it so,

but somehow, someday, your heart will know.'

His voice dried up, and he sat for a while doing nothing. And then when he looked again towards the entrance, she was gone.

CHAPTER 14



DUBLIN

M^{AY}

MAY GLANCED at her mother across the coffee table, where a plate of scones and a bowl of jam sat untouched, alongside a pot of tea. Poor, plain, tender-hearted Olive looked so uneasy, perched on the edge of the sofa, it was hard to witness. A few moments ago, May's father had realised something critical needed to be done in the garden shed and had fled the sitting room, leaving his tea untouched. *Typical man*, May thought crossly, *to run from any awkwardness*. How women were presented as the weaker sex, she could never fathom. Even her mother was strong enough to remain here in David's presence, putting a brave face on it and trying to keep the conversation going.

'So, David, darling, would you like another scone? May, pass a scone to your brother. Or would you like May to butter it for you, darling? And spread on a little strawberry jam maybe? Mrs Cuddihy from the flower-arranging committee made it herself. She has terrible taste in flowers for the church altar – her sweet peas give poor Father O'Reilly hay fever – but her jam is delicious.'

David said nothing, just sat twirling a matchstick in his fingers as he slouched in the armchair on the other side of the fireplace. May's brother was not just six years older than the dashing young soldier of seventeen who marched off to fight for freedom and democracy in 1914, his uniform immaculate and buttons shining. This man was a different person altogether; she had no idea who he even was. He looked like David, it was him, but nothing she recalled about her brother was evident in this person.

She'd arrived by train this afternoon, after a long and arduous journey. Twice they'd had to get off and allow soldiers on to take their seats; the wait for another train had

been interminable both times. Eventually she had caught the tram to their house in Rathgar, the city teeming with soldiers and she full of nervous excitement. When she arrived, Mother was fussing as usual and Father looked pained, the way he could, and May knew from how they were acting that something was very wrong. This was not going to be the tear-filled, joyous reunion that she'd been hoping for.

'Smile at him when he comes downstairs. Try not to look upset,' Olive whispered in the hallway. 'He hates us to look upset.'

'Then maybe he should stop trying to upset us,' muttered May's usually stolid father, Michael Gallagher, who had come to the door of the sitting room.

'Oh, don't, darling, don't criticise poor David – he's been through so much,' gasped Olive, her soft eyes welling with tears. And then she called sweetly up the stairs, 'David, darling, your sister is here. She's longing to see you. Do you want her to come up or will you come down?'

A long silence ensued, during which May set down her locked leather bag in the hall and looked in puzzled anxiety from one parent to the other. Eventually a door slammed and her brother appeared at the top of the stairs and began a slow, limping descent.

May did her very best not to look shocked. The limp was the least of it. As her mother had warned her, he was wearing a mask that hid most of the right side of his face and most of his lower jaw, with a hole through which she could see half his mouth. Where the eye socket was covered, another eye was painted on. The overall effect was honestly macabre, though she dreaded to think what worse horror it must be concealing.

'Hello, David. I can't believe you've come back to us, such a wonderful surprise,' she said brightly, and went to hug him. But he recoiled – not obviously, but a recoil nonetheless.

'Hello, May.' He didn't even sound like the David she remembered, her happy-go-lucky brother, the boy who teased her and pulled her hair but who had also punched Seamus Finnerty when Seamus had told everyone he'd looked up her

dress and seen her frilly bloomers when May was seven. He was nothing like the boy she made carry her around Dublin Zoo because her legs were tired. This man's voice was deeper, but that was to be expected, she supposed. He was only a boy of seventeen when he left.

And now that they were settled in the sitting room with the tea and scones, even the way he sat was different. Nothing about her parents' stuffy sitting room said relax, but he seemed to be sort of thrown in the chair, as if deliberately being disrespectful even by the way he sat. Ignoring his mother's desperate attempts to feed him, he lit up a foul-smelling cigarette from a foreign packet – German, she supposed. Father didn't indulge a liking for tobacco, and Peter when he was here always went outside to smoke, so it felt wrong to see someone puffing away in the house, and even more wrong that he was doing it through a hole in the mask.

And it was such a ghoulish mask, supposedly flesh-coloured but more like pinkish-white, and the static eye was hard to ignore. The mask Roddy Linehan, a brother of one of her childhood friends, had looked different; it was made of a different material. But perhaps David got his from the Germans.

'I read the article about you,' he said suddenly.

'Oh...er...' May jumped a little in her chair, startled. 'Which one?'

He smiled, or at least she thought he did – the visible part of his mouth twitched. It was so strange not being able to see his face properly. She'd seen men wearing masks before, mostly in London when Peter was in the Acadia, God love them, but seeing one on her own brother was most unsettling. It made him seem even more of a stranger than he actually was.

'You've had more than one article written about how successful you are, have you?'

May blushed. 'No... Well, no, not about me personally...' Though the cabaret had attracted plenty of attention from the press, which May nurtured; all publicity helped. 'But...yes,

there was an article about me as a businesswoman. Where did you see it?’

‘Germany. It was in a German magazine. Someone showed it to me recently – a woman I knew brought it home to me.’

‘Oh my, in a German magazine. Fancy that.’ May gave a smile she didn’t feel. Something was off about this. So he’d been running around free in Germany? Why hadn’t he made contact? So many questions. ‘I believe it was translated into several languages. All very flattering of course, but I did it mainly for publicity really, for the cabaret.’

‘Well, it’s clear you and your husband are doing very well for yourselves, thank you very much.’ He crushed the cigarette out on her mother’s best Aynsley China side plate as Olive swallowed miserably. ‘You must have money to burn.’

‘Oh, not to burn...’

The mask turned in her direction. Under it, the one eye that could be seen was the same hazel colour as before, but where his boyish gaze used to dance with mischief and warmth, now it was cold like a snake. ‘So you told the magazine journalist a barefaced lie, did you?’

She felt her cheeks grow hot, and when she answered, she hated to hear the note of apology in her own voice. ‘Not lies, of course not, and the cabaret is doing very well, a full house most nights. But there were considerable start-up costs and the running of a show of our size, well, it’s very draining financially.’

‘Well, if you charge a shilling a seat...and how many can you fit in each night, a hundred and fifty did you say?’ He spoke as if she wasn’t there, doing calculations in his head. ‘Seven nights a week and twice at the weekends...’

‘Well, as I mentioned, there are significant overheads.’ She spoke sharply to cut him off; she didn’t owe this stranger an explanation of her finances. ‘Anyway, back to you. Tell us how you’ve been, what you’ve been doing. I’m dying to hear about it.’ She kept her voice light despite the heaviness of the atmosphere in this stuffy, now smoky room.

‘Me?’ He sighed. ‘I’m just a poor wounded soldier, having fought for king and country, done my bit and all of that, sent off to war by my loving parents and now come home to be regarded as a traitor to my country. It was all well and fine for you and your people, prancing about on stage, singing and dancing – I don’t expect you to understand. But for those of us who were there...’

‘My husband, Peter, served in France, fought at Ypres and Passchendaele, as did our friends who perform in the cabaret, so *my people* know precisely what it was like.’ May didn’t care if he heard the acid in her voice. How dare he make out that Peter and the rest of them were slackers?

‘Is that so? I didn’t know.’ He didn’t sound at all contrite.

‘How could you have known, darling?’ Olive said now, turning to her son. ‘I forgot to tell you.’ Desperate to forgive him.

‘It’s just hard, you know, to come back with nothing, no future, like this’ – he waved a hand at his masked face – ‘and seeing others who didn’t fight making plenty of money and living it up.’

May’s heart ached then for her brother. Everything had changed in Ireland since the Rising of 1916. He left as a patriot and returned as a traitor. It wasn’t fair or right, but it was the reality. It must have seemed terribly unfair.

‘We’ll do what we can to help you find your feet, David,’ she said more gently. ‘Perhaps we can find you a job in the cabaret.’ Her heart wasn’t in the offer; she couldn’t think of anything more unpleasant than having this nasty, bitter man constantly at her side. So it was a relief when he made a sound of disgust.

‘Oh yes, I can see it now. You can’t wait to put me on as one of your circus sideshows beside the bearded lady and the midget. Roll up, roll up, see the most disgusting, disfigured face you’ve ever seen...’

‘David, have a scone,’ gasped Olive, trying to find a clean plate.

‘No, of course not, and it’s not a circus,’ said May, torn between anger at his self-pitying accusation and sympathy for his pain. ‘I was thinking of selling tickets. But if it’s not what you want, then when we’re more on our feet, maybe we can do something for you.’

He nodded, better pleased. ‘I’m glad to hear that, because I will need all the help I can get. And fair’s fair – you have lived off our parents all these years, so it’s time for my share.’ He smiled again, that odd kind of half grimace he did. ‘So I’d be grateful for a financial leg up, I won’t lie. Mother and Father just have this poky house and whatever pension he’ll get from the bank, but now that you’re in the big leagues, May...well, it’s a weight off my mind.’

Goodness, just what was he expecting from her? ‘As I said, I’ll try to help you, but I will warn you, we have considerable debts. We owe our friend Nick a sizable sum, and we need to keep the show going, so...’

‘Playing the poor mouth, May, are we? I never envisaged that when I read the article about how you were dominating the entertainment business.’ He snorted then, a small, bitter, mean sound.

‘Oh, May dear, is the cabaret in financial difficulty?’ Olive looked aghast, reeling from her precious son calling their home poky and now finding out May had money troubles.

‘No, Mother, just a few cashflow issues to deal with, nothing more.’ May sought to reassure Olive while hopefully still dampening David’s obvious expectations of a massive handout.

‘But the two-thousand-pound inheritance from Maura, May? Where is that gone?’ Olive was panicking now. ‘Please tell me you have that put somewhere safe. If only you’d have listened to your father and let him manage it for you...’

‘My inheritance is fine, Mother,’ May lied silkily. She needed her hysterical mother’s fussing like a hole in the head. ‘It’s invested and cannot be touched for five years, but it’s showing very impressive dividends.’

‘Well, that’s nice to hear, isn’t it?’ sneered David. ‘I’m sure your husband married you for your brains, May. Mother was telling me before you arrived that he’s from the tenements, but the money must have been a nice little sweetener for the deal, am I right?’

May was shocked, and also furious with her mother. How could she speak about Peter like that? What on earth had happened to David, and who was this venomous monster slouched on one of her mother’s good chairs?

‘My husband is from working-class stock, something both he and I are very proud of, David. He’s a self-made man and has got to where he is through sheer hard work and nothing else.’ She heard the pitch of her voice rising, and she breathed deeply to try to keep her emotions in check.

‘And two thousand quid had nothing to do with your love match, of course it didn’t,’ he chortled, clearly enjoying needling her. ‘And by the way, Mother, what did dear old Aunt Maura leave me?’

Olive flushed. ‘Well, I’m sure... Well, she would have of course...but you see, we all thought...and Maura thought...’

David waited, not saying anything to ease his mother’s clear mortification.

May was furious now. ‘She didn’t leave you anything, believing you were dead. We all believed that because we got a telegram to say you were missing in action, and nothing after that for years.’

Again the flicker of a bitter smile. ‘And how handy for you to believe that too, dearest sister, so you could pocket my half of the inheritance with a clean conscience and squirrel it away.’

‘I didn’t want to believe it, and I didn’t, to be honest, but then the war ended and nobody heard from you. And why was that the case, David? Where were you? Why didn’t you get in touch?’

He stood then and gazed at her with his one cold eye. ‘That doesn’t matter now, but lucky for you that I didn’t turn up,

isn't it, May? Or you'd have no big inheritance, so no gold-digging husband, and no business, and no articles in fancy magazines raving about how rich you are.' He limped past her then, out into the hall, and without a word of goodbye, he left the house.

Olive sat, pale and shaking, her teacup trembling on the saucer. 'I never called Peter that name, May. I just said he was from there but that he was a very good person and that whatever reservations we might have had were gone now and...'

May exhaled. 'Yes, Mother, I know.'

CHAPTER 15



A IDA

THE WORST OF the Irish winter seemed to be abating as March came in. Honestly, she'd never known cold like it. Winters in Valencia were bright, though the mornings and evenings could be cool. There was nothing like this incessant wetting drizzle, the grey skies so low, it felt like the entire country was covered in a wet grey blanket. And the cold that just permeated the core of a person.

She had a gas heater in her van, but while in summer they were comfortable places to live, in the coldest months, the condensation ran down the inside of the glass and everything felt damp.

Peter had suggested he find her digs like they used to do, but the effort of getting to and from a landlady's house when she couldn't walk unaided seemed too much, even with Peter's sister Maggie to help her. On the first day of her return, Two-Soups had welded her a chair with wheels from an old pram, which Maggie offered to push her around in. But she didn't like it – it made her feel like an old woman – so she preferred to stay here, in the damp caravan. At least that was what she told Peter, and it was partially true. But what she didn't say was that she felt safe when he was nearby and fearful when he wasn't.

Nick had promised the English would not come for her again, but in the small hours of the morning, as not a pinprick

of light got through to ease her, she was back there, with that monster Harvey Bathhurst.

She could hear his pleasant, almost sweet voice, belying his savage attacks. His wheedling to get her to give him information, which she said over and over she didn't have. The kicks, the blows to the head and body, the stamping on her feet, her feeling the small bones splinter. And then the invasion of her body. She'd had two sexual encounters in her life, both awful. She sometimes wondered what it would be like to have an intimate relationship in a loving way but immediately dismissed it. She would never allow a man that close to her again, not if she could help it.

She sat sideways on the U-shaped seat of her caravan, resting her broken feet on the cushions. Peter was sitting on the other side of the table. The sun streaming in the window gleamed in his thick blond hair, which he kept pushing back off his forehead as he spoke. He was wearing only a shirt, with his sleeves rolled up; like all the Irish, he didn't seem to notice the cold. Any day without rain was 'a lovely day' in this country.

'Honestly, Aida,' he was saying, 'the Irish dancing teacher from Bray was there last night, and she told me this Rosie girl is a true natural, as light as a feather on her feet...'

'And what is this to do with me?'

'Well, when May told me she'd given some girl and her mother free tickets to the dance night, she asked me to make sure Enzo partnered her, but when Enzo asked her, she wouldn't. And you know how every girl would give her right arm to be asked up by Enzo. And then she wouldn't dance with me either, even though everyone was having such fun...'

Didn't he realise how painful it was to hear about everyone having fun, dancing?

'I still don't understand why you are telling me this.'

'Well, because dancing is your business, and this girl... maybe she could be your protégé.'

‘Ah, putting me out into the fields already, are you?’ she asked, unable to keep the sadness out of her voice.

He leant forward over the table and tucked a piece of her hair back behind her ear. The gesture was so intimate, so personal, it shocked her a little – and him as well, it seemed, because he blushed and withdrew his hand. ‘Never. I’ll always want you around.’

She shrugged coolly, though her heart was fluttering. ‘And how could I help anyone, even if they wished to dance? I can barely walk.’

‘Now, that’s true, but Dr Lynn says within a month or so, you’ll be feeling much more like your old self.’

‘Except my old self was an exceptional dancer.’ She wasn’t being vain or boastful; they both knew it was true.

‘And you can be again.’ This time he reached for and held her one good hand in a firm, friendly way, and she allowed it. They had never had any physical contact before she was thrown out of the Castle, or only when dancing together, but since then, he’d bathed her, he’d tended her wounds, he’d dressed her feet with fresh bandages, he’d fed her with a spoon. There was no more distance between them, any more than between patient and nurse.

‘You don’t know that, and neither do I,’ she said softly.

‘True. But I hope, and hope is a powerful thing, Aida.’ He made gentle circles on her palm with his thumb, a gesture she found soothing. ‘Let me tell you something. When I was a nipper, we were so poor, my old man was a drunkard and a bully, I’d no proper schooling or anything, everything was against me. But I knew that somehow I’d get out of there and make something of myself. I’d no idea how – nobody I ever knew had done it – but I had a belief that I would. Our thoughts are things, Aida. They have a power. May once told me that if she prays for something hard enough, then God will give it to her. I don’t know about that, or about God. But I agree with May that what we believe can become our reality. If you believe, really believe it, see it, feel it in your body that you will dance again, then I know you will –’

‘All right, I believe it,’ she said quietly, cutting him off. It hurt her heart how much he longed for the old Aida to come back. ‘Just tell me why you think I can help this dancer who won’t dance with you or even with Enzo.’

He pushed his hair out of his eyes again, frowning a little. ‘The thing is, she’s had a hard time. Some English soldiers attacked her, beat her up, cut off her hair. She’s so self-conscious about her looks and feels disfigured – that’s why she stopped dancing.’

Ah, so that was it. He wanted her to be a role model for the child, to show that a dancer can recover from her trauma, physical and mental. But it was too soon. She didn’t even know if she was going to recover. Her face was a mess of yellow and dark purple, several of her teeth were broken, there were bald patches on her head, her ribs hurt when she coughed or laughed, and though she could walk across the caravan if she held on to the furniture, that was all.

‘Peter, I won’t inspire her. I will horrify her.’

He tightened his grip on her hand, then leant forward again. ‘I’ve told her you’re injured, but she saw the show last summer and says she’s never forgotten you. And your bravery in your suffering will inspire her. You will show her that Irishwomen can be beaten and bruised in their bodies but their spirits are not broken.’

‘I am not Irish,’ she said sadly.

‘Oh, let me be very clear on this, Aida Gonzalez. You are an Irishwoman now. It’s not determined by where you were born, or who your parents were. It’s a state of being, a passion, a strength. You’ve endured so much for this country, more than anyone should ever have to, and you did it with courage and determination and a will of iron. So you take your place with Queen Méabh and Gráinne Uaile and Máire Rua and Bridget and all the other Irish warrior women, because you deserve it.’ His eyes burned with intensity.

She knew who he was talking about because they’d added a dance segment with Irish music that told the old stories of Queen Méabh, whom everyone, even the most powerful

warriors, feared, and her battle for the famous brown bull of Cooley. And Gráinne Uaile, the pirate queen who was feared on the high seas and who parlayed with Queen Elizabeth I, negotiating in Latin, the only language they shared. Peter did the voice-over to the dances, telling of Máire Rua, who had many lovers and husbands and dispatched most of them, threw a bucket of milk in a stream to tell her soldiers downstream the castle could be invaded and one of her husbands slaughtered. Or Bridget, who bargained with the king of Leinster to give her only the amount of land her cloak could cover. She sought to build a monastery, but when she laid the cloak down, it magically covered acres. These stories of Irishwomen in myths and legends were well known to the Irish, but they were mesmerised to see it turned into dance.

For a moment the courage came back into her sad, scared heart, and she realised Peter was trying to help her every bit as much as he was trying to help this poor girl. Elenora Fitzgerald had said in their prison cell, ‘They want to break us. They want us frightened and weeping. But we will not give them what they want.’ It was true; all the women of Ireland needed to stand together, to support each other, to show the English that they would not be beaten down. But still she hesitated, ashamed of what had been done to her, even though Peter’s mother had told her to hold her head up high. ‘I don’t know, Peter. I look like a monster...’

‘Stop that,’ he said huskily. ‘You’re the most beautiful girl in the world.’

The door opened, and he flushed and let go of her hand and sat back into the corner as Maggie stepped in with a plate of soda bread and cheese for Aida’s lunch. ‘I cut the crusts off, Aida, so hopefully it’s soft enough for you to chew. D’you know the next town we’re off to has a brilliant dentist? Olivia from the chorus was tellin’ me. Her nan is from there and sings the fella’s praises day and night, says he’s the reason she still has all her own teeth. Oh, there y’are,’ she added, suddenly noticing Peter as she put the bread and cheese on the table. ‘I wondered where you were. I’ve been looking everywhere for ya. There’s a baldie, bruised little girl and her ma here to see ya, the one you said should come over today. I

told her to wait in the tent and I'd send you over, but that was half an hour ago, so I dunno if she's gone or not.'

'That must be Rosie. Tell her to wait a little longer if she's still there,' he said. 'Say Aida Gonzalez is having her lunch and we'll be over in a while.'

Aida made a sudden decision. 'No, lunch will wait. Let's not keep her any longer. If you insist on me seeing this poor girl, I'd rather get it over with.' She stood up painfully. He offered her his arm and she took it, with Maggie on the other side as she hobbled to the door.

The chair with wheels was parked outside, and she sat into it carefully. Peter started pushing her across the field, with Maggie walking alongside. Aida managed not to cry out for a few yards, then one wheel hit a rabbit hole and she couldn't help letting out a scream as her broken ribs cramped painfully.

'What is it?' He bent over her anxiously. 'What happened?'

'Nothing, it's fine, carry on...'

'She's not fine, Peter. Don't listen to her,' said Maggie sternly. 'Every time the wheels go over a bump, she goes white as a sheet. If you really want this poor woman to come with you to see Rosie, you'll have to carry her. I'll bring the chair back to the caravan. Maybe when she's feeling a bit better, then we can use it.'

Peter gathered her up in his arms, so gently it didn't hurt at all, holding her wasted body like he was carrying a child, and they crossed the field into the tent. A girl of around sixteen was standing there, looking very shy, her mother by her side. She was dark like Aida herself, with delicate features and a neat, small body; there was a scar on her forehead, and she had a scarf tied over her shorn scalp.

'Rosie,' said Peter as he sat Aida into a chair facing the stage, 'this is Miss Gonzalez, the dancer I was telling you about. She was hurt by soldiers too, like I told you, and she wanted to meet you. Now come over and say hello.'

The girl moved away from her mother and came to stand in front of Aida; her mouth hardened with anger and her eyes blazed. ‘I can’t believe they did this to you, Miss Gonzalez. It’s even worse than what they did to me. I’m so sorry you can’t walk.’

Aida knew this was a vital moment, and she sat very upright in the chair and straightened her back and shoulders though her ribs ached. She summoned all her strength, the words of her fellow cellmates, Bridie Cullen and Peter ringing in her ears.

‘I can’t walk now, Rosie, but I will one day soon, and then I will dance again, because I believe it in my heart...’ To her surprise, she found herself quoting Peter, even though she’d cut him off before. ‘And I won’t let the English win. I won’t let them defeat me.’

‘Oh...’ The girl’s eyes filled with tears. ‘I wish I could be as brave as you.’

‘You can be, Rosie. And you must, not just for your own sake but for all of us. A very great woman called Elenora Fitzgerald – she’s a member of Cumann na mBan – told me to dry my eyes and not let the English see they can hurt us.’

Rosie immediately scrubbed her own eyes with the back of her hand, then straightened her shoulders and raised her chin.

‘Now, will you dance for me, Rosie? And show me, and Mr Cullen here, and your mother, and the people of Bray who all love you – and especially the English thugs – that they cannot break our spirits.’

‘I will,’ Rosie said quietly, but with such determination, Aida felt her own heart lift and strengthen in response, as if they were healing each other.

The tent was empty of patrons, and the cast were all busy.

‘Peter, will you put on *Swan Lake*?’ she asked.

He went to a gramophone and opened the record storage compartment in the bottom. The gramophone was from Dublin, because the one Peter stole in the trenches was long blown to bits. But he always told the audiences it was the same

one, along with a story about how he stole it and a heap of records from an officers' dugout near Ypres and how the songs started him and Nick on their road to the music business.

Moments later, the opening strains of Tchaikovsky's famous ballet score filled the tent.

'Get up on the stage and dance,' Aida said to Rosie.

'I don't know how... I never learnt ballet, only Irish dancing.' She glanced nervously at her mother, who was anxiously picking at the sleeve of her well-worn cardigan.

'Don't worry about that. Just move, whatever way you want to move. It doesn't have to be anything. Let the music flow through you, and allow your body to respond as it wishes.'

But the girl was frozen, her courage forgotten, unable to move, tears rolling down her face. Aida knew she needed to do something, and with a huge effort, she rose from the chair and walked slowly towards the stage, all the while keeping her back straight and refusing to show any pain on her face. She took Rosie's hand and raised it over her head as the music swelled and abated, a river of sound.

'Dance, Rosie, and show them the women of Ireland will not be defeated.'

Determination came back into Rosie's face, and she fixed Aida with a look, dead in the eye. Aida recognised it as the look she herself had worn after she had allowed her landlord's son to use her body in return for the money to bury her mother, and now after what Bathurst had done to her, to her soul as well as to her body. Scars like that never left; they were just covered up. But right now this girl was trying not to let them win, trying to reclaim herself.

'Close your eyes, feel it. You are safe here. Nothing bad will happen. We will protect you. Just do what your body wishes,' Aida murmured.

And slowly the girl began to dance.

Everything her dance teacher had told Peter was true. She had grace and poise and innate rhythm.

Peter and Rosie's mother watched in spellbound silence. Aida only became aware of them as the music finished, the crackle from the gramophone the only sound.

Addressing Rosie without consultation with anyone else, Aida asked, 'You want to come join us? Dance in our chorus?'

The girl turned in amazement to her mother, who looked worried and torn.

'We take care of all of the girls, Mrs Dalton,' said Aida calmly. She wanted to help this child, but she had to reassure her poor mother, who clearly loved her daughter to bits, as Gabriella had loved Aida. 'You can ask them yourself if you like. There are no boys allowed, no late nights, no drinking, no smoking, nothing like that. We run a very clean company here. She will be safe, I promise you.'

'Please, Mammy,' the girl begged, clearly barely able to believe this was happening.

Her mother nodded then, wiping her eyes on her well-worn sleeve. 'I know you have a good reputation... But do you really think she's good enough? All the girls last night, they were wonderful, and Rosie has only done Irish dancing. She wouldn't know any of those steps.'

Aida met Peter's eyes as she stepped off the stage. He came to give her his hand, but she brushed it aside and walked slowly back to her chair and sat down. She was enjoying being independent and in charge again, even like this, with her feet burning as if they were being stabbed by knives.

'You're right, Mrs Dalton, she isn't good enough. But neither were those girls until I took them in hand and made them dance, dance, dance. So, Rosie, you must understand, I will work you very hard. You have talent and courage, but you also have a lot to learn, and when we are not performing, we are rehearsing. Also, our girls are expected to lend a hand with everything – we have no divas in Cullen's Celtic Cabaret. You might have to sell tickets, launder costumes, run errands. You understand?'

Rosie nodded and beamed. ‘I’ll do whatever you tell me, Miss Gonzalez.’

‘Call me Senorita Aida, but yes...’ For the first time in a while, she arched her eyebrow, her signature expression that always struck terror in the chorus line. ‘You will do exactly as I tell you, or I’ll be sending you home.’

‘I promise.’ The girl was far from terrified; she was fizzing with excitement.

‘Now’ – Peter spoke at last, beaming – ‘Rosie, you go outside and wait. We need to speak to your mother alone.’

Rosie skipped out as Peter brought Lily Dalton over to sit down next to Aida; he took the chair on her other side.

‘Now, Mrs Dalton, we pay weekly, and Rosie’s wages will be in cash, fifteen shillings a week. We provide bed and board and costumes and all she will need, so my wife, May, encourages the girls to save their money in the post office, not to waste it on frivolous things. It’s not compulsory to save, of course, and some girls need to send their wages home, but I can assure you that between my wife and Aida, and myself of course, Rosie will be taken care of.’

‘That sounds very good, Mr Cullen. I’m heartbroken to let her go, but seeing her up there, so happy... I’ve not seen her smile in such a long time. I... Everyone around here knows what happened to her, and she feels like everyone is talking about her.’ She dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. ‘I’m grateful for the opportunity.’

‘You’re welcome. Now go and take your daughter home and tell her to pack her things and report for work in the morning. We’ll find her a berth in one of the caravans – one of our dancers has gone to be married, so there’s a spare bed. But tell her not to get too excited. Her first job will be to help pack everything up – we’re moving on down the coast tomorrow.’

Nodding through her tears, Lily Dalton headed out into the spring sunshine. Aida, sitting in silence with Peter, could hear Rosie’s excited cries as her mother told her what Peter had said, and then their voices faded away across the field.

She sat there for a while, waiting for her feet to stop hurting so much and wondering whether she needed to be carried back to the caravan after all. Maybe she could make it alone.

The decision was taken out of her hands as Peter swept her up in his arms and lightly kissed her cheek. 'Welcome back, Senorita Aida,' he whispered in her ear. 'I've missed you.'

CHAPTER 16



*N*ICK

PETER WAS GETTING TOO close to Aida. Nick could see it; everyone could. Nick was sure his friend wasn't being unfaithful in the real sense of the word, but it would complicate things for everyone if it went any further.

Though he was loathe to say anything, he felt strongly that Peter might need a friend.

He waited until everyone was fed and watered after the show and then knocked on Peter's caravan door. May was in Dublin, so he'd be alone. It was almost midnight, but Nick knew Peter, like himself, didn't fall asleep until the small hours. Maybe it was to do with having fought in the Great War, the constant fear of your dugout being blown to bits while you were sleeping.

Peter didn't answer the door, though. Where was he? Not in the tent – Nick had checked. As he was about to walk away with a heavy heart, he saw a shadow coming towards him across the field. Being the end of April, the days were really stretching now, but it was too dark to make out who it was. 'Who's there?' he called softly.

'Nick, it's me. What are you doing up so late?'

'Looking for you, as it happens.'

'Well, you found me. Everything all right?' asked Peter as he reached the caravan and opened the door. 'Cuppa?'

‘Thanks.’ Nick followed his friend up the steps.

Peter lit the gas stove and put the kettle on as Nick sat on the opposite side of the van to the double bed. The van was tidy but smelled a bit damp. May being absent meant the van probably wasn’t aired properly; Peter worked long days, only returning here to sleep.

‘So what’s up that has you lurking about at all hours?’ asked Peter as he took out two mugs from the cupboard beside the cooker.

‘Nothing really, just c-c-couldn’t sleep.’

Peter poured boiling water on top of the two teaspoons of tea leaves he’d put in the mugs. ‘Celine all right?’

‘Yes, she’s fine.’ He still hadn’t told anyone about the pregnancy. Celine wanted nothing said until she was three months gone, so apart from themselves, only Millie knew; Celine had told her before she told Nick. He felt a mild stab of resentment at the thought but pushed it away. It wasn’t Celine’s fault she hadn’t told him about the pregnancy before she told Millie. He’d been actively avoiding her, running away from any attempt at conversation. He was better at listening to her now.

Peter nodded. ‘Good to hear. Glad that big row between ye is over and she’s back in the nest. What was that all about? I didn’t like to ask at the time, but now that you’re getting on again...’

‘Oh, it was over nothing really, stupid stuff.’

‘Fair enough.’ Peter went on with getting the tea things together on a tray: milk from the local farm, sugar in a blue paper bag, a couple of delicious currant buns made by Delilah – the girl was such a talented cook.

As he watched his friend fussing about, Nick’s thoughts remained on Celine. Ever since she’d moved back into his caravan and told him about the pregnancy, she had been the perfect wife. She’d even suggested they make love, though he had too much doubt in his heart to follow through. ‘Please, Nick, I want to be your wife in every way,’ she’d said, but it

was too difficult for him. He needed to believe in his heart that Celine was not just his wife on paper, the mother of his child and his best friend, but also that he was her true love, as she was his. And how could he believe that, knowing what he knew about Millie?

Though Millie was still adamant that she was moving on, possibly leaving show business altogether. She said she was thinking of going to America and buying a house with a bit of land. She fancied herself as a farmer, and Nick could see it too; she was multitalented, that woman. She'd be a loss to the cabaret...but would she be a loss to him? Logic would dictate that he'd love to be rid of her, but oddly he found that wasn't true. Which is probably why he'd made no effort to come up with any money to encourage her to leave. It wasn't just that he wanted Celine to be happy. Despite everything, he liked Millie Leybourne, and since that drive to see Harvey Bathurst, he trusted her as well; sometimes he thought he'd miss her if she wasn't around. He remembered thinking once that she'd be a better wife to him than Celine, if only he loved her that way; she wasn't at all out of place at Brockleton and fitted in well with the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, which was full of shrewd, well-groomed women like herself. And she genuinely loved the old estate – she'd mucked in a lot before Christmas. And she'd saved his life when Harvey insisted that Nick ride Star and the stallion went crazy.

As Peter carried the tray over to the table and sat down opposite him, Nick brought his mind back to the purpose of this visit. 'So then, is May doing all right in Dublin?' he asked carefully.

'Ah, she's fine. Her parents drive her daft treating her like a toddler, but their hearts are in the right place. And anyway, her brother is taking a long time to adjust to normal life. He's badly injured and maybe shell-shocked and they're very anxious around him, so they need her to stay around until things settle down with David.'

Nick swallowed. He and Peter were so close, but would he be overstepping the mark with his next question? 'And Aida?'

Peter added milk to both cups of tea without looking at Nick. ‘What about her?’

He could back out, make some excuse and change the subject, but that would be wrong.

‘P-P-Peter, I’m only saying this as a friend, b-b-but...’

‘But what, Nick?’ Peter looked at him now, handing him his tea.

‘Well, there’s t-t-talk that you and Aida are, well... spending a lot of time t-t-together, and with May gone...’

‘We’re just friends, Nick,’ Peter said quietly. ‘There’s nothing going on.’

‘I know that, I d-d-do, but I didn’t want there to be things said behind your b-b-back and for you to hear it...or May.’ Nick stared down at the table, feeling his face go hot. He hated doing this – it made him sound petty and a gossip – but Peter needed to know that people were talking.

To his astonishment, instead of laughing it off or vehemently denying any wrongdoing, his friend sighed so deeply that Nick looked up in surprise.

‘It was never my plan to marry May when I first started courting her, that’s the truth,’ Peter said bluntly. ‘I was in a play and she waited for me at the stage door, and it just sort of went from there.’

Nick said nothing, just picked up his tea and sipped it, waiting for his friend to go on.

‘You know May. She can be very persuasive’ – Peter glanced at Nick with a wry smile – ‘downright pig-headed actually, and she wanted me to take her to coffee shops and things and hold her hand. And I don’t know, Nick...maybe I should have said no to her right at the beginning. If I’m honest I knew she was more interested in me than I was in her, but she was from a posh part of Dublin – not Brockleton, mind you, but certainly far fancier than I could ever have imagined. I seem to have a knack for picking up toffs on my travels.’ He laughed a little then, and Nick laughed with him. ‘But nice, you know, well-to-do, not the rat-infested hovel I came out of.’

So I thought once she found out, she'd drop me like a hot potato. But then...'

He paused.

'Then?' prompted Nick.

'Then my auld fella, he got an idea in his head I was a queer, so he attacked me. Eamonn hit him a clout of an iron and told me to get out of Dublin before Kit Cullen woke up again and did for me, so I ran to May's house. I had nowhere else to go. I hid in the garden shed and, in the morning early, crept into her room. It was she who had the idea that I could join the army. I'd no idea what I was signing up for – none of us did, did we? But her brother, David, I knew he was already in the army, and May said he was writing, saying everything was fine – you know, the way all of us did when we wrote home to our families.'

'I know. We told them a p-p-pack of lies.' Nick remembered letting his grandmother believe he was practically living in a holiday camp out there in France.

'Yeah, well, when she got over the surprise, she was happy to see me. My head was all over the place that night, and when she put her arms around me and kissed me...' He looked slightly abashed. 'Well, you know, that's when we ended up going all the way. And then she gave me money and some clothes of David's, and after I joined up, she sent parcels and letters.'

'I remember. We all loved when you got a p-p-parcel. So much stuff, chocolate and tea and biscuits and sugar and loads of socks. And didn't she even make you a shirt once? May's so clever at everything she turns her hand to.'

'I know, she is, and the parcels were real lifesavers. And with each one she sent, she kind of became more and more my girl. Then when I came back on leave – remember that time Billingsley gave us a four-day pass?'

Nick nodded. 'I was still b-b-being Nick Gerrity then. I didn't t-t-tell you I was meeting my grandmother.'

‘Were you? Well, we both have our secrets then. I didn’t tell you this, but that was the time May convinced me to get engaged. I know it sounds pathetic. I should have said no, and I swear it wasn’t just because she was willing to sleep with me, though that was a factor, I’ll be honest. But she made it sound like the best idea in the world. And somehow I ended up speaking to her father, but I said we had to wait until after the war and I had enough money to support her properly, and then...’ He picked up one of Delilah’s buns but, instead of eating it, just crumbled it between his fingers.

‘Then she turned up in London,’ said Nick, ‘on the night poor B-B-Betty was k-k-killed, and then the Acadia burnt down, and Teddy Hargreaves made sure no other theatre would t-t-take us, and May was such a great help with it all. She got everyone through it.’

‘That’s right, she was. She was wonderful, a rock. But that wasn’t why I married her so quick. It was...’ Another long pause.

‘What was it, Peter?’ asked Nick gently.

His friend inhaled, as if steeling himself to say the next sentence. ‘Nick, she offered me two thousand pounds to get the cabaret on the road in Ireland and save all our jobs, but she could only access her inheritance before she was twenty-one if I married her... So I did.’

The clock ticked, and the caravan creaked as it began to rain. The trickle became a constant drumming on the roof.

Nick’s heart felt torn between sorrow and fear for his friend, and for what this might mean for all of them. ‘And are you saying you regret it now? Your m-m-marriage?’

Peter rested his head on the wall behind his seat, closed his eyes and exhaled. ‘If I do, there’s not much I can do about it now, is there?’

‘And will the baby change things?’ Nick asked, wondering as much for himself as for Peter. ‘Maybe not now, b-b-but after it comes, things will feel c-c-closer between you and May?’

Peter nodded, and Nick saw tears in his friend's eyes. 'I hope so. I'm the baby's da. I have to do the right thing by him or her.'

'But...' Nick said tentatively.

'But...' Peter drained his cup and lit a cigarette, a circle of smoke encircling his head. 'She's not the woman I love.'

Nick didn't need him to elucidate further; they both knew who the woman he loved was. Just as he couldn't fool himself about the true love of Celine's life.

'So what are you going to d-d-do now?'

Peter considered the question. 'My old man was useless, worse than useless, and yours wasn't much better when you were a kid, though you've patched it up now. But when I saw Enzo's father after the show in London, hugging him and beaming and delighted and proud... Well, this isn't about what I want any more. Our child didn't ask to come into this, but he or she deserves the best father I can be. That means a man dedicated to his family, and so that's what I'll do.'

'Seems like a b-b-big sacrifice, though.' Again his thoughts turned to Celine, and how she was prepared to give up Millie in order to be the mother to Nick's child.

Peter shrugged. 'All my own fault. I should have been stronger when I had the chance, but I didn't. I've made my bed, so I'll lie in it – it's only fair to the baby. Besides, I don't *not* love May. I'm very fond of her, but in a different way, I suppose. She's amazing and a wonderful friend to me, and she's carrying my child.'

It reminded Nick of what Millie had said to him on the drive to see Harvey. *Celine loves you too, Nick. Maybe in a different way, but she adores you.*

'And Aida?' he asked gently.

'Is a beautiful single woman and someone I have no claim to whatsoever,' Peter replied, and Nick heard the pain in his voice. 'I'm a married man, I'm going to be a father, and that's the end of the matter.'

Nick sat and thought about what Peter had said, and knew he was absolutely right. His own father had been cold and unfeeling towards him, and it had hurt Nick beyond measure. Nick would be a different father. His baby, like Peter and May's, deserved that. Celine was determined this child would have two parents, and he should stop doubting her loyalty and her love for him, even if it was a 'different' sort of love. Life wasn't a romantic novel, it was reality, and he had a sweet, caring pregnant wife who said she wanted to be with him. He would be greedy to want more. As Floss had told him, successful marriages were built on far less than what he and Celine had.

He thought about the date and realised that it was the end of April, and his wedding night had been in the middle of January... 'Talking of keeping secrets, Peter, I have one to tell you.'

* * *

HE CREPT IN, trying not to wake her, but she was sitting up in bed.

'Nick, are you all right? I was so worried.'

'I was just talking to Peter. I'm fine.'

She lay down, and he undressed and put on his pyjamas and got in beside her. Every night since she'd told him about the baby, they'd slept in the same bed, not touching. But now he moved over and placed his hand on her stomach. He realised her abdomen had swelled a little; it felt hard and smooth. His baby, growing.

'Celine, I hope you don't mind. I told Peter we were going to be parents.'

'Oh... ' A hesitation. 'And you told him because you were happy to tell him?' She was no longer sure of him, and he hated making her feel like that. 'I mean, are you happy about our baby, Nick?'

'Very, very happy.' He stroked her stomach.

‘Oh, I’m so glad,’ she whispered, and snuggled into him, then raised her head to rest it on his shoulder.

He held her closer and kissed her head as her hand wandered inside his pyjama top and caressed his chest. Then she kissed his neck. ‘Nick, make love to me.’

‘It’s all right. You d-d-don’t have to. We’re g-g-going to be fine.’

‘I want to, Nick. I want that you make me your wife, in every sense.’

He longed so much to make love to her. If only he could remove the feeling that she was doing it out of duty, not desire.

‘Please, Nick,’ she murmured.

He turned towards her.

Afterwards, she clung to him, her soft cheek pressed against his shoulder as she fell asleep. Eventually he fell asleep as well.

CHAPTER 17



DUBLIN

M AY

THE CLOCK TICKED with ridiculous volume on the dresser. Her father rattled the paper as he pretended to read it in his armchair by the fire. The evenings were drawing out now. The conversation about when they should stop lighting the fire in the sitting room was had over and over; countries were invaded with less discussion and debate.

Her mother was knitting socks for ‘the poor’, whoever they might be. Unfair as it was, May thought she might go mad if she had to hear the *click, click, click* of the needles for much longer. The magazine she’d bought today was failing to distract her; like her parents, she was on tenterhooks.

David knew it too; she was convinced he enjoyed making them squirm. He stood there now with his back to the room, hands plunged into his pockets, staring out of the window into the darkening evening, a large glass of whiskey in his hand, his third of the evening so far.

Everything else in the room looked identical to when she was a child. The yellow wallpaper with the thin pink stripe, the overstuffed dark-green sofa, the pair of brown wingback fireside chairs, the sideboard full of trinkets and knick-knacks her mother had gathered over the years, the glass-fronted bookcase, the miniature pendulum clock on the mantelpiece, ticking incessantly. Everything was the same, and yet nothing was.

In the old days, once they were all home for the evening, Olive would draw the curtains. But this new David liked to stand and stare out the window, onto the street beyond the small, neat front garden, and nobody dared ask him to close the drapes for a bit of privacy.

May knew people could see in – if the light was on and the curtains open on a dark evening, of course they could – and she felt like an animal in a zoo. There had been a hedge – just shoulder height, but it afforded some privacy – but David, without any consultation with anyone, had gone out last week and cut it down. Now just the dwarf garden wall stood between them and the whole place knowing their business.

Mother had been in tears about the hedge; May even thought privately that she'd blown it out of proportion. But of course this wasn't about the hedge. It was about how awful David was being about everything. And her parents were letting him get away with it.

Even after the hedge incident, Olive kept making excuses for his dreadful behaviour. Many men who came back from the war were different, she kept saying. And David had always been her favourite.

But how could they help him when he wouldn't help himself?

May had suggested repeatedly he go and see old Dr Gleeson, the physician who had taken care of them all for decades. At least maybe he could prescribe some treatment for whatever was behind the mask – a terrible burn, as so many soldiers had come back with? But David sneered and said nobody was going to be looking at him, that he didn't need a doctor and he was fine. 'You can afford to indulge every twinge and pain, May, and go off to have the finest medical minds in Dublin wondering what might be wrong, but I can't.'

In the weeks May had been home, mornings were the only time she got to hold a normal conversation with her mother, only because David lay in bed till noon, his bedroom door locked. But then he emerged, looking for food and tea and inevitably money from his mother, who always turned into a frightened mouse and gave it to him.

He might then go out for a walk, and come back smelling of beer. Then about five or six in the evening, he would start on the whiskey that Michael Gallagher bought for him, though she told her father not to. Then he would talk, rubbish mainly,

sneering, derisory comments about Dublin, the Irish, the attacks on the British by the Volunteers all over the country that were almost daily occurrences now. Several high-ranking members of the police and the intelligence services of the Crown stationed in Dublin Castle had been shot at by rebels, some killed, and he complained the city was not a safe place to be any more. It was disgraceful.

He rambled on and on, making the same slurred point over and over: how he'd fought for the British when everyone said it was a good thing, and now he was supposed to apologise for getting his face shot off in defence of democracy and the free world.

And he spoke about some high-ranking officer he knew from Dublin Castle, and said he was appalled at the savagery displayed by the rebels, and rightly so. The entire Irish nation should, by his reckoning, be ashamed of themselves.

Their father tried gently to warn David off mixing too closely with the English; things were a tinderbox in Ireland now, and showing allegiance to either side openly was very dangerous.

But David had sneered something about their father being a pen pusher who had no idea what was going on in the real world, and that he shouldn't worry so much – David doubted anyone suspected a coward like Michael Gallagher of being a secret agent or a saboteur.

May constantly found herself having to bite her tongue. She hated to see her lovely father humiliated by his own son, but to stick up for him would be worse. Michael Gallagher could take the abuse, but having his daughter rush to his aid would not be something his pride could endure.

She had advocated with him and her mother in private that they have it out with David, explain that they were very sorry about what happened to him, but in all fairness, it wasn't Michael or Olive Gallagher who blew his face off, that they wanted to help but that this way of going on was not acceptable. But her parents had begged her not to say anything, pleaded with her, and so she agreed. But she wished

she hadn't. Her brother was bitter and snide and said the cruellest things, and she was heartily sick of him, war hero or not. Though there was no talk of heroics, so perhaps he hadn't covered himself in glory. If he had, she felt the new and much disimproved David would have boasted about it.

The most upsetting thing for May was that every time her brother got drunk, he'd drop endless heavy hints about her and Peter being loaded and how she really owed him half her inheritance, if not all of it, him being the eldest and a boy.

The day before yesterday, she'd gone into the kitchen to see him snooping through her accounts book, which she'd left open on the table. Normally she kept it in her locked leather bag, but she had some bills to pay, which Peter had posted to her. She'd grabbed it from him, ran up to her room, locked herself in and sat there shaking. If David found those letters from Eamonn, which she'd hidden in the cover of the book, her life would be over. The old David would have been on her side. This horrible new David would go straight to Peter to deliberately wreck her life. Or maybe he'd try to blackmail her... Either way it didn't bear thinking about. At least her narrow escape made her do the one thing she should have done long ago; she got matches and burnt the two letters in the grate. *Good riddance*, she told herself sternly, as Eamonn's loving words, written in the Irish language, went up in flames.

After that, David was even more convinced she was concealing vast sums of money from him and even hinted, with his sly, half-hidden smile, that she and Peter must have made the money by nefarious means.

Trapped in the sitting room now, with him standing at the window and her parents hunched and miserable in their chairs, she inhaled and exhaled loudly, her annoyance showing through. Both parents shot her nervous glances, and she hated that. Her mother and father drove her mad of course, but they were good people and this was horrible. They were terrified to live, to breathe even, in their own home. This could not go on. She had to get out of this house. She longed to head for the fresh, clean air and beautiful scenery of the Wexford coast, where Peter and the show were now. But her parents were

going out of their minds with worry and fear and she couldn't abandon them, not until this situation was fixed.

She wished, not for the first time in the last two weeks, that a sniper or a mine had taken David. Her brother as she knew him was gone anyway.

'Another constable was shot dead last night,' her father said, looking up from his paper, and May wanted to scream. *Really? That's what you thought might be a good ice-breaking comment?*

David just laughed, a hard, cruel sound. That horrible bitter sound she had come to despise.

'We'll string up five of theirs for that. The Neanderthals will learn eventually.' He turned then and went to refill his whiskey from the decanter. 'Won't you join me, May? You're a married woman now – surely you can have a little nip to keep you warm in the bed without your husband?'

May refused to rise. He was trying to embarrass her, embarrass their parents, but she would not be a pawn in his game.

She looked at him, not at the grotesque mask, but right at him, trying to find a trace of the fun-loving, gentle boy who had left here in 1914 so full of enthusiasm and pride. The boy who promised his little sister that he'd bring her back ribbons for her hair from France, and a bottle of perfume for his mother and a bottle of French wine for his father. It was not just hard to reconcile that sweet-natured, handsome boy with the monster that inhabited their home now – it was impossible.

'I won't,' she said calmly. She hoped he heard the edge of steel. Not only would she not drink with him, but she wanted him to get the message that she was not afraid of him, that she would defy him, and that if it was up to her, he'd be out on his ear for the way he was behaving.

'Suit yourself. Mutti?' He waved the bottle at his mother. He called their mother that in a mocking way. May had not known what it meant, and he refused to explain it, but she went to the library and found it in a dictionary. It was an

affectionate term for mother in German, though when David said it, there was no affection in it.

‘No thank you, dear.’ Olive smiled, a brittle, sad effort.

‘What about you, Father? After your hard day’s toil making even more money for the grey

men in top hats? Sssurely’ – May heard the familiar slur on that word – ‘you deserve that at least?’

‘No thank you, David. I’m not much of a drinker,’ Michael said, with a forced smile.

‘Not much of an anything,’ David muttered, filling his glass again and turning back to the window.

May felt her blood boil. *Enough*. How much longer were they going to tiptoe around him? He was shell-shocked, Olive said, traumatised by what he saw, what had happened to him, and she felt for him, but this wasn’t their fault and they shouldn’t have to pay the price. Peter, Enzo, Ramon, Nick and Two-Soups – they’d all been there too, and they never went on about it. Peter did get nightmares sometimes, and he would wake in a sweat, but she would put her arms around him and soothe him back to sleep. Any time they ever mentioned it, and it wasn’t often, they just said it was awful, worse than anyone could ever imagine, and it wouldn’t do anyone any good to be reminiscing about it.

Why couldn’t David be like them? Stoic. Strong. Getting on with their lives. He was just wallowing and being horrible, and she’d had enough.

‘How dare you speak to Father like that?’ She stood and grabbed his shoulder, forcing him around to face her. He didn’t speak; he was taken aback, she thought, and a bit unsteady on his feet too.

‘May, please, dear...’ her father began, horrified by her intervening on his behalf, getting to his feet, but she turned on him then.

‘No, Father, this must be said. He’s making you both feel like strangers in your own home, and it’s not right.’ She turned back to David. ‘I know you’ve had a hard time, we all know it,

but so did everyone who went, and they are not back here being horrible to everyone, drinking every night and saying nasty things to people who are trying to care for them. We thought you were dead. We've explained why we thought that – we got a telegram – so if you're furious because we didn't look for you earlier, that was why.'

'You think I wanted you to find me?' His mouth curled up in a sneer inside the mask.

'Isn't that why you're being so awful?' she demanded, as her mother got to her feet and moved over to where her father now stood at the fireplace. Both terrified.

'No, *May*, sweet, spoiled, indulged little sister, that is *not* why. But you're too busy making a fortune with that urchin from the slums you married to have the faintest clue about me. And this' – he gestured at her dismissively with a wave of his hand – 'this big stand-off is to show them' – he nodded at his parents – 'they are on the right track giving you everything I'm entitled to. Make them believe that you did your best with me so you can run off to mate with that bit of rough in a tent or a barn or wherever he throws you down.'

'How dare you!' May was fuming now. Her blood thundered in her ears, fury threatening to engulf her. She wanted to scratch what was left of his smug, supercilious face. 'I wish you had been killed – it would be better than having you here. Why don't you just go back to Germany or wherever you were hiding for the last two years?'

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she froze, shocked at what she'd said; her hands flew to her open mouth.

'Look, David' – she tried to take it back – 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I know it was hard and that we don't realise how bad –'

'There's not a lot about this world you don't realise, sweet, innocent May. Or are you that innocent? I don't think so somehow... What were the letters you had hidden in your book that you were so afraid I would see?'

‘They were from Peter!’ God help her, had he read them? But they were in Irish, and she knew David’s Irish was terrible; he’d been lazy at school, relying on his charm to get by and getting May to do his homework for him even though she was three years younger.

‘Really?’ He gave that mocking chortle that she’d come to hate so much. ‘Then why did you look so frightened just now? Very odd. I think you’re a conniving little witch.’

May inhaled and exhaled again, more slowly this time, forcing her temper to abate. She would not rise to him, no matter how infuriating he was. He knew nothing. He was just trying to get a rise out of her.

‘David, I’m sorry I said I wished you dead, I am. But why are you so angry with us? If it’s not that we didn’t go to find you, if it’s not that you blame us for your injuries, though perhaps you do, then what is it?’

Her father spoke again then. ‘May, love, please just leave it.’

‘No, Father. I’m sorry, but no. We need to have this out one way or another. David, we all were so happy to hear you were coming home to us, but now that you’re here, we are afraid of you.’ She swallowed back the tears. ‘Truly, we are. I am, Mother and Father are, and we just want to help you, try to find a way for you to rebuild your life. But you are so cold and cutting. We want to help, but we don’t know what to do. Tell us what to do to help you and we’ll do it, but please, stop this.’

David turned back to the window then, his back to the room. May had no idea what was going to happen. She eyed the poker on the set of firedogs that had once belonged to Granny Gallagher. She could get to that and defend herself and her parents if needs be.

Her father had his arm around his wife now, something May had never seen; a brief peck on the cheek was the only kind of affection she’d ever witnessed between her parents up to this.

Eventually David turned, and May exhaled; he wasn't in a rage at least. 'Give me money, May, enough to set me up for life, and I'll be gone. You'll never have to see me again.'

'Oh, David.' Olive was distraught now. 'That's not what we want. We don't want to be rid of

you! We want to help –'

'It's what *I* want.' He cut across her coldly. 'There is nothing for me here, and I don't want to stay.'

'But, Son, we can get you medical care, and I'm sure I can get you a job. Girls are more used to injured men nowadays – you might meet someone...'

May hated the pleading she heard in her father's voice. David was going to go, and it was for the best. The war had destroyed her brother. The boy she knew was lying dead on some field in France, and this entity, not even a person, was in his place.

'I want two thousand pounds,' David said calmly, lighting a cigarette and filling the room with smoke. 'The amount Maura left to May because you told her I was dead when I was only missing in action.'

'Son, I wouldn't have... I haven't got that kind of money...' Michael Gallagher said desperately.

'Don't call me son, and get me the money.' David's icy tone was so aloof, so indifferent to the chaos he was causing. 'Otherwise you think this is bad? I can make your lives hell. I know how much your precious reputation means to you, Father, how you are terrified by what the neighbours might say. So how will it go when everyone knows your daughter is a bit of a slut?'

'That's not true!' shouted May, wondering in an awful moment of panic if he really had read Eamonn's letters.

'Who cares if enough people believe it? When the bank hears the rumours I'll start, a few choice words in the right ears, it will reflect very badly on poor old plodding-along Michael Gallagher to have a money-grabbing whore for a daughter.'

‘David, why would you say something so untrue?’ Her mother was pleading with him now.

‘Because I hate you, and him, and her, and this country and this city and this house, and I don’t care what kind of carnage I create. Because, Mother’ – sarcasm dripped from the word – ‘though my heart is beating, I’m dead. Dead and gone to hell. So get me the money and spare yourselves more pain.’

‘I hate you too,’ May heard herself say.

‘Then we’re clear.’ He smiled and left, the front door slamming behind him.

May went to her parents then and embraced them. They were broken-hearted. She couldn’t leave them to the devices of David; he was disgusting and foul-mouthed and a liar and endlessly cruel. She made a decision.

They’d been saving money to repay Nick the thousand pounds he’d given Peter, and there were four hundred in that pot now. Nick had insisted the money was a gift, not a loan, but May was determined to pay him back. Still, she was sure he wouldn’t mind waiting. She’d write to Peter and ask him to send her that money as soon as he could, and at least that was a start to paying her brother off and being rid of him for once and for all.

CHAPTER 18



COURTOWN, COUNTY WEXFORD

*P*ETER

DEAREST PETER,

Oh, how I miss you. I would give anything, absolutely anything, to be in your arms tonight instead of here in the house of horror. I long to just pack my bag and walk out the door, but I can't leave my parents to the mercy of the monster, I just can't. They are terrified of him, and that's the truth. I wonder sometimes if this person is really my brother? With his mask he could well be someone impersonating him, though that is so fanciful and wishful thinking on my part that you are probably laughing your head off at me now.

It was like May to have such fanciful notions all right. He undressed while reading. The show had had four encores tonight, and he was exhausted but on a high. Magus had managed to devise an act that had him escaping from a chained box, and Enzo contorted while Nick played dark chords on the piano, and though audiences weren't exactly sure what they were watching, they were fascinated. It was bordering on circus, and May would probably not approve – she was always trying to make the cabaret more highbrow – but people liked the macabre too. He doubted he'd sleep. He carried on reading, sitting on the bed in his undershirt having hung up his costume.

Honestly, though, Peter, this is no laughing matter. Tonight we had the most almighty scene, a long story I won't go into except to say you know my temper. I ended up confronting his appalling behaviour, the drinking, the rudeness and all of it, and then he made a very distasteful remark about you and me, so I said I wished he'd been killed in France. I regretted it – or did I? At least I regretted upsetting my parents further.

Anyway, there was much hullabaloo, and Mother and Father were practically in tears, and the upshot of it all is he

hates us, hates Dublin, Ireland, everything we are, and he's demanded two thousand pounds, the same as I got in my inheritance. He thinks it was rightfully his and I somehow stole it from him, and he says once he gets it, he'll leave forever. If he doesn't, he's going to create scandal by telling lies about all sorts of things. I wouldn't give a hoot – let people say what they like – but my parents thrive on their respectability, as you know – they cling to it like a lifeline – so him saying nasty things about me and you to their friends and Father's colleagues at the bank is their worst nightmare.

Well, possibly their second worst. He's their worst. And there is no waking up.

So, my darling, I hate to ask. I gave you my inheritance with a whole heart, and I know things are tight, but at least we're in the black now – I left things in good order for you, I know. So can you send me the chequebook I have for the savings account where Nick's money is held so I can start to pay David off? There's only four hundred in there, but I know Nick won't mind waiting; he's not even expecting it back.

Then maybe David will agree to leave if I promise to send him a bit more every month, and then I can come to join you and we'll all be reunited and this whole nightmare will be over.

I called over to see your mother again yesterday – any excuse to get out of the house – and she sends you her love. She's at least stopped apologising and feeling embarrassed when I come; she's getting used to me now. And her new house is lovely and cosy. She's such a lovely woman, your mother, so sensible and full of good advice. I know you told me before she was kind of beaten down by your father, but she's really coming into her own now. She told me she went to see Aida when you were caring for her in Dublin. She's got a kind heart, your ma.

Peter smiled at May's use of the endearment; Olive Gallagher would need the smelling salts if May called her 'Ma'.

Anyway, darling, I love you so much and I miss you like a physical pain.

Your loving wife, May xxx

He folded the letter and replaced it in its envelope, then collapsed on his back on the bed, his hands over his face. What was he going to do?

Every penny of the money May had set aside for Nick was gone. Since she'd left for Dublin, he'd been living night to night, his head wrecked. With every seat filled – and the tent could take a hundred and fifty people – at a shilling a seat, was seven pounds, ten shillings. But once he took expenses out of that, he was left with about two pounds profit. Inevitably something broke or ripped or needed to be paid for, though, and so most days he didn't get the full two pounds. He saved the profit assiduously, but the bills kept coming, so he'd only managed to bank about ten pounds in the last week.

As well as all that, he'd taken on Rosie, and he was paying Maggie as well; she'd offered to work for free, but that was just exploitation.

Not that the girls' wages were the issue. The problem was, he had been spending money on getting Aida better. The dentist who had fixed her broken teeth had been brilliant, just as Maggie had promised, but it had cost a fortune, though he'd pretended to Aida it was for practically nothing. Her hair was growing back, and he'd paid a good hairdresser for her to have her hair cut in a way that concealed the shorter locks. But most expensive of all, there was the podiatric physician, a famous foot doctor based in Waterford, who had promised to ensure she danced again. And he'd lied to Aida about how much that doctor cost as well. He was determined she wouldn't pay a penny out of her own money for her recovery, not after she'd saved his wife and unborn child with her bravery.

He knew he was doing the right thing, but as a result, all the savings were gone, and how was he going to confess to May? She'd been so kind, so supportive, and now she needed him to step up and do the same and he had let her down badly. He had been planning to get Nick to pretend he'd paid him

back already; he was sure his friend would understand, and he wasn't expecting it anyway. But now May needed the actual money and it wasn't there.

He did his best to stop panicking. He would get dressed in his best attire tomorrow and go to the bank. He was a businessman, he had his own company – maybe they would give him a loan.

He lay back on the bed with his eyes closed, but sleep wouldn't come. He got up again. He'd get dressed and go for a walk and a cigarette; that often helped him think more clearly.

There was laughing and giggling coming from the girls' caravans, and Two-Soups and Ramon were playing cards in their van. Despite the lateness of the hour, they were all the same, too alert to go straight to sleep after a show.

He could see Enzo and Nick in Enzo's van and decided to knock. He needed the distraction of his friends tonight. Nick opened the door. Enzo, bare-chested in just his trousers, was standing at the mirror, a basin of water ready for a shave on the dresser.

'All right, boss?' The Londoner glanced at him in the mirror.

'Is everything all right, P-P-Peter? You look worried.'

'Yeah, fine.' He wasn't going to share his worries with them. Enzo had a need to believe everything was fine, otherwise he got jumpy and gave a poor performance. And Nick would offer to bail him out, but this was too much, and besides, Peter knew Nick's relationship with the baron was a bit strained at the moment, and there was no allowance coming to him while he 'cavorted around with the circus', as Walter Shaw called it.

Enzo turned and gave him one of his looks. The sort of look that said 'You might be fooling everyone else, but you're not fooling me.' 'Anythin' we can 'elp with?'

'No, thanks. I'll be fine.' Peter smiled as he sat down.

'Cuppa?' Nick offered.

‘Lovely, thanks.’ What with May calling his mother his ‘ma’, and the future baron making him a ‘cuppa’ in a caravan, he really was dragging them all down to his level.

They drank strong tea and smoked a cigarette together while chatting about Celine’s baby and Nick’s pending fatherhood. ‘I haven’t told Father yet,’ confided Nick. ‘He’ll just use it as a lever to make me come home, and I don’t want to do that until I really have to. But I think when Celine is just a little further on, I’d better bring her to Brockleton to be looked after. Life on the road when you’re pregnant doesn’t look easy. You must be relieved May’s still with her mother.’

‘Yeah, I suppose I am.’ Though from her latest letter, the Gallagher house sounded a much worse place for a pregnant woman even than a damp caravan, bumping along the increasingly potholed lanes between shows. ‘How’s Celine coping?’

‘Wonderful, not sick at all.’

‘E still won’ tell me wha their row was about back in January,’ complained Enzo. ‘Even though us three are s’posed to be blood brothers, like.’

‘Ah, he’ll tell us in his own good time if he ever wants to,’ said Peter mildly, and changed the subject to the matter of Two-Soups and Delilah, who were still seeing each other, though there was no ring in sight. It was nice, sitting there, joking and laughing, talking about nothing much. It reminded him of the nights in the dugout, but without the dread, cold and hunger.

After an hour, he left, feeling like maybe he could sleep now, before going to the bank tomorrow.

As he went back to his and May’s van, he saw her in the moonlight. She was sitting on the steps outside her van. It was a warm night, warm enough even for her. She still marvelled at the weather here, how all the seasons could be felt in one day. He hesitated a moment before approaching her. Nick’s warning about campsite gossip rang in his ears...

To hell with it.

‘Can’t sleep either?’ he asked as he changed direction.

‘I’m doing the exercises the doctor gave me.’ She smiled and stretched out her feet, turning them in circles from left to right, then bending them back and forwards. ‘I have to do them as much as I can, he says. You?’

He knew he shouldn’t – May would hate it if he confided in her – but something in him made him say, ‘How long have you got?’

‘All night if you need it,’ she replied. ‘Tea? I would offer you some of this sherry Ramon has had sent – an old school friend of his in Valencia makes it – but you won’t drink it, I suppose?’

He shook his head. He’d seen enough of how drink could destroy in his youth; he would never touch it.

‘I have some elderflower cordial I made? My mother used to make it from the flowers that grew on the tree outside our apartment building. How about that?’

‘Thanks.’ He smiled and followed her up the steps to her van, delighted as she mounted the steps ahead of him slowly but surely.

Inside, the bed was covered in a beautiful dove-grey shawl he’d seen her wear when she danced before she’d been tortured by the unknown officer; it was threaded with gold and silver. And in the last few weeks, she’d upholstered the cushions in the seating area at the other end in fabric from Granada, dark gold with red and indigo through it.

She lit a three-candle candelabra that sat on the little round table, giving the room a cosy glow.

‘These are beautiful. They really are exquisite,’ he said, picking up one of the scatter cushions.

‘I spent almost a month’s wages on just the fabric. It is a silk velvet brocade. And see here – these are little pomegranates with a trellis behind. I like to think it was the type of pattern they had in the Alhambra, so delicate, so beautiful.’

She came to stand before him and stroked the cushion lovingly. Aida's van was a treasure trove of beautiful things. She kept her hair combs, many of them mother-of-pearl or tortoiseshell and decorated with silk flowers, on a specially made holder she had pinned to the wall, her *sandalos* in neat decorated boxes under her dressing table. Her dresses, her pride and joy, were in a specially made wide wardrobe; the standard ones crushed the dresses and that was unacceptable, so Two-Soups had made her a special one. The whole effect was colourful, exotic and elegant.

'They're lovely,' he agreed, replacing the cushion.

She looked up into his face. 'I know you are the boss, but if there is something on your mind, you can tell me and I will keep it in confidence. You know this, yes?'

Peter hesitated.

'You don't need to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders, Peter.'

The responsibility of it all suddenly felt crushing, and he heard himself blurt it all out. David demanding two thousand pounds from May...but the cabaret was barely keeping its head above water despite the tent being filled every night. He didn't say anything about how he'd used the savings intended for Nick to pay for Aida's care. He just said he wasn't as good with money as May and he'd let things get in a mess since she'd gone home to Dublin.

While he talked, Aida made up two glasses of elderflower cordial, then brought them to the table where he sat and seated herself opposite him. 'I'm so sorry, Peter. I didn't know things were so tight. Now I feel bad about spending all that money on cushion covers. You should have let me put it towards the dentist, the doctor.'

He nearly took her hand but stopped himself, remembering again what Nick had said about gossip. Bad enough that he'd let May down about the money. 'Aida, don't ever say that. You're not paying anything for this, ever. You sacrificed your health to save May, and anyway, that money was a drop in the ocean compared to what David is asking.'

‘So what’s your plan, Peter?’

He loved this about her; she was a great listener, not rushing in with solutions all the time like May did.

‘I’ll see if I can get a bank to lend the money to me, pay it back as fast as I can and only tell May if it’s absolutely necessary.’

The look on her face made words unnecessary. No fixed assets, no savings, no track record and a notoriously precarious business. There was not a snowball’s chance in hell they would lend him ten pounds let alone two thousand.

‘I’m wasting my time, aren’t I?’ He asked the question, but he already knew the answer.

‘I think that you are,’ Aida agreed, in her usual blunt manner.

‘So what do I do now?’

‘I think you know.’

‘Say it anyway.’

‘As you already know, you must tell May the truth, for a start. She’s not a stupid woman. She’ll be fine. And she loves you so much, she will forgive anything, even making a mess of her accounts.’

She was right. May did love him that much, he knew it, but that didn’t solve the problem of David. ‘I’m worried for her and her parents. He sounds dangerous. He’s always talking about how the Irish should be ashamed of themselves for fighting the English, and he’s been threatening to tell her father’s neighbours and his workplace some scandalous lies – she didn’t even say what – to ruin his reputation.’

Aida’s eyes widened in alarm. ‘Then you need to go there and help your wife deal with this man. She has been so loyal to you, and especially now, with the baby, she should not be upset like this. Go to her, tell this man that he simply cannot make such demands, and if he refuses, well then...’ She paused.

‘Well then what?’ Peter asked.

‘That gun that your brother had the day we were arrested – I threw it under your bed. Unless someone moved it, it is probably still there.’

Peter shook his head. ‘I wish I could just threaten him with a gun, get him to leave, but I don’t see how. May’s parents would never forgive me – they love him even though he’s no good for them. And probably May wouldn’t either.’ Though he suspected she would. ‘And even if I did get rid of him, with their blessing, there’s no guarantee he won’t come back as soon as I’ve left Dublin.’

‘Not if he’s gone permanently,’ Aida said darkly.

The idea hung between them in the glow of the candlelight.

‘I don’t think I could...’ Peter said hesitantly.

‘Well’ – Aida shot him a glance – ‘you know people who *do* think they could, the kind of people who don’t like David Gallagher and his treacherous kind. If he was to fall foul of some of those types... It sounds like his opinions are the kind that could get you a bullet in the head very easily these days.’

For a moment Peter toyed with the idea. Could Eamonn arrange it from America? Aida was right about one thing: This monster, as May called him, would never really be gone unless he was dead. ‘Maybe it is an option.’

The reality of his words dawned on him then, and he mentally shook himself. ‘What am I talking about? Even if I wanted him gone, and asked Eamonn to arrange it, I would never be able to tell May, and I couldn’t have a terrible secret like that at the heart of my marriage. No. That’s not going to happen. I’ll just go to Dublin and have it out with him, man to man. Maybe he’s not quite the monster May thinks he is. She’s like her mother sometimes – she does get fanciful notions and blow things out of proportion.’

CHAPTER 19



RATHGAR, DUBLIN

*P*ETER

HE LONGED to check his watch but knew it would look rude. He'd only just arrived off the train, but already the dinner seemed interminable. The Gallaghers had insisted on having a special meal to celebrate him meeting their son for the first time, but it was perfectly obvious that the prodigal son had no wish to meet him.

'So, David,' Peter tried again valiantly as May's brother helped himself to more whiskey, 'has Dublin changed much, do you think, since you went away?'

David looked at him, a steely glare with one cold eye. The mask covered most of his face, and it was disconcerting. Peter had seen men with masks before; trench warfare meant facial injuries were commonplace, and valiant efforts were being made to try to give the men affected some of their dignity back with the use of prosthetics. Undoubtedly it was better than having the injury on public display, but not by much, and this one looked even odder than those others he'd seen, with its pinkish-white colour and painted-on eye.

'Well, apart from the fact that it's been blown to bits by degenerate thugs, you mean?' David drawled.

Before Peter could reply that the degenerate thugs were the ones in uniform, Olive jumped in hastily. 'I think Peter just meant the general feel of the city. I think the new flower beds in Stephen's Green are just lovely, such a nice place to go for a stroll nowadays, and the ducks and all the birds on the pond...' Her voice trailed off as David pointedly ignored her and helped himself to more whiskey.

'More roasties, Peter?' May offered. Though there were only five of them, the table groaned under the weight of roast beef, mashed and roast potatoes, gravy and three different

types of vegetables. May had told him that Madge and her mother had been slaving for hours.

As she passed him the plate of potatoes, he saw the desperation in her eyes. His heart went out to her, and to her parents, who had no idea who this bitter, angry man with the prosthetic face was, sitting at their table drinking whiskey like it was going out of fashion. They were all clearly totally distraught, despite the efforts to appear normal.

He made another attempt to get a conversation going. ‘And why was it that you weren’t able to come back to Ireland when everyone else did?’ he asked. He knew May longed to know the answer to this one.

David’s mouth twitched behind the mask, and he allowed his single-eyed gaze to rest on each person for a second before moving to the next. He said nothing.

‘Yes, we were so heartbroken, David, love. We thought you were dead. If we’d known you’d survived, and thank God you did, then obviously we’d have come to fetch you...’ Olive pleaded for her son’s understanding. Peter knew this was a conversation that had been had over and over, never with a satisfactory resolution.

David lit a cigarette, and Peter recognised the green pack – Eckstein. Standard issue to German troops. A fug of smoke encircled David’s head as he blew out the match and threw it on his plate, on top of the untouched food. His venom was palpable.

‘I didn’t contact you because I didn’t want to come back here, to this place.’

Peter felt disgusted. This man was every bit as bad as May had warned him in her letter, if not worse. The Gallaghers did not deserve this.

‘What’s wrong with Dublin?’ Olive’s voice quavered.

‘I don’t mean Dublin. I mean you. I didn’t want to come back to you.’ Each word dropped like a stone, crushing these good, kind people.

‘Why not, Son? We only want to look after you...’ Michael was trying to keep his emotions in check, but tears were now seeping down Olive’s face and May was ashen and silent.

‘Because I don’t know you any more,’ sneered the masked man. ‘And you don’t know me. I’m a different person to the boy you sent to war in 1914, six years ago, might as well be sixty years. You haven’t a clue, not the faintest idea what it was like, what we had to do, and now I’m supposed to come back here and play happy families, pretend it’s all fine, forget everything that happened? I can’t do that, and I won’t do it.’

There was a slight slur to his words, the alcohol having its effect, but even over the whiskey fumes, the smell of the man’s cologne was oppressive.

‘Sending me off there, all smiles and delighted to have a son you could boast about down at the rugby club or at Mass. Easy to be full of pride when it wasn’t you doing the fighting.’ He stubbed out the cigarette in his mashed potato.

A heavy, emotionally charged silence fell over the table. Peter knew from all his years listening to a drunken Kit Cullen that no good would come from this now. Seeing the fear in his mother-in-law’s eyes decided him.

He spoke forcefully. ‘David, you’re directing your anger at the wrong people. It isn’t your parents’ fault, or your sister’s. The war destroyed us all in some way or another. Some scars are outside, some aren’t, but we all have them, or at least those of us who weren’t sent to kingdom come do.’ He’d had enough of this snivelling whinger. ‘You’re not the only one, David, and maybe less self-pity and a bit more kindness towards your family who are trying to help you wouldn’t go astray.’

May’s parents were fidgeting and anxious. But May caught his eye and the look was one of pure love, so he carried right on.

‘We were all sold a pup, David, every last one of us, fed a load of lies about guts and glory. And now we all know, all of us who were there, we know what it was like. But blaming

your family isn't fair or right. These good people are just glad to see you, and you'd want to start behaving a bit better.'

David pushed back his chair and stood, swaying slightly, and Michael, who'd been sitting beside him, reacted quickly, getting to his feet and putting an arm around his son. 'Right, a lie-down, I think, is what you need now, David.'

'Get your hands off me – who the hell do you think you are?' David snarled, and turned on his father and drew back his fist, ready to punch. Olive screamed and Michael ducked, and the effort landed in mid-air, and then Peter dove between them and grabbed David by the arms.

The man struggled and flailed – he was strong despite all the whiskey – but Peter was stronger and shoved him against the door. As he did, he caught the corner of the mask with his thumb. The elastic holding it in place around the back of David's head released, and the mask fell off...

To reveal a face completely devoid of injury.

No scars, no burns, no empty socket where an eye had once been. If it wasn't for the cruel light in his eyes and the twisted sneer on his mouth, he would have been one of the best-looking men Peter had ever seen.

It was Michael who spoke first, his voice faint and bewildered. 'David, you... You're not scarred... Your face... it's fine... Why would you... I don't understand...'

'Oh, David, darling David, thank God you're not injured! We thought...' Olive cried with relief and confusion at the same time. 'Why, why did you let us think...'

'Because he was trying to trick us, to make us feel sorry for him, so we'd give him money. How could you, David?' May was crying now as well, furious and devastated at such duplicity. 'How could you do this to Mother, and Father? They've done nothing but love you and try to help you. I can't believe me and Peter were planning to give you all our savings.'

'Oh, shut up, you pathetic little slut,' her brother spat. 'You're just like all women, turning on the tears when things

don't go your way. That might work with your street-rat husband here – he's only interested in rutting like the wild animals and getting his greedy hands on your money.' His eyes blazed with hatred. 'And don't pretend you care about this old pair of fossils either.' He pointed at their parents. 'You just have your eye on this property and whatever safe, dull, predictable investments Michael "Never Take a Chance" Gallagher has made.'

Enough, Peter thought. This man was a toxic, venomous creature, and he'd never give them a moment's peace while he was still in this house. Now was his chance. He yanked David's arm up his back, and the other man let out a yelp of pain.

'That's quite enough from you for now, I think,' he said through gritted teeth as he held the taller man in an armlock. 'You've lied and cheated and been so cruel to your family. I think it would be best if you took your leave now and don't come back. You're not welcome here. There's nothing for you. So crawl back into whatever hole you crawled out of and let these people in peace.'

'You can't do this...' hissed David. 'Mother, Father...'

But Peter shoved him out into the hall, away from the Gallaghers, slammed him against the front door and whispered in his ear, all the while keeping him restrained. The scent of his cloying cologne was sickening.

He could just about hear May quietly shutting the door between the dining room and the hallway; her parents didn't need to see or hear this. And it was notable that they weren't making an effort to come out and stop him.

He shoved David's elbow up his back, and the man whimpered in pain, rendered immobile for fear of dislocating his shoulder. It was a trick Eamonn had taught Peter years ago.

He moved his mouth up to David's ear and spoke clearly but only loud enough so David could hear. He slipped back into his Henrietta Street accent.

‘You have May wrong, but you’re right about me. I was dragged up the slums, a place where we solve matters this way, not with nice words. Life is cheap for us, David, not precious like it is for May and your parents. Now I’ve seen enough, and I’ll protect them with everythin’ I have, and believe me, I get what I want and I don’t let anyone or anything get in my way.’

David didn’t respond, his breathing laboured through the pain of his almost dislocated arm.

‘Now, *I* may not have anything to do with the IRA, David – you heard wrong there – but my *brother* is very well connected politically, not on your side of the divide, I have to say. But he’s well positioned, and he’s very, very fond of my wife, so given your vocal views on the patriots in this country, I think it wouldn’t shock anyone if you were found floatin’ in the Liffey some mornin’.’ He yanked David’s arm higher, causing the man to yelp and a tear to form in the side of his eye, his handsome face pressed to the teak front door. Peter kept the pressure on, David’s body pinned by his to the door, his knee between the other man’s legs.

‘So if I were you, I’d leave this house now and never come back. May and me, we’ll see your suitcase is in a locker at Kingsbridge station by this time tomorrow – the stationmaster will give you the key – and if you’ve any sense, you’ll take the next train out. England, Germany, America – nobody cares so long as we never have to lay eyes on you again. Are we clear?’

David produced a whimper in response.

‘If I hear so much as a whiff of you, I’ll make sure your opinions on the Irish cause are made known to people who may not be that receptive to your way of thinkin’, and who are feeling a bit trigger-happy at the moment. Do we understand each other? And just for the record, I have a gun myself, so don’t be sneakin’ back here in the night or I’ll mistake you for a burglar, do you get me?’

David groaned but didn’t respond. Peter yanked his arm even higher up his back, and this time he howled.

‘All right...all right...’ he managed.

Peter pulled him back and opened the door, then shoved him out, tripping him as he did so to make him fall onto the path. Ignoring the stream of expletive-laden abuse, he shut the front door and watched through the opaque side window panel as David Gallagher got up and walked, without a limp, down the path and out onto the road.

Once he was sure David was gone, Peter entered the dining room.

Olive was weeping, and Michael was staring into the middle distance, lost in thought.

May rushed to his side.

He put his arms around her and kissed her forehead. ‘He’s gone, and he won’t be back,’ he said quietly.

She kissed his cheek and hugged him. ‘Thank you, darling. I don’t know what we’d have done if you weren’t here. I can’t believe he lied to us... Oh...’ She tensed in his arms and went white.

‘May? What’s wrong?’

‘I’m fine...’ May said through gritted teeth. ‘Just a cramp...’ She looked deathly pale and was clearly in intense pain, and then she groaned and buckled at the knees as he caught her in his arms.

‘Oh dear, sweet Jesus...’ Olive blessed herself. ‘Not the baby! It’s all the stress. Michael, send Brendan next door for Dr Gleeson – tell him it’s an emergency!’ She was panicking and flapping, and Michael went running out of the house, the first time Peter had even seen that stolid man move so fast.

May drooped against him with another groan, and he picked her up and carried her out of the dining room to the sofa in the living room. He laid her on it gently, putting cushions behind her head, and sat with her, holding her hand.

‘Is it the baby, May?’ he asked gently.

She gazed at him, her forget-me-not eyes brimming with anxiety. ‘It feels like it, but it’s much too soon. Oh, Peter...’ A

tear ran down her face. ‘Peter, I think... Can you bring me to the bathroom?’

He helped her upstairs, with Olive fluttering behind them, then horrified the poor woman by going into the bathroom with his wife and closing the door. Olive would never have allowed Michael into the bathroom if she was using the toilet or the bath, but living in a caravan meant there wasn’t much room for privacy, so he and May were not at all prudish with each other.

As soon as she pulled down her underwear to sit on the toilet, she cried out in shock. The gusset was stained with blood. ‘Peter...Mother’s right – I’m losing the baby.’ She wept, distraught. ‘That’s the dampness I felt running out of me...’

He knelt in front of her, holding her hands tenderly, anxious to soothe her. ‘Try to relax, love. Let’s just wait and see what the doctor says. Maybe it will be all right. There’s not much blood. Sometimes this happens, I think. I know it’s hard, but try to stay calm.’

‘Get me some fresh underclothes, will you, in my room, and some sanitary napkins, the drawer beside the window,’ she whispered.

‘I will, stay here.’

Both her parents were on the landing outside the bathroom when he opened the door, their faces grey. ‘What’s happening?’ Michael asked, his voice hoarse with emotion.

‘I don’t know. She’s bleeding a little, but not much. She wants me to get her clean clothes.’

‘I’ll do it,’ Olive said, glad of something to do. ‘Michael, go and wait downstairs for the doctor.’

‘And some sanitary napkins,’ Peter added, and his mother-in-law blushed crimson but nodded.

Peter went back to May, and moments later her mother appeared with all she needed, including a nightie and a bed jacket. ‘If you leave now, Peter, I’ll help May to get washed and changed before the doctor comes.’

‘No, no.’ May got upset again. ‘I want Peter. I need Peter to help me.’

‘Thank you, Olive.’ He took the clothes from May’s mother. ‘I’ll help her, if you don’t mind. Now, May, can you make it to your bedroom? You’d be more comfortable there.’

May nodded, and as Olive hovered nervously, he picked her up again and carried her down the landing to the last door. He remembered well which door was hers from the night he’d spent in the garden shed before he’d crept past the grumpy housekeeper, Madge, in the early hours, up the stairs to this landing, and checked each room until he found her.

David’s had been empty, with the bed made perfectly and some rugby pennants on the walls. Off fighting the war, making his parents proud.

The next door had been her parents’ bedroom. He’d heard heavy feet moving around in there and then a man grunting, probably bending to put his slippers on.

But the last door had been hers, and he’d slipped in and closed it behind him. It was the prettiest room he’d ever seen, with a dressing table holding a mirror, a jug and an ewer in delicate china with pink peony roses on it, and a single bed covered with a quilt embroidered with flowers. And there in the bed had been May, fast asleep, her head turned to one side, eyelashes resting on her dimpled cheeks, her pink mouth very slightly open, her rich blond curls fanned out across the pillow.

She had been his rock then, giving him clothes, money. Writing to him at the front, sending him treats and socks, and a shirt she’d stitched herself. And then when he came back, she was the one waiting, glad to see him, willing to do whatever it took to help him get his dream off the ground. He was lucky to have her.

He placed her gently in bed, the very one he’d snuck into at her request all those years ago. She was pale and frightened but stoic, and he was struck again by the strength of character of his wife. She might not look it, with her dimples and curls, and she might weep and get frustrated at times, but May had a will of iron.

Eventually the elderly Dr Gleeson arrived and shoed Peter out of the room while he examined May. He was old-fashioned and believed husbands had no business in pregnancy or birth after the moment of conception. Peter found him gruff and rude, but he knew May trusted him so said nothing.

He waited with her parents downstairs, trying to be positive while dreading the doctor's verdict. If his fight with her brother had brought on a miscarriage, he would never forgive himself. Nor would he forgive David.

The doctor descended the stairs, ponderous and slow, and Michael stood up and went to the door of the living room to let him in. All three of them, on their feet now, waited for him to speak.

‘Mr Cullen, Mr and Mrs Gallagher...’

Had anyone ever spoken so slowly, wondered Peter in desperation.

‘May seems to be well.’

‘And the baby?’ He hardly dared ask.

‘The child seems to be fine as well.’

‘Oh, thank God...’ breathed Olive, as Michael put his arm around her in a second uncharacteristic act of public tenderness today. Peter couldn't even speak, such was the wave of relief that crashed over him; it left him breathless. He hadn't realised until that moment how much he wanted this baby. He'd thought of fatherhood as a simple matter of doing his duty, but now he felt an overwhelming wave of love for his unborn child.

‘But it is critical that she remains on complete bed rest from now on. No more rushing about around the country. She's to stay here until the child is born.’ He looked accusingly at Peter.

Peter found his voice. ‘That's fine by me, but she's not going to like that. She's been desperate to come home.’

‘Frankly, Mr Cullen, whether she likes it or not, it is her doctor's orders, and to do anything other than that is to risk the

life of both mother and baby. I made that plain to May and she understands, so I expect you to understand as well. The bleeding has stopped, and the baby's heartbeat is fine.' Dr Gleeson was still glaring at him as if he expected Peter to argue with him, even though that was the last thing Peter wanted to do; all he wanted was to keep his wife and baby safe. 'So complete bed rest and absolutely no marital relations whatsoever.'

Michael and Olive looked like they were witnessing the debauchery of the last days of the Roman Empire, so horrified were their faces. It was almost enough to make Peter smile.

'I understand, Doctor.'

'I should hope you do, young man.'

'Thank you, Dr Gleeson,' Olive intervened hastily, desperate to move the conversation away from this topic. 'I know my son-in-law will see to it that May follows your orders to the letter.'

* * *

AS SOON AS Dr Gleeson left – Michael insisted on paying him, waving away Peter's money – Peter ran upstairs to find May sitting up, still very pale but smiling. 'He thinks the baby's all right,' she whispered.

'Thank God.' Peter kissed her forehead and sat beside her, holding her hand.

'But I have to be on bed rest till the baby is born,' she added sadly.

'He told me, made out like I was wanting to force you down a coalmine or something.' Peter rolled his eyes.

'And he told me that there was to be "no marital relations".' Peter mimicked the old doctor perfectly. 'Your mother and father nearly had a stroke.' He laughed then, and she joined in, relieved and happy.

‘How David and I were ever conceived, I can’t imagine. They surely never did it, did they?’ she whispered, and he pulled a face that made her laugh again.

‘Well, I’m on strict instructions, so I daren’t go against him, May. You better stay here.’

‘Oh, I can imagine. He’s nice really, but he’s just a bit grumpy.’ May squeezed his hand. ‘It’s too big a risk to go back to the way we live with the cabaret apparently, not till the baby is born. But I don’t know, I’m not sure... Can you manage without me?’

‘I’ll have to, my love. It’s hard work, but I’ve managed so far.’ He was intensely grateful that he hadn’t had the time or opportunity to tell her about using up Nick’s money. She’d never have let him go back to the cabaret without her if she knew about that; she wouldn’t have trusted him not to go bankrupt overnight. Aida had said he owed May honesty, but his wife was in a delicate state and it would be wrong to put an unnecessary burden on her. ‘I’ll get back to see you as often as I can, and I’ll send a telegram every time we move so you’ll always know where to find me if you need me.’

‘They’ll drive me daft’ – he knew she meant her parents – ‘but they’ll take good care of me, and hopefully Kathleen and Connie and your mother can visit.’

‘Of course they will, and it’s going to be all right, May, I promise.’ He took her in his arms then and kissed her, like that time long ago when he’d crept into her room at dawn. ‘Everything will be fine, May. I love you, and everything will be fine.’

CHAPTER 20



A IDA

THE DANCERS WERE ON STAGE, working on a new number to accompany the popular new song ‘Wang Wang Blues’, a foxtrot by Paul Whiteman, and they’d had a whole set of costumes made to match. It was a shame they’d lost Peggy, but Rosie was living up to her potential, and Aida took joy in teaching her. Maggie, Peter’s sister, also had something special, that star quality her brother had. She wasn’t as technically good as Rosie, but she had stage presence and held audiences in the palm of her hand with her winning smile. She could sing like a lark and was light on her feet. With her mop of copper curls, she’d been nicknamed Copper Topsy by the others, and it had stuck.

Aida knew the girl often drove Peter mad. Her antics, unrehearsed and unsanctioned, sometimes had audiences laughing at the wrong times, and she refused to follow half of his instructions, and sometimes she disappeared mysteriously on her days off. But the siblings clearly loved each other under it all.

‘All right, let’s leave it there. But remember, that pirouette at the end, elbows up, heads locked, and I want to see each face at the same time. Copper Topsy and Rosie, take a five-minute break but then stay behind – I want to run through that tap number with you.’

She heard the sigh of relief. She worked them hard, she knew, but they enjoyed being good even if extra work was the price. Their working days followed the same pattern: rising late, breakfast, rehearsal and then rest from after lunch to five in the afternoon, when it was time to get everything ready for the show. She was aware she was cutting into their rest time, but she knew they didn't mind; the two of them were like sponges, soaking up all she taught them.

She fetched an exercise book from her caravan, in which she'd written a number of notes choreographing a new dance, then returned to the stage. She could walk easily now; her feet only hurt a little. But she hadn't yet dared to dance, not a single step. She was afraid, if she was honest. She had been such a wonderful, breathtaking dancer, and she would never be as good again, she knew it.

Rosie and Maggie were waiting patiently on stage for Aida as she returned with the book and took her chair in front of the stage.

'Now listen to me, girls.' She had choreographed a number based on a popular song, 'He Ain't Yours, He's Mine', where two girls are fighting for the same man and he's playing one off the other until they both eventually realise he's not worth it. She wanted to create a dance fight scene, incorporating parts of tango and paso doble, where the girls would use each other as anchors for spins and lifts. It was complex and needed precision timing, but she thought if anyone could do it, it would be Rosie and Maggie, and it would look spectacular.

They would use Enzo as the man not worth their efforts.

She explained slowly what she wanted, talking them through step after step.

Again and again they tried, throwing all their energy into the complicated high-energy moves but unable to deliver exactly what Aida wanted. Soon sweat was dripping from both girls, and they were red in the face with exhaustion and exasperation at their own failure.

Aida sighed. 'OK, it's not working. Take a five-minute break, girls. We will try again.'

Rosie rushed for the jug of water set on a table by the stage, poured a glass and gulped it down to slake her thirst. But Maggie did one of her disappearing acts, slipping out of the tent. Just as Aida was beginning to think she wasn't coming back, she reappeared with her brother in tow.

'And what is it you are doing here?' Aida asked in surprise, glancing with eyebrows raised from Peter to his sister.

'I'm not sure. I just got dragged here,' said Peter, a mixture of amusement and frustration in his voice. 'No explanation...'

'Senorita Aida, it's just that me and Rosie can't get what you want us to do 'cause we can't imagine it in our heads. We need to see it, and we want you and Peter to dance it for us.'

'No, that is impossible, Copper Topsy...'

But Peter smiled and stood before her, offering her his hand. 'Let's do it slowly.'

'I...I can't.' She lowered her eyes, clasping her hands in her lap. 'Not yet.'

'Why not yet, Aida?'

'My feet still hurt...' Though that was only partially true. She wouldn't even care about the physical pain, but the heartbreak of realising she could no longer dance would kill her, she knew it. So best not to try. She could live in the belief that one day she would dance again, but not yet.

'It's time to try,' he said quietly. He went up on stage then and wound the gramophone. The crackling of static before the song began felt like thunder in her ears.

'Girls, give us a minute to work it out,' Peter said. 'Come back in fifteen minutes.'

Maggie and Rosie did as he asked, and then they were alone.

He held his hand out to her once more, and she felt crippled by terror, just as crippled as she was when the soldiers dumped her on that Dublin street. A solitary tear rolled down her face, and it felt as though nothing could make her get up

off the chair. She was safe while she sat there, the reason for her existence was intact. She was a dancer, just not now. If she stood, took his hand and failed...

She could only shake her head; no words would come.

He bent down to her then, their heads close, so only she could hear him.

‘It’s me, it’s Peter. You’re safe. I know you’re terrified, I know it, but you’re the bravest woman I ever had the privilege to know. You are fearless and strong and the best dancer any of us have ever seen. And it’s time to climb back up on that throne as queen of the dance, Aida. It’s been long enough. If you don’t, that bastard wins and we lose.’

She met his eyes...and an old memory returned.

When she was a little girl, she had a mental block about a particular dance move, convincing herself she had it wrong. Her mother had taught it to her, but she was sure she was missing a step. Eventually she saw it done professionally by Dominica Rodriguez, the acclaimed flamenco dancer of Málaga, at a show performed in the *plaza* to celebrate the bicentenary of the city.

‘You see?’ her mother had whispered as they watched the free show. ‘You know it is right in here’ – she pointed to her daughter’s heart – ‘but this’ – she put her finger on Aida’s temple – ‘is getting in the way.’

As she hesitated, Peter pulled her gently to her feet. ‘I’ve got you,’ he whispered, and led her to the stage.

The rows of benches, then the wooden seats and then the fancy seats were all empty.

May had had a brainwave to add rows of nice upholstered seats that cost half a crown compared to a shilling for the wooden ones, but people preferred them and they were always first to fill each night.

He took his position, placing his hands where she’d taught him. They’d danced the tango and the paso doble many times. She tried to focus on the music, the rhythm, and closed her eyes, searching deep inside herself. She could feel herself

trembling in his arms, but he was solid, unwavering. She could do it.

Could she? For her, dancing wasn't a physical action but a representation of a feeling. She felt the music, felt the emotion of the piece, and then her body reacted to it. It was how Gabriella did it, how Ramon's mother, Conchita, did it.

Her grip on Peter's hand was death-like, she knew, but if this went wrong...

They waited for the next turn in the melody and began. She faltered. Her feet were like lead. How could she have thought she could do this? The images of splintered bones, her swollen and excruciatingly painful feet... Her whole world was toppling down. She'd lost it; it was gone. Whatever magic, whatever skill she'd ever had was left lying on the floor of that room where Harvey Bathurst took everything from her. It was gone.

Peter locked eyes with her. 'Stop it. It's just nerves. Don't let the doubts in. You are the great Aida Gonzalez, the one and only. You can do this.'

'I can't...'

'You can. Now stop feeling sorry for yourself, senorita, and just do it. You danced before you could walk. Your mother's talent is in your veins. Just do it.'

She was shocked at his stern tone; they were normally gentle with each other.

'Worried about your precious show, are you?' she snapped back. 'Maybe you won't fill as many seats without me on the bill?' She was furious now. 'Maybe you should give me the sack! I'm just taking up space when I can't dance any more.'

'Maybe I will sack you,' he countered. 'Because we have no room here for prima donnas. Those were your words, Aida, but you're more guilty of that crime now than any of the chorus ever were.'

She wanted to slap him then, across his smug face. How dare he? She was the lynchpin of this show, not just for her extraordinary dancing but for all she extracted from the others.

They were a slick, professional company, easily the best in Ireland, because of her attention to detail in every performance. She choreographed everything and made sure it looked aesthetically pleasing. How dare he speak to her like that?

The music began again, and now she was alone. She would show him or die in the attempt. Enough of letting her head get in the way. She wasn't wearing her *sandalos*, but these shoes would do.

She danced flamenco to the music. Though it wasn't a flamenco piece, rhythm was rhythm. Her hands snaked in the air, her fingers snapped, and then she felt it, her feet stamping, her *braceo* and *floreo* taking on a life of their own. She was the *figura*, the star. She allowed the music to sweep her away, even the *tarantos*, which she only did occasionally as it was so difficult to get them totally correct. On and on she danced, alone, singular, like a flame burning bright. Her muscles shrieked in pain, having lain idle for months. It was like dancing on knives, and her body felt stiff...but she was strong, and most importantly, she was dancing.

Finally, at the end of the piece, drenched in sweat, panting, she stood before him. Defying him to be so cruel to her again.

'Welcome back, *senorita*,' he said softly. 'Oh, and for the record, I will never, ever sack you.'

'You'd better not.' She allowed herself a small smile too. A weight had been lifted, and she was more herself than she'd felt since that day they took her to that horrible Castle. She could sense Gabriella and Conchita beside her. Flamenco was about power and strength and defiance, and that was what her mother and Ramon's mother had given her, all those qualities, and she had not let them down.

She held out her hands to him now. 'Are you ready for the tango and the *paso doble*, Peter?'

'Oh, I am, I am.' And he swept her into his arms.

CHAPTER 21



DUBLIN

M AY

IF HER MOTHER knew she was in town shopping, she would have a canary, but May had to get out of the house. She was suffocated by all the attention, not allowed to cook or clean or sew, barely allowed to write a letter in case somehow it hurt the baby.

She'd cajoled Dr Gleeson to lift his total bed rest rule, and he agreed a little movement would be good. For Olive, it meant a walk from the bedroom to the bathroom, or at a push to sit downstairs for an hour or two, but May decided it meant a day in town shopping.

This morning, Olive had had to go to her Saturday flower-arranging committee, and Madge was supposed to be caring for May. Madge, May knew, loved a flutter on the horses – her parents would have been appalled if they knew – and Madge had a fantastic tip for the big race today at the Curragh, so May urged her to slip out to the bookie's and place her bet.

The temptation was too much for the housekeeper, and the moment her back was turned, May had given into temptation herself and slipped out of the house to go wandering around the shops. She was still neat, though the baby was the correct size for this time of pregnancy, Dr Gleeson assured her. She had a few weeks to go, but she needed a few things, and besides, she'd go daft if she had to stay in that house one more second.

It was early August and very warm, and many people were sitting on their doorsteps sunning themselves despite the Black and Tans, who were walking aggressively up and down the streets. They had arrived in Ireland back in March. They were a bunch of destructive thugs recruited from prisons and the ranks of the unemployable, sent here by the English to root out the IRA. It was having the opposite effect; the Tans were so

violent and cruel, more and more people were flocking to the republican cause.

Avoiding a group of them, she ducked into a lovely little store on South Anne Street that sold baby clothes, and though she had more than enough – Olive seemed to get something new for the baby every week – she couldn't resist an adorable little outfit. White cashmere with a broderie anglaise collar, of the softest cotton. It cost a fortune, but she didn't care.

She passed the windows of several boutiques she used to love and reminded herself that soon, very soon, she'd have her body back and she could fit into those clothes again.

Just as she was thinking she was too hot, really, and she'd better get home before Olive finished her meeting, a tram rattled past in the direction of the Guinness factory, where Eamonn worked before he left to command a company of Volunteers. Peter's mother, Bridie, lived near the factory, in one of the houses the Guinness family had built for their workers. She had a widow's pension because Kit Cullen died of an accident in the factory. Peter always said Bridie was much happier now that she had the pension instead of her drunken husband, who had blown every penny on drink.

It struck her that this was a good opportunity to visit Bridie, of whom she was very fond. Peter's humble mother was too shy to come to the Gallaghers' house, and Olive had refused to let May travel alone to see the Cullens since she'd 'nearly lost the baby', as Olive insisted on putting it. 'I suppose I could come with you?' she had suggested, but the offer was half-hearted at best and May didn't take her up on it; her respectable mother would find it very awkward to visit a small working-class house in the Liberties.

Standing at the tram stop, she wondered if she was doing the right thing, staying out this long. Olive would be very worried if she came home and found her daughter gone. But when was May going to get another opportunity? And she wasn't at all worried about the baby now. It was weeks since she'd had the pains, and another six weeks until she was due. Or two, she reminded herself, if the baby was Eamonn's. Her cheeks flushed at the idea.

She pushed away the familiar pang of guilt. It was Peter's child, she knew it. She'd told Eamonn that it couldn't possibly be his, and that was what she wanted to be true. And she'd always believed that if she wanted something hard enough, then God would give it to her. He had given her Peter, hadn't He? And He'd brought David home, though that hadn't worked out very well, but still... Maybe He would grant her this wish as well, even though she knew she didn't deserve it.

The tram arrived, and she got on. Peter's older sister, Kathleen, would be at work in Arnotts, and his youngest sister, Connie, would be at school, so it would be nice to have a cup of tea and a chat with Bridie by themselves. She might ask her a bit about childbirth and what to expect. Olive was useless as a source of information. It was impossible to believe her own mother had ever had relations with May's father or had two children, because she looked horrified any time any mention of conception or childbirth was made. Hopefully Peter's mother wasn't so foolishly 'respectable'. It was May's first baby, and she needed to know what was going to happen.

The tram rattled on towards the Liberties in painfully slow fits and starts as the Tans in their slipshod mismatched uniforms jumped on and insisted on questioning the passengers, mostly women and old men.

A middle-aged Guinness worker kindly had given May his seat near the back of the tram, and now one of the Tans came over to where she was sitting, pointing his rifle at her huge stomach. 'Whatcha got hidden under yer dress, missus, a few pounds of dynamite? We know all the Paddy tricks, hiding guns in prams and all sorts.'

May held up her head and stuck out her chin, though inside she was trembling. 'I'm expecting a baby, can't you see that? Please leave me alone.' The other passengers kept very quiet; they didn't want to make things worse. These Tans were out of control and anything could set them off, shooting people and causing havoc.

'I'll leave you alone once you've shown me under yer dress.' He poked the point of his rifle into her hard abdomen.

‘Oh, don’t, please don’t...’ She felt her stomach clench with distress, and sweat ran down her face.

A ripple of discontent ran through the tram passengers, and one of the Tans up the front, who maybe had more sense, called, ‘Oi, Jonesie, I fancy a pint. Leave the whore to ’er trade, and we’ll grab a drink.’

To May’s intense relief, Jonesie lowered his rifle and pushed his way back up the tram to join the others, who were jumping down from the tram. Nobody else got off with them, but about half the passengers dismounted at the next stop, and by the following stop, the tram was nearly empty. The middle-aged Guinness worker had taken a seat across the aisle from May, staring out at the River Liffey as they journeyed on bumpily up the quays.

May wished she’d gone home instead of taking the tram. Since the Tan had poked his rifle into her stomach, her abdomen kept cramping.

‘Are you all right, missus?’ The middle-aged man had turned towards her.

She nodded, gripping the back of the seat in front of her.

‘Where are ya going?’

‘Iveagh cottages,’ she said through gritted teeth, praying that Bridie would be home. She realised she was holding the rail with a white-knuckle grip, but the pain was subsiding, and she uncurled her fingers and sat back, forcing a smile.

‘You live in the Liberties?’ asked the man, with a curious glance.

May realised her smart, expensive clothes did not tally in his mind with a young woman from a working-class area. ‘I’m from Rathgar, but I’m going to see my mother-in-law, Bridie Cullen,’ she said, resting her hands on her stomach, relieved to feel it ripple as the baby kicked.

‘Ah, Eamonn Cullen’s ma, is she? I worked with Eamonn at the brewery. Eddie Flaherty’s the name. Then are you Eamonn’s wife?’

‘No, Peter’s.’ Dublin was a village really; everyone knew everyone.

‘Is it your first, love?’

She nodded as the pain subsided.

‘Ah, ye’ll be another while so. The first one is always slow, but after that it’s like shelling peas. My missus was ages having our eldest, but the last one was born in ten minutes.’

If this was meant to be soothing or helpful, it definitely wasn’t, but he was being so kind and reassuring, she managed a smile. ‘Oh, but I can’t be starting yet. You see, my due date is weeks away... Oh!’

A gush of hot liquid had run down her legs and into her shoes, puddling on the floor of the tram. She stared down at herself in horror. Not blood, a clear liquid like water... Oh good Lord, she’d wet herself...

‘Oh, be the lord hokey, this nipper is on the way,’ the man said with a laugh, also looking down. ‘Don’t worry, love. I’ve nine of me own. I know all about this. That’s your waters have broken, love. Were you not expecting it?’

‘I didn’t know...’ she managed weakly. The wave of pain came again, and she forgot about the shame of wetting the floor and her clothes.

Unselfconsciously he rubbed her lower back, and it did actually help. ‘Only two more stops, love. Don’t worry, ye’ll be grand. Bridie will know what to do – she often helps out with the others,’ he said confidently. ‘And is your husband there at his ma’s?’

She shook her head as the contraction passed. How she wished Peter was here. ‘He’s away in Wexford, working.’

‘Era, just as well. We’ve no business there at that time. Best leave that to the women who know what they’re doin’ and stay outta the way.’

She was in the grip of another wave of pain so didn’t answer.

‘Time enough to involve him when you’ve the nipper in your arms. If you’re anything like my missus, you’ll have a few things to say about him when the little one is comin’ into the world that it’s best he doesn’t hear anyway.’ He laughed aloud at that. ‘The names she didn’t call me, roaring at me it was all my fault for gettin’ her in the family way, as if I did it all on me own.’

Mercifully they came to the Cullens’s stop, and she began to gather her bags together.

This pain really was hard to bear; she was worried her legs wouldn’t bring her as far as the house.

The man picked up the bags himself and stood, offering her his arm. ‘Righto, let’s go.’

She looked at him in surprise, and he laughed again.

‘Ah, ya didn’t think I was goin’ to let ya find your own way now, did ya?’

‘Thank you so much, Mr Flaherty.’

‘Eddie, please!’

‘Eddie then. And I’m May.’ She took his arm, and he helped her off, then put his arm around her and half walked, half carried her to the Cullens’s door fifty yards from the stop. He banged on the door, then banged again, then opened it. It wasn’t locked. Nobody in the Liberties bothered to lock their doors; they had nothing worth stealing, and anyway in this community, as May was rapidly finding out, everyone looked out for each other.

‘Hello? Hello, Bridie?’ He stuck his head into the hallway. ‘I have May Cullen here and she needs ye...’

There was a sudden movement in the tiny parlour, and the door to it opened. A big, dark-haired man stood there, his blue eyes blazing with alarm. ‘May? What’s the matter?’

‘Ah, Eamonn, ’tis yourself. I heard a rumour yous was back, but don’t worry, my lips are sealed.’

‘May, are you sick?’ He took her arm as she leant against the wall. Between the pains and the shock of seeing him, she

felt faint.

‘She’s grand, sure, it’s only the nipper is on the way. Waters went on the tram,’ Eddie replied for her cheerfully, as if discussing the fine weather.

‘Come in, May, come in and lie down.’ Eamonn brought her into the tiny parlour, taking her bags from the man. ‘Thanks, Eddie. I...and Peter...we really appreciate you looking after her for us.’

‘Ah, ’tis no bother. I’m duckin’ my one who says she can see the dirt on the window now the sun’s out.’ He turned to May then. ‘Best of luck to you, missus, and don’t worry – before you know it, you’ll have a lovely little baby in your arms. I’ll let meself out, Eamonn. Don’t be coming to the door – you don’t want the world knowing you’re here. Sure the Liberties is safe enough, but you never know who might be passin’.’

‘Thanks, Eddie, you do that. Give my regards to the missus and all the kids.’ Eamonn closed the parlour door behind him, discarded the shopping bags in the armchair and led May to the sofa. As soon as she was seated, yet another even more powerful wave of pain washed over her. ‘Eamonn, get your mother...’ she gasped.

‘She’s not here. She’s gone to Connie’s confirmation Mass, and she’s doing the tea and buns afterwards. I’ll run for her. It will only be twenty minutes there and back.’

‘No, don’t go out in the daylight! What if someone recognises you in the street? Why are you even here? It’s so dangerous for you.’

‘I’m only here for a day or two. I’ve been raising money for the cause over in America, and there was no one I trusted as much as myself to bring it to Collins. I’ll muffle up well, May.’

Another pain gripped her. ‘No, wait, don’t leave,’ she gasped. ‘I can’t be left alone that long, I’m afraid...’ And she was afraid, but it was more for him than for herself.

‘All right, all right, I won’t go for Ma.’ He looked more flustered than she’d ever seen him, even more than when the English soldiers dragged him away from the caravan that awful day in March, along with Aida. ‘But all the neighbours are gone to the Mass – sure everyone had some nipper making it. There’s no other women around to help that I can think of.’

‘Aaaaarrrrgghhh...’ The sound that emerged from her wasn’t one she recognised; it was like an animal. And now she felt frightened for herself as well.

‘All right, into bed. Can you go to the bedroom downstairs?’

She nodded. Anything would be better than this tiny hard sofa.

Eamonn picked her up then, bodily, and carried her to the bedroom, laying her down. The bed had been slept in, and judging by the suit hanging in the wardrobe, this was where Eamonn had been sleeping. He took out one of his shirts from the wardrobe. ‘Put this on, May. Take off the wet clothes.’ He turned his back as she removed her underwear and the sodden dress and put on the shirt that came down to her knees.

‘Oh, oh...’ She doubled up again, the shirt still unbuttoned.

He sat on the bed then and did it up for her gently. The pains were coming so fast now...

‘Eamonn, what’s happening to me?’ she groaned. ‘Eddie said it would be hours before the baby came.’

‘I don’t know about hours – it sounds like you’re well on the way. Do you want me to look?’

‘No, I don’t!’ She was horrified at the thought; maybe there was more of her mother in her than she’d realised.

‘Are you sure? I did this once before,’ he soothed her. ‘I was in a house we were staying at. Her husband was in jail, and the woman of the house was hiding us in the barn, but she started and there was nobody but me and this other fella, and he was only a kid, so I helped her deliver her baby. And it was all fine, so don’t worry.’

‘Oh, God help me...’

‘Do you want me to see if I can see the baby’s head?’

She didn’t. She wanted his mother, or her mother, or some woman, but Eamonn would have to do. In a fit of despair, she leant back against the pillows, her knees raised and legs at an angle, the shirt up around her thighs. The pains came again, and she screamed.

He gently parted her legs and looked.

‘I can just see the top of the baby’s head, so you’re nearly there, May. Don’t worry. And you yell as loud as you like – Eddie will make sure everyone knows there’s not a murder being committed. We’ll get through this together.’

‘You better get me through it – this is all your bloody fault!’ she shouted, as a wave of agony gripped her abdomen like a vice. She grabbed his big, strong hand.

For what felt like eternity, the pains came, one immediately after the other. At one stage she felt herself drift away. *So this is what dying feels like*, she thought. She cried and screamed, but all the while, Eamonn held her, sometimes letting her grip his hands; she was nearly breaking his bones, she was sure. But other times he got behind her on the bed and she leant back against him. No position was comfortable for very long, and her whole body was wracked with agony.

‘The head is out now! One more push, May. Push as hard as you can now, that’s the girl. Well done, you’re doing great, you’re marvellous. Go on, May, one more big push for the shoulders now...’

He didn’t need to encourage her. Every fibre, sinew, muscle and ounce of willpower she possessed helped her bear down to expel this child from her body.

‘One more, May. Just one more and they’ll be here. Hard as you can now...’

She grunted, her chin on her chest, and pushed for all she was worth. And she felt it, the final slither, as the child left her body. Eamonn wrapped it in a soft jumper he had, and as May

lay back on the sweat-drenched pillows, she heard a cry. A strong, outraged bellow.

‘It’s a girl, May, a lovely little girl...’ Tears rolled down his cheeks. ‘And she’s perfect.’

She wanted to look, but the pain came one last time and a lumpy grey mass slipped out, still attached to the baby by a long twisted cord. ‘Oh, Eamonn, what is it...’ she croaked in terror, her voice hoarse from her exertions.

‘It’s the afterbirth, May. It’s perfectly natural. It’s how the baby was attached to you inside. I have to cut the cord now.’ Laying the tiny girl on the bed, he took a pocketknife from his pocket and a small bottle of whiskey from the chest of drawers, pouring the alcohol over the blade. Then gently he cut the cord between May and her daughter.

He handed her the baby then. The little girl was covered in a creamy substance, her little face wrinkled in indignation, a fine mop of black hair stuck to her head. May ran her finger down her face. ‘She’s perfect,’ she whispered, gazing at her.

‘She is, absolutely perfect. Well done, my love...May, I mean.’ Eamonn rolled up the top sheet with the afterbirth and threw it into the corner, then sat beside the bed on a stool, gazing mesmerised at the baby.

‘And well done to you too.’ She smiled at him with a deep rush of gratitude. ‘I don’t know what I’d have done... She came so early! But she seems fine enough, doesn’t she?’

‘She does, and I’m just glad you’re safe and the baby’s here and all’s well.’

They stared at her together then, both of them startled as she let out a mighty squall. ‘What do I do now?’ asked May in a panic.

‘Put her to your breast,’ Eamonn suggested quietly, unbuttoning the top of her shirt for her. ‘Just bring her mouth close to you...well, to your breast...and she’ll find it soon enough. It’s all natural, May.’

Nervously she did as he suggested. The baby twisted her head and opened her gummy mouth, then, after a few false

starts, latched on to May's nipple so hard, May cried out. Then May laughed. 'She's doing it, Eamonn. She's doing it.'

For a while, Peter's brother stayed watching dreamily as the little girl sucked away happily. Then he shook himself and got to his feet. 'Right, I'll get these sheets and your clothes into the wash. Ma will be back soon enough to deal with it, and I can send Connie to tell your mother, and send a telegram to... Peter.' She heard the pause there before he said his brother's name.

'Yes, do ask her to send Peter a telegram. He's in Wexford. He'll be so glad to hear the baby arrived safely.' She saw a shadow cross Eamonn's face, and added gently, 'And thanks, Eamonn. Thank you for everything.'

He bent over her and kissed her forehead, then ran his calloused finger ever so tenderly down the cheek of the suckling infant. 'What you said, May, about this being all my fault?' he asked softly. 'What did you mean by that?'

Her eyes widened, and she felt herself blush. Had she really said such a thing? She didn't remember; it must have been the pain talking. Just like Eddie Flaherty's wife, roaring and cursing at him for getting her in the family way. She lowered her head over the tiny girl gulping at her breast to hide her hot cheeks. 'I mean, for not being a woman when I needed one, but of course I know that's hardly your fault, and I'm sure you did every bit as good as a woman could anyway.'

When he didn't reply, she looked up at him.

No words were needed. She knew exactly his suffering as he stared at the dark-haired child.

'Do you have a name for her yet?' he asked wistfully.

'Not yet. We can't agree on anything.' Of course she and Peter had discussed names, and if it was a boy, she'd suggested George. Peter hadn't liked it; he thought it was a very English-sounding name and preferred the idea of calling a boy Eamonn, after his brother. He'd been surprised when she'd argued against it, pointing out that she'd once said to him it was a nice name. Thank goodness then that the baby

was a girl, though they hadn't managed to agree on a girl's name either. She wanted Maura, after her aunt who left her the two thousand pounds, but Peter preferred Bridie, which May thought too old-fashioned.

'If I had a daughter, I'd name her Aisling,' said Eamonn, and she knew why; it suited the way he thought about things. The aisling poems were the most treasured poems in the Irish language, depicting Ireland as a beautiful woman and her support and protection being the responsibility of her sons.

'Maybe you will have a daughter of your own one day,' she said tentatively.

But he only shook his head. 'You know that's not true, May. Or not in the way you mean it anyway.'

She lowered her eyes and didn't ask him what he meant.

CHAPTER 22



DUBLIN

M AY

HER HUSBAND PUSHED the pram across Stephen's Green. It got him some odd looks – it wasn't the job of a man to do such things – but Peter had never been particularly bothered by convention, thank goodness. If Michael Gallagher had ever pushed a pram, it would have had poor Olive reaching for her smelling salts. May walked beside the pram, holding on to the edge of it.

Old Dr Gleeson had given her a couple of stitches, and they still felt a bit sore. Nobody told you what childbirth was like, not really. She'd assumed her belly would revert immediately to its flat, taut self, and she had never even considered the idea that she might tear, down below, but reality was biting now. Her nipples were cracked and sore from the baby's constant need of food, and she'd even asked her mother to get her a corset, something she'd never needed before. Mostly she had recovered well, but she'd agreed to stay with the Gallaghers for two weeks, at least until the stitches were taken out. Peter had been coming back from Wexford when he could, but it was an arduous journey and this was only his second visit.

They strolled around the lake, where the ducks were enjoying the cool water, and they kept passing prams coming in the other directions, all steered by women, mothers or maids. The green was resplendent in the summer sunshine, and every baby in Dublin, May was convinced, was being brought out to enjoy the rare hot spell.

An older woman stopped to compliment Peter for pushing the pram. 'I wish more men were as good. What a darling baby. What's her name?'

May shot Peter an awkward smile. 'Mm...' The baby was two weeks old now and still being called 'the baby'. 'My

husband and I haven't decided yet. She came six weeks early, you see, took us quite by surprise.'

'Six weeks early!' The old woman seemed very surprised. 'She looks very well on it.'

'Thank you. Now, Peter, we'd better move on.' She walked off rapidly, not wanting to be asked any more awkward questions about the timing of the birth.

Peter chuckled as he caught her up with the pram. 'We'll have to give her a name, May – this is dragging on. I'm not surprised you got embarrassed when that woman asked.'

'Well, what would you like to call her?' She had her own idea, the name she called 'the baby' secretly in her head, but it made her feel guilty even to suggest it.

'I was thinking something theatrical, so when she inherits the empire, she doesn't need a stage name.'

'And what if she doesn't want to inherit the empire?' she teased. 'What if she wants a normal, respectable life?'

She loved that Peter didn't treat the child as a lesser being just because she was a girl. In fact he seemed delighted with the idea of having a daughter now that she was here. The baby had only slept and fed so far, but Peter had big plans for this tiny child.

'Why wouldn't she want a business, a profitable one at that – or it will be as soon as we get you back doing the books – landing in her lap? She'd be mad not to. And she's your daughter, May, and mine – she's never going to be content with sitting at home like your mother, doing nothing but going to flower-arranging committees for the church.'

'So what name is theatrical enough?' she asked, amused.

'Esmerelda?' he suggested, and she pealed with laughter, causing her stitches to tug uncomfortably.

'I take it that's a no?' He gave her a sidelong glance.

'A definite no.'

'Belinda?'

‘No.’

‘Desdemona?’

‘No.’

‘Ophelia?’

‘You’re joking now, surely.’

‘All right then, if you’ve all the answers, what name do you like?’ he asked.

Did she dare? She wanted to, to give Eamonn some tacit acknowledgement; after all, he’d brought the baby into the world. She’d not told Peter about that; she’d not wanted him to know it was Eamonn at the birth – it felt embarrassing. Luckily Bridie, when she came home, agreed to say it was her; she accepted May’s explanation that Olive Gallagher would be absolutely mortified if she discovered May had gone through such an intimate experience with a man she wasn’t even married to. Connie, thank goodness, had been delayed playing with her friends in the street, so she didn’t know any different, and now Eamonn was back in America and wouldn’t say anything.

‘I like Aisling,’ she heard herself say.

Peter peered into the pram. ‘What do you think, little lady? Is Aisling Cullen a good name for you? Let’s think about it for a while.’

The baby was awake for once and gave her father a serious stare with her dark-blue eyes.

‘She has my colour eyes,’ Peter had announced proudly as soon as he’d seen her.

‘She does,’ May had agreed.

Bridie had murmured to her that all babies had blue eyes to begin with, but May was just going to hope and pray the eyes stayed blue. Eamonn had very dark-brown eyes. Of course she could always say they were her eyes, as hers were brown as well, but it would be better if they were blue.

As they strolled along Harcourt Street, the warm sun on their faces, May made a decision. 'I'm coming back with you this time. Dr Gleeson is taking my stitches out tomorrow, and I'll stop being sore when they're gone, he says. So it's time.'

To her relief, he nodded. 'It is. We need to be a family, and that can't be done with you here and me God knows where. And besides, I'm not the best bookkeeper, as you know. We're afloat but that's all.'

'So I was thinking Sunday?'

'Bags, not being the one to tell your parents.' He smiled ruefully.

'They'll be fine. They're much better now. Father is back playing golf, and Mother is busy as ever with all her committees. She'll hardly notice we've...' She stopped then and gripped his forearm.

It was definitely him, wearing his officer's uniform from the war, coming up out of a basement ahead. She'd seen many furtive-looking men come and go from that place when she lived in Dublin before her marriage and took the tram every day to her work in the office. It was clearly some sort of club, but with no markings or signs. Was that where David went drinking?

And who was that with him? It was that relative of Nick's, the one Nick had persuaded to release Aida and Eamonn from Dublin Castle. What an unholy alliance. How could they know each other? The two men were coming towards them now, seemingly bosom pals, and it was too late to take evasive action.

'Ah, if it isn't my little sister and her husband and a baby? Surely not.' David's voice dripped with contempt. He was clearly a lot less afraid of Peter now that he had a high-ranking British officer at his side. Peter had assured her that David was a coward at heart; he said he'd seen it so often at the front, the loudmouthed men who always had something to say but who, when it came to it, would leave their brothers-in-arms in the lurch to save their own skins. He told May he thought David probably deserted and got someone to say he was killed; that's

how most of them got away with it. And May agreed – David had a look of that kind of man. Something shifty in the eyes.

‘Hello, David,’ she managed, while Peter just glowered.

‘I’m assuming congratulations are in order?’ sneered her brother.

‘Yes, this is our daughter, Aisling,’ May replied, with as much dignity as she could muster.

He barely glanced into the pram. ‘Well, congratulations, and Peter as well, I assume, though goodness knows.’ He winked at Harvey. ‘You can never tell these days. But where are my manners. Apologies, Mr and Mrs Cullen, this is Sir Harvey Bathhurst –’

‘We’ve met before,’ said Peter coldly, ignoring the other man’s outstretched hand.

‘Yes, at my cousin’s wedding,’ Harvey answered, smoothly withdrawing his hand while his eyes settled on May with a puzzled frown. ‘Mrs Cullen, did you say?’

She smiled determinedly at him. ‘Yes, and I’m David’s sister. I’m very pleased to meet you again, Sir Harvey.’ After all, this was the man who had got her and Peter – or rather Aida and Eamonn – released from the Castle and had promised to have the government’s forces leave them alone. She prayed hard that he’d not laid eyes on the prisoners; even though they were brothers, Peter didn’t look remotely like Eamonn, nor did she look one bit like Aida. ‘Nick tells me you are soon to be married? Congratulations.’ She was relieved to have this snippet of information to help the conversation. Nick had written her, moaning that he had received an invitation and felt he had to attend for the sake of diplomacy, even though he couldn’t bear the man.

‘Yes, quite right, I am,’ Harvey said, still staring at her oddly. ‘Very shortly, in fact. David, you never told me your sister was one of the circus folk? How diverting. You should have said.’

‘Well, one doesn’t like to air one’s dirty linen in public,’ sneered David. ‘Now we must be getting on. Good day to you

both.'

As the men walked away, Harvey Bathhurst turned to look back at May. She dragged Peter into the little café beside them, out of sight. 'Let's have a cup of tea, Peter, while the baby's fast asleep.'

She sat at a quiet corner table with the pram, while he went up to the counter and bought them each a cup of tea and an iced finger, her favourite cake after cream horns.

She still felt tearful and shaken by their encounter, especially David's sly innuendo about the fatherhood of her child. She was sure, absolutely certain, he hadn't read Eamonn's letters, that it was just him being horrible and taunting her, but it was unsettling. 'I'd hoped he'd left the country,' she said when Peter returned.

Peter sighed. 'Yes, that would have been best. That Bathhurst is a slimy piece of work. How well they found each other.'

'I was thinking the exact same thing. Birds of a feather flock together, I suppose.'

She added a splash of milk to her tea and furrowed her brow.

'I know I should be used to it by now, but I just can't understand how he's changed so much. He's a completely different person, Peter. He was nothing like this, nothing whatsoever.' She longed for some explanation, some reason. 'And why did he lie about being injured?'

He shrugged, his face impassive. 'He is injured, May, it's just his injury can't be seen. And any more than you can wish for the other young men to get their legs or their arms or their poor destroyed faces back, you can't wish your brother back. It's hard, I know, but let him off.'

'But I would understand him hating Germans or even the British army for putting him there, but why does he hate me and our parents? What happened to him out there?'

He looked at her then; he seemed to be thinking about what to say.

‘I’m sorry, Peter. Maybe I shouldn’t have asked.’ She knew he and his friends didn’t like to talk about what it was like in the trenches.

He held up his hand to stop her. ‘It’s fine, and I could tell you a hundred stories about it. And it’s not to excuse David, but many men came out of it convinced there was nothing but evil in the world. If you want to see life as meaningless, that there’s no God, no point to anything, that nothing is real but blood and rats and death, then there was ample opportunity to believe that on the Western Front. Sure there was one fella who went home on leave and strangled his wife and child and then shot himself. That’s how dark it could get. I’m not surprised these Black and Tans are the way they are. There were many monsters born in France.’

‘But you’re not a monster –’

Again he stopped her. ‘Look, I don’t go on about it, but May, there was such bitterness towards people at home, people thinking we were having a bit of a lark out there, all tea and medals and us having a right laugh. And the longer it dragged on, and we all began to realise it was all for nothing, like we had no gripe with the Germans – I never even met a German – and they had no grudge against us, so we were just playthings for generals and the public, it could make you so bitter. And if you combine that with the complete disregard for human life, it changes you. And some men were changed so fundamentally that there is no going back, and your brother is one of them.’

She shook her head sadly. It was hard to imagine what it might have been like for her if Peter came home such a man.

The baby whimpered in her pram, and Peter lifted her out, cuddling his daughter to his chest. ‘This little lady is the future now, May, and she’s who we need to focus on.’

‘Ah, look, she’s tiny, God bless her,’ cooed two older women who had just got up from the table beside them. ‘What’s her name?’

‘Aisling,’ Peter replied, smiling at May, clearly relieved to have an answer for the question at last. ‘Aisling Cullen.’

One of the women reached for her purse and extracted a penny, put it gently in the baby's little fist, and said, 'May you never know want, Aisling Cullen, God bless you.' Then she tucked the coin under the mattress of the pram.

As the two ladies went off, Peter smiled at May. 'Well, she's handselled as Aisling Cullen now, so Aisling Cullen she will stay.'

'I suppose she is.' May found herself smiling for the first time since the horrible encounter with her brother and Nick's sinister cousin.

'Right then, Mrs May Cullen and Miss Aisling Cullen, should we take you both home to Grandma Olive and Grandpa Michael and tell them they can stop calling you "the baby"?''

CHAPTER 23



TRAMORE, COUNTY WATERFORD

A IDA

SHE WAS FURIOUS WITH RAMON, absolutely incandescent with rage, but she could say nothing because she knew he did what he did because he loved her. But honestly. What on earth was he thinking? Her father. Rafael Narro. How could Ramon have thought contacting him would do any good when she was being held in Dublin Castle? She wasn't even there as Aida Gonzalez – she'd been there as May Cullen. It could have blown her cover.

She handed him the letter, and he scanned it quickly, folding it and returning it to her.

'I knew your father was high up in the Spanish navy, and I thought that he might have some influence with the British, he might know someone. Look, maybe I shouldn't have, Aida, but I was panicking.'

And now Rafael Narro knew where she was. Her mother's careless lover, who had treated poor Gabriella as nothing more than a dockside dalliance. The arrogant Spanish admiral, who kept his wife and children in a beautiful villa in Madrid, not on the fourth floor of a rundown tenement in Valencia like his mistress and the daughter he barely acknowledged as his own.

She sat down at her table in her caravan, leaning back against the embroidered cushions with her eyes closed. Ramon made her some coffee, proper Spanish coffee that Peter had brought her from Dublin last weekend, and sat down opposite her. 'I'm sorry, Aida. I was just doing what I thought was best. And once you were out, I wrote again to say it was all fine and there was no need to make contact. But don't shoot me for saying this, and I'm not saying you should rush over there – I understand you hate him – but you could see what he wants at least?'

He was speaking in Spanish for once, to soften her up; he usually spoke in English. His father had been English, so Ramon spoke it fluently. When she first joined the cabaret, her English was halting and slow, and Ramon wouldn't let her speak Spanish to him because he thought she'd never learn the language otherwise. But now she sometimes even dreamed in that strange, guttural foreign tongue, and so it was nice to use their mother tongue for once.

'I don't care what he wants, it's meaningless to me. I have no relationship with him – I never had and I never will.' She knew she sounded petulant, but it was how she felt.

'I know, but aren't you even a bit curious?' Ramon asked as he handed her the tiny white porcelain cup and saucer with the little blue painted flowers.

Aida sighed. 'Of course I'm not.'

Though that wasn't strictly true. She knew the words of the letter by heart at this stage, so often had she read it.

Dear Aida,

I realise it may come as a shock to you to hear from me, but I am happy to know all is well now. Ramon's letters arrived on the same day – the first had gone to many different places. I have moved house twice since I knew your mother. I salute your bravery, Aida, of giving yourself up to the English to save your pregnant friend. I trust your time in prison wasn't too onerous.

I must first offer you my deepest condolences on the death of Gabriella. She was a very special woman and a talented dancer. I miss her. I would dearly love the opportunity to meet with you and speak to you about her.

My address in Madrid is on the top of this letter. My wife and children know of your existence, they have done for years, so if you do choose to make contact, you do not need to pretend to be anyone but yourself. If coming to my home is not possible, I will go anywhere to meet you.

I hope and pray you do, but of course it is your choice.

You owe me nothing, but I feel I owe you a great deal, not least an explanation.

Yours faithfully,

Your father,

Rafael

It was ridiculous. He had a wife and children in Madrid, so why on earth had he written to her? What did he want? She certainly didn't want anything from him. She should send a letter, yes, but only to tell him not to make any further contact, if for no other reason than to eliminate the possibility of the man turning up in her life unexpectedly.

Her life was good, better than she ever imagined it could be in those dark days after her mother died and she was all alone. She had a job doing what she loved, her injuries at the hands of Bathurst were healed, she was building up a nice little nest egg of money so she would never need to be destitute again, she had friends, she was dancing. She was living this life, and she was loathe to disrupt it. And whatever Rafael Narro wanted, she instinctively knew he would be a disruption.

'And no part of you wants to hear his explanation?' Ramon sipped his coffee.

'His explanation? Of what? He used my beautiful mother as a plaything, someone of no consequence to be taken advantage of and then discarded. How inconvenient that a child was born as a result.'

Bitterness and bile rose within her; the pain and hurt of all those years long buried were now bubbling to the surface again.

'My mother was a fool for him. She allowed him to walk all over her, treat her like dirt, glad of the paltry attention he gave her when he could be bothered to visit. Nothing he could say would interest me. He treated me like a nuisance, not like a daughter.'

That was the story she told herself.

‘But look at Nick,’ Ramon pointed out reasonably. ‘His father treated him like the dirt on his shoe when he was a child, but now he’s completely changed. Nick’s even planning to take Celine to Brockleton now that she’s beginning to get tired from the pregnancy. May and Peter’s baby coming six weeks early gave him a terrible fright...’ His voice tailed off and he blushed.

Aida felt another flash of irritation. Why was Ramon behaving as if she might not want to talk about Peter and May having a baby? As if it might upset her? ‘I’m so happy everything went well for them,’ she said. ‘I hope May comes back with Peter this Sunday – he needs her beside him. And he’s delighted to be a father.’

Ramon nodded, relieved. ‘See, being a father is important. It doesn’t always come the way you’re expecting – I don’t think Peter was ready, and Nick’s father took years to come around to it – but it seems to change men. I might even try it myself one day.’ He laughed a little.

Aida rolled her eyes. Her childhood friend was as bad as Enzo, she knew, always with women on the go, though he was a lot more discreet and at least kept his attention on women his own age who weren’t married. Though she’d noticed him watching young Rosie recently, and she suspected the interest was mutual. She was going to have to keep them apart unless Ramon could prove he’d changed and would become serious. That girl had had enough trauma at the hands of men; Ramon would not add to it.

Still, she hated to admit it, but maybe he was right about fatherhood changing people. One line from the letter kept going around and around in her head.

My wife and children know of your existence, they have done for years, so if you do choose to make contact, you do not need to pretend to be anyone but yourself.

He’d told his family about her, and so presumably about her mother. Why would he do that? She hardened her heart. Maybe his wife always knew; maybe he wanted to show off how irresistible to women he was. Wanted to rub his poor

wife's nose in his infidelity. Maybe he wanted his children to live on tenterhooks that their sister could turn up any day to disrupt their idyllic lives.

‘What will you do?’ Ramon asked, draining the little cup and refilling it.

‘Nothing,’ Aida replied. ‘I will telegram to say I wish to have no contact and leave it at that.’

CHAPTER 24



BROCKLETON

*N*ICK

THE AVENUE UP to Brockleton was ablaze with escallonia hedging with its shiny green leaves and tiny pink flowers that separated the driveway from the parkland for the first mile and later the manicured lawns. The gardeners really kept the place beautifully, they always had, and the estate was a blaze of late-summer colour, banks of pinky-blue hydrangeas and brilliant crimson fuchsia, and the rose gardens looked utterly beautiful.

His ancestral home loomed ahead of them, and pretty as it all was, the weight of his responsibilities descended on his shoulders. He didn't care about the titles or the money, and he loved the cabaret; performing gave him tremendous satisfaction. But for so many people who lived and worked at this estate, the staff, the gardeners, the tenant farmers, this was their livelihood, and it was his responsibility to look after them when his father became too old. To be cavalier about Brockleton would be to put too many futures in jeopardy, and he could never do that.

He looked at his wife, who was in the front passenger seat this time, with Nick crammed behind in the luggage department. He kept getting awful cramps back here. He wasn't fat, but he was a big man. Still, he wasn't going to make Celine squeeze in behind the seats, not when she was seven months pregnant, even though she'd offered.

'Feeling all right?' he asked her now as she gazed straight ahead, appearing not to notice the beautiful view unfolding in front of her. She'd been very quiet on the trip, and he wondered if he'd done the right thing in asking Millie to drive them.

The smart, clever, funny Millie Leybourne had been chatting away for the whole drive about leaving the cabaret,

going to America, and the sadness on his wife's face at the thought of her going told Nick all he needed to know.

His feelings had come full circle about it all. He believed that Celine genuinely loved him and wanted to be his wife and was happy to be the mother of his children – she always said children, plural, when they discussed it.

But he knew she loved Millie as well, although maybe in a different way from the way she loved Nick, and that was the truth. It was hard to accept, and it would be easy to point fingers or apportion blame, but that would serve nobody. A different man, arguably a stronger one, would have sent the woman, his rival for his wife's affections, packing, but he wasn't that man. And he couldn't cause pain to Celine.

He and Celine had talked, really talked, after that night when they'd finally made love again, and she explained that at first she had no idea what was happening between her and Millie. She'd never even heard of that sort of thing before and believed herself and the other woman to be freaks of nature. She was filled with shame and confusion. But Millie, who was older and far more worldly-wise, had explained that there were many women like them, but also that it was a love that dare not speak its name and that most women of their type married and accepted it.

It had all felt so incredibly sad to Nick, to have to deny your true self, to pretend your whole life.

Yet that was the life that lay ahead of him as well, pretending to want the life of an heir and a privileged peer of the British realm. And at least he'd had the chance for a while to be his true self, Nick Gerrity, cabaret performer; he would always have that. And Celine had had her love affair with Millie.

At the turning circle, Millie parked and jumped out of the car, then ran around to help Celine, and then the two women folded down the seats and did their best to drag Nick out of the back, pushing and pulling and heaving until he popped out like an enormous, red-faced cork and the three of them were reduced to helpless laughter.

Armitage opened the door.

‘Ah, welcome home, sir, wonderful to see you, and you too, m’lady.’ If he was surprised to see Celine pregnant, the old butler didn’t show it. Though Nick had written to both his father and Floss to announce that they were coming and why, so Armitage probably knew. Floss had written back, expressing her joy and ordering Nick to bring Celine home at once, but his father hadn’t answered. Nick assumed the fifth baron de Simpré was still sulking at his son’s decision to go back on the road with the cabaret so soon after his wedding.

‘Thank you, Armitage. It’s nice to be back, especially with everything in bloom. It was winter last time.’ He escorted Celine, now more cumbersome due to the pregnancy, up the steps as the footmen took their bags.

‘Indeed, sir. Your grandmother has been most diligent at counting the days until your arrival. She is in the summer drawing room and asked that you be shown in to her immediately, before you see your father.’

‘Of course.’ He was slightly surprised and wondered what she wanted to talk to him about before he saw Walter Shaw. He hoped nothing too serious. He offered Celine his arm and she took it. ‘Are you glad to be back, darling?’

‘Yes, is so nice to be back. It feels like home,’ she answered softly.

‘It is your home,’ he said. And then he noticed Millie standing awkwardly in the doorway. ‘Millie, will you come and say hello to my father and Floss?’

The woman smiled but shook her dark head. ‘No, I’ll go up to my room and unpack, then maybe head out to the stables. Perhaps I’ll see you at dinner.’ And she followed the footmen with the bags up the stairs.

As he and Celine entered the summer drawing room, Floss crossed the room. She looked every inch the Edwardian lady, in a dusty-pink tea gown, lightly corseted with a bustle, lace at the collar and cuffs. Her hair was in a chignon over a

pompadour frame for volume, and Nick felt a wave of love for her. However old she got, she never let standards slip, ever.

His grandmother fussed over and congratulated Celine, scolded her lightly for not having come home earlier – ‘But you’re here now, and that’s where you’ll stay’ – then settled her on the striped sofa, gave her a glossy copy of *House & Garden* and ordered Armitage to bring her ‘darling granddaughter’ a glass of Mrs Mulcair’s lemonade and a plate of shortbread biscuits. Then she drew Nick away with her to the other end of the room, to stand under a portrait of one of his many ancestors, a forbidding old woman in a stiff white ruff.

‘Nicholas, try not to worry too much. He’s not dying, but your father has had a stroke,’ she said softly.

‘What? When?’ Nick struggled to take in this startling information.

‘A week ago, the day we received your letter saying you were coming home.’

‘Oh, good Lord. Was he very angry with me? Was it the stress that d-d-did it?’

‘Not at all. He was delighted and happy, and kept busy all day giving orders to have the place spick and span. We were very lucky it happened in Dripsey – he was there about those blessed pigs again, speaking with Pat Twomey when he collapsed, and they were able to send for Dr Murphy right away and make sure he was well cared for, not that there is a great deal medicine can do for such things. Poor Walter just needs rest and time. It’s very hard to tell with these things, Dr Murphy explained. Sometimes there is a miraculous recovery, sometimes...’ She spread her hands with a sad little shrug.

Nick swallowed tears. ‘But why d-d-didn’t you tell me in your letter?’

‘Because he refused to allow me to. I wanted to, I assure you, but he became very agitated and said you’d be here when you could and he didn’t want Celine upset or the two of you driving here like lunatics endangering your lives and the life of

your baby. You know what he's like about heirs. And he said there was nothing you could do anyway and that you would see for yourself when you visited. And, well...now you can.' She looked at him with compassion.

'But how is he? C-c-can he walk?' Nick was still having difficulty getting his head around this. His big, strong, bullish father surely couldn't be struck down by something so random.

'He can, he can walk short distances. And he can speak, but slowly and with some difficulty. It's not as bad as it might be, and the tenants and staff have been marvellous and have assured me they will take care of everything. Pat Twomey collected the rents and arranged the bull calves to be taken to the mart in Macroom, and Mr Cotter from Blarney is overseeing the kitchen gardens and making sure all surplus is being sold at the market. But...' Her customary stoic demeanour dropped then, and she looked worried and upset, the remaining words hanging unnecessarily in the air between them.

'B-b-but we can't rely on p-p-people's goodwill forever,' Nick finished for her. The dawning realisation was unavoidable. It was time to come home, run his estate and care for those who relied on it.

'No, we can't,' Floss nodded, clearly relieved that he understood.

'I understand.' He looked around him. 'Where is my father?'

Floss nodded towards the open French windows. 'He is out on the terrace, enjoying the sunshine. Let me go and drink lemonade and eat shortbread with your lovely wife while you spend some time with him alone.'

Walter was sitting outside in a comfortable upholstered chair, staring over the sunny green fields and wooded hills. When Nick greeted him, it took him a while to look around, and his mouth drooped slightly on the left side.

‘Hello, Father. I’m sorry to hear you’ve not been well.’ He kissed the old man’s leathery cheek. It wasn’t a gesture he would normally dare make, but seeing his father so vulnerable, so helpless, hurt him in a way he could never have thought possible, and his heart welled with affection for the old villain. And Walter didn’t flinch as once he might have.

‘Jus’ happy to have you home, Nick. Don’ go running off so soon again...’ Walter Shaw slurred slightly, as if he was drunk.

‘I’m g-g-glad to be home, Father, and don’t worry now – I’m not g-g-going to shirk my responsibilities, I promise you.’

Walter nodded, clearly satisfied his son was telling the truth.

Nick pulled another garden chair close to his father’s and sat down.

‘But thank you...for letting me go back to the c-c-cabaret for a few months first. I know you d-d-don’t understand about my life, but I’m g-g-grateful to you for allowing me to live it for a while.’

Walter raised his right hand weakly, his left hand lying helplessly on the arm of the chair, and placed it on Nick’s leg, speaking haltingly and deliberately, each word a struggle. Nick strained to interpret every word.

‘It is I ssshould be thanking you, dear boy. I do not deserve you. I treated you badly, and I am sssorry for it. You’re a better man than me, and I’m proud...so proud...’ A tear rolled down his wizened old cheek, and Nick wiped it with his handkerchief. ‘Now where is that fi...fil...’

‘Celine is indoors with Floss, Father,’ said Nick, before his father could call his wife a ‘filly’, as if she were a brood mare. ‘I wanted to spend some time alone with you first.’

‘Right, quite right...’ His father flapped his right hand in the direction of a bell pull on the wall of the terrace. ‘Now, a drink.’

Nick went over to tug the bell, and Armitage appeared almost immediately, stepping up onto the terrace from the path

below, as if he'd been waiting around the corner for exactly this.

'Champagne... My sson is home,' Walter managed. And when Armitage reappeared with a silver tray, a bottle of Moët and two glasses, he insisted on both flutes being filled to the brim, though he barely took a sip of his own champagne. It seemed to cost him an enormous effort to raise the glass to his mouth, and he splashed more on the napkin Armitage had laid across his lap than he got into his mouth.

Inside, the grandfather clock in the hall boomed the dinner hour, and Walter smiled crookedly at Nick. 'Won' dress...for dinner... Fine as we are,' he slurred.

Dinner was jollier than it should have been. Nick sat at the table, watching his father laugh at some story Millie was telling; she was a natural wit and his father loved her. Celine was talking to Floss about how the pregnancy was progressing, quietly enough that Walter didn't hear; women's business would give him another stroke if he heard it. And Nick realised how much he loved all these people, even Millie.

Celine retired after dinner and so did Floss, but Walter insisted Nick and Millie join him for a nightcap. It was a long walk to the trophy room, so Kenneally, the second valet who had been promoted to first, pushed Walter in a wicker wheelchair and then helped him into his favourite chair by the huge fireplace in the little ante room off the dining room. The hearth was now filled with an elaborate but decorative dried floral arrangement instead of blazing logs. Nick took the armchair opposite, and Millie perched neatly on the leather sofa. The three of them chatted about the horses, then sat in companionable silence for a while, sipping their brandy, before Walter nodded at Nick to ring the bell for Kenneally again. 'Time for my bed,' he slurred. 'Not got the sstamina any more...'

'Goodnight, Father, sleep well,' Nick said, as the valet produced the wheelchair again and easily lifted Walter into it, covering his thin legs in a blanket. Nick noticed how his father was a frail, thin man now, not the bear of his childhood. He and Millie followed them out. Millie went one way at the top

of the first staircase, and he went the other, climbing to the turret bedroom where he and Celine had spent their wedding night.

His wife was fast asleep. He climbed in beside her gently and closed his eyes, but sleep wouldn't come. So this was it. The moment he had to give up his life in the cabaret and come back and be the baron. Could he bear it? He had no choice. He didn't want to, but there was nobody else.

Roger had known from the cradle that this was his fate and so never envisaged any alternative, and even Wally had time to get used to the idea. Besides, Wally had come to relish the prospect, no doubt; he'd always been jealous of Roger, a sentiment encouraged by their parents. Walter and Harriet had never done anything to endear themselves to their children, or the boys to each other.

But being the heir had never been on the horizon for Nick. A life of privilege, certainly, but not of responsibility. Yet here he was, taking over, a wife by his side, a child on the way. He should be, if not delighted, then at least not despondent, but he was. It wasn't just stupid things like having to go to Harvey's upcoming wedding to the Lord Lieutenant's daughter because Floss was too frail and his father too incapacitated to represent the family. It was the thought of all those livelihoods resting on his nonexistent knowledge. Knowledge he'd never been taught because he was never going to need it, unlike Roger and possibly Wally, stuff he'd never had a chance to find out because he'd run away to war and then joined the cabaret.

Hour by weary hour, the night passed as he lay on his back, hands behind his head, trying to acclimatise to his new reality.

He must have drifted off eventually, because when he woke, the bed was empty. He stumbled out of bed and opened the heavy drapes to be blinded by bright late-morning sunshine.

The new second valet, a man who introduced himself as Barry, instantly arrived to help him wash, shave and dress for the day.

‘Where is my wife?’ Nick asked as the man insisted on tying his tie. It really was ridiculous, and one of the first things he’d change when he took over. He did not need a valet.

‘In the kitchen, sir. I believe Mrs Mulcair needed some direction regarding menus. The village festival is on Saturday, and the house always provides a picnic lunch for the tenants and their families. Armitage always saw to it, but he’s had to go to the doctor because he got something in his eye earlier today, and the dowager baroness says she has no idea about such matters, so Lady Shaw and Miss Leybourne offered to help.’

‘Very g-g-g-good. Thank you, Barry.’

‘Will I have them serve breakfast in the breakfast room or would you rather a tray up here, Your Lordship?’

Nick winced at the title. He preferred just Nick, not Lord Nicholas or sir, but he would never be able to change that, he supposed.

‘No, I’ll find my wife in the k-k-kitchen and eat there.’

A look of sheer horror crossed the young valet’s face. ‘I’m not sure Armitage and Mrs Mulcair –’

‘Don’t worry, Barry. They’ll g-g-get used to me.’ He smiled.

CHAPTER 25



DUBLIN

May

HER PARENTS STOOD at the front door, Michael looking despondent and Olive clinging to Aisling like she was adrift on a lifeboat of the *Titanic*. The Gallaghers had always known that their daughter and granddaughter were not going to stay forever, but they had been very reluctant to let them go. Olive especially loved having them here; her whole day had revolved around Aisling. And May suspected her father would feel his granddaughter's absence just as keenly. They were such fusspots, but they'd had a terrible time with David, and she felt a wave of affection for them.

Peter was up and down the garden path, loading Aisling's pram and crib and tin baby bath and toys and teddy bears into the truck, which he had fetched from Wexford to bring them home. There were a lot of baby clothes as well. May had gone a bit mad buying outfits for the baby, but Aisling was so cute and the outfits so adorable, she couldn't resist. Many of her mother's friends had knitted little cardigans and bootees, and Peter's sister Kathleen had made her the most beautiful dress and cape.

'Right,' Peter said, throwing in the last bag, then coming back through the well-oiled garden gate. 'Where we're going to put all this stuff in a caravan, I've no idea, but apparently it's all critical to the happiness of one small infant.' He leant in to coo at the baby in Olive's arms. 'You need all this stuff, according to your mammy anyway...' She gave a gurgle, and he laughed in delight.

May thought her husband had never looked more handsome than when he was admiring their baby girl. The boy she fell so deeply in love with was gone; Peter was a man now, even though he was still so young. She was so proud of her

little family, her husband with his boyish charm and his youthful good looks and her wonderful little girl.

‘Are you sure you have everything?’ her father asked Peter, clearly not wanting to let them go just yet. ‘Maybe check in the house.’

‘Well, if we haven’t, we can’t fit any more, so I hope so.’ Peter laughed, offering Michael his hand. ‘So we’d better go before May finds anything else she wants to bring, like your kitchen sink.’

Her father took Peter’s hand and shook it warmly, then kept hold of it. ‘Look after them, Peter.’

‘Don’t worry, Michael, I will.’

Michael gave a watery smile. ‘I don’t doubt that for a moment. We couldn’t be happier that May and now our precious Aisling are in such good hands, but we will miss you, we really will.’ May’s father paused, swallowed and then said, ‘You’re like a son to us, Peter, and, well...we’d be lost without you.’

May’s heart melted. Her father was not one for emotions, ever, so she knew how much effort it must have cost him to say those words. He must have really meant them. And Peter *was* a son to them, much better than the one they had raised, as it turned out.

‘Well, any time you need me, or May, for anything, we’re only a telegram away,’ Peter replied sincerely. ‘And you know, Michael, my father wasn’t much good, awful in fact, so you’re like a father to me too.’

May cast a glance of pure love at her husband then. Peter found this sort of thing easier than her father did, but it was still difficult for him to speak about Kit Cullen, so it was kind of him to say what he had said. And it really meant a lot to Michael; she could see it on her father’s face.

Then, in an entirely unprecedented move, as May and her mother looked on in astonishment, the two men hugged. Before there was time for it to be awkward, Peter turned to Olive and kissed her cheek, taking Aisling from her arms.

‘Thank you so much, Olive, for looking after my girls so well. They’ve been fed up like prize –’

‘Watch it!’ May warned with a grin. ‘If you say pigs, there’ll be trouble.’

‘As if I’d compare my beautiful girls to pigs. No, I was going to say prize heifers actually...’ he joked, and May mock swiped him. ‘Say bye-bye to Granny and Granda, Aisling.’ He waved her little chubby arm with the ring of fat at the wrist.

It was Peter who had started off calling May’s parents Granny and Granda. Peter’s mother – they’d said a tearful goodbye to her earlier that day, along with Kathleen and Connie – was Nana Bridie, so Peter said May’s parents had to be Granny and Granda.

The Gallaghers had bristled at first; they’d assumed they would be known as Grandmother and Grandfather, but Peter said he thought that sounded too stuffy and not like them at all, and to May’s surprise, her parents relented and now told everyone that’s what Aisling called them. Not that Aisling said anything yet; she was only a couple weeks old. But Olive would chatter to the baby all day, saying, ‘We must ask Madge what’s for Granda’s dinner.’ Or ‘Shall we send Granda’s shirts to be ironed today, Aisling?’

Or her father would come home from work and say hello to Aisling first, then to May, and then he would beam at Olive and say, ‘Hello, Granny.’ It seemed to give him no end of delight. This one little girl had illuminated their world, and May loved how much they adored her.

‘Goodbye, Peter, and my lovely little Aisling.’ Olive had a tear in her eye.

May lingered as the men walked towards the truck, Aisling in Peter’s arms. ‘We’ll be back to visit soon, Mother, I promise.’

‘I just... We felt so safe when you were here, May. It sounds silly, I know...but you are the strongest person in this family, and maybe we don’t tell you often enough, but we rely on you, my dear. You are a wonderful daughter, and we’re so

lucky to have you. These last weeks and months, with everything... I don't know how we'd have coped.'

May took her mother by the shoulders and looked into her eyes.

'Listen to me. I know that awful carry-on with David upset you both – of course it did, it upset us all – but that's over now. He's fine. I know you still worry about him, but he's fine. Like I already told you, I saw him in town the other week, in his British uniform, so he's back on the army payroll and you need not worry he's under some bridge wrapped in newspaper.' She laughed then, knowing this had been one of her mother's many fears. 'David is fine, but if he comes back here – and I doubt very much that he would, but if he does – do not open the door and send for me or Peter, all right?'

'But how will we know where you are?' her mother asked, terror in her eyes again at the prospect.

'Every time we move locations, I'll telegram, let you know where we are so you can contact us any time. And as I say, I'll be back with Aisling soon.'

'Please do, darling. I love that little girl – she's so sweet. Even Madge shed a tear this morning,' her mother said, sotto voce. The sourness of the housekeeper was rarely mentioned, but everyone in the house was aware of it.

'Well, if she can win Madge over...' May smiled and hugged her mother.

Olive held her in a tight embrace for a few moments. 'I shall miss you more than words can say, darling,' she whispered.

They walked then to the truck. May climbed into the front, and Peter handed her the baby.

'The house will be so quiet again now,' her father said sadly, looking in the window.

'You'll be glad of the peace and quiet,' May said with a smile, but she knew it wasn't true.

‘We’ve had enough of that. We love having you all here. You’re all welcome any time at all.’

‘How about you two come to visit us?’ Peter asked. ‘Come down to Cork, stay in a hotel, and come and see the show?’

One of the many things she loved about him was his refusal to see limitations, or to be concerned with what people thought about things. He did what he wanted to do and didn’t give a hoot that he might cause scandal.

Her mother looked as if he had suggested she strip down to her underwear and do the Charleston on the front lawn, and May swallowed a giggle at the thought. But to her astonishment, her father replied, ‘Well, I am due to take some holidays from the bank, and the weather is nice, so we might just do that, Peter. Thank you for the invitation. What do you say, Olive? Will we go and see this famous show?’

May’s mother blushed bright pink and took a deep breath. May knew that dancing girls and a show in a tent would have been enough to make her mother take to the bed in shock before she got to know Peter, and goodness knew what Father O’Reilly and Mrs Cuddihy and the rest of them would think, but then she heard her mother say, ‘That sounds marvellous. I would love to see it. I hear it’s absolutely smashing.’

‘Wonderful. We’ll make the booking and let you know. Now’ – Peter gave his mother-in-law one last hug; somehow Peter Cullen from Henrietta Street had made huggers of the Gallaghers – ‘we’ll see you in a fortnight’s time in Cork. Bye for now.’

May embraced both her parents and got into the truck beside Peter. He put it in gear, and they pulled away.

They were back on the road to the cabaret, with one extra member of the family on board. And despite everything that had happened, and against all the odds, it was going to be all right.

May exhaled for what felt like the first time in months.

CHAPTER 26



BROCKLETON

NICK

NICK WAS WALKING across the yard four days later when he saw her talking earnestly with Gerry Creedon, the head groom whose arm was in a sling from a fall last week.

He approached and heard Gerry say, ‘You could well be right, Miss Leybourne, and I hadn’t considered that, but you could be right.’

‘Right about what?’ Nick asked pleasantly.

‘The chestnut gelding is going to have to be shot, sir,’ Creedon said. ‘He’s in terrible pain. The vet is not available today, and I was trying to figure out what it is, but Miss Leybourne here thinks it could be ragwort poisoning.’

‘But d-d-don’t we p-p-pull all the ragwort?’ Nick asked.

‘We do, sir, but sometimes we don’t get all of it and it can get into the hay. They won’t eat it usually growing in the field, but it’s more palatable dry and more potent too – it attacks the liver and ’tis an awful death for the poor animal.’

‘Show me him.’

He followed Millie and Creedon into the stable, and in the stall, the poor animal was writhing on its side on a bed of straw that was freshly soiled.

‘And there’s nothing to be done?’ he asked, and this time Millie answered.

‘I don’t think so. He’s been yawning and appears blind. That, combined with the loose bowels and the pain, would suggest his liver is not functioning. There’s no coming back from it, I’m afraid.’

‘We’d better do it so,’ Nick said sadly. He’d never shot an animal before and didn’t relish the thought, but Creedon’s arm

was in a sling and out of action. 'Though I hate the idea of it.'

'I can do it if you want me to,' Millie said quietly. 'I've done it before.'

'Really?' Nick realised he knew very little of Millie's background.

She nodded. 'We had a farm, in Yorkshire.'

'Oh, of course. So that's why you're always t-t-talking about buying yourself some land. Very well then, if you c-c-can, I'd be grateful.'

Millie took the 22-calibre rifle Creedon handed her with his good hand, and very calmly and gently, she ended the animal's life. The poor horse died instantly.

'Thank you,' Nick said quietly as Creedon withdrew to lock up the gun once more. Weapons had to be stored carefully, especially now when a raiding party of the IRA would love to take whatever they had.

'You're welcome,' she said. 'It's a pity. He was a lovely chap.' She knelt in the dirty straw and patted the gelding's neck. 'But it was the kindest thing to do.'

'My father t-t-told me that he never met a woman who c-c-could discuss farming and land management until he met you.' That was back at the wedding, when he'd been too busy and too in love to listen much to what was going on around him.

Millie shrugged. 'I'm interested, but the farm was sold when I was only sixteen. It had been in my father's family for generations, but he died and Mother preferred life in town, so she sold it and we had to leave.'

'You sound sad about it.'

'I was.' Millie got back to her feet. 'But she inherited it from him. I was an only child and still too young, and I got no say, and she and I didn't get along anyway. She accused my father of making me like a boy, letting me help around the farm, mucking out and riding horses and milking cows and breeding sheep and bringing in the hay...everything a son would have done. And I loved all of it.'

She glanced at him nervously as they walked out of the stable together; this was their first conversation of any length since they'd driven to see Harvey.

'I d-d-doubt your father had much to do with you being like a b-b-boy. It comes naturally, I think.'

She gave a rueful chuckle. 'But my mother had to blame someone for her peculiar daughter. She cut me off, said she never wanted to see me again. She'd discovered my...well, what she called "unnatural tendencies". We don't speak, haven't for years.'

'And if you'd inherited the farm, would you ever have got into p-p-performing?'

'Probably not. I loved the land and the animals, going to the market, all of it. I'm not naturally a theatre person, but I'm good at it and it pays the bills.'

'I'm sorry you d-d-didn't get to d-d-do what you wanted to d-d-do,' he said quietly.

She stuck her hands in her trouser pockets. A woman in trousers was a cause for comment in Brockleton initially, but even his father was getting used to her now. 'If anyone should be apologising to anyone, it should be me to you,' she said, her voice barely audible.

Nick knew they were no longer talking about her family's farm.

He opened a gate into the kitchen garden and led the way to a bench set into the sunny wall where marrow, tomatoes and cucumber grew.

'Have a seat,' he offered, sitting down and patting the space beside him.

She did as he asked and sat quietly, saying nothing.

'I d-d-don't hate you, if that's what you think,' he said.

'You probably should,' she replied, gazing at the gravel path between her feet, her elbows resting on her knees. It was such an unfeminine pose but one totally natural to her.

‘No. Celine loves b-b-both of us.’ There. He’d said it.

‘She does,’ Millie agreed, with a small, grateful smile. ‘But she’s your wife, and soon to be the mother of your child, your heir.’ She smiled again at that. ‘And she wants that, more than she wants anything else. I’ve warned Peter already that I’ll be leaving the cabaret, though I don’t think he believed me really. But I think I should go sooner rather than later. I was going to wait till I’d enough saved for America, but maybe I’ll just go back to England instead. I’ve enough now to buy a small house in Yorkshire with a few acres and see if I can support myself.’

Nick sat in thought, an idea formulating in his mind.

‘What if we c-c-could all have what we want, Millie?’

‘What do you mean?’ She looked at him, her brow furrowed.

‘My father isn’t well. He c-c-can’t manage this place any more. I’m the heir, so it’s up t-t-to me now, but I don’t want to come b-b-back here. I like the cabaret. I’m not like you, just d-d-doing it for money – I love that life.’

‘But you have no choice...’

‘How about...’ He paused, thinking. Was this insane? Probably. But he was learning to trust his instincts and not be ruled by convention all the time. Every nonconventional chance he’d taken had paid off. Maybe this would too. He didn’t want to come back, but the estate needed a manager.

‘On a t-t-trial basis...what if you take over running the estate for me? Then after you’re settled in, in a month or so, maybe after Harvey’s wedding, I go b-b-back to the cabaret and Celine can stay here. I can sing with M-M-Maggie – she’s got a lovely voice – and I’ll visit when I c-c-can, and once the baby is born...well...we see then?’

‘Are you serious?’ Millie asked incredulously.

He nodded. ‘I am.’

‘But Nick...I need to get away from Celine. She’s your wife, and I’m just in the way...’

‘Says who?’ Nick asked quietly.

‘It would be too hard for me, Nick.’ To his surprise he saw a tear roll down her cheek. ‘I love her. I know I shouldn’t and I can’t and it’s not right and everything, but I do and I can’t help it. Being here with her all the time...but not...’

His heart thumped loudly in his chest; he was sure she could hear it.

‘Millie, I n-n-need an heir, and I n-n-need a wife. I wish I was enough for her, b-b-but I’m not. It hurt me so much at first, but I’ve had t-t-time to think.’

Millie didn’t answer but hung on every word.

‘We c-c-cannot deal in what we wish for – we must live with how things are. And this situation is what it is, and it c-c-cannot be changed without hurting one or t-t-two or all three of us.’

‘So what are you suggesting?’ she asked, her voice only barely above a whisper.

‘You are p-p-perfectly capable of running the estate, and the staff will all help – they like you, Millie. Celine and you can have whatever it is you share...and you’ll look after her for me while I live my life. And sometimes I’ll come home to see you all. At least until the b-b-baby comes, but even after that if it works.’

‘And you could live with that?’ Millie was incredulous.

‘C-c-can you bear to share her with me?’ he countered.

She simply nodded.

‘Then if you c-c-can, I can too. P-p-provided Celine approves, and to b-b-be honest, I think she will.’

‘Oh, Nick... I can’t say how much this means to me, I haven’t the words...’

‘Then d-d-don’t say anything,’ he advised. He leant back and put his large arm around Millie’s slight frame. She relaxed against him, and they sat in silence, watching the bees and butterflies enjoying the sun in their simple, natural way.

CHAPTER 27



A IDA

SHE READ the letter she had written one more time while sitting at the table in her van.

Sr Rafael Narro,

I received your letter and am writing to inform you that I have no desire for or interest in further communication. The opportunity to be my father passed many years ago, and I see no reason to try to create one now.

Please do not contact me again.

Aida Gonzalez

She'd thought long and hard, and she had listened to Ramon and what he had to say about giving Narro a chance, that she didn't know the whole story and all of that, but on balance she had decided that such an entanglement was something she didn't need.

She had so longed for a father when she was young. She remembered the searing jealousy she had of Ramon and his father, who adored his son, and how she longed for a big, strong man to pull her on his knee and tell her stories, or push her on a swing, or buy her an ice cream.

She remembered her teenage years, struggling financially, her mother working so hard, when she'd had to give up school because Gabriella couldn't afford the fees, when she danced in

sandalos with holes in the soles – those were the years she'd needed a father.

Not now.

She had, against the odds, made a life for herself on her own. She was a strong, independent woman with no need of anyone, especially some man who had now decided he wanted to play happy families. Too little, and much, much too late.

The part of her brain that niggled at her, the part that said 'why not give him a hearing, why close the door on a possible family when you now have none,' was not telling her what she wanted or needed to hear, so she shut it down. She was a loner. She didn't need people. Her life so far had made her that way, and to suddenly get soft would not help her – it would hurt her. She was alone and better off for it.

She placed the single sheet in the envelope, addressed it and licked the flap. She would post it before she had time to change her mind. She had two hours before she needed to be back for make-up and costumes.

Walking up the street in Skibbereen, County Cork, she watched as families went about their business. The middle-aged man helping his elderly father into the doctor's office, a woman chatting to a friend in the churchyard while two little girls played hide-and-seek among the headstones of long-dead priests, an older man telling a story to a couple who erupted into a burst of raucous laughter. All around in every direction were people who'd bonded with others, couples, friends, family, children, parents, siblings. And it was a world she knew so little of.

She walked quickly up the street to the post office.

'Aida!'

She heard her name being called and saw Peter across the street; he was carrying his baby in his arms.

She waved and crossed to join them.

'Daddy is taking me for a cream slice,' Peter announced proudly, speaking in a squeaky voice for his infant daughter.

‘Well, she can’t have one, but Daddy can,’ he added in his own voice, grinning.

‘*Que te sonría la Diosa fortuna!* Aren’t you a beautiful girl?’ Aida said, gazing at her. She was such a sweet baby, with her dark hair and blue eyes that were slowly darkening to hazel, her button nose and permanent gummy smile; she brightened all their days. She was the only child in the cabaret and universally adored by everyone.

‘Well, she was a right fairy last night and kept her mammy up with her caterwauling, so I said we’d go for a walk to let May have a rest. The roads are in no fit state for pushing prams, so I carried her – she prefers it anyway. Do you want to come for a cream slice?’

Aida hesitated. She should post the letter. But she’d given Peter and May space since they’d come back, and so it was the first time she’d really spent any time with Aisling and Peter alone.

Peter smiled. ‘Come on, join us – my treat.’

‘Well, if you’re paying,’ she said coolly.

In the Wooden Spoon Café, they ordered coffees and cream slices and sat at a booth in the back.

As they waited for the waitress to bring their cakes, Aisling’s father gazed with adoration at his little daughter, helping her shake the little wooden rattle that Two-Soups had made her.

Having a child had changed him so much.

Normally he would take a private moment like this to confide in Aida about the finances of the show or what other acts might be for hire, or ask her if they should put on another dance night, as May had done once to great success. But the baby had totally distracted him from the business.

‘You’re a natural papa,’ she said. ‘Look at you.’

He smiled up at her with his intense blue eyes. ‘Do you think?’

‘I do, despite your former fears.’

‘I know. I can’t believe I was ever unsure about being a father. She’s the best thing that ever happened to me. I can’t imagine life without her.’

‘Of course you can’t.’

‘My old man was so useless, you know? A horrible person. And I swore I’d be better, do better, but I had no idea of my capacity for love until I met this little girl, even when May was pregnant. I knew I was going to be a father, of course I did, but it wasn’t until I actually saw my daughter, held her in my arms, that I realised. You can’t really understand – men don’t anyway, although it’s probably different for women – until it’s a real person, you know?’

Aida felt suddenly, deeply sad. ‘No, I don’t know. Even though I am a woman.’

Peter coloured. ‘Ah, I didn’t mean –’

‘No, you are right,’ she interrupted him. ‘I don’t have any way of knowing the love you and May have for your baby. I don’t have family the way you do. You and your daughter, your wife, your brother and sisters, your mother. I know your father was not good, but the rest of you are so close, and for Aisling, she has this big loving family. She is lucky. I have Ramon, I suppose...’

But her childhood friend was busy chasing after Rosie these days, who was showing surprising strength of character by not falling into his arms as he was used to. Silently Aida applauded her.

Besides, when Ramon wasn’t romancing, he was messing and laughing with Enzo. He was a fun-loving boy, and she knew he found her too serious. She exuded a standoffishness, she knew that. She didn’t encourage connection.

The waitress appeared with a full tray and immediately oohed and aahed over the baby, and another waitress, a middle-aged woman with a huge nose, rushed over to join in. Peter beamed, the proudest father in the world. This was what life was actually all about – family, connections, love. She

thought of the letter in her bag, stamped and addressed and ready to post to her father.

There was a family for her, in Madrid, brothers, sisters, a father, even a stepmother maybe. Did she dare to dream that she could have that sense of belonging? What others took for granted? All she had to do was reach out and say she wanted it. Maybe it would be a disaster. Maybe she would never fit in with them. But if she didn't try, then she would never know. Could she allow herself to be that vulnerable? Should she?

While Peter answered all the waitresses' questions about Aisling's age and weight and size, and explained about her being six weeks early but as fit as a fiddle nonetheless, Aida nibbled her cream slice and drank her surprisingly good coffee and waited patiently for him to finish.

The ladies got on with their work eventually, and Aida and Peter chatted easily, mainly about the show. How Magus was such an oddball but so incredibly talented, and how Clive had a narrow escape with a widow who set her cap at him in Ardmore.

Back outside, he asked, 'We waylaid you – where were you off to before we dragged you for cake?'

'Nowhere,' she answered with a shrug.

'Great, will we walk back together then? I think this little girl is going to need her mammy soon – she's getting very wriggly.'

As they passed a rubbish bin, Aida reached into her bag and extracted the letter, ripped it in half and threw it in.

She'd write another one tonight.

CHAPTER 28



DUBLIN

NICK

NICK AND CELINE sat hand in hand in the magnificence of Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin. He explained to her that it stood at that site since the Viking times of around 1000 AD and had been used by a Norse king, but how subsequently it had been the location of several pivotal moments in Irish history. She loved history and so begged him to tell her more as they waited for the wedding to begin.

He told her of Archbishop Laurence O'Toole and the negotiations with the Anglo Normans when they arrived in 1169. How Richard II sat there to receive the four kings of Ireland, from each of the four provinces. That it was there the pretender to the throne, Lambert Simnel, in 1467 was crowned while Henry VII sat on the English throne, causing consternation.

It had seen many kings and queens, and it became a Protestant cathedral when Henry VIII broke with Rome. And the rumour was that an Irish author called Bram Stoker was inspired by the crypt of the cathedral to write his gothic horror novel *Dracula*.

Celine hung on his every word, and Nick enjoyed the feeling. She'd been so moved at his suggestion that Millie run the estate and that she stay there until the baby came at least, and that he was willing to turn a blind eye to their relationship, that things had been wonderful between them since.

They'd continued to make love occasionally at Celine's gentle insistence; she didn't want him to feel rejected. But it was different for him now. It was lovely and comforting to hold her in his arms, and the sight of her pregnant belly made him feel so protective of her, but he found he didn't yearn for her the way he once had. It was hard to explain, and he didn't fully understand it himself. He loved her deeply and always

would, but not in the blind, infatuated, lovesick way he once had. They were a team, Celine, Millie and him, and though it would defy all logic to explain it to anyone, it worked, and that was all that mattered.

Harvey stood at the top of the aisle, resplendent, it must be said, in an immaculately cut morning suit. He wore the mandatory single-breasted coat with peaked lapels, a grey waistcoat, grey striped trousers, a gleaming white shirt and polished Oxford shoes. Around his neck was a cravat, and he carried a top hat under his arm.

Among the other morning suits sitting in the aisles were some high-ranking British military men, judging by the gold braiding on their red dress uniforms, and several other uniformed officers, including a handsome fellow with an unpleasant sneer on his face, who seemed to think the whole thing was a bit of a joke.

Nick refused to dress according to either code and had settled on a navy pinstriped lounge suit instead. He got away with it because of his reputation as a bohemian, which he enjoyed. Celine looked lovely in a pale-blue floor-length chiffon.

Dotted all around the church were other of Nick's relations and friends of the family. Florence Gamminston and that lacklustre husband of hers were sitting right behind him. In the front pew was Harvey's sister, Lucinda Bathhurst; she was a plain, bitter-looking spinster who had been left on the shelf because Harvey was too mean to give her an allowance, or so said Florence.

And sitting beside Lucinda in the family pew was Nick's mother, as slim and perfectly groomed as ever, her gleaming black hair pinned up under an elegant hat.

Nick didn't know why he'd been so surprised to see his mother at this wedding. Harriet Shaw had always been very fond of Harvey, which said a lot about her. She'd accepted him as the rightful heir to Brockleton, and had expressed her sorrow on his behalf when Nick turned up and ruined his dreams. Roger had been the only son Harriet had loved; she'd

found her second son, Wally, boorish, and as for Nick, she despised him for his softness and his stammer. Nick hadn't spoken to her since before the war and had no desire to do so now.

The organ suddenly filled the cavernous cathedral with the triumphant strains of Mendelssohn's 'Wedding March' as the bride on her father's arm began the long walk to greet her future husband.

The Lord Lieutenant looked splendid in his dark-blue uniform with silver buttons, epaulettes and sash. He wore a cap with a shamrock emblem on the badge and a sword with a shining steel scabbard. Beside him his daughter was looking decidedly less thrilled. She was a plain little thing, no more than nineteen years old – whereas Harvey was over forty – and she looked like she would rather be anywhere else on earth at that given moment.

Harvey, for his part, looked like a sly old fox, with the misfortunate girl the tastiest chicken he'd ever seen. It was clearly a marriage of strategy, with the girl the sacrifice required. Nick's heart went out to her. His own marriage was by no means perfect, but he loved his wife and she loved him and they treated each other with respect. He had no confidence his cousin would do the same.

Earlier Florence had gossiped with Nick in the sunshine outside the church while Lord Gamminston chatted to a heavily decorated general. The private detective that her dreary husband set on her was in her employ now, and Nick suspected there might even be more to the relationship than that; you never could tell with Florence. At least she'd given up on Enzo as a bad job. Anyway, apparently this detective was still obsessed with watching Harvey, and the man's taste for the young was now being met in a club on Harcourt Street, a known den of iniquity where all manner of indecency went on, along with May's brother, David Gallagher, of all people. Nick wondered if May knew about that. He didn't think he would mention it to her, even though he had the impression there was no love lost there. He wondered if David Gallagher

was here at this wedding, not that Nick would recognise him if he was. Only Peter had ever met him, apart from May.

The ceremony began, and the priest said, ‘Should anyone present know of any reason that this couple should not be joined in holy matrimony, speak now or forever hold your peace.’

Nick still had the photographs of his cousin molesting children, and he wondered if he should have made them available to the poor young bride after all, despite his pact with Harvey. But he couldn’t; it would put his friends and himself in too much danger. Maybe having the Lord Lieutenant for a father would afford the poor girl some protection, though somehow he doubted it.

The ceremony groaned on, the archbishop officious and long-winded. It felt like ages before he finally said ‘man and wife’ and the bride was shackled to that pervert for life. Short of killing Harvey, it was too late to save her.

He and Celine shuffled out with everyone else up the aisle into the sunshine. Nick wanted to get away from what felt like the scene of a crime as quickly as possible, but they would need to at least stay until the couple had their pictures taken. Celine said that as soon as that was over, she would do a convincing fainting fit to spare them having to attend the reception, and he laughed.

‘Please do.’

The photographer had set up his camera and waved at people to stand here and there on the steps of the cathedral. Nick’s mother stood to one side, deep in conversation with that dreary Lord Gamminston; she didn’t seem to have noticed him, and he decided to take Celine over to introduce her for form’s sake if nothing else.

As it turned out, she could barely find two words to say to him, and none at all to Celine. Her green eyes rested with distaste on his wife’s gently swollen belly, her mouth twisted in disgust, and then she was called by the photographer to stand on the steps with the bridal couple. Nick watched as his mother whispered in Harvey’s ear. His cousin’s eyes turned in

Nick's direction...and then came to rest on Celine's stomach. Harvey looked none too pleased. Of course if Nick had an heir, that was another obstacle between Harvey and Brockleton.

A small shiver ran up Nick's spine, and he murmured in Celine's ear, 'Faint.'

Celine gave a little cry and put the back of her hand to her eyes, and he threw his arm around her and bore her away, explaining to anyone who noticed that his pregnant wife was finding the heat hard to bear.

Millie was waiting in her car two streets away, and he and Celine scrambled in, giggling.

It was a ridiculous way to travel. They'd been going to borrow Walter's magnificent open-topped Bentley and arrive in style with Millie in a chauffeur's uniform, wearing a chauffeur's hat, but the Bentley was up on blocks in the stable, having broken its axle going over a blown-up piece of road. It was impossible to get a different car in the current climate – the British army was requisitioning everything – so Millie's two-seater it had to be.

After the previous drive to Brockleton, when it had been nearly impossible to drag Nick out of the luggage space behind the seats, Celine had put her foot down and insisted she was perfectly fine, even at eight months pregnant, to travel in the back. So they'd bedded her down with cushions and blankets until she protested they were treating her like a baby, and set off in the early hours of the morning to get to Dublin in time for the wedding.

They were going to take a detour back through Youghal in Cork, where the cabaret was now resting, to say hello to everyone and see May and Peter's new baby.

CHAPTER 29



*N*ICK

‘NICK, YOU’VE A TELEGRAM FROM BROCKLETON.’ Maggie came bursting into Nick and Celine’s caravan with the envelope in her hand, just as Nick was scrambling eggs in a pan for breakfast. ‘I met the delivery boy on the road, and I asked if there were any for the cabaret, and this was for you.’ It was misty rain outside; her wonderful wild red hair was like a halo with the damp, and her green dress clung to her.

‘Thanks, Maggie.’ He was putting the finishing touches to the eggs. ‘Set it down there, and I’ll –’

‘No, quick, open it now.’

Nick realised she was worried then and remembered the conversation he’d had with her on his first day back with the cabaret. She’d come to find him to tell him she thought it was ‘almost surely safe’ for Celine to go back to Brockleton with Millie. Her implication was clear. The IRA were burning down the big estate houses everywhere; they’d already had a go at Harvey Bathurst’s seat, Cushing Hall. But Maggie had inside knowledge that Brockleton was not on that list ‘Cos ya friends of the Cullens, ya see, and Mr Collins knows ya saved Eamonn’s life when he were in the Castle.’ Maggie was deeper in the republican movement than even Peter realised, and she was well able to handle herself.

Nick had long suspected that Maggie Cullen was a member of Cumann na mBan, which would make her a

Volunteer like Eamonn. He'd never asked her, of course, but it explained her occasional disappearances, which Peter, May and Aida never commented on or complained about. Of course none of them talked to him about it because he was on the 'other side'; his father was an Anglo-Irish peer of the realm. But he knew everyone in the cabaret supported the rebel cause, and that's no doubt why they turned a blind eye to Maggie's comings and goings, and it also explained her insider knowledge about Brockleton.

But the fear in her eyes as she handed him the telegram now made his stomach turn over. Clearly she thought maybe she'd got it wrong about Brockleton and this might be bad news about the house. He thanked his lucky stars that Celine had been too tired after the wedding and the long drive to Cork to head to Brockleton at once but had decided to stay the week in Youghal. Right now his French wife was sitting up in bed in a pretty lace bed jacket and looking anxious as well.

'Open it, Nick.'

His heart in his mouth, he tore open the envelope and scanned its contents.

**NICK COME NOW STOP WALTER DYING STOP
LAST REQUEST TO SEE YOU AND CELINE STOP
ALICIA**

'It's from my grandmother. Father's d-d-dying,' Nick groaned, sinking down on the U-shaped seat while Maggie grabbed the eggs and took them off the flame.

'Oh, oh no.' Celine had gotten out of bed and was searching for her slippers. 'We go now. Maggie, ask Millie to bring the car...'

'No, Maggie, don't. Wait.'

'Why you say wait?' gasped Celine in frustration. 'Walter is dying, and he want to see us.'

'I know, I know. I just...' Nick stared at the telegram; he had an odd feeling about this, although he couldn't put his finger on it right away. The two women were looking at him in confusion, unable to understand how he could just be sitting

there when his father was dying. He knew it looked unnatural, but there was something wrong...

And then he had it. 'Celine, I'll go, but I'm not taking you.'

'Nick!' Celine was horrified. 'I love your father.'

'So do I, Celine, but this telegram isn't from my grandmother. She would never, ever sign a telegram to me "Alicia". All my life I've called her Floss. She'd never call herself Alicia to me.'

'But maybe someone else sent it on her behalf?' Maggie looked worried again.

Nick shook his head. 'Nobody on the staff would use that name either. No, something is off about this.'

'I thought Brockleton was safe, but maybe...' Maggie said, clearly distressed now.

He smiled at her, though he didn't feel like smiling. 'I don't think it's anything to do with...well...friends of yours, Maggie. It wouldn't make sense. Floss wouldn't pretend Walter was dying to get me to come – she'd just tell me the truth. Something strange is going on, and I have to go and find out what it is.'

'I'm coming with you,' insisted Celine.

He shook his head firmly. 'No. I'm not endangering you and the b-b-baby, Celine. Stay here, rest, eat your breakfast. I won't do anything stupid, I p-p-promise. I'm just going to find out what's going on, and then I'll c-c-come straight home.' He stood up, grabbed a mouthful of eggs from the pan, pulled on his boots and coat, kissed his worried wife, and jumped down from the caravan, heading across the fields towards Millie's caravan.

Maggie followed, falling into step beside him. It was still raining but not so heavily. 'I'm coming with you, Nick.'

He nearly laughed at the cheek of her. 'No, I'm g-g-going alone. I'll get Millie to d-d-drop me in the nearest village and walk.'

Maggie stood indignantly, blocking his path. ‘Like hell you will. The roads are all blown up all over the country, and you don’t know who you’d run into. It’s too dangerous. I’m comin’ with ya. Now you can argue or we can just go – the end result will be the same.’

‘Maggie, p-p-please let me by, and of course you c-c-can’t come –’

‘And what? You’ll just go driving through all sorts of checkpoints or ambush sites, will ya? With your plummy accent and everyone knowin’ you’re the next bleedin’ baron? There’ll be some kid Volunteer who won’t know you’re a friend of the Cullens, and ’e’ll put a bullet in ya quicker than look at ya.’ Maggie rolled her eyes at his naiveté.

It was an alarming thought, but... ‘I have to t-t-try, Maggie. Floss needs me. I d-d-don’t know why, b-b-but something’s wrong.’

‘And you don’t think havin’ Eamonn Cullen’s sister with ya could help, no?’ Maggie asked sarcastically.

Despite the dire nature of the predicament, he couldn’t help but laugh. Standing there in the soft rain, her hands on her hips, her green dress clinging to her curves, her magnificent hair tumbling down her back in glistening waves, her dark-blue eyes flashing – it would take a stronger man than him to resist her.

‘Well, maybe as far as Dripsey,’ he agreed. ‘But then that’s it, M-M-Maggie, OK?’

‘We’ll see about tha’...’ she said darkly.

But he didn’t answer. They’d reached the caravan, the one she shared with Millie, and he banged on the door.

‘Millie, I need your c-c-car!’ he called. ‘We have to go to B-B-Brockleton, well, as far as D-D-Dripsey. It’s an emergency.’

The door flew open, and the small, neat woman appeared with the keys already in her hand. ‘What’s happening? Is Celine coming? What about the IRA checkpoints?’

‘I don’t know what’s happening, and I’m leaving Celine here – I’ll explain on the way. Maggie’s coming to help with the checkpoints.’

‘Maggie’s coming?’ Millie glanced approvingly at the wild-looking but beautiful Dublin girl. ‘Good.’ She didn’t seem at all surprised.

‘We n-n-need to go now. We have no t-t-time to waste. I’ll explain on the way.’

Millie’s car was parked beside the tent, and Maggie scrambled into the back. ‘How fast can this go?’ she asked Millie as Millie climbed in behind the wheel.

‘Forty-five miles an hour if I push it.’

‘Well, ya better push it then,’ Maggie said with a smile.

‘Nick, Maggie, Millie, what’s going on?’ Peter hurried from the tent as Nick climbed in and Millie revved the engine.

‘We think something’s wrong at Brockleton, not Volunteer stuff, though. But Nick got a strange telegram off his nan, and he wants to make sure she’s alright’...’ Maggie outlined the situation in her rapid-fire Dublin way, knowing with Nick’s stammer it would take him much longer, and Nick shot her a look of gratitude.

Peter marched around to the driver’s side. ‘OK, Millie, sorry now, but I have to be the one to drive Nick and Maggie. I can’t let my sister go there without me – our ma would kill me. And you know I can drive, Millie. Sure I drive the truck everywhere –’

‘But this car is mine!’ The woman’s eyes flashed with indignation; the little green eight-horsepower Chambers Motors vehicle was her pride and joy.

‘I know it’s a big ask, Millie, but doesn’t Celine need you here?’ Peter’s eyes flicked to Nick, and for a moment, Nick panicked that Peter knew the truth about their relationship. ‘I mean, Celine’s pregnant and she needs either her husband or best friend with her at all times. Supposing something happens to both of you in Brockleton – it would be a disaster for her. I should have been there for May – look at what happened to

her. She went into labour on a tram and barely made it to Ma's house in time.' He was at his most persuasive, his dark-blue eyes filled with concern, and Millie sighed, turned off the engine, handed him the key and got out.

Nick felt a wave of relief. 'Thank you, Millie. Peter's right – Celine needs one of us with her at all t-t-times.'

The dark-haired woman came around to the passenger side and leant in to peck his cheek. 'Take care of yourself, Nick. Both of us would be broken-hearted if anything happened to you.'

'Peter, wait!' May was running towards them now. She looked really beautiful in a white dress and sandals, a pink shawl around her shoulders. 'Where are you going?'

Peter leant out the driver's window. 'Brockleton. Something's wrong, we don't know what. Look after everything till we get back.'

'Something's wrong? Stay right there, Peter.'

'We have to go,' Maggie called urgently from the back, but May was already gone, flying across the field to her and Peter's caravan. Seconds later, as Peter revved and turned the car, ready to take off, she came running back again with a small embroidered handbag that she shoved into his hands. 'Take this,' she said urgently. 'Just in case.' Then she kissed him fervently and stood back.

Peter winked at her, put his foot to the floor and roared out of the field, with Millie and May staring after them, Millie with her hands to her mouth as her beloved little car bounced along over the hard rutted ground. As they passed Nick's caravan, Nick saw Celine sitting on the steps. And as Nick waved to her, she touched her hand to her stomach and then her heart, wishing him love from her and the baby.

Peter drove at breakneck speed on narrow country roads, only taking his foot off the accelerator when absolutely necessary and taking some corners very sharply. But it was still slow, and Maggie was right – the roads were in terrible condition. Several times they had to make diversions, but

thankfully they were able to get to Dripsey unchallenged. From there Nick said he'd proceed on foot, not wanting to put his friends in any danger, but Peter was adamant that Nick was going nowhere without him and Maggie refused to be left.

It was just as well, because there was an IRA roadblock between Dripsey and Brockleton, and two young Volunteers, looking scared but fierce, waved their guns. The Volunteers only let them through the barricade because Maggie climbed out and whispered something in one boy's ear. He blushed scarlet to the roots of his hair and shouted to his comrade to back off, then had a whispered conversation with Maggie and waved Nick and Peter through.

When she climbed back in on the other side of the checkpoint, Maggie said, 'Well, there's definitely no IRA activity to do with Brockleton, though someone put out a rumour about it and it's been going around Dripsey. Most of your staff were spooked, Nick. The Volunteers have been posted here by the local commander to protect the house. I wonder if that's what your nan heard, and she was afraid to put it in the telegram? In case it didn't get sent or the wrong person read it?'

'Good thinking, Maggie,' said Peter, and Nick's heart lifted.

'That's a good thought. Maybe she did feel she couldn't write about it and that's why she signed it "Alicia", so I wouldn't worry about Father because I'd know it wasn't true. But she still wanted me to come and rescue them, because Father and Floss are too frail to leave by themselves and the Bentley's still out of action probably, so Armitage wouldn't be able to drive them...'

'Then we've all been worrying for nothing,' said Peter as they pulled off the road and up the avenue. Ahead of them, Brockleton loomed, still and imposing in the afternoon sun, the cut limestone and sandstone looking resplendent in the buttery evening summer light. Here and there the walls were covered by the creeping ivy in colours of red, gold and copper.

‘Don’t drive as far as the house, though,’ said Nick. ‘Not till we’re sure everything’s all right.’ Despite Maggie’s reasonable explanation of Floss’s telegram, he still couldn’t shake a bad feeling about this. ‘I don’t want anyone to see the car.’

Peter came to a stop in a gateway, where the low car would be invisible from the house.

Nick got out and hurried the rest of the way up the avenue, circled the huge fountain – which depicted Neptune, with mermaids all around, every statue spilling water – ran up the steps and tried the front door, which was freshly varnished. It was locked, unusual during the day. He nearly rang the bell, but there was something strange about the hush that hung over this place. The servants had gone, that much was true; there was no sign of life in the gardens or the stables.

He peered in through some of the windows to see if there was anyone inside. It was dusk, and many of the drapes were drawn, but there were no gas lights on or candles lit.

He went back to the car. ‘The front door’s locked, and I can’t see anyone inside.’

‘You forgot to bring the key?’ asked Maggie, leaning forward from the back.

‘I never had one.’

‘Wha? Why don’t you have a key for your own bleedin’ house?’ She clearly couldn’t believe her ears.

‘B-b-because there’s always staff. We d-d-don’t carry things like keys.’

‘Well, there’s no staff now, is there?’ She ran her hands through her hair in exasperation.

‘It doesn’t look like it, and maybe Floss and Father and Armitage have left as well, though I don’t understand then about the telegram. I wish I could just get inside for a look.’

‘We could break a window?’ she suggested.

‘How about round the back?’ Peter got out of the car.

‘You’re right – maybe the kitchen door is open.’

‘Maggie, you stay here out of sight,’ Peter said, ‘while we take a quick look. Call us if anyone comes – sing one of your mock arias, the one that could break plate glass and be heard in the next parish. Nick, lead on.’

Back at the house, Nick took the shortest route to the kitchens, through the perfectly manicured rose garden, the scent heady and sweet as the flowers released their oils in the warm evening air. All around, the arboretum, parklands and lawns were various shades of verdant green. Nick understood the anger in the country, he knew who had lit the flames, but still, if this beautiful place was burnt, he couldn’t help but feel it would be a terrible, irreparable loss.

The kitchen door was locked and closed. But further on, some narrow steps led down to a basement door, beside which was a small narrow window, no more than six inches wide. Nick picked up a stone cherub lying recumbent on the lowest step – Brockleton was dotted with such random bits of decoration from the former house, which had burnt down once before in 1730 – and smashed the glass. Then he reached in and tried to grab the handle but failed, as his big, muscular upper arm was too wide for the space. He was afraid to push; there were bits of jagged glass everywhere. ‘I c-c-can’t reach.’

‘Move,’ Peter ordered. Nick stepped back, and Peter took off his coat and used it to knock out more glass, then reached in one arm. Seconds later there was a click as the latch released, and the door swung open. Peter stood aside to let Nick lead the way into the house.

The door opened into a scullery, somewhere Nick didn’t think he’d ever been, with washing boards and enamel basins piled neatly. Beyond was a passageway, and on the right was the enormous kitchen with a table where Mrs Mulcair usually reigned supreme. Now, the kitchen was empty.

The cast-iron stove, at least twelve feet wide, sat squat, black and dull, unlit. The rest of the room was lined with shelves containing all manner of foodstuff and utensils, and

the aroma of years of baking and roasting hung pleasantly in the air. But of human life there was no sign.

‘Hello?’ Nick called softly down the passageway to the butler’s pantry and the housekeeper’s sitting room. ‘Armitage?’

No answer.

The two men hurried through the warren of passageways that made up the basement, the silver room, the boot room, and the servants’ quarters. They passed the wine cellar, locked but visible through a dark wrought-iron gate, and a laundry and a sluice.

Up the stairs, they passed through the green baize door, beyond which the family did not venture usually.

Nick walked quickly through the ground floor, Peter trailing behind. It was so strange to be here without staff or family; he’d never experienced it before. He needed to get to his father and Floss; they had to be here somewhere. Strange Armitage wasn’t around, though – where was he? The other staff might well have been instructed to leave, but Armitage would never leave his father and grandmother; Nick would stake his life on it. Trying to quell a mounting panic, he began running towards the trophy room, where his father liked to sit, the thick Axminster carpet deadening the sound of his and Peter’s feet. They passed rows of gilt-framed portraits, and in every nook and cranny, there was a sculpture or a piece of art. Antique furniture, far too big for any other kind of house, was strategically placed so rooms and halls were furnished but not overstuffed, as a smaller house, like Cushing Hall, would be.

Reaching the trophy room, he barged in without knocking, Peter bundling in behind him.

The click was instantly recognisable, the cocking of a pistol. Time seemed to stand still as Nick took in the scene.

Beside the vast fireplace, filled with dried flowers, Armitage was tied to the armchair, his ankles strapped to its legs, his hands behind his back and a handkerchief in his mouth, a massive red bruise discolouring his temple. In the

armchair opposite, also gagged and bound, was Floss, her usually immaculate hair in disarray, as if someone had been tugging at it. On the leather sofa was his father, handcuffed by a stirrup leather and his feet tied, and a gag was in his mouth as well; the baron's eyes bulged with fury.

‘Do come in,’ said the man holding the pistol to Floss’s temple. ‘Both of you, how nice of you to join us. Hands up.’

CHAPTER 30



*P*ETER

THE MAN HOLDING the cocked pistol to Nick's grandmother's head was familiar to Peter. He was slender, with light-brown hair and pale-grey eyes – Nick's distant cousin from the wedding, the man who had stopped to speak to him and Aida in the snow that day. The man Nick had gone to, to get Aida and Eamonn out of Dublin Castle.

Harvey Bathhurst beckoned with his other hand, and Peter followed Nick further into the trophy room with his hands raised. The door closed behind them, and though he didn't turn to look, he knew immediately who had shut it; he'd recognise that smell anywhere. And he remembered the second time he'd met Harvey Bathhurst. In Harcourt Street, coming out of that seedy, unmarked club with May's brother, David Gallagher, who always stunk of whiskey and cologne.

He thought about swinging around and throwing a punch, making a surprise attack. But their captors were armed British officers, and one of them had his gun to Nick's grandmother's head. Why had he left the gun May had given him, hidden in her embroidered handbag, back in the car? He was an idiot; it was a fatal mistake.

Gallagher grabbed his arms from behind. Peter instinctively kicked him in the shins, but Bathhurst shoved the muzzle of the revolver harder into the baroness dowager's head and yanked her head back by grabbing a fistful of her

hair. ‘Sit down on these chairs and don’t say anything. David, tie them and gag them.’

At the foot of the sofa, where Nick’s father lay bound, red-faced and furious, were two empty kitchen chairs, obviously intended for Nick and Celine. Hence the telegram, luring them into this trap.

At least these monsters had accidentally netted Peter instead of an innocent pregnant girl. Harvey didn’t seem very pleased by this turn of events. ‘How *not* charming to meet your brother-in-law again, David. Peter Cullen, isn’t it? I’ve never understood why you wished to mingle with these slum rats, Nicholas.’

‘At least this slum rat understands loyalty,’ said Peter calmly, and David Gallagher, who had just finished binding and gagging Nick, punched Peter in the side of the face before shoving a cloth in his mouth and tying him to the second chair, then punching him in the face again. ‘That’ll teach you to run me out of my parents’ house.’ He spat in Peter’s face.

‘Do you really understand loyalty, Mr Cullen?’ asked Harvey, grinding the pistol against Alicia Shaw’s temple until it broke the old lady’s skin and a streak of blood ran down her face.

Nick groaned behind his gag.

‘I don’t think you do, Mr Cullen, with your many wives. Does David’s sister realise there is a second woman in your dirty little circus set-up who also calls herself Mrs Cullen and thinks herself married to you? My little c-c-c-c-cousin here had the audacity to suggest I was perverted, but at least I only have one legal wife. Though I do understand why you were tempted to add a second to your harem – David tells me his sister is a stuck-up, bossy, middle-class bore, so I’m not surprised a guttersnipe like you had to find a different outlet for his pleasure. And the other Mrs Cullen...such a beauty. Very...em...sensual. Hot-blooded. I enjoyed that when I had her on the floor in Dublin Castle.’ His leering tone dripped like syrup. ‘Such a pity to destroy such beauty but’ – he sighed and shrugged – ‘we must all do what we must do.’

Peter felt as if his heart was going to explode with rage. Blood thundered in his ears; bile rose in his throat. So this was the man who had violated Aida in Dublin Castle, who had broken her feet, who had smashed her teeth, who had pulled out her hair, who had battered her body and all but destroyed her spirit.

Yet he couldn't do anything. He had to sit here, rigid and still, bound to the chair. If he threw himself sideways, then maybe... No, nothing would happen except Nick's grandmother would suffer some more.

'So here we all are,' Harvey went on smoothly, as if he'd run into them at a cocktail party,

'gathered in this charming home, soon to be razed to the ground unfortunately. Your side of the family got the better end of the stick here, Nicholas. I was always envious of this house, so much more substantial than mine, but such is life. And it can be rebuilt. And there's the house in Mayfair and the Yorkshire and north Norfolk estates, and the hunting lodge in the Highlands, and that plantation in India. Plenty enough for humble Harvey Bathurst to survive on very nicely, especially after I've evicted the tenant farmers for helping the IRA burn this place, the treacherous Irish scum.'

Nick's muffled protest caused his cousin's eyebrows to rise in question.

'What was that? Nicholas, I know you have a speech impediment, but really you must try to enunciate – nobody has the faintest idea what you're saying.'

Gallagher sniggered at that, and Harvey glanced at him with a supercilious twitch of his trimmed moustache.

'Anyway, enough of this. We have a job to do. David, kindly go and fetch the jerry cans of petrol from the stables – there's four in the luggage compartment of the Rolls-Royce. And do be careful, won't you, not to spill any of it on the way back. We don't want to face a wall of fire as we make good our escape. Oh, and loan me your pistol as you go, there's a good chap. You never know what slum rats might get up to in their sneaky, slippery way.'

David slid towards the door, handing over his pistol to Harvey as he exited. Aida's torturer was armed with two guns now, one pointed at Alicia Shaw and the other trained on Peter and Nick. Even with his victims bound and gagged, thought Peter contemptuously, Harvey was so cowardly, he still needed a second gun.

Alicia Shaw was so much braver than Harvey despite her advanced years and frail body. She had her chin held high, and her eyes were blazing; she was made of tough stuff, the dowager. And Armitage, his arms tied behind him, was also sitting very upright despite his bonds, the light of defiance in his rheumy old eyes.

All around, the stuffed and mounted heads of deer, bison, a wolf and even bears gazed down from the walls with glazed eyes, and Harvey, his eyes as cold as theirs, looked equally as bored as he observed his victims, a faint smile playing around his lips.

'Would you like to hear how I did it? We have some time to kill.'

Nobody reacted, not a flinch, but he carried straight on as if they had begged him to tell his story. 'David Gallagher knows the traitor who betrayed you and your so-called wife, Peter, and the man knew how to send a warning that the IRA were going to burn the house. I immediately contacted your father, telling him to stay where he was. I knew the Bentley was out of action, but I said I would personally come to fetch him and his mother in my Rolls-Royce. Armitage was also here when we arrived, such a loyal old retainer, but a punch in the face was all it took to shut him up. And your grandmother obliged us by phoning the post office and sending a telegram to summon you and your pregnant wife to share her fate. How's that for family love, Nicholas? They've always despised you in this family, haven't they?'

He smiled sweetly at Nick then, but Nick ignored him. His gaze was fixed lovingly on his grandmother, who had tears of outrage in her eyes, and then his father, who was twitching on the sofa, so purple in the face with fury, he looked in danger of having another stroke.

‘I must say, I’m a little surprised Celine refused to accompany you, Nicholas,’ Harvey added, a hint of irritation showing. ‘She made such a good job of pretending to love this pair of old fossils, but maybe that was just until she had her hooks into this house. It doesn’t matter, though. I know women and babies are easy to dispose of. Very dangerous world we live in, y’see.’ He sighed, then looked at Peter. ‘And David is clearly delighted to see you instead, Peter. He’s told me all about what you did to him. The great showman himself, Peter Cullen, having the audacity to threaten my good friend David in his own home.’ Harvey laughed then. ‘Well, not “my good friend”, exactly. Between ourselves, your brother-in-law is a tad lowbrow for me, and I happen to know he’s a deserter who should have been shot by a firing squad instead of still walking around in his uniform. But shall we say we have... shared interests.’

Bathhurst’s lips curled smugly as he contemplated his sexual deviance with satisfaction.

‘Oh, and I know you’re wondering why the doors were locked.’ He carried on as if Peter had spoken. ‘Well, the way you circus types go around in packs, I didn’t want to be set upon by a mob. David kept watch until we were sure there were just two of you, and if you’d rung the bell, he would have let you in. But then you let yourselves in, and we decided it would be easier and more fun to wait.’ As he said the word ‘wait’, he glanced at his pocket watch with a frown. ‘What’s keeping that man?’

Even as he spoke, the door opened and David staggered in with two huge jerry cans of petrol, dumping them on the floor with a groan of relief. ‘Here’s two of them, Harvey. Will I go back for the others?’

‘Not at all, this is plenty. The other jerry cans are for the outhouses. Now splash it all over the carpet. There’s a good man.’

After stretching the cramp out of his arms, David Gallagher picked up one of the containers and began walking around the room with the can tilted, leaving a long soaking trail across the Bengal tiger rugs that had so terrified Nick as a

child. As he passed by Peter's chair, his lips drew back in a grin like the snarling wolf's head on the wall, and he stopped and threw petrol right in Peter's face and then poured it all over his clothes.

Peter closed his eyes and held his breath against the noxious fumes. *So this is how I die*, he thought grimly. *Surviving my father, the tenements, the Christian brothers, France, surviving sniper fire, landmines, shrapnel, only to be burnt alive...* He tried to comfort himself by thinking of his daughter. At least Aisling was safe, and May would be a wonderful mother to her. Aida would help her, he knew it. And Celine and Millie, and all of those strong women. And Enzo, Ramon, Two-Soups. They'd all survive without him. But how wonderful it would have been to see Aisling grow up...

'I'm going to have such fun with my sister when you're burnt to a crisp, Peter,' sneered David Gallagher. 'If she doesn't hand over the inheritance she stole from me, I'll make sure the state knows she's a traitor, so she'll swing and your little brat will grow up in an orphanage, no better than she should be.'

Peter's eyes sprung open, watering and burning with fumes, and he fixed Gallagher with a look of such deep loathing that Harvey, who was watching, giggled with glee. 'Ooh, if looks could kill, David...'

'Fortunately, they can't,' chuckled Gallagher, splashing the rest of the petrol over the end of Walter's couch.

Peter closed his eyes again, struggling in an ocean of despair. *Aisling... May... I'm sorry, my darling child, my darling wife...*

'You're right, looks can't kill,' he heard Harvey saying in his cool, bored voice. 'Guns, on the other hand, can. I'm sorry about this, old chap' – he faced David now – 'but think of it this way. As a deserter you should have faced the firing squad years ago, so think of this as delayed justice...'

Peter's eyes flew open again, in time to see David Gallagher throw himself back against the wall, hands raised,

bewildered terror on his handsome face. ‘Harvey, put down the gun. I’m not a deserter,’ he cried in alarm.

‘Not what a little bird called Paul Kenny told me,’ sneered the British officer. ‘Now stand still, will you? There’s a good fellow. Stop bobbing about.’

‘Please, I’m your friend...’

‘A friend who will soon attempt to blackmail me for money in return for not reporting me to my father-in-law, the Lord Lieutenant, for murder and arson. I know your type, Gallagher.’

‘I would never dream... You can trust me...’

Harvey pretended to weigh this up, his mouth pursed in thought. ‘No...I don’t think so. You would do exactly that, David, so...’ And Harvey fired, then fired again, with the man’s own pistol, and Gallagher slipped down the wall and lay against the skirting board, speechless, agony on his dying face, blood pouring across the Axminster carpet from his many wounds, the metallic scent of the blood mingling with the petrol fumes.

‘Now,’ said Harvey, throwing aside Gallagher’s empty pistol and brandishing his own, ‘that’s put me in a good mood, so everyone, you’re in luck. Anyone who wants a bullet through the brain instead of dying in the fire can have it. Say it now or forever hold your peace.’ He cupped his hand to his ear theatrically. ‘Hello? Hello? Speak up! Was that you grunting behind your gag, Armitage? Sorry, old man, I can’t make out what you’re saying. Honestly, the diction of everyone in this house is gone to the dogs...’

Peter turned his eyes towards Nick and found his old friend gazing directly at him, his eyes brimming with love and sorrow. Sorrow for having dragged Peter into this. Love for everything they had been through. Was there a heaven where they would meet again? Peter didn’t know, but he hoped there would be, after the coming hell. At least he could die happy now, knowing May and Aisling were safe from David Gallagher.

It seemed strange to feel gratitude to Aida's torturer for anything, but for this, he did.

'Well, if there are no takers for my generous offer, let's just get on with it,' said Harvey, his voice getting high-pitched with excitement, as if murder was another of his perversions. 'Now, where are my matches...'

Peter saw the movement at the door, a flash of green, a swirl of red curls, just before he heard the crack of the pistol and the thump of Bathhurst's body as it hit the floor.

Maggie ran in with the pistol May had given him held straight in front of her, ready to shoot again...but there was no need. Bathhurst was dead; the bullet had hit him perfectly between the eyes. Stashing her pistol in the belt of her dress, she glanced around the room, winked at Nick, then came to Peter first, slashing his bonds with a pocketknife. 'Peter, you stink of petrol.'

'I love you too, Maggie. I really do,' he gasped hoarsely as she pulled out his gag. 'You're the bravest, maddest, cleverest sister a man could have...'

'Go way outta tha', you're embarrassin' me. And it was easy anyway. I just followed yer man when he came back with the jerry cans.'

Grinning, she moved on to help Nick, while Peter, hardly able to believe what had just happened, untied his own legs and went to free Armitage and Alicia Shaw.

'Help Walter!' gasped the dowager as her gag came loose, but when Peter turned to the sofa, Nick and Maggie had already released the baron and were assisting him to sit up against the cushions.

'Great girl, Nicholasssh,' slurred the baron in his booming tones. 'What a ssshot, saw it all...'

'You're right, Father, she's amazing. Maggie, you're amazing.' Nick threw his big arms around Peter's sister, crushing her half to death with the power of his hug. 'How can we ever, ever repay you?'

‘With my wife’s emerald tiara, that’s how!’ roared the baron, waving his good arm. ‘Ssshe tried to make off with it when ssshe left me, but it’s been in the family for hundreds of years and I wouldn’t let her take it, though ssshe carried on like I was robbing her rather than the other way round. It will be beautiful wiss her red hair...’

‘A brandy, m’lord?’ asked Armitage, back on his feet as if nothing had ever happened, despite the bruise on his temple.

‘Sssplendid, Armitage, brandies all round,’ agreed Walter, who seemed, if anything, energised by his ordeal.

The old butler stepped over Harvey’s cooling body as he exited the room, acting as if it wasn’t even there. But the corpse was there, very much so; it was lying on one of the Bengal tiger skins, Harvey’s cheek pressed against the tiger’s head and his grey eyes wide open. Peter wondered what on earth they were going to do with him. Bathurst had friends in high places.

As if she could read his mind, Floss, standing with the aid of a stick, gave Harvey’s side a poke with the toe of her elegant, pointed shoe. ‘Take this monster to Cushing Hall and burn the place down.’ She had regained her composure remarkably swiftly for such an old lady.

‘B-b-burn it down?’ Nick looked shaken. ‘C-C-Cushing Hall? We c-c-can’t...’

‘Of course we can. He was going to do it to Brockleton. Houses are being burned every night of the week – this will not cause any raised eyebrows. Everyone hated Harvey. He was an informer and an official in Dublin Castle. Of course the IRA want him dead and his house destroyed.’ Floss was unrepentant.

‘B-b-but the staff, the horses...’

‘I can arrange to give the staff a warning. That’s what the IRA normally do, tell them to get out of the way, like the way staff did here,’ suggested Maggie.

‘Ssshe’s right, by gad,’ exclaimed Walter. ‘The IRA have been threatening to burn Cushing Hall for ages, and God

knows the man's made enough enemies. They'll find his body in the charred remains and assume the rebels finally got the bugger. Awful man, never could understand what your mother sssaw in him. Knew he was a bad egg from the sstart. Should have sssmelled a rat when he said he was coming to help...'

'And Gallagher?' Maggie asked cheerfully. 'Add him to the bonfire too?'

All eyes went to the man lying by the skirting board, his dead eyes staring at the room. And then everyone looked at Peter. The aristocrats in the room might be cavalier about burning their relative, but maybe the working-class boy would demand a Christian burial for his kin.

Peter hesitated. He knew Olive and Michael Gallagher would want their son buried in hallowed ground; they would want to pray for his soul. But Nick put his hand on Peter's arm. 'I know you have reservations, P-P-Peter, but I think Father is right – we c-c-can't let anyone even know your brother-in-law is dead. Think of Maggie,' he said in a low voice. 'She's eighteen. If this comes out, she'll be hung.'

'We'll burn him too,' said Peter decisively.

'Excellent!' roared Walter, as Armitage returned with the tray of brandies. 'Armitage, I've changed my mind. It sstinks in here. Bring those to the schuummer drawing room, and Maggie, fetch me my wheelchair and push me along, there's a good lass.'

'Peter, let's g-g-get these bodies out of here right now,' muttered Nick out of the side of his mouth, grabbing a glass from the tray before Armitage could disappear again and gulping it down. 'It's b-b-bad enough having all these stuffed things with glass eyes on all the walls without human c-c-corpse staring at us as well.'

Peter agreed; he didn't want these bodies around any longer than necessary either. Alicia Shaw and the baron and Armitage seemed remarkably unfazed. They were used to dead things all over the house, he supposed. And Maggie was as bubbly as ever. But personally he found those cold, dead stares

disconcerting. ‘Will your father mind if we use the tiger skins like sort of sleds to pull them on?’

‘I’m sure not. Let’s do it. Good idea.’

Harvey was already lying on one Bengal tiger skin, and between them, they humped David Gallagher onto the other, face down, and Peter and Nick dragged the two bodies down the corridor and across the hall, Gallagher and Bathhurst riding on the tigers’ backs, the thickness of the skins protecting the Axminster carpet from their blood.

‘Have to say, I never liked these horrible rugs, but they’ve finally c-c-come in handy,’ gasped Nick as they wrestled the two bodies out onto the top step. ‘Now how will we bring them to Cushing Hall? The Bentley’s still up on blocks, and we can’t use Millie’s c-c-car – she’d k-k-kill us...’

‘Didn’t Harvey say he had his Rolls in the garage? With jerry cans of petrol in the boot as well?’

‘P-p-perfect, though we’ll have to b-b-burn the car if the upholstery gets stained with b-b-blood.’

‘Least of our worries,’ said Peter.

Once the Rolls was fetched from the stable yard and Harvey and David were deposited inside, wrapped up in the tiger skins, Peter went up to the bathroom next to the room where May and he had stayed for the wedding and washed himself. He dressed in trousers and a shirt Nick gave him, ridiculously big for him; he had to roll up the trouser legs as well as his sleeves, but they were still better than the ones he had been wearing, which David Gallagher had soaked with petrol.

He put his head into the bedroom before going downstairs. It was strange to think it was in this room that May had shaken him awake last January to tell him David was coming home. She’d been so happy and excited. Who could have imagined it would end like this? And how was he going to tell her that her brother was dead and burnt?

Downstairs in the summer drawing room, everyone was on their third glass of whiskey, including, for once, Armitage. It

was the only sign the butler had given since his ordeal of being even slightly shaken. Peter poured himself a glass of water and sat down next to Nick's grandmother on the striped sofa. The old woman was drinking a gin and tonic instead of whiskey, and as soon as Peter joined them, she raised her glass and called for a toast to Maggie, who beamed with pride and winked at Nick, all blushing and flirty, just as she'd been towards him in the hotel bar all that time ago.

Luckily Peter's old friend was clearly still far too shaken to even notice.

CHAPTER 31



*N*ICK

NICK COULDN'T SLEEP.

Every time he closed his eyes, he heard the roar of flames, the deafening sound of the Rolls-Royce exploding, the crashing down of beams as the roof of Cushing Hall collapsed, glass showering outwards, curtains ablaze, the horses in the fields, released from the stables, stampeding and screeching with alarm as orange sparks from the burning stables drifted down through the velvet sky.

It was too much like what he'd experienced in the trenches – the death, the blood, the violence, the booming and crashing.

At two in the morning, he gave up and decided to go down to the kitchen to make himself some hot milk. It took him a while to find a pan small enough and work out how the gas hob worked; he'd never had to lift a finger for himself in this house. But eventually he was sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of hot milk in front of him, stirring in a spoonful of honey collected from the hives on the estate and put in jars by Mrs Mulcair.

He looked up with a start as the door cracked open, but it was only Maggie. 'Howya?' She slid in and sat down opposite him. 'I couldn't sleep either. What are ya drinkin'?'

'Hot milk. Do you want some?'

‘G’wan sure.’ She sighed. She had her hair piled up in a top-knot, and with her alabaster skin and dark-blue eyes, a white silk dressing gown wrapped around her, she looked like a Grecian goddess.

‘Your nan gave me this. She said it was a kimohchu or somethin’? Me dress was filthy, so I gave it a wash. It’s nearly dry.’

He laughed. ‘A kimono. It’s a Japanese kind of dressing gown.’

‘Japanese, if ya don’t mind?’ She laughed as well.

Luckily he’d heated up too much milk, and it hadn’t yet cooled enough to form a skin. He poured the rest into a blue striped mug, added a spoonful of Brockleton honey and brought it to the table. ‘I’m not surprised you can’t sleep,’ he said sympathetically. ‘But you mustn’t feel guilty about shooting Bathhurst – it had to be done.’

She laughed. ‘Shootin’ Harvey Bathhurst isn’t what’s keepin’ me awake. I’d do it ten times over without battin’ an eye.’ Seeing the look of surprise on his face, she said smartly, ‘Sure, did you never kill anyone in the war?’

He blushed. ‘Well, maybe I did... I’m not sure, to be honest. I mean, I fired in people’s direction. You never know if it’s you that’s killed them really, and anyway, that was war, that was different.’

Her eyes flashed with amused contempt. ‘Different from what, Nick? This is a war we’re in right now, or haven’t ya realised? Where d’ya think I learnt to shoot straight – from a fairground? I got pistol trainin’ in Cumann na mBan.’

So it was true. ‘Eamonn recruited you?’

‘I recruited meself,’ she replied with indignation. ‘And I done plenty more than runnin’ messages, I can tell ya.’

‘Like...’ He hardly dared ask.

‘Gun-runnin’, abductions, movin’ people from one safe house to another, an execution once...’

‘But you’re just a girl!’ The words were out before he realised it. ‘I’m sorry. I d-d-don’t mean... It’s just you’re so young.’

She looked annoyed but then relented. ‘Ah, Nick, nobody stays young where we come from. Ya have to fight to survive there, and we have to fight back against the English now. ’Tis either them or us – it’s the only way. I’m not fierce brave or nothin’, but we can’t go on the way we are and so we all have to fight, women, men, even kids.’

He lowered his head over his milk. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘What are you sorry for?’

‘For forgetting what my k-k-kind have done to you.’

He felt so inadequate and full of guilt. People like Peter, Maggie, May and her family, living under a colonising power that systematically and without compunction tried to destroy Irish culture. He now knew about the wealthy landowners and business owners, who were in cahoots with the government – the English government, that was; Irish people had no say – to keep people like the Cullens poor. It was deliberate to deny them education or any opportunity for advancement, violently crush any efforts at resistance and keep them in fear, because they would work then for a pittance. It was lucrative. And it was people like Nick’s family who perpetuated it. His father was good to the staff and the tenants; he wasn’t the worst, but he mixed with the worst, the other Anglo-Irish aristocrats, some no better than Harvey. This land was not theirs to own. They had profited off the backs of Irish men and women and now looked down on them as second-class citizens in their own country.

‘And what did you yourself do to us, Nick?’ she asked.

‘B-b-benefited from what was done,’ he answered simply.

‘And you chose that life, did ya? You selected Baron Walter Shaw as your auld fella? ’Cause I’ll tell ya what – I sure as hell never chose Kit Cullen as mine, but it’s the hand I was dealt.’

‘Yes, but –’

‘Yeah but nothin’. The way I see it, Nick, we can’t take the credit or the blame for what went before us. We don’t deserve it. We can only judge and be judged on what we do ourselves in our own time. And I know you’ve been so good to me brother. I know you’re a decent man who tries to help people, and I know life hasn’t been easy for ya.’

‘I’ve had more p-p-privilege than most.’

She looked at him for a moment, a strange sympathy in her eyes, then shrugged and smiled. ‘And it was so nice and cushy, you ran away from it to war and then to the cabaret? Different hard, Nick, but life wasn’t a bed of roses for you either, so stop bein’ so hard on yourself.’ She drained the drink and stood up. ‘Want to go for a walk?’

He grinned, glancing down at himself. ‘Maggie, I’m in my pyjamas. And you’re in...that.’

‘We’ll go and get dressed then. Or can’t ya dress yerself without a valet, ya poor thing?’ She laughed.

* * *

IN TROUSERS AND A TWEED JACKET, he joined her at the open front door, where she stood waiting. Outside, the moon was still in the sky, everything turned to silver, and the stars twinkled in the dark-blue cloudless skies. It was like last January with the snow, only pleasantly warm.

‘Take me an interestin’ way,’ she said as they crossed the gravel, past the massive fountain. ‘You know this place like the back of your hand. Show me somethin’ interestin’.’

So in the moonlit dark, he led her over stiles, and through gates, and across narrow stone bridges, through parkland and woodland and open fields, along a disused lane, with knee-high grass in the middle and the wheel tracks rutted and puddled, then up a steep hill, then down into a valley, where an eerie famine village stood, a cluster of seven or eight stone cottages on which the thatched roofs had long ago rotted.

‘What happened here?’ Maggie whispered.

Nick went over to the leeward side of one of the ruins, and what he was looking for was still there. Thirsty from all the walking, he knelt down and used his hands to cup some gathered rainwater out of the iron bastible pot and brought it to his lips.

‘Some water?’ he asked.

She nodded and knelt beside him, scooping up water from the very large pot. ‘What is this thing?’

‘This is a b-b-bastible pot, used to cook in the embers of the t-t-turf fire. It’s been here since the O’Donovan family left here for Boston in 1846. The landlord, my great-grandfather, forced them out because they couldn’t p-p-pay the rent, so they all left. We never heard what b-b-became of them.’

‘They all left together?’ Maggie asked.

Nick nodded.

‘And just left this place? Did anyone live here since?’

‘Local legend says it’s haunted, that the g-g-ghost of Jennie O’Donovan haunts it. She was known as a witch, and they say she b-b-brings her wrath down on anyone who ventures into the village.’

‘Ah, that’s lovely, that is, bringin’ me to a haunted place, with the grandson of the fella that drove out the witch that haunts it. Thanks very much, Nick.’ Maggie pealed with laughter, a wondrously joyous sound in the warm night.

She stood, stretching her back, then started walking back up the hill, leaving the ruined famine village behind. He followed her until she reached the brow of the hill. There Maggie stopped, silhouetted against the moon, panting slightly, and he felt a catch in his throat. Her dress that she’d rinsed and hung to dry earlier clung to her body, and her wild hair hung in curls to the small of her back. And Nick realised he’d never seen anyone so beautiful in his whole life...

But he was a married man, and she was his friend’s little sister. This was wrong.

He went to stand beside her, but at a distance. She smiled, noticing his reserve, and took a sideways step towards him... and then another. He wished with all his strength that he could walk away...

Then she was right there, no more than four inches between them; he could feel the heat from her body.

He turned to face her. In the moonlight, her skin was clear and her red hair gleamed; it reminded him of a story book his grandmother had bought him in secret when he was little. It was about Gráinne Mhaol, the Irish pirate queen who defied Queen Elizabeth I, who duelled with buccaneers, who ruled men and was feared but was beautiful beyond measure.

‘Can I kiss you, Nick?’ she asked softly. ‘I’ve wanted to since I first met you.’

He should say no, he should resist and do the right thing...

Too late – she was there, winding her arms around his neck, her lips on his, her mouth hungry for him. She ran her fingers through his hair, pressing her body to his as he felt his arms go around her, holding her tight to him. He could feel his body react to her and was past caring. She didn’t flinch slightly away as Celine always did but ground herself against him. The effort to drop his arms, not to press her against him, took every ounce of determination he had.

‘We mustn’t...’ he gasped. ‘I c-c-can’t...’

She refused to accept it and kissed him again, this time allowing her hands to roam over his broad back, her fingernails digging into him. Then she jumped – she was tiny and light – and wrapped her legs around his waist, her tongue deep in his mouth, probing, searching. Celine had never kissed him like this, or made him feel like he was the most desirable man in the world. He knew he should stop it, but instead he held her to him, his hands cradling her bottom, pulling her towards him. He knew it was wrong, but blood thundered in his ears and the smell, the taste, the heat of her were irresistible. He did nothing to stop her as she fumbled with his trousers, just kissed her on and on as she tore off her own dress and slip. She was naked beneath, and he was helpless in

her arms as they fell onto the soft grass, their bodies intertwined. She pulled his shirt off, then his trousers, and as he entered her, she wrapped her legs around his back and responded to him with such a shudder and a cry, he was sure he'd hurt her, but she laughed and begged him to go on.

‘Please, Nick, never stop, never... Ooohhh...’

As they climaxed together, he didn't realise he was crying and so was she until it changed to laughter, and together they clung to each other under the full moon.

Afterwards, lying there, his jacket over her, her head on his chest as their breathing and heart rates returned to normal, his arms around her, holding her tightly, he knew he should feel remorse, guilt, shame. But he didn't. This was a revelation.

He opened his mouth to speak, but she put her finger to his lips.

‘Please,’ she said, quietly now, lacking her usual bravado. ‘Please don't say sorry or that you were wrong or that we shouldn't have done that. Please don't say that. Just...’ She leant up on one elbow and looked down into his face. ‘Just listen, all right?’

He nodded, gazing at her.

‘I'm only eighteen, and I'm from a different life to you, and if it wasn't for me brother, our lives would never cross over – how could they? But they did, and I've wanted you, Nick, since I first laid eyes on you at Peter's weddin'. I feel mortified saying this. Girls aren't supposed to feel like...well, like how I want you...but I do. I crave you. And I'm sorry if I sound like a cheap tart for sayin' it, but my body reacts to you in a way I can't explain.’

She ran her hand through his thick dark hair and then climbed on him, looking down into his face, one knee either side of him, her hands on his shoulders.

‘I want you. And I know you're married, but it's not a proper marriage. You don't need to tell me, but there's someone else for her, isn't there? You and her, you're good friends, and I know you're having a baby an' all, but she don't

feel about you that way, does she? I can tell, 'cos I *do* feel about you that way. Maybe she married you for your money, or because she couldn't have whoever she's really in love with, and I'm sure she'll be a good mother to your children. But Nick, I'm offerin' you whatever you can do. I'll be your mistress, your secret, your girlfriend. I'll never make a demand on you, Nick, I swear. I just want to have some part of you, 'cause I'll die if I don't.'

She caught her breath, and a tear ran down the side of her nose. Unable to stop himself, he reached up and brushed it away. She smiled and turned her head quickly to kiss his wrist.

'And don't say I'm young and I'll get over it, because I won't. I'll love you and want you for the rest of my life, Nick, and I know it.'

She stopped, rubbed her hand across her eyes, and said, 'OK, you can speak now.'

He knew he should tell her none of this was possible, that it shouldn't have happened, that he had nothing to offer her, that she had a full life ahead of her and she should go away and forget him.

Instead, he spoke just from his heart. 'I would lay my life down for you, Maggie, honestly I would. I never knew that anything could be like this, that being with a woman could be...so beautiful. And if you want me, then maybe we can...I don't know...'

She smiled then, and her face lit up. 'Did you notice somethin'?'

His brow furrowed; what did she mean?

'You never stammered when you talked to me just then. You got the whole sentence out without a stutter on any word.'

He laughed. Was it true? He hadn't noticed.

'Well, if it's t-t-true' – he chuckled – 'then you have succeeded where the finest d-d-doctors failed.'

She kissed him again then, more slowly but just as urgently, deeper and with more longing. She sat up so he could

run his hands up and down her spine as she moved on him. Their eyes locked, unblinking. He felt as if nothing in his life up to this point mattered, and nothing after it. Just being here, in this moment, with this incredible girl telling him she loved him.

CHAPTER 32



*M*_{AY}

MAY TRIED HARD NOT to look at the clock on the caravan wall. It was a lovely one her mother had bought her, delicately carved mahogany with a china face and brass hands, but at the moment, she hated it, because it was showing one o'clock in the morning and there was still no sign of Peter.

Aisling was fast asleep beside the bed in her crib, having been last fed at midnight. She slept for four hours at a time now; she was a little angel. May turned on her side, gazing down at her beautiful dark-haired baby, whose eyes were now brown, not blue. With every passing day, she looked more and more like Eamonn and less like Peter. It didn't mean anything, of course; babies could look like their uncles. Bridie had told her that Peter looked like her brother, Anthony, who had died of scarlet fever when he was twelve.

Still, when Maggie had commented on the likeness, she'd felt her cheeks burn, and Peter's sharp-eyed sister had thrown her a curious look. Maggie was one of those people who seemed to know what other people were thinking and feeling...and the idea of Peter's sister or anyone ever guessing the truth was enough to dry May's mouth and set her heart racing, cold sweat forming on her skin.

She mentally shook herself. Nobody knew, and nobody would ever know. Eamonn, she was certain, would take it to

the grave, and she would never tell anyone. There was only one person who might blab, and the thought of it terrified her.

She couldn't shake the memory of that day she'd caught David snooping in the accounts book. Had he read the letters Eamonn had written to her, hidden in the cover? She didn't think so; he had so little Irish. But when she and Peter had met him and Nick's cousin in Harcourt Street, the lewd comment he'd made about not being sure it was Peter's baby had really got under her skin.

She kept telling herself that he couldn't know. He would have used it against her already if he did. But was he just biding his time, ready to strike? Night after night, she prayed to God to keep her secret safe. If she prayed to Him hard enough...

She looked at the clock again – only five past one. Normally the days and nights flew by and she could hardly believe it when the time came to feed Aisling again, but now each minute felt like an hour.

She stood, wrapping the light summer cardigan around her nightgown, and lit the Primus to make yet another cup of tea. She gazed out the window of the van. They were camped on a hill overlooking the ocean, and the bright moon shone on the sea; the gentle sound of the waves and of a distant foghorn were the only sounds. Everyone was fast asleep. The lights were off in Millie's caravan, where Celine had gone to wait with her best friend, too worried to spend the night alone. Aida's caravan was also in darkness, though as May watched, someone in there lit a candle. Aida herself, who else would it be? She never had anyone over; she was more solitary than ever since her ordeal in the Castle.

May resolutely avoided looking at the clock. But then she did, and only another five minutes had ticked interminably by. And then she heard it, the distant rumble of an engine. There were so few vehicles around, let alone in the middle of the night, it must be him. Relief flooded her body, all her muscles relaxed, and she realised how tense she'd been.

Moments later Millie's little car turned into the field and parked, and the driver switched off its lights. May opened the caravan door, allowing the light from behind her to flood across the grass, and watched as Peter came walking towards her out of the moonlight.

'Peter, thank goodness!' But as he climbed the steps of the caravan, her joy turned to shock as she saw the state of him. He was wearing clothes far too big for him, the sleeves and legs rolled up, smelling of petrol and smoke, and he looked bone-weary.

'Peter, oh, my love, what happened? Are you all right? Where are Nick and Maggie? Was it true about Nick's father, was he dying?' She kept her voice quiet so as not to disturb Aisling.

'I'm fine, and Nick and Maggie are too. They've stayed back in Brockleton to mind the old folks. Walter Shaw is fine. It's all fine...' he whispered, sinking onto the bed. He began to strip off his clothes, and she filled a basin with the hot water from the kettle so he could wash.

'Tell me,' she said.

He handed her the outsize trousers, shirt, then his underwear, stripping naked as she gave him the flannel and some soap and bundled the dirty clothes into a pillowcase to be laundered.

As he stood and washed his lean, beautiful body, she made tea and got out some biscuits, and he told her an unbelievable tale of Harvey Bathurst, and a plot to lure Nick and Celine home to be murdered, and how Maggie had saved them all. When he stopped there, she handed him a clean pair of pyjamas, a nice pair, navy blue with a thin stripe. She sat at the table and poured out two mugs of tea.

After pulling on the pyjama trousers, then the jacket, he came over to the table and sat opposite her, buttoning his top.

She looked at him, waiting for him to continue. To tell her what it was he was holding back. Because she knew him well by now.

His dark-blue eyes met hers; he brushed back his thick blond hair. 'I'm sorry, May. There's no easy way to say this, but Harvey had an accomplice, and he is dead now as well.'

'And who was that?' She felt her pulse quicken.

Peter took her hands then and gazed into her eyes.

'Harvey shot him, May, not us, but it was David. I'm so sorry. Despite everything, he was your brother...'

May tried to take it in. Old memories of her brother flashed before her, the protective brother of her childhood, the bright young boy marching proudly off to war in his new uniform...the monster who had returned. And Harvey Bathurst had killed him?

'May?' Peter had his hands on her shoulders now, and she realised she was shaking. 'I'm so sorry to bring you this news.'

'Where is he...his body, I mean?' she said, in a voice that didn't sound like her own.

'Nick and I, we took both bodies to Cushing Hall and burnt it down.'

She gazed at him incredulously. 'You burnt his body?' She felt like she was in a dream, or underwater. Everything seemed slowed down, hazy. It was difficult to focus.

Peter nodded again. 'I'm so sorry, May. I know this must be an awful shock, a devastating thing, to lose him like this. And we can't even tell your parents. I'm so sorry. This is such a burden for you to carry...'

She took a deep breath then and looked straight into her husband's dark-blue eyes. 'No, Peter, I'm glad.' Her voice was clear and strong; she had no qualms whatsoever. 'He was a threat to us, a torment to my parents, and he had nothing good to offer the world. I wish you'd known him before the war – he was lovely, a totally different person. Full of fun. But that boy died in France, and the one that replaced him, well... we're all better off without him. I'm glad he's gone, and I'm glad there's no grave and we don't have to say anything or tell

my parents, because it means I don't have to pretend to be sad.'

She knew Peter was a bit shocked, but she meant every word. Every single word.

She had got what she'd prayed for. She didn't have to worry any more about being found out. Even if David had read Eamonn's letters, it didn't matter now. Her secret lay buried in the ashes of Cushing Hall.

EPILOGUE



DUBLIN, IRELAND, 1926

Eamonn Cullen didn't catch the eye of the young lad he'd trained up as a carpenter as he came out of the foreman's office.

It wasn't the lad's fault, he supposed. What was he to do? Turn down a promotion? He'd be a fool to do that, but it rankled, and the young fella had the grace to look awkward at least.

He had been working for McCoy Construction for the last four years. He was a qualified cooper since his days in the Guinness brewery, and so carpentry came naturally. Frank McCoy was happy to give him a job, paying an apprentice wage for a skilled tradesman, but once everything settled down politically in the country, work was hard to come by, so Eamonn took what he could get. He'd assumed that once he'd proved himself, he'd move up the ranks, earn more money and move on with his life, but it was looking increasingly like that was never going to happen.

Time and time again, young fellas came in after him, he trained them up, and then they leapfrogged over him for the promotions as they came up. McCoy's had the contract to rebuild a lot of the civic buildings that had been destroyed during the War of Independence and the subsequent Civil War, so there was plenty of work. That red-faced young lad passing him now would be given his own crew and sent to do all first-fix carpentry on one of those ruins, while he stayed here as a dogsbody.

He'd tried to discuss it with Con Hurley, the foreman, but Hurley wasn't having a bit of it. He was a Free Stater, a Collins man to the death, and he knew Eamonn had been vehemently opposed to the treaty that Collins negotiated with the English.

Eamonn didn't think Collins a liar or a traitor as many said he was, and he'd been heartbroken to hear they shot him

below in Cork, but he couldn't get behind the document, no matter how Collins phrased it.

It was not what they all fought and died for. As far as he was concerned, it was a pathetic compromise that satisfied nobody except the warlords in Whitehall. Ireland had to remain part of the Commonwealth, had to take an oath of allegiance to the king of England and, worst of all, was to be divided, the six counties in the north remaining part of the United Kingdom. He couldn't stomach it, not after all they went through. He'd been outspoken about his opposition, and for a brief time had made his point through force of arms. It had killed something inside of him to turn his gun on men who'd been his brothers-in-arms when the enemy was without, and it felt wrong to see them as the enemy within, but that was how it all went.

The bitterness, the rifts in families, friendships. Harry Boland, Collins's great friend and confidante, took the anti-treaty side, not believing the Big Fella when he said the treaty wasn't perfect but it gave Ireland the freedom to achieve freedom. The famous Hales brothers in Cork, patriots both, fearless in the face of the English, now bitter enemies. Ernie O'Malley, Tom Barry... He could go on and on and on.

Most of the men like him, who disagreed with the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, ended up dead, or emigrating. There was no future here for them, and Ireland had nothing if not a very long memory. He could have gone back to America – he had plenty of contacts over there, had gone there twice during the Troubles when he needed to lay low – but something kept him here. Being treated as a second-class citizen in his own country, no better now than when they lived under the British.

Everybody asked him why he didn't just go. And he said he was an Irishman and he wanted to live in Ireland. But that wasn't the reason.

Even Peter last week, when Eamonn went down to Kildare to visit them all on his day off, had suggested he pack it all in, said that people here would never forget he opposed the treaty, that he was, unfortunately, on the wrong side of history. Kathleen had married. Maggie was with the cabaret that was

the largest in the country, going over to England and Scotland and Wales regularly to sell out shows there. Peter and May were going from strength to strength, and Aisling was growing into the most wonderful little girl. It wrenched the heart out of him every time, but he went to visit them as often as he could. Aisling loved her Uncle Eamonn, running into his arms when he turned up.

Connie was at school still, the latest any Cullen stayed in school, but Ma could afford it and Connie was bright.

And there he was, living in his mother's house, on a pittance wage, with nothing to show for himself. Peter had sympathised and even agreed with his stance to a certain extent, but ever the pragmatist, he felt that Eamonn would never make a proper life here now, not after everything.

Eamonn knew he was smart enough, and not afraid of hard work, but to the victors the spoils. His side lost in the end, and so they had to pay the price. It was subtle, but it was there.

But he couldn't go. He came close a few times. He'd even gone so far as to buy a ticket once, bound for New York, but he ended up selling it on, knowing for certain he couldn't get on that boat. He just couldn't leave Aisling, and he couldn't leave...her.

The End

IF YOU HAVE ENJOYED this book, and I sincerely hope you have, I would really appreciate a review on Amazon or wherever you buy your books. To hear more from me, or to join my readers club and get a free novel to download, pop over to www.jeangrainger.com

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The Gem of Ireland's Crown

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jean Grainger is a USA Today bestselling Irish author. She writes historical and contemporary Irish fiction and her work has very flatteringly been compared to the late great Maeve Binchy.

She lives in a stone cottage in Cork with her lovely husband Diarmuid and the youngest two of her four children. The older two come home for a break when adulting gets too exhausting. There are a variety of animals there too, all led by two cute but clueless micro-dogs called Scrappy and Scoobi.



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