

From the Shores of Eternity

The Dark Side of Irish Immigration

Chapter 1

John Walsh sat easily upon the damp, grassy hillside overlooking the muddy streets of Tullamore Village. A light breeze caressed the lad's face, tousling his dark hair wildly into the deep-set blue of his eyes. The sound of thunder rolled faintly in the distance as the dark clouds roiled heavily just overhead, threatening a soaker at any moment. *Another grand day*, he thought sullenly, looking wistfully up into the frenzied gray canopy above him.

It had become his custom to escape the confines of his family's cottage every Sunday morning. After all, it was his 'Christian duty' to observe the Sabbath and rest from the back-breaking labor he had been so unwittingly born into. At every opportunity John found it necessary to retreat into a time of solitude. A father, a sister and two younger brothers stuffed into two small rooms under a leaky thatched roof could get all too close for most anyone, especially a twenty year old young man who was just trying to find his own way.

The beleaguered lad scanned the misty countryside from his soft perch, noting especially how the clouds completely obliterated the mountains that stood but a few miles away. Another

soft breeze stirred the oak trees lining the dark waters of the river that ran through the middle of the village. He could barely see where the swelling stream slipped silently through the town and out into the bog to the west.

Nothing stirred under the anvil weight of the mist-laden air. Even the brightly colored buildings of the Town Centre seemed somewhat diminished in the gloomy shadows of that early spring morning. His stomach suddenly growled loudly, reminding him of a delayed breakfast.

In the distance, a small procession of his neighbors filed out of St. Catherine's Church after attending the early Protestant service. They seemed but a line of ants from his vantage. The tall spire of the cathedral disappeared surrealistically into the rolling clouds. *Poor suckers*, he thought, *trusting in a God that either did not exist or just did not give a damn*.

The sky kept its promise as a light rain began to escape from the dark, burgeoning clouds. Running his fingers through his dampening brown hair, John stood slowly to his feet and ambled down the slickened hill towards his family's cottage. He slipped nimbly through the patches of purple heather that grew raggedly from the spongy, peat covered hillside. Reaching the narrow lane that connected the farming country with the village, John turned his back to the town and slowly continued toward the family homestead.

The lad strolled through the steady drizzle, passing plot after plot of small tenant farms. The young barley was just emerging from the hand-plowed rows in many of the fields. Yet, so many of the fertile plots stood lifeless and unplanted, a testament to the trying times facing not only the village where he lived, but the whole of Ireland. A few acres of grain were just not enough to pay the exorbitant rents required by some of the landlords who owned the land. Too many people were being evicted from the farms that their families had originally occupied for centuries.

Greedy English landowners, who had never seen the shores of Ireland, found any justification they could to seize land from the poor tenant farmers. The same tenants who now

lived in squalor on tiny parcels of land were descendants of the original clans who communally shared great acreages. Those clans had been systematically subdued, outlawed, and their leaders killed or imprisoned. The ancestral lands were then forcefully seized and divided amongst the Gentry who were sworn to the English Crown. All this forced redistribution was done in the name of civilization, progress, and the unjust system of a laissez faire economy.

John stopped silently before a weed infested field, which stood alongside a small stone cottage with darkened windows and a damaged thatched roof. Amidst ominous rolls of thunder, he stood staring at the empty cottage as the rain gathered strength. Small muddy puddles were collecting rapidly on the sides of the narrow lane.

He leaned his thin, wiry frame heavily against the ancient dry stone fence that lined the narrow roadway. Reminiscing, John plucked a small stone from the top of the fence, tossing it absently into the unplanted field. He sorely missed his friend Ciaran O'Doyle. *Did the poor lad's family ever make it to America?* he wondered. *How could anyone, even a brutal landlord, ever strip such a grand family of their pride and land, then leave the fields barren and useless?* John looked disgustedly toward Heaven. His stomach grumbled once again with hunger almost simultaneously with another loud clap of thunder, sending the lad racing toward home.

“There you are,” bellowed Joseph Walsh, John’s father. “Where in the name of the blessed mother have you been? We got potatoes to be getting’ in the ground.” The tall, red-faced fellow held up a large bag of small seed potatoes. Joseph, like both his older sons was thin, but tall for an Irish tenant farmer. His back was strong and straight from a lifetime of hard work, and his eyes were crisply blue. Everyone listened when Joseph spoke. He was a man of few words, yet, he made each and every one count.

“But Da, ‘tis Sunday!” John whined. “And ‘tis raining like someone released the hounds of hell!” He watched a large drop of water fall from the thatched roof and splatter on the dirt floor. The lad moved slowly to the small wooden table that sat against the edge of the little fireplace.

“Bah, a little rain never hurt a hearty soul! Today is the only day we got to get these spuds in the ground. We have but a short supply left. You know the blight got most of our crop last autumn. And if you intend to eat for a more’n a couple more months, you better be gettin’ your arse out in the potato field and start a digging!

“And you too!” Joseph directed at his daughter Eileen as she shuffled out of the second room of the tiny cottage. “Ain’t no lass in this household beyond working for her dinner!”

Eileen glared at her father with all the fury of a banshee, her dark red hair as wild as a March wind. “Is it never going to stop this infernal rain? This is the third day now in a row!” she complained, her hazel eyes smoldering like emerald fire in the shadows of the poorly lit house. Dancing reflections of the small turf fire played at her lean, tanned face as the silence of an eminent storm fell over the group. “I be eighteen years old. I should be out raisin’ my own brats with a husband to support me, not taking care of the likes of this group of helpless whelps!”

“Well, if you did not scare off every suitable lad around these parts you just might do that,” came a response out of the shadows of the dark corner of the room. The lass’ middle brother, Peter, loved prodding his sister relentlessly. “Ole’ Tom Kennedy came a wooing around here for ‘bout two years, howlin’ like a Tom cat looking for his. . . .”

“Oh shut up!” Eileen howled in disgust, cutting off her prodding brother. “Ain’t no man around here got enough gumption to take me home with him!”

“No, ain’t no man around here got little enough sense to try.” Peter trailed off almost under his breath.

“Hush now!” Joseph stepped into the middle of the fray, his rosy cheeks getting even

redder in the firelight. "If your mother was here, God rest her loving soul, herself would have all your hides! Now get out in that potato field and let's get these spuds planted! All of you!" He glared around the room at his children. "Bunch o' heathens," he whisper to himself.

"Where is James?" asked Peter, looking intently around the room. "He is old enough now to help with the planting."

"He is feeling poorly. I laid him in my bed in the back room." Eileen responded with a sudden note of compassion. "I think he has got some fever."

Peter glared disgustedly at his sister, "I would wager he has got a fever of work, myself. I will go get the little bugger and kick him out. . . ."

"Peter!" Joseph snapped, "What has got into you, boy? You know you ain't supposed to be a speakin' that way!" He took a couple of fiery strides toward his middle son. Surprised, Peter backed off a step, tripping over the stool he had just vacated.

"I got a mind to send you out to plant these spuds all by yourself now, I do! Then beat the devil himself from your backbone." Their bristling father glowered around at his children with disgust vaporizing from his nostrils. "I do not understand what has become of our youngsters today! Time was, I would not a never snapped back at my Da! Or if I did, 'twould be the last time! Go on, off with you now! All of you!"

Peter up righted himself and swiftly exited the dim cottage, followed closely by Eileen. John looked out through the single small glass window across the room to see a steady light rain still falling. With a slight grimace, he picked up a couple of boiled potatoes from the small table, dipped them quickly in the small bowl of salt, and followed his siblings toward the door.

Joseph stuffed the large bag of seed potatoes into John's arms as he walked by, "You keep 'em busy now son. I am going to look after your little brother to see if he would be truly ailing. I will be out directly."

Several steady streams of rain, dripping from the edge of the thatched roof, greeted John,

running coldly down the back of his thick, tattered sweater. He shivered involuntarily at a sudden gust of chilled, damp air as he finished the last few bites of his meal. Following his siblings to the rear of the small cottage, they each chose a digging implement from the stash leaning against the whitewashed stone wall.

“OK, let us do this the easy way now,” the elder brother directed. “I will open the trenches with my hoe. Eileen, you take the bag of potatoes and drop them in the trench. Peter you come behind and cover them up.”

Both younger siblings stared at their brother maliciously, then followed him slowly to the cultivated acre of land behind the small stone abode. The light rain diminished as John opened a small trench in the first mounded row of the garden. Eileen, dragging the heavy sack behind her between the rows, reached in, fetched a small potato and absently dropped it into the prepared hole. Peter, leaning heavily against his hoe, staring off toward the cloud obscured Slieve Bloom Mountains. Another gust of wind tousled a lock of light brown hair into his ruddy young face.

The trio performed their task in silence. Only the sounds of the gusting breeze in the surrounding trees and their digging implements scrapping into the black muddy ground broke the deafening quiet. Out of nowhere, a large raven flew directly over their heads, alighting with a whoosh of wings on a fencepost nearby.

Eileen stopped her work to stare worriedly at the large black bird. “‘Tis a bad omen, that!” she almost whispered to no one in particular, breaking the silence. The crow cawed loudly, stretching its inky wings to the damp wind. “Something is soon going amiss.”

“And who do you think you are, the old cailleach, the town witch?” Peter prodded. “You may look like one sometimes, but, I think that is about as much as it goes.”

John stopped his digging, looking harshly at his younger brother. Eileen continued to stare silently at the raven without as much as a blink of her eye. Then, with a sudden wail, she hopped across the garden rows, running at the bird with arms flailing wildly over her head. The

startled creature shot straight into the air from his perch, losing several feathers that floated gently to the damp earth. The lass wailed once more as the bird turned south, cawing loudly as it disappeared into a grove of birch trees.

Eileen reached the fence, staring after the vanished crow. With an audible sob, she turned her attention to the ground before her. She bent down and picked up four black feathers, holding them close to her breast. "Four months," the sobbing lass cried. "In four months many things will be a changing."

Peter and John both stared at their sister. Neither had the inclination to say a word. Eileen had made a few statements in the past that had proven to be true, now might be no different. A chill blain shot up John's spine, causing an involuntary shiver. He looked at Peter who was still staring, open-mouthed, at his sister. A light drizzle of rain began to fall once again, augmenting the moment.

"Come on," John finally broke the spell, "these spuds ain't going to plant themselves."

Eileen turned quietly from her station, tucked the long feathers into her cloth belt, and stepped heavily across the rows to return to her duties. Returning to their silence, the trio resumed their planting in the gathering rain.

Chapter 2

John leaned heavily on his hoe. It was a backbreaking job to keep the weeds out of the young barley. Break the soil with a hoe, pull the weeds, making sure to get the root, and then replace the clean, fertile ground around the tender shoots of newborn grain. It was a job no one liked.

Fortunately, the day had turned out beautifully. After a drizzly start to the morning, the sun had broken out brightly. The warm afternoon sunshine set beads of sweat on the lad's forehead, making him pause every few minutes to wipe the salty moisture from his stinging eyes.

The only consolation for John was that his whole family was working diligently beside him. Everyone put in their part. Although, many times it was not without complaint. But, what else was there for a poor farmer's son to do with his days but work in the fields?

"Hallo, Joseph," cried the familiar voice of Angus Mahoney, their neighbor. The man waved briskly over his head as he walked toward the working family members.

"Good day to you, Angus," Joseph greeted in return. "And what would you be stepping

so brightly about this fine afternoon?"

Angus smiled broadly as he approached the group. He stepped nimbly over the final three rows of young barley plants and stopped in front of Joseph. "I did myself some angling this morning, I did. Caught two gorgeous salmon." His bright eyes sang his excitement. The man held his hands two feet apart. "They must be this big!"

Joseph eyed the man suspiciously. "And what would you be about to do with them fine fish?" he asked rather sarcastically.

"'Twould be why I am here, Joseph, to invite you and your young'uns to have supper with us tonight," the neighbor replied graciously. "Kate would be preparing the fish as we speak. Herself said to tell you they would be ready just before sundown."

Joseph's jaw dropped. He was expecting another one of Angus' fish stories. The man could spin quite a fishing yarn given half a chance. Only rarely could he show the results he so often boasted of.

"Why, we would be honored to sup with you this evening," Joseph stammered. "Is there anything we can do or provide?"

"No, not a thing, Joseph. Unless, that is, you have a touch of whiskey hidden around here somewheres." He looked quickly around the small acreage, like he was expecting a bottle of the golden liquid to suddenly appear out of the barley patch.

"No," Joseph shook his head sadly, "not a drop to be had. I have not tasted that particular nectar for months, myself."

Angus' eyes dimmed slightly. "Same with myself. But, we can always hope now, can we not?"

Joseph chuckled. "Aye, neighbor. That we can still do. Unless, of course, the English have passed a new law that we have yet to hear about." He laughed once again.

"Aye, but isn't that the truth?" Angus replied, laughing aloud and slapping Joseph on the

arm playfully. "Well, I am off now. Going to see if the Keneally's on our other side would like to join us as well. And maybe Samuel has a touch of whiskey, himself to share with us!"

"Or maybe a drop of poteen?" Joseph added wryly.

"Aye, 'twould be nice as well," the neighbor echoed, turning quickly and heading back toward his cottage across the field. "See you just before sunset."

"We will be there," Joseph promised.

"Salmon!" Peter exclaimed, unable to bridle his enthusiasm any longer. "We have had no meat for months. Why do we not fish, Da?"

Joseph scowled at his middle son. "I have not the patience nor the liking for such," he replied sternly. "Neither do we have the proper equipment. We are farmers, lad. Not fishermen."

Peter looked rather disappointedly at his father. He was as rambunctious and exploratory as any other seventeen year old, but he showed that he knew when an answer had to be good enough. Still, a taste of fish on occasion would be a welcomed thing. He smiled, looking as if he were almost drooling as he turned back to his hoe.

"But," John started, tentatively, "did you not say that you fished with Angus many times since the two of you were but wee lads?"

Joseph glared at his eldest son with fire in his eyes. "That was long ago," he spat simply and turned back to his weeding. "We have work to do."

John, as well, had learned when a subject was complete. There were so many things he could not figure out about his father's past. The man was a stone sometimes, when dealing with some of his more delicate issues. Someday, maybe, he would open up. However, the lad had decided long ago that his life would not depend on his father's admissions.

Eileen kept quiet as she watched the interaction of the men of her family with a smirk. She pulled another weed from the soggy soil and handed it to James to be tossed on the pile

outside the garden. "That is a fine lad," she praised the youngster. "And you will grow to be a fine man, as long as you do not follow in the footsteps of your brothers." She snickered again quietly.

James smiled lovingly back at his sister. His frail body was not in very good shape for any amount of physical toil. Eileen hoped with all her heart that the wee lad would eventually grow out of his sicknesses.

"We will have salmon tonight!" Peter whooped again unexpectedly, kicking his heels high up into the air.

"'Twas a fine taste of fish, indeed," Joseph congratulated Kate Mahoney. He took a sip of cool water and stuffed the last morsel of boiled potato into his mouth.

John looked curiously at his father. He had not known the man to be so complimentary since his mother died. His father was now usually fairly withdrawn and silent. Even when the neighbors got together for their monthly barn dances, he would only chat with a few old friends and his two brothers.

"Aye," Peter chimed in brightly, "'twas the best thing we have had in months! I love fish!"

Angus smiled warmly at the expressive lad. "'Twas when your Da and me were about your age that we used to go angling regularly down at the river and the Grand Canal. Do you remember that, Joseph?" He looked quickly over to the father.

Joseph nodded slightly, looking away from the gaze of the friendly neighbor. He wordlessly picked up a large fish bone and used it to clean the remnants out from between his teeth. John wondered why he seemed so uncomfortable whenever the subject of angling arose.

“Will you tell us about it, Angus?” Eileen begged. “Our Da will not tell us of his angling trips.” Her eyes sparkled under a hood of thick, red hair.

“Himself will not tell you of...” Angus looked surprised at his neighbor, who scowled sourly at Eileen. “Well we will just have to tell you of your Da’s and my angling!” the man continued, unabated. “But, first I think we should be moving to the hearth. ‘Tis a wee bit chilly in here now.”

Angus slipped off his small stool and carried it toward the glowing hearth. He noisily tried to shoo Bett, the family pig, away from the front of the warm fire. The creature had taken up residence before the warm coals and stubbornly refused to leave her spot. “Go on, off with you now, pig!” Angus ordered loudly, clapping his hands over the unmoving animal.

“Oh, Da, not like that,” chuckled Colleen, Angus’ youngest daughter. The twelve year old moved quickly to the swine’s side and rubbed her behind the ears. “Come on Bett,” she directed gently. “Others want to warm themselves by the fire now.”

The large pig suddenly stood to her feet and ambled slowly toward the door, followed closely by Colleen. The young lass opened the door for the critter and Bett waddled quickly through. “Good girl, Bett,” she praised the pig.

Angus looked stupefied at his other four children who still sat around the tiny table. “And does the creature not like her Da, now?” he asked of them curiously.

“Oh, Da, you are just too rough with her!” replied Meghan with a chuckle. The sixteen year old made eyes at Peter.

Peter pushed quickly away from the table and moved toward the fire beside Angus. “Come on, Angus,” he prompted, “tell us of your angling with our Da.” His face was bright with anticipation.

John was also getting keen on hearing these stories. “Aye, Angus, we want to hear!”

All the siblings of both families quickly gathered around the man, sitting closely at his

feet on the hard packed dirt floor. "Come on, Da, tell us of angling," begged Fergus, the man's youngest son.

"Well, let's see here," the neighbor began. "Oh, yes. There was the time when Joseph and me, we went angling at the river. We musta' been only 'bout twelve and thirteen at the time." He smiled, looking up at Joseph, who still sat quietly at the table picking at his teeth. "Do you remember the time, Joe," he asked, trying to involve his friend in the story. Joseph looked away, refusing to say a word.

"Anyway," Angus continued, undaunted. "As I was saying, Joseph and me, went angling at the river." He looked curiously back up at his old friend, then back to the children. "Joseph was catching fish like the Almighty himself was just putting them on the hook for him. And I could nary get a nibble on my worm. Suddenly, surely as there is clouds in the heavens, a whopper hits me line!" His eyes grew large and bright as he pretended to fight the fish for his own life. "He hits so hard it pulls me off the bank, now! Like this." He slid roughly off his stool, almost landing in the laps of two of his youngsters. "I fought and I fought until I was waist deep in the river!" He stood to his feet, still pretending to fight the invisible fish.

Several of the younger children shrieked with delight. "What then?" they prompted eagerly. "What then?"

"Well," Angus continued, sitting gingerly back onto his old stool, "I pulled and pulled until I had the huge creature just up at the shoreline. Then me line snapped and the big fellow swam quickly away!"

The surprised faces of all the children expressed their disappointment. "Awww," they all sounded at once. "And did you get to see just how big he was?" Peter asked excitedly.

"Aye lad, I did," Angus answered quietly. "He was every bit this big, if he was an inch!" The man held his arms out as far as he could reach. "'Twas a sad day indeed. That is just how it went, huh, Joseph?"

Joseph smirked unbelievably at his neighbor, shaking his head negatively. John looked around at his father and smiled knowingly. *But, he does tell a good fish tale*, the lad thought with a chuckle.

“Tell us another!” James prodded excitedly. “One with an even bigger fish!”

Angus chuckled heartily. “The lad wants an even bigger fish, he does! All right now, lads and lasses. There is only one more time of angling that we encountered and even bigger fish than the last one. ‘Twas the time when your Da and me, we must have been about eighteen or nineteen or so. Do you remember, Joseph?” He looked quickly up at the scowling man. “‘Twas the last time you and me went angling.”

Joseph just stared harshly back at the prodding man. He shifted uncomfortably on his hard stool, fidgeting with the fish bones. John watched curiously as his father seen extremely agitated. Something was amiss about this story, he could feel it in his bones.

Turning back to the anxiously awaiting children, Angus continued his story. “Aye, ‘twas when we were ‘bout eighteen, I would suppose, Joseph and me were angling in the Grand Canal. This time though, I was doing all the catching! Musta’ had twenty fish that day.” His eyes grew big and bright once again as he leaned in toward the children. “I was watching a barge slip through the locks. What a beauty she was!”

“I love boats!” James suddenly offered loudly. The rest of the group chuckled momentarily at the unexpected comment.

“Anyways, she came a sliding by so quiet and prim and proper. She must have had a team of eight mules pulling her from the opposite bank.” He shifted on his stool, getting himself comfortable on the hard seat. “When all of the sudden, the hugest fish you ever seen took me pole right from me hand! Musta’ been a whale, it was!”

The children all gasped in unison. Their eyes were wide and bright in the light of the small turf fire. “Da, what does a whale look like?” Meghan asked excitedly.

Angus narrowed his eyes, looking menacingly at his daughter. "They be about as big as this house, they do! And black and ugly as the sins of Judas! And they has teeth this long!" He held his hands out a foot apart.

The children all gasped loudly once again. James buried his face in his sister's bosom. The rest of the smaller children huddled closely together.

"Well, I be tellin' you, that pole went zipping across the canal, pulled by the huge beast!" Angus continued explosively. "I dives in after the contraption and catches it just before it gets out of reach! Now, here I am being pulled across the canal by a man eating monster!" Another collective gasp from the group.

"What happened, Da? What happened?" several children cried at once.

Angus took a deep breath and looked panicky around the small room. "I takes a deep breath and makes myself sink to the bottom of the canal, I did! Then I plants me feet and tugs on the line. That monster stopped and turned back toward me!" He forced his eyes wide open with surprise. "I lets go me pole and swims as fast as I can to the shore. Just as I am crawling out of the water, I feels the monster snap right at the bottom of me foot!" The storyteller lifted his foot quickly off the ground with a look of terror on his face. "Just barely escaped the wrath of a mad whale, now I did! Ain't that right, Joseph?"

Joseph still just sat and scowled at the man. "Not exactly as I remembered the day," he finally responded.

"No, no, you remember the day there, Joe," Angus replied looking for backup for his tale. "'Twas the day the Dragoons came for ole' Liam Sweeney."

The neighbor's stern look took John by surprise. The lad looked quickly over to where his father sat. Joseph's mouth hung agape, a look of disdain etched deeply across his face. The man rose from his seat, still staring heatedly at Angus.

"I would thank you to not be speaking of those times," Joseph protested adamantly.

Angus' face showed a look of complete surprise at the statement. "'Twas but an innocent angling trip," he offered haltingly.

John's curiosity was now completely aroused. Why would his father not want to remember a trip angling, he wondered? Had Angus said something about Dragoons?

"Da, who was Liam Sweeney?" Colleen asked innocently.

"He was an old friend of mine and Joseph's," Angus answered absently, still reeling from the unexpected lashing from his friend.

Joseph moved swiftly for the door. "Time to go lads," he called gruffly to his family.

"But, Da," Peter complained, "we want to hear more about angling."

"Time to go," the lads father repeated sternly, as he reached the rickety door.

Eileen and James rose slowly from their seat, followed reluctantly by Peter. John sat in place, watching his father as he whisked through the portal and disappeared into the darkness of the night. Peter looked back and forth between the empty opening and the still surprised Angus.

John searched through the empty door, himself. Seeing no sign of his father, he quickly asked, "Who was Liam Sweeney? I know you said he was a friend, but what did he do for the soldiers to capture him? Our Da has never said a word about him."

Angus looked sadly at the curious lad. "He killed a man, an Englishman, or so they said. Liam belonged to some kind of secret society, rebelling against the English crown. He asked me to join once, and your Da as well." He shifted on his stool and looked to the thatched roof above, deep in thought.

Eileen, James and Peter stopped in their tracks, listening to a history of their father that they never knew. "Did our Da join this group?" Eileen quizzed.

"Not that I ever knew," the man answered truthfully, "But, there were many times he and ole' Liam would sneak off somewhere and not invite me along. Did not bother me, I just went angling by myself."

John stared at his neighbor in disbelief. "What became of this Liam Sweeney?" he prodded, unable to satiate his whetted curiosity.

Joseph suddenly reappeared through the dark opening. "I said it was time to go. I did not mean tomorrow! Now, off with you," he demanded.

John shot to his feet, looking quizzically toward Angus. His siblings shuffled rapidly toward the door before him. Joseph stood in the doorway staring at his eldest son. Grudgingly, he turned toward the portal, himself. "Coming, Da," he answered quietly.

Angus looked up toward the lad. "They hanged him by the neck, they did" he answered solemnly. "Hanged him till he was dead." He crossed himself quickly as he muttered.

"Angus!" Joseph snapped hotly. "'Tis not a story for the wee ones! I thank you to never bring that story up ever again."

Without another word, John slipped past his father into the cool, dark night air. He heard the sound of the rickety cottage door slamming behind him. *Never*, he thought, *will I ever mention the name of Liam Sweeney again.*

Joseph strode stiffly past John, covering the two hundred yards between the cottages before the lad could get halfway home. Stopping before he entered their own dark cottage, the lad looked up into the broken clouds, wondering about the early life of his father. Eventually, he opened the rough plank door and stepped inside his home.

Chapter 3

Squinting through the deepening evening shadows, John pulled the flickering candle a little closer to his newspaper. The fluttering of the unsteady flame made the letters seem to vibrate uncontrollably on the shadowy page. He felt fortune had been with him that day, for though the ragged paper was several weeks old, it was still something new for him to read. After all, there was no extra money to buy such luxuries as newspapers. He just had to keep his eyes open for any opportunity he could to 'acquire' such things. And that very evening, while walking through the village, several sheets of this very periodical seemed to materialize right out of Heaven itself and blow across his path. He chased them down, folded them up, and hid them under his sweater. Most of the local authorities frowned upon the son of a tenant farmer learning his letters. That art was to be left to the upper classes, primarily the English.

Though he struggled with some of the more uncommon words, he was doing well in his self-initiated education. Most of his basic skills had been taught to him while still an early teen

by the local Parish Priest, through a brief, basic course outline. However, after but six months of study, the unfortunate Priest had been accused of some outlandish devilry and tossed unjustly into prison. Everyone knew he was just being chastised for practicing the Catholic religion and educating the unfortunates in his diocese. After the unjust demise of his mentor, John had been left on his own to teach himself.

The lad had become a voracious reader, completing the only two books he had been able to acquire numerous times. Any time the knowledge-starved lad could sneak into one of the village shops, he would scan the periodicals to the best of his ability. On more than one occasion he had been chased out of a market by an irate shop keeper wielding a handy broom.

John's favorite subject was reading about the people who lived around him; who they were, how they viewed life. Events all seemed so cut and dried. But people, now that was the changing face of the world around him.

"Listen to this, Da," John broke the silence of the darkened cottage.

Joseph looked up from the britches he was mending. "What's that you say?"

"Paper here says there is sign of the blight again in the northeast. Says several farmers in Ulster already lost their crops." John lowered his paper to look over it at his father who sat at the fireplace stitching.

"Serves those squattin' Protestant Scots bastards right." Joseph responded quietly. "Only it probably was not them that gets to suffer. Probably just our own kin having to give more of their family lands over to the marauders." He resumed his patchwork, moving a little closer to the hearth with a glowering face. "Peter, the fire is going down."

Peter struggled off his hay pallet in the far corner of the room. Picking up several pieces of dried turf, he placed them absently on the fire. The sweet smell of the peat fire wafted through the room as the flames gathered brightness with their new fuel.

John looked worriedly at his father, "The story says that signs of the blight have been

seen around Dublin as well.” He squinted in the dim light to see the date line on top of the paper. “This paper was written almost two weeks ago.”

Joseph’s attention seemed to perk up with the latest news. “Two weeks ago, huh? No sign of the blight here. Pray to the good Lord above that we are spared that plague around here this time.”

John squinted at the shadowed paper once again, shifting it in several directions to catch a better light. A loud rap on the rough wooden door startled the lad. It was not often that they had visitors after dark.

“Who in the devil could that be?” Joseph queried worriedly. He motioned for Eileen to answer the door.

The lass rose from her stool, looking hesitantly at her father. A second loud knock caused even more hesitation. “Hi ya’, Joseph, let me in. I am catching me death out here!” a familiar muffled voice called through the thick planks.

“‘Tis but your Uncle Brian,” Joseph announced relieved. He motioned for Eileen to hurry and open the door.

John folded his newspaper and slipped it out of sight under his chair. Eileen unbolted the door, swinging it wide for her uncle. A gust of chilled wind greeted her. “Hi ya’, Uncle,” she greeted with a smile.

“Good evening, lass,” Brian responded cheerfully. He slipped past his niece and into the warm room. Looking around in the dim light, he greeted everyone. “John, Peter, Joseph.” Looking around once again he asked, “Where is little James?”

“He has been feeling a wee bit poorly the last week. He is back in my bed. Been turning in early the last few nights, he has,” Eileen responded.

“Sorry to hear that. I hope he heals quickly.” A bright devilish grin suddenly spread across Brian’s face as he turned his gaze toward his brother. “I got something for you, brother.

This should make your tongue sing!” He reached into a hidden pocket inside his grimy overcoat and produced a flat, hand sized flask.

Joseph’s eyes widened as a huge smile slowly enveloped his face. “Is that. . .is that what I think it might be?”

“Doesn’t take Solomon and half his wives to figure that out!” Brian uncorked the flask and waved it under his brother’s nose. “Whiskey, uisce beatha, the water of life! And I have another jug right here!” he laughed, patting the opposite side of his coat.

Joseph jumped up from his seat and swatted his brother playfully on the shoulder. “How did you come about this wonder of God?” he asked gleefully.

“Snuck it out of the distillery, I did! Old foreman Williams left his post early today so I took advantage. Thought I would never have another taste of this precious concoction, even though I make it!” Brian licked his lips, a huge smile still on his face. “We make hundreds of gallons of this stuff, only to have it carted away without nary a drop for our own tongues. Had anyone caught me with these jugs I would be spending the next few years in a prison cell!”

“You are a good man, Brian,” Joseph commended his brother. “And an even better brother!” He patted Brian lovingly on his shoulder. “But where is Tom? No brother of ours should be without a wet mouth on a night like this!”

“He will be along directly. Had a couple of chores to finish. You know Bridget, a good wife, but herself is a bit of a task master.”

Both men laughed at the comment as Joseph reached for the jug in his brother’s hand. Pulling the container directly under his nose, he took a long sniff of the fragrant liquid. “Sweet Mother of God,” he sighed, soaking up another deep draught of fragrance, “There is some good to you losing your land and going to work in that distillery, after all!”

Brian’s huge grin slowly diminished as he turned his eyes to the floor. “Maybe,” he responded quietly, “yet, I would give it all up to have but ten acres of fertile ground to raise a

money crop and breathe the free, clean air.

“But, enough of that!” Brian continued, stretching the broad smile back across his weathered face. “Here is to your health, me brother, slainte!” He turned up the jug, took a good nip and handed the vessel to Joseph. “Ahhh, ‘tis still a wee bit green, but bites just as well!”

Joseph took the flask, licked his lips and turned it up. “Holy Jesus,” he replied with a whistle, “been too long since I had a taste of paradise! Come here lad,” he motioned to John holding out the jug of whiskey, “you work like a man, now is time to live like one!”

Surprised, John stood slowly to his feet and covered the floor to his father. He had tasted whiskey twice before, but never at the prompting of his own Da. He took the small jug, sniffed the fragrance rising from the narrow throat, and turned it up to his lips. A small sip of the virile liquid caused him to cough deeply. He felt as though his throat had just been scorched with hot coals. Tears well up in his eyes and escaped down his tanned cheek. The lad took a deep breath, sighed and coughed once more.

Peter and Eileen had slipped curiously to their brother’s side. Both burst into hysterical laughter as John choked on the stout whiskey. Even Brian and Joseph quietly snickered at his reaction. Both older men then patted the young man on the shoulders.

“That is a lad!” Joseph commended his son. “Go on, have another.”

John turned the vial up once more without hesitation. Though his throat still burned all the way to his stomach, he took the second drink and swallowed. “Aye,” he choked out, stifling another coughing session. “‘tis good liquor!” Eileen and Peter laughed again.

James slipped through the dark doorway of the back room rubbing his eyes. “What is going on?” he asked curiously. Everyone in the room, even John, laughed heartily.

John handed the flask back to Brian, who took a drink and passed it on to Joseph. After a few more passes between the three men, Joseph handed the jug to Peter, then Eileen. This was truly a family affair. Both teens took a big swig, coughed heavily and refused further

provocations to take another taste. James had sat himself on his father's knee, laughing with the rest of the family.

Eileen rose to answer another knock at the door, "Here is Uncle Tom," she announced gaily.

"Hi ya', lads!" Tom greeted his family. "Oh, and lasses! I see you started without me. Guess I got some drinking to make up." He moved toward the hearth to warm his hands and throat.

"Did you bring your tin whistle, Uncle?" Eileen asked excitedly.

"Aye, I did at that!" Tom responded with a broad smile. "I cannot go far without me whistle."

"Will you play us a tune later?" the smiling lass requested brightly.

"Of course I would be happy to play a happy jig for such a fine young lass! Just let me wet my mouth first."

Joseph handed the jug to his youngest brother. "Too bad John is no longer with us," Joseph lamented, speaking of their recently departed eldest brother. "No party could be the same without him. Himself was always such a corker. And we could have some fiddle with your whistle, like old times!"

"Aye, 'twould be a brilliant time!" Tom replied reminiscently, "but the pox is a ruthless reaper! Though I miss him sorely, the almighty smiled on us when he took but a few." He held the jug toward Heaven, "Here's to ya', John, me lad. May you keep Saint Peter busy while I sneak through the Pearly Gates!" He turned up the flask again as the whole room chuckled.

"Speaking of parties," Tom continued after swallowing the last swig of liquor, "the Grady's are having a Barn Dance next Saturday night! 'Tis going to be a brilliant affair with a fiddler and all the liquor you can drink!"

"Sweet Mother of Jesus!" Brian whistled, "How is ole' Seamus pulling that off? He was

six months behind in rent.”

“Heard his landlord forgave his back debt and is not asking for more until the crop comes in this year.” Tom replied incredulously.

“Forgave his...” Joseph stuttered. “Holy Peter and all the Angels of Heaven, we need more landlords like that around here.”

“You sure that ain’t some English trick to run them off their land?” Brian questioned seriously.

“Says he has got a writ from the fellow, all legal and all.”

“The lucky bastard!” Joseph chimed in. He took the bottle from his brother and had a long swig.

“How ‘bout that tune now, Uncle?” Eileen begged once again. “My feet feel like dancing!”

“Just for you, lass. Just for you.” Tom answered with a smile. He pulled his old, dented tin whistle out of his belt, placed it to his lips and started a lively jig. The whole cottage seemed to lighten up.

A smile erupted on everyone’s face and their feet began to tap to the rhythm. Joseph reached above the fireplace and removed the ancient bodhran drum from where it hung on the wall. He took the beater between his nimble fingers and set a furious beat for his brother’s flute.

Eileen and Peter jumped to their feet and began to dance laughingly to the furious music. The brother and sister squared off, danced around each other, then linked arms and twirled around the tightly packed room. John tapped his feet and slapped his knees with his hands until he could stand it no longer. The elder lad bounced to his feet and alternated with his younger brother, spinning their sister around the room. Even little James began to high-step around the wee cottage. Brian laughed aloud as the tune reached its climax, swatting his knees loudly.

The whistle and drum stopped simultaneously, leaving everyone out of breath. The three

siblings laughed roundly. “Another!” Peter shouted breathlessly. “We need another tune, Uncle!”

“Once more, then!” Tom responded happily, taking a good hit off his bottle and returning the whistle to his lips. The room was filled with glee. Time was forgotten and troubles seemed to vanish. The music seemed as thick and tangible as the room around them. Music was the blood of life and the steady thump of the bodhran, its heart. Nothing could be remiss with a happy tune floating on the air.

Finally the group began to wind down. Tom caught his breath and began blowing a soft, gentle song to dispel the excess energy in the room. Brian began to sing a song, in Irish, along with the flute. The words were unfamiliar to John, never having the opportunity to learn his native language. The melody, however, calmed all their hearts and almost brought tears to the eyes of the siblings, even though they did not really understand the words. Eileen, yawning widely, closed her hazel eyes and smiled as the sweet melody ended. James had already curled up on the straw pallet in the corner of the room and fallen asleep. Peter soon joined his little brother on the mat. Eileen gave her thanks, bade goodnight to everyone and slipped through the doorway into the second tiny room of the house.

Being left alone with his father and uncles, John suddenly felt a part of the men-folk now. And, even though his head was beginning to spin from an occasional sip of the alcohol, he was not about to leave the company he was feeling so bonded with. *Family, nothing is more important than family. They can take our crops, our lands, and even our lives, the lad thought, but they will never take our hearts!*

Brian absently passed the nearly empty bottle to John. The lad turned up the jug and drained the few remaining drops. He held the bottle upside down and shook it over the dirt floor to accentuate its emptiness, then handed it back to his uncle.

“Look at the lad,” Brian teased, “invite him to drink with you and he finishes the bottle!”

He laughed quietly, pulling out his second jug. "Good thing I got a spare."

Joseph looked curtly around the room to see where his younger children were. His face tightened as he addressed both his brothers, "We got something serious to be talking about."

Brian's broad smile vanished immediately and Tom sat forward on his stool. The flickering peat fire had dimmed and the single candle shed little light on the small room. Joseph stood, fetched a few more sticks of turf and doled them out into the hearth.

"Come on, man, what is so serious?" begged Tom. "Don't tell us something like that then leave us hanging by our necks!" He looked wide-eyed between Brian and John.

John, too, was stunned by his father's unexpected statement. A chill zipped up his spine as he sat up to attention. His previously spinning head even seem to clear somewhat as he watched his father feed the hungry flames.

Brian took another shot off his jug and joined in. "Tell us, Joseph, what is on with you?"

Joseph returned to his stool and took the whiskey from Brian. He took a quick sip and looked worriedly between his two brothers. "The boy here tells me there is word in his newspaper that the blight has been seen again up north and around Dublin." He looked toward John, "Show them lad. Show them what you read me."

The request surprised John. Usually his father did not have much use for books, newsprint and the like. He was much more a realist, concerned only with what he could see and touch himself. The lad reached under his stool, fetching the folded paper and opened it to the story he had relayed to his father.

The attention of the three brothers was intently upon John. He could not recall a time where he was the center of a conversation with the elders in his family. "The story is right here," he replied, sitting upright on his stool and pointing to a section of the printed page.

"Read it to us," Tom requested with great interest. He looked seriously over at Brian and leaned forward, resting his stout arms heavily on his thighs.

“This paper was written almost two weeks ago,” John started. “It says that a large portion of the potatoes up in Ulster have been found with the blight. Large black spots showed up on the plants almost overnight. When they dug up the roots, they had already started to rot with the young potatoes already turning black.” He adjusted his paper to gather more light from the candle. The alcohol had not helped his sight any, either. “Goes on to say, whole fields were wiped out. Not a single plant survived in the infected plots. It says that acres of potatoes in whole regions were wiped out. And it all happened in just a couple of days.”

All three men sat in silence for several moments. Finally Tom whistled, “Holy Mother of God! Go on lad, what is more?”

“The story goes on to say that several farmers even around Dublin had noticed some black spots on their plants the day before this was written.”

“What do we do, Joseph? What will we eat?” Tom asked seriously.

“What can we do? Pray to the good Lord that the spot does not spread this way,” Joseph answered, taking another drink from the flask.

“Nothing has been seen as yet around here. I planted a few weeks ago and got good healthy green leaves sprouting on my spuds. At least they were today when I checked,” Brian offered.

“You know I lost a big part of my crop last year. I cannot afford to lose this one too.” Joseph ran his fingers through his dark, thinning hair. “I got hungry mouths to feed.”

“Aye, so do we all. At least you have got a paying job at the distillery, Brian. You can buy food if need be. My barley will not be ready for months, and almost all that will be used to sell for my rent.” Tom added worriedly.

Brian looked at his brother out of the corner of his eye. “My job hardly pays me rent,” he commented gruffly. “I have but a half acre of spuds to feed me wife and six youngsters. I am not in any better shape than you, brother.”

“No need to quarrel, here,” Joseph said, trying to ease the growing tension in the room.

“Is there anything else in that story, lad?” He looked back to John.

“No, sir,” John responded, still scanning the ragged paper. “Nothing else about the blight, anyway.”

“We have just got to keep our heads and our faith, lads,” Brian interjected. “We are family, we have survived storms, invasions and landlords, we will get through this. Hellfire, that is, if anything at all even does happen.”

“‘Tis true, brother, ‘tis a wise and honorable statement. We will dance in the playground of the Devil if so be the need, but we will survive!” Joseph promised. He took another drink of whiskey and passed the jug to his son. “But, enough of Hellfire and damnation, we got good whiskey to drink and the Devil take me if I am going to let some wee problem spoil its grand effects!”

Chapter 4

John strolled slowly up and down each row of the family potato patch looking for signs of blight on their crop. It had been three weeks since reading the newspaper article about the return of the fungus to the north. So far, however, everything here seemed fine. There was no sign of disease on any of the plants. All the leaves and stems were a dark, healthy green and growing strongly. Even when he brushed back a bit of soil around the base, the tubers seemed to be filling out very well.

Since his inclusion in his father and uncles' party, he felt a sense of self initiated responsibility for the family's welfare. So now he had taken it upon himself to stroll through the plot every morning to closely check the crop. Maybe if the blight did come, he could catch it early and save most of their spuds.

The lad checked the last few plants then strolled through the small opening in the stone fence into their 'cash' field, five acres of barley they would harvest and sell to pay the rent. The barley was growing well, the young green leaves full and swaying in the breeze. There were

even a few early grain heads developing on some of the plants. The year had seen a mild spring with plenty of rainfall and the barley plants seemed to love it.

A quick survey of the field revealed several large weeds standing between the rows of grain. Tomorrow he would get Peter and Eileen out into the field to help him hoe out the chaff. Today, however, was Sunday, and it was time to get away to his favorite hillside.

John turned his back to the duties awaiting his attention and walked toward the lane heading into town. The sun broke brightly through the scattered clouds, dancing gaily through the leaves of the oak trees lining the narrow lane. A fresh breeze blew against his face, enlivening the lad as he turned down the road.

He picked up his pace. The sun was already a hand's width up into sky. If he did not hurry to his spot, he would not have long to enjoy his solitude. John was to meet his extended family in Tullamore Village at midday.

Every Spring since his mother had died, the family gathered at her grave behind the Catholic Church to pay respects. His mother, Mary, was a well-loved woman. She had been kind, compassionate and a pillar of the community. She was known many times to sew a new dress or shirt for one of the poorer children in the village, even at her own neglect. And no one had a hungry belly if she could help it.

John still missed his mother sorely. He could almost feel her presence strolling there beside him. Her voice seemed to whisper to him from the babble of the narrow creek that dissected the lane. Crossing a small wooden bridge over the creek, he took a long deep breath of sweet air. The sun shone in his eyes as his deep memories brought a brief tear to his cheek.

He had never had the desire to really get to know his baby brother, James, since his mother had died giving him birth. Somehow, he could not get over feeling that it was he who took their mother away. Eight years since her passing seemed both yesterday and a century ago.

John slipped off his thick sweater, pulling it roughly over his head. The sun had become

warm as he left the tree shaded stretch of lane and entered into the sun drenched open fields of the fertile farming lands. Rich green rolling tracts, criss-crossed with ivy covered stone fences surrounded the lad. He took a broad sweep of the countryside, sucking in every morsel of damp fragrance and quiet beauty that he could. The swoop of a great hawk momentarily caught his full attention as it plummeted from the sky upon its breakfast. He loved this land.

A small column of thickening smoke caught his attention, rising darkly into the sky before him. *What could that be?* he wondered. *It was too thick to be smoke from a hearth.* The column gathered strength until it became a black boiling cloud carried slowly away in the light upper air currents. His curiosity piqued, John quickened his step toward the smoke.

A distant popping sound, followed quickly by two more, startled the lad. He began to run toward the fire. Maybe someone was in trouble. He would help if he could. The smoke seemed to come from just over the next hill. That was where the O'Toole place was. Some of their clan had been left behind when their landlord shipped Ciaran and his immediate family to America.

John began to hear a low rumble come from over the rise in front of him. Suddenly, over the crest of the small hill, a capped head appeared, bobbing up and down as if on horseback. A whole column of bobbing heads then topped the rise one by one following the lead rider closely. Over the countryside they rode at a fast trot, eight soldiers, sitting tall and rigid in the saddle. The crimson of the men's coats splashed brazenly against the mix of dark blue sky and coarse black smoke. In a trick of the mind, those fiery jackets seemed to be the very source of the thick smoke still rising into the sky behind them. The early sun glinted brightly off the gold buttons and ornaments of their uniforms. A large white-feathered plume flowed in the wind, draping brightly off the side of each of their blue, flat-topped hats. A long rifle was strapped tightly across the backs of all but the lead rider.

The line of soldiers bore down on John as if he were completely invisible. The lad had to scramble off the roadway and lean heavily against the stone fence to avoid being trampled. The

horsemen brushed so close that he felt he could snatch one of the sabers that dangled at each man's side.

The sound of the horse's hooves was deafening. John held his hands tightly over his ears, choking in the boiling dust of the group. Off they rode, leaving the air laden with heavy dirt. The astonished lad stepped back into the middle of the road, coughed and spat after the horsemen. *Damned English soldiers*, he thought, *cannot be any good come of that!*

"Away, boy!" shouted an unexpected voice from behind him. Startled, John spun around, three more horsemen wearing brown business suits and derbies were quickly bearing down on him. He jumped nimbly to the side of the road as the horses whisked by. "Damned Irish beggars!" he overheard one man shout to the others. "No better than white niggers!" All three riders laughed loudly as they retreated down the way.

John grimaced hotly. Looking after the unsettling group, a cold chill ran suddenly up his back. "What the devil could they be about?" he asked no one in particular. He gathered himself, brushed off the cloud of dust that had settled over him and refocused his attention to the now diminishing column of smoke over the rise. He took off at a run, something surely amiss.

Cresting the hill at a dead run, the lad spied a small cottage a quarter mile away, its collapsed thatched roof still smoldering from between the smoke blackened stone walls. A small group of people were scattered around the yard in front of the house. Most of the group were standing close to the burning structure, staring at the burned out shell. One more figure knelt halfway between the cottage and the fence, near two others who lay on the ground, unmoving.

"That is Angus O'Toole's place," John said to himself, not breaking stride. "What has happened?"

John increased his speed down the backside of the low hill. He arrived, panting heavily, at the gap of the stone fence in front of the ruined cottage. On closer inspection, he spied four young children staring in horror at the last wisps of smoke rising from their home. Their mother,

Sara O'Toole, knelt tearfully beside her eldest son. John also recognized the woman's husband, Angus, who lay moaning on the ground between the gate and his family. A large pool of blood issued from the man's wounded left chest.

The panting young man almost passed out. Between the hard run and the horrific sight that lay before him, he had to steady himself on the thick fence and catch his breath. Several neighbors were now running across the fields toward them. They had obviously waited for the departure of the soldiers before finding out what was happening.

Slowly, John left the security of the fence and walked passed the moaning Angus. "Help me, lad," the man wheezed just above a whisper. John looked at the man, his blood spilling freely onto the warm earth. He could not do anything, he did not know how.

The young man returned his attention to the mother and her son. As he approached the pair, he could see that the boy was no more than twelve or fourteen years old. A step closer revealed a large hole through the center of the young boy's chest. His dead eyes were still open as he was being cradled lovingly in his mother's arms. John wanted to vomit. He forced himself to hold down his food and turned quickly away from them.

Instead, he looked toward the other four children. They ranged in age from probably four to ten years old. Vacant stares adorned their faces, eyes trained on the burned out shell of their cottage. *How could anyone do something like this?* He wondered incredulously.

Horror overtook John. Tears began to flow freely down his dusty face. Unable to contain himself any further, he spun toward the gate and bolted. He dashed headlong through the opening, stopped and lost control of his stomach. He vomited time and again. One of the neighbor women screamed as she neared the family, further curdling the sickened lad's blood.

Dizzily, John began to run. At first he did not care where, just away from that scene. Eventually he turned toward his spot on the hill overlooking the village. Blindly he ran. His lungs ached and his heart raced. The lad clawed his way up the hillside through the heather. He

gasped hotly for air. *Breathe!* he commanded himself.

Bright spots exploded before his eyes as the young man collapsed on the grassy knoll. He gasped deeply, wanted to wretch once again, but had nothing left to give. Instead, he rolled onto his back and opened his eyes to the bright sky. "God, why did you do this?" he questioned. He received no answer.

John's scorched lungs began to ease as one tear, and then two slipped silently down the sides of his face, into his ears. He rubbed the liquid out of the openings, rolled over onto his stomach and buried his face into arms. He could not get the image of the dead boy out of his mind. The young lad's blank, lifeless eyes already haunted him. *How could anyone shoot down a child in cold blood?* He began to sob in earnest.

Wiping the last few tears from his face, John sat up and looked across the small village. The tall white spire of St. Catherine's stood like a bony finger pointing into the deep blue sky. He refused to think, only look over the lives of his fellow villagers, smelling the sweetness of the flowering heather and listening to the sounds of life around him.

Wagons rolled through the streets of the village, passing small groups walking to their respective places of worship. The small group of Protestants in the town came here to St. Catherine's while the majority of the populous attended Catholic Mass across town. It had only been relatively recently that they were once again legally permitted to attend a Catholic Mass.

Joseph had told his son stories of his young life, how Priests were hunted as outlaws and sport taken at their capture. John was told how anyone caught attending a Catholic service would be imprisoned or worse. No Catholic person was allowed to live in town, possess property or have any human rights under persecution of law. Now, Catholics could openly worship as they pleased without fear of being imprisoned, but, had things really changed?

Gazing out across the fertile green farmlands his heart warmed a bit. He really did love this land. It was a place where anyone could till the earth, raise a few animals and live in peace

with family and nature. Why did not the outside world just leave them alone? He looked up at the sky and saw the sun nearing midday. It was time for him to head into town.

Standing in the shadows of the tallest ancient Celtic Cross in the cemetery, John scanned around him for any signs of his family. The sun bore down brightly, causing a trickle of sweat to roll down his brow as he shifted nervously, not at all comfortable in this place for the dead. He was especially uncomfortable after the harrowing events of that day. The eyes of the dead seemed to stare back at him from every lichen covered gravestone.

His mother's resting place was on the opposite side of the graveyard from where he stood. The disturbed lad just could not bring himself to journey into that space as yet. He would need some company for that. Death was still too close to him right then.

The sun had already broken midday. Where was his family, John wondered, in an attempt to take his mind from the pit it now inhabited? They always met at his mother's grave at midday. He peered longingly past the gray stone walls of the old church toward Harbour Street, from which direction his family should arrive. There was still no sign of movement.

Sweet Brigid, he thought suddenly, those horsemen that passed me on the road earlier were headed toward my house. Please God, let everything be all right! The worried young man started toward the gate of the churchyard. Maybe he should retrace his steps home and make sure all was well. God forbid something should happen to his own family.

John swung the squeaky wooden gate open and hurried down the side of the old chapel toward the dusty street. Stopping in front of the structure, he gazed down the cobblestone street in the direction of his house. A number of people scurried to and fro between the rows of brightly painted stone buildings lining each side of the narrow roadway. Several horses were

ted in front of Callahan's Pub, restlessly bobbing their heads and whinnying back and forth. Father O'Casey stepped through the heavy plank doors of the church and, though uninvited, joined the lad at the edge of the street.

"Good afternoon to you, John," he greeted cheerfully. "Looking for anything in particular or just waiting here for next Mass?"

John looked blankly at the Priest, hesitant of even returning an answer to such a ridiculous question. "No, Father," he finally returned blandly, "I am meeting my family here to pay our respects to our departed mother."

"Are you, now?" the prying Priest responded questioningly. "I will be happy to read some Psalms for the sake of your mourning family. Then, I will be happy to have all of you come in for confession. Been a while since I have seen the whole lot of you here."

John grimaced at the pontiff, then turned his attention back down the road. "You will have to ask me Da about that. I am not the one to make those decisions."

Father O'Casey smiled at the young man. "Oh, but you are, lad. Show the rest of your family by your own example of how to pay respect to the Almighty. I will dare say, you will be wanting to find yourself a wife here sometimes soon and you will be needing a Priest to wed you. You know, its never too soon to..."

"Excuse me Father, but I really need to see where my Da and the rest of my family are. They were supposed to be here long ago," he cut the clergyman off mid-sentence, stepped immediately into the street and walked away without looking back.

He found Priests about as offensive as soldiers. Both were in the market of death and dying. It was not time for that as yet.

"I will be here when you return," the persistent Priest called after the lad.

John ignored the last comment and strode hastily down Harbour Street toward William Street. *Where could everyone be*, he wondered. Old Paddy Fitzpatrick stumbled out of The Hare

and Hound Pub and ran headlong into John, almost knocking him down. The smell of whiskey on the old man's breath nearly overpowered the wincing lad. Paddy fell flat on his face in the middle of the street and did not move.

Holy Jesus, did I kill him? John wondered. He reached down and shook the fellow's shoulder. "Paddy, oh Paddy."

The man moaned, laughed and rose slowly to his knees. "Oh, me lad, are ya' a calling to me?" he slurred, with a deep, drunken laugh. Paddy got to his feet, swayed and dropped back down to his knees.

John laughed and looked around at the people gathering around them on the street. Several of the village ladies turned their noses and walked hurriedly passed. A couple of the men chuckled, slapped each other on the arms and walked toward John.

"Need some help there Lad?" one of the men asked John jovially. "Your pappy has had a wee too much drink, I would say!"

"He ain't my Da," John corrected with a snap. "He just ran over me right here on the street and fell over."

The clip-clop of horse's hooves caught the lad's attention. He looked up the street to see three riders in brown business suits turning the corner of William Street onto Harbour. Uninterested, he turned back to Paddy, who had just grabbed a heavy hold of John's shirt. "Paddy, I think we need to get you out of the street," he requested. "I will help you up and we will get to the side."

Paddy looked up at the lad, his head bobbing unsteadily and eyes wild as June thunder. "Up we go!" he laughed, attempting to regain his feet. The old fellow's legs were like rubber as he took a couple of steps toward the side of the road. He fell, once again, to his knees. Outweighed by probably sixty pounds, John was unable to hold the man upright.

The sound of the horses was getting closer. The struggling lad looked up to see the

riders, riding abreast across the narrow street, now less than a block away. "Come on, Paddy," he prompted hurriedly, "riders are coming."

Paddy laughed again, making no attempt to regain his feet. He pulled John down closer to him to say something in his ear. "Know what I saw today?" he asked, almost unintelligibly.

"We do not have time for that right now. There are riders coming," John prompted more seriously. "Let's get off the road." He looked toward the riders to check their progress.

Everyone else had stepped to the side of the road to let the horses pass. The riders seemed to have sped up after seeing the struggling pair in the middle of the street.

John tried unsuccessfully to drag Paddy off the road. The horses bore down quickly on John and Paddy. "I need some help," he pleaded, seeing the riders giving no quarter to them. Two bystanders rushed into the street, grabbed the drunkened fellow by the arms and dragged him off the road. The horsemen trotted by, completely ignoring that anything was ever in their path.

One of the men, who helped John, spat vehemently after the riders. "Damned English! May you burn in the fires of hell." he muttered, spitting once more at the men.

John, now panting heavily in exhaustion and fear, looked unbelievably after the horses. "Who was that?" he questioned hotly.

"Henchmen for the Winfrey's," one of the men informed the lad. "They oversee the rent payment for a few hundred acres not far out of town. Send all the money back to their Lord in England." The fellow muttered some vehemence under his breath.

"I think I saw them earlier," John told the men quietly. "They were with a group of soldiers."

Both men and a few other people who had gathered around looked curiously at the lad. "On my way into town, they passed me riding away from Angus O'Toole's place." Recanting this story was the last thing he wanted to do right then.

“That could mean no good,” a bystander commented with alarm. “Go on, lad” You see anything amiss?”

The crowd quieted as John began to tremble. He could not hold back his tears while informing the townspeople of what he had witnessed.

“The bastards!” someone commented from the crowd. “They shot a defenseless young lad?”

“What do we do?” someone else asked.

“What can we do?” responded one of the fellows who helped pull Paddy out of the street. “They got the law and the soldiers on their side. We do not even have weapons!”

Paddy moaned and vomited loudly, prompting everyone to move further down the road.

John looked around the crowd once more. “My Da was supposed to be here earlier, but he ain’t showed up. I have got to go see that he is all right, ‘cause those riders were heading away from town toward our place when I last saw them.” He quickly turned and headed back down Harbour Street toward home.

Another small group of people suddenly rounded the corner off Williams, led by Liam O’Toole, Angus O’Toole’s brother. John recognized most of the faces in the crowd, including his father, Eileen and Peter. Brian, Tom and other members of the lad’s extended family marched curtly alongside many of the O’Toole clan. John breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of his family, but worried at the look of the group.

Liam’s long red hair tossed wildly in the wind. He had the look of vengeance burning on his face. Straight down Harbour he led them, stopping before the crowd of people gathered on the street.

John slipped between O’Tooles and Walshes, gaining the side of his family. “What is on?” he asked Peter and Eileen quietly.

“Henchmen burned out two families of the O’Toole clan,” Eileen responded sorrowfully.

“First they killed Angus O’Toole and his eldest son, Tighe. Then they went and burned out Liam’s old aunt and uncle’s cottage.”

Peter interrupted, “We have come to get the Sheriff and demand justice!”

John glared at his brother and sister. A strong mix of fear, loathing and absolute hatred filled his senses. “I saw what they did to Angus and his family,” he replied with emotion overcoming him. “He was still alive but bleeding badly when I saw him last. The boy was already dead though. The men who did it passed me on the road on my way here. There was a group of soldiers and three men in suits. I did not know they burned another family out, as well.”

“You saw them?” Eileen asked stunned. “And you did not come to warn us?” A look of surprise and dismay crossed her lean face.

“I . . . I just ran away. I could not stand what I saw,” John returned defensively. “The boy’s eyes, they stared at me, a stare of death.” He turned his face away, unable to look his sister in the face.

Several of the men conversed hotly in front of the group. Liam O’Toole spat out profanities and threatened everyone from Queen Victoria to God himself. The cooler heads tried to calm him a bit with very little success. The man’s scarlet head seemed more like fire than hair as he animatedly waved his arms over his head.

“The three men that I saw this morning just passed by here a few moments ago,” John added, almost as an afterthought. He looked down Harbour Street where the trio had passed.

“They what?” Peter answered incredulously. “Where?”

“That way,” John pointed. “I think that is their horses tied up at the pub there.”

A look of sheer amazement enveloped Peter’s face. He moved to his father’s side and grasped his shoulder. The younger brother then spoke quietly into Joseph’s ear. His father turned to look at John, motioning him to come forward. Pushing his way through the tight band

of people, Joseph directed his son to Liam's side. The red haired man was still shouting curses as Joseph grasped his shoulder. Liam's head snapped quickly around to see who had dared approach him.

"This is my son, John," Joseph addressed the fiery man. "He saw the men who murdered your family."

Liam's jaw dropped slightly, "This true, lad? You see the dogs that killed me brother and nephew?"

John nodded affirmatively, staring at the ground before him. He shifted slightly. No words would form in his mouth as shame burned in his gut.

"Who were they? Where did they go?" Liam prodded roughly.

"A group of soldiers, eight or ten, I think," John forced between clenched teeth. "Three men in fancy business suits followed close behind. I just saw those three men pass by here a few minutes ago." The quivering lad looked quickly at his father then back to the ground.

"Where?" another member of the O'Toole clan joined in. "Where are they now?" The whole crowd stared at the young man now.

He pointed down the street. "That way," he squeaked.

"They went into Callahan's Pub," another bystander answered angrily.

Without another word, Liam O'Toole pushed through the tight crowd, shoving people out of the way as he headed for the pub. "I will kill the bastards," he spat. Hostility bled from his pores. The gathered crowd followed the man to the front of the building. Its brightly painted walls and large, fresh sign identified the pub as the nicest one in the village.

Liam stomped up to the entrance of the pub and slammed the door open wide. He peered silently around the bar, the ravenous crowd pushed tightly up against him, trying to peek over his shoulder. "Where are the English dogs who killed me family?" he hissed vehemently.

A small man on the opposite side of the room stood slowly to his feet. Two others,

sitting at each side of the man, turned to look at the wild man in the doorway. None seemed too awfully concerned.

James Callahan, standing behind the bar, stifled an outcry. The publican's jaw dropped and his face clouded. "Gentlemen," he begged, "please, if you have an argument, take it outside. I will have no disputes in my pub!"

Liam stared at the suited man, fire blazing from his eyes. "Bloody swine!" he hissed again. "I will break your murderous neck!" The man took a quick step inside the door, wild vengeance smeared across his face.

The worried publican rushed out from behind the bar, blocking Liam's entry. "Please, lad," he begged again quietly, "take your troubles outside. I have not done a thing to you, now!"

Liam gazed viciously at James Callahan and looked back at the three Englishmen across the room. "You get those vermin out front or I will burn this place down myself," he swore through his clenched teeth. The Irishman spun on his heels and stomped back out the door.

John stepped swiftly aside as Liam brushed passed. Was he going to get someone else killed here, he wondered? He felt it would be his fault for telling the vengeful man of the identity and location of the Englishmen. The worried lad slipped to the rear of the growing crowd, pushing passed his brother and sister.

Liam stood stiffly in the middle of the street, staring intently into the door of the dark pub. His sinewy arms hung loosely at his sides with fists clenching and unclenching. His breath vaporized with every exhalation. The crowd was deathly quiet, arched around the back of the bristling Irishman. All eyes were fixed on the dark opening. The bright afternoon sun dimmed as a thick cloud slipped overhead.

"Get out here, you mangey vermin!" Liam screamed. "You have ten more seconds before I come in to get you, and no one will stop me this time!"

The crowd began to mutter quietly as the doorway remained empty. John held his breath.

Peter and Eileen stood directly in front of their brother, on the front lines of the antsy crowd. Joseph stood apart from his children, close behind Liam, a stern glower on his face. The sun burst out from behind the shady cloud, causing several people to shade their eyes to the bright light. Impatiently, Liam started back toward the open door. Suddenly a man appeared from the dark opening, followed closely by two others. Each man wore similarly styled, dusty brown suits and a Derby hat. The man on the right had his arms folded tightly across his chest while the other two sauntered casually into the street.

“And who would you be to disturb my dinner?” the first man asked coolly.

“Me name is Liam O'Toole. You murdered me brother and nephew today, shot them down like dogs. Then you burned their house and the house of me defenseless auld aunt and uncle. Almost killed them as well!”

All three men smiled coldly. “Dogs is too kind a description for that louse infested brood,” the front man snickered. “They were more than six months behind with their rent and Lord Winfrey was only exercising his legal right to evict such deadbeats and repossess his own lands. Your brother, or uncle, or whomever resisted our legal proceedings and we had no other recourse than to protect ourselves.”

Liam's body tightened. The hairs on back of his neck stood on end. John swore that fire shot from his nostrils. His jaw was locked hard and his eyes glowered at the repulsive men standing before him. “The right...” he started, unable to complete his phrase. “The right to murder a twelve-year-old child? Then you call me family worse than dogs and burn their houses?” He took a step toward the three Englishmen. “I am going to break your God damned neck, I am! I will see you all sent to hell before this day is over!” He lunged toward the trio.

A small pistol suddenly appeared in the hand of the Englishman on the right. He aimed coolly at Liam's chest. The Irishman stopped in his tracks. The crowd split into two, moving suddenly from behind the Irishman. Several women screamed fearfully and ran into local

buildings. Most of the rest of the group dropped to the ground. John fell to his knees, a cry stuck in his throat. The second Englishman pulled a gun from under his jacket. He waved the pistol threateningly around the crowd.

“If anyone here dies today, it will not be us,” the leader responded callously. “We are under the legal jurisdiction and protection of Her Majesty, the Queen of England. It is our duty and responsibility to protect her laws and preserve her order. Any one of you who stand in the way of our enforcement of such will be determined a criminal and dealt with accordingly. For those of you who are under the governorship of Lord Winfrey, rents will be demanded paid on time, in amounts determined by his Lordship and his honorable agents. Now, be gone with you! I want to finish my dinner.”

Liam took another step toward the Englishmen with a yell. The agent on the right cocked his weapon and held it at the Irishman’s face. Liam stopped again. “You worthless, rotten balls of shite!” he cried. “Your souls shall rot in hell and the worms gnaw at your bones soon! I will see to that myself. I would keep me eyes looking over me shoulder if I were you! The devil himself will soon be clutching at your soul!”

John breathed again as Liam turned reluctantly down the street. The three English agents returned to the inside of the building. The remaining group of people dispersed quietly, leaving John’s family and the O’Toole clan plodding silently down the street.

“It is time to bury the dead,” Liam muttered quietly. His children gathered at his side.

Chapter 5

“Know what?” Eileen giggled at her two older brothers while she dug at the root of a small weed with her hoe. “I am going to have a suitor this Saturday night.”

John halted his digging and looked curiously up at his sister. “And who would that be?” he asked, leaning heavily upon his hoe. A heavy gust of wind whipped an oily strand of hair into his face and rustled the growing barley leaves noisily.

Peter looked disgustedly at his sister and shook his head. “I thought there were not no lads around here with enough gumption for you.”

“Brothers!” Eileen huffed exaggeratedly, looking between the young men in mock frustration. “I have a mind to just shut me mouth and not be saying another word.” She returned exaggeratedly to her chore.

“Okay sister, tell us who is this lad that the angels of Heaven smile upon with their glorious fortune!” John snickered, toying with his sister. He really did love her and felt more than a little responsible for her well being. Yet, teasing a sister was a brother’s right. Especially since she had doled plenty of agony upon him. This lass was a master at that.

Eileen did not utter a word. She scrapped at the dirt with her hoe, pretending to give no mind to the two curious lads. She looked across the field to her baby brother who gathered the weeds they removed. "James," she shouted sweetly, "will you come here, lad, and take these weeds away for your favorite sister? That is a lad!" The youngster immediately weaved his way through the rustling grain, heading directly to his sister's side. "At least I have one good brother!" she teased, looking into Heaven with a serious look on her face.

"All right, you have got us begging now!" Peter cried. "Give us the bugger's name or we will roll you in the dirt and spit in your ear!"

"Bugger is it now?" Eileen toyed with her brothers. "If you would ask like a civilized lad, I just might give you a hint." She looked blankly away toward the distant mountains. The wind blew a furious gust, tossing her hair thickly around the lass' face.

Both older brothers looked disgustedly at their sister. Peter dropped his hoe and took several steps toward her. John quickly followed suit. Eileen squealed and laughed aloud. Her voice seemed to carry instantly away with the prevailing gust into the thick, broken clouds above. A brief ray of sunshine fled across the small field, disappearing almost as quickly as it appeared.

"All right, you bloody fools!" she screamed as her brothers approached her. "Himself is Brendan O'Toole. There, you have it. Now, off with you, back to work!"

"For the soul of Saint Brigid!" Peter exclaimed teasingly. "Has not there been enough sorrow in that family?"

"Enough. . ." the lass began, then stopped, instead running at her brother, grabbing his head under her arm and twisting him to the ground.

"Watch where you are going!" John cried out, seeing several barley plants knocked over. He ran to his brother and sister, grabbing both under each arm. "For the love of Saint Michael, will you two stop your fighting here? Go out in the road and twist each other's heads off, but do

not tear down the barley!” Both siblings squirmed briefly, laughing and poking each other behind their brother’s back. John let them go.

Eileen looked around, reached down and straightened a barley plant that had been rolled over in the fracas. “Nothing harmed,” she giggled.

“Nothing, indeed!” John bellowed. “And what is this about an O’Toole coming around here for a courting?”

“You heard me,” she replied mockingly. “Met him at his Uncle and cousin’s wake a couple of weeks ago. No harm in making acquaintances when you can.”

“He is but seventeen years old, if I recall!” John replied then teased her more. “Picking them green off the vine are ya’?”

“Himself is but a year my younger, brother!” she defended a little more seriously. “I have met no lads older who would be as good a prospective husband. Besides, we have met but twice!”

James scooted up and tugged on his sister’s dress. “Are you marrying, sister?” he asked seriously. “Are you going to leave us?”

The three older siblings laughed heartily. James turned his eyes to the ground and backed away a step. “No, lad,” Eileen responded tenderly to her little brother. “Not as yet, leastways.”

James smiled at his sister and hugged her around the waist. She was the only mother he had ever known. Eileen had cared for their youngest brother almost as if he were her own. From his birth, she would finish her own chores, then spend hours with him, caring for his needs. It was a lot of responsibility for a ten-year-old girl. Now the youngster was very close with her.

“Let’s finish hoeing this field,” John suggested, “then we can take little James to the Grand Canal and watch the boats float by.”

James’ eyes brightened. The young lad loved to watch the transport barges pass by and navigate the locks of the waterway. Maybe it was time to at least attempt to know his little

brother, John had been thinking. Sometimes even children die.

“Hi ya’, John. What is on with you?” the familiar voice of Seamus Mallon called to the group of siblings walking down the main village road.

“Good afternoon, Seamus,” John called back to his friend waving happily. The fellow stood in the middle of his barley field merrily greeting the group. Seamus was a tall, thin, middle-aged man that John had met on his way back and forth to his Sunday morning getaways. Though more than ten years John’s elder, the two men had many things in common. On rare occasions, Seamus would even accompany the lad to his hideaway. Other than a couple of pretty young lasses, Seamus was the only friend of John’s to do that.

“Have you met me brothers and sister, Seamus?” John asked his friend.

“You know, lad, in all the years I have known you, I have never had the pleasure. You have talked of them plenty, but never brought them by,” his friend answered politely.

John quickly introduced everyone to Seamus. “Where you off to?” the fellow asked cheerfully.

“We are taking a bite to eat down to the canal to watch the boats.” James spat out excitedly. “We really like the boats!” The young lad looked between his siblings with a grand smile.

“Sounds gorgeous!” Seamus replied to James, tousling his hair playfully. “Me wife, Patricia, just baked up a few blackberry scones. Why don’t I go and get a couple for you to share with your meal?”

James’ huge smile got even bigger. “Blackberry scones?” he asked wondrously. “Oh, I love blackberry scones!”

John's jaw dropped. "Seamus, we could not. Your offer is so generous, but, we cannot take such a rich offering from you!" he stammered shyly.

"Nonsense, lad," Seamus returned with a grand smile. "Patricia picked some early berries and used a wee bit of her flour stores and baked up a few scones. I am afraid they would go bad before we had them all. Really 'tis a good thing you came along! Hate to waste any food, you know!" He turned toward his tiny cottage at a brisk gait, waving for the group to follow him.

John and his siblings waited at the entrance to house for the man to return. Patricia Mallon quickly appeared, followed closely by her husband. "Here you are, lads and lasses. I have put two beautiful scones in here for you now. Try to keep them warm, now, and enjoy them!" she instructed with a brilliant smile. The lady handed Eileen a small bundle wrapped in a little square of cloth. "Off with you, now." she continued with a laugh, "we cannot have the boats waiting around for you."

Everyone offered profuse thanks. James jumped up and down, almost unable to control himself. "Grand," he shouted gleefully, "today is just the perfect day!"

The whole group chuckled at the excitement of the lad. The siblings turned back down the road toward the canal. "When will we get there, John?" James asked.

"Soon, lad, soon," the eldest brother responded, placing the packet of scones with the rest of the food.

James skipped down the lane, kicking up dust as he spun, ran and jumped from side to side. They crossed the little bridge just before the rise leading to the O'Tooles' ruined cottage. "This is where the soldiers passed me the day they burned out the O'Tooles," John informed his brother and sister quietly. Both siblings seemed disinterested, so he dropped the subject.

Topping the low rise, John scanned the small dale. Several ruined cottages were visible across the green fields. A small herd of cattle now wandered amongst the tumbled stone walls

and fences. *Cattle had not been grazed through this countryside in generations. This is tillage country*, John thought, his curiosity piqued. *Did the landlord perhaps push these families off their land just to graze cattle? No, could not be, that does not make any sense.*

John continued through the small valley, fighting tortured memories as they neared the tumbled cottage of the O'Toole family. The lad could almost see children staring at their smoking cottage, a mother kneeling at the side of her dead son. His eyes were locked on the old structure. The bellow of a nearby bull brought him back to the present. The lad forced his eyes up the road and toward their destination.

The family bypassed the town center, undesirous of too much contact with the villagers. Instead, they left the roadway and followed a small pathway to the edge of the Grand Canal. They then turned down the waterway toward the old bridge and lock system. The canal was empty of traffic so far. Other than a few waterfowl and a kingfisher diving here and there, the channel was empty. James stopped often, taken with the colorful birds inhabiting the waterway. Eileen even paused to pluck a few wildflowers and tuck them gaily into her thick, rusty hair.

Nearing the old arched stone bridge over the canal, John found a shady spot to stop. The wind had eased and the sun peeked periodically through the broken clouds. The Slieve Bloom Mountains had trapped a thick layer of darker clouds, decorated by an occasional bright flash of lightening visible near their peaks. *'Tis a grand day for an outing*, he thought as he lay back into the thick grass at the channel's edge.

James rolled up his pant legs and sat on an exposed tree root with his bare feet hanging into the cool water. Eileen soon joined her youngest brother. Peter produced a short length of twine and a piece of thin wire from his pocket. Fashioning a crude hook from the wire, the lad tied it handily onto the twine and began a short search for a suitable stick for a fishing pole. With his search accomplished, the middle brother then put the components together captured a handy earthworm and slipped his line into the clear waters of the canal. "I am going to get us

some meat for dinner," he informed them matter-of-factly.

John hoped his brother was right. He had not had a taste of meat since their dinner with their neighbors. Though potatoes were filling and provided all the meal they required, a change on occasion was very desirable. A nice fish would be just grand. "Best of luck to you, brother," he replied.

"Look, James," Eileen called to her brother pointing down the canal toward the bridge. "There is a boat coming this way!"

James jumped to his feet and stared under the bridge at the narrow craft that was silently approaching them. "'Tis beautiful, ain't it?" he cried with joy. The boat reached the lock beneath the bridge and slowly navigated through the gates. The young lad ran toward the bridge, eager to get a closer look. He waved happily at the pilot, never taking his eyes off the vessel as he ran.

John smiled. *'Twould be really lovely to be young and curious again,* he thought lovingly. He watched his brother draw near the bridge at a trot.

Unexpectedly, two small figures popped up into John's view from the tall grass of a drainage ditch behind where James was running. The youngster paid no notice, his eyes were intently trained on the boat. The figures looked to be children about the same age as his brother or maybe a little younger. *Someone else must have had the same idea,* he thought with a chuckle, *I wonder where their parents are?*

The sound of the children's movement suddenly caught James' attention. He stopped dead in his tracks, seemingly unable to take his eyes off the others. Staring at the two, the lad's arms drooped limply to his side and he made no sound. John found his brother's reaction odd, as he was usually very gregarious with others his age. It was not uncommon at all for him to go directly up to a strange child and immediately become friends with them, lad or lass.

All at once, James spun and bolted back toward his siblings. As he neared, John could

see terror in his eyes. All three siblings stood at once and rushed to meet their youngest brother. Peter dropped his fishing gear almost into the water and stopped momentarily to retrieve and place it on the bank.

“What is wrong?” Eileen shouted fearfully.

A long low scream began to erupt from James as he ran closer. The two small figures in the background never moved. They just seemed to watch the lad as he ran from them. James continued to just scream and run away from the figures.

“What is wrong?” Eileen screamed again, this time in complete terror. She reached her brother first, taking him tightly in her arms. The lad’s screaming ceased, though he quaked mightily in his sister’s grasp. Eileen pulled him tightly to her breast, stroking his head and whispering in his ear.

John and Peter reached their brother at the same time, both asking what was happening. “You look like you have seen a ghostie, lad!” Peter commented at the first look of James’ face.

“‘Tis!” he stammered fearfully with a quick look over his shoulder. “‘Tis a pooka! No, two pookas!”

John’s jaw dropped. He thought pookas were fairy tales, meant only to frighten children and keep them in the house at night. These creatures looked like children to him. The lad looked back to where he had seen the two figures. They still had not moved, just stood in place staring back at them.

“Tell me what you saw, lad,” John instructed his little brother. “Describe them to me.” He wanted desperately to know what was standing out there, but a small grain of fear of the unknown kept him from just marching up to the pair.

A third figure rose slightly from the grass as he peered toward the figures. It looked to be just a head, looking their way. Then, once again it vanished. “What in the name of St. Paul and all the disciples?” John questioned no one in particular.

Looking impatiently down at his little brother, John decided it was urgent he go investigate. Slowly and carefully, the lad struck out toward the unmoving pair. He looked quickly over his shoulder toward Peter, motioning him with a nod to come along. Peter shook his head no. Then with another prompt, he reluctantly set off to follow John across the grassy field.

As John cautiously approached the pair, it became evident that his first impression was correct. Two young children stood just a few feet in front of him, their wispy frames nothing but skin and bones. Their bulging eyes were huge in their gaunt faces, lacking the fire usually seen in the eyes of children. Both children's jaws were slack, holding their mouths halfway open. Nothing but the barest of rags covered their shoulders, not enough to keep them warm on a chilly night.

John's heart sank. He quickened his step toward the two children. Reaching their side, he knelt before them. They were a boy of about six and his sister of maybe eight years old.

Peter stepped up behind his brother. "My God," he muttered. "What in the name of Heaven is happening here?" The lad looked horridly down on the emaciated youngsters. "Who are they?"

"I do not know," John responded quietly. He gently asked the children their names. They gave no response. The pair just looked at him, empty eyed and energy-less. A low moan in the grass nearby caught John's attention. That was where he had seen the head of the other person peek over the top of the grass. He rose and moved toward the sound.

A young woman came into view. She was even more emaciated than her children, if that were possible. It looked as if the few tatters still draped over her body had been torn apart to make clothing for the children. The woman could hardly lift her head as John approached.

"Lass," he started quietly, "are you all right? Is there anything I can do?" He knelt down beside the woman in the thick grass.

She rose shakily onto her elbows. "Food, can you get some food for me children? I fear they are both starved near to death. They have not eaten in days," she responded weakly. "Please, lad, feed me children." She then closed her eyes and laid back down. John feared she had died.

Looks like she had not eaten in weeks, John thought, looking at the bones showing through the pallid skin on every part of the woman's body. "I have some food," he said tenderly, not sure if she could even hear him. "I will give what I have to your lad and lass, but, you must eat some yourself."

"Just take care of me children," she responded unexpectedly with a small sigh. "I will have some if any is left."

"I will be back momentarily," John promised, standing quickly to his feet. He turned toward the place where he had set their package of food on the shore of the canal. Peter knelt with the two children, still trying to talk with them. Setting off at a trot, John spotted the tree he had just left and headed quickly for it.

Eileen shuffled slowly toward the two children with James grasping tightly to her thigh. Fear still covered the lad's face as he approached the other children. He had never experienced anything like this before, being rather sheltered by his sister.

John passed his siblings, quickly making his way to the food pouch. "What is happening?" Eileen questioned as he trotted by.

"I will tell you in a few minutes," he responded, not breaking stride. "They need food, terribly."

Grasping his small bag of food, John made a direct line back toward the starving children. He watched from the distance as Eileen knelt beside Peter taking a hand of each of the youngsters tightly in her own. "Holy Christ in Heaven," John heard her say as she let go a tiny hand and crossed herself. James stood behind his sister, holding onto her shoulders.

“I have food,” John announced simply, arriving before the small group. “‘Tis not much, but it will be filling.”

The eyes of the children seemed to light up just a bit. Not a word yet escaped their hungry mouths, however. Eileen drew the two youngsters closer to her while John fetched a couple of boiled potatoes from his packet. He offered the spuds gently to the two youngsters who quickly snatched them up. They virtually inhaled the potatoes, as a small smile brightened their pallid faces.

Peter looked compassionately at the two children. John had never seen his brother so interested in the welfare of another. He pulled tightly up beside his sister and brushed a lock of hair out of one of the youngsters' eyes. Taking a second offering from John, he presented it to the hungry siblings. “They must not have eaten in days,” Peter responded quietly. His ruddy face looked on the edge of tears.

“Seems so,” John replied, watching the children make small work of their meal. The elder brother handed two more small potatoes to Eileen, then stood slowly to return to their mother.

Arriving at the woman's side, John knelt, placing the lightened packet beside her. “I have food for you,” he announced gently with a small smile. “Your children are fed, now you need something for yourself.

The woman's weak eyes looked up at him. “Please, sir, save the food for me children,” she pleaded quietly. “I fear ‘tis too late for me. I have not the strength to chew nor swallow.” The lass again closed her eyes and lay motionless in the soft grass.

“Come on, lass,” John pleaded with the woman. “You must eat. Who will take care of your children if you give up?”

With that prompting, the lass rose weakly upon her elbows. John reached carefully behind her back and helped the struggling lass to a sitting position. He could not help notice that

she seemed to weigh almost nothing. The tattered rag that had been draped over her body slipped to the ground, revealing the fleshlessness of her emaciated body. Every rib was visible, as were the bones making up her narrow shoulders. The starved lass's stomach was no more than a pit in the center of her body.

The lad retrieved the rag and tried haphazardly to place it over her bare shoulders. He then handed her a small potato and held his hand tightly against her bare back, bracing her as she sat and bit into her morsel. The woman even struggled to bite into the spud, finally allowing John to mash it slightly and break the tough skin.

After a few bites she paused. "'Tis all I can take at the moment," she whispered. "Do you have any water?"

"We will get you some," John replied, a wave of dark emotion flooding through his veins. "Peter," he called to his brother, "fetch us some water."

Peter turned to John, a streak of wet down one cheek. He stood slowly, looking back at the children. John had never seen his brother so moved. Normally he was a quick-witted, stand-offish lad who showed little emotion, other than a quick fit of anger on occasion.

John rummaged through his food pouch once again and produced a small tin cup for Peter to retrieve the water with. The middle brother seemed to make an effort not to look at the woman sitting unsteadily beside John as he arrived to take the vessel. Instead, he turned pertly toward the crystal waters of the canal, cup in hand.

John returned his attention to the woman. "What is your name?" he asked her tenderly.

"Patricia," she replied, almost at a whisper. "Patricia Dougherty. Me children are Mary and Jason."

"Lovely names, all," John commended. "Do you live around here?"

"No, we are from Drogheda," Patricia replied, closing her eyes as her energy waned.

"No food there at all. People starving. I had to feed me family, so we walked. . . ."

“From Drogheda?” John questioned incredulously. “How long since you have eaten?”

Patricia sat quietly, eyes still closed. “Please care for me children,” she repeated almost inaudibly.

Peter returned with a cup of water in his hand. John took the vessel and held it to the woman’s lips. She took his hand between her bony fingers and drank slowly.

Unable to ignore the woman’s presence any longer, Peter looked down on her frail body. He gasped loudly, bringing John to turn to his brother. A look of horror was plastered on the lad’s face. He stared at the emaciated frame of the human that sat at his feet. His body convulsed as if he was getting sick. The lad spun on his heels and darted away, stopping a few steps beyond the children and staring into the distant mountains.

“Thank you,” Patricia whispered.

“Here, take another bite of food,” John instructed the woman once again.

She took another couple of bites and looked up at John. “You are such a gracious lad. I cannot thank you enough,” she whispered again, a small tear running down her face. She tugged weakly at the rag draped over her shoulder in an unsuccessful attempt to cover her bare bosom. John helped the lass the best he could to stretch the material.

Peter unexpectedly returned from behind John’s back, pulling off his shirt and offering it to his brother to cover the woman. John took the clothing and helped Patricia slip one arm, then the other through the sleeves. He buttoned a couple of buttons and laid her gently back into the grass.

“We need some help,” John informed his brother. “Will you go back to Seamus Mallon’s cottage and get his help? We need to get these people into a warm spot for the night.”

Wordlessly, Peter turned away and set off at a trot down the lane toward the Mallon’s cottage. John picked up his lightened food bundle and walked to Eileen’s side.

“How are the children?” he asked, looking compassionately at the wee pair.

“With a little feeding up, they should be fine,” she answered, brushing a wisp of hair from the eyes of the little lass. “How is their mother?”

“Not very well I am afraid. She has had nothing to eat for a long while. It will take some time before she can recover any strength. I sent Peter off to get Seamus’ help. Maybe he will have an idea.”

“Grand idea,” she replied. “I do not think Da would approve of bringing home more mouths to feed. Our potatoes are running low as well and it will be a few more weeks before any of the new crop is ready.”

John looked away into the distance. “What should we do?” he asked quietly.

Eileen’s face suddenly brightened. “What about the church?” she asked. “Maybe Father O’Casey will help us.”

While the idea might be their best possibility, John dreaded returning to the church to ask for help. He was sure that they would be barraged with more guilt and threats of hell fire. The lad tried desperately to think of a different tactic, to no avail. He looked back at the silent children, then over to their mother who lay motionless in the grass. “If Seamus has no better ideas when he arrives, we shall take them there.” he acquiesced. “I can think of nothing better.”

James, who had wandered off earlier to the canal, returned and quietly moved to his sister’s side. “Are they going to be all right?” he asked quietly.

“I think so, lad,” Eileen answered him sweetly. “Nothing a bit of food and shelter cannot fix.”

“Do you think they would like a blackberry scone?” James asked again. He looked at the two younger children, compassion shining in his young eyes. “I really think they would like them.”

Eileen smiled and hugged her little brother. “We shall see,” she replied thoughtfully. “John, shall we see of the wee ones would like a lovely scone?”

John smiled at his brother and sister. "Of course, we shall" he answered, retrieving one of the scones from his packet and unwrapping it.

He broke the biscuit in half and gave a piece to each of the children. Their eyes lit up as they immediately took the treats. Smiles spread across both their faces when they bit into the tasty morsels. John looked proudly at James as the youngest brother smiled widely at the children's reaction.

"I knew they would like it," James replied proudly. "It will make them feel better."

Eileen smiled at her little brother and tousled his hair playfully.

"May I have some water please," little Mary suddenly spoke up.

"Me, as well," chimed Jason.

"But, you can speak," Eileen responded with a smile. "Of course you can have some water. John will you hand me the cup?"

"I will get it," James volunteered, taking the vessel from John.

John walked quietly back to Patricia's side. She opened her eyes and smiled slightly at him. "Thank you," she responded again very quietly.

Chapter 6

“I will do the best I can to find room for them,” Father O’Casey responded to the request of the small group who had just arrived on the doorstep of his church. “This is the third family in the past four days to come here.”

John looked amazedly at the friar. “The third family?” he asked incredulously. “From where?”

“One family from outside Dublin and the other from Wexford,” the Priest responded glumly. “Both say the blight has destroyed all the crops where they are from. ‘Tis only a matter of time before the midlands here are affected.”

A cloud seemed to engulf the group. That was horrible news. It seemed the disease was surrounding them. Maybe the Priest was right. Maybe they would be next to lose their crops.

“Any word from other parts, Father?” Seamus asked, a serious look of concern on his deeply lined face.

“Only hearsay, my son,” the Pontiff replied solemnly. “None is very good, I am afraid. I

have heard of more sign of the blight in Munster as well as Connacht. No place seems immune this year.”

“Is God mad at us, Father?” little James asked the Priest seriously.

Father O'Casey smiled very slightly, shaking his head no. “I cannot tell you the mind of God, lad,” he responded compassionately. “I can only say, some things that happen in the lives of men are but the way of the Universe in which we live. He will protect us somehow, make us stronger.”

James looked sadly at the two children who stood across from him behind the Clergyman. “Will you ask God to take care of them?” he asked again.

“Of course I will.” A saddened look clouded the Vicar's face. He turned without further word and directed the two young children into the church where their mother had already been taken. Mary looked over her shoulder toward James, her huge blue eyes casting thanks toward the family. Then they disappeared behind the heavy wooden door of the Cathedral.

“Will we be like that, sister?” James queried, tugging on Eileen's dress.

“I hope not, lad. I pray not us,” she replied sadly.

John opened the door to their darkening cottage. The last rays of the evening sun reflected rosily on the whitewashed wood. He peered into the shadows looking for his father.

“Da,” the lad called, “Are you here, Da?”

“Aye, son, here at the fire. The coals have all but gone out. Where are your sister and brothers?” Joseph replied from the darkness.

“Just behind me. Da, we have bad news,” John began, entering the dark cottage, followed closely by his siblings. The lad moved to the stack of dried peat, retrieved a few small

chunks and tossed them into the dying coals.

Eileen, Peter and James sat quickly at their father's feet. The mood was quiet and somber as the first finger of flame caught on the new fuel. John began his tale with each sibling taking a turn to interject another part of the story they had just witnessed. The siblings related the details as vividly as they could, finishing with the Priest's omen.

"What will we do, Da" Peter asked, a noticeable quiver in his voice.

The growing firelight danced on their faces like portends of hell. No one spoke again for several minutes. "We should go out tomorrow and dig any spuds as might be near ready. Even if we do not get a full crop, we shall have something to eat for the winter.," Joseph promised.

Everyone nodded agreement. The room remained silent as the last traces of daylight faded. Eileen stood to her feet and sauntered casually to the exit. Wordlessly, she slipped through and closed the door behind her.

John soon followed his sister outside. A chilled breeze met the lad as he stepped a few paces from the cottage. Eileen stood staring at the rising full moon. The lad approached his sister, taking up station beside her.

"Do you think we will be like that poor family?" Eileen asked, not taking her eyes from the huge orange disk of the moon.

"I pray not," John responded lovingly. "I am sure we will be all right. Da has a good plan, tomorrow we will ready ourselves for trouble."

The sound of the door shutting prompted both siblings to turn to see who was coming. Peter walked past them, toward the roadway on front of the house. "I will be back in a while," he informed his siblings. "I need to have a walk."

Eileen and John both looked silently after their brother. The rising moon lit the lane with a golden glow, highlighting Peter as he moved silently away, down the roadway. Another chilled gust of wind caused Eileen to shiver and wrap her arms around herself. "It is time for

bed,” she announced, turning back toward the cottage.

John remained silently in the moonlight, watching curiously as a bank of low lying, heavy fog approached from across the nearby fields. A curious odor suddenly wafted across the light breeze. The lad sniffed the air, trying to recognize the growing pungent smell.

Soon the fog encroached upon the bright orb of the moon, hiding her face behind a colorless gray curtain. As the fog grew closer to where John stood, the strange, acrid odor mounted in his nostrils. It seemed to be the smell of old rotting plants. The lad sniffed the air once again, wondering where such a stench could be coming from. He moved upwind, toward the side of their cottage, looking into the deepening night. Molly, the family milk cow, bellowed as he approached.

“Ho, Molly, I am not coming for milk tonight,” he assured the animal, patting her nosily on the buttocks. “I do not suppose you could be the cause of such a smell.” John chuckled and walked past the curious creature.

The lad sniffed the foul air once again as he reached the edge of their property line. Still no source of the pungent smell could be found. Curiously, he continued to search the night as the odd smelling fog thickened around him.

The cloud was becoming so thick that John could no longer see their cottage only a few yards away. *I hope Peter can find his way home in this fog*, he thought. He strained to see through the thick darkness once again with no success.

“Oh well,” he replied to himself and turned toward the cottage. Quickly making his way through the fog, John found the entryway and left the strange night behind.

John took his hand spade and gently pulled the dirt away from the base of a potato plant.

He did not want to destroy the plants, just dig up the spuds that were fairly matured. The rest of the plants could stay in the ground and maybe produce a few more potatoes before the blight reached them, if ever it did.

Dropping three more small potatoes into his roughly woven bag, he moved to the next plant. Joseph, Peter and Eileen each took the other rows of plants, digging the semi-ready spuds out of the black, wet sod. Everyone worked in silence, intent on carefully finishing the entire field that day.

An ominous roll of thunder sounded low in the distance as the dark clouds overhead began to rain lightly. *There is no time for this*, John thought, scooping the muddy soil away from the tubers on the next plant. The lad's clothing began to stick to him, becoming soaked in the steadily increasing rainfall.

Eileen's sudden gasp, rang out over the sound of the rain. Everyone turned to see what was happening with the lass. "Sweet Mother of God!" she cried out. "Come look at this. Is it what I think it is?"

Joseph sprang to his feet, quickly hopping the couple of rows that stood between him and his daughter. "Oh my God," he replied, crossing himself quickly. "'Twould look like the first sign of blight to me." He knelt down beside Eileen and scraped at two small dark spots on the leaf of a plant with his fingernail.

John and Peter watched their father intently. A sudden outburst of heavy rain dampened them even more. "Is that the only one?" John asked through the cascading rainfall.

Joseph scanned the other nearby plants, searching intently through their leaves and stems. "There are a few more leaves with yellow patches. Probably early signs of the disease." he sadly informed his family. He moved back to the blackening plant and pulled it, tubers and all, out of the ground and carried it out of the garden.

All three siblings set off anew to dig the potatoes out of the muddy earth. Lightning

flashed nearby, followed by a booming clap of thunder. Joseph began a grim search of all his potato plants, pulling up vines here and there and salvaging what potatoes he could off the roots.

Silently, the crew worked, rain pouring from the gray heavens. John shivered as a cold, wet chill flashed through his body. The troughs between the rows of potatoes began to fill with water, creating a noisy suction whenever the lad moved positions. Could this really be happening to them? Maybe the blight would be like last year's and ruin only a portion of their crop. After all, it was just getting started.

Finishing his first row of digging, John looked across the wet barley field. The green, healthy leaves stood tall in the pouring rain. The grain heads were beginning to form enmass, promising a good crop. If only their potatoes would do the same. Digging potatoes in the rain and storing them wet was not the greatest idea, but what other recourse did they have?

The hard rain finally let up and a quick ray of sunshine slid along the water soaked earth. Another roll of thunder boomed in the distance. John slid cold, muddy fingers through his wet hair. He could have used a sunbeam to warm his bones right about then.

James called to the group from the open door of the cottage. "Everyone, the potatoes are boiled and ready, come eat."

Eileen and Peter stood shakily and sloshed through the puddles toward the house. The lass was visibly cold. Her blue lips quivered in the chilly, damp breeze and raindrops dripped steadily down her face. Breakfast next to a warm peat fire would be a welcomed break. Joseph soon followed his children to the house, leaving John alone in the patch.

Joseph soon exited the cottage several small boiled potatoes in his hand. "I have got to go warn your uncles," he stated matter of factly. "Finish pulling these spuds before the spot gets them."

A light sprinkle of rain began once again. Joseph stepped through the gap in the stone fence and headed down the muddy lane. John looked briefly after his father, then joined the

others in the house for breakfast.

John kicked at a clump of earth, sending it down the row of potatoes like a shot. He looked disgustedly over the remains of their crop. A thick fungus now covered every plant. Huge black spots enveloped the leaves, invaded the stems and even infected the potatoes and tubers left buried in the soil. This was a nightmare that had begun only two days ago. Last year's infection had damaged their crop, destroying a good portion of it, but nothing like this total devastation. Not a plant was spared this time around.

The lad pulled another blackened vine from the ground. The result was the same as the previous two, the small potatoes just forming on the root structure were already beginning to rot away. He tossed the plant disgustedly into the middle of the aisle between the rows. His heavy heart felt like it was about to explode as he looked into the puffy rolling clouds floating across the early morning sky. The bright sun was warm on his face, if only it would warm his numb brain.

A gust of wind blew through the blackened leaves, raising a suddenly familiar foul smell from the rotting plants. Joseph stepped out of the cottage and approached his son. He looked across his ruined field, sadness etched into the deep, weathered lines on his brow. Draping his arm across his son's shoulders, Joseph addressed him sadly. "We must burn them," he said, pointing across the garden. "We will pull all the plants and pile them here to be burned."

Wordlessly, John strode to the end of the first row of plants and began roughly pulling them from the ground. Deep emotion beset the lad. This was a bit like losing a part of his family, and he did not know why.

Dropping the remains into a pile at the middle of the patch, he walked slowly to the edge

of the barley field. At least they still had their cash crop and a few potatoes to survive on.

Maybe they would not be in too desperate a situation.

The figure of a man walking up the road caught John's attention. He gazed intently at the man until he recognized his uncle, Tom. "Da, 'tis Uncle Tom coming up the road," the lad announced, catching his father's attention.

Joseph dropped a handful of vines onto the growing pile and walked slowly toward his brother. They spoke out of earshot, both men looking down at their feet. Tom turned away and sauntered away the same way he had come.

"The landlord is coming today to collect his rent money," Joseph informed his son. "Just when you think the storm is at its blackest. . . ." he trailed off, looking into the distance. "I have the money to give him, but not much to spare. We might need some money for food with our potato crop damaged. I have but fifteen shillings and the rent for the next six months is fourteen. Our barley should sell for another fifteen or sixteen shillings, but it will not be ready for three or four more months."

John shuffled his feet uncomfortably. He did not know what to say. His father had never confided household issues with him before. "Mister Moore is a fair man," he finally responded, "Maybe something can be worked out with him."

"Aye," Joseph responded, "he is a fair man. Maybe he will allow me to pay partial rent until our barley sells this autumn." A slight look of relief crossed his darkly tanned face.

John smiled slightly, feeling he had contributed a small bit of relief to his Da. He resumed his task of pulling potatoes and piling them for incineration.

"Da," Eileen yelled from the door of the cottage. "Come quickly! Some of the potatoes in the storage bin have turned black!" The lass turned curtly and reentered the house.

Joseph looked up, dropped the plants he was holding and ran toward the house. John followed closely behind his father. As the two men entered, Eileen stood over the small wooden

storage bin in the far corner of the room. She had propped the lid open and was digging frantically through the contents.

“Look, Da!” she cried, “They are all turning black! How can they do that? I thought we pulled them up in time?”

Joseph rushed to his daughter’s side. He rummaged through the spuds, picking up several and dropping them roughly back into the dark box. “They are ruined,” he admitted quietly. “All will be black in a day or two. Save what you can and boil them up now. At least we will have food for a day or two.”

John’s already heavy heart sank even more. “What will we do, Da?” he asked, feeling on the verge of hysteria.

“As you said, son, I will work out a deal with Mister Moore, then go into town and buy enough food to last us a while. We need to finish clearing the potato field and burn it off. If I can find more seed stock, we will replant. Maybe the spot will pass by the time the new crop begins.”

“What if Mister Moore will not deal?” Peter questioned seriously. “Look at the O’Tooles. They never had a chance!”

“‘Twas a different landlord, they had. Mister Moore has always been a fair man. I see no reason he will not be now,” Joseph answered hopefully. “Go on, lass, find the good spuds and let us have some food on the table.”

Chapter 7

John laid back into the thick, soft grass of his favorite hillside. He gazed sedately up at the puffy white clouds that floated gently through the dark blue late afternoon sky. A large black crow flapped noisily by, cawing loudly as it flew overhead. With a vivid image of black feathers floating to the ground, Eileen's prediction of a few months ago suddenly popped into the lad's wandering mind. She had said that many things would change in four months. And they had.

Even since losing their potato crop just two months ago, changes were rampant. His family had been spared the brunt of the famine thus far. Their landlord had postponed the rent until a new potato crop could be raised, giving them the money to buy food. At least they were unlike dozens of other families he had seen recently, homeless and starving with very little hope of rebuilding a life in the future. No, so far they were spared the worst of the agony.

Fate, however, had not smiled so brightly upon his friend Seamus. After losing his potatoes, his landlord demanded full payment of the rent. Faced with either starvation or homelessness, he refused to pay. The owner, backed by Constabulary and the English Army, forcefully evicted the poor man and his wife, sending them unwillingly to America. Who knows,

maybe that was a good thing.

Others wandering the street were even less fortunate. Many people all around the country had died. Munster and Connacht were particularly devastated. The edition of The Cork Examiner he found yesterday described horrific conditions. Hundreds were dead or dying, tossed out of their homes like sickened animals. Very little relief had come. A new government program to employ laborers to construct useless roads provided too little food for even a man and his wife, much less a family of five or six. Stories abounded of desperate men working themselves literally to their own deaths, taking home every morsel of food to give to their families and falling dead in the middle of their work.

The abundant grain growing on thousands of acres of Irish farmland was being exported to England to be sold for the profit of English absentee Landowners. Tons of food left the country while thousands starved, facing prison or death should they attempt to steal enough food to stay alive. Images of death and dying haunted John's recent memories. He closed his eyes to the bright sky, allowing the small trickle of a tear slide down the side of his face.

His emotion played out, John sat up and picked up his newspaper once again. *So many articles filled with bad news*, he thought. Opening to the second page of the newspaper he began to read once again:

September 23, 1846

FOOD RIOTS IN YOUGHAL.

DESTRUCTION OF THE BAKERS' SHOPS.

[FROM OUR REPORTER.]

After the termination of the meeting held in this town on Monday last, our reporter was surprised to see a large concourse of persons, exclusively of the labouring

classes, hurrying from one street to another, apparently in a most excited manner. On making inquiry, it was ascertained that this demonstration was made in order to prevent the merchants and manufacturers from exporting the corn or provisions of the town, for which purpose upwards of a dozen ships were lying in the harbour.

After visiting several of the corn stores with the apparent intention of intimidating the proprietors, the mob proceeded down to the quay, where they speedily compelled some carmen, who were loading the vessels with corn for exportation, to desist and return to the stores; on coming back, they met another carman who however, did not remain to receive the injunctions of the mob, but immediately turned the horse's head, and commenced a speedy retreat amidst the cheers and jeers of the multitude. Not satisfied with their success in these instances, they turned towards another portion of the quay, where they succeeded in a similar manner.

Up to four o'clock there proceedings were confined to preventing the exportation of provisions; and by the respectable portion of the inhabitants, it was anticipated that no actual violence would be the result; but unfortunately their expectations were frustrated. The mob, elated probably by the success of their first attempt, commenced at a later period of the day to demolish the

flour and bread shops, which was only partially prevented by the interference of the Military. I understand, in consequence of the extent to which these outrages were carried, that Mr. Keily, J.P., arrived in this City on yesterday, for the purpose of consulting with the General of the district, and obtaining a large reinforcement of military.

Was there no justice? Was there no heart in the people inflicting this intolerance and wrath on his beloved people? How many had to die before the lead hand of free enterprise and progress released its grip from the throats of a starving people? His sadness was quickly overtaken by anger. There had to be recourse.

John could no longer stand his own thoughts. He quickly folded his paper, stuffed it under his shirt and trotted down the hillside. There was no way he could go home yet, his anger would eat him alive. Blindly he ran, as fast as he could, for dear life. The lad jumped several stone fences, running through green fields of corn and barley. At the edge of the Tullamore River he stopped.

Overlooking the tree lined banks, John screamed. As loud as he could, the lad cursed the English, the Irish, even God and all the occupants of Heaven themselves. There was nothing else he could do.

This land was his home. This was his people. Yet, everything was being destroyed. John pulled off his clothes and dove deep into the dark, cold waters of the river. Maybe he would just go ahead and drown. That way he would not feel the helplessness and hopelessness that surrounded him.

His body suddenly convulsed with the frigid water. Numbness beset his flailing limbs.

His lungs ached for air. John found himself beneath a tree root at the edge of the flowing water. He did not know how far it was to the surface. His survival instinct then took over.

Thrashing wildly with numb arms, the lad struggled to free himself. He could hold his breath no longer. The depleted air in his lungs exhaled into the dark water. If he could have felt what he was doing he could free himself. Panic set in. His chest screamed for a breath. His body ached with cold and lack of oxygen. A last mighty push backward freed him from the trap. John's head popped above the surface and he drank in the sweet cool air into his blazing lungs.

A small portion of water slipped down his throat along with his breath of air. John choked and coughed deeply. His numb body began to sink back into the inky water. He had to get to the shore. Land lay only ten feet away, yet, that seemed miles from him at that time. Forcing his stiff, aching arms and legs to paddle dog style, he finally reached the solidity of the muddy embankment.

John dragged himself onto the bank, forcing his naked body completely out of the cold water. His every muscle rippled in retaliation to being subjected to the cold plunge. His mind fogged over and he coughed heavily once again. Crawling into the lowering rays of sunlight, the lad tried to warm his blue body. Where were his clothes?

It was ten yards away where the cold lad had removed and dropped his clothes. The dim sunlight warmed him slightly, allowing him to force himself on hands and knees to the garments. *That was a dumb idea*, he thought, pulling his sweater onto his quivering body.

Pulling on the rest of his garments, John leaned against a nearby tree. The sun was beginning to set, casting a rosy glow over the river. His body ached with exhaustion from the ordeal. He had to get home. Eileen should have some cornmeal biscuits made for supper. It was not much, but he needed food in his stomach.

John's breathing had begun to return to normal and his numbness to dissipate as the exhausted lad dragged himself off the chilly earth. He was still a long way from home and the

day was dying quickly. The setting sun was halfway behind the horizon and affording little warmth as the rising, chilly breeze sent another shiver through John's damp body. Once he began moving, his body should start to warm up.

The shivering lad clambered up a short, steep embankment to the road that ran alongside the river. Reaching the top, John grudgingly decided to follow the shortest way home, which led directly through the village. He took a long deep breath, sighed, and rubbed his arms rapidly to try and warm himself a little more.

The last bit of sun had slipped below the horizon as the lad turned down the road toward home. His body had begun to recover, yet his belly felt very empty. The chilled lad set a fast pace, trying to keep himself warm.

The first twinkle of stars began to sparkle between the floating clouds. The empty stretch of farmland passing slowly by to his right felt haunted and surrealistically lifeless. Several abandoned cottages dotted the landscape, their dark windows a testament to the reality that surrounded him.

A putrid odor suddenly wafted heavily across the dying breeze. The stench was revolting and becoming stronger the further he walked down the narrow road. Several rats scampered across the lane in front of him, darting quickly into the weeds on the river side of the road.

John held his nose and picked up speed. Something had surely died, probably somebody's poor retched pooch. Several more rats crossed just in front of him, almost running over his feet. The lad jumped, a startled cry escaping from his throat. He hated rats. They carry the plague, and worse.

For some odd reason, John's curiosity was suddenly piqued. Hesitantly braving the horrid stench and threat of rats, he moved slowly to the side of the road. The lad swatted at several irritating midges that buzzed in his ear as he perused the dark roadside. The moonless sky made the shadows of the weeds difficult to see through. Shifting his head back and forth,

John peered intently through the gloom.

There seemed to be a figure lying in a section of crushed grass not far from where he stood. The night had grown far too dark for him to make out any detail of the motionless object. Hesitantly, John moved through the thick weeds, closer to the lump. As he drew nearer, the outline of a human body came into view. *Oh Christ*, he thought, *not this again*.

Parting the high weeds a little more, he recognized the figure of an old man, dead for quite some time, lying face down in the dirt. The fellow's skin was draped loosely over his bones. What little meat had been left on the man's body upon his death, had been nibbled on by the pack of rats that John had just seen.

The lad could only close his eyes, turn away and continue down his path. The sights of death and starvation were becoming so common that they no longer sickened him. John decided the best he could do was inform someone in town as he passed through.

The dim glow of light shining through the little window of his cottage was a welcome sight to John. His body ached from the intensity of the day's activities as well as the two hour walk home from his river experience. He passed through the opening in the stone fence and plodded heavily toward the entrance.

Peter unexpectedly slipped out of the cottage door, turned into the darkness and gasped as John approached him. "You startled me, brother," he replied quietly with a small chuckle.

"What has taken you away for so long?"

"I just had to get away and clear my head," John answered sadly.

"And is it clear now?" Peter replied rather jokingly.

"Not hardly. Fact is, I think I have got more turmoil than ever before," John admitted,

hanging his head. "I saw a man this evening, a dead man, eaten by rats on the side of the road. How can we let this happen?"

Peter placed his hand lovingly on his brother's shoulder. "I understand you," he answered quietly. "Times are not what they should be, nor could be. Come with me tonight, brother. There are others who think like you and me. I think you should meet them."

"Oh, Peter," John begged off, "not tonight. My body is rebelling and my head is sore with thought. It has been a long day, this, and now I am ready for bed."

"Just a couple more hours, John," Peter pleaded. "'Tis not far and we will be seated soon as we are there."

"But, I am starved as well!" John continued, still looking for a way out.

"I will go get you some pan bread and a cup of corn mash," Peter offered. "You can eat it on the way. Sit right there, brother, and I will get you some food." Without waiting for an answer, Peter returned to the house. After a few moments, he returned with a small cup and two small loaves of pan bread in his hands.

Handing the morsels to John, the eager lad prompted his brother to follow. "We do not want to be late," Peter informed him seriously.

"Who are these people?" John questioned with his mouth full of bread. "Do I know any of them?"

"They are mostly lads from around the area here," Peter answered, setting a quick walking pace. "I think you know a couple of them. There are also a couple more lads from Dublin. They kind of organize things. I have been meeting with them for a couple of months now. They have some grand ideas."

John drained the cup of mash and slipped the last bite of bread into his mouth. "How did you meet these lads?" he questioned, still a bit wary of where he was going.

"Here and there," Peter answered cautiously. "You have got to promise me you will tell

no one where you have been tonight. No one at all! All right?"

John eyed his brother curtly. "Where are we going, lad?" he asked.

"Just over there," Peter pointed across a dark, empty field. "Just follow me."

John stopped in the middle of the road. "No, brother, I mean what is this group of lads we are going to meet with? Tell me true or I will go no farther."

Peter turned disgustedly to his brother. He looked him squarely in the eye and huffed loudly. "We do not have time right now, John." Thinking for a minute, he continued. "We are a group that calls ourselves The Young Irelanders. We believe in self rule, Irish should govern Irish! We want foreign oppressors out of our country and are willing to sacrifice whatever we need to make that happen. Now come on, the meeting is about to start." Peter turned without another word and scurried across the empty field toward a large, dark barn at the edge of the tree line.

The half moon was just rising, lending a soft golden light on the knee-high growth. The still air was sweet and cool, smelling of damp clover and ripening crops. Pinpoints of stars shined brightly overhead, blotted out by an occasional passing cloud. John took a long, deep breath and followed his younger brother across the field.

Arriving at the door of the barn, Peter knocked lightly with two short series of knocks. The old door squeaked open, revealing a bright redheaded lad who quickly motioned them into the structure. Peter took a quick look around him and slipped through the door into the darkness. John followed suit, tripping slightly over the high door threshold. The door shut behind them with a grinding squeal.

"Take my hand, brother," Peter instructed, leading him up a dark, narrow stairway. "Watch your step. We make a turn to the right at the top."

Following his younger brother up the flight of steps, John felt totally enclosed. He could see nothing in the dense darkness. He almost felt as if he were still in the river. Peter guided

him through a right hand turn and directed the lad blindly to a narrow wooden bench. He sat down uneasily, glaring through the darkness of the old building.

A small candle was struck and shaded in a far corner of the room, allowing John to dimly pick out the shapes of other people around him. All was eerily quiet except for the sounds of breathing and shuffling feet. John bent over to whisper in Peter's ear, but was quickly pushed away and urged to be quiet.

Suddenly, someone in front of the group struck a match. The sudden flare startled John as he settled back down onto his seat. His feet and back were beginning to ache and sitting with no place to rest his back did not help.

The fellow who had struck the match, set the flame to the wick of another small candle and waited for it to catch. "Welcome, brothers," he greeted the small group quietly. "I know all here except one. Peter, who is with you there?"

Peter stood quickly to his feet, the dim flickering of the candle's flame toying with the color of his face. "This is me brother, John. I think he is ready to join us," he announced with a small smile.

John looked quickly around at the faces in the room. Some he recognized from his dealings around the village. A few faces he could even put a name to. There was Patrick O'Meara and his brother Sean. Across the room were three brothers of the Clancey clan and two O'Tooles, Fenton and Brendan, who had come to see his sister twice.. The leader, however, was a total stranger to him.

"Welcome to you, John," the stranger replied. "I am Tim." He was a tall man in his thirties, dark hair and deeply set eyes. He had a kindly face, but one seemingly scarred by a hard life.

John simply nodded in response. He was pretty wary of anyone who felt they needed meet in a dark, hidden place. That form of communication usually meant trouble for everyone.

“Any news?” Tim asked the group, returning to the business at hand..

Several of the lads began to speak quietly amongst themselves. One of the Clancey brothers finally spoke aloud. “I went by the Flannery’s place yesterday and it looked empty,” he began, looking rapidly around the group. “Knowing Tom Flannery, I though I would see what happened to them. There was no sign of them being burned out or anything. I peeked through the little window in the front of their cottage and saw the whole family sitting off in the corner of the room together.” The young lad’s voice began to quiver. His eyes turned to the floor as he paused his story.

“I thought maybe ole’ Tom needed some help in his fields,” he continued in a much quieter voice, still looking only at the floor in front of him, “his barley going ripe and all. I could use a little money for food myself, you know. Anyway, I knocked on his door and no one came to answer.” The red headed lad grimaced and his voice became a whisper. “So I opened the door myself and went right in. The smell. . .,” he choked back his emotion. Trying to subtly wipe his eye, he continued. “They were all dead. All sitting there together Tom, his wife and five little ones. Must have been gone for days. I could not stand the awful smell.” He sniffled and quickly sat back down.

The room grew deathly quiet. No one spoke a word for several minutes. Tim eventually stood back up at the front of the group and wiped his eyes openly. John’s heart fluttered. Too many memories bombarded him at once. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat and tried to swallow the huge lump in his throat.

“Any other news?” Tim asked with a sniff.

“Paddy Murphy who was here last week from Birr is in jail,” one of the strangers spoke up. “Got caught lifting four ears of corn, he did, from one of Lord Buxley’s precious fields. He only wanted to feed his two hungry young‘uns. Now he is spending the next six months in prison with no one to feed his family.”

Tim just shook his head unbelievably. "Any more?"

John shifted uncomfortably once again. Unable to keep quiet any longer he spoke up. "I saw a man dead," he started, "just this evening. He was lying in the weeds over by the river." The lad gazed around the room, all eyes upon him. He was not much of one to speak out in public, but when he had something to get off his chest, a group like this could relate to him.

He swallowed, caught his breath and continued. "He looked to be an older fellow. I do not know how long he had been lying there, but the smell, like the other lad just said, was horrible. And the rats. . .," he shifted his feet, having trouble even finishing the sentence. "The rats was eating him." Looking around the room once again, he saw the look of disgust and apprehension on everyone's face.

"Why did not you tell me, brother?" Peter whispered over to him.

"I really did not want to think about it," John responded quietly, and then he continued his story. "On my way through town, I stopped at the Church. I asked Father O'Casey to at least get the poor retched soul and bury him," He looked at the floor and kicked at a piece of straw with his toe. "He said there were too many people to feed at the church and that he could not afford to buy any more coffins to bury any more poor souls."

A murmur started throughout the dim room. Tim took his spot once again in front of the room. "Lads," he said, trying to quiet the group. "Let the man finish. Anything else, John?"

"That is all with that," John responded. "But, I have a copy of The Cork Examiner here," he patted a bulge under his shirt. "There is bad news everywhere. I can read some later if anyone is interested."

A low murmur began once again. "Come up here, lad," Tim asked of John, motioning him to a spot next to himself. "Tell us what is going on around our beautiful country."

A little reluctantly, John took a spot at the leader's side. He pulled the newspaper out from under his shirt and lined it up with the dimly flickering candlelight. Tim moved in closer,

scanning the smudged headlines over his shoulder. "There," he instructed, pointing to an article that caught his attention, "read that one to us."

John shifted the newspaper in the dim glow. He tried desperately to adjust his eyes to the combination of dim lighting and smudged newsprint from the paper getting wet after his swim. "This was written about a week and a half ago," the struggling lad prefaced. "The workmen and labourers employed by Mr. FITZGERALD, Rocklodge, near Cloyne, refused to allow him to send his corn to Cork, or to market, and stated that they would give him the price he demanded for it. To this step they said they were compelled by the loss of their potatoes, and the dearness of provisions." He shifted the paper around in the light to get a better view.

"We have heard rumours of intended risings in various parts of the country," John continued reading the story, haltingly, "but trust that the activity of the local authorities and the advice of the clergy, and other influential friends of the people, will be sufficient to keep them quiet until relief and employment can be afforded. A party of Dragoons left Cork yesterday for Youghal. The Clashmore Mills were attacked by a mob, and flour taken from them."

Tim stepped once again to the forefront. "That, lads, is who we are up against. The English are starving our people, stealing their land, and murdering anyone who gets in their way." He stopped, looked around the dark room then rubbed his face in his hands. "The bastards took our freedom, sent in Protestant Scots squatters to occupy our ancestral farmlands and now send a plague upon our main supply of food, trying to murder our whole population. Tons of grain grows in our fields, yet we can have none for our own stomachs through penalty of prison, death or worse!" Tim slammed his fist into a post of the hay bin beside him. He rubbed his face again and turned to lean, face first, against the railings of the bin.

Fire erupted in John's heart, burning through his veins and blazing into his brain. *Sons of bitches!* he thought, clenching his fist. His Celtic blood began to boil, fired with the agony of centuries of oppression. The lad dropped his newspaper to the ground and looked around the

group of young men. Vengeance burned on every face.

Tim turned back to the group. "We cannot tolerate the Imperialist bastards any longer," he spoke quietly. "From the days of Cromwell's conquest we have been a divided people. We have trembled like a flock of sheep in our hovels. Our once fierce and proud ancestors would be sickened by our lack of action." Tim dropped his arms heavily to his sides. He looked sternly around the dark room at the faces of the lads gathered in the name of freedom. John slipped quietly back to his seat, never taking his eyes off the charismatic young leader.

"It is time all that changed, brothers," the impassioned leader continued quietly. "The struggle will not be easy. Some of us in this room may die. But, that is a price I am willing to pay to give my children a future of freedom and honor." Tim grew quiet once again, waiting for reaction from someone in the group.

An unfamiliar voice spoke from behind John, "But what do we do, brother? We have been meeting here for three months now, yet, we do nothing but talk! When do we act?"

John turned to face the voice. He had the look of a young O'Toole. His slim, red face highlighted the embers of hunger in his eyes. It was easy to understand the passion of that family.

"Soon, lad. We act soon," Tim answered the fiery lad. "There are groups meeting at this moment all around our beautiful country. Some have already begun operations. We must organize a strategy, pick our time and purpose. Then we strike like the tiger we are." He wrung his hands and took a deep breath. "Go home now, lads. Watch over your families like the guardian angels you are. Think of an action that we can accomplish to strike at the legs of our enemy. Be back here in three days ready to fight for our country."

Tim looked across the room a final time, smiled and bent over, blowing out the candle. John started to stand up. Peter placed his hand firmly on his brother's leg, urging him to sit still. "We leave one at a time, brother," he whispered quietly through the darkness.

John could feel an occasional body brush past him. Sitting quietly in the darkness, his over stressed body began feeling its exhaustion once again. The lad's neck began to ache and his eyes sagged for lack of sleep. No one passed by for a couple of minutes, prompting Peter to release his leg and tap his brother's shoulder as a signal to get up and leave. John allowed Peter to slip by and lead the way through the darkness.

The brothers quickly reached the door exiting the barn. Peter opened the door slightly and stuck his head out to make sure the coast was clear. "Come on," he whispered, slipping into the moonlit field.

Reaching the narrow lane back to their cottage, John took up a position beside his brother. "What do you think?" Peter asked at a whisper.

"I agree mostly," John replied quietly. "I have seen far too much death and agony as late. But what can we do? We are but a few angry lads, they have the English army on their side."

"Remember Father O'Carroll when we were but wee lads?" Peter asked with a smile. "He told us of David and Goliath from the Bible stories. We must find our slingshot, brother." He smiled brightly, looking at his older brother through the moonlight.

John smiled back. He was not much for bloodshed. The lad considered himself a farmer and family man. But, he recognized a dire situation for what it was and he understood the measures necessary to exact change from an intolerant government.

Chapter 8

John followed his father slowly through the barley field. A stiff, steady wind kept the growing plants rustling noisily. Joseph stopped periodically to inspect the grain heads for ripeness. “‘Twill be a fine crop this year,” he repeated several times with a broad smile. “Three more weeks and we will harvest this gorgeous crop!” He reached down to pluck a stray weed from the base of a barley plant.

“If only our potatoes had done as well,” John commented dryly.

Joseph looked at his son with a displeased grimace. “We take what the good Lord in Heaven gives us, son, and give thanks that we are not like so many others of our countrymen right now.” He looked toward Heaven and crossed himself quickly.

John suddenly felt embarrassed. He felt his face flush red at the return. What had gotten into his father? He had never known him to be a particularly religious man. *Bad times makes people act in strange ways*, he surmised.

“Da,” John address his father seriously, “do you think the English had anything to do with the potato rot?”

Joseph stopped, looked back at his son, and glared. An unusually strong gust of wind howled through the barley, threatening to blow over the whole crop. "Now what would make you think up something like that?" he asked harshly. "Has someone been feeding your head with tales of nonsense?"

John looked wordlessly away into the cloudy sky, his embarrassment showing brightly in his face. "I have just heard rumors," he finally answered quietly, his voice snapped away in the wind.

"There are some among the English who are arrogant, intolerable and not to be trusted," Joseph answered his son heatedly, "but I have yet to meet one with the magical power to control the forces of nature! Besides, if not for the compassion of our landlord here, we would be starving to death like so many others."

"But was not all this land, for hundreds of acres around, once farmed by our family?" John returned, his courage and conviction overcoming his shyness.

Joseph's face softened. He gazed across the farmland surrounding them and took a deep breath. "Aye, son, 'twas at that," he finally answered softly. "But, 'tis no longer." Joseph walked over and put his hand on his son's shoulder. "Do not let anyone lie to you, lad, and fill your brain with thoughts of rebellion. Only death walks those fields...and we have already had far too much of that around here. I have no wish to see my sons with their necks stretched."

Did his father know he and Peter had attended the meeting of The Young Irelanders? Did someone tell him? Somehow, his father had changed of late. Could it be he was just growing old? John could remember seeing fire in his father's eyes when speaking about the old ways, living the life of a clan. In those times, land was open to the free passage of any man. No one truly owned the land, but everyone had full use and benefit of it. Why was he suddenly acting so different?

"Would not you like to see the land the way it was in the old stories, Da?" John asked,

seeing the sadness in his father's eyes. "This land is ours, it was stolen from us."

Joseph looked sadly at his son. "Aye, lad," he responded slowly, "I would at that. But, 'tis no longer the way of things. Now, I would rather see my sons have sons of their own, living on five acres of rented land, than to see them buried under that sod for a dream that will never be." He looked quickly away, turning his attention exaggeratedly back to his crop.

John's heart felt heavy. He had to act on his own conscience, yet, how could he hurt his own Da? The struggling lad desperately wanted to attend his second meeting with the group tomorrow night. There was a kinship there, a feeling of connected purpose, that flowed far beyond physical ties.

"Let's go eat, lad," Joseph suggested lovingly, turning back to his son. He turned toward the cottage and slipped past John, weaving through the row of grain.

The gusty wind boiled through the low clouds. John watched as two ravens sailed across the sky like black darts, angling across the gale. Stepping through the gap in the low stone fence, the lad followed his father into the empty remains of their potato patch. Grey ashes were wind scattered across the garden, a last testament to the ruined crop. Maybe he should be happy just to be alive and still in the home he loved. So many others were starving, dead, or sent off to far away lands, forced to leave their homes. His family still had food, shelter and a cash crop that would soon be ready to harvest. What more could he rightly ask? He stepped through the door into the dimly lit cottage.

Peter looked up at his brother and smiled. "Another day, brother," he greeted quietly. "Tomorrow we begin again."

John finished the last of his corn mash and flat bread. He looked over at Peter who, with

a disgusted look on his face, forced down the last of his meal. James coughed heavily, sitting beside the fire, chewing slowly on his crust of bread. The young lad shivered in front of the fire, staring into the glowing coals.

Joseph tossed a couple more peat logs on the fire and looked at his youngest son. "Are you all right, lad?" he asked, feeling of the boy's forehead. "Eileen, I think your brother has fever again, will you look after him?" James looked silently up at his father, his face pale and jaw quivering.

Eileen sat down her cup and tended to her baby brother. "You are on fire!" she commented, placing her hand on his pallid face. "Let's put you to bed." The lass lovingly picked up her brother and disappeared through the doorway into the rear of the cottage.

The sound of horses outside suddenly caught John's attention. He looked up at Peter, who had obviously heard the same thing. Joseph looked worriedly through the dark opening across the room where his daughter and youngest son had just disappeared. A loud rap at the door quickly recaptured his attention.

John slowly got up to answer the door. *Who could that be?* He wondered, worriedly. *The sound of horses could bring no good news.* Another loud rap sounded at the door. Stopping behind the still closed portal, John asked gruffly, "Who is it?"

A loud English voice called back through the door, "Open up. We are the agents for the Honorable Lord Winfrey! Open up, I say."

John looked back to Peter and Joseph, a puzzled look on his face. *What could they want?* He waited until his father joined him at the door. Another loud rap at the door accentuated the impatience of the men waiting outside.

"Open up in there, I say!" the voice demanded even louder.

Joseph swung the door slowly open. Three men in suits and Derby hats stood before him. John's stomach turned. A jolt of recognition sent shock waves up his spine. His breath caught

in his throat.

“What can I do for you, gentlemen,” Joseph asked politely.

“I am Oliver Renfrew, agent for Lord Winfrey,” the man answered coldly. “I am charged by his Lordship to inform you that this property is now in his possession.”

Joseph’s jaw slackened and his arms dropped loosely to his side. “What?” he asked, aghast. “How could that be?”

“Thomas Moore, your former landlord, is now deceased.” the agent informed Joseph matter-of-factly. “His family sold this property as well as the rest of his holdings to Lord Winfrey. Looking through Mr. Moore’s books, we have become aware that you are now two and a half months behind in your rent.”

“Yes, that is right. But, he was giving me the time until our barley was harvested to pay our rent. Since our potato crop failed...”

“You have three days to pay your rent in full or vacate the premises.” Agent Renfrew cut the Irishman off coldly. “Your rent due is now eighteen shillings for the next six months.”

“Eighteen shillings?” Joseph stammered. “How do you expect me to find that amount of money in three days? My barley will be harvested in three weeks, sold in another. It is a good harvest and with what I have now, I can pay then. But, not in three days!” His sun darkened skin turned pale as the blood drained from his face.

John felt he was about to faint. He looked quickly back to his brother. Peter stood aghast, his eyes wide and mouth open. Eileen stood in the doorway of the back room, her hands over her face. The lass was shaking visibly.

“We will be back three days from today.” the agent stated coolly. “Be prepared to pay in full or vacate. Good day, sir.” The three Englishmen turned sharply on their heels and stepped brightly to their horses. They mounted and quickly turned down the lane toward town.

Joseph stood silently, gazing with an unbelieving stare after the three agents. Slowly he

shut the door and moved to the fireplace. Dropping heavily onto a stool on the side, he stared into the dancing fire. A strong gust of wind rattled the window across the room, breaking the heavy silence.

“What will we do, Da?” John asked at the verge of tears.

Eileen burst into loud sobs, dropping heavily to her knees onto the hard dirt floor. “What is wrong, sister?” James’ weak voice asked feebly from the back room.

Peter just stood and stared at his father, a look of absolute muteness across his face.

Another loud knock at the door startled John. His heart pounded in his ears. *What now?* his mind cried. Reluctantly, he took a step toward the door.

With a second knock, a familiar voice called through the wooped planks. “Joseph,” the familiar voice of their uncle, Tom, yelled out of breath from running. “Open up, Joseph, we have got to talk!” He pounded once more.

John moved to open the door for his uncle. “Come in, uncle,” he replied sadly.

Tom rushed through the opened doorway. “Joseph,” he cried breathlessly, looking around the room for his brother, “our land, it has been sold!”

Joseph sat still staring into the fire, his back to his brother. He did not move a muscle. John did not even know if he had heard Tom.

“Did you hear me, Joseph?” Tom started again, still out of breath. “Our land is sold to the same Lord Winfrey who evicted and burned out the O’Toole’s!”

“They just left here,” Joseph answered slowly and quietly. “They gave me three days to have eighteen shillings or they will burn us out as well.”

Tom stared wordlessly at his brother’s back, breathing heavily. The wind whipped through the door, blowing in a cloud of ash from the garden. John closed the portal silently.

“What do we do, Joseph?” Tom asked quietly, catching his breath. “I have the same instruction.”

“Pray,” Joseph responded at a whisper. “Ask the Blessed Virgin to destroy the whole bloody lot of them!” He spun to face his brother, fire blazing in his eyes.

John was taken aback. Such a sudden turnaround caught him totally by surprise.

“Maybe we should do more than just pray,” he commented quietly.

Joseph looked up at his son, a storm in his eyes. “You will do nothing but wait here while we go to the Constable and inform him of the situation. Maybe things can be worked out. We only need three weeks until we can pay their rent, as much a theft as it is. Eighteen shillings indeed!” He stood and walked to his brother’s side. “Let us go to town, Tom.” Grabbing his overcoat for protection against the wind, Joseph led the way out of the cottage and toward the lane.

Peter put his arms around his sister. “We will not let that happen,” he whispered in her ear. Peter turned and looked up at John. “We know what we must do now, brother,” he said loud enough for his brother to hear him. “Tomorrow night we share a plan with the rest of the lads.”

Eileen looked between her brothers, confusion in her eyes. “What are you talking about?” she asked, worriedly.

“Nothing, sister,” Peter comforted her, stroking his fingers through her thick, knotted hair.

John sat down onto the small wooden bench in the darkness as he had before. A cold wind whistled through the cracks in the old barn while a pouring rain hammered at the slate roof. The lad’s wet clothing sent a shiver up his spine in the chill. The rustling of feet and almost inaudible whispers back and forth in the impenetrable darkness still felt very eerie to John. He

leaned over to Peter and whispered quietly in his ear, "The room seems really full tonight."

"'Tis, sometimes," Peter whispered back. "More than half the lads in the county attend the meetings here at one time or another."

Tim struck a match in the front of the room and lit the dim single candle to start their meeting. The flare of the sudden flame seemed so bright that John almost had to squint to look toward the leader.

John could hardly sit still. He was ready to begin the meeting in earnest. There were serious issues to discuss here tonight. Somehow, he had not grasped the reality, nor the severity of the plague that afflicted his country until now. But, now was the time for action. The lad's heart began to thump rapidly with anticipation. He and Peter had schemed late into the darkness of the previous night, concocting a plan of action. He now intended to present their idea to the group tonight.

"Hi ya', lads," Tim began quietly. "Lovely evening!"

The group chuckled quietly, then quickly hushed to allow their leader's direction. "Any news?" He looked over the group for a speaker to give his news.

John looked over his shoulders around the dim room. He had been right, there were probably twice as many people as in the last meeting. He recognized a few more faces from the village, though he could not put a name on them. There was also a couple more of the O'Toole clan in attendance. He would have to speak with Brendan later and find out his intentions for his sister. He had not visited Eileen for a month and she was pining.

A stranger stood up in the shadows at the back of the group. "The whole Malloy clan over in Birr has been shipped to America by their landlord," he announced. "Now there is a herd of cattle running through the countryside where their crops used to be."

"There is a new Workhouse being set up in Athlone," another member of the group informed them. "I hear it is already full and not yet completed."

Tim shook his head in disgust. "How can anyone give up their freedom for a few morsels of food?" he asked no one in particular. "Any more news?"

Peter hesitantly stood to his feet. "The lands to the southwest of town that were owned by the Moore family are now owned by Lord Winfrey," he began. "Our land is part of that tract. Our family got behind on rent when it was necessary for us to buy food when our potatoes failed. Now, we are given until tomorrow evening to produce eighteen shillings rent or be put off our land." He shuffled his feet slightly, running his finger through his hair. "We have a beautiful crop of barley in the field that will be ready for harvest in three or four weeks, but they will give us no longer than tomorrow eve."

He quickly sat back down and stopped speaking. John patted his brother on the back and shook his shoulder lovingly. Peter smiled slightly at John and turned to listen to Tim.

"That is terrible news indeed," the leader replied with a gasp.

"Those are the same buggers that killed our family and ran them off their lands," Jim O'Toole interrupted angrily, jumping hastily to his feet. "The bastards need to pay for their action!"

Tim motioned the lad to sit back down. "They need to pay, indeed. How do we do that?"

John stood slowly to his feet. "They have a large herd of cattle now on the O'Tooles old lands. I say we poison the water supply and kill them all. That will take their precious money out of their pocketbooks!" he suggested.

A low murmur drifted through the group, sounding slightly above the drum of heavy rain on the roof.

"That will not work," someone else from the rear of the room replied. "'Tis raining much too hard. All the overflow would just contaminate our own livestock and crops. We need something more close to the agents themselves."

Another fellow, whose face John recognized from the village, stood up with a suggestion.

"I know where those agents have their evening meal every day," he began. "They go to Callahan's Pub. If anything should be poisoned, I think it should be their own horses."

A collective gasp went through the crowd. "I would rather kill the sons of bitches themselves than punish a beautiful innocent horse!" someone commented from the fringes.

"Me as well!" several more commented.

Tim, once again, stood up to quiet the group. "If we kill the agents, the consequences could be more than we want to deal with at this point in time. We will have the Dragoons down our throats faster than a sow can squeal! I think poisoning their horses serves a brilliant purpose." Tim nodded to the fellow who made the suggestion. "But, where do we get the poison?"

John stood up again, pulling a vial from a pocket of his damp, tattered coat. "Right here," he answered with a devilish smile. "My sister is knowledgeable in herb lore. She cooked us up some nightshade without asking why we would need such a thing."

Tim smiled to match John. "I see you keep yourself prepared, brother!" he commended the lad. He looked across the faces in the room. "We cannot take everyone who came here tonight. We would be spotted right away, even in the rain. We must choose no more than eight or ten lads to do this deed."

"I think it should be the O'Tooles and the Walshes!" young Brendan O'Toole announced vigorously. "We are the ones with a fight against these particular bastards."

Tim nodded in agreement. "Very well then," he agreed. "I see five of the O'Toole clan, two Walshes, Samuel Brady here to give us directions and myself. We will wait until the rest of you lads depart. The next mission more of you will get to participate."

After a quick murmur through the group several members got up to leave. Tim quickly blew out the candle and slid onto the bench beside John in the dark. "Glad to have you with us," he whispered to both Peter and his brother. "Tonight is a first step in our fight for freedom!"

John smiled broadly in the dark. He had never thought of himself as a freedom fighter, but he was starting to like the feel of it. He had certainly had his share of brawls as a lad, it was almost expected of his culture, but never had he thought of the possibility of taking a life. Not even the life of an animal, solely for the sake of vengeance.

The fire flared in his veins. Visions of battle tales streamed through his thoughts. He could help lead this revolution! The taste of freedom crossed his lips.

The lads of the O'Toole clan slipped in behind John, Peter and Tim. "I knew we were cousins in spirit," one of them commented, patting John roughly on the shoulder.

"We need to leave one or two at a time." Tim instructed. "We will meet down the road towards the village at the bend in the creek. Two of the O'Tooles go first, the Walshes second. Sam and I will go next, then the rest of the O'Tooles."

John heard two of the lads behind him slip off into the darkness. He waited a couple of minutes and tapped Peter on the knee, prompting his brother to lead their exit. The lad's heart bounced up into his throat, beating so hard he could hardly breathe.

He followed his younger brother out of the barn, into the chilly rain. At least the storm was not as hard as it had been previously. John's breath vaporized with each heavy exhalation. The muddy field sucked at the lad's feet, making his walk very difficult. Struggling through a shallow ditch onto the muddy lane, the two brothers turned toward the village.

Quickly, they made their way silently to the appointed meeting spot. Brendan and Ignacious O'Toole waited for the others at the edge of the trees. The rest of the group soon arrived and everyone headed silently toward town.

The rain had let up, becoming only a light sprinkle as Samuel took the lead, directing the small party through the back alleys of the village. He motioned for them to stop at the crossing of another alley. "Callahan's is there," he whispered, pointing to the rear of a dark building. "The horses will be tied up front. They are rarely watched over, so there should be no problem

slipping them the poison.”

“How do we give them the poison?” one of the O'Tooles asked curiously.

John had not thought of that part. “We need something they will eat, I suppose,” he answered, still rather perplexed at the problem.

“There is a market across the street,” Samuel answered, “they have a few apples left inside. They are rather rotten, but a horse should still eat them with fervor.”

The lads looked between themselves, “Get them,” Tim directed the lad.

Sam slipped between buildings toward the shop. The rain finally stopped as they awaited his return. A figure suddenly appeared around the corner of the pub. Struggling to see if it was Sam returning, Tim motioned for the group to stay quiet and still.

The man disappeared into the outhouse in the rear of the tavern. A flash of lightning reflected off the rear of the building, followed by long, low roll of distant thunder. A light rain began to fall once again, splashing lightly into the puddles around the group's feet.

“That was one of the Englishman's agents,” Liam O'Toole announced quietly, his eyes growing wide with recognition of the man in the privy. Fire kindled deeply in the lad's eyes. He took a quick look around the group, then back toward the outhouse. Spotting a short thick piece of square wood leaning against the building next to him, Liam grabbed the plank and crept toward the outhouse.

A smile crossed Brendan O'Toole's face as he recognized Liam's intention and followed him quietly toward their target. He motioned the rest of the group to follow. Tim, perceiving the opportunity as well, instructed the rest of the lads to follow him. The group carefully approached the privy, their footsteps splashing through the shallow puddles of rain. Liam leaned as quietly as he could against the side of the building.

“Who is there?” the English accented occupant asked through the walls. “Edward, is that you? I will be out momentarily.”

John's heart raced. His ears began to ring with the excitement of the moment. The lad's senses were heightened to the point that he could almost hear the agent's breath inside the tiny building. The lad exhaled slowly, a cloud of steamy vapor forming in front of his face. The cold light rains streamed down the young man's face, tickling his forehead. He was afraid to move and remedy the situation.

Peter crept up beside his brother at the rear of the privy, leaning silently against the rough wooden wall. He turned, peeking around the corner to Liam's side of the structure. His elbow bumped the wall, thumping the wood audibly. His eyes widened and face flushed.

"Who is that?" the occupant yelled worriedly. "Who is out there?"

John sucked in his breath. His muscles tensed and he felt he needed to scream. What could he do? "Hurry up in there!" he demanded loudly, making his voice sound as if he had already drunk too much whiskey. "I have got to piss!"

Peter and the other lads looked over at John with broad smiles.

"Get out of here, you old drunken Irish fool," the Englishman in the privy responded vehemently. "Go piss in the street!"

"I have got to go," John repeated drunken voiced.. He splashed around the side of the outhouse to the door of the structure and knocked loudly.

"All right, I am coming out," the agent replied hotly. "Damned drunken Irish louts," he mumbled almost inaudibly.

John backed away from the little building. He watched as Liam readied himself behind the swinging outhouse door for his attack. The big O'Toole lad lifted the plank off his broad shoulder and cocked it beside his head. The door swung open and the Englishman emerged into the light rain. He spotted John, standing five yards away, just as the door slammed noisily shut.

"What the bloody hell?" he spouted, startled.

Liam stepped around the corner of the building, his weapon cocked. The surprised

Englishman reached quickly into his coat for his pistol. It was too late.

The big Irishman swung the heavy plank with a vengeance. His blow landed flatly across the agent's chest, knocking him roughly into the wall. The Englishman sprang back off the building, still digging desperately for his weapon. Liam struck again, hitting the man on his right shoulder with a savage blow.

The rest of the group gathered around, encircling the agent. Horror engulfed the man's face as he look around at the mob of vengeful Irish youths. The pistol appeared in the agent's right had. Liam again was too swift. Another wicked blow broke the Englishman's forearm, knocking the weapon into the mud. The man's right hand dangled limply. A desperate loud cry issued from the horrified agent's lungs.

Blood lust filled the faces of the young Irishmen. All watched with pleasure as Liam struck another blow, sending the stunned man once again roughly into the side of the outhouse. A second rapid swing by Liam caught the Englishman directly across the forehead, pinning his head between the plank and the wall.

Blood splattered profusely across the front of the building. John gasped, horrified at the sight of terrorized death. The man fell like a shaft of scythed barley into the mud. The light rain slowly washed the blood down the wall.

Fenton O'Toole crouched beside the bleeding corpse, digging in the mud for the dropped pistol. Finding the weapon, he lifted it over his head like a trophy. Tim reached under the man's coat, retrieving his extra cartridge belt. Liam walked over to the body, kicking it harshly on his way by. The rest of the party followed suit, taking turns walking by and kicking at the dead Englishman.

John was caught up in the excitement and blood lust. He kicked at the dead man's side as hard as he could, then spat on the corpse. Fire flowed hotly through his Celtic blood, sending chills up his back. He never before thought he could kill another human. Yet, for some reason,

he felt brilliantly alive.

Running footsteps splashed up the far side of the pub. "What is happening back there?" another English voice screamed from around the dark corner.

Tim waved the party to split in half. John, Peter, Liam and Fenton followed him, the rest bolted in the opposite direction. Tim led his small group down a dark, narrow alleyway between the pub and another building. Stopping at a small niche in the dark wall, they all packed into the tight space. Liam stood at the entrance of the niche with his club. Fenton stood nervously beside him, brandishing the muddy pistol.

"Where did they go?" the Englishman yelled, leaving the body of their dead partner.

"There," the other agent directed loudly.

Running footsteps splashed up the alley toward John and the group. "I do not see them," one of the agents responded, quickly approaching the group's hiding place.

Liam pressed tightly back into the shadows, almost crushing John into the rough wooden wall. The smashed lad could hardly breathe, and his muscles ached with fear and anticipation. His heart pounded so hard that he could hear it over the sound of the light rain dripping from the roof. Another distant flash of lightning reflected off the building across the alleyway.

The two Englishmen splashed loudly down the path. Just as they passed by the hidden group, Liam unexpectedly stepped out. He swung his wooden plank, catching the rear agent in the back of the head. The man landed face down in the mud, his pistol flying across the alley.

The lead agent stopped and spun in their direction. His feet slipped out from under him in the slick mud. The fellow fell to his knees, bracing himself with his arms.

Fenton stepped quickly out of the shadows, holding the pistol in both hands. He pointed shakily at the Englishman and fired, striking the man dead center of his chest. The man fell face down onto the muddy ground. Fenton stood rigidly, staring at the man he had just shot.

The agent that Liam had hit with his club, struggled to his knees. He searched the mud

for his weapon, stricken with panic. Liam drew back his plank for another blow. Fenton turned toward the man, pointed the pistol at the man's head and fired once more.

John watched in horror as the top of the Englishman's head exploded. The fellow was blown backward, falling face up at the lad's feet. Blood and brain matter flew everywhere. John dropped to his knees in the mud, unable to move, staring into the remains of the man's face.

Peter and Tim slipped from their hiding places. Tim quickly crossed the alley to find the pistols. Peter turned away from the dead men and vomited loudly several times. Fenton stood wordlessly staring at both men he had just shot. His arms were still extended with his hands wrapped around the handle of the weapon. Slowly, he lowered his arms.

Several people from the pub ran to the entrance of the alley. Seeing what had just transpired, they disappeared as quickly as they had arrived. Tim found both pistols and stuffed one in his belt and handed the second to Liam. "Get the ammunition!" he snapped at the Walsh brothers.

Peter spat and moved to the side of the man who was shot in the chest. He reached under his coat and found the pouch containing the man's spare cartridges. Jerking the leather container roughly off the dead man's belt, he clipped it precariously to the top of his trousers, under his shirt.

John crawled through the bloody mud to fetch the ammunition off the body of the agent lying before him. He wanted to follow his brother's example and vomit, but he could not. His belly was on fire as he dug at the dead agent's corpse. Retrieving the bounty, he tossed it to Tim and stood, turning his back to the dead man.

"Let's go," Tim hissed, running back the way they came.

Peter looked panic stricken toward his brother as they followed their leader down the alleyway. They ran as fast as they could, intentionally not looking at the first man they had killed. Taking the most direct path out of town, they found the road back to their house.

The rain began once again in earnest as John and Peter parted from the other lads and headed toward home. They took off at a fast trot, trying both to escape the rain and leave the events of town far behind them. Silently they ran, splashing through the standing puddles of rain and mud on the narrow lane. Both lads' breath steamed thickly in the cold air.

Lightening flashed nearby, followed by a loud boom of thunder. John's lungs were ablaze and his body ached with fatigue. Still he ran, only wanting to be next to the warm turf fire at home. His stomach still felt sick as images of dead men plagued the lad's consciousness.

Peter suddenly tripped over something in the road. He fell astraddle the muddy lane with a huff. John stopped, breathing heavily, to help his brother. Peter rolled over into a sitting position, clutching at his ankle. "Damn my carelessness!" he cursed, grimacing at the pain.

John reached down to help the lad to his feet. "Come on," he offered, "I will help you home."

Peter grasped his brother's hand and stood painfully to feet. Trying to take a step, he almost fell back into the mud. John wrapped his arm around the lad's shoulder as a brace.

"Is it broken?" John asked, compassionately.

Peter moved his ankle around gingerly, holding it in the air in front of him. "No," he replied, "just twisted the hell out of it." He put his foot back on the ground and took a light step. The grimace on his face showed his pain.

Peter stepped out of John's grasp and took several more steps on the sore ankle. "I just need a few minutes to walk it off," he informed John through his clenched teeth. "I will be all right soon."

"Take your time," John responded. "I will wait for you until you are able to walk better."

"No, brother," Peter replied, "go on home. There is no need for both of us to be standing in this pouring rain. I will be right behind you."

"I cannot leave you out here like this," John declared. "Come sit on the edge of the road

for a few moments and then we will head home.”

“Please, John, go on home and make sure the fire is warm. I am going to be cold when I get home.” Peter limped around the narrow lane, trying to work the soreness out of his twisted ankle.

“All right,” John answered, eyeing his brother unsurely. “I will wait up for you. If you are not soon behind me, I am coming back for you.” With a nod from Peter, the lad set out at a run once again for home. At this pace, he could be home in fifteen or twenty minutes.

The rain diminished as John ran through the gap in the stone fence in front of their cottage. Feeling the mud caked into his hair and clothes, he ran straight to the water trough on the side of the house. The lad decided to just get in, clothes and all. After all, he was already drenched to the bone in the soaking rain.

He shivered, plunging under the cold water. Running his fingers through his hair a couple of times under water, he resurfaced, taking a long, sharp breath. The lad stepped out of the wooden trough and sprinted for the warmth of the dark cottage.

John quietly pulled the door open and stepped inside. A low fire still burned on the coals in the hearth. Everyone was asleep and, except for the light from the fireplace, the room was quiet and dark.

He slipped out of his wet clothing and laid them on the stones of the hearth. Retrieving a blanket off the straw mat at the rear of the room, John covered his naked body. Joseph snorted from his pallet on the opposite side of the room.

Quietly, the lad placed a couple more peat logs on the glowing coals. He sat beside the kindling fire to try and chase the rawness from his bones. Peter should be along in a few more minutes, so he would rest his weary body until he arrived. Leaning back against the warm stone wall of the fireplace, John closed his eyes and was soon fast asleep.

Peter began to shiver uncontrollably in the frigid rain. He huddled with himself, sitting in the cold, wet darkness on the side of the muddy lane. Damn his wretched ankle, he wanted to get home where he could warm his aching bones and bury this day in the forgetfulness of sleep.

The lad tried standing once again with little success. Every time he put weight on his foot to take the smallest of steps, he writhed in a bolt of pain that shot up from his lower leg. But he didn't know what was worse, the pain of his injury or the misery he suffered from the cold wetness that ran down his back.

"Come on Peter," he scolded himself, "just one foot in front of the other. I have got to get home soon or I will be found a frozen corpse in the morning." He grimaced and tried to make himself chuckle at his macabre vision. "Maybe I can find a stick that I can use for a cane," the lad blurted out into the darkness. He peered into the darkness at each edge of the road. There was nothing apparent that would serve his purpose.

Peering into the field along the right side of the road, Peter could just make out the outline of a shanty. *Perhaps I can find something I can use for a cane at that house,* he thought, limping heavily to the dry-stone fence that lined the edge of the lane. He pulled himself across the barrier and plopped heavily into the muck of the field. Slowly, the lad limped toward the structure, more hopping than walking.

It seemed to take hour to reach the little hut, but in reality it could not have been more than a few minutes. As he approached the shanty, the lad noticed that the door swung freely in the cold breeze. It was obviously one of the all-too-common abandoned houses that dotted this countryside. Peter staggered painfully up to the structure and fell heavily against the doorpost. He peered into the inky interior, unable to make out anything within.

Maybe if I just slipped inside for a few moments and get out of this wind and rain, Peter

thought to himself, *I could rest for a few minutes and then head home.* The shivering lad cautiously entered the house, listening and peering intently into the darkness for any sign of habitation. It seemed empty. "Hallo," he whispered, "anyone here?" He got no response.

Peter stood just inside the doorway for another minute, listening for any sound of man or beast. Satisfied that he was alone, the young man gingerly seated himself on the dry earthen floor with his back against the wall. He still shivered heavily in the darkness, but at least he was sheltered from wind and rain for the time being. Closing his eyes, he took in a deep breath and released it slowly. He pulled his knees up tight to his chest and winced as another pain shot up his leg from his ankle.

It took only a few moments before exhaustion trumped his fear and pain. Peter slipped into a light, uneasy sleep. The events of the evening began to spin maddeningly through his slumbering brain, playing out once again the terror and stench of death that he had just experienced. He awoke with a start at the vision of an Agent lying dying in the mud at his feet, his blood splattered all over Peter's arms and face. He stymied a scream as he bolted into consciousness.

"I have got to get along now," he scolded himself, trying not to think of his dream. The lad tentatively struggled to his feet. "There will be time for sleep when I get home." He reached for a cold heaviness dangling at his chest and rediscovered the ammunition belt that he had taken from the Agent's body in the village. A cold chill ripped up his spine, colder even than the damp chill of the wind. He started to pull the belt over his head, intending to leave it behind in the hut. The lad weighed the heaviness of the cartridges in his hand and decided that he would have to answer to Tim if he didn't bring that valuable of an asset with him to their next meeting. Ammunition for a firearm was more valuable than gold for their cause. He slipped the belt back across his shoulder.

The rain had slowed to a light drizzle as the lad limped wearily out of the doorway. He

searched the darkness around the shanty, looking for any likely candidate for a crutch. The best he could find was the broken handle of a shovel that stood just about chest high to him. The young man tried out his new walking aide and found a small amount of relief from its usage. *It should work better on the hard road*, he surmised, pulling the end of staff from the muck with a sucking noise.

Peter fumbled his way back across the dry stone fence and turned toward home. Slowly he hobbled down the road, leaning ever more heavily on his crutch. The rain had finally ceased and the clouds above broke slightly, revealing a fleeting glimpse of moonlight. A noise behind the lad startled him. It sounded like the clip-clop of hooves on the road, and they were gaining on him quickly.

The panicked lad looked left and right for a place to hide. He bolted toward the right side of the lane, hoping to get across the stone fence before the riders spied him. Peter stumbled on the slick, muddy surface and collapsed into a pile with an excruciating bolt of pain shooting up his damaged leg. He stifled a moan and scrambled to regain his feet. The horses galloped closer.

A moonbeam broke through the jagged clouds and seemed to spotlight directly upon him. The lad stumbled to a kneeling position in the middle of the narrow road. He looked over his shoulder and could make out the outline of riders gaining on him quickly. On hands and knees he bolted toward the wall. The moon broke through the clouds once again, illuminating the field behind the stone wall.

Peter pulled himself up the side of the waist high dry-stone fence and dragged his ravaged body over the top. The ammunition belt that dangled across his chest caught upon the corner of a fence stone, suspending him on the side of the wall. He could hear the hot breath of the galloping horses as they drew near. He panicked, tugged mightily at the belt and fell to the muddy ground with a splash. The horses pulled even with him on the opposite side of the fence.

The stone that his belt had tangled on teetered precipitously on top of the fence and fell to his side with a loud splat, followed closely by two others.

The riders reined their steeds with a loud whiney and spun toward the noise. "Who is there?" one rider demanded. He could hear the hammer of a firearm cocked. "I know someone is behind the fence! Stand up now or we will fire on you!"

Peter's heart almost gave out. The blood rushed to his ears and rang like cathedral bells. His breath caught hotly in his throat. A muffled cry escaped his lips. The moon suddenly lit the landscape again. The terrified lad struggled painfully to his feet, peeking quickly over the stone fence. He recognized the nearest face in the moonlight. It was the town Constable. Peter's heart sank as he stood slowly to his full height.

"Please don't shoot me," he begged. "I can't run away."

Three riders who sat behind the Constable lowered their weapons toward the muddy, shivering lad. "Come here," the Constable ordered harshly. "Across the fence!" He dismounted his horse and landed on the wet roadway with a plop.

"I am sorry, sir, but I am afraid I cannot get back across the fence. My leg is injured and I cannot climb back over," Peter replied, holding his hands high over his head and looking dejectedly at the ground.

The Constable motioned two of his Deputies to retrieve the lad. Both men rode up to the fence on each side of Peter, took a grasp of his shirt on each of the lad's shoulders and dragged him roughly over the wall. The lad stymied a scream as his legs raked over the ragged stones. The two riders dropped the boy in front of the Constable.

The officer looked into Peter's eyes in the moonlight and his face softened slightly. "I know your face," he announced gruffly. "What is your name?"

Peter looked ashamedly at the ground as he answered softly, "Peter, sir. Peter Walsh."

"Walsh, hmmm, Walsh. The son of Joseph Walsh?" he queried.

“Aye, sir, he is my father,” he answered dejectedly.

“What in the name of God are you doing out here? Joseph Walsh is a good man, I cannot believe one of his sons would be mixed up with the likes of the rabble who just killed three Agents in my village! What is that around your neck? Hand it over to me!” the Constable ordered, looking at the ammunition belt that Peter still carried.

Peter closed his eyes and slid the belt over his head, handing it, trembling violently, to the lawman. He stood silently as the officer examined the belt.

The Constable motioned to one of his men, “Bind him.”

The Deputy dismounted, walked swiftly to Peter, pushed him roughly to the muddy road and started tying his hands behind his back. Softly at first, the sound of more riders approaching floated distantly on the chill breeze. The Constable snapped his head toward the sound of the approaching riders, glaring into the faint moonlight. He walked swiftly to the side of his horse and secured the belt to his saddle, obscuring it from view with the blanket. “Damned soldiers,” he mumbled under his breath.

The Deputy pulled Peter to his feet and shoved him against his horse. The lad grimaced and gasped as a sharp pain shot through his leg. A large troop of Dragoons arrived swiftly in a fury of sound.

“What have you here?” the Commander asked brusquely. “A party to our murder?”

The Constable eyed the troop defiantly. “No, he is just a local lad that stole some whiskey and got drunk. I am taking him to my jail to face the consequences of theft and disorderly conduct.”

The Commander shook head and laughed evilly. “Damned Irish, start them out young. There is no wondering why they are hardly better than the apes! Carry on,” he ordered, glaring around the Constable’s group and waving his troop around them. He then reined his horse against Peter, knocking him brutally into the mud. The horses’ hooves narrowly missed stepping

on the Irish lad.

“Stand up, boy!” the Constable ordered. “Sit him behind you until we get to town,” he directed one of the Deputies who glared defiantly at the backs of the soldiers.

Peter thought he was going to wretch, but held it down. He shivered in his cold and fear so hard that he didn't know if he could stay on the back of a horse. *My life is over*, he thought as he climbed up into the stirrup.

Chapter 9

John awoke with a start. The predawn light spilled dimly through the small window in the room, giving everything an eerie glow. The lad's neck ached and the back of his head had no feeling from sleeping against the hard, rock fireplace all night. Snippets of nightmares still plagued his mind, clouding any clear thoughts.

He stood up slowly, wrapping the blanket he had slept with tightly around his unclothed body. John stretched stiffly, the cold rain, physical exertion and emotional trauma of the previous night had taken its toll. His whole body began to ache from the abuse.

Stretching hugely once more, the lad reached for his clothing that lay before the low embers of the hearth. Thank God they were dry. He dressed himself quickly as he heard rustling in the back room. *Eileen must be getting out of bed*, he thought, buttoning his shirt.

A weak shaft of sunlight appeared on the wall across the room from John. *At least the rain has stopped*, the lad surmised. Suddenly, a thought of Peter crossed his mind. *When did he get home*, John wondered, *I must have been dead asleep not to have heard him come in!*

Eileen entered the room, heading immediately out the front door to relieve herself. The door shut noisily, waking Joseph. Their father rolled over, rustling the pallet of hay, as he tried

to stay asleep. The ray of sunlight on the far wall grew brighter, lighting the corner where Peter's straw pallet lay. John glanced toward the pallet, fully expecting his brother to be sound asleep, curled up against the breaking morning. However, it was empty.

Where could Peter be? A feeling of dread took him. Maybe he just got up early and left the house. No, his pallet was not slept in. The blanket was just as he left it yesterday. John's breath caught in his throat. Something was definitely amiss. His stomach grumbled loudly for lack of food and harsh physical activity. But, he did not have time to eat; he had to find his brother. John slipped on his mud caked shoes, tying them so that the broken seams could not come any farther apart.

James coughed deeply in the back room. The young lad moaned slightly and coughed again. "Eileen," he called weakly, "I have got to go, Eileen."

John looked toward the door. He hoped James was all right. Hell, he hoped both his brothers were all right. Unfortunately, he had to go out and search for Peter right then, there was no time to care for his littlest brother.

Swiftly making his way to the exit, John almost knocked Eileen over as they met face to face in the doorway. John stepped aside and let his sister enter the cottage. "James is calling for you," he informed her quietly.

"Where would you be off to so early in the morning?" Eileen replied, questioningly. "You must have just gotten home not long ago." A sour expression covered the lass's face.

"I will tell you later," he responded, quickly stepping through the doorway. "I have got something I have to do right now." Without another word, the lad sped out of the door and toward the gate. John turned toward town and set a brisk pace down the soggy road.

"Do you not want breakfast?" she called after him.

"Later." John answered, calling loudly over his shoulder. The worried lad turned his attention back down the lane toward town. He would walk as far as where he had left his brother

the night before. If he could not find him on the road, there were several abandoned cottages on the way. *That is probably it*, the lad thought, attempting to calm himself, *Peter probably hurt his ankle more than he would confess and made his way to an abandoned cottage alongside the road somewhere.*

That idea made more sense to the lad than anything else he could think of. He would have to keep an eye out for any signs of life as he passed each of the ruined houses. Bright streaks of sun darted to earth between the rolling, puffy clouds, giving the ripening grain a golden hue.

A slight breeze rustled the leaves noisily in the trees next to the road. Autumn was getting close with September just around the corner. *It looks like the crops will be ready a little early this year*, he thought, keeping his errant mind busy as he made his way down the lane. A chilly breeze tousled his dark hair, sending a chill up the lad's spine.

Passing by an abandoned cottage, John decided to investigate for his brother. He turned off the road and pushed open the door to the one-roomed hovel. The portal swung open with a loud squeak. The place was not much more than four dilapidated mud walls and the remains of a caved in straw roof. Peering inside the shadowy shanty, he found the structure empty.

He attempted to kick the mud off of his feet on the wooden doorpost. The motion caused another large section of thatch to fall roughly to the floor. John jumped with a start. His heart raced as a gasp caught in his throat. Recognizing what had happened; he took a long, deep breath and returned to the road.

A line of dark clouds appeared on the horizon, blocking the sun. They boiled as if in a cailleach's vat. A heavy gust of wind rustled the leaves around him once again, promising another miserable, wet day. John looked disgustedly at the cloud mass and shook his head. He hoped he could find Peter before the rain started again.

A far distant roll of thunder brought a smirk to the lad's face. Or was it thunder? The

sound kept rolling and getting louder. "Holy Jesus!" he swore aloud and jumped to the side of the road. A long line of horses overtook him from behind, mounted by a whole platoon of Dragoons.

John's heart leapt into his throat and his breathing raced. It was too late to run, they were right on his tail. What should he do? The lad stood deathly still on the curb of the narrow lane. He knew he was done for. The squadron of soldiers was no doubt called in after the killing of the three agents last night. Now they would be out for blood.

The lad's knees quaked as the riders approached. He watched them arrive in front of him, rigid with fear and completely unable to move. He was as good as dead.

The soldiers reined as they pulled beside him. Four Dragoons dismounted and rapidly surrounded the lad. "Where you headed, boy?" the leader of the group asked gruffly, still seated in his saddle.

John opened his mouth but nothing would come out. "I...", he started and choked. "I was trying to find some work," the lad finally spit out, coming up with the best excuse he could find. "My family is hungry and my little brother's sick. We need food, can you give us some?" He looked up at the soldier with begging eyes. Weakly, he held out his hand toward one of the soldiers surrounding him.

The soldier spat on the Irish lad, grasped him tightly by the arm and shoved him into the side of a horse. The empty, hanging stirrup knocked his breath out of him and a rivet in the heavy saddle gouged his lip. The Dragoon then kicked John's feet apart and roughly frisked him. Next, the Englishman grasped John by the scruff of his neck and shoved him, face first, onto the muddy road.

"Irish scum," the man spat. He shook his head negatively at the Lieutenant that lead the group. The soldier then stepped back toward his horse, followed by the rest of the dismounted Dragoons. John fought to his knees, still gasping for breath. Blood dripped from his lip as he

shook his head to try and regain his senses.

“Get home, boy,” the Lieutenant commanded. “Tell the rest of your Irish bastard relatives that we will find the damnable white apes that murdered her Majesty’s Agents last night! You hear me?” The leader’s horse spun around in the street. “And when we do,” he continued, bringing his steed back around to face the roughed up lad. “every last one will hang by their bleeding, grimy necks until they are dead!”

The lieutenant spurred his horse down the road. The animal took off like a shot, narrowly missing trampling John. The Irish lad forced himself to quickly roll off the muddy road, dodging horses hooves as they flew by.

John moaned and spat out a mouthful of blood as he watched the mud spattered Scarlet backs of the soldier’s retreat down the lane. “Sweet Brigid,” he said aloud, “I hope they do not have Peter!” He shivered heavily with a combination of cold and fear.

What should he do, John wondered? Looking both ways down the lane, he needed to make up his mind. Should he keep looking for his brother or return home? John spat again and struggled to his feet. His ribs were already sore from the rough handling, making every breath painful.

The lad turned and rammed his fist at the backs of the distant soldiers. “Damned English dogs!” John mumbled under his breath. “I hope you all go to hell!” He spat toward the Dragoons once more and followed the soldier’s path.

He was not far from where he had left his brother. He would just go that far and turn around back home. John wiped the crusting blood off his lip, grasped his aching chest and set off at a brisk walk.

Reaching the spot where he had last seen Peter, John poked around through the weeds that grew on the sides of the lane. There was no sign of his brother. The recently passing horses of the Dragoons had eradicated any kind of footprint or other such sign in the soft mud of the

roadway.

Several abandoned cottages stood nearby. They would need to be checked. No matter the apparent danger, John was determined to find his family member. There was no other reasonable option. After all, he felt fully responsible for leaving him injured in the middle of the roadway.

The worried lad hopped a low, moss covered stone fence and headed toward the first structure. There was no sign that it had been inhabited for quite some time. The door of the empty, one room house was off its hinges, lying askew against the outside of the cottage. Brushing a large cobweb aside from the opening, John stepped inside. Several large mice scurried away when the lad entered, disappearing under the stone walls.

John grimaced at his lack of discovery and left the structure. Light rain began to fall from the darkening clouds overhead. At least the weather should afford a wee bit of protection for his search of the surrounding countryside..

The lad moved to the next structure with similar results. Frustrated, he scanned the nearby countryside and chose the closest of the remaining three cottages nearby. The lad set a track for the small building.

Entering the small structure, an all too familiar stench greeted him at the door. John's heart skipped a beat. He stuck his head through the opening and was greeted by the rotting remains of someone's unfortunate pooch. The carcass seemed to have been butchered like a hog. *What has our world come to when our people have to kill and eat their own pets to stay alive?* he wondered sadly.

Beginning to feel his search was in vain, the lad decided to return home. *Peter might already be there anyway*, he thought. *And here I am trudging around in the rain and mud!* John looked up into the billowing clouds and set out toward home.

He would have to be careful on his return trip. His first confrontation with a group of

soldiers had been successful, but another might not be so. John walked quickly down the edge of the lane, ready at any sign of trouble to slip behind a nearby stone fence or patch of weeds. He kept his eyes wide open all around, constantly watching over his shoulder so as not to be taken again by surprise.

Several rounds of gunfire sounded in the distance, far behind him. He had become all too acquainted with that sound. At least the shots were opposite the direction he was headed. The lad had no desire to be involved in more shenanigans right then.

John quickened his pace a step in response to the sound. *No need to tempt fate*, he surmised. A wet gust of chilled wind predated a heavy rain shower coming his way. Thunder began to roll in the distance and the temperature began to drop noticeably. The lad clutched at his sore ribs and set off at a trot.

The rain was puddling deeply as John arrived back at his cottage. The sweet smell of burning peat signaled the warmth waiting within. He ran for the door, splashing through the grassy front yard of the house.

Joseph and Eileen sat across from each other at the little table before the fireplace as John entered the room. There was still no sign of Peter. The fire in the hearth was the only light in the room against the dark overcast of the rainy day. John shivered and stood dripping at the door.

“Where you been, son?” Joseph asked roughly. “Where is your brother, Peter?”

John looked dumbly at his father. He did not have the heart to relay his story. “I do not know,” the shivering lad answered truthfully. “I have not seen him this morning.”

Eileen stared silently into the burning fireplace as John moved closer to warm himself. “How is James?” he asked, remembering the young lad’s cough, and call for Eileen, earlier that morning.

Eileen looked sadly up at him. “He is not doing well at all,” she answered quietly. “His

fever is high and he can keep nothing in his stomach.”

“And today the agents will be back for their rent money,” Joseph added, disgustedly. “They will probably have soldiers with them and evict us without a thought for the wee one.” His eyes were red with worry and sadness. The man’s body slumped heavily, obviously feeling no recourse but to give up.

John opened his mouth to tell his father that the agents definitely would not be coming today, but thought better of it. “Maybe the weather will keep them away for the day,” he offered instead.

“I pray to the Holy Mother that be true,” Joseph answered softly. “But, ‘tis inevitable that we are forced out anyway. Unless God in Heaven sees fit to give us a month or so to get our crops out of the field.”

“Stranger things have happened,” John commented, staring into the fire and rubbing his hands in the warmth.

Eileen looked oddly at her brother. “I need to check on James,” she replied, slipping off her stool and toward the back door of the room. “Your lip is bleeding, brother,” she added flippantly over her shoulder, disappearing through the doorway.

A loud clap of thunder shook the little window. Several drops of rain began slipping through the old thatched roof, dripping with a splat onto the dirt floor. John wiped the blood from his lip with the side of his hand and stepped closer to the bright fire. He then ran his fingers through his dripping hair, trying to squeeze out some of the rainwater. The hungry lad picked up a small piece of day old bread from the table and began to eat.

The sound of horse’s hooves splashing up to their door gave John a start. His heart began

to pound in his sore chest. He looked over at his father, who sat silently in front of the bright fire. Joseph had not moved from his spot all day. The deluge had finally let up, becoming only a fine drizzle after a long day of soaking rain.

John and Eileen looked nervously at each other. However, Joseph either did not seem to notice the sound or really did not care. Eileen jumped up and rushed to the little window, peering worriedly through the dirty glass.

“‘Tis the Constable,” she replied, a slight look of relief easing her facial expression. “No agents with him.”

Joseph turned his gaze off the fire and toward his daughter. “The Constable?” he inquired curiously. “What could he want on a day like this? Will he be the one to evict us?” The man dragged himself off his stool and plodded to the door.

“Joseph, Joseph Walsh!” the Constable called loudly from outside, still mounted on his horse. “Come out here, I have news for you.”

Opening the door slowly, Joseph prepared himself for the inevitable. “Hello, Edward,” he greeted the Constable quietly. “What could bring you out here on a stormy day such as this?”

Both men had grown up in this village, just in different social circles. Still, they were familiar enough with one another to be cordial. There had even been a few occasions between the men that could be described as friendly encounters.

“I am afraid I have your son, Peter, in my jail,” the lawman answered seriously. His watered down English accent denoted his family’s long tie with this country. The man remained true to the Crown, but also seemed to feel the plight of the people around him.

Joseph’s jaw dropped. “Peter?” he started with a gasp. “Why. What did he do?”

The Constable dismounted from his horse, walking toward the startled man with grave concern showing on his face. “There were three agents of Lord Winfrey who were murdered last night,” he began. “Seems a few lads ambushed them behind Callahan’s Pub and clubbed and

shot them to death.”

Joseph listened intently, his eyes wide with disbelief. How could his son have been involved in murder? “Are you sure it was Peter?” he interrupted.

Edward took a deep breath and continued his story. “We are unsure of your son’s participation in the killings. But, one of my deputies found him on this road last night, after the murders, with one of the agent’s cartridge belt on his person.” He stopped to wipe the rain off of his forehead with a kerchief pulled from his trouser pocket.

Thunder rolled again ominously in the distance as the Constable tucked the cloth back into his pants pocket. Joseph rocked with anticipation, dumbstruck with the sudden news. Eileen stood pressed tightly against her father’s back, listening intently to the Constable. She was visibly shaken, her face twisted with emotional agony.

The Constable looked up into the darkening clouds, and then continued his information. “There is a grain of good news on your son’s behalf, however. We have evidence that your son did not actually kill any of the men. It is suspected that one of the O’Toole clan was the actual killer. He, himself was shot and killed today by Dragoons after they found him with the agent’s weapon. The lad tried to shoot his way out of the jam, but was unsuccessful.” The lawman retrieved his kerchief once more to blot his wet forehead.

“What...what does that mean for my son?” Joseph stammered, taken with the news. He stared wild-eyed at the Constable.

“It means that I think I can keep your son from hanging,” Edward answered solemnly. “The leaders of this group will surely be hanged when we get them into custody. But, as for your son, I think I can prevent that. However, I do not think I can keep him from being sent to Botany Bay Colony.”

Joseph’s arms dropped limply to his side. His knees were visibly weakened and he almost sagged to the ground. “Botany Bay?” he responded emotionally. “I will never see me

son again!”

“Aye, Joseph,” Edward responded sadly. “But, he will be alive. That is the best I can do. The army wanted to hang him immediately, but I intervened and got a trial for him with a Barrister I know very well. I can arrange his transport to Australia, but since he was caught with the cartridges, it implicates him directly with the crime. That is the best we can hope for.”

Leaning heavily against the doorpost, Joseph broke into a heavy sob. “Holy Mother of God!” he cried. “How could this happen to us?”

Eileen wailed loudly to match her father. She crossed herself, trembling greatly, almost unable to stand. John still stood before the fire, suddenly thrown into deep shock. He could hardly breathe, let alone cry. His whole body and brain went numb. He had let his brother down. How could he have left him injured like he did?

“Can I see him?” Joseph asked shakily.

“No, at least not directly,” the lawman replied, grief shaking his voice. “I will see if I can arrange something, at least get a message to the lad.”

“At least tell him we love him,” Eileen broke in. “Tell him we are thinking of him!”

“I will be sure to do that,” Edward responded quietly. “I must get back to the village.” He looked again to the dark clouds overhead. Without another word, he strode back to his horse and remounted. The Constable spun the steed out to the lane and back toward town.

Joseph and Eileen stared after the lawman in silence. Another clap of thunder rumbled loudly through the sky. Large drops of rain began to splatter in the deep puddles in front of the house.

Joseph dragged himself back into the cottage and collapsed onto the stool by the fire. He stared silently into the flames for several minutes. Looking up at John, who stood beside him, he asked, “What do you know about this?”

John grimaced and looked away from his father. His eyes met Eileen's. The lass stared

questioningly at him from across the room. The lad's heart felt as if it were about to rupture. Tears began to roll down his cheek. Turning back toward his father, he began, "Peter took me with him to meet with a few lads he knew a week or two ago..." He was numb as he related the story as best he could to his father.

The heavy rain began to filter through the roof once again, dripping as though setting time with the story. Joseph listened quietly to his son. At the end, he turned back to the fire and stared wordlessly into the flickering flames. "I thought I taught my sons better than this," he spoke to no one in particular. "Now I lose everything."

James coughed deeply in the back room. "Eileen," he cried weakly, "where are you?"

"Coming," the lass replied sweetly. She shot a glance of vehemence toward John and slipped into the other room.

Chapter 10

John carried little James on his back as they neared the Grand Canal. For the past week, the dysentery had devastated the young lad. His small frame had dwindled to almost nothing. His pallid, sunken cheeks seemed almost translucent in the sunlight and the lad's limbs had dwindled to mere skin and bone.

Yet, this was probably the last sight he, as well as anyone, would have of his brother, Peter. The Constable had been kind enough to inform them of when the prison barge would be leaving the quay in the village in its route to Cobh, and ultimately Australia. Peter would be on board. At least they could catch a final, brief glimpse of their family member.

Joseph led the small procession across the damp field to the shore of the waterway. John followed, carrying James, with Eileen by his side. Several other members of the Walsh family as well as a large number of O'Tooles followed closely behind, including Brian, Tom and both their families. If not for the solemn occasion, it could have been a grand time.

The sun peeked occasionally through the patchy clouds, only partially warming the chilly breeze. It was awfully cold for the beginning of autumn, threatening a harsh winter. The wind rippled the water of the canal, creating sparkles in the intermittent sun.

The barge should be floating by soon. Hopefully Peter would be at a place they could see

him. Joseph picked out a spot on a gently sloping, low hillside. Wordlessly, he sat down on the wet, green grass, watching for any activity from upstream.

Eileen spread out a threadbare blanket and John laid James in the center of it. The lad coughed deeply and moaned slightly. "Is Peter coming yet?" he asked weakly.

"No, little one," Eileen responded gently. "You lie back now and take your rest. We will let you know as soon as we see something." The wee lad closed his eyes and waited silently.

The extended families gathered around the shoreline. Angus O'Toole sat down sadly beside Joseph. His nephew Brendan was also scheduled to be on that barge. Liam O'Toole was in a prison cell, awaiting his execution, having been found with the gun belonging to the other agent.

The leader, Tim had not been heard from since the incident. No one was quite sure where he had gotten off to. Maybe he returned back to where he came from. John had already emotionally bade him good riddance.

Few words were spoken between the members of the crowd. Most sat looking silently down the empty canal, waiting for the first glimpse of the boat. Brian sat down easily beside John, placing his hand supportively on the lad's knee. "Do not blame yourself, lad," he whispered. "You only did what you felt was right. Time was, when your father and I would have done the same thing."

John looked sadly at his uncle. "But, would you have left Da alone in the middle of the road?" the lad asked, his heart heavy with blame and grief.

"You had no way of knowing, lad," his uncle replied softly. "No way at all." Brian looked wistfully across the dark water. "Your Da had a similar choice once in his early life. Unfortunately, he let the results haunt him all his life. Do not you go and make that same mistake now, lad. You have a life of your own to live."

John looked away toward the cloud-covered mountains. The story of Liam Sweeney and

his Da's infamous fishing trip suddenly popped into to the lad's aching mind. His father's refusal to talk about the experience finally began to make sense. A mistake like that would be difficult to admit for a lifetime.

And because of that mistake, John felt strongly that he should be on that barge with his brother. But what would that have done to his father? Losing one son was bad enough. And to have another gravely ill was almost unbearable to him. But to lose all three of his sons would have been sure death to the man, and the lad knew it.

"There is a boat" someone in the crowd behind John cried. The lad looked down the waterway through foggy eyes, spotting a small speck of movement far upstream. The vessel approached slowly, prolonging the agony of everyone in the group. As the craft finally neared, everyone stood to their feet and lined the shore of the waterway.

On the opposite shore of the canal the mule team that powered the small barge passed slowly by. The drover whipped the team mercilessly, trying to gain speed past the crowd. On board, four Dragoons stood guard, one on each corner of the small craft. Each soldier had his musket in hand and eyed the group cautiously. Peter and Brendan sat in the middle of the craft, beside two other lads. Each of the young men's wrists and necks were bound with steel collars. Large, heavy chains spanned between the collars and were attached and locked down to the deck of the boat. Peter shifted as much as he could to see the group that waited silently there to send him off. He attempted a small wave, however, the chains restricted him greatly.

Everyone in the crowd waved sadly as the boat floated swiftly by. John held James in his arms so he could gain a last look at his brother. James waved slightly and buried his face into John's chest. He cried with what little fluid he had left in his fragile body.

One of the other young lads in the crowd picked up a large stone and drew back to hurl it toward the soldiers. Tom grasped his arm and forced the lad to drop his missile. "There is already been enough of that!" he warned, hotly. The admonished youngster looked dejectedly

into the canal, his face turning bright red.

John looked over to his father. A small tear slid down the man's face, sparkling in the bright ray of sunlight. Joseph quickly brushed the tear away and stood stone-faced until the boat passed out of sight.

Every member of each family continued to wave at the craft until it was far down the canal. As the boat disappeared around a slow bend and headed towards the River Shannon, the family members turned, one by one, and slowly regrouped at the side of the road. John stared after the boat until it was well beyond sight.

Angus O'Toole draped his arm around Joseph's drooping shoulder. "I have two bottles of whiskey at my house and, by God, I am going to get roaring drunk tonight!" he told Joseph matter-of-factly. "You are welcome to come and join me."

Joseph looked at the big man and smiled a sad smile. "I have six pence in me pocket," he said, patting the jingling coins in his trousers. "I am going to stop in town and buy the biggest bottle of whiskey I can find and worry about tomorrow, tomorrow!" he finished his answer firmly. "I will be honored to join you with me own bottle, if Brian and Tom can come along as well!"

"You know they are always welcome, Joseph," the big man responded with a squeeze of his hand. "You have become as much a part of my family as my own brothers! My door is always open to you!" A large smile grew on Angus' red, round face. His wild blazing red hair shimmered in the windy sunlight, blowing back and forth across the man's shoulders.

Joseph looked at John. "Take your brother and sister home, lad." the father instructed. "I will be home later. I have some drinking to do and James and Eileen need someone to protect them. Someone strong." He patted his son lovingly on the arm. It was the first loving thing he had been able to say to his son since the incident first occurred .

The four older men met at the roadway and struck off toward town. John shifted James

in his arms and called for Eileen to follow. The siblings trailed the crowd slowly down the road.

Reaching their respective farms, the group began to dwindle in size. All of the O'Toole clan had left by the time John and his siblings reached home. The lad carried James to bed and went back outside to look over their barley. In two or three more weeks, the grain would be ready for harvest. Maybe, by the grace of God, no one would come to collect rent before that time.

Molly, their milk cow, mooed her agreement with John. The lad smiled at the timing. He felt like running to his hillside and sitting, away from everyone, to think all his thoughts through.

How could he ever get Peter off his mind? The thought of his brother's captivity made his heart sink once again. What a horrid sight it was to see him chained up and under guard that way. "Goodbye, brother," John called quietly into the wind. "May the seas be calm to your new home."

John sat atop the mossy stone fence and gazed out toward the Slieve Bloom Mountains in the distance. He wanted desperately to cry, but forced himself to hold it in. *I wish I could get desperately drunk*, he thought, *at least just for tonight*.

Eileen walked up quietly behind John. He jumped as she placed her hands on his back. "Sorry, John," she apologized quietly, and then joined him on the fence top.

The lad looked at his sister and smiled sadly. "You said everything would change," he commented. "I knew I should have listened to you. Anything that has not changed seems like it will soon."

She stared quietly into the billowing clouds. "I fear another big change will be upon us

soon,” she cried, large tears beginning to flow down her lean face. “James is taking a turn for the worst. I am afraid he may not make it past tomorrow or the day next.”

John looked sorrowfully at his sister. Taking her tightly in his arms, he tried to comfort her. “God would not take two brothers from us in one week,” the lad responded. “He just could not do that. Could he?”

Eileen sobbed at her brother’s chest. A large gust of wind rustled the leaves on the barley. “I am afraid that might not be all he takes,” she sniffled, wiping the long wet streaks of tears from her face. Another burst of screaming wind ripped through the barley field, bearing the eerie sound of a long, distant wail. John gently stroked his sister’s hair and gazed into the dreary distance.

John awoke slowly, the morning light already bright in the cottage. His mind was still fragmented from the profuse dreams of the night. He fully expected Peter to be still sleeping on the pallet next to him. However, threads of reality quickly pulled the lad from the grip of fantasy. However the more cognizant he became, the more he wished that the grip of fantasy had not lost its hold.

Groggily, the tumultuous lad rolled over and dragged himself to his feet. He rubbed his eyes and noticed that his father’s pallet still lay empty. *Where could he be?* John wondered. It was not like his father to stay away from home all night. He sure hoped his Da had not gone and done something fool hearty with Angus and his uncles while they were drunk. He shook off the bad thoughts and refocused his thoughts elsewhere.

The air was extraordinarily chilled for the start of September. John shivered, prompting him to start a new fire in the hearth. James coughed weakly from the back room. John looked to

the dark opening, wishing he knew something he could do for his little brother. Unfortunately, nothing came to mind.

John's stomach growled loudly. This diet of cornmeal and flat bread was not doing much for him lately. It just did not have the filling qualities of a good meal of potatoes and milk. However, there were no potatoes to be found in the whole county that he knew of. Well, at least he could have the milk.

John slipped quietly out of the door with the small milk pail. Molly mooed loudly as the lad as he approached. "Good morning to you, lass," John greeted the cow as if she were human. "Lovely morning isn't it?" He tied the cow tightly to a post on the side of the house. This had been Peter's job most of the time, so John still felt a little unconfident in his milking abilities. Seating himself on the milking stool, he grasped the warm udders with his cold hands, eliciting a loud bellow from Molly. "Sorry, lass!" he mumbled, stopping to warm his hands slightly under his arms.

"Psst, John," a soft male voice whispered from behind him, giving the lad a start.

The young man's heart jumped into his throat as he spun quickly on his stool to see who was there. Tim stepped quietly from behind the privy, surprising John completely.

"What the . . .?" John began, but was too shocked to finish.

Tim smiled boldly. "What is on, lad?" he greeted quietly. "How have you been?"

"What are you doing here? Where have you been?" John questioned, his mind racing almost as fast as his heart.

"One question at a time, lad," Tim answered, still smiling. "I had to go back to Dublin to get some more help. We bit off a good bite the other night. Now I am back to get the lads back together for another operation." He stepped fully into the open, his left arm in a sling.

"What happened to you?" John queried again, his face gaunt with displeasure.

"Had a small run in with a deputy that night." Tim replied a little more seriously. "I

barely got away.”

“Go away now or you might not get away again,” John informed the lad, turning back to his milking.

Tim looked around quickly. “Is there someone watching this place?” he asked, concern in his voice.

“No, I just do not want you around here. Now, off with you!” John began warming his hands once again.

“Do not want me around?” Tim responded with a shocked look on his face. “What do you mean? We are Young Irelanders, lad! We have got a mission to do!”

“My only mission is to get some milk for me breakfast. I have got no more cause to stand for, other than that.” the lad snarled.

“You have got to join us, John. We need all the support we can get. Most of the lads are meeting over in Birr. Here, I will give you directions.” Tim pulled a small sheet of paper from his shirt. “Meet us about an hour after dark,” he finished. He tucked the paper down the back of John’s shirt. “See you there, lad.”

John refused to turn and face the man. He gripped the cows udders and squeezed, squirting a spray of milk noisily into the bottom of the pail. “Be sure and tell the lads how you have gotten three good men killed and four more sent off to Botany Bay when you meet with them tonight,” he replied angrily.

Tim stopped in his tracks. He stood silently with his back to John for several seconds. Finally, he spun around, walking right up to the back of John. “I got three lads killed, did I?” the man questioned hotly. “Whose idea was that mission? As I recall, it was not from my mind! Anyway, this is war! I said up front we were on a dangerous path. Some of our members might not make it through every action.”

The lad stopped, spinning away from John, who sat steadily milking the cow. Tim threw

his hands up into the air. "Have you turned into an English loving dog? Or, have you just lost your spine?"

John jumped to his feet, kicking the small stool several feet across the yard. He turned roughly on the prodding lad, grabbing his shirt and pushing him hard against the wall of the outhouse. John's gaunt body shook with fury as he held the fellow tightly against the rough wood. "I have lost no part of me spine!" he hissed. "What I have lost is me brother and several friends!"

Fear showed in Tim's face as he stared at the lad holding him in place. He trembled, not knowing what the wild-eyed lad might do to him. "I did not mean that, John." he apologized softly. "I really am sorry for your loss."

The sound of footsteps behind John caught his attention. He looked over his shoulder to see his father approaching from the street. John released Tim and stepped back a couple of steps. "Go away, now," he spat through clenched teeth, vehemence in his low voice. "Off with you and do not come back!"

The fellow turned indignantly and set off across the vacant potato field. "You will see things our way again," he promised over his shoulder. "You will be back with us!" He disappeared into the tall stand of barley.

Joseph walked up beside his son. "Who was that lad?" he asked quietly.

"His name is Tim," John answered, still looking after the lad. "He is the leader of the Young Irelanders that I told you about. He was wanting me to come join them again." John looked at his father with fire still in his eyes. "I told him no and to never come here again."

Joseph smiled slightly at his son. "I am proud of you lad," he affirmed. The man rubbed his temples with his fingers and turned toward the cottage. "My head feels like its going to split in half and my stomach is on fire. I have got to go lie down for a while. Wake me if you need anything," he instructed.

John smiled back at his father. Maybe it was a good thing that he did not get drunk last night, the smiling lad thought. He felt bad enough already. "I will, Da." John watched his father disappear into the house.

Molly moored, her head tied too closely to the post to reach a bite of hay. The lad smiled once again and picked up his stool to resume the milking. John's stomach growled loudly as Eileen slipped out of the door and into the privy.

"I will have milk ready for breakfast," he called after his sister.

Chapter 11

“We are so sorry for your loss, Joseph,” Maggie O’Toole relayed, standing red-eyed beside her husband Angus. “James was always such a lovely little lad.” She and her husband slipped past the diminishing family and into the church.

Joseph placed his arm lovingly around his daughter’s waist. He stood quietly at the doorway, waiting for the rest of his family to arrive at the funeral for his youngest son. It was a tough time for a father, losing two sons in a week’s time. He had watched Peter float by, out of his life, but six days ago.

Father O’Casey approached the family from inside the church. “Come Joseph,” he invited softly, “Come to the front of the church with me. ‘Tis time to lay your son to rest.” He placed a hand lovingly on the grieving man’s shoulder and nudged him gently toward the alcove at the front of the cathedral.

John and Eileen followed their father slowly to the altar. Each family member followed the Priest’s example, stopping to kneel and cross themselves before the Blessed Virgin that stood beside James’ little wooden coffin. John gasped, fighting to hold back his emotion at the sight of his little brother lying in the rough wooden box. They each took their seat on the small pew at the front of the cathedral.

Father O'Casey stepped behind the little casket, decked in his ceremonial robes. "Our country," he began his homily, sounding more like a political statement than a eulogy "has reached a point of crisis. Far too many children have died." The priest swept his hand over the small body in the coffin. "Far too many families are torn apart. Twelve women and their children are currently lodged right here at our church, their husbands and fathers killed or imprisoned for attempting to put food in the mouths of their loved ones. And if not for the gracious actions of this very family, at least one of those families would probably no longer be alive themselves. Little James, himself, was a part of that unselfish act."

John shifted uncomfortably in his seat, turning a deaf ear to the droning pontiff. The emotional images toying with his mind were all too recent to set aside. A trickle of a tear slipped down his cheek. Quickly, he mopped the moisture off his face with the back of his hand.

He gazed disinterestedly around the inside of the ancient stone building, trying to keep his feelings muffled. Halfway unconsciously, he heard the priest begin to recite something in Latin. Maybe that would help alleviate a bit of the distress, he hoped. Unfortunately, that hope did not come true. The lad became unable to force himself to even watch the ritual, hot emotion boiling just below his skin. Desperately trying to shift his attention, John studied the details of several old coats of arms embossed into the stone walls.

Joseph and Eileen slid forward, crossing themselves and kneeling onto the rough wooden planks built into the low partition in front of them. John followed along blindly, absently mouthing a prayer along with the rest of the congregation.

A light tap on his shoulder by his sister prompted the lad to look around and see the rest of the people back in their seats. He blushed slightly, sliding back quickly into the pew. John closed his eyes and wished all the horror would just fade away. Unfortunately, it all remained when he reopened them. The suffering lad went on automatic, unconsciously following the tenets of the rest of the ceremony.

The Clergyman finally completed his rituals and motioned for the family to come forward. John followed his father and sister to the side of the casket, reluctantly looking in at his little brother's shriveled face. He choked on the emotion gurgling in his throat. They took their places as instructed at the ends of the coffin and awaited the last respects of the rest of the parishioners.

John then took his place at the side of the casket and grasped the wooden handle protruding there. His father stood directly before him, carrying the front of the box, while his two uncles supported the opposite side. Eileen followed closely behind, sobbing heavily, as the escort moved slowly through the side exit of the cathedral toward the graveyard in the rear.

The party sat the little coffin on the grass at the side of a fresh grave next to the dead lad's mother. Eileen fell to her knees over the top of the box and wailed hysterically. The remainder of the mourners filed in around the family, those behind Eileen consoling her lovingly.

John gazed around at all the fresh mounds of earth piled over the new graves in the cemetery. He agreed with the Clergyman, far too many people have died needlessly. There were far too many families like his, and worse, populating this country. Unfortunately, he saw no end in sight. The grievous lad crossed himself and knelt beside his little brother for the last time.

Joseph stood in the middle of his barley field closely inspecting the grain heads. John watched disinterestedly as the memories of the morning's funeral dominated his mind. The partial warming of the morning sun had faded behind another thick cloud cover. John shivered as a sharp gust of cold air sent a chill up his spine. "Its going to be cold tonight," he commented to his father.

“Aye, ‘tis,” Joseph answered absently. He plucked at a couple more stalks of grain.

“Tomorrow we will start the harvest,” the man continued, engrossing himself in his work.

“But, Da, would not it be best to wait another week or two?” John asked worriedly.

“‘Twould be best, ‘tis true. But, we might not have that long,” Joseph responded, looking back at his last son. “The Honorable Lord Winfrey,” he proceeded sarcastically, “will, surely as the pits of Hell, have a new agent here soon to collect his rent. I have lost enough of me children. I intend to lose no more.”

John found wisdom in his father’s words. “Tomorrow we harvest,” he agreed. “Will we have help from anyone else?”

“Both of your uncles and their eldest sons will be here for help,” Joseph responded. “I have agreed to help Tom harvest his grain next week and Brian to repair his thatch some time soon.”

“‘Tis a good thing,” John agreed once more. He followed his father out of the field and toward the cottage. His emotions still haunted the lad deeply. He took his leave, yearning to visit his hill once more. It had been quite some time since he had the opportunity to get away by himself for a time to reflect on his life.

The next few weeks would be very busy. Between the harvesting of their own and Tom’s grain, he would have very little time for himself. Maybe that was good. Working would keep his rambling brain busy and off these trying times. Besides, there were many good times to be had working alongside his family.

Eileen came out of the cottage, her eyes all red and swollen. She brushed swiftly by her father at the doorway as he entered the house. Stepping a few feet out of the entryway, the lass looked into the cloud laden sky, ran her fingers roughly under thickly curled locks of red hair and screamed horrifically at the top of her lungs. John nearly jumped out of his skin.

Joseph ran back out of the house, looking around with panic written on his face. “Are

you all right, lass?" he stammered, eyeing his daughter suspiciously.

The young woman stood staring silently into the cloud cover. She muttered something incoherently to herself and turned to her father. "I am all right, Da. I just had to do that to keep my mind sane," she answered softly. "I saw all this coming months ago and was feared to pay attention. Now the biggest fear is that it still ain't over."

John's eyes dropped to the ground in front of him. *How could that be?* he wondered. There was nothing left to take. Their crop would be harvested in a few days with money in hand to pay the landlord. Winter was coming and food stores low, but they could manage somehow. The lad walked slowly to his sister.

"Come with me, sister," he urged. "You need some time away from this house."

Eileen turned and looked blankly at her brother. She took his extended hand and slowly heeded John's prompting. "Where are we going?" she asked almost at a whisper.

"To a place I go to get me head together," was John's sweet reply. He smiled at his sister and tugged at her hand slightly.

The two siblings passed through the stone fence and down the road toward the village. Occasionally, Eileen stopped at the side of the lane to stare into an abandoned farmhouse. After several wordless minutes the lass would turn back down the roadway.

John had a heart full of compassion for his sister. She had not only lost two brothers, but essentially a son as well. In fact, apart from carrying him in her own belly, James had been more a son to her than a brother. Now, she was lost without that connection.

"What do you think America is like?" Eileen suddenly asked.

"I do not know," John responded, taken aback at the question. "Why do you ask that?"

"You think I could find a husband in America?"

John eyed his sister oddly as a fine mist began to fall. "Why all the questions about America?"

“Oh, I do not know, brother.” Eileen answered, her eyes seemingly far away. “But, maybe you could find yourself a good wife in America.”

“I can find myself a good wife right here when I am ready for such a thing,” he defended. “I have just no motivation to be saddled with the likes of a screaming wife and herd of wee ones right now. I am still much too young for such!”

“Nonsense,” his sister returned with a smile. “Many lads your age have several babies at their feet already. I want ten babies myself. The sooner the better, I say.” She smiled largely, reflecting into herself.

John looked at her, happy about her swing of mood. *Maybe it did her good to get out of the cottage after all*, he thought. “Ten children?” he laughed. “What might you do with ten wee ones suckling on you?”

She laughed, looking up into the misty sky. “Watch them all grow up until I get old and grey,” she responded, stopping to take a long breath of fresh air deep into her lungs. “Then let them all lay me to my rest.”

John sighed heavily. He did hope his sister was all right. She was acting a bit strange today. “There is plenty of time for growing young ones, sister,” the lad added gently. “Now is the time to care for yourself.” He shivered at the chilled, misty rain that collected in his hair.

“I am cold, John,” Eileen responded with a chill blain of her own.

Looking around them, the lad spotted two small cottages that seemed to be standing empty alongside the roadway. One still had most of its roof intact so it would at least be a place to keep dry and out of the wind until the rain blew over. John led his sister through the gate of the old shanty and to the front door.

The portal opened with a creak, exposing the dim interior. Several seconds passed before his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He gazed into the small single roomed hovel, keeping Eileen behind him. His eyes could just pick out four dim figures against the back wall. “Stay here, I

have got to check something” he whispered to his sister, slipping into the room alone.

He kept watch of the dim shadows against the wall, none of them moved. *Oh Jesus*, he thought, *do not let this be happening again, not right now!* Crossing the small room, he found a young man around his own age, his young wife and two very small children, all recently dead. Turning immediately around, John hurried out the door, closing it soundly behind him.

“This cottage is no good,” he informed his sister, “there are too many rats in there.”

She looked disgustedly at the closed portal. “Let’s just go home,” she replied. “I will be all right now.” Without awaiting a response the lass turned toward the lane.

John wanted to just send his sister home by herself and continue to the Village to inform someone of his find. However, his memories would not allow that to happen. He would have to take her home and then return on his own. He glanced back at the hovel and felt the sickness rumbling through his stomach. *When will all this death stop*, he wondered sadly?

Chapter 12

John stretched hugely upon his hay pallet and pulled the thin blanket tighter under his chin against the early morning chill. Eileen lay closely against his back, too cold to sleep in her own bed away from the only fire in the cottage.

It had been a long and vicious winter. Snow had covered the ground numerous times, dealing a death blow to many poor souls finding themselves without food or home. John's empty stomach was bad enough, yet the thought of finding himself on the road with no roof or warmth to protect him was almost unimaginable.

The lad rolled over, facing the little window across the room. He opened his groggy eyes in the dim light to see snow falling once again outside. It was not a pleasant thought to be trapped inside the tiny house for who knows how long again.

Struggling out of warmth of the bed, John hurried to place several turf logs on the slightly glowing ashes of the hearth. Carefully, the lad stoked the small fire to new life. He rubbed his hands together for warmth and looked at his sister sleeping quietly on the pallet. Joseph also slept soundly on his own pile of straw, rolled into a tight ball in the warming room.

Eileen groaned slightly in her sleep, twitching under the thin covering. The poor lass had

been through a difficult time, trying to recover from the loss of two of her brothers. Dark dreams disturbed her sleep more often than not. Her mood was almost continuously melancholy. Even the times that their uncles' families had come over with music and dancing, she had refused to participate.

The lass awoke with a start, sitting straight up in the bed with a gasp. John looked compassionately at his sister. He could not really understand what she was going through, but he felt a deep responsibility for her well being. Moving to his sister's side, he put his arm around her trembling shoulder. "Today is not a good day," she said suddenly, turning toward the window to look outside.

John looked at her with a small smile. "I can see," he answered quietly. "'Tis snowing again. And the sheep should be lambing by now." He followed her eyes out the window. "March is not the month for snow."

Eileen relaxed slightly, closing her eyes and leaning heavily against John's shoulder. "Do we have anything to eat?" she asked groggily. "I am hungry."

"Not that I can find," John responded, stroking his sister's hair, attempting to comfort her. "I do have a fire going to warm the room a bit, however."

"Do we dare use any more of the rent money for food?" she asked again shakily.

"It will do us no good to starve to death with a roof over our heads," he answered reluctantly. "We have to ask Da what he thinks when he wakes."

Joseph rustled on his sleeping pallet, eventually sitting up and looking sleepily around. "For the love of Saint Michael, it is cold in here," he commented gruffly. "John, get the fire started!"

"'Tis, Da," the lad responded quickly. "'Tis snowing again."

Joseph groaned, leaning against the cold stone wall. The man just shook his head and looked out the window. "Do we have food? My stomach is complaining of eating only once

yesterday.”

“No, Da,” John answered sadly. “We have nothing. Shall we go buy more in the village?”

Joseph thought for a minute and stood slowly to his feet. “I have no better ideas,” he finally answered, moving in front of the fire to warm himself. “All the money we have left is one pound and a little more than a shilling. When the agent comes he will demand eighteen shillings for our rent. That means we have but three shillings to feed us until we get a crop grown this spring. And we cannot even plant until the weather warms a bit.”

“Two shillings should buy enough Indian corn for a month or so,” Eileen replied. “A few pence more will get us a little wheat flour for bread and a wee hunk of cheese. Molly has gotten low with her milk, so we only have a little butter. But we can make do.”

“Very well,” Joseph agreed, moving to his hiding spot. “Here is three shillings and two pence. Do the best you can. Remember, we do not know when we might be able to plant for the spring.”

John took the money from his father and looked back at his sister. She was busy wrapping her old shoes and feet with rags against the snow. John’s own tattered shoes were not much protection against the cold, but they would have to suffice. He had no other choice. “Come on, Eileen,” the lad prompted, his growling stomach a good provoker, “the sooner we get to town, the sooner we can come back and eat.”

Eileen met her brother at the door and stepped out into the frosty wind. “Sweet Mother of God,” Eileen swore as she plodded through the drift of snow at the entryway. Outside, they were met with a frigid white blanket that covered the entire landscape, blending everything into one colorless mass and dulled their sullen footsteps.

The small flakes of snow continued to fall as the siblings trudged down the icy lane towards the village. Familiar landmarks were obliterated by the white mass. Smoke billowed

into the unmoving air from the chimneys of every occupied hovel and cottage. John had even noticed several half-tumbled shanties with a column of smoke emanating through their broken down roofs.

They passed two small groups of local men on the road. They were wretched creatures, barely able to propel themselves down the road with a shovel resting over their shoulders. Most were farm laborers with no land of their own and little hope of survival for their families. Their only recourse was to work on the under paid government programs that were primarily designed to keep them occupied and out of trouble. Some were shoeless, walking bare footed on the frozen road, toes turning black with frostbite.

The rags hanging on the men's bodies were hardly enough to cover them and far too little to truly protect them from exposure. Almost all the unfortunate lads had bony ribs protruding over sunken bellies and limbs looking more like skeletons than walking human beings. Yet, these fellows were supposed to build roads to nowhere, being paid a handful of Indian corn each day to feed their entire families.

Unfortunately, John had become so accustomed to the sight that he no longer even noticed the extent of the destitution passing him on the road. In the past five months of winter, he had learned to hold his emotion and count the fortunes that had seen his family through this turbulent time. He had seen the burial of two more family members, Tom's wife and Brian's youngest daughter, both taken by a combination of hunger and sickness. And he also helped put several unknown persons to rest in the bog. The strangers had been interred with no coffin nor Christian burial, for lack of funds for such things.

Eileen wrapped her blanket tighter around her face and shoulders in an attempt to hold out the cold. Her gait was furious, both to hurry into town and to increase her body warmth. Her eyes were fixed straight ahead and she said nothing as she scurried down the lane.

On the edge of town, a young mother and her three children silently approached the

siblings. All four were obviously starving and dressed in nothing but a few tatters to protect them from the biting cold. The two youngest children, probably six and eight years old, held out their bony hands for alms. Their big, sunken eyes seemed to touch Eileen.

The young woman stopped dead in her tracks, looking compassionately upon the unfortunate family. "Please ma'am, do you have a pence to spare?" the youngest lass begged pitifully.

Eileen looked at her brother, her eyes reddening with emotion. "John," she said quietly, "give me two pence." She held out her hand to him.

John looked at his sister incredulously. "Two pence?" he questioned, his eyes wide.

"Aye, give me two pence." Eileen cupped her hand in front of him once more.

"We cannot afford to give away any money, set aside two whole pence!" John protested heatedly.

The lass took the threadbare blanket off her shoulders and wrapped it over the two children. A small tear trickled down her cheek as she knelt in front of them in the piling snow. John quickly recognized the pain twisting his sister's face and reached into his pocket for a coin.

Pulling a penny from his pocket he handed it to Eileen. "This is all we can do," he said quietly. "They can all get a bite to eat with this."

His sister took the coin and handed it to the little one with a smile. "Here you are," she offered. "Take this to your mum."

The little lass took the money, her eyes wide with excitement. She spun, running back to her mother she cried, "Mummy! We have money for food. Can we eat now?"

The young mother smiled at the siblings, taking the youngster in her arms. "Of course we can!" she replied happily. The strangers eyes returned to John and Eileen. "Thank you very much!" she blessed the two, "May God bring you many fortunes!" Gathering her children, the mother turned into the village to gather a meal for her children.

John felt a warmth flow through his veins. He watched Eileen stare after the young family and wished he had more to offer. His sister was more like her mother than she probably knew. If she was not part of his family, he would marry her.

A horseman in a fine black cape, riding down the road out of town caught John's attention. He rode straight through the middle of the little family, scattering the children with a scream. "Out of the way, you wretched little whelps!" the fellow demanded in a roguish English accent. He reined the horse as closely as he could to the family without riding down the children.

Eileen gasped, running at the horseman. "What are you doing?" she cried.

The man smirked and rode by at a trot, looking callously at the distressed young woman. "Savage white Irish apes!" he spat, speeding to a gallop past John.

John watched the man speed past, jumping hastily to the side of the narrow lane. "What the devil was that?" he asked his sister, angrily staring after the fellow.

The irate lass shrugged and checked on the children to see that they were all safe. Sending the family once again on their way, Eileen returned to John's side. "How can anyone be that cold hearted?" she asked. The lass suddenly shivered violently. "Holy Jesus, I am cold!" she suddenly admitted.

John put his arm around his sister and directed her into town, trying to keep her as warm as he could. He had avoided the village as much as possible since the incident with the agents' deaths. About his only destination had been the church on the outskirts of town. Only one other time had he ventured directly into the town center with his father to buy food at the market.

The siblings hurried up the street to O'Meara's Market, darting into the doorway and the welcomed warmth inside. Only an occasional snowflake now fell as they entered the establishment. The shelves were only half full, the cost of food now more than many shopkeepers could afford to stock.

Eileen hurried to the counter at the side of the shop. The old proprietor, Sara O'Meara, rose out of her ancient rocking chair to greet the lass. "Can you believe this snow?" she greeted friendly.

"'Tis incredible," Eileen responded with a shiver. "We will be needing some of your Indian corn and a few other items."

"Very well lass," the old lady complied happily, "How much will you be having?"

"We will have that bag of corn there," she pointed to one of the medium sized bags of ground corn meal leaning heavily against the counter. "That should do us for a few weeks."

"Lovely, lass," the old lady responded. "That will be three shillings. What else will you have?"

Eileen's jaw dropped. "Three shillings?" she replied in shock. "The same bag was but one shilling four pence only two months ago!"

"I know, lass," the shopkeeper answered sadly. "'Tis a horrid thing, this. But of the food that comes to me, I can make hardly enough to keep myself and me poor old husband alive."

Eileen took a deep breath, motioning to John for the money. She looked disgustedly around the shop. "I see you have some lovely potatoes there," she finally responded to the woman. "Where did you get them?"

"From America, lass, where there is plenty of food. Came with the corn," she responded with a gleam in her eye. "I can give you a dozen for one penny."

"Make it sixteen," Eileen answered quickly.

The old lady eyed her blankly. "All right," she finally answered and smiled. "Sixteen for a penny, it is."

John moved to the counter to retrieve their sack of meal. He picked up the powdery bag and tossed it heavily over his shoulder, its weight conforming to his body like a saddle. Though the bag was only twenty five pounds, it could get heavy before they reached home, especially on

an empty stomach.

Eileen gathered sixteen nice potatoes and wrapped them neatly in a square of cloth provided by the shopkeeper. Giving her thanks, the lass led the way out of the small shop. “‘Tis highway robbery, I tell you!” she complained as the door closed behind her. “A poor body cannot afford to eat any longer! I do not know what we will do in a few more months.” She trailed off with a shiver as a cold gust of wind blew heavily against them.

The clouds had begun to break and brief rays of sunshine streaked through on occasion. The wind, however, had picked up, blowing the wet snow into high drifts. Eileen and John both shivered mightily as the gusts blew straight through their old clothing. Both picked up their pace, wanting to get home to food and warmth.

As the siblings approached their cottage, the snow had already begun to melt, leaving slushy puddles in the roadway. John felt as if his feet were frozen solid by the time they reached the opening in their fence. He ran through the yard, followed closely by his sister. A warm, friendly gust of air greeted the siblings as they opened the door to enter the cottage. Their father sat staring emptily into the bright fire.

“Da, you all right?” John asked at once, concerned.

“The Landlord’s new Agent was just here,” Joseph responded quietly. “I gave him our eighteen shillings. He took the payment then said we owed him another Pound and ten shillings for the rest of the back rent. He also took Molly as a partial payment against old rent he says is due.” He shifted his weight uncomfortably on the stool, never taking his eyes from the fire. “He will be back in two days to collect the total due or we will be evicted.”

Both siblings placed their parcels on the little table and moved to the fire for warmth.

“What will we do, Da?” Eileen asked, mortified. “We have no place to go.”

“The agent said we will be sent to America if we do not pay,” Joseph amended himself.

“I cannot go to America. This is my home!”

John and Eileen looked at each other in silence. The fire popped, sending a bright spark out toward John's foot. "Can they send us away from our home?" John questioned, dizzied by the prospect.

"They can do whatever they want to do," Joseph answered dejectedly. "They are the Government and the Law."

"We can leave right now," Eileen suggested. "We can leave and find another place to live."

"Where would we go?" her father responded quietly. "We have no place. The Englishman was leaving here and going to Tom's house to tell him the same thing. And Brian has a house full of children with nothing to eat already."

"So we go, just like that?" John asked his father unbelievably.

"Aye, son," Joseph answered, "We go, just like that."

John sat nervously beside his father and sister in front of their little cottage. The lad figured this would be the last time in his life he would ever set eyes on this place. The weather had warmed considerably in the past two days, melting the snow cover and bringing a hint of life to the plants. The morning sun warmed his face as he fidgeted with the little bundle of possessions the lad had gathered to take with him.

He was happy that two days advanced notice had allowed him and his family to say their farewells to their deceased loved ones, as well as his uncles. John stood to his feet, taking a long last stroll through the barren barley field that had served them so well. *We should be out here planting spuds right now*, he thought, strolling through the old potato patch, *not leaving our home forever!*

John's heart felt heavy as a stone, weighing him down like a weight around his neck. Eileen soon joined him in the middle of the little field. "We should not be doing this," the lad commented to his sister. "We should leave right now. Ireland is our home!"

A small streak of wetness formed along the lass's ruddy cheek. She looked back at her father sitting beside the door of the cottage. "No we should not," she agreed sadly. "Yet, we have no other options, not and stay together as a family."

"I feel like a part of me has been flung from my chest and hurled away into the four winds," John returned dejectedly. "And that part I may never see again."

Eileen smiled sadly, walking over to hug her brother tenderly. "I feel the same brother," she whispered into his ear. The lass released John and walked slowly through the stone fence into the empty barley field. She pulled four black feathers from her belt and knelt in the center of the plot. Digging a small hole with her fingers, she placed the feathers in the ground and covered them up. Then she returned to John's side. "'Tis done," she replied simply, staring out toward the distant Slieve Bloom mountains.

John heard the sound of horses down the lane. He looked over to see a column of soldiers coming their way, led by a man in a fine black cape. The lad took his sister by the hand and walked slowly to their father's side.

Several Dragoons followed the agent into the yard, while the rest of the platoon waited on the roadway. A small open wagon followed the soldiers, stopping at the opening in the fence.

The black clad agent quickly dismounted his steed and strode rigidly to stand in front of Joseph. "'Sir," he stated loudly, pulling a writ out of a small pouch at his belt. "You are hereby given notice by the Honorable Lord Winfrey of Staffordshire to vacate these premises at once, unless the sum of one pound, ten shillings be remitted to this agent immediately."

The Englishman waited for a moment with no response from the Irishman. "In that case, sir, I exercise my legal right to reclaim this property for his Honor and demand you leave these

premises.”

The family stood wordlessly, watching the animated man present his formalities. John clenched and unclenched his fists over and over again, trying to control the fire that boiled in his chest. Maybe he should have listened to Tim after all; maybe he could have fought to preserve his family and his people's way of life. Maybe they could have ended this evasive, totalitarian English imperialism in his country. Maybe, but it was all moot now. The lad drew a long, slow breath and closed his eyes at the monotonous droning of the bastard in front of him.

“You are instructed,” the stiff agent continued arrogantly, “to board the transportation provided here for you and proceed to the wharf in Galway Harbor. There, you will board a ship by the name of the Cushla Machree, bound for New York Harbor in America. The sum of three pounds will await you with an agent on the docks in New York. That agent will meet your ship and call the names of the persons he is to pay. Any money not claimed on the day of arrival will be forfeit.” the man dropped the parchment in front of him. “Do you understand these instructions?”

Joseph sadly nodded his acknowledgment. Two soldiers quickly dismounted and roughly led the family to the wagon. Joseph and John helped Eileen into the rear of the small cart and followed her aboard. As soon as they all sat down, the driver snapped his whip and turned the wagon around toward the village.

John watched as the two dismounted soldiers returned to their horses, lit several torches and tossed them onto the thatched roof of their home. Flames erupted as the dry straw caught fire, sending a growing white column of smoke into the broken clouds. Tears filled his eyes and he wept openly. Eileen burst into loud sobs, burying her face into her hands. Joseph sat stone still as he watched his lifelong home go up in flames.

The little wagon creaked down the rough road, followed by a line of soldiers. Smoke boiled into the sky in the distance as they drew farther from the cottage. John cried until he had

nothing left to give. Eventually, Eileen quieted, laying her head softly on her brother's shoulder. She took her father's rough hand into her own and squeezed it tightly. Joseph just sat silently watching the diminishing column of smoke as the fresh wind currents carried it swiftly away from them.

They skirted the village, crossing the Grand Canal just to the west of town. Most of the soldiers dropped off, leaving only four trailing the cart. From that point, the driver took the main road to Athlone, and then intersected with the direct road to Galway City. John had never been so far in his life. Twice he had gotten to Birr, a few miles away from his home. However, now he was on his way to Galway, and beyond.

There was an underlying sense of adventure in this journey. If he knew he would return home afterward, he would actually be looking forward to the trip. Every mile was a new sight, alleviating a small portion of the sadness crowding his heart. After all, this was still his country. He could be satisfied here. The hills were still green and the meadows fertile. Sweet smells of early spring filled his nostrils. Early lambs bounced in the meadows and birds sang overhead.

For hours, the group bounced down the rutted dirt lanes. John's back was sore with travel and his legs had become numb. A headache was slowly developing from his stiff neck. Looking over at Eileen, she looked to be suffering about the same fate as himself.

The lad, however, was really beginning to worry about his father. The man had sat silently and relatively motionless throughout the whole day. He had refused the biscuits offered by the driver and the potato offered by Eileen. He seemed to respond to nothing.

It was late afternoon when they group creaked into Ballinasloe. They changed wagon drivers and allowed the family a few minutes to stand and stretch their legs and backs. A new contingent of soldiers also took over behind the group. Soon, however, they were reboarding the cart and leaving for the final leg of their journey to Galway.

John shifted positions for a while, moving to the rear of the cart and allowing his legs to

dangle off the end. Eileen soon joined him. Conversation was at a minimum for the entire trip.

No one was in much of a mood for chatter.

Darkness crept upon the group. Fortunately, the weather had favored them all day. The sun had shone more than not and the breeze stayed relatively warm and calm. Yet, as evening approached, a fresh, chilly breeze began to blow. Eileen shivered, snuggling tightly against her brother. She looked into the sky, pointing out the bright North Star at their side. The half moon was already high above the horizon.

Eileen lay back onto the rough floor of the wagon, the small bundle of her personal belongings under her head as a pillow. She closed her eyes to the moonlight and rolled into a tight ball. John yawned and soon joined his sister, snuggling tightly against her with his arm over the lass for warmth. The lad quickly fell into a light slumber.

A sudden change of sound from the cart's wheels woke the lad with a start. He sat up in the back of the wagon and looked around at the large city surrounding them. Smooth cobblestone streets had replaced the dirt path, rumbling under the stiff wheels of the cart and vibrating John to his bones. He did not know how Eileen still slept.

After several minutes, he shook his sister to wake her. "Eileen, he whispered in her ear. 'Tis Galway, Eileen. The city is huge!" He sat up looking around once again.

Eileen stirred and sat up, rubbing her eyes. She looked around at the gas lamps on the street corners. Pockets of people stood silently on the streets under the yellowish light of the lamps. The people here looked no better off than where they had just come from. Everyone John could see looked half starved, their emaciated faces appearing ghostly under the dim light. Men, women and children huddled tightly together against the cold sea air.

The siblings stared at the people as they stared back. "So many people," she gasped, catching sight of a young mother, crying as she rocked a newborn baby in her arms.

The heretofore silent wagon driver laughed. "You think this is lots of people," he commented in a thick Munster accent, "wait 'til you'se gets to New York! This is but a wee village compared to that din of iniquity."

John turned to look at the back of the man's head in surprise. He thought an Englishman would be driving their wagon, not a fellow countryman. "Have you been to New York, then?" he asked the man in wonder.

"Aye, lad," the driver answered quietly. "'Twas there but last year. Lost me home and family down in Mallow, I did. Got evicted from the farm me family had worked for a thousand years. Landlord sent me off to America, to New York, and I worked me way back home. I tells you, you'se ain't seen nothing." He turned to take a quick peek at the family. "You'se knows I am not supposed to be talking to you." he added quickly. "I will lose me job and the only way I have got to provide food for me family."

John sat again in silence, the city sliding by like a blur of light. "How much further...to the ship, I mean."

"'Tis just ahead," the man responded quietly. "If you look closely, you'se can see the moon reflecting on the ocean."

Eileen turned to look down the low hill in front of them. Soft sparkles of light danced in the distance. "I have never seen the ocean," she said quietly.

"Well, lass," the driver offered, "You are about to get your fill of it, you are." He then again grew quiet and offered no more conversation, afraid for his livelihood.

The wagon soon rolled onto the wooden docks. The sharp clip-clap of the horse's hooves on the cobblestone way changed to a dull thud on the thick raised wooden platform. The masts of numerous vessels dotted the harbor, glistening dimly in the moonlight. A hazy fog began to

blow in off the ocean, obstructing a good deal of John's view of his surroundings.

The smell of salt air stung the lad's nostrils. He had never smelled anything of the sort before. And the rhythmic sound of the tidal surge rolling against the beach dominated the night, a methodic drone of unseen power. He wanted to see everything. Yet, most everything was lost in the deepening fog layer. Looking over at Eileen, he smiled. His sense of adventure was now kindled. Even the driver had given him hope that maybe he could work his family's way back home after all.

The small wagon pulled to a stop in front of the Harbor Master's Office. A rugged looking older man with a full graying beard walked out to the side of the cart. One of the Dragoons approached, handing a piece of paper to the fellow. He squinted in the darkness, turning the paper to catch what little light spilled from his office window.

"The Cushla Machree?" he questioned, eyeing Eileen lustfully. "'Tis there, at the end of the quay," he pointed down a long pier behind him, never taking his gaze off the lass.

Eileen shifted uncomfortably and looked disgustedly away. She drew close to John and shivered at the combination of chilled sea air and sickening gaze. John put his arm around his sister's shoulders and glared back maliciously at the old seafarer. Joseph just sat silently, staring into the mist that was quickly overtaking the town.

The wagon started off again with a jolt, moving slowly to the end of the quay where their ship was docked. "Here we are," the driver informed them, "end of the line."

The family members slid one by one out of the rear of the cart. John exited first and helped his sister to the ground. Joseph followed slowly, his eyes absent of focus. The cart pulled away, leaving the family alone with the soldiers. John was confused, unsure of where to go or what to do.

"Move on to the boat," the Dragoon in charge directed blandly. "Tell the purser your name and they will assign a bunk for you." His instructions and duties complete, the Dragoon

led his platoon away, leaving the group in the dim, foggy moonlight.

John's body ached with fatigue. The twenty yards it would take to reach the side of the ship looked like miles to his tired eyes. He looked at his father and Eileen, then back at the distant boat. "Shall we go now?" he asked exhaustedly.

Joseph looked emptily into his son's eyes. "You two go on ahead," he instructed, "I will be along directly."

John and Eileen looked at each other. The lad shrugged and turned down the quay, followed closely by his sister. The lass turned to see her father standing idly in the same spot, looking toward the city. "We will be on the ship," she called back to her father, receiving no reply.

The waves of fog rolled in swiftly, obliterating the moonlight as they approached the tall ship. All three masts of the vessel disappeared into the low clouds, looking as if they had been cut off just a few feet above the smooth wooden deck. Approaching the long gangplank, they could see no one else on board. A small light shone through a tiny porthole cut into one of the rear cabins.

"Hallo!" John called, standing chilled at the base of the walkway. "Anybody up there?" He looked curiously up onto the deck of the large wooden vessel. "Hallo," he called once again.

Eileen stood tightly against his back, shivering in the light, damp breeze. The sound of waves lapping against the pilings was the only noise the siblings could hear. The lass looked back toward the end of the quay to check on her father. However, the thick fog now completely obliterated her view.

The boat creaked and rocked slightly on an incoming surge. John gripped his sister's arm and carefully climbed the slowly rocking gangplank toward the empty ship. "Hallo," the lad called again, halfway onboard.

A thin fellow sauntered out of the dimly lit cabin, picking his teeth with a stick. "Oh, I

thought I heard someone,” he replied crustily. “Come aboard. What is your names?” The man’s accent was different than any John had ever heard.

John led Eileen aboard the vessel. The slight movements of the deck below his feet made him feel uneasy. He grasped for the railing on the side of the boat as an unusually high wave lifted the deck higher than usual. The boat groaned as she settled back in place.

The seaman saw the lad’s uneasiness and smirked. “You will get used to it, boy.” he laughed.

John looked over at his sister who looked almost as uncomfortable as he was. The largest boats he had ever seen were the narrow barges that cruised the inland canals, transporting supplies to his village. And the canals did not ever really have waves to rock the crafts.

“Come to the office,” the fellow directed, his raspy voice almost as hoary as the rest of him. He limped his way toward the open office door, waving impatiently back at the siblings.

Eileen and John followed shakily as the deck continued to rock slightly. The brightness of the oil lamp in the tiny cabin dazzled the lad’s eyes. He squinted against the unexpected brightness. John grasped at the doorpost as he entered the cramped cabin. Eileen held him tightly around the waist, struggling to keep her feet.

“What is the names,” the old fellow repeated, sitting behind a tiny desk that was pushed against the outside wall of the room.

“I am John and this is my sister, Eileen,” John offered.

The seaman looked up at the pair contemptuously, “Last name,” he demanded.

“Oh, Walsh,” the lad corrected, moving unsteadily to the side of the desk.

The sailor scanned through the lines of a tattered, hand-entered book. He picked up a quill and tapped his forehead nervously with the feathered end. “Ah, there you are,” he remarked, placing a dark tick mark beside each of the names. “And who is this Joseph? He with you?” he asked gruffly.

“Aye, ‘tis our father,” Eileen answered, looking over John’s shoulder. “He will be here soon. He is just running a wee bit slow, I am afraid.”

The fellow placed another check mark next to their father’s name. “I will show you to the hold and you can pick yourself a bunk. Not many people onboard yet, so you should have no problem, even in the dark.” He stood and directed the siblings out of the cabin door. “I will send your pa down whenever he comes aboard.”

The old seaman walked across the deck toward a small, low roof in the center of the ship. John and Eileen followed, swaggering with the moving deck. Opening a low, narrow door, the sailor pointed down a dark stairway.

John led the way, grasping the handrails on each side of the stair tightly and allowing his eyes to adjust to the near total darkness. A faint stale odor permeated the air, growing smellier as he descended. Eileen took a tight grip of the back of his shirt and followed her brother closely. Slowly they entered the dark belly of the ship.

The lad almost tripped as he reached the bottom of the stair, expecting to find another step where there was a flat floor instead. He found a narrow aisle of bunks at either hand, hardly wide enough to walk through. Feeling his way through, it seemed all the beds closest to the stairway were unoccupied. They would do, at least for the one night. In the morning he could investigate in the light and see if there were better options available.

John took Eileen’s hand and placed it on a bunk at about his knee level. “Here is a good one,” he whispered in her ear. “I will be just above you.” The lass agreed and slipped into her spot. John’s chosen bed was at waist level to him, not allowing much room between the racks. He climbed onto the hard, thin mattress and covered himself with a threadbare blanket he found folded up at the foot of the bed. His body ached as he laid down in the narrow bunk. The bed was not much wider than his shoulders with an empty aisle on each side. A low wooden railing ran the length of both sides of the bunk, extending a couple of inches above the top of the

mattress. A hard, thin pillow propped up the lad's head.

The thick, sickening odor seemed to permeate everything, making it difficult for John to relax. However, after rolling over a few times, the lad finally found a reasonably comfortable position. The slight rolling of the vessel, though not good for walking, soon lulled John into semi consciousness.

"Good night to you, brother," Eileen whispered, sounding like a Silkie from dreamland.

"Sleep well," he returned, struggling to listen for his father's arrival. Complete exhaustion soon overcame everything and John fell fast asleep.

Joseph stared blankly through the deepening fog as the lights of Galway Town blinked hazily between the breaks in the mist. He just could not force himself to turn toward the ship where his two children had just boarded. It was like an invisible magnet that pulled the Irishman back toward shore, tightening its grip the farther west he traveled.

His legs were numb. His brain was numb. The fleeting thoughts that spun through his head were gone as quickly as they came. *What do I do now?* He questioned himself but didn't have the resources to answer his own question.

Absently, he took a step forward toward the town. Then slowly he took a second step. It was as if his body was acting of its own accord. His mind was not directing his legs, they just seemed to move of their own volition, placing one foot slowly in front of the other. He could hear the voices of Dragoons, huddled together somewhere nearby in the fog. A round of loud laughter turned Joseph's head slightly. He plodded slowly along the quay, his body following wherever his feet might lead. Somehow, the soldiers seemed of no particular concern.

Like a wraith in the night, Joseph floated by the troop of Dragoons, oblivious to anything

but the fog that cuddled him. His footsteps changed pitch as he stepped from the wooden pier onto the cobblestone street that ran up the hill into the dense fog covering the town. Several shadowy figures gathered in front of a small building on the waterfront. Joseph plodded past, aimlessly wandering up the hill away from the port. Two dark men approached him from their position under a lamppost. Their shadowy figures seemed ghostly in the swirling fog as they paced his slow stride just a few steps behind.

A third man approached rapidly from his left side. The cobwebs in Joseph's brain seemed to shake loose enough to realize the danger that could be developing around him. He darted his gaze toward the men that followed him then quickly spun his attention back to the figure approaching his side. His step quickened. He saw a light in an open doorway just ahead on his right. *Had someone discovered his absence from the ship*, he wondered?

Suddenly, the figure on his left reached out, grasped the startled man by the right upper arm and pulled him close. "You are in danger here, brother," the man whispered, pointing toward the lit, open doorway. Joseph squinted into the darkness trying to get a look at the man's face. He seemed alright. He then stole a look behind him to see the other two men peeling off and returning toward the direction from where they had come, dissolving swiftly into the fog.

Silently, the man with a hold on his arm guided Joseph into the candlelit building. Entering through the narrow doorway, the nervous Irishman scanned the room. There were several men gathered around a few small, low tables, conversing and drinking pints of dark beer. No one turned to see who had just entered the pub. No one seemed to care.

The stranger seated Joseph at one of the small tables in the rear corner of the room and slyly extinguished the candle at its center. He looked up at the bewildered Irishman through the gloom with a wry smile. "Ciaran is my name," he offered his hand. "If I am not hallucinating, you are one of the party that was just set off on the quay."

Joseph nodded his head affirmatively, taking Ciaran's hand with a brief shake. "Aye," he

responded quietly. "I am Joseph."

"Pleasure," Ciaran continued. "I don't know how you managed to get past that rabble guarding the dock, but it is very good that you were not discovered. I dare say there are more than one set of Irish bones beneath the waves there."

A slow chill rose up Joseph's spine. Thank God for the fog, he thought and crossed himself as unnoticeably as possible. "We were recently evicted from our family's home. For hundreds of years we lived and grew our crops on those acres and now it belongs to the English." His head dropped to his chest, still in shock of his forced journey.

"Aye, brother," the man whispered empathetically. "'Tis the same for many around here. Who else was with you on the wagon when you arrived?"

"'Twas me son and daughter. The only things I have left in this world," Joseph replied, his head still hanging in despair.

The barkeep limped across the floor toward them and set two pints of stout on the table before the two men. Ciaran nodded up at the barman as he turned away.

Joseph quickly looked up at his new partner, his jaw dropping slightly open. "I am sorry, sir, but I cannot pay for this. I gave me only money to me daughter and now me purse is empty."

Ciaran smiled slightly. "No need for payment, brother. I can recognize a friend in need. I have no one else to share my earnings with. Now drink up and let us discuss what we shall do about your situation."

Looking into the glass of inky black beer, Joseph didn't know how to respond. "Thank you very much, sir," he finally stammered. "I don't know how I could ever repay you."

"I told you, brother, there is no need for repayment." Ciaran smiled across the table.

Joseph took a long drink of the ebony liquid and sat the glass back on the table. "Thank you very much. 'Tis an uncommon thing in these times."

"Now tell me, brother, how are we going to get your children off that ship by tomorrow

morning?"

"I, uhh, I don't think that to be a wise action, sir. This country is no longer a good place for a fine young man or woman to be bringing up a family. Irish anyway. This is no place for either of them to live. The English have destroyed us." Joseph took another drink of beer. "As for me, all I ever knew is here. Me da' and mother is buried in a churchyard in Tullamore town. Me wife is buried but a few feet away. And James, oh young sweet James, me youngest son is in the ground at his beautiful mother's side.

Me middle son, Peter, he is somewhere in this wide world. The last I saw his face was on a prison barge on his way to Botany Bay. I cannot leave this county, I know nothing else. And I never got the chance to tell me beautiful wife goodbye. I cannot leave." Joseph's chin dropped to his chest once again.

"Oh lad, the English have done you grievous wrong." Ciaran slowly shook his head from side to side. "They have to pay for their wrongdoing. What of your son that was sent to Australia? What was his crime? If it is not too personal that is."

"Crime?" Joseph's head popped up, his face suddenly hard and his eyes smoldered in the dim light. "'Twas a crime against me son! All he was doing was protecting his family and home against invaders to our land!" His voice raised above the whispers of those around him.

Ciaran motioned for him to lower his voice, looking quickly around to make sure they had not attracted too much attention. "Brother, you must keep those thoughts at a whisper in these times. But please tell me more."

Joseph drained his glass and leaned heavily on his elbows. "My Peter," he continued, "he joined a group of lads calling themselves 'Young Irelanders' or some such. See, he had overheard three Agents threatening to evict us from our land. So, Peter and these other lads went into Tullamore town and attacked the Agents, killing them all."

Ciaran motioned for two more stouts and leaned heavily on the small wooden table to get

closer to Joseph. His eyes burned with a sudden passion, reading his new comrade's face as if a gambler, playing for the prize of his life. The bartender deposited the second beer on the table and spun away as quickly as he had come. "A man with the agonies you have lived deserves another beer. This group, 'The Young Irishmen', I know them. What do you think of them?"

Joseph took another deep draught of his stout. His brow furrowed as he slipped into deep thought about that question. "A week ago, I would have said they were a bunch of hooligans that deserved to be rounded up and shipped across the sea, never to be seen again. But, I have had too much time for thinking lately. Now if I met one, I would shake his hand. Freedom fighters they are. How else will we rid our land of this scourge of invaders who have all but destroyed us as a people?" His eyes suddenly erupted from a smolder to a din of fire.

Reaching across the table, Ciaran extended his hand to the man. "Aye brother, how else to rid our land of this pox?" He grasped Joseph's hand, shaking it briskly. "You know I hear they are gathering an army. Going to rid our home of this scourge," he seethed through his teeth. "We have been oppressed far too long."

"Aye to that!" Joseph whispered gruffly, lifting his glass and tipping it slightly toward Ciaran. "Me son, a soldier. I suppose that could make things a wee bit more palatable." He took another drink of the black brew.

"You know, brother, an army needs leaders. Most soldiers are fine young men, but young they are," Ciaran tested. "A man of grand character and wisdom, especially one with a love of our homeland would be invaluable to a new army. I mean, brother, someone similar to you would be welcomed into a resistance with open arms and pocketbooks."

Joseph narrowed his gaze on his new friend. He cleared his throat slightly and shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "What do you mean a man such as myself? I have never done any soldiering. And I don't know that I would be willing to take a step such as that."

"Think about it, lad, just such a father figure as himself would bring discipline and

direction to a group of rowdy lads,” Ciaran responded, taking a sip of his beer. He tipped his glass to Joseph. “Slainte,” he toasted.

“So you say you know of this group that is forming this army. Just how well do you know them?” Joseph inquired, leaning back into his chair. He stared into the eyes of Ciaran, a slight scowl on his face.

Ciaran began to respond but stopped before a sound could escape his lips. He shifted and looked back into Joseph’s eyes and cleared his throat. “Listen, brother, I will not fool you any longer. I am a Young Irishman, myself, charged with recruiting for the Galway area. I have begun to put together a fine group of lads, willing to give up their lives to free their families from the hold of the tyrants that are destroying Ireland. Now, I need a leader who can help me turn these farm lads into soldiers.”

Joseph surprised himself by leaning back toward his companion. He had to admit that under the circumstances his curiosity was piqued. After all, he didn’t know where he was going to go or what he could possibly do just to eat. “And what was it that made you choose me?”

“I saw you delivered to the docks, obviously recently evicted from your home. I watch many new arrivals. Mostly just to see if there is anyone I know personally.” Ciaran took another long drink of stout. “When you didn’t follow your children onboard the ship, then showed up alone in town, somehow getting past the guards, I knew you were someone I wanted to help me. That takes fortitude, brother, and a love and commitment to our country to leave your own children that way.”

Joseph hadn’t thought about his departure in that way. “I . . . I just wandered away. I could not leave me home. John and Eileen are old enough to care for themselves, I would just be in the way with them. They are probably better off with new lives in America. I am too old to cross the ocean on a ship. But, I just don’t know how I could be of help to an army.”

Ciaran smiled a warm smile at Joseph. “What you did this evening was courage, brother.

If you teach that to our recruits, they will be twice the men they are today.”

Joseph stared off into the gloom of the room. His mind spun with difficult options. He waited for Ciaran to say more, but the lad sat silently watching his elder. He picked up and drained his glass, beginning to feel the warmth of the alcohol coursing through his veins. Taking a deep breath, the Irishman sat his glass silently onto the table. “I would have never imagined myself a soldier in any form. I am a farmer, born to a farmer, in a family that farmed the same land for a thousand years. I love Ireland. I now know what me son must have felt and why he was willing to chance his own life for our land.

“You know I have no way to even feed myself,” Joseph continued. “I sit here a broken man. I have nothing, thanks to the English dogs who stole our home. But you must know, I will not take from me own countrymen.” He glowered at Ciaran, who smiled softly back at him.

“No need for that, brother. Many of your countrymen, and mine, have donated to our cause. A true soldier must not be concerned with the fundamentals of life. We have a compound in the mountains of Connemara. We would be honored to have you there with us. You can then avenge the stealing of your children and your home.”

“I don’t need vengeance,” Joseph snapped back quietly. “I need food and a place to lay me head at night. I need the ability to speak to me wife at her graveside. I need to see these foreign invaders repelled from Ireland. Those things I need. I leave the vengeance up to God.”

“Well said brother,” Ciaran responded with a twinkle in his eyes. He motioned for another beer. Food and shelter we can provide. I don’t think that a few trips to Tullamore town is out of the question. And I pray to God that we will evict the foreign dogs from our shores! Can we count you among us then brother?”

The barkeep sat two more pints of ebony gold on the table. Joseph retrieved his glass and took a deep drink. “Aye, lad, I shall join your cause. God help me. I will do whatever I can to see our country free once more.”

Ciaran picked up his glass and touched it to Joseph's. "Éireann go bráth!" he saluted.

"Éireann go bráth!" Joseph responded in a whisper.

Chapter 13

John awoke with a start, completely confused as to where he was. He sat up quickly, banging his head harshly into the bottom of the low bunk above him. Dropping heavily back onto his mattress, the lad began to regain his bearings and remember the details of the day before.

The dim light in the room suggested early morning had broken. He looked slowly around the gloom to try and see the details of where he was. Low voices came from the far end of the room. At least he knew they were not alone.

Looking over the edge of his bunk, John saw Eileen still sleeping soundly. He did not want to disturb her, fearing she might be still exhausted from the day's journey before. Quickly scanning all the nearby beds that he could see, there was no sign of his father anywhere. *Maybe he had found a spot farther back into the room,* John surmised.

The lad decided to pause his search until later and slipped quietly out of his bunk and up

the narrow stair to the deck. The sun shone brightly, already rising high above the horizon. John squinted his eyes against the sudden brightness as he reached the top step of the stair. He shielded his sight with his hand, spotting a few people milling about the deck or cooking their breakfast on one of the open fire pits that were spotted around the cluttered deck of the ship. The smell of the cooking food made the lad's stomach growl loudly.

John stepped fully out onto the deck. Suddenly it occurred to him that he had not even noticed the ship's movement this morning. He took a broad sweeping view of his surroundings. A large grin grew on the lad's face as he turned and spotted the mouth of the bay that led to the open ocean.

“‘Tis gorgeous!” he said aloud, looking out across the dark blue water that continued all the way to the horizon. John scurried to the side railing of the ship, leaning heavily against the thick wooden handrail. He stared out at the ocean with his mouth ajar.

Flocks of large white gulls twisted and turned through the air over his head, darting to and fro on the wind in ways he had never before witnessed. The birds screeched as they plunged head first into the choppy water. Two huge white swans swam amongst the multitudinous other birds of all sorts. Most of the creatures the lad had never before seen.

John took a long deep breath of the salt laden air, closing his eyes to the brightness of the morning sun. The constant cool breeze blew stiffly through his shaggy brown hair, whipping it across his forehead and into his eyes. Running his fingers through those oily locks, he cleared his vision for more exploration.

Several fishing boats were sailing through the busy harbor. The small, single masted vessels slipped quickly and quietly through the choppy waves toward the mouth of the bay. John's heart thumped rapidly with excitement. He gripped the railing until his knuckles turned white. Even the memory of his hunger had diminished. *The ocean, he thought, what a brilliant place!*

“First time to see the sea, lad?” a man’s voice behind him asked kindly.

John turned to face a middle aged Irishman, made gaunt and thin by poor nutrition. His sunken eyes still held the cheer of his youth, though he had obviously known recent hunger.

“Aye, sir,” the lad replied with a smile. “‘Tis such a grand thing! I never thought I would see the ocean, though I have read about it many times.”

The fellow smiled warmly, closing his eyes and deeply drinking in the sea air. “I grew up not far from here, visiting the sea many times. I have never overcome my awe of her wondrous power.” He joined John at the railing and scanned the horizon through squinting eyes. “Some folks around these parts still pay honor to Mananann MacLir. He is the King of the Sea, you know. Some say they have even caught sight of him walking the strand late at night, under the moonlight, when the mist rolls thickly over the sand.” He chuckled, “Do not go in for those fairy folk myself. But I say, people should be allowed to see what they want to see.”

John liked this fellow. He could be a good companion on their journey. He was sure Eileen would be fascinated, as well. “I am John,” the lad responded, holding out his hand. “John Walsh. I am here from Tullamore Town. We just got sent off our farm and put on this boat to America.”

The older man’s gleaming eyes seemed to lose a little luster. “Aye, too much of such things happening as late,” he replied with a sigh. He took John’s hand, shaking it firmly. “Paddy, Paddy O’Sullivan is me name. My wife, daughter, and two sons are here from Ennistimon, down in County Clare. We too are evicted from our family’s farm. We have been on the same patch of land for hundreds of years.” He shifted his weight against the railing. “And you, lad? You here alone?”

“No, sir,” John answered, looking back out over the ocean, still intrigued. “My sister is asleep in the room below, as I suppose is my father. Eileen and me, we left him on the dock late last night when we came onboard.” The lad took another deep draught of fragrant air into his

lungs. His stomach growled angrily at its neglect, prompting John's action. "Where do we get food?" he asked Paddy simply.

Paddy smiled warmly once again. "Come, lad, let us put a mouthful or two in that empty belly!" He put a friendly arm over the lad's shoulder. Pointing toward the rear of the ship, he directed John to the ship's pantry.

Another grizzled looking, but younger, sailor sat on a small stool. The tar leaned heavily against a high cupboard running along the sidewall of the small, tightly packed room. He peered wordlessly up at the two men as they stopped at the opening.

"My friend, here would like his rations," Paddy announced happily, patting John roughly on the back.

The grizzled fellow slowly got to his feet and opened another frayed, leather bound register. "Name," he croaked, turning to the correct page.

"John, John Walsh."

The sailor checked a column in his book and closed it with a snap. Turning on his heel, he stepped quickly to the high shelf and gathered several items.

John scanned the walls of the small, tightly packed cabin. Huge bags of meal leaned heavily against the far walls with much smaller bags packed neatly across the high shelves. Half-gallon sized glass crocks lined several more shelves, taking up a great deal of room. The lad's eyes eventually scanned the uppermost shelves, where several tall, dusty bottles of whiskey were stored, secured tightly against the rocking of the vessel.

With his hands full, the seaman returned, handing one of the small bags of meal, three hard crusty biscuits and three palm-sized hunks of jerked meat to John. Again he turned and fetched a crock of water from the neatly stocked shelf. "A day's rations," he informed the lad harshly. "If'n you loses the water crock, you will gets no more water!"

John smiled slightly looking at his food. "What about the whiskey there?" he asked

innocently, nodding upwards toward the top shelves. "Do we get some of that?"

The sailor's eyes narrowed to a scowl. "And what would a young whelp do with such a treasure?" he growled. The tar stared at John for several seconds then finally answered his question. "No, the whiskey is for sale. If'n you has the money, you gets the whiskey." He laughed mockingly at the lad.

John shrugged unconcernedly, knowing there was no money in his pockets. "My sister is here with me, can I get her food as well?" John returned cheerfully, unfazed by the seaman's ridicule.

"No," the tar snapped gruffly, tiring of the persistent pest. "Everyone gets their own food, no excuses, no exceptions!"

Startled at the sharp response, John gawked at the sailor. He then took his own rations and slipped back out onto the deck, followed closely by Paddy. "Not much for hospitality, is he?" the antagonized lad chuckled snidely. John suddenly spotted his sister coming up from below deck. "There is my sister, Eileen," he announced to Paddy.

Eileen sauntered over to the two men, taking a deep breath of damp salty air. A look of amazement came over her face as she looked around the surrounding landscape. She smiled, running over to her brother. "'Tis so beautiful!" she exclaimed joyously, spinning quickly in a circle to see all around her. The lass's blue eyes twinkled brightly in the sun, her thick flaming hair flying freely in the wind.

John smiled dearly at his sister's joy. "Eileen, I would like you to meet Paddy O'Sullivan. He is here like we are, but from County Clare."

"Honored, sir," she presented her hand with a smile.

"What a lovely lass you are!" he commented gaily. "And about the age of my own daughter! You two should get on well."

Eileen looked excited. She never thought of making friends on the journey. Maybe this

would be a pleasant thing after all. New hope began to show in her face. "I would love to meet her," the lass responded. "What is her name?"

"Mary," Paddy returned, "She is helping her mother below. And that is my son, Martin, up there." He pointed to the bow of the ship, where a handsome, dark haired lad of about twenty years of age sat reading a small book.

Eileen's smile grew even brighter. "I would like to meet him as well," she added coyly.

John laughed. "Looks like he has got gumption," he replied with a smile, then added, "My stomach is almost in rebellion. Maybe Paddy here will show you the way to your food, whilst I have my breakfast." He looked hopefully at his new friend.

"Of course I would love to escort a beautiful young lass to breakfast," he offered with a bright smile. "This way Eileen!" He held out his arm for Eileen to take. The two strode merrily to the pantry as John found a seat and began to slowly eat one of his biscuits. *'Tisn't the greatest of meals*, he thought, *but things could certainly be worse.*

"James would have just loved all this," Eileen commented suddenly, a glint of sadness in her eyes. "He just loved boats so."

"Aye, he would have, at that," John agreed, closing his eyes to feel the cool wind on his face. "I do wish himself was here with us to see this."

Eileen sat carefully onto the raised gunwale at the edge of the ship's deck. Slipping her legs on either side of the railing, she slid forward until her feet were hanging loosely over the water. "I do not understand why so many people have had to die," she continued sadly. "God should not do that to us, we are a faithful people."

John tousled his struggling sister's hair. "Look, the sun is starting to set. Look how the

sunlight lays like a blanket over the water.” He smiled sweetly at the lass. “God has his reasons, I am sure. And I know he will take care of all things.”

“So, where do you suppose our Da is?” Eileen questioned her brother, changing the subject slightly. “We have not seen him all day.”

John watched the bottom edge of the sun touch the water on the distant horizon. “Could not say,” he responded, now completely fascinated with the beautiful sight. “Maybe he never came onto the boat.”

“I am mostly sure he did not come onboard with us last night,” the lass answered him worriedly. “But, where could he have gone?” A look of panic was beginning to show in her eyes.

“Oh, he probably went into the city for a while. He will be back before we leave tomorrow.” John tried to calm his sister, sure of his father’s ability to watch out for himself. “If he is not here by the morning, we will go search for him as best we can.”

The sound of footsteps behind them turned both siblings’ heads. Paddy approached happily with his family. They were a handsome group, the men tall, dark haired, and though lean from hunger, of muscular build. The women of the family were very fair of face, shapely, even with their lack of food, and fair-haired. All sported beautiful smiles. Their tediously patched clothing, a witness of long hardship, also spoke of toughness and self-pride.

“John, Eileen,” Paddy called out gaily, “I would like you to meet my family. This is Mary, my daughter, Honor, my wife, and my son Martin.” His voice was proud and happy. “And these are my new friends, John and Eileen Walsh,” he introduced the siblings to his family.

Eileen’s demeanor suddenly changed from near panic to curious. She then began to eye Martin delightedly, her gaze smilingly returned by the handsome lad. Mary also quickly stole John’s attention, but being probably a year or two younger than his sister, he was afraid to let the fact be known. They all greeted one another happily and turned to watch the setting of the huge

red sun. The high, scattered clouds suddenly caught fire as the disk slipped farther and farther into the inky blue of the Atlantic Ocean. Golden and orange shafts of light erupted into the darkening sky, making a glorious backdrop for the blazing clouds.

“There is nothing like sunset over the sea,” Mary commented quietly, looking over at John with her bright blue eyes gleaming.

He smiled back at the young lass, taking a deep lung full of chilly ocean air. The seagulls cried on the end of the wharf, seemingly to say goodnight to each other and the daylight. Several small cooking fires were lit around the ship, warming meals for the steadily arriving passengers.

“Tomorrow will be a big day,” Paddy commented with a sigh. “A whole new life lies ahead of us all.”

“Twill be,” John agreed. “I do not know what to expect next. Partially, I feel an adventure on the way, and partially, a deep sadness for leaving the home I love dearly.”

All agreed with the lad. Quietness settled over the group as the sky darkened with the growing evening. Eileen began speaking softly with Martin, their words carried away by the light breeze. John smiled softly towards his sister. She seems to have found a liking for a lad, after all. Martin seemed to be an honorable fellow, and he certainly seemed to be from good stock. John felt happy for her. If only Mary were a few years older, he might have a liking for her as well.

“Look, John,” Mary surprised him, “the evening star.” She pointed to the bright point of light just above the horizon where the sun had just extinguished himself.

John smiled back at the lass once again and nodded his head in agreement. He turned to look across the ship toward the dock. A long line of people was forming at the base of the gangplank. The lad’s hopes of a sparsely occupied ship were being tossed by the wayside. Maybe one of those in line was his father. He would have to keep a closer watch.

The lad pulled his last piece of jerked meat from his belt and bit off a small bite. He

turned back to the railing just as a dark object surfaced next to the boat and barked loudly. The noise startled the lad and he jumped away from the rail.

Paddy and Honor laughed quietly. "Have you never seen a seal, John?" Honor asked playfully.

John moved back to the rail to take another look at the noisy creature. "No," he answered solemnly, "never in me life."

"Well, you have now, me lad," Paddy chuckled. "Unless of course, this happens to be a Silkie!"

The settling lad was aware of the legend of the Silkie, how they were creatures of the sea that could come ashore at night and shed their skins to become beautiful human beings. "Is that the creature a Silkie is from then?" he asked delightedly, taking another look at the playful creature rolling around in the dark water. He wished it were still daylight so he could actually see the animal.

Paddy and Honor smiled at the lad. Paddy yawned largely and stretched. Taking his leave, he followed Honor to the stairwell leading to the bunks. Eileen and Martin had wandered quietly down the railing, still chatting and laughing softly.

"I guess just you and I are left here," Mary toyed happily. She smiled warmly at the lad and moved a couple of steps closer.

John smiled back at Mary as he shifted his weight to rest his forearms heavily against the wooden railing. The chill in the air sent a slight shiver up his spine. He watched the water intently as the seal swam noisily away.

"Where did you come from, John?" Mary asked sweetly.

"Tullamore Village," he answered, not turning his attention from the dark water. "'Tis in the midlands."

"But, still beyond the pale," she commented with a smile. "Just like us."

John really wanted to like this lass, why could she not be just a wee bit older? “So you have lived close to the sea, have you?” he tried making small talk.

“Not far from,” the pretty lass replied. “‘Twas born and lived there all me life. Until now, of course.” She shivered noticeably and moved against John. “I am so cold,” she whined.

John put his arm uncomfortably around her shoulder. He looked blankly out to sea, wondering what the following day was going to bring. “You know,” he started, “When we first got on this boat I could hardly walk. With the deck moving up and down and all.” He chuckled silently to himself. “Now I do not even notice the boat moving.”

Mary chuckled lightly, “I was the same way,” she said, “Now I only slightly notice the movement as well.” She snuggled a little tighter against the lad, shivering.

“It is getting pretty cold out here now,” John confessed. “Maybe we should go down to our bunks. I would hate for you to catch your death out here the first night we meet.”

“‘Tis very noble of you, to watch after me so,” she smiled. “I hope I will see you on the morrow.”

“I hope so too,” John replied, slightly embarrassed. “Good night to you, then.”

“Good night, John,” Mary returned quietly as she turned and walked swiftly away.

Halfway to the stair, she turned and smiled over her shoulder to John.

John watched the sweet lass all the way to the stairwell. Eileen and Martin chatted beside one of the cooking pits, warming themselves on the fanning flames. The lad strolled around the deck to see if he could catch a glimpse of his missing father. The boat was filling quickly. Many people milled around the deck, as many more were still lined up at the base of the gangway.

Most everyone, men, women and children, young and old alike were not much more than skin and bone. Many seemed sickly, coughing heavily in the damp ocean air. Pallid faces and dim eyes were abundant, many seeming to have very little will to live. The majority of the passengers wore tattered rags, hardly covering essential body parts. Several of the children,

especially those that traveled with the most downtrodden adults, were practically naked in the cold night air.

The adventurous spirit that had begun to flow through John's veins was beginning to turn once again into pity and grief over the fate of his countrymen. It looked to him as if some of these people were being sent away to die, rather than burden their landlords with the details of their survival. At least he and his family had remained in relatively good health and were essentially nourished. Some of these unfortunates seemed as if they might not last the night, let alone survive a long voyage across a wide ocean.

The handful of food given to these people from the ships stores was probably the most some had seen in months. Destitute people were beginning to crowd around the cooking pits, with whole families waiting eagerly for a bite of corn meal mash. Several tiny babies cried for want of food, their mother's breasts dried up from lack of nourishment.

A large contingent of soldiers sat astride their mounts at the head of the wharf as more and more people gathered at the gangway for boarding. *Where would all these people sleep?* John wondered. He had not seen that many bunks below. Shuffling quietly through the growing crowd, the lad watched all the faces he could see for his father. However, there was still no sign of the man.

John stopped to warm himself at one of the low cooking fires. The night air had gotten very chill and a thick fog was once again beginning to roll in. The small flames flickered against the mainmast, just to the fore of the small round brazier. He rubbed his hands in the heat and closed his tired eyes to the dying wind.

Feeling the warmth return to his bones, the lad opened his eyes, looking directly into the beautiful green eyes of a lass across the fire. She looked to be similar in age to himself. Sitting cross-legged on the rough deck next to the pit, the lass stared silently up at him. A thin shawl tightly covered her head and shoulders with only her thin, yet pretty, slightly tanned face peering

out. A wisp of dark red hair lay softly across the lass's forehead, framing her deep-set eyes beautifully.

She smiled slightly at John, causing his heart to flutter. "Hi ya'," he greeted nervously, smiling back.

"Dia duit," she replied in a thick Gaelic accent.

The reply rather stunned the lad. He really did not understand what she had said. "Grand evening, isn't it?" he continued shyly.

The lass looked up at him and shrugged, confusion in her lovely eyes. "Níl as béarla agam," she returned quietly, looking away in embarrassment.

Understanding flooded John's face. "Oh," he replied, "You do not speak English! You only speak Irish?"

She looked back at him, still puzzled by his words. Looking away again, she slowly stood to her feet. The lass then turned quickly away from John, lowered her eyes to the dark deck and stepped away from the fire.

"Wait," John called hurriedly after her. The lass turned to look over her shoulder. "I am John." He pointed to himself. "John."

The lass smiled back at him. "Brigid is anam dom," she replied kindly. "Oíche mhaith, a Shean." Brigid walked off into the darkness, disappearing into a group of people.

Now John felt confused. The lad had known several attractive lasses back in his village, but never had he felt the attraction that he did to both of these women. Maybe it was just the sea air or the new surroundings, he did not know. He needed to sleep on it for the night.

He slipped through the crowd that was quickly congregating on deck, and moved toward the stair to the bunkroom below. Maybe he could check the logbook in the morning to see if his father had checked in. If not, he would make a quick survey down the wharf for him.

Slipping down the narrow stairway, he found that a couple of small oil lamps had been lit

in the large room. It was the most light he had ever seen in there. The cabin was larger than he had previously surmised, with numerous rows of beds extending from one side of the wide ship to the other.

John quickly spotted the bunk he had left his belongings on. Eileen was already in the bed below. She lay awake, watching her brother approach. "You have a good evening, brother?" she asked with a smile.

"Lovely," he returned quietly, arriving at the side of his own bed. "And you, sister?"

"Gorgeous!" she replied happily. "Maybe this will be a good trip for us."

"I pray so," John responded hopefully. "I certainly hope so." The lad climbed into his bunk and spread his blanket over himself. *Tomorrow will be a new day, indeed*, he thought, closing his eyes and feeling sleep come quickly over him.

Chapter 14

John awoke as his bunk suddenly lunged from side to side. The movement of the boat startled the lad into consciousness. Eileen's head appeared over the edge of his bunk in the gloom. A quizzical look was painted across her face.

"What is happening," she whispered, concern heavy in her voice.

Other people around them stirred as well, chatting quietly amongst themselves. The sound of feet running to and fro on the deck over their beds, rang loudly through the dim room. The boat creaked and shuddered once again. Loud voices called back and forth outside, muffled beyond comprehension by the thick wooden planks of the deck.

"I do not know," John responded, carefully sitting up and dropping his legs over the edge of the bunk. "But, I intend to go see."

Several youngsters slipped past the siblings and scurried between the narrow rows of bunks, toward the stairway. The small door opened as the leading lad reached the top of the stairs, revealing the dim early morning light. The youngster stuck his head out of the opening

and looked around. "We are leaving!" he announced loudly into the dark cabin. "We are off the dock!" With that, the group disappeared out the door.

"Da?" Eileen questioned immediately, "Is our Da onboard yet?" The look painted across the lass' face was that of a young woman nearing hysteria.

John quickly slipped off his bunk and helped his sister from her own. The siblings sprinted down the aisle and up the stair. John popped through the opening with Eileen closely at his back. The boat was twenty yards off the wharf and turning her bow toward the open sea.

Sailors scurried everywhere. Men were climbing the rigging and running across the beams. John caught his first sight of the Captain of the ship, an older man, standing against the front railing of the quarterdeck. He quietly relayed his orders to the much younger Boatswain at his side. The directions were then in turn barked out to the scampering sailors around the ship by the junior seaman. The two officers choreographed every move of the crew. The Captain's dark blue coat was fringed with bright red cuffs and collar that stood out boldly from the foggy gray sky. His short silver hair shone under the large plumed, double ended hat he wore. The Boatswain contrasted greatly with his superior. The lesser officer wore a simple white shirt and dark blue britches. His shoulder length dark hair was unfettered in the stiff morning breeze.

One sail on the foremast of the ship suddenly unfurled with a flutter. The heavy cloth flapped loudly for a few seconds, and then caught the prevalent offshore breeze. John could feel the slight surge as the sail was carefully trimmed and filled with the gusting wind. The large sailing vessel turned slowly through the wide bay and out toward the open sea.

John and Eileen scurried across the deck toward the port side railing. Both siblings searched the faces of everyone they saw, desperately looking for their father. He must be onboard somewhere. Large tears began to slip down Eileen's reddening cheeks.

Orders continued to be barked by the officers, guiding the crew to pilot the vessel farther away from their moorings. The ship weaved carefully through a slight chop of waves, passing

several smaller fishing boats anchored securely in the safe waters of the harbor. The heavy mist obscured most of the town as they completed their turnabout to starboard and put the wharves to stern. The shoreline on either side of the long bay began to slip slowly by.

“Da?” Eileen suddenly called out loudly across the bustling ship. She paused, looking desperately around the deck. “Joseph Walsh, are you onboard?” The lass cried again.

“I am going to see if I can find our Da,” John offered, himself becoming quite concerned at his father’s absence. “Maybe he came onboard late last night and is still below.”

Eileen seemed to pay little attention to her brother. Her only concern was in finding her missing father. She stepped away from the railing, searching back and forth across the wide deck. “What if himself is not here?” the panicked lass asked, her tears now flowing freely down her cheeks.

“We will find him,” John reassured his sister, unconvincingly. “He could not have just left us here to ourselves! I will search the front of the ship while you look around here.”

The siblings parted, each searching their assigned areas. John quickly headed to the bow of the ship, bounding up the steep steps onto the forecastle. He desperately searched every corner for his missing father. Without success, he returned down the stair to the amidships deck.

“Did you find him?” Eileen questioned quickly upon seeing her brother’s return.

“No, not a sign of him,” John answered truthfully.

“Where is he?” Eileen screamed hopelessly. Her sobs became a wail. The other passengers on deck watched the siblings empathetically.

“I will go check below,” John returned nervously, taking his wailing sister into his arms.

“He is not there, I know it,” Eileen blubbered. “He has left us for certain. What will we do?”

“Our Da would not leave us. Himself must be below. I will go search right now.” John pulled away from his sister, his heart heavy as a stone. Quickly, he trotted to the stair shroud

down to the hold below. The lad almost tumbled head over heels as he rushed down the steep, narrow stair.

Several dim lamps had been lit and most of the passengers had left the bunkroom to witness their departure. The worried lad sped up and down several aisles of bunks, searching for his parent. Winded, he stopped as he once again approached the stairway. "Joseph Walsh," he called out loudly, his voice echoing through the gloomy, cavernous room. There was no reply. "Are you here, Joseph Walsh!"

John's stomach turned tumultuously with the silence. He felt alone and frightened. The day had to come for him to gain his complete independence. Yet, he did not expect the end to come in such dramatic fashion. The lad wiped his moistened eyes and turned toward the stairway. He felt a dark, missing hole deep within his chest. There was nothing else he could do but continue on with life. There were so many more like himself, with families torn apart by this plague, that he dared not even try to comprehend anything beyond himself and Eileen.

As he reached the top of the steps, he found his sister waiting down-heartedly for his return. Her cheeks were streaked with dried tears and her eyes red with weeping. "I knew himself would not be there," Eileen mumbled. She stood to her feet, reached for her brother's hand and directed him to an open spot along the starboard gunwale. Quietly, they watched the dock recede together.

Time seemed endless as the harbor faded slowly into the mist. The fresh breeze blowing from behind them, however, seemed to be a good omen, allowing an easy departure down the narrow bay. Crowds of grieving passengers lined both sides of the siblings, pushing silently against the railings on either side of the ship. Most of the onlookers stared in silence, though some began to weep quietly.

Obviously trying to keep her own raw emotions in check, Eileen pointed out the keep of an ancient castle, standing alone and abandoned at the edge of the foggy shoreline. John smiled

silently at his sister, feeling his own heart growing even heavier as the countryside drifted past.

He put his arm around her waist, pulling the lass tightly against his side. She laid her head heavily on her brother's shoulder, staring across the dark water to the gray-green landscape.

“Good bye, Da,” she whispered, barely audible over the sound of the wind in the rigging.

After a half hour or so, the deck began a slow rise and fall, rolling smoothly on the incoming waves of the approaching ocean. The siblings turned to look across the opposite side of the vessel to watch a pair of small, triangular sailed fishing boats leave a tiny village on the north shore. The little vessels outdistanced their own as they set a full sail out to the open sea.

With the growing light, sea birds began to screech overhead, as well as on the distant shores. The prow of the Cushla Machree cut through the choppy dark water, leaving a wake of foamy turbulence rolling toward the quiet shore. The sound of frothing water soothed John a bit as he watched his homeland slip away. The lad looked over at his sister once again. She stood silently, her arms folded heavily on the railing and her foot propped on the gunwale. A look of apprehension had grown across her sad face. “You know, this will probably be the last time we will ever see our home,” she said quietly, gazing sorrowfully out onto the countryside.

John just nodded his acknowledgment, his heart sinking even more to hear that thought from someone else. Not only his father, but, his beloved homeland was slipping quietly by before his eyes like a vapor on a summer's day. Would he ever see these shores again, he wondered?

The disheartened lad then turned his gaze toward his countrymen who remained solemnly lined along the railing of the ship. Most of their faces were gaunt with sadness. Several women now cried openly, seeing the shoreline slip quickly out of their futures. The men mostly stood in silence, watching their lives change in ways they never before imagined. Almost everyone onboard was leaving family and friends behind to an unknown fate.

Looking past the front of the ship, John could see the growing inlet of the bay, where the

open ocean began. The favorable offshore breeze had begun to propel them rapidly toward their destination. The boat began to rock a little more pronouncedly as they approached the more open waters of the bay's mouth. The fog was beginning to lift somewhat, allowing a much more detailed look of the rocky shoreline.

With the morning's growing warmth, the breeze began to gust even more, increasing the speed of the vessel and tearing apart the fragile cloud layer that covered the landscape. Bright streaks of sunlight began to peek through the parting cloud cover, the rays disappearing as quickly as they appeared. Sailors once again stood anxiously atop the beams and in the rigging. Several more sharp orders from the Boatswain prompted the seamen to ready the sails for the open sea. John shaded his eyes against a sudden shaft of intense brightness, watching the men run the spars.

The ship approached a point where the bay began to narrow, a high promontory of rock marking the closest point of the body of water. Beyond lay three small islands, still shrouded in mist, a ghostly gateway to an unknown land. Except for the bantering of the sailors overhead, the ship was deathly quiet. Not an Irishman on board now spoke, already feeling the loss of a way of life that had been centuries in the making.

Rounding the promontory, the bow of the ship dropped sharply into the trough of a larger wave, sending sea spray across the surface of the suddenly rolling water. John grasped tightly onto the railing, not expecting the sudden change of motion. Exiting the protection of the quiet bay, the bow of the vessel began to rise and fall regularly with the rolling sea.

The Boatswain barked loudly, sending sailors scurrying through the spars to set the sails. With each additional sheet that was unfurled and trimmed, the ship gained speed. Soon they were under full sail, the bow crashing through the choppy surface of the opening ocean with dazzling sprays of white foam.

John held tightly onto the thick railing, his stomach beginning to feel queasy. He looked

over at Eileen. His sister's face was flush and grim. "You all right, sister?" the lad asked, concerned.

"This rocking does me stomach no good," the lass replied haltingly.

Several more passengers up and down the deck began having dry heaves over the side of the railing. Most, however, had not enough food in their bellies to be sick. And good thing, with the condition of their bodies', not one could afford to lose any nourishment whatsoever.

John tried to pay no attention, focusing instead on the high cliffs slipping rapidly behind them. A bright ray of sunshine burst onto the top of a towering sheer white cliff to the port stern of the ship. Even from the vantage of a half-mile out to sea, the wall was spectacular.

An unexpected hand on John's shoulder startled the lad. He turned quickly to look into the pale face of Paddy O'Sullivan. The fellow struggled to the railing between John and Eileen. Grasping tightly onto her father's arm, Mary followed the man, landing awkwardly at the handrail on the opposite side of John. The young lass looked up at John smiling sadly. At least she did not seem to be bothered by the movement of the ship.

"Morning," Mary greeted quietly, smiling softly once again. She looked back to the huge white cliffs with deep distress growing on her face.

Paddy stood silently looking toward the shore as well. As the vessel pulled parallel with the limestone wall, he sniffled quietly. "Have you ever seen such a grand sight?" he asked, pointing to the sheer feature. "Those, lad, are the Cliffs of Moher. Our farm was just a mile or so inland from that very spot." Sadness permeated the man's face and voice. He grew quiet once again, gazing longingly toward the shore. "Goodbye," he said quietly after several more minutes of silent contemplation. Paddy dabbed quickly at a small tear running down his cheek.

Eileen looked lovingly at the man and put her arm tenderly around his waist. "'Tis a shame," she commented, "that we are forced from the homes we love so." Tears trickled once again down the lasses face.

Mary erupted into heavy sobs at John's side. He wanted to console the broken lass, but felt afraid. Finally he moved against her side, placing an arm over her shoulder. The young woman turned, wrapping her arms tightly around John, sobbing heavily at his shoulder.

Martin soon joined the group, informing Paddy that Honor had chosen to stay near her bunk for fear of nausea. He slipped quickly to Eileen's side, looking warmly into her face with a tender smile. Together, the young couple bade a sad adieu to their homeland.

The ship made a slow turn, heading sharply away from the coastline. Within an hour, the receding cliffs echoed a last goodbye from Ireland. The sun shone brightly through the broken clouds, promising a fair start to their journey.

Many passengers still lay distressed on the deck of the ship as the shoreline disappeared beyond the watery horizon. John had never thought that the motion of the sea could cause such sickness. And while he was beginning to feel much better himself, his belly was still not ready for food.

Eileen quietly left the group, returning after a few minutes with her brother's water jar. The cool water refreshed him and eased his spirits. Paddy suggested they all retrieve their rations for the day and at least attempt a light meal. John and Eileen readily agreed and together weaved their way across the moving deck toward the storeroom.

Chapter 15

A chilly wind blew through John's dark hair as he stared out across the dizzying blueness that surrounded him. Nothing was visible but dark rolling blue waves rising against the lighter blue of the sky. Small whiffs of high white clouds were the only breaks the lad had seen in this infernal blueness for three days.

The fidgety lad stood silently as far forward of the bow as he could. The late afternoon sun was angling toward evening, generating a deep longing for his hillside perch back home. There was no place to get away from the overwhelming mass of people onboard the ship. Nowhere was silent. No place was solitary. And the damned ups and downs of the vessel could drive a person insane.

The only relative sanctuary John could find was standing as far forward on the ship as possible, looking out over the empty ocean. His mind rattled nervously. How long could it take to sail to America, he wondered? No one had ever answered that question for him.

The lad turned and looked longingly back across the deck of the vessel. He gazed down the steps of the forecastle where he stood, watching the constant activity of the other restless

passengers. Several families were beginning to build cooking fires in the small pits. His stomach was beginning to growl as well, prompting him to leave his post and stroll down the short flight of stairs amidships.

John caught sight of the captain setting up a box of instruments on the quarterdeck. He wished he could get up there to investigate, but the Irish passengers were not allowed up the stairs nor in the private cabins at the rear of the ship. Punishment for the first violation of that rule was to be locked away in the tiny brig in the dark hold of the vessel for two days. The lad did not care to know what the second violation merited.

The captain never came down onto the deck amidships nor did his only two paying passengers; two Englishmen, dressed in gaudy finery. All three stayed either to their cabins or on the quarterdeck, at the raised rear of the vessel. Not even the crew was allowed to associate with the Irish unless absolutely necessary. Any conversation between crew and passenger was intentionally held to a bare minimum.

His curiosity was now thoroughly piqued, however, and John watched intently as the ship's master held up a sextant, checking the readiness of the instrument for later use. His attention completely absorbed in the actions astern, the lad rounded the mainmast and rammed head on into someone else. He snapped around to look into the lean face of a lovely redheaded Irishwoman. He grasped her hand tightly as she reeled backwards from the collision. "Oh, Christ, I am so sorry! Brigid?" he questioned, surprised.

The lass caught her balance and smiled back forgivingly at the lad. "Gabh mo leithscéal," she replied softly, turning slightly red faced. "A Shean?"

John smiled kindly at the blushing lass. "John," he answered slowly.

"John," Brigid stammered, unable to fully pronounce the 'J'. She laughed at her errant attempt at the pronunciation. "A Shean," she repeated again boldly in her own language.

"Do you speak no English?" the lad asked curiously.

“Eng. . .?” Brigid began, her face suddenly losing its beautiful smile. “Níl,” she replied solemnly. “Níl as Béarla agam.”

John felt strange. He was Irish, he should at least have some knowledge of his native tongue! Yet, that right had been stripped from many of his people long ago. However, when the ship arrives in America, this poor lass will probably be lost without speaking any English. Maybe he should teach her. But how would he communicate with her to begin her lessons? Or even know if she wanted to learn?

“Hi ya’, John!” Mary O’Sullivan called brightly from across the deck. “Lovely day isn’t it?” She approached quickly from behind the thick mast. Arriving at John’s side, her bright face dimmed at the sight of Brigid. “Sorry,” she stammered, “I did not know you were entertaining.”

Brigid looked quickly away, again blushing brightly. Her eyes dropping to look silently at her feet, the embarrassed lass took a halting step away.

“No, Brigid, do not go,” John started, still not quite sure how to communicate effectively. “Mary, uh, hallo.” Now the struggling lad did not know where to proceed. “Uh, Mary, this is Brigid. I almost accidentally knocked her over a moment ago. She does not speak English.” John pointed awkwardly at Mary, “Brigid, this is Mary.”

“Dia duit, a Bhrigid,” Mary suddenly responded, much to the lad’s surprise. “Conas tá tú?” The dark haired lass held out a kind hand to her new acquaintance.

“Dia is Máire duit, a Mháire! Tá mé go maith. Agus conas tá tú eile?”

“Tá mé go máith, go raibh maith agat,” Mary replied with a warm smile.

John stood feeling the odd cog. “What did you say?” he questioned curiously.

Mary and Brigid both chuckled. “Just a cordial greeting,” the dark haired lass replied. “Hello, how are you, that kind of thing.”

“Can you teach me a little of that?” John asked, his eyes brightening. “Better late than never, you know.”

“Of course I can,” Mary offered happily, “what little I know myself. I have only learned from neighbors who spoke Irish as a second language. Our family never used the tongue to any extent ourselves.”

“I think we should teach Brigid at least some English as well,” John commented, concern in his voice. “She will have a very difficult time in America only speaking Irish.”

“I think you are right,” Mary replied contemplatively. “I will ask if she wants to learn.”

The two young women conversed briefly in their native tongue as John stood helplessly by. A few old toasts and songs by his father and uncles was all he had ever heard of the language. Mary paused and announced, “She agrees. We will meet her here tomorrow morning to start.”

John felt good in himself. Not only would he be doing something good for someone else, but he would have something to do with his time as well. “Tomorrow then, very well,” he responded with a warm smile directed at Brigid.

“Me stomach is complaining terribly,” John continued, taking his leave of the two lasses. “I must get some food for myself. Good evening, lasses.”

“Oíche mhaith,” Brigid replied happily. “Slán go fóill.”

Mary smiled at the lad. “She said goodnight and she will see you soon.”

John just smiled and turned away with a nod. The lad strolled to the doorway that lead below decks. Opening the portal, he was met with a growing acrid stench. Many of the passengers were sick and disabled, confined to their beds with dire illness. Their excrement and body odors were beginning to foul the air terribly. A lack of proper ventilation also aided in the growing stench. There were no windows to the exterior. The only opening whatsoever was the small entry door to the deck.

The lad took a deep breath and entered the hold. Descending the stairs into the gloom, he hurried to his bunk where he had stashed his provisions and belongings. John quickly grabbed

his bundle of clothing, his food and blanket and scurried back up the stairs to the deck. The weather was sufficiently warm and dry, so he decided to try sleeping on the deck that night to avoid the foul smell.

The setting sun, slowly falling before the starboard bow, painted the surface of the ocean a dark red with his dying light. The wind had even calmed somewhat, diminishing the wind chill effect of the open sea. He found a protected spot between the line of cooking pits forward and the low wall of the forecastle. That should make a nice place to spend the night.

Unwrapping his crusty biscuit and piece of dried meat, the lad settled beside the warmth of the cooking fire. He spotted Eileen across the deck chatting cheerfully with Martin O'Sullivan. He smiled warmly and waved toward the couple. At least there seemed to be some good to this ordeal after all.

John's thoughts turned suddenly toward his father. *Where could he have gotten off to? Hopefully he found his way into Galway City and found a way to care for himself.* Still the lad wished he had gotten the opportunity to say goodbye. He really did miss his Da greatly.

The evening light began to wane as the first stars appeared in the indigo sky. The slight rolling of the ship and the music of the wind in the canvas was beginning to lull the lad into unconsciousness. Several people took a spot around the fire, cooking gruel with their supplies of corn meal and water.

An older fellow who was just settling in across the fire moaned noisily with every movement. His heavily bruised skin looked extremely swollen, especially around his knees, ankles, elbows and wrists. A gray fog seemed to obscure the old fellow's dark, sunken eyes as he put together the simple ingredients for his meal. Numerous open sores showed through his tattered rags as well.

Waiting for his food to cook, the old fellow spotted a wee lass of four or five years staring at him. Motioning her over with a bony, calloused finger, the man unwrapped his

evening biscuit and handed it to the joyous little girl with a smile. She took the offering, running quickly away to share her prize with a toddler brother across the deck. The old man chuckled brightly.

Finishing the preparation of his mash, the old man closed his eyes, mumbled a few words and faithfully made the sign of the cross over his heart. Then, through toothless gums, he drank the thin, tasteless gruel down with gusto. A broad toothless smile spread across the fellow's face when he noticed John staring at him.

John felt suddenly ashamed. He had obviously seen much easier times than many of the other people aboard this vessel. His family had never gone completely without food or shelter. Though death had visited their door, it had not been the prolonged agony of starvation with no hope of filling a belly. Yet, the man before him seemed to have suffered greatly and still had the faith of a Saint.

He leaned heavily back against the forecastle wall and looked longingly into the starry sky. He searched his soul for any faith he could find. But, there was very little left there. *God*, he thought, *what do I do when my faith has been left on a distant shore?* The lad placed his bundle behind his head, wrapped the thin blanket around his shoulders and drifted slowly off to sleep in the warm glow of the firelight.

John awoke, lying on his side with his back against the forecastle wall. The morning sun was rising brightly over the port stern. The lad sat up, rubbing his eyes and stretched his cramped limbs. He suddenly caught sight of Brigid sitting a few feet away watching his every move. A jolt of surprised adrenalin brought him into full consciousness with a start.

“Maidin mhaith,” Brigid greeted pertly with a bright smile.

John rubbed his face, looking questioningly at the lass. "Good Morning," he mumbled.

"G...Morn," she stuttered, trying to imitate John's greeting.

John chuckled involuntarily, creating a frown on the pretty lass. "No, no," he replied, forcing the smile off his face. "'Tis just so bloody early."

"Early," she tried again, able to mouth the word pretty well. She smiled again brightly.

"Yes, early," the lad returned with an exaggerated nod. "I am hungry." He rubbed his stomach and mimicked putting food in his mouth.

"Tá cinnte, agus míse!" Brigid rubbed her thin belly as well, motioning the lad to follow her.

John struggled to his feet on stiff legs, the early sun glinting brightly in his eyes. The slight breeze felt warm on his face. He stretched once again and scanned the horizon around the ship. A dark line of clouds lay heavy on the horizon directly ahead of them. *Maybe 'tis just fog,* he thought absently and followed Brigid to the pantry.

Mary was already waiting, along with a small group of other passengers, for the door of the pantry to open. She smiled warmly as John and Brigid approached. "Nach breá an lá é?" she greeted the pair happily.

"Tá cinnte," Brigid responded with a happy affirmative nod.

John just looked away nodding his head. Mary laughed. "I thought you wanted to learn the language," she chuckled.

"I do," John replied with a smirk, "but, I have to know what you are saying if I am going to learn."

Mary brushed an errant lock of hair out of John's eyes. "I just said, isn't it a fine day today? And Brigid answered, it certainly is. Simple as that." The lass repeated her statement in Irish, then prompted John to try.

Brigid chuckled as the lad stumbled over the words. John looked at the two snickering

young women and burst out laughing at himself. “‘Tis supposed to be Brigid’s time of learning,” he commented with a chuckle. “I will be a learning me own lessons later.”

The sailor in charge of the pantry arrived and wordlessly opened the door. The group pushed in close around the doorway. John’s water jar was almost knocked from his hand, so he grasped it a little more tightly, not wanting to be without water for the rest of the voyage.

A young mother stood in front of John with her five almost naked children. The youngest babe in her arms cried constantly as she waited patiently for her rations. As she reached the front of the line, the sailor eyed the lass suspiciously.

“Are you sure those are all your little whelps?” he questioned the young woman roughly. “I better not see any of them come through here with anyone else! That will be the end of the rations for all of you.”

“But, I am not taking any extra food, sir,” the poor mother pleaded, looking solemnly to the floor. “I am only getting what I need to keep me children’s bellies full.”

The cynical old Tar doled out the family’s food and sent them harshly on their way, spitting belligerently on the floor behind them as they left. John took his rations and left the storeroom as quickly as possible. He passed Eileen on the way out the door.

“Where were you last night?” Eileen asked the lad.

“I slept on deck,” he replied, “‘Twas much too smelly down below.”

The lass chuckled. “I think I might join you tonight,” she replied.

John turned away and headed toward the bow of the ship. The clouds on the horizon were getting darker and closer. The whole western sky was now blue-black with storm clouds climbing high into the heavens. The lad took a drink of his water and bit into his hard, stale biscuit. He hoped there was another food supply on the ship because at this rate their food would be essentially unfit to eat in the weeks ahead.

“Umm, scrumptious,” Mary commented, walking quietly up behind John. She bit into

her biscuit as it crumbled into her hand. "Looks like rain," she continued absently.

"Aye, does," John agreed. "But I hope not. I do not know if I can stand the smell of the cabin downstairs."

"Myself," Mary commented with a wriggle of her nose.

The two watched the clouds get closer as they finished their breakfast. Brigid arrived soon after. She and Mary conversed in Irish for several minutes. John watched the lasses curiously. A look of surprise suddenly crossed Mary's face.

"Brigid says she takes half of her food to her mother below." Mary explained to John in a disgusted voice. "She cannot get out of bed to get her own supplies and the old sailor in the storeroom will not give Brigid her mother's food, so she has to share her own."

John shook his head in disgust. It was unbelievable to make even the infirmed passengers leave their sickbeds to retrieve their own rations. "Maybe we can help," John suggested, a look of ire still in his eyes. "Maybe Brigid just cannot tell the old man what is amiss. We can explain the problem to him and maybe help her get her mother's food." The idea of confronting the cranky old sailor did not sit with him very well at that moment.

"Could be," Mary agreed with a slight smile. She relayed the plan to Brigid in halting Irish. The lass seemed very happy and pleased with the idea.

"We will wait until most everyone else has gotten their own food then we will go get Brigid's mother's supplies." John directed with a smile. He and Brigid smiled warmly to each other. There was a communication between them that went beyond language.

As the line of passengers dwindled, Mary led the way back to the pantry. One by one, the few people still waiting in line for their food received their supplies and left. The eager lass stepped up to the doorway to be greeted by the belligerent sailor.

"All three of you were here earlier," he rumbled. "Off with you, I got other work to do." He started to push the three unquestioningly out the door.

“Wait,” John responded, speaking very quickly to get his say before being shoved out of the cabin. “We are not here for ourselves this time. Our friend Brigid’s mother is downstairs sick and unable to get out of bed. We just want to get her some food.”

The crusty old seaman eyed them hostilely and kept pushing at the small group. “I have heard better stories than that one,” he spat. “Go on now, off with you before I get mad.”

“No it is true,” Mary chimed in. “Brigid does not speak English and she could not tell you before! Now she has to share her own food with her mother, who is starving down below.”

Several more passengers moved up behind the trio waiting for their own supplies. The old sailor’s visage grew even more resolute. “I said away with you!” he hissed once again. “And do not come back here with that cockamamie story again. If’n you do, I will see to it that you get no more food for the rest of the voyage! Go on, get!”

John’s heart burned with loathing. “Listen, come with us and we can show you her mother. Then maybe you will believe us,” he offered, trying desperately to hold his temper.

“I do not need to see nobody,” the seaman spat through clenched teeth. “If’n you cannot get up to get your food, you do not need to have it wasted on you anyway! If I hear one more word from any of you, there will be no more food. That I promise!”

Disappointed and thoroughly ired, John led the little group away. Brigid looked at him, not understanding what was happening. Mary began to explain to the confused lass as best she could in broken Irish. A look of shock and dismay crossed her face as the explanation developed. Finally another look of grim acceptance settled in her eyes.

“Well, I just cannot let Brigid not eat,” John determined. “I can at least share my food with her.” He turned sharply and lead the two lasses to his packet of food. Unwrapping his second biscuit, he handed it to Brigid with a warm smile.

Brigid looked thoroughly surprised. “Níl,” she protested, holding up her hands in a show of disagreement. “Tá sé dó díneair!”

“She will not take it.” Mary answered for the resistant lass. “She says that is your dinner.”

“How do you say please?” John asked, still looking Brigid in the eyes.

“Le do thoil,” Mary responded, looking amusedly between them.

“Le do thoil,” he stammered, still holding the biscuit out for the lass.

“Agus seo,” Mary offered, also holding out a piece of her jerked meat.

Brigid looked at both of her offering friends. “Ó, tá go maith,” she acquiesced, taking the food from her friends.

Mary smiled, “Oh, all right to you as well!” she laughed, mimicking Brigid.

The hungry lass practically inhaled the food. John and Mary watched Brigid eat her meal in total silence, quickly swallowing every crumb. “Go raibh míle maith agat!” she thanked the both of them as she swallowed her last bite.

“She said thank you very much,” Mary interpreted with a smile.

John did not need an interpretation. He could see the thankfulness in the lasses eyes.

“You are welcome very much,” he replied warmly.

A low roll of thunder suddenly caught John’s attention. He craned his head around to scan the sky in front of the ship. The dark clouds he had seen earlier were rapidly closing in. The light wind that had been driving the ship suddenly died completely, slowing their progress. The ocean flattened out, leaving the vessel drifting slowly toward the storm on an eerily calm sea. Her sails sagged on their spars, hardly ruffled by any airflow as the dark clouds mounted, still some miles ahead.

The quartermaster took a position at the railing of the poop deck. He looked cautiously around the horizon, sniffing the air and watching the building thunderheads. The officer barked several orders sending sailors scurrying up the rigging and across the beams. Several of the sails were raised and tied off against their booms. The Captain joined his first officer on deck,

scanning the sky for himself.

With another series of orders, the full compliment of sails were hoisted and stowed. The first dark fingers of cloud began to occupy the sky over the dormant ship. Thunder rolled again more closely. A fresh gust of wind from the cloud mass ahead rippled the glassy water. The poignant smell of rain drifted across John's nose.

Another gust of wind tousled the hair of John and his two friends. And again thunder rumbled through the heavens. "Unfortunately," John commented, "it looks as if we will be having our English lesson down in the cabin below."

The ship lurched slightly with a sudden onslaught of rolling seas. A furious gust of wind tore out of the dark storm and blew a quick froth on top of the rolling waves. The boiling clouds began to obliterate the sun, casting a deep shadow across the suddenly turbulent sea.

"All passengers get below deck," the quartermaster barked through the howl of the windy onslaught. "Batten down the hatches!"

John scurried to the forecastle to collect his belongings and rejoined the girls at the door to the stairs. The wind whistled across the deck of the ship, threatening to jerk the small door out of his hands as he held it for several people while they plunged down into the gloomy cabin. A large drop of rain spattered on the low roof of the entryway, followed quickly by several more. John looked up to see a dark gray wall of rain headed directly for them at a mad rush.

A bright flash of lightening sent the lad scurrying down into the acrid hold. He gasped as the warm stench rushed up his nose. The lad quickly closed the door behind him as the wall of rain began to pound noisily on the low roof over his head. A deep surge of the ship shifted John precariously on the top step of the stair landing. He grasped tightly onto the handrail.

Several low moans followed the vessel's sudden shift of motion as she rose from the trough of the wave. The timbers creaked loudly, straining under the pressure of heavy seas. A loud clap of thunder boomed nearby, sending John scurrying down between the bunks to join his

friends.

The rise and fall of the ship made the lad's transit of the narrow walkway difficult. He was tossed roughly against the wooden sides of the racks several times. Several passengers scattered around the gloomy room were getting violently sick with the motion, making his stomach turn in revulsion.

John made it to the side of his own bunk after several minutes of being tossed around into others'. Eileen sat slumped over, precariously in the middle of her own low bunk. She grasped tightly onto the railing with one white-knuckled hand while holding onto Martin with her other. Martin likewise, held onto the side of the bunk and onto Eileen. Both were sheepishly watching John as he stumbled closer.

The lad was relieved that his sister was safe and seemingly in good hands. He decided to find Mary and Brigid and join them. Wordlessly, he clawed his way down the narrow aisle, through the midst of the moaning, sickened passengers. He found Mary reclining in her bunk, holding onto the raised railings for dear life. The lass's ghostly face expressed the fear permeating her being.

"Oh, John," Mary whispered as he approached her bunk. Paddy and Honor lay together in the little bunk above their daughter. Paddy smiled worriedly at the lad.

John climbed in beside Mary. Instantly, she clutched for him, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist. He sat beside her wordlessly, holding the lass in his arms.

The gale howled outside. The drone of the fierce storm was deafening. Heavy rain pounded onto the wooden deck above, mixing noisily with the waves crashing into the sides of the creaking vessel. Long, deep rolls of thunder were borne on the wailing wind, screaming audibly through the rigging overhead. Children cried as concerned parents tried to calm them. The murmur of prayers intermingled with low moans of agony.

Mary began to sob freely in John's arms, praying for their safety under her breath. The

lad did his best to comfort the frightened lass. He set his own fears aside, caring tenderly for the safety of his friend. Together they rode out the fury of the storm, comforting each other against the wrath of an angry sea.

The Cushla Machree performed admirably. She braved the storm for hours on end, providing safety for all onboard. Though she complained at being tossed around in the violent sea, she held her head and masts high.

Eventually, the storm began to break. The rolling of the ship became less violent and the sounds of the storm became the low drone of a light, steady rain and gusty breezes. The cries and murmurs of the fearful passengers quieted to a collective sigh of relief. Mary's sobs ended as she relaxed and rested quietly on John's shoulder.

"Thank God," the relieved lass sighed quietly. "And thank you for staying with me like this." She smiled up at John with a little sparkle in her eyes.

John smiled back tenderly, stroking the lass's hair and giving her a small kiss on her forehead. "I am happy I could be of comfort to you," he responded softly.

Paddy jumped down from his bunk onto the slightly rolling floor. "I got to stretch me legs," he announced. "Is everyone all right down here?"

Embarrassed at being seen with his arms around Paddy's daughter, John slipped out of the bunk and stood beside the man. "Aye, sir," he replied haltingly, "I think all is well with us."

Paddy slapped the lad playfully on the shoulder and smiled warmly at him. "Thank you very much for watching after me daughter through that," he said with a gleam in his eye. "A fine lad you are and a good friend, indeed. And if you care to be more at some point. . . ," he trailed off with a smile.

John blushed hotly. He looked shyly over to Mary, who was herself brightly red faced. "My pleasure, sir," he responded quietly, looking down at his feet nervously.

Understandingly, Paddy patted the lad's shoulder once again. "What do you say we go

up and see what has happened on deck?" he asked brightly.

"Aye, I will be right behind you," John answered, looking back to a still blushing Mary with a smile. "Maybe there is some help we can offer on deck."

John followed closely behind Paddy toward the stairway. *It will be good to get some fresh air*, he thought, his nose still feeling the effects of the acrid odor in a very confined place.

Chapter 16

"'Tis brilliant!" Mary exclaimed looking up from her language instruction to the colorful sunset. The passing storm system had left a remnant of high cloud that glistened in the setting sun. Bright orange, red and yellow rays intermingled with darker shades of blue and purple to create an extraordinarily picturesque scene. Gold spilled richly across the softly rolling ocean, glistening silver where the ship cut the water into foam.

John looked up into the horizon and smiled. "Aye, 'tis," he replied, stricken by the hand painted beauty of the evening. He shivered slightly in the chilly breeze and watched the shining orb slip silently beyond the brilliant horizon laid out before the vessel. Pointing his finger toward the colorful scene, he directed Brigid's attention to the beauty.

Brigid turned to face the west and smiled broadly. She shook her head, allowing her thick red hair to blow gently off her face. "Tá sé go h'alainn," she sighed in her own language.

“How say?” the lass queried haltingly.

John smiled back at his friend. “Beautiful,” he answered warmly. “Just beautiful!”

“Beautiful,” Brigid mimicked with a happy smile.

The three friends sat in silence, watching the sun slip quietly beneath the golden waves. The murmur of the prow slipping across the surface of the ocean serenaded the trio. John was happy that they had the quarterdeck to themselves. Everyone else was on the lower deck, amidships, preparing their suppers. That left the front of the ship quiet and set a wee bit apart.

The ship’s progress had slowed with the change in wind direction. Instead of having full sails and a very favorable breeze, the winds now came rather briskly from the northwest necessitating a slight change in tact. However, the seas had calmed to long rolling troughs, making the ship’s rise and fall much more slow and rhythmical.

Darkness began to creep into the sky from the east. Brigid pointed up to the bright evening star. “Réalta,” she stated happily.

Mary looked at the shining point of light. “Star,” the lass informed her friend.

“Star,” Brigid mimicked once again. The lass smiled and added, “Beautiful.”

John smiled sweetly between the two young lasses. ‘Aye, beautiful,’ he agreed once again, looking into Brigid’s sparkling eyes. A deep warmth settled into his heart, a warmth of friendship, or even love, that he had never felt for anyone outside of his own family. His only confusion was that he felt very similarly about both women. He had no confirmed direction like Eileen seemed to have found.

Brigid suddenly coughed and shivered in the chilled night air, chuckling as she brought the coughing spell to a halt. The lass patted her chest playfully and laughed aloud. John and Mary joined her laughter, creating a raucous on the forecastle. Several other passengers down on deck looked up at the happy trio and began to chuckle themselves.

A quiet strain of music began somewhere on deck as someone began blowing a tin

whistle. It was a merry tune that wafted into the night breeze. John, Mary and Brigid all turned in unison to find the happy sound. The chords grew louder as several people below spurred the piper on. Another flute joined in harmoniously, increasing the volume of the music. Several people on deck began clapping to the tune. Some of the heartier passengers even began to dance.

John looped an arm through each of the young lasses arms and directed them down the forecastle steps toward the music. They stopped before the two pipers, each smiling brightly. Brigid pulled away from the lad, clapping her hands loudly and tapping her feet. Mary soon followed suit.

Gazing around the growing merry crowd, John chuckled. He spotted Eileen dancing wildly around Martin. Paddy and Honor stood at the edge of the group smiling and clapping happily. A large group of people had, by then, begun to dance all around the tight deck.

A ragged older gentleman joined the pipers, playing a worn out fiddle. John just could not keep his feet still any longer. The lad took each of the young women successively in his arms, dancing brightly around them. Everyone laughed loudly. Even some of the sailors appeared on deck, smiling and clapping to the merriment.

The stars shone brightly on the merry-making passengers. The crisp evening air stole away any remaining heartache or hunger from their gaunt faces. Merry feet tapped the deck joyfully, adding the rhythmic beat of the missing bodhrán to the ensemble.

A bright full moon began to rise out of the shimmering sea behind them, bathing the vessel's worn wooden deck with a warm golden glow. Gentle shadows hid the faces of the musicians as the final silver thread of the dying day slipped into the deepening west. John felt more alive at that moment than any since his experiences with the death of the English agents. Those awkward experiences now seemed a distant memory anyway.

Brigid suddenly stopped dancing, flopping exhaustedly onto the rough deck. She took a deep breath, coughed deeply, and smiled up at John and Mary. "Tá seo craic go leor!" she

exclaimed.

Mary laughed heartily. "Aye, 'tis great fun!" the lass agreed as she sat down beside her friend.

John turned and watched the musicians intently. The fast-paced jigs and reels had begun to slow to a much more mellow rift of music. Memories of home began to flood his mind, stinging his eyes with bittersweet tears. He really missed his father and both his brothers. The lad could almost see the dim walls of the family cottage and smell the thatch of the roof. Even the acrid smell of the coal cooking fires smoldering beside him seemed to dim into the sweet smell of burning turf. A small tear slipped down John's cheek. He quickly brushed away the moisture, lest anyone should see.

The young lad felt a pair of arms slip around his waist from behind. He turned slightly to see Mary snuggle against him. Her body was warm in the brisk evening air. John turned slightly and placed right his arm around the caressing lasses shoulder. She smiled warmly up at him.

The music slowed pace even more, becoming an ancient, quietly flowing melody of his homeland. John could feel a soft summer breeze in his face, carried by the wonderful tune. The sweet smell of heather and a vision of green rolling hills flowed all around him. His eyes began to sting mightily as his heart fell into a cold shadow. How could he ever live without Ireland? How could he breathe any air not warmed by the goddess Brid's own breath?

Another slender arm slipped around John's waist. His friend Brigid pressed warmly against his left side. Tenderly caressing the second lasses shoulder, he pulled both young women tightly against him.

Brigid coughed slightly and sniffled. John looked down at the lass to see tears rolling down her pretty face. *She must feel the same thing I do*, John thought tenderly. Mary looked between John and Brigid, sadness deep in her eyes as well.

"I miss my home," she whispered hoarsely. All John could muster was a sad smile back

at the sniffing lass.

The music came to a spiraling end. Nothing remained but the sound of wind in the sails and the bow of the ship pushing steadily against the waves, taking them all farther from their homes. Quietly, the group began to disband, most of the passengers heading for their bunks.

“Oíche mhaith agaibh,” Brigid sniffled, pulling John over to gently kiss his cheek. She then slipped around the lad and hugged Mary tightly.

“Oíche mhaith, a Bhrigid,” Mary returned softly. “Codladh sámh.”

“Goodnight,” John returned with a dim smile. He brushed his hand easily through her thick hair.

Brigid stepped swiftly away from the couple, disappearing into the doorway leading below decks. Mary snuggled tightly against John once again, shivering in the chilled, damp ocean breeze. John wrapped both arms around the lasses quivering body, pulling her close to him. The lad looked longingly over the top of the quarterdeck to see the moon, now shining silvery in the dark, starry sky.

John kissed Mary gently on the forehead and stroked his hand through her dark tangled hair. His heart felt as if it had been poured out across the damp deck and trampled on by the disappearing crowd. The lad's eyes were still on the verge of flowing tears, yet, he dare not cry. A gust of wind blew a tuft of hair into John's eyes, giving him an excuse to wipe away the dew.

Mary pulled gently away, taking John by the hand and leading him to the starboard gunwale. She leaned heavily against the wooden rail and looked forlorn into the moon at the rear of the ship. John stood behind the lass with his arms wrapped tightly around her waist. “Do you think we will ever see home again?” she asked quietly.

John stood silently, staring absently into the frothy wake. Mary shifted restlessly in his arms and shivered slightly. “With the grace of God Almighty, we will return to our home!” he finally spoke out in a voice clear and firm. “If we do not, there is not a God in the heavens.”

“I am afraid, John,” Mary answered simply. “We do not even know where we are going. I mean, we know we are going to America, but, what will it be like? Will we be able to survive? We have no place to stay once we get off this ship. And we have no money.”

John’s heart finally broke completely in two. Several tears streamed quickly down the lad’s face. He sniffled, pulling the lass as tightly as he dared against his own body. “I am afraid as well,” he admitted. “But, somehow we will get by.”

Mary turned gracefully in John’s arms, wrapping her own arms tightly around his waist. She looked the lad directly in the eyes. “Stay with me, John,” she whispered. “I know we can get by together.” The lass reached up and kissed John warmly on the lips.

The lad was at first taken aback, caught completely by surprise. Yet, a warmth suddenly filled his body, stitching up his torn heart and adding color to the ghostly sea. He pulled Mary tightly to his chest, pressing his lips fully on hers. Time stood still as their hearts intertwined. The air seemed to warm and the glow of the smiling moon flooded even through John’s closed eyelids.

“We will get by together,” John agreed lovingly. “We will do the best we can in America, then, someday, we will return home.

Brigid and Mary followed John to the steps of the forecastle. John halted at the bottom of the small stair, watching several small children playing amongst themselves on the raised deck. The lad smiled at the youngsters and turned to the lasses following him. “Why do we not try another spot? No need to disturb the little bit of playtime the wee ones get on this ship,” he suggested cheerfully.

“‘Tis a grand idea,” Mary agreed quickly. There seemed to be some clear space at the

back of the boat.”

“Grand, let’s try it!” John directed, shuffling quickly past the lasses.

Brigid looked confused. Bewilderment covered her face as she followed Mary and John back the way they had just come. She grasped Mary’s arm asking, “Cad é seo? What. . .?”

Mary just smiled, motioning for her to follow. Weaving between the cook fires, people, and stray rigging, the trio made their way toward the rear of the ship. They found an out of the way spot at the base of the quarterdeck along the starboard side of the vessel. John sat nimbly down upon a thick coil of rope, motioning the two lasses to join him. He smiled at the girls as they found a spot to sit next to him.

Brigid still looked somewhat confused, looking toward the forecabin where their lessons had normally taken place. She shrugged and smiled at John. “Lesson?” the lass stammered, then broke into a fit of coughing.

“Dia Linn,” Mary blessed her coughing spell. She patted Brigid on the back with a smile.

“Thank you,” Brigid replied thickly with a warm smile. She coughed once again and laughed.

“All right now, where do we begin?” John questioned. He looked at Mary with a perplexed smile.

“I think herself should learn a few common expressions,” Mary returned looking toward her friend. “Maybe like; I would like this or I would like that. You think?”

“Brilliant idea,” John concurred.

Brigid watched the discussion between the two curiously. Her eyes were bright and she seemed eager for participation. “Brilliant,” the lass mimicked with a smile.

Both John and Mary laughed heartily. Brigid soon joined with their giggles. The three friends shared the moment like a gift from Heaven. They wrapped their arms around each other’s necks and touched foreheads.

“You’re havin’ much too much merriment!” a familiar voice chirped unexpectedly.

John turned to his sister who had joined the trio unannounced. “Hi ya’, Eileen! Come and join us. We are just giving Brigid a lesson in English. Herself speaks only Irish at present.”

“Only Irish?” Eileen questioned curiously. “I thought the language was only for old men drinking in a pub!”

Brigid stood to her feet. “Brigid is ainm dom. Cad is ainm duit?” She held out a warm hand to Eileen.

Eileen looked puzzled toward John, taking Brigid’s offered hand.

“She said her name is Brigid and what is yours?” John translated.

“I am Eileen, John’s sister,” the lass answered with a warm smile.

“Eileen,” Brigid recanted.

“Tá sí deirfiúr ag Sean,” Mary explained Eileen’s relationship to John.

Brigid smiled warmly. “Brilliant,” she replied.

“Would you like to join us, sister?” John inquired brightly. “I have sort of learned a few things myself. About Irish, I mean.”

“I would love to. At least until Martin comes up from below,” Eileen obliged, then looked to Mary. “He is helping your mother look after some personal effects.”

A cloud seemed to cover Mary’s face. “Should I go and give what help I can?” The lass stood abruptly to her feet.

“No, lass,” Eileen comforted her with a small smile. “All will be fine. Martin will be finished and back up here shortly.”

“Lovely!” Mary replied, “Then we can get back to our lessons.” She sat back into her seat.

Brigid looked worriedly at her friends. Mary smiled reassuringly back at the lass. “Tá sé go maith anois,” she assuaged her worried looking friend.

Brigid's visage eased. Her eyes sparkled in the rising sun, glowing as blue as the shining sea around them. A sudden puff of breeze blew a thick lock of hair across the lass's face. She tossed her head back to the clear sky and smiled into the warm sun. Sighing deeply, the lass looked playfully at John.

John's heart skipped a beat. He had never seen anyone do anything that attracted his desire more than what Brigid just did. He swallowed hard just to recapture his own attention. The lad just knew everyone must be able to sense his desire. Yet, he could not allow himself to fall into his feelings and hurt Mary. She was such a wonderfully loving young woman.

"Excuse me," John suddenly rose and stepped quickly away from the group. He moved quickly to the port railing, looking blankly out to sea. He had to sort out these feelings. He was being fair to no one, not even himself. The far away glint of sunlight on the waves somehow reminded the lad of looking over the Tullamore River.

John closed his eyes, feeling the warmth of the morning sun full on his face. He could hear the rustling of Birch leaves along the river shore and smell the sweet nectar of new rain. A wondrous vision of Brigid sitting beside the Grand Canal, tossing her head back in the gentle breeze and smiling warmly into the noonday sun exploded into his consciousness. It was a grand illusion. Yet, one that frightened him.

A pair of tender arms suddenly wrapped gently around John's waist, waking the lad from his dream. He sighed deeply and slowly opened his eyes. *Oh God, if you are really up there, show me what to do*, he begged silently. He turned in Mary's arms. Silently, she looked deeply into John's eyes.

A deep well of turbulent emotions lay behind her hazel eyes. John could see the fear, confusion and disillusionment as readily as if they were painted on the walls of some ancient cathedral. Her soul seemed to be laid bare before him, inviting his adjoining. Her heart called, sweetly, honestly, touching the lad at the moment he could least bear it.

John's heart ached. He longed for his home. He missed his father, his mother, and his brothers. He felt the confusion of a man lost in destiny. The wrenching of his soul squeezed a tear from his eye. Quietly and warmly, he let the drop roll unfettered down his cheek, still struggling within those green pools of madness.

Mary reached gently up and brushed away John's tear. She wrapped him up tightly, resting her head lovingly on the lad's chest. John stroked her black hair softly, holding the lass tightly against his slightly quivering body. Not a word was spoken. They did not need language.

Funny, John thought, language seemed the barrier to Brigid. Now, the lack of it seems the bridge to Mary. He closed his eyes again, feeling Mary's warm body pressed firmly against him.

A loud angry voice nearby broke John's spell. He snapped to attention, looking for the source of the heated anger. Looking up to the quarterdeck, he spied one of the English passengers screaming over the railing at Brigid, Eileen and Martin, who had just joined the two lasses. The three Irish passengers stared up at the Englishman with mouths agape.

"You there," screamed the Brit, "get away from here! You are fouling the air. Go on, get away now!"

Eileen, Martin and Brigid just stood and stared at the irate man. "We have cause to be here, sir," Martin finally managed weakly.

"Cause?" the Englishman roared, swatting the handrail in front of him with a thick riding crop. "The Irish have cause for nothing but to get drunkened and sleep in the shite of their wretched pigs! Now, get away from here before I have the Captain run you away!"

"We have the right to be here," Martin continued a little more forcefully. "We are not up in one of your high class quarterdeck cabins. We are just here minding our own."

John released his grip on Mary and took a step toward his friends. His heart began to flutter, bringing back old, bad memories. *Does it never end,* he wondered?

“Captain!” the Brit bellowed, his paunchy belly jiggling with his effort. “I demand you get these waifs away from my seating area!”

The Captain of the Cushla Machree stood at the stern railing, staring out to sea. He glimpsed briefly over his left shoulder at his passenger, then turned nonchalantly back to the sea. He seemed unwilling to get involved in a conflict between any passengers.

“Captain MacMillan, sir,” the Englishman screamed, turning fully toward the officer in an effort to command the man’s attention. “I have paid good money to sail aboard this ship in comfort. Now I demand that you do something with these white apes! They smell so bad they spoil my morning tea.” He placed his hands firmly on his hefty hips, his thin grey hair flying in the ocean breeze.

The Captain refused to move. He stood resolutely looking over the rear of the ship toward the eastern horizon. The helmsman peered through the spokes of the large wheel, smirking at the belligerent Englishman. Several other sailors up in the rigging even stopped their tasks to watch the show.

John moved quickly to Martin’s side. Several other Irishmen milled silently in the background, watching the fracas curiously. Several of the younger lads drew closer to Martin and John, the glow of battle rising faintly in their eyes. Most had been evicted from family owned lands by just such a man as this. An opportunity to exact at least a bit of emotional revenge would be very welcomed indeed.

The Brit’s face turned blood red and his body shook visibly with rage. The man grit his teeth and swatted his riding crop into his left hand. Unable to control himself any longer, he let go a loud growl and strode brusksly toward the steps leading to the lower deck. “Fine!” the irate Englishman bellowed. “I will take care of these stinking oafs myself!” The passenger bounced down the narrow steps, his belly jiggling with each move and his face glowing red as fire.

John watched the man in disbelief. His jaw dropped open in surprise. *Did he really*

believe he was going to do anything by himself, the lad wondered? As the fellow drew closer, John moved into the man's path, planting his feet heavily onto the rough deck. His hands clenched and unclenched involuntarily in anticipation. Martin moved close up behind him.

The fuming Brit pounded the deck toward the small group, stopping almost nose to nose with John. He was almost a full head taller and out weighed the lad probably two to one. His breath stank of old ale. The man's oversized belly rubbed unceremoniously against John's. Sweat beaded down the fellow's forehead, dripping in large drops onto the wooden planks.

"You bunch of imbecilic Irish louts," the Englishman hissed through clinched teeth. "Get away from here before I take my crop to you!" He swatted the wall of the quarterdeck loudly with his whip. "Off with you!"

John and Martin stood their ground. John crossed his arms defiantly, looking up into the face of the man. "We have our right to be here, sir. We have honored the rule to not enter any area of the quarterdeck, but in this place, you have no authority over us."

"Right?" the Englishman roared. "The only right of the Irish is to get howling drunk and be the fools you are! You bunch of heathen rabble, away with you!"

Brigid pushed up beside John, fire smoldering in her eyes. John knew she could not understand his words, yet, the man's belligerence needed no interpretation. The fiery lass looked up into the face of the man towering before her and sneered. "Sassanach, go hifreann leat!" she cursed, spitting onto his shoes.

The Englishman squealed like a wild boar. His face crimson, he drew back his riding crop as if to strike Brigid. John pushed into the man the man after noting that several lads now closely surrounded the enraged Brit. "You stinking bitch!" he yelled. "You will wish you never did that!"

John looked coolly up at the fellow, the crop still cocked. "'Tis a poor excuse for a man who would strike a lady, sir," he replied, forcing himself to hold his composure. "Please lower

your whip, sir, and apologize to the lass.”

The Englishman lowered his hand, glowering at the young Irishman in front of him. His eyes seethed with hatred. He raised a hand toward John's throat, then lowered it, glancing around at the crowd of Irishmen gathering around him. The devil, himself, seemed to stare down at John from behind that malicious face.

“Mr. Whittingham, sir,” the Captain called from the quarterdeck railing above. “I suggest you do as the lad bade and return to the quarterdeck where you belong.” The officers thick Scottish seafarers brogue as hard as the deck he stood on. “I will not come and pick up the pieces left of you if you choose otherwise.”

John shot a glance up toward the Captain with a thin smirk. This was an unexpected twist. The lad shifted, standing up a little taller and far bolder. “Please apologize to the lass,” he requested once more.

Stunned at the turn of events, the Brit looked dazedly around him. Stern Irish faces stared back at the man as the lads drew closer in. He looked harshly up at the Captain who maintained his place at the quarterdeck railing. Setting his jaw and drooping his shoulders a little, the fellow looked coldly at Brigid. “I apologize,” he hissed through large clenched teeth. “Now out of my way.” He spun, pushing through the lads who stood between him and the steps to the quarterdeck.

The Englishman gained the upper deck at an amazing speed. He shot another evil glance at Captain MacMillan as he strode past. Quickly, the man disappeared down the steps at the rear of the quarterdeck, heading for his berth.

John looked up and smiled at Captain MacMillan, a stoic, immobile rock at the handrail. The Captain eventually glanced, stone-faced, back at John, turned from his post and returned to his position at the stern of the Cushla Machree. John watched the man leave, feeling much more respect for him in his heart. *Maybe the Scots are an honorable race after all*, he thought,

dispelling the tales he had been told all his life.

Several lads walked up to John and Martin, patting each respectfully on the shoulder as they walked silently by. Brigid then turned, grabbed John tightly around the neck and kissed his cheek warmly. He blushed brightly and smiled lovingly at the passionate lass. Grasping Brigid tightly around the waist, John kissed her back tenderly on her cheek and hugged her tightly.

“How do you say brave?” he asked Mary over Brigid’s shoulder.

Mary smiled. “I am not sure,” she replied. “I have never had cause to learn that word.”

“Maybe it is time to learn,” John returned with a big smile. He released Brigid, pointed a finger at her with a large smile. He then shook his fist and pretended to spit at the floor, imitating the lass. “Brave,” he stated, pointing his finger once again at Brigid.

Brigid burst out laughing. “Brave,” she imitated, pointing back at John.

“Brave, as Gaeilge?” John queried.

She shrugged absently, then smiled and answered, “fearg.”

“She thinks you are saying she was angry,” Mary laughed. “I know that word well.”

“Ah well, all right then,” John chuckled, rubbing his hand across his face. “Shall we proceed on with the English lesson?” He looked quickly between the two young women.

“Tá, cinnte,” Brigid answered brightly.

“I am ready as I will ever be!” Mary agreed.

Eileen and Martin moved a little apart. “We will see you later,” Eileen called to the trio. “We have seen enough trouble for one day.” The couple moved away toward the front of the ship.

“All right then,” John started again. “I think our first word today should be brave.”

“Brave,” Brigid mimicked once again.

Mary and John both chuckled heartily as the warm, late morning sun shone down brightly.

Chapter 17

John woke up from a troubled slumber. The seas had been heavy all night, tossing him around against the fire pit several times. He opened his groggy eyes in the dim light to make sure Mary was still all right beside him. Her sleep seemed especially troubled as well. The lass tossed to and fro under her thin blanket.

The morning was gray and dark. Heavy clouds hung overhead as a chilled wind sang in the rigging. The low roll of distant thunder was just audible over the sound of heavy seas breaking against the bow. The groggy young Irishman pushed himself slowly upright. Mary mumbled something in her sleep, tossing violently and waking with a start.

The lass stared blankly around the deck as if completely lost. There were signs of muddled confusion and fear smothering behind her hazel eyes. Mary spotted John watching her

and crawled toward him, laying uneasily into her friend's lap. The lad tenderly stroked the young woman's hair. Another dull roll of distant thunder sounded on the horizon.

"I am cold," Mary chattered quietly, snuggling closer against John. "I had horrible dreams."

John wrapped his blanket around his own shoulders and then carefully over Mary. "Not a promising morning," he answered solemnly, gazing around the low canopy. "I hope it does not rain much. I could not stand the smell down below. I am afraid I would have to brave a storm out here on the deck."

"Myself," Mary agreed readily. "Seems we are not alone in that either."

"Aye," John returned, looking hastily across the full deck. "Seems half of the passengers spend all their time up here on deck, the same as us."

"And the other half or either sick or have sick family to care for," Mary added quickly. "How long 'til we get to America?" She squirmed, pulling the blankets closer around her. "We have been on this boat for more than a month passed now."

A light mist began to fall, making the gloom even deeper. John readjusted his blanket to protect Mary's head against the drizzle. Low, distant thunder growled ominously once again. "I wish I knew," John moaned simply.

Sailors began to make their way nimbly through the rigging. The light, steady drizzle began to soak everything. The other passengers stirred from their soggy coverings, doing their best to stay warm and dry. Some people tried unsuccessfully to light a fire in the damp coals of the fire pits.

The sounds of the crew and passengers seemed to fall noiselessly to the sodden deck. The mist began to turn into a thick fog, obscuring all but the ship herself. The cold, clammy breeze felt almost like the fingers of death trying to pry their way under John's skin. He shivered involuntarily. No one spoke. Only the sailors in the rigging made any sound at all.

Suddenly, a dull, muffled scream echoed from the bunkroom below decks. John sat upright, listening for further indications of trouble. "You hear that, Mary?" he inquired abruptly.

"Hear what?" Mary queried, suddenly startled. "I heard nothing but the ocean."

"No, it sounded like a scream down below. Maybe I should go have a look for myself."

John gently slipped away from Mary, stood to his feet and immediately headed for the hatchway to the cabin below.

Before the lad could reach the doorway, however, several people hurriedly filed out of the opening. One young lass of twelve or thirteen was weeping hysterically. Two adults accompanied her, trying to console the wailing girl to no avail.

"My mother," the lass screamed to no one in particular, "she is dead!"

John stopped in his tracks, choosing instead to return to Mary's side. "Poor lass," he lamented to his friend. "I know how herself feels. I lost my own mother at just such an age. But, at least I had my own home to be in." He sat down beside Mary on the wet deck.

"Is there nothing we can do?" she asked, her face showing the agony that wrenched her heart. "Something must be able to console the poor lass."

"No, she must be able to mourn her loss" John replied solemnly. "I do not know what we could do for a proper wake. We do not even have a clergyman on board."

Mary pulled her blanket further over her face against the deepening drizzle and took John's hand in her own. Another dim roll of thunder sounded in the distance. The mourning young lass who had just lost her mother, sat in the rain, sobbing quietly. The mood onboard the ship was appropriate for a funeral.

Several minutes of silence passed until the body of the unfortunate woman was passed up through the small opening onto the wet deck. Most of the passengers gathered around the woman's corpse as she was laid gently onto the slick planks. One by one, the soggy passengers paid their respects to both the deceased and the grieving daughter.

John spotted Brigid as she knelt beside the dead woman. The lass quickly crossed herself, stood, and turned away. The lad tried to capture her attention, however, Brigid seemed not to notice. "We should go pay our respects," John informed Mary solemnly. "It would be improper not to." He struggled to his feet and helped Mary to hers.

The lass brushed a rain soaked lock of hair from her eyes with her fingers. "'Tis a sad day indeed," she replied, walking slowly toward the woman's body.

John walked reverently to the dead woman's side, knelt to one knee and crossed himself quickly. He looked into her ashen gray, expressionless face and shivered with cold memories. The woman's open eyes stared lifelessly into the depths of eternity. The lad's breath caught in his throat. He gasped and choked. Standing quickly back to his feet, John turned away from the death.

Mary followed suit, kneeling at the woman's side and paying her respects. The lass quickly turned to John's side, took him by the arm and led him to the grieving young girl. "We are very sorry for your loss," Mary offered the sobbing lass. "I am Mary and this is John. If you need anything please feel free to ask."

"Thank you very much," the young girl sniffled. "I am Aoife. Thank you." She began crying once again in earnest.

"Do you have other family here?" Mary asked.

"Only an aunt," Aoife sobbed. "All others died back home, my two brothers and my Da. Auntie Kate is sick below."

"You just let us know if you need anything," Mary reiterated kindly.

"I will," Aoife responded with a weak smile. "I will."

John spotted Brigid once again, standing at the port railing, staring out to sea. The lad directed Mary toward their friend. Brigid seemed not to notice as the couple strode quietly to her side. She stood staring resolutely into the heavy mist with her hand wrapped tightly around the

wooden railing.

“Dia duit,” John greeted, forcing a happy tone.

Brigid turned toward them, her blood red eyes filled with mixed tears and light rain. She coughed heavily and attempted a smile. “Dia is Maire duit,” she responded with a forced smile.

“Conas tá tú?” Mary inquired worriedly.

“No good,” Brigid stammered. “My mother sick much. Me no good too.” She coughed again.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph!” Mary squawked, feeling Brigid’s forehead. “You should be out of this rain! John, she is hot as coals.”

John gently touched the young woman’s cheek. “Holy Saint Michael!” he responded. “She is burning up! Let’s get her below, out of this rain.” John took Brigid around the waist and escorted her toward the hatchway to the lower cabin. She was horribly weak with fever and coughed several times before they reached the entry.

Brigid stumbled at the top stair prompting John to gently pick up the lass and carry her down the steep steps into the gloomy cabin. The fetid stench took John’s breath. *This will not do*, he thought, trying to figure out another place to take the sick lass. Yet, there was no other dry place available for the ailing young woman.

John looked around the dim room. He had not been down into the lower part of the ship in more than a week, unable to endure the horrid smell. The lad was shocked and appalled at what he saw. Feces and vomit lay scattered around the putrid floor. The only passengers still down in the cabin were those who were too sick to leave their bunks. Those poor souls were wasting away, unable to leave their beds to care for themselves or even get their own food. Many of the most unfortunate ones were literally starving to death were they lay.

The horrified lad could readily see at least six such unfortunates near them. He knew there must be more scattered around the dingy room. John’s stomach turned in revulsion. He

held Brigid tightly, looking back into the petrified face of Mary. "My God," he responded, aghast. "This is much worse than I ever imagined. How...how can these people be left like this? Is there no way to care for them?"

Mary remained stunned mute. "I...they..." she trailed off, her jaw slack and disbelief written in her eyes.

Several low moans came from around the room. Brigid coughed heavily once more, then gripped John tightly around the neck. "Where?" John asked the lass quietly.

Brigid lifted her head off his shoulder and pointed toward the rear of the room. John followed her direction, moving carefully between the narrow bunks. He slipped, preferring not to think of what he had just stepped in on that awful floor.

"Anseo," Brigid directed weakly, pointing to a bunk occupied by a frail, middle-aged woman. "Mother," she stated quietly.

John gazed into the dimly lit bunk. The only occupant was an emaciated woman of perhaps forty years of age. It seemed the lad could see the fragile woman's bones through her thin, translucent skin. Brigid's mother lay unresponsive to their arrival. The dark, sunken pits that were her eyes, remained closed. John greatly feared she might already be dead. A low, slow gasp issued from the frail woman's thin lips as her eyelids opened weakly.

"Brigid?" the ailing lass' mother whispered.

"Is mise," Brigid answered almost inaudibly, reaching weakly down to grasp her mother's bony hand. "Tá me anseo."

A thin smile formed on Brigid's mother's pale lips as she once again closed her eyes. Brigid gently released her mother's hand and reached for the railing of the bunk above. John helped his friend slowly into her bed. He covered her lovingly with her thin blanket.

Brigid shivered visibly with fever under the threadbare covering. "Thank you," she replied weakly, curling up tightly to try and conserve her warmth.

“Do you have food or water?” Mary asked quietly.

Brigid shook her head negatively. “Níl,” she replied.

Mary turned to John. “I am going to the pantry to get my day’s food,” she informed her friend. “I will bring it back here and give Brigid something to eat. She needs it more than myself.”

“I will do the same when you return and give it to Brigid’s mother,” John agreed.

Mary turned and quickly vanished down the gloomy aisle. John stood quietly beside Brigid’s bunk, watching the shivering lass fall into a restless sleep. He wished he could do more for his friend. Yet, he had no facilities in which to do so. If he were back home, he could go to the chemist and find some kind of remedy for her. Here, he could not even fetch his friend’s food.

John gently stoked Brigid’s hair. Someone coughed weakly across the room and then moaned. He had never felt such frustration in his life. Infirm countrymen surrounded him, but he had no power to aid them. The struggling lad looked slowly around the room, wondering who would be the next to be carried out of that room dead.

A fleeting shadow caught John’s attention. It seemed to be a slight movement at the end of the line of bunks, against the darkest wall. He peered through the gloom, trying to recognize the shape in the darkness. Suddenly, the outline of a small figure came into dim view, pressing tightly into the dark corner between the wall and bunks. The lad stepped away from his friend and toward the figure.

“Hallo,” John called quietly, stopping before he reached the moving shadow.

“Hi ya’,” answered a young sounding, feminine voice. She pressed tighter against the dark wall.

John took another step forward and stopped once again. “Are you all right?” he asked softly. “I will not harm you.”

The young lass seemed to relax just a little. "I am all right," she answered after a brief silence. She slowly extracted herself from the cramped, dark confines.

"Are you ill?" John questioned again. "What is your name?"

"I am Colleen," the lass answered shyly. "No, I am well."

"Why are you down here by yourself in the dark and smell? Is your family ill?"

"No, 'tis only my mother and myself," Colleen answered quietly. "She is upstairs getting food."

"Do you not need to get your own food?" John quizzed the young girl again, puzzled.

"Aye, sir," Colleen responded shyly once again. "But, I have no clothes." The lass stepped forward into the dim light, slightly opening the blanket she had wrapped carefully around herself to exposed her unclothed body. She was a young lass of perhaps twelve or thirteen, not much more than skin and bones. Her dirty face smeared with who knows what. The young girl's black hair was wild as a June storm, falling stringily all about her thin shoulders and face. "When my mum gets back, I will take her dress and go up to get my own food." She pulled the blanket closely around herself once again.

John's heart sank even further than he thought possible. Just when he thought nothing could shock him more, something would. "We have got to find you something to wear," the lad responded incredulously. "You cannot be stuck down here with this sickness all around. Besides, what will you do when you get to America? We must find you some clothes!"

Colleen smiled slightly. "That would be gorgeous, sir," she replied, heartened.

"John," a voice called quietly behind him, "where are you."

The lad turned to see Mary walking down the gloomy aisle behind him. "I am here," he replied. "Come here."

"What are you doing? Is Brigid all right?" Mary seemed confused that he was not by their friend's bedside.

“Just come here.”

Mary shuffled quietly to John's side. Colleen sunk silently back into her dark corner as the lass approached. “‘Tis all right,” John consoled Colleen, “this is our friend. She will help us get you some clothes.”

“Who are you speaking too?” Mary quizzed, puzzled. “Is there a pooka in here?” She smiled slightly.

“To herself,” the lad answered, pointing into the dark corner. “This is Colleen. She is here with her mother. But, she has no clothes so she cannot go up on deck.”

Mary peered through the gloom to try and make out the figure. “Hi ya’, Colleen. I am Mary.” She took a step toward the young girl with her hand extended.

Colleen slowly pulled out of the corner toward Mary. “Hi ya’,” she answered back quietly. “Can you help me get some clothes?”

Mary smiled warmly at the poor lass. “Aye,” she answered softly, “I think I can arrange something.”

“That would be grand!” Colleen shrilled gleefully. “My only dress was so tight, I finally tore it to pieces before we got on the boat.”

“You have been without clothes since you got on this ship?” Mary questioned unbelievably. “I have an extra dress that should fit you well enough to go up on deck. Wait right here and I will be right back.” Mary handed her bundle of food to John as she turned back down the dark aisle.

Colleen moved swiftly out of her hiding spot to John's side. “I thank you so much, sir! You are so kind! What is your name?”

“I am John. I cannot bear to see such a lovely young lass without as much as the bare necessities of life.”

Colleen's eyes shone so brightly they seemed to glow in the dim light. “John it is! And

Mary. Such lovely people.” The young lass smiled warmly up at John. “Here comes my mum.”

She pointed down the aisle behind John.

A very thin woman with long, dark hair approached rapidly. “Is there a problem?” she asked quietly. “Is my daughter all right?”

“I am lovely, mum!” Colleen announced as her mother approached. “This grand gentleman and his lovely wife are getting me a new dress to wear!”

Colleen’s mother arrived at John’s side. “Is this true?” she asked, seemingly astonished.

“Aye,” he responded, blushing at Mary being called his wife. “Colleen seems to need a dress and Mary has an extra one to fit her. But, Mary is not my...uh, I mean... Never you mind.”

“Bless you sir,” the woman responded with delight. “We have been in need for a while now. Thank you very much!” She took John’s hand, curtsied before him, and then quickly kissed his hand.

John blushed again. No one had ever done that before. “‘Tis nothing special. Colleen has something we can provide, and it will be of no consequence to ourselves.” He tried to hide his embarrassment. Yet, he felt his face burn with redness. “I am John.”

“And I am Kate,” the mother replied happily. “Are you here like us, forced off your family’s rightfully owned land?”

John’s bashful smile faded as he returned to the reality of the moment. “Aye,” he responded quietly. “I came here with my Da and sister. But I guess my Da never got onboard the ship. My Mum and youngest brother have died and my other brother, sent to Botany Bay Colony.”

“Aye, ‘tis sad times indeed.” Kate agreed with a deep sigh. “My husband, himself, was sent to Botany Bay. And sent only for taking a few ears of corn to feed his family. That left me, Colleen here, and my two youngest, twins they were, to fend for ourselves.” She sighed once again. “Unsuccessfully, that. The twins, Paddy and Patricia, died but a few months later when

we had little food and they became very ill. Colleen and myself made it through the fever and very nearly starved to death. Our landlord then forced us here when our rent became due and we had no way of paying, since we had been unable to tend our crops.”

Fire rose in John's belly. But there was nothing he could do to act on the situation. No one seemed to care about the lives of his countrymen. No one, at least, who could stop the systematic destruction of his country anyway. Maybe his brother was right. Maybe the Young Irishmen were the answer after all. He looked empathetically down into the face of the antagonized woman. She had seen more hardship than even he had endured. The fruit of this woman's belly had been ripped from her life.

Maybe it was from standing in the midst of filth and sickness, or maybe from his recent close views of death, but, something had gotten his mind spinning wildly once again in the realm of retribution. Whatever it was, had John stoked to the boiling point. “How did we come to the point of losing our country and ourselves?” he asked rhetorically. “I mean, there has to be a way to . . .to take back what is rightfully ours!” Fire glowed in his eyes and he could feel his grip on the bundle of food tighten.

Kate looked understandingly up at the lad she had just met. “Aye, but if we stoop to the same actions as the ones who have taken us over, we will be no better than they.” Her sad eyes spoke to John's heart far more than her few brief words.

A sudden tidal wave extinguished John's growing fire. His countenance softened immediately. “Forgive me,” he begged. “I have just seen so much as late. I feel so useless. I miss my home and my family desperately and I guess you just reminded me of that.”

Young Colleen watched the exchange between the two adults disinterestedly. “I am so happy to be getting a new dress,” she finally interjected with a huge smile.

“John, Colleen,” Mary called quietly from down the dark aisle. “Here it is.” Mary arrived at John's side with a brightly colored dress draped across her arm. “Oh, hi ya’,” she

continued, spotting Kate.

John smiled slightly at Mary's return. "Kate, this is Mary," he introduced the women. "Kate is Colleen's mum."

"Pleasure," Mary addressed the older woman. "You have a lovely daughter."

"Thank you very much," Kate smiled warmly at the lass. "And thank you very much for offering one of your very own fine dresses to Colleen. That is the grandest thing anyone has done for us in a long while!"

Mary smiled shyly. "My pleasure." She handed the dress to an ecstatic Colleen.

Colleen danced with glee as she held the garment to her heart. "Look mum, 'tis beautiful! Oh, thank you so very much!" She turned her back to the group, let the threadbare blanket slide off her thin shoulders, and slipped the dress over her head. "Look, mum, 'tis but a wee bit big. I will fit into it proper soon."

"My, but are you not the grand little princess," Kate cuddled her daughter lovingly. "You must be the loveliest lass on board this boat! Or at least one of the loveliest." She looked smilingly over to Mary.

Mary smiled warmly at the mother and daughter. "I hope to have a daughter just as beautiful as you some day," she commented to Colleen with a happy sigh. "And I hope I can be as grand a mother as you, Kate. If I can help in any other ways please ask."

"Thank you very much, again," Kate returned happily. "Both of you are so kind." She turned to her daughter, "Off with you, now. Go up and get your food. I will be up in a few moments and we can stroll around the deck together!"

John smiled broadly. His heart was lifted by his ability to come to the aid of a countryman in need. "Yeah, I need to get my food as well, before the lovely steward closes the pantry for the day."

"Come with me, John!" Colleen bubbled. "Come up on deck with me!"

“Go on ahead, I will be right behind you,” he answered kindly. “I just have to stop and check on my friend.”

Colleen smiled brightly and slipped past the little group. She skipped down the dark aisle toward the stair. John turned to follow, stopping at Brigid's bunk. The lass was sleeping a little more quietly, now. He reached out to feel her forehead. She was still aflame with a high fever. “I will be back shortly,” he whispered, not really expecting her to hear. “You have got to have some food and drink.”

“I will take care of her,” Mary informed John quietly as she slipped up to his side. “Go get your food and get a breath of fresh air.”

“And I will be happy to help when you need relief,” Kate offered happily.

John smiled sweetly at Mary, gently touched her thick hair, and turned wordlessly down the narrow walkway. Colleen had already outdistanced him and skipped up the narrow stair. He heard the dull thud of the door closing as he left Mary's side.

The putrid odor had already permeated his nostrils, dulling his sense of smell to the point of smelling only a faint stench. He pulled himself up the stairs and out the little door. The sweet fragrance of sea spray immediately brought his sense of smell back to order. The leaden canopy had risen and began to break up. The rain had stopped and a bright band of sunlight lay on the eastern horizon. A large group of passengers stood solemnly at the port side gunwale where the body of the unfortunate woman had been laid.

John moved silently toward the group, taking a position at the outermost edge. “And dear Lord,” one of the passengers prayed, “please take the soul of this lovely lass into your arms. We do not have a Priest here with us to ask you formally, but, I know you look after your own. Amen.”

“Amen,” most in the group repeated under their breath, crossing themselves faithfully. Two of the healthier young lads picked up the body of the woman and let it slide into the waiting

arms of the sea. With a dull splash, the body sunk out of sight. Aoife wailed out from somewhere across the crowd. He noticed the face of Colleen standing a few feet away. A confused look of sadness and fear clouded her young face. She really was a lovely young lass, it hurt John that she had to face a life such as this so early in her life.

The lad moved slowly away from the crowd and toward the pantry at the rear of the ship. He put his arm on Colleen's shoulder as he walked by. "Let us get some food," he directed gently. He nudged the lass to his side and towards the stern. "Are you all right?"

The youngster looked up to him with big, sad blue eyes. "Did she die?" Colleen asked mournfully. "Just today?"

"Aye," John responded softly, "I suppose she did."

"I hope no one else dies," she added, looking back over her shoulder toward the slowly dispersing crowd. "It is too sad."

"Aye, 'tis," John agreed, steering the lass toward their goal. "'Tis, most certainly."

Chapter 18

John held a morsel of dry crumbling biscuit to Brigid's mother's lips. Though he supported her back heavily with a strong hand, the woman was almost too weak to raise high enough to swallow the small morsels without choking. Her weary eyes were shut most of the time and she attempted no speech.

Mary was doing the same with Brigid. The younger lass was much stronger and able to down the poor food. However, she seemed but a hollow shell of the Brigid that John and Mary knew. Hopefully the illness would pass quickly and their studies could resume soon. Besides, both John and Mary had come to depend on the lessons as a pleasant diversion from the tedium of their passage.

"Did Brigid ever tell you her mother's name?" John asked, attempting to persuade the woman to take a sip of water.

"No," Mary answered contemplatively. "But I will ask her right now. A Bhrigid, cén

t-ainm atá do mháthair?"

"Síle," the struggling lass answered weakly.

John smiled and broke off another crumb of his biscuit, placing it gently to the sick woman's lips. She weakly pushed the morsel away. "Níl," she replied.

"You have eaten almost nothing, Sheila," John replied seriously. "You must eat to get back your strength."

Sheila made no more attempt at nourishing herself. John tried repeatedly to get a morsel of biscuit through her lips. Eventually giving up, John switched to his water jug instead. He lifted Sheila slightly, placing the jug to her lips. Still she refused any attempts to help herself.

"How do you say water?" John asked Mary quietly.

"Uisce," she replied, not taking her attention from giving Brigid another bite of food.

"Uisce," John prompted, once again placing the jug to Sheila's mouth.

The woman was completely unresponsive. She finally turned her head completely away from the lad. John did not know how to react. How could someone refuse to even try to sustain themselves? He closed the jar back up with a grimace.

"I am going up on deck," John announced in frustration, stepping away from Sheila's bunk. He bundled up his food and set it on Brigid's bunk next to Mary. "How is Brigid?"

"She is very weak, but she seems to be a wee bit better," Mary responded, brushing her patient's hair gently from her face.

Brigid weakly opened her eyes and smiled slightly. "Thank you," she whispered. "My mother."

John smiled warmly back at the lass. "Tá failte romhat," he replied, patting the lass' leg tenderly. The lad turned quickly down between the gloomy bunks. Bounding up the narrow stair, he pushed quickly through the low exit.

The warm, sweet sea air flowed generously through John's nostrils, washing away the

smell of sickness. The dim sun shone hazily through a high, thin canopy. The lad moved away from the opening, sauntered slowly to the port railing and leaned heavily against the thick handrail. John took in a deep draught of sea air, thinking of his ill friend below. He should bring Brigid up on deck while the sun shone and the air was warm. It would do her soul, as well as her body, good.

“Hi ya’, lad,” an unfamiliar voice greeted John from behind.

John turned to meet three young men similar in age to him. “Hi ya’,” he answered in response. “Fine day isn’t it?”

“Aye, but not for having a funeral without a proper Priest and all,” another lad with bright red hair responded with a sarcastic smile. “Or even that we had a funeral at all.” He looked for the support of his other two friends.

“Ain’t you the lad that stood up to the Englishman the other day?” the first young man questioned eagerly.

“Aye,” John responded hesitatingly, “‘twas myself.”

“Grand,” the lad replied with a bright smile. “I am Connor.” He held out his hand in friendship.

“I am John.” He took the fellow’s hand, shaking it briskly.

“Pleasure, John,” Connor concurred. “This is Peter, and himself is Douglas.”

John greeted the other lads likewise.

“We liked the way you stood toe to toe with the English dog,” the redheaded Douglas interjected, patting John heavily on the shoulder. “Seems you have done that before.”

John just smiled slightly, looking the three lads in the eye. “Seen more than I want,” he responded after several long seconds of silence between them.

“Just as I thought,” Connor commented with a sly grin. “We have seen you around, but you do not seem to socialize much. I think we might have some things in common, you and us.”

"Maybe," John answered slowly. "But, I have seen enough troubles, I do not want any more now."

"Us as well," Peter spoke up for the first time with a serious look on his ruddy face.

"Too bad about the woman dying this morning and all," Connor changed the subject quickly. "I hear there are more corpses below." His face grew stern and a little paler in the diffused light. "I have heard tell 'tis the fever. Some say if you even go down below now, it is a sure death sentence!"

John grimaced. "I have just come from below," he replied harshly. "I have a dear friend who has recently gotten sick and I have been taking care of her. I have seen no more dead souls, nor have I signed a death warrant. Tell me who is saying that we have the fever on board."

All three young men looked taken aback. "I, uh...we did not mean anything personal," Connor stammered. "My very own mother, who was a nurse at the sanitarium in Cork. She says she has seen the fever many times. She says from what she can tell, the woman this morning died of the fever." He looked sadly at John. "I pray for your friend, but you would not catch me going down those stairs if the Hounds of Hell themselves were nipping at my heels."

Douglas and Peter both shook their heads in stern agreement, all three crossing themselves rapidly. Connor wiped his hand absently on his pants leg. "I certainly do pray for you," Connor repeated.

The doorway to the bunkroom pushed open and Mary appeared out of the gloom. The three lads turned away as Mary approached, stepping aside as she neared. "Good day," she greeted the trio with a smile.

"Good day," they each returned, stepping back away from her path. "I think we best be on our way," Connor addressed his pals. He turned his back and strode quickly away as Mary passed by.

Mary looked quizzically at John. "Such proper lads," she quipped snidely.

John looked worriedly back to his friend. "They say it is the fever," he stated simply.

"What?" the lass responded worriedly.

"They said the people down below are sick with the fever," John elaborated. "Connor says his mother was a nurse at the sanitarium in Cork and she says it is the fever all right. I think we should bring Brigid up here on deck. If it is the fever, she will never get better down there."

Mary stared at her friend big eyed and mouth agape. "The fever?" she reacted, concern shaking her voice. "Do you suppose we might get it now?"

"I . . . I do not know," John answered truthfully, his face turning ashen. "I guess I have not thought about it. I do not know how those things work."

"Nor do I," Mary answered, mirroring his concern. "The weather has warmed very well. I think we should go bring Brigid up right now."

Visibly shaken, John nodded his agreement. He looked around and spotted Connor and his two friends sitting across the deck, watching him and Mary intently. "But, what about Sheila? There will be no one left to care for her."

Mary grimaced. "'Tis true," she agreed, "Still, I think we should bring Brigid up here and then deal with her mother." The lass sighed deeply, looking at her feet and shaking her head negatively. "Will this curse on our people never end?" She looked sadly into John's eyes, and then took the last couple of steps up to him, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist.

"I wish I knew," John answered, hugging Mary in return. "I certainly wish I knew."

Mary released her grip on her friend and quickly turned back to the passageway toward the bunkroom. "Let's go," she directed resolutely.

John followed his girlfriend back down the dark, narrow stair. The couple swiftly scurried down the constricted, putrid aisles, breathing as little as humanly possible. They stopped at Brigid's bedside where she slept uneasily. Mary touched the lass's forehead with a hand and grimaced.

“She is still on fire,” she informed John worriedly.

John placed his arm supportively around Mary's waist. He looked up into Sheila's bunk. Her shallow breathing was almost imperceptible. Touching the woman's forehead gently, the lad pulled quickly away. “Herself feels like hot coals,” he whispered. “What should we do?”

“Get Brigid,” Mary determined bluntly. She turned toward the stair.

John reached into the bunk and gently lifted their friend into his cradling arms. He gently adjusted the blanket as best he could to better cover the lass. Brigid shifted slightly in his arms and grasped him weakly around the neck.

“Where?” she whispered weakly.

“Shhhh,” John whispered. “We are going up on deck.”

Brigid slowly raised her head, looking feebly over John's shoulder back toward her mother's receding bunk. “Mother,” she grumbled.

“I will take care of her,” John promised, not knowing if his friend understood a word.

Out of strength, Brigid relaxed into John's arms. He reached the base of the stair and carefully positioned the lass as he began the steep climb out of the dark hold. Mary waited at the top of the steps with the door held open. Bright sunlight streamed through the opening, temporarily blinding the lad. Brigid suddenly coughed heavily. Her shaking body threw John slightly off balance. His right foot slipped off a rounded step, sending his left shoulder roughly into the wooden handrail, narrowly missing Brigid's head. John grimaced, caught his balance and searched for the next step up with a blind foot.

A sharp pain shot down John's arm, starting from the point where he banged against the railing. Knowing he had no choice but to proceed to the top of the stair, the lad closed his eyes, took a deep breath and forced himself and his passenger upward.

“Mary, Michael, and Saint Peter,” Mary exclaimed as John exited the gloom into the bright sun. “Your arm is bleeding like a butchered pig!” She looked quickly around the deck,

then settled for tearing a small corner off Brigid's blanket to seal the lad's wound.

John refused to wait any longer as Mary tried desperately to wrap his moving arm. "Let me set Brigid down somewhere, then you can patch my arm."

The lad moved quickly to his chosen sleeping spot against the forecastle wall. Mary followed closely behind. Reaching the little pile of his belongings, John instructed Mary to roll out his blanket on the rough planks. He then gently laid Brigid on the blanket, resting her head carefully on his little bundle of extra clothing. She opened her eyes slightly and tried a thin smile, shivering heavily with fever.

Mary was quickly at John's side, covering Brigid's quaking body. Making her friend as comfortable as possible, the lass turned to tend to John's wound. He flinched as the pesky young woman dabbed at his arm with the rough patch of blanket material. John finally stopped to look at his wounded arm, wondering why his friend was so persistent about doctoring him. Much to his surprise, his whole upper arm was blood soaked. Several large drops of blood had splattered onto the ship's deck at his feet. "Holy Mother of God," he responded in astonishment. "How did that happen?"

"I do not know, but you sit yourself down right here until I can get the bleeding stopped," Mary ordered firmly. "We cannot have you go and bleed to death now, can we?"

John managed a light chuckle. "Suppose not," he confirmed. "Cannot do a body any good."

"Hand me my water jug," she instructed.

John reached across Brigid, picking up a partially full bottle. Mary took the jug, poured a little water on the scrap of cloth and began dabbing at John's arm once again. The lad flinched, jerking his arm hastily away from his insistent nurse. "Get back here!" she ordered with a sly smile. "I have got to get it clean."

The lad reluctantly complied, offering his arm for more torture. Mary opened the large

slash in his shirtsleeve to try assessing the damage. She grimaced slightly as the blood began to flow once again. “’Twas gashed pretty well,” she stated, wrinkling her nose, “but, I think you will live to see another day.” She replaced the cloth tightly against his bleeding wound.

“I have but one other shirt,” John complained, looking at his frayed and bloodied sleeve.

“Well do not look to me,” Mary responded snidely. “I have got nothing left that would fit you proper.” She laughed slightly, pulling the rag away from her patient’s arm to view her progress. “Here, hold the bandage on here tightly,” she instructed the lad.

Brigid moaned slightly, shivered visibly and tried to pull her blanket tighter around her neck. Mary moved from John’s side to help the lass. Wrapping her friend as tightly as she could in the two blankets, Mary sat back down between her two friends.

John smiled warmly at the dedicated lass. Mary looked back at him sternly, “And what would you be so smiling about, your torn arm and all?” she queried with mocking antagonism.

“You are just such a lovely nurse,” he replied, smiling even broader.

Mary blushed slightly, tapping him playfully on the leg. The lass reached over to feel Brigid’s forehead. “I wish her fever would come down a bit,” she stated worriedly. “Come here, pray with me.”

John looked at his friend, bewildered. “Pray?” he asked. “I have not done that in so long that I doubt the Holy Virgin even remembers who I am!” He kind of smiled.

“No, now, I am serious. Help me pray for our friend,” she retorted seriously. Mary rose to her knees beside Brigid, crossed herself, and clasped her hands in front of her. She looked sternly over to John.

Reluctantly, John knelt beside Mary, and prepared himself for prayer. “I hope you remember who I am, God,” he teased, looking up toward Heaven.

Mary elbowed him stiffly in the side. Settling back down, she began a silent prayer. John watched for a couple of moments then decided to join her. He figured it probably could not

hurt, anyway.

Several minutes of prayer continued until Mary turned and sat cross-legged on the deck. John looked over at his friend and quickly joined, dropping heavily beside her. Looking out across the ship, the lad spotted Connor and his cohorts staring at them. The three lads leaned heavily against the stair shroud. All with arms crossed and soured faces.

After several minutes, Connor took a few steps closer to John and his friends, followed closely by Douglas and Peter. "The sick ones should stay below!" he shouted hatefully, and turned sharply toward the stern of the ship. All the passengers within earshot turned to see what the ruckus was all about.

John sat silently, glaring at the three young men as they walked away. "Bunch of buggers," he spat, tensing rigidly with ire. He closed his fist tightly and pounded the rough planking of the deck.

"Let them be," Mary consoled him with a pat on his leg. "They are a bunch of idiots."

The indignant lad reached for his aching shoulder that had begun to bleed slightly once again. He stared angrily after the antagonistic group. "No wonder we live as servants to the English," he stated painfully from nowhere, "we are always at our own kin's throats." John looked sadly at Mary. "We will never be free like this."

Mary looked silently into her friend's longing eyes. She gently brushed a lock of errant hair from his sad eyes. Taking his hand, the lass interwove his fingers tightly into her own. "We need a leader, strong and brave, but with deep compassion and commitment to our people."

"Aye, but where is such a person?"

A warm smile formed on Mary's lips as she gazed deeply into John's eyes. She pulled his hand softly to her face, rubbing his rough skin against her smooth face. "He comes from the most unlikely places," she answered softly, looking across the deck at the retched group milling about. "Sometimes he is standing right in front of us and we just turn a blind eye."

John took a deep breath and followed her eyes across his countrymen.

Chapter 19

“I need to go below to see if I can get Sheila to eat a wee bit,” John informed Mary quietly. “She has not eaten at all for the past two days. I fear she is taking a turn for the worst.”

“Me as well,” Mary answered worriedly. “Kate has been an angel to look in on her for the past few days. Even she said Brigid’s mother looks as if death already has a firm hold on her.”

John looked back at Brigid, who slept peacefully behind them. “At least Brigid seems to be recovering. Her fever has been much less today and she seems to be sleeping and eating much better.”

“Aye, herself does at that.” Mary gently touched her friend’s face with a smile. “Much better.”

Brigid squirmed slightly at the light touch. The bright morning sun poured warmly onto the slumbering lass. She rolled onto her side facing her friends and opened her eyes slightly to

the brightness. A small smile cracked her flushed lips. "Morning," the weak lass whispered hoarsely.

Mary smiled lovingly back at her friend. "Maidin mhaith," she answered.

"In English," Brigid returned, rising tentatively on an elbow. "Only English now... America."

John smiled hugely at the determined lass. "Only English now," he agreed. Mary nodded affirmatively in unison.

A small puff of white cloud shaded the sun briefly, casting a swiftly moving shadow across the sun splashed deck. A light breeze tousled the trio's grimy hair and noisily ruffled the full sails. Brigid weakly held up a hand to shade her eyes from the sun as it erupted from behind its quickly moving cover. She took in a deep breath and sat up slowly, leaning back against the forecastle wall.

Pulling the blanket up to her neck, Brigid closed her eyes and took in another deep breath. John and Mary watched the lass happily, feeling that she must be doing much better. Brigid opened her eyes once again, shading them against the glaring light. John repositioned himself to block the bright rays from the struggling lass.

"You must be feeling better," John quipped with a broad smile.

"Better?" Brigid answered forcing a smile in return. "Yes, better." She shifted her position and shivered slightly under the thin blanket. "My mother? She. . .better?"

John's smile diminished quickly. He looked over to Mary as if looking for direction. Mary looked sadly back at her friend. He quickly redirected his attention to Brigid. "No," he started honestly, "your mother is not doing well."

Brigid looked back at him puzzled. "Better?" she questioned.

"No," Mary joined in. "Not better. Still very sick."

Brigid's shoulders slumped slightly as her eyes lowered to the deck in front of her. A

tear slipped down her cheek and onto the blanket. "What do?" the saddened lass asked, slipping her hand from under the blanket and pointing to herself. "Me, what do?"

John slid beside Brigid and put his arm around her shoulder, pulling her tightly against his chest. "You," he answered lovingly, "get better." He pointed to her playfully, trying to break the suddenly sullen mood. "I am going to see your mother in a few moments." The lad pointed to himself and to the stair shroud. Brigid looked him sadly in the eyes and nuzzled warmly against her friend.

Mary moved in beside the couple, unwrapping her food bundle. The stores of biscuits that came from the ship's pantry had become inedible. They were hard as stones and, more than not, had mold growing in hairy spots all over them. Most of the passengers had begun to just fling the tasteless things into the sea. The industrious lass had begun to follow the example of the other passengers and prepare a hard panbread or corn meal gruel from their daily rations of cornmeal and water. The option was even more tasteless, but at least it was safe to eat. Breaking a corner off one of the small loaves of pan bread, Mary offered the morsel to Brigid.

The ailing young woman took the tidbit and sat up slightly away from John. She shielded her eyes once again from the glaring sun and leaned heavily against the forecastle wall. Brigid then accepted a small chunk of dried meat and ate her tiny breakfast as her friends watched.

John smiled up at Mary, happy to see the signs of recovery from their friend. "I am going below to check on Sheila," he informed the lass softly.

Brigid looked quickly to the lad. "Me go?" she asked weakly, trying to stand to her feet.

"Níl," John responded, pulling her gently back to the deck.

Brigid frowned at the insistent lad. "English," she replied sharply.

John smiled softly and acknowledged his friend, "English, I know. You stay here and get better. I will check on your mother." The young Irishman gathered himself and stood to his feet. Mary quickly took his place beside Brigid.

Both young women looked up at him, squinting at the bright sky that he stood against. John picked up his food bundle and water jug, and then turned toward the stair shroud amidships. He caught sight of Eileen and Martin standing at the vessel's railing. It had been several days since they had spoken, so the lad turned their way. "Good morning, sister," he hailed on his approach.

The young couple turned, hand in hand to greet John. "Fine morning, isn't it?" Eileen greeted happily in return. "Where you off to? Would you like to join us for a while? We just saw some lovely dolphins swimming beside the ship."

John smiled warmly at his sister. "No thank you. I am off to check on Brigid's mother below. She seems to have taken a turn for the worst. And I promised Brigid I would take good care of her."

"I do not know how you manage to go down there," Martin answered honestly. "I hear people say the fever is going around below. Take care of yourself lad."

"I shall," John answered, his face becoming more stern. "I have not been below for a few days, but it almost seems I can still smell the stench from the last time I was down there. If it were not for my promise to Brigid, no hounds from Hell could drag me down there again."

Eileen smiled at her brother. She turned and hugged his neck lovingly. "You will be a fine, faithful husband," she acknowledged softly into his ear. "I hope I can always be as trustworthy to my friends."

"You shall," John answered, "I know you that well, sister."

The lad turned to continue his duties. Stopping briefly at the door to the stair shroud, he drew a long, deep breath before entering the dark, rancid bunkroom. He gingerly fingered the still tender wound on his arm, triggering the dark memory of rescuing Brigid from that fetid pit. One last deep breath and John opened the door to the stairwell and plunged into the dark portal.

He held his breath all the way down the stair, stopping at the base to allow his eyes to

adjust to the eternal gloom. Unwillingly, John exhaled slowly, then tried a small sniff of the still air. The putrid thickness suddenly stuck in his throat, forcing him to cough and turning his stomach with repugnancy. He tried another shallow breath with the same result.

Unable to stomach the putrid smell any longer, John shot back up the stair into the welcome sunlight and sweet sea air. He burst through the door, coughing and shielding his eyes from the intense glare of the bright sun. The lad turned, placing his hands on the edge of the shroud roof, swallowing hard to stifle the regurgitation threatening to erupt from his throat. He leaned heavily against the structure, breathing in deeply and trying to clear the thick stench from his lungs. John spat onto the deck at his feet, attempting to eradicate the horrid taste from his mouth.

There had to be another plan. He could not leave Sheila unattended. John turned toward the forecastle. He quickly traversed the deck toward Mary and Brigid. He would have to cover his nose and mouth to stand the stench below.

Mary watched her friend approach with puzzlement in her eyes. Brigid sat against the forecastle with her eyes closed. John approached silently, holding a finger to his lips to keep Mary quiet. He hoped not to disturb Brigid with his return. Quickly, he retrieved the tattered, blood spattered shirt he had been injured in. As quickly as he could, the lad turned back toward the stair. He could feel Mary's eyes staring at him the whole way back. His odd actions seemed to have attracted several curious onlookers.

Numerous passengers watched as John arrived once again at the doorway to the stair. He looked around at the mostly empty looks in their eyes as he tied the spattered shirt tightly around his face. The thickly folded material made his breathing a bit more laborious, but, at least it should help him bear the stench below.

A haggard, middle-aged woman slowly approached John from behind, startling him when she spoke. "Please sir, my husband is still down there. Will you be so kind as to check on

himself for me? He would not let me come near after he became very ill.” Her raspy voice grated on the lad like a dry twig on a sun-bleached rock.

“There are many people below and I do not know your husband,” John answered, hoping to get out of the dark chamber as quickly as possible.

“I will tell you where he is,” the hag begged, “he is not far from the stair.”

John closed his eyes in dismay and shook his head affirmatively. The woman pinpointed out the bunk where her husband lay as John listened half-heartedly. “Thank you very much, lad,” she praised him, reaching up to mistakenly grasp his sore arm in appreciation.

John moaned, quickly pulling away from her grip. “My arm is wounded,” he quickly explained.

“I am so sorry,” the woman apologized. “When you come back out, I will fix it for you.”

“Thank you,” the lad responded, trying to be polite. He turned for the door, taking a deep breath before entering. He did not know how effective his mask would prove to be. However, he had to remain long enough this time to complete his duties.”

Quickly opening the door, John entered the darkness of the stairway. The shaft of diffused sunlight streaming from the door helped break up the gloom somewhat. He turned, reopening the door and propped it open for light. Slowly, the lad descended the stairway, allowing his vision to adjust as he went. The rancid odor, though still noticeable, was at least bearable with the mask protecting his breathing.

The guarded lad reached the bottom of the stair and gazed around the gloom-filled room. A low moan from across the hold was the only break in the ominous silence. John’s apprehension piqued as he could almost feel the cold fingers of death rake down his spine. Something was surely amiss. He could feel it in his gut. Another low moan sent a cold shiver up the spooked lad’s back from head to toes.

John took a step toward Sheila’s bunk and stopped once again. He could feel someone

watching him. Another shiver raced up his backbone. His breathing raced through the thick mask. His body shivered severely. After two quaking moments, John forced himself forward into the deepening shadow.

The lad felt something lightly grasp his shoulder in the darkness. He turned to find someone's hand reaching from a nearby bunk and loosely gripping his arm. His heart pounded.

"I am sorry, I cannot help you," he stammered. But the hand would not release its grip.

John reached up and grasped the icy hand, trying to extract himself. The attached limb was stiff as an oak tree. A cry stuck in the lad's throat. He looked quickly into the bunk where the limb originated. The eyes of emaciated death stared back at him.

He gasped, pushing the dead hand roughly away. Instantly, he shot down the aisle toward Sheila's bed. John looked behind him several times as he traversed the dark passage. His journey to the woman's bedside seemed like an eternity. His legs felt weak and his labored, erratic breathing rasped in the stillness. The only sounds he could hear above his own breathing was an occasional muffled moan from somewhere in the room and the sounds of heavy footsteps on the deck above. The ominous feel of death now completely surrounded him.

John finally arrived at Sheila's bunk, his heart pounding with apprehension. The woman lay unmoving at his arrival. The nervous lad peered in at the woman through the shadow. He could detect no sign of movement from her breathing. A bolt of dread shot through his chest. Her eyes and cheeks were sunken deeply into her face and a fleshless arm rested awkwardly across her body. Tentatively, he reached out and touched the woman's forehead. Her skin was cold as ice.

"Holy Mother of God!" he whispered, crossing himself rapidly several times. "Sweet Brigid, do not let this be."

John backed away from the bunk, bumping into the row of bed frames across the aisle. "What do I do now?" he asked no one in particular. The lad crossed himself once more and

turned quickly for the exit.

Another low cough and moan sent chilblains up John's spine once again. He reached the dead man's arm that protruded across the aisle and ducked quickly under, crossing himself again as he rose to full height. The frightened lad broke into a run toward the base of the stair.

The mask restricted his breathing to the point where he felt faint as he reached the stairway. John stopped for a minute to regain his senses, lest he take another tumble and injure himself once again on the steep steps. His rapid, shallow breathing eventually began to regulate.

Turning his eyes toward the dazzling opening above, he took a couple of quick steps up the stair toward the exit.

An old woman's face peered back at him through the bright portal. At first John thought it was a delusion. Then he remembered his promise to check on the old woman's husband. The reluctant lad turned back down the stairway in search of the old man.

He reached the bunk described by the old hag and peered in. An emaciated old fellow looked weakly back up at the lad through the dark. "Have you come to help me, lad?" the old man asked weakly.

"Aye, sir," John answered softly, "I have indeed."

The old man smiled slightly, lifting a bony hand to the lad beside him. "I could use some water and a wee taste of food," he begged.

The weight that had been crushing John's heart fell off like a stone. He smiled back at the gentleman. Looking down at the bundle of food and the water jug he still carried, the lad took the old man's hand and helped him sit up on the side of his bunk. "Here, sir. This is all I have, but you are welcomed to it."

"Such a fine lad," the man lauded. "Thank you very much!" He took the water and feebly pulled it to his lips. John assisted the man, intentionally feeling his skin for temperature. He seemed too cool to have a fever. Maybe he would pull through.

“How do you feel, sir,” John asked with concern.

“Much better than a few days ago. I sent my wife away a week or so ago. She left me what little food she had and I have managed to survive on that, but I have had nothing for the last two days.”

“Saint Brigid bless you, sir,” John blessed the man. “Your wife asked me to stop and check on you just a short time ago. I can now take her the good news.” John opened his food bundle and took out one of the pan breads that Mary had prepared. “Eat a little of this to get your strength and then we will get you out of this darkness and back to your wife.”

“The blessings of all the Saints and Angels on you, lad!” the old man responded, taking the morsel from John. He quickly finished the small cake of bread and took another drink of water. “Ahhh, lad, ‘tis a grand gift you give me. I think I am now ready to return to the living.”

John smiled. That statement meant more to him than the old man could possibly know. He helped the fellow gingerly slide off his bunk to the floor. The old chap’s wobbly legs would hardly support him. Wrapping a steadying arm around the fellow’s waist, John directed him toward the stairway. The old woman still peered through the doorway into the darkness below.

The old fellow looked up, spotting his wife’s face and called out to her. “Colleen! I am coming up Colleen!”

“Seamus? Is that you, Seamus?” Colleen cried back, hardly disguising her enthusiasm and excitement. “Saint Michael and all the Angels of Heaven, thank you!” She crossed herself and stood anxiously at the doorway as the two men slowly plodded up the steps.

John and Seamus stepped through the small doorway, shielding their eyes from the blinding sunlight. Colleen rushed the men, throwing her arms around both of them. Tears streamed from her sunken eyes. “I thought you dead,” she cried. “Thank you, lad, for bringing him back to me!”

John stood in her embrace, untying his mask with one free hand and feeling slightly

embarrassed. A small group of passengers began to gather around. They all seemed to be friends and family members of Seamus. John noticed the lad, Douglas, who had antagonized him earlier, was amongst the group.

Seamus slipped out of John's grasp and into the waiting arms of his faithful wife.

"Thank you very much, lad," he repeated. "I am forever in your debt."

John just smiled at the fellow and turned toward his waiting friends. Douglas hurried to his side, putting a friendly arm across his shoulder. "John, is it? Thank you for helping my uncle. I am sorry that I gave you such a miserable time earlier. I was just frightened and listening to Connor."

"Forgiven," John answered simply. "I have got to go to my friends right now. I will see you later on deck."

Douglas patted him stoutly on the back and turned back toward his uncle. John spotted Mary standing where he had left her, anxiously awaiting his return. Brigid was sitting upright once again at Mary's side, looking slightly stronger and more wakeful. Mary noticed his return and waved broadly at the lad.

John's heart suddenly sank once again, the elation of aiding Seamus faded as he thought of Brigid's mother. He stopped short of his friends, motioning Mary to come to him. She looked quickly down at Brigid and stepped away to join him.

"What is wrong?" Mary asked, concern wavering in her voice as she approached.

"It is Sheila," John answered dejectedly, turning his back so that Brigid could not see his sadness. "She...she is dead."

Mary gasped. "Holy Jesus!" she replied, crossing herself quickly. "Is she still...ah, still down there?"

"Aye, and she is not the only one," John answered sadly. "I know there is at least one more dead, and probably more."

“Can we get her up here?” Mary questioned. “She should have a proper funeral. Even though we have no priest.”

“I am not going back down there! ‘Tis horrible!”

“We need to do something!” Mary prodded. “We cannot just leave her down there to rot!” She looked around to check on her impatient friend. “We also must tell Brigid. We cannot just let her think everything is all right.”

“Aye, agreed,” John confirmed. “Might as well get it over with.” He turned toward Brigid and slowly sauntered to where she sat.

“Mother?” Brigid queried, a glint of sparkle returned to her eyes. “Mother all right?”

John sat silently down beside the lass and took her hand. A dark look began to overtake Brigid’s brightened demeanor. Deep sadness filled John’s eyes as he looked into his friend’s worried face.

“Brigid,” he began painfully. “Your mother was very sick.” He could tell she did not understand by the look in her eyes. He decided to start over and just be direct. “Your mother, she is. . .uh. . .” He was having a very difficult time just telling the lass that her mother was no longer alive. John cleared his throat, the look of anguish steadily growing on Brigid’s face. “Your mother has died,” he finally forced out as tenderly as he possibly could. “Understand?”

A look of uncomprehending anguish completely clouded the lasses face at that point. She looked up at Mary, who had taken a position standing behind John. “Mother?” she directed toward Mary. “All right?”

“Níl,” Mary replied sadly. “Is bás ag dó mháthair.”

“Bhí sí marbh?” Brigid answered, stunned.

“Is sea,” Mary answered, offering her condolences. “Tá brón orm.” The lass looked away from her friend, large tears welling up in her eyes.

Brigid sat staring at Mary, disbelief written across her face. Suddenly she erupted into

deep sobbing. The lass' weak body quaked with the violence of her lament. She let go a wail that attracted the attention of most others on the ship.

John and Mary took a place on either side of the grieving young woman, wrapping loving arms around her in consolation. Brigid melted between her two friends. Her tears flowed freely.

John was heartsick. He felt he was the constant bearer of bad news. Would this plague of death never leave them? How much further was it to this 'new world'? No one gave any indication that they had another day's journey or another month. If it were another month, how many more Irish would die aboard that boat. What would happen if they were to confront another fierce storm that required everyone to go below, what then? What of the dead bodies below? Would anyone ever go down to retrieve them? His disgust for the current state of humanity was beginning to overcome his sorrow.

John looked slowly around the deck. More than a hundred passengers milled around the restricted enclosure, most of them feeble and at the verge of starvation. More passengers than not were dressed in rags, hardly fit for wearing. Fortunately, the weather had stayed relatively warm and dry for the past couple of weeks, allowing those that would to sleep and remain up in the fresh air. He felt grateful once again that he and his sister had been relatively healthy when they boarded the ship and had managed to stay that way.

Brigid's crying had subsided greatly and the weakened lass shifted, curling up across Mary's lap. John rose gently to his feet so as not to disturb her. The lad knelt quietly beside Mary and whispered into her ear. "I will go tell the Captain that there are dead below. Maybe he will send some crewmen or someone else to retrieve them."

Mary silently nodded her agreement. John turned and quietly walked away. He spotted Eileen and Martin sitting together with Paddy and Honor around one of the extinguished fire pits. Deciding he could use a little moral support, the lad decided to join them for a few minutes.

"Hi ya', John," Paddy greeted as the young man approached. "Come join us for a

while!”

“Thank you very much,” John responded with a smile. “I have but a few minutes and then there is a regretful duty I must see to.”

“A duty, you say,” Honor replied curiously. “And what kind of duty would that be?”

John sat down between his sister and Paddy. “A very unpleasant one I am afraid,” he answered, the small smile fading quickly from his ruddy face.

All eyes were on the lad, awaiting his continuation. John squirmed into a comfortable position and looked around the small group. “As you probably know, I went down below this morning to check on Brigid’s mother, Sheila.”

“Aye,” Paddy interrupted, “and what a fine thing, bringing up old Seamus Magee to his wife like that. You are a brave lad, you are!” The others in the group sounded their agreement.

John blushed slightly and looked down at his bare feet. “Aye, but that is not the problem.” Everyone quieted as John fidgeted, trying to once again get comfortable on the hard deck. “You see, the reason I could bring up old Seamus is that Sheila is lying dead in her bunk down there.” He stopped and looked across the disheartened faces of his friends and sister. “And, she was not the only one. I know there is at least one more dead fellow in his bunk, and probably more.”

Paddy looked away, out across the rolling ocean. The other three just stared at John, deep sadness in their eyes. “I was afraid that was the case. I just could not bring myself to go below and find out,” Paddy commented solemnly.

John nodded his agreement with Paddy and continued, “I was just on my way to tell the Captain about the dead below when I saw you.”

“‘Tis a good thing,” Martin agreed, “if the Captain will even listen to you. He has not paid much attention to our needs or requests up to now. Why should he change?”

“This is his ship. He will have to remove the bodies at some time,” Eileen spoke in her

brother's defense. "Best to get them up now, before they start to rot."

Everyone wriggled their noses at the thought of a rotting human corpse just under their feet. "Aye, 'tis true, Eileen," Paddy agreed. "Come lad, I will join you in speaking with the Captain. Maybe a group can convince him of the urgency more readily than one person."

John smiled back at Paddy. "Thank you very much," he responded brightly. "I did not relish facing the Captain alone."

Paddy and John rose simultaneously, followed quickly by Martin, at Eileen's prompting. The three men walked quickly to the steps of the quarterdeck. The Captain was nowhere to be seen. John moved to the center of the ship in front of the Boatswain, who stood at the railing directing his crew to trim the sails after a slight wind change.

"Sir," he called up to the officer. "I need to speak to the Captain, sir."

The Boatswain ignored his request, focusing intently on the ship's rigging. He barked out a couple of orders to the sailors stationed on the beams. His voice was brusque and commanding, as was his demeanor.

"Sir," John called again, this time more forcefully, "I have urgent business for the Captain." The officer still refused to acknowledge the lad's presence.

Paddy shook his head in dismay. "Sir," he chimed in, "there are dead below. They will soon begin to rot and pollute your hold."

Paddy's statement garnered the undivided attention of the Boatswain. "Dead?" he spat back. "How many? How long they been there?"

"I was down there earlier this morning and I saw at least two dead," John answered him pertly. "I am not sure if there are more, I did not stay long enough to look around much. I know that at least one of them was alive yesterday. The other, I am not sure."

"Stay here," the officer directed, "I will inform the captain."

John and Paddy looked at each other pleased that they had been heard. "Thank you for

speaking up like that,” John replied, patting Paddy on the shoulder.

Paddy just smiled back at the lad. The sound of footsteps plodding up the rear stair of the raised deck signaled the return of the Boatswain. The officer resumed his place at the handrail. “Captain will be up directly,” he rasped.

The head of Captain MacMillan soon appeared coming up the back stair. He looked across the deck, spotting the three men standing in front of his Boatswain. The Captain sauntered over to take a spot at the railing next to the officer. “Are these the ones?” he asked in his thick Scots brogue.

“Aye, Captain,” the Boatswain affirmed. “That one was below earlier and saw the corpses,” the officer pointed at John.

“Is this true, lad?” the Captain asked with a deep scowl on his face.

“Aye, sir,” John responded sternly. “I saw at least two dead myself. One of them I know by name. The other I have never seen before. There may be more, I do not know.”

“How do you propose to get these bodies out of my hold?” Captain MacMillan queried gruffly.

“I...I did not propose getting them out, sir,” John stammered. “That is why I came to you, to send a couple of your crew down to get them out.”

“A couple...a couple of my crew?” the Captain barked. “To retrieve the bodies of Irish peasants who died of some ungodly disease? Are you daft Lad?”

John cowered. His hope of official aid dropped like a stone in a whirlpool. “But, sir, how will they...uh, who will...”

The Captain glowered down at the stammering lad. “I suggest you find the families of the dead and let them retrieve their own damned bodies.”

“But Captain,” Paddy interrupted once again. None of our own will venture down below with the dead there. See, those who have died have no other family and no one else will retrieve

them. If they lie down there much longer they will pollute your hold where you will be unable to use it for a good while.

Captain MacMillan looked out across the deck into the dark blue sea, obviously pondering Paddy's last statement. "I will not risk the life of any of my crew to retrieve any corpses of sickly Irish," he finally commented with a frightful frown. "I will double the rations of any four Irishmen who will fetch up those bodies." He looked sternly into the faces of John, Paddy, and Martin.

John and Paddy looked at each other. "No," they both answered, shaking their heads in unison. Paddy started to turn away, still shaking his head.

"Wait," the Captain ordered. "I will triple the rations." He looked at the two men awaiting their reply. After a few seconds without an answer, he amended his offer, "I will also give each man a bottle of whiskey. But no more. The Irish can all rot down there if that is unacceptable."

"We will ask if any are willing," Paddy responded, turning away from the officers. He walked slowly away, followed closely by Martin.

John stood in place for a few seconds longer as Captain MacMillan and the Boatswain turned from the railing. "Why could not the oafs wait just three more days to die, after we make landfall," the lad overheard the Captain comment to his officer.

Three days? John thought, we will be landing in three days? Did I hear the man right? He turned anxiously to catch up with Paddy and Martin. "Paddy!" he called after the men. "Wait for me." Paddy and Martin stopped, letting John catch up with them in a few steps.

"I do not think that is what we had in mind, lad," Paddy addressed John as he reached his side. "But, I do not think we will get any better. Ask around and find a few lads who will be willing to go below for their reward."

"I will go myself," John volunteered. "I cannot let Sheila just lay down there and allow

Brigid to suffer any longer.” He looked sternly at Martin. “Come with me, Martin. I need your help.”

Martin looked dejectedly back at John. He started to speak and stopped. “All right,” he acquiesced. “I will help you, for Eileen’s sake.”

John then looked to Paddy. The elder man smiled slightly back at the lad. “I am an old man with weak knees,” he replied. “If I thought I could help, I would be first in line. But, I am afraid you might be dragging me up along with the corpses.” He looked proudly at his son.

“That is a good lad. I am proud of you, son.” Martin smiled back at his father.

“I just heard something else,” John blurted out. Both men looked curiously back at him. “I heard the Captain tell the other fellow that we would be landing in three days.”

Paddy and Martin’s faces both brightened. “Three days?” Martin questioned, astonished. “Are you sure you heard right?”

“I am sure that is what he said,” John answered happily. “Three days!”

“‘Tis grand news indeed!” Paddy boasted. “I think we should keep it to ourselves at this point, however.”

“Agreed,” answered both John and Martin.

“Let us go find two more lads to help you below,” Paddy directed.

Chapter 20

“You have got to tie the cloth tightly around your face,” John instructed Martin, Douglas, and Peter. The two other lads services were enlisted as a favor for helping Douglas’ uncle.

“You can still smell the odor this way, but it is not unbearable.”

“I still do not like this,” Peter complained under his breath. “Going down into the dark with the dead. Let them rest in peace, I say.”

Douglas looked scornfully at his friend as he finished tying the mask over his nose. “Get your mask on,” he commanded, his voice muffled by the thick folds of cloth covering his face.

“A bottle of whiskey, eh?” Peter questioned snidely. “I hope they give it to us right after we get out of that pit of death. I feel I am going to be in need of it!”

John smiled at the resistant lad, the mid-afternoon sun glowing brightly on his sweaty forehead. He looked around a final time, nodding an affirmation to Paddy who stood resolutely,

waiting at the stairway door. He then looked to Brigid, whom he had helped move closer to the opening so that she could be near when her mother was brought up on deck. Mary and Eileen stood beside Brigid, holding the ailing lass' hand. Connor stood at the edge of the growing crowd, glowering at his two-timing friends.

“OK, lads, time to go,” John directed resolutely. He stepped to the door and allowed Paddy to open it for him. The lad stepped into the gloom, allowing his eyes to adjust to the low light before proceeding down the narrow staircase. Silently, he descended the stairs, followed closely by his three companions.

The small group reached the bottom of the dark stair, pausing to regroup before continuing their gruesome task. “Jesus Christ, it stinks in here!” Peter complained quietly. “How could there be anyone alive in this place?”

As if in answer, a low moan and cough echoed from somewhere across the shadowy room. The four partners looked sadly at one another. “What do we do with the ones still living?” Douglas whispered.

“I do not know,” John answered honestly. “We will worry about that later. Come on, I will show you where the old fellow is. Douglas, you and Peter wrap him up in his blanket and take him up. Martin and I will get Brigid's mother.”

Douglas slowly nodded his affirmation. John turned down the dark aisle with Martin at his heels. “Here,” he replied quietly, arriving at the bunk with the hand extended into the walkway. “This is the fellow I told you about.”

John and Martin ducked the limb and left the other two companions to their chore. “We will meet you on deck,” John whispered.

Douglas and Peter both silently nodded their comprehension. Arriving at Sheila's bunk, John looked in at the ill-fated woman. A deep sadness gripped his heart. He could almost feel Brigid's grief. Or was it his own memory?

Martin pressed up against him. "What now?" he whispered nervously.

John snapped back to the task at hand. "We need to wrap her tightly in the blanket. Then you take her feet and I will get her head. We can then carry her up onto the deck."

The shaking lad reached tentatively across the dead woman, pulling the blanket from under her cold body. With Martin at one end, the two lads straightened the blanket over the body, carefully covering her from head to toe. John then rolled the woman away from him as much as possible and tucked the blanket under her body. Finally, the two lads rolled the woman toward themselves, pulling the ends of the blanket to completely wrap around her.

"All right then," John directed, "pull her out gently." He grasped the emaciated woman's stiff shoulders and lifted her off the bunk. Her body weighed almost nothing. Martin had hold of the blanket like two handles, pulling her feet from between the low bunks.

"I will have to go first," Martin commented, adjusting his load as he turned back toward the stair. Quickly, he led the way down the narrow aisle, carrying his end of the light bundle under his left arm.

John followed, struggling to keep a gentle hold on the dead woman's upper body. His grip began to slip and the lad grasped for the firmness of the blanket's corners. "Wait!" John cried quietly. "She is slipping."

He dropped to his knees, resting the woman's head and shoulders onto his lap. A chilblain shot up his spine with the corpse resting coldly across his legs. Martin turned to survey the problem, a grotesque look on his anxious face. "Hurry, would you!" he hissed through clenched teeth.

Changing his tact, John wrapped his hands into the blanket. He figured the bundle would be much more secure that way. The lad struggled to regain his feet and was almost pulled off balance by a harried Martin. "Jesus, Joseph, and Mary, Martin!" he pleaded, "Would you at least let me get my balance?"

Wordlessly, Martin shuffled for the stairway. He stopped momentarily at the base of the steps. "We are coming up!" he called up to Paddy, who stood peering through the doorway with a rag held tightly over his nose.

"They are coming up!" Paddy relayed to the crowd behind him. "Careful, lad."

Martin started up the steep, narrow stairway, holding tightly to Sheila's feet. He struggled up each step, pulling himself along with his free hand. John pushed the woman's body as much as he ethically could. This was his friend's mother, he thought. Not a piece of planking to be shoved up like building materials.

"Give me your end, lad," Paddy directed from his perch. He reached for the woman's feet. "Got it," he confirmed, grasping the end of the blanket tightly.

Martin stood at the top step, helping John with his end of the load. "All right then," John grunted, finally handing off his burden to another fellow who took Paddy's place in the doorway.

John followed Martin out through the exit, shading his eyes to the brightness of the bright afternoon. Paddy and his cohort gently laid the woman's body beside the other. Those who stood near knelt down and crossed themselves, mumbling prayers for the dead.

Brigid slowly approached the covered body, fear and pain in her misty eyes. John took a path to intercept the lass. "Brigid," he called tenderly. She never took her eyes from her mother's corpse.

"Máthair," Brigid cried, suddenly bursting into tears and charging to the dead woman's side. "Tá grá agam duit, a mháthair!" she exclaimed, dropping heavily to her knees beside her mother.

John was quickly beside Brigid, gently stroking the pining lass' hair. Tears began to well up in his own eyes. Mary knelt down on Brigid's other side, placing a loving arm around her shoulder. Brigid reached out and slowly pulled the blanket off her mother's face. It was the colorless, sunken face of a long and agonizing death. Brigid wailed like a banshee. She fell atop

the dead woman, tightly hugging her stiffened neck.

Several old women crowded around the agonizing lass, tears flowing freely down their faces. John moved slowly away, feeling he was out of place with the grieving. He moved to Paddy's side. "Such a sad sight," he commented, quickly brushing an errant tear from his cheek.

"'Tis," Paddy agreed solemnly.

"Has anyone come to claim the old man's body?" John inquired, trying to break the agony of the moment.

"No, not a peep from anyone." Paddy returned sadly.

John looked away, out across the ocean. "We need to go back down there and see if there are any more dead."

Paddy nodded his agreement.

"Come on, Martin," John ordered. Martin haltingly complied, following the lad to where Douglas and Peter stood waiting. "We should go back down," he addressed the group. "There may be others down below. We cannot let our countrymen rot away unattended in an Englishman's boat!"

A sudden flare sparked in the three lad's eyes. "Aye," Peter agreed hotly, "the bastards can take our land but they will not have our dead!" He tied the mask around his face and headed toward the stairway door.

"Wait," John instructed. "It is dark down there. We need matches to light the lamps."

"Good idea," Douglas agreed. "I have got some right here." The lad reached into his pocket, producing several large matchsticks.

"Lovely," John commented, taking a couple of matches from his partner. "Now we need a plan."

"I think we should start in the far corners and work our way out," Martin offered.

"Aye, good plan," Peter acknowledged. "But, I think we should first take a tally, see how

many dead there are. Then we will know what we are facing.”

“Grand,” John agreed, “Then we are off. We will each take a corner of the room and work our way out. We will all meet back out here and determine what kind of a problem we have.”

Peter turned once again for the stair, followed closely by Douglas. Martin looked at John and turned to follow the other two lads. John looked back to see Brigid still laying across her mother's chest. *Poor lass*, he thought. He sighed and stepped quickly off to catch up with his cohorts.

John tied the shirt around his face and followed Martin down the dark passage. The flare of a match brightened the gloom slightly as Douglas held the flame to the wick of the lamp hanging next to the stairway.

“Here Peter, you take this one,” Douglas directed, taking the lamp from its hanger. “There is another just around the corner.”

Peter took the brightly burning lamp and started toward a far corner. Douglas reached the second light and lit the dampened wick. He took the burning lamp off its holder, handing it to Martin. “I am afraid the other lamps are toward the rear of the room,” he said to John.

“‘Tis all right, I have matches!” John held up the wooden sticks. “I will go this way.” He pointed toward one of the unexplored corners.

Douglas nodded his agreement and turned for the opposite side of the room. Even the flickering glow of the receding lamps helped dispel the gloom to some extent. John stepped between the narrow bunks, winding his way to the far corner of the room. He spotted a lamp hanging precariously from one of the ships timbers. The lad reached up, retrieving the vessel and struck a match. The bright flare caused him to squint momentarily as he lit the wick.

Much better, he thought as he set off down the row of bunks once again. John could see several people in the bunks as he passed, however, he did not take the time to see if they were

still living or not. The lad reached the rear of the room and stopped to survey the area.

There were so many bunks. It would take a good while to just search them all. He held his breath as he peeked into the very end row of bunks. The beds were stacked four high with very little room in between. The first four were empty. He exhaled slowly, relaxing his shoulders a little. The second group was also empty as were their counterparts across the narrow aisle.

The lad continued searching the rows of bunks, spotting nothing amiss. Maybe things were not as bad as he feared. John was close to completing his search of the entire first row of bedding. Then there were only five more aisles to check in the section he was to search. Holding out his lamp to better light one of the lower bunks, he peered in on an old fellow who was barely breathing. The poor emaciated man seemed nothing more than a skeleton under his thin blanket. "Sir," he whispered, "can I help you in any way?"

The old man turned slowly to face John, his eyes sunken deeply into his skull-like face and bloody sputum caked down the side of his cheek. John wanted to turn away and run. His stomach turned at the sight. The fellow moaned slightly and closed his eyes, gasping for another breath.

A cry of anguish caught in John's throat. He turned quickly away, not knowing what to do. The lad crossed himself rapidly, praying to all the Saints he knew of to remove the horrid vision. His knees trembled so badly he could hardly stand. The lad finally sank to the floor to regain his composure.

Setting the glowing lamp on the floor beside him, John crossed himself once again. "Saint Brigid, give me strength," he begged under his breath.

The lad took a deep, filtered breath, and stood slowly back to his feet. He intentionally avoided looking in the direction of the old man's bunk and hoped there was no one in the bed above him.

John turned the corner into the second aisle of beds. His heart was pounding so hard that he could hear his own blood pumping in his ears. A sick feeling troubled the lad's stomach and his heart. *God forbid there be others like that in here*, he thought with a grimace.

Tentatively, the lad held his breath and shone his light into the first bunk of the second aisle. Thank God it was empty. The hot breath hissed out of his tight lungs. Second bunk, also empty. Again, he was making progress searching an empty line of bunks.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" a male voice wailed from across the room. "Uuugh!" The sound of a stifled wail quickly followed.

John turned to see what the ruckus was about. Suddenly, the sound of running feet clapped through the dim room. The glow of a swaying lantern shot across the opposite side of the bunkroom and up the stair, disappearing quickly from his view. The lad hoped that one of his partners had not stumbled on as horrifying a scene as himself.

"Douglas," Peter's muffled voice called from across the room. "Douglas, you still here?"

There was no answer. John returned to his duties, shining his lamp into the next empty bunk. He wanted to follow Douglas up the stair and never come back. Yet, he could not leave his duties to his countrymen.

Another low groan echoed through the room, sending more chills up John's back. His nerves were becoming more frayed with each bunk he looked into. He stopped in the center of the aisle, closed his eyes and took another long, slow breath. The faint smell that had earlier permeated his mask was now absent. He figured his nose must be seared from the acrid stench. Letting his shoulders droop, he leaned heavily against the railings.

It seemed he had been down there for an eternity. Maybe he should go up to the deck, catch his breath and return later. He decided against the plan, it would only prolong his agony. He took another deep breath and extricated himself from the bed frames.

John turned, shining his light into the next bunk. The thin blanket that lay across the bed

was heaped over a small lump in the middle of the narrow mattress. His heart jumped. The lad closed his eyes momentarily, and then poked gently at the mound. "Hello," he whispered. "You all right?"

The mound did not move. Another lump grew in his throat, making his breathing erratic. Reaching out with a shaky hand, John pulled the blanket slowly down the bed. Thick, long red hair appeared. Slowly, he continued, revealing the lifeless face of a young woman. She lay on her side staring inanimately at John. His breath caught in his throat. The top of another tiny head became visible. Inching the covering down further he found a wee tot of two or three lying dead in his mother's grasp.

Hurriedly, he recovered the bodies. Tears welled up in his eyes. He wanted to vomit. *Too much death, too much death*, kept echoing through his mind. John rubbed his eyes, crossed himself and moved slowly to the next bunk.

The sound of footsteps plodding down the stair signaled the return of Douglas to his duties. John watched as the glow of the lad's lantern blinked between the forest-like bed frames. The pounding of the lad's heart was beginning to subside a bit and his eyes had begun to dry.

"Are you all right?" Peter called faintly to his friend.

"Aye," Douglas answered hesitantly. "I will survive."

The deathly silence again took over the gloom of the bunkroom. John quickly scanned two more empty bunks. *Thank God the room was not filled with corpses*, he thought sullenly. The lad was not so fortunate with the next two bunks, however. The bodies of a middle aged man and woman lay stiffly under their coverings.

Unfortunately, the sight of death was becoming ever more bearable. John noted the couple and moved to the next aisle. Two aisles down and only four more to go. Then would come the worse task of removing the corpses from their resting places.

John looked up the stairwell into the waiting face of his friend Paddy. His feet and his heart felt extremely heavy as he plodded up the final few steps. The lad stepped out into the late afternoon sunshine. The shadows of the rigging lay distinctly across the deck. A small puff of cloud floated gracefully across the face of the sun, casting the ship into brief shadow.

Taking off his mask, John shielded his eyes as the sun suddenly erupted from behind the cloud. He closed his eyes and took a deep draught of fresh sea air. Paddy moved quietly behind the lad, gently massaging his shoulders.

“How bad was it?” Paddy asked somberly.

John dropped his chin to his chest, kicked at the wooden deck and sighed heavily. “I counted nine dead, two still alive, but very sick, and one poor old fellow who should have given up the ghost long ago,” he answered hesitantly. The lad rubbed his face and eyes in both hands. “What of the others?”

“Martin and Peter have returned,” Paddy replied, “Douglas is still down below.”

John took another long breath and looked around the deck of the ship. A group of curious passengers surrounded each of John's partners. A few others just milled about in the background. Mary stood silently, just a few feet away. Her saddened face was streaked where her tears had dried down both cheeks. Brigid was nowhere to be seen.

Forcing a crooked smile, John reached out for Mary. The eager lass rushed to his open arms. “I have heard the Devil himself would be wont to go below,” she whispered in his ear, hugging his neck tightly.

The lad silently hugged her tightly in return. He would not want to put the weight of his observations on anyone's mind, much less Mary's. John gently stroked the lass' hair and kissed her softly on the cheek.

“Aye,” he finally answered, “‘tis worse than I feared.” A tear formed silently in his eye. John pulled gently out of Mary’s grasp, quickly rubbing his emotions from his face and eyes. “I must go speak with the others.”

John turned, hung his head and strolled to where Martin stood. The small group surrounding Martin opened to allow John to pass. “We need to make a plan,” John addressed the lad simply.

Martin’s face was still ghostly. He stood with his mask hanging loosely from his hand. “I...,” the trembling lad stammered, “I never could imagine it could be so bad.” Eileen pulled next to her beau and took his shaking hand. Tears slipped noiselessly down her cheeks to spill onto the rough deck.

“There is the other one,” a woman in the crowd spouted, pointing toward the stairway.

John and Martin both looked toward the opening. Douglas slipped quickly out of the dark portal and pulled the mask off his ashen face. The lad covered his mouth with a hand and dry heaved several times as he ran for the ship’s railing. He hung his head over the rail, heaving several more times before he stood upright, taking in several long draughts of cool sea breeze.

Peter pulled away from the group surrounding him and joined his friend at the side of the ship. John motioned for Martin to follow him and join the others. The crowd parted once again to allow their exit.

“Douglas, Peter,” John called across the deck. “Let’s talk.”

Peter and Douglas turned toward the approaching lads and nodded their agreement. Both their faces were pallid and their eyes red. “The dead,” Douglas started shakily, “they are everywhere.”

Peter turned away, looking out to sea. “I do not know if I can go back down there,” he confessed. “I...I just do not know.”

John stepped up to the wavering lad and laid a friendly hand upon his shoulder. “I

know," he agreed. "How many did you see down there?"

"I counted twelve dead," Douglas answered softly, "and several more very sick." He looked up into the deepening afternoon sky. "One old woman has been dead a long time. I had to run out when I saw her." He began trembling violently. "I...", the lad stopped short, instead turning to face the gently rolling ocean.

"I saw fifteen dead," Peter spoke up, still facing the ocean. "I think six were from one family. Man, woman and four wee ones." He stopped speaking and took in a long breath. "Only two more were still alive but sick."

"I found nine, myself," John contributed. "Like you say, a few looked like families. And three still alive, barely." He looked to Martin.

Martin closed his eyes, his pale face just beginning to show a little color once again. "I saw but eight," he replied sadly. "But there were six still sick where I was. One is a young woman with two sick children. They look as if they had not eaten in a week."

"There we have it," John summed up the situation. "There are forty four dead below. Plus the two we have already retrieved. And several more still sick. What shall we do?"

"I think we should ask for more help," Martin suggested. "I would be willing to give up some of my extra rations for another pair of hands."

"Aye," Douglas agreed. "We need more help."

"Connor will help," Peter stated matter-of-factly. "I will share my bottle of whiskey with him. "Hell fire, I cannot drink a whole bottle by myself anyway."

John nodded his agreement to the plan. "Agreed. Peter, if you can get Connor's help, I think the rest of us can enlist one more lad each."

"Fair enough," Martin returned. "I think we should get started."

"We need to put the two to rest that were brought up earlier," John directed. "The woman is my friend Brigid's mother. I cannot just let her lie coldly on the deck."

“Agreed,” all three partners chimed in harmony.

John stepped away, walking slowly toward Mary. He wished desperately that there were a Priest on board, even with his disdain of the profession. At least a Priest's last rights would give completion to the dead and the living alike.

Taking Mary's hands into his, John took a breath and looked the lass lovingly in the eyes. “I think we should put Sheila to rest,” he opined quietly. “Is Brigid ready for such?”

“I think herself is,” Mary responded in a hoarse whisper. “She is still by her mother's side at the moment.”

“All right then,” the lad retorted loathingly, “let's get this done.”

Mary stepped away toward the two bodies lying on deck. John followed directly after her. The lad weaved through the group still surrounding the dead and moved quickly to Brigid's side.

The pining lass looked up to John as he approached from where she sat at her mother's side. Lines of grime from the voyage were washed away by a thick flow of tears, leaving white lines down her young cheeks. Though her eyes were dry at that moment, the blazing redness was proof that they were not that way long ago.

John and Mary knelt on each side of Brigid. The lad reached out and lovingly stroked the mourning lasses hair. Brigid reached up, taking him by the neck and squeezing his body tightly to her own. “Tá ghrá agam duit,” she whispered in his ear. “Is love to you.”

John smiled slightly, feeling the trembling lass' feverish body pulled tightly to his own. “I love you, as well,” he whispered back into her ear.

Brigid's body began to once again convulse in tearful sobs. The lad's heart was wrenched. He could not even communicate well enough with the lass to console her. John held her tightly for several minutes more, until her sobs began to subside.

The heartbroken lad gently pulled slightly away, looking compassionately into Brigid

sweet face. "Are you ready to say goodbye?" he asked tenderly.

Though the look on Brigid's face said she did not understand the exact words, his meaning came across very clearly. The lass slowly nodded her tearful affirmation. She looked at her mother's body one more time and stood to her feet along with John. Quickly crossing herself, Brigid clasped her hands together, looked toward Heaven and with silently moving lips began to pray.

John knelt down beside Sheila's body, reached out and wrapped the blanket tightly around her. The late afternoon sun streaked dark shadows across the woman's body. A light breeze tousled the lad's hair as he rose to his feet and summoned the assistance of Martin.

Mary stood near to Brigid, seeing her knees wobbling with a rising fever. The lass put an arm around the sick young woman's waist for support. Brigid's face was becoming ever more flushed as she stood praying.

John and Martin each slid their arms gently under the corpse, lifting her off the hard deck. "Move her to the railing," John instructed his partner.

The pair laid Sheila softly back onto the deck at the railing. "Should we say something?" John asked Mary respectfully.

"I would not know what to say," Mary responded softly as several passengers gathered around.

Paddy arrived with Honor and Eileen at his side. All three of the group crossed themselves in unison. "We have come to pay our last respects," Paddy offered.

"Thank you," Brigid mumbled raspily.

"We feel we should say something, but we do not know what," Mary addressed her father.

"Aye, would you help us, Paddy?"

"I will do what I can, not being a Priest and all," Paddy answered solemnly. He turned

toward the wrapped body of the dead woman, and then looked out to sea. Crossing himself once more, the fellow began as much a eulogy as he could muster. "Dear God," he prayed, "we give you the spirit of this fine woman and mother. Please receive her in your loving arms and comfort her eternal soul."

"Amen," several passengers nearby replied.

"And Lord God," Paddy continued, "Please see fit to give aid to our countrymen. There are too many dead and dying already. Please take this burden from us."

"Amen," the group responded once again. Someone with a tin whistle in the crowd began to play a slow dirge. Numerous passengers in the crowd crossed themselves and began to pray silently.

Brigid began to weep freely once again and leaned heavily upon Mary for support. "Tá ghrá agam duit, a mháthair," she sobbed.

John nodded to Martin and reached down to pick the woman up off the deck once more. The two lads lifted her over the hand railing and gently let her slide into the dark blue water below. The body hit the water with a muffled splash as Brigid wailed out. The lass ran to the railing and watched as her mother's body slowly sank below the surface. Once the body was out of sight beneath the dark water and foam from the ship's wake, Brigid collapsed onto the deck, wailing loudly.

Several people gathered around the hysterical lass in an attempt to comfort her. "Help me get her to her blankets," Mary directed John. "I will stay with her whilst you complete your duties."

John nodded slightly and moved to Brigid's side. He tried taking her hand and leading her up from the deck where she lay in a pile. However, she refused to move. Finally, John scooped the bawling lass up in his arms and spirited off with her.

Burying her face in John's chest, Brigid trembled heavily with her weeping. Her feverish

body weighed little in his arms. Mary followed at his heels, her hand lovingly pressed against his back.

Reaching their sleeping spot, John laid Brigid carefully on her blanket and covered the quaking lass tightly. His heart ached with empathy for the distraught lass. He watched her silently for several moments.

“I have got a lot of work to do,” he eventually said, reminding himself as much as informing Mary.

Mary looked lovingly at the young man, took him in her arms and kissed him gently on the lips. “You are a fine man, John Walsh,” she replied. “A fine man indeed.”

John stroked the lass' hair and kissed her back on the forehead. “And you are a fine lass,” he confirmed. “Take care of our friend and I will return as soon as possible.”

John looked up to see the body of the other old fellow slide silently over the hand railing and into the dark water. He rubbed his face in his hands and walked briskly toward the crowd. “There is much to be done,” he whispered to himself. “Too much!”

Chapter 21

The light of the flickering lamps danced brightly in the growing night breeze. Stars twinkled brightly between puffs of quickly drifting clouds. The silence on the ship was deafening as John and Martin exhaustedly laid the last corpse on the darkened, gently rolling deck.

As they had been doing all evening, Paddy and a small group of faithful passengers promptly gathered the body and cast it reverently into the waiting waves. Each member duly crossed himself and muttered a blessing for the unfortunate soul.

John and Martin slumped onto the hard deck beside Douglas and Peter. All four lads were exhaustedly sprawled against the railing, catching a well-deserved rest. John brushed the hair out of his eyes with a sore hand and stared up into the night. The activities of the day weighed upon his heart like a fallen oak. His emotions seemed to exude through his pores,

sweating his angst out to be carried away by the wind.

“When do we get our whiskey?” Peter muttered. ‘I could sure use some right now!’

“Me as well,” Martin agreed. “Too bad no one else would volunteer to help us. Seems we will have no one to share our bottles with.”

“Other than your Da,” Douglas teased, venting his pent up anxiety. “It was he who played Priest and sent the unfortunates to the sea. And you know how Priests like their drink!” He looked at Martin, smiling slightly.

“Aye, and the fellows who helped him,” John added. He shifted slightly, trying to relieve the tension on his aching back. The lad looked back toward the quarterdeck. He could see a couple of sailors milling around the raised platform in the glow of a flickering lantern. “I will see if we can get our bounty right now,” the lad volunteered, standing groaningly to his feet.

John shuffled slowly across the deck toward the rear of the ship, followed closely by the other three lads. Stopping at the base of the poop deck stair, he called up to one of the sailors standing at the rail. “Sir, we four have just now finished retrieving the bodies of the dead from below and have come to collect our payment.” He shifted slightly, awaiting an answer from the stoic figure.

“Sir,” John tried again a little more emphatically, “the Captain promised us each a bottle of whiskey when we brought the dead up from below.”

Still the sailor said nothing. He turned away from the handrail and began to walk away from John and the others. Aggravated and too tired to have much patience, John looked around himself and spotted a small clump of frayed rope that had recently been trimmed off.

The lad picked up the hand-sized bundle and tossed it, hitting the retreating sailor squarely in the back. The seaman jerked around and glared toward the four insubordinate lads. “You should not a done that!” he growled, retracing his steps to the railing. “Off with you. Get away from here, you lugs!” The second sailor standing at the helm smirked at his shipmate.

"We just want our whiskey," John repeated forcefully.

"Come back tomorrow," the incensed tar shot back. "Stores are closed for the night."

"We do not want it tomorrow, we want it now," Peter spoke up.

His eyes blazing with wrath, the sailor turned toward the steps to the deck. "You might not need it at all when I finish with you!" he croaked. "Off with you whilst you still can!"

The four lads stood tightly at the base of the steps, awaiting the gnarled fellow. A shot of adrenaline infused John with new life. He stood firm at the lead of the pack. "If you come down here," he warned, "You might end up floating in the ocean with the other bodies we just set afloat!"

The infuriated sailor hissed at the belligerent lad. He took a heavy step down the flight of stairs. "What is going on here?" the thick Scottish brogue of Captain MacMillan boomed.

The seaman stopped in his tracks, turning to greet the officer. "Just getting rid of these noisy buggers, sir," he cowed. "They are making themselves a nuisance."

"What do they want?" the Captain questioned.

"They were asking for..." the sailor began.

John interrupted the fellow, wishing to express his own request. "Captain, sir, we have come for our whiskey. We have just finished removing all the dead from below and now would like to have our payment."

The Captain scowled briefly at the four ragged lads. "Give them their whiskey," he ordered the frowning sailor.

"Ship's stores are closed, sir," the unwilling tar croaked back.

"Then open them, man! The lads deserve their drink after digging through the dead all day!" Captain MacMillan snapped at the sailor. "And take their names down for extra rations the remainder of the voyage."

"Aye, sir," the sailor complied grudgingly.

“Thank you very much, Captain,” John replied gratefully. He turned and followed the sailor to a small doorway entering into the wall of the raised deck.

“Wait here,” the sailor snarled harshly.

The four lads gathered around the closed door. Several minutes passed, seeming like an eternity to the small group. “What if he does not come back?” Douglas whined.

“Now, where would he go?” Peter chuckled at his friend’s pessimism. “Besides, we could just tell the Captain what he did and probably have his toothless arse dragged behind the ship.”

All four lads chuckled at the vision of the sailor being towed behind the ship. “‘Twould be grand fun, would it not?” John mused.

The door cracked open, revealing a brightly lit lantern. The face of the sailor in charge of the stores appeared through the opening. Silently, he led them to the ship’s pantry and unlocked the door. The keys rang on the heavy brass ring as he spun the lock. The door swung open into the pitch dark room. “Stay here,” the fellow ordered. “I will bring your whiskey.”

He disappeared through the doorway, closing the portal at his back. Quickly he returned carrying a bottle of liquor. “Here,” he spat, glaring at the four lads.

“We get a bottle each,” John replied vehemently. “Get us three more!”

The old seaman glowered at the belligerent lad. Slowly, he retreated back into the opening and returned with three more bottles. He quickly handed a jug to each of the four lads.

“Now the Captain said to take down our names,” John ordered, feeling cocky. “We get triple rations for the remainder of the trip.”

The grisdled fellow looked down his long, crooked nose at John, his eyes smoldering with ire. John did not back off, staring the sailor down. The old tar grudgingly returned through the portal and returned with his passenger rationing logbook.

“Names,” the gruff sailor growled.

The four lads cheerfully volunteered their names, each repeating his name slowly to taunt the fellow. "All right then," John replied, "I think we have got other things to do than make small talk here!" He lifted his bottle of whisky and nodded for the other lads to follow.

Chuckling and pushing each other playfully, the group sauntered across the deck to an open spot near the port side hand railing amidships.

"I will find my Da," Martin offered, looking around the dark deck.

John nodded approvingly. He found a pile of tightly coiled rope and plopped roughly down into the hollow center. Douglas and Peter followed suit, dropping to the slowly heaving deck to either side of John.

The eastern sky showed a slight, golden glow where the waxing moon was just about to show her face. Bright stars twinkled overhead in the clear night sky, promising another fine day tomorrow. John took a deep draught of cool night air, stretched his weary limbs and relaxed into his coiled seat. He pulled at the cork that stopped the mouth of the whiskey jug. The stubborn stopper resisted his first efforts, and then finally slid out of the opening with a loud pop.

Peter and Douglas fumbled their corks with determined expressions on their faces. Peter's cork succumbed to his persistent yanking with another loud pop, followed quickly by Douglas'.

"Ah-ha!" Peter retorted, holding his bottle up to toast his comrades.

Martin, Paddy, and two other older fellows arrived with bright smiles. "Just in time!" Paddy responded to Peter's cheer.

Martin placed his bottle between his knees and tugged on the stubborn stopper. Everyone waited until the now familiar pop of the cork was heard.

"Hear-hear!" cried Douglas. "To the those brave enough to dance amongst the dead!"

John and the others looked at the toasting lad with mixed feeling showing on their faces. "Or those desperate enough," Paddy finally responded, taking the whiskey bottle from his son

and turning it up.

John, Douglas and Peter followed Paddy's lead, each turning up a bottle and taking a large swig of the amber liquid. Douglas coughed and spat as he downed the hard liquor, then gasped for his next breath. John fought his urge to cough with thick tears forming in his eyes. Paddy growled his approval, handing the bottle back to his son.

Peter gasped for a breath. "Blah!" he spat hoarsely, "'tis Scotch whiskey, are they trying to poison us?"

"Aye, and bad Scotch whiskey, it is!" Douglas complained between coughing spells. He handed his bottle off to one of the fellows that arrived with Paddy. John did likewise.

"Aye," Paddy addressed the youngsters, "but bad Scotch whiskey is better than no whiskey at all!" He laughed, watching his son take a drink and break into a deep coughing spell.

The bottles were passed around for several more rounds with no conversation between the men. "John, here, tells me he heard we will be arriving in America in a couple more days," Paddy offered, finally breaking the silence.

The others in the group turned wide-eyed to John. "Is that true?" Peter asked, his voice already beginning to slur with the liquor.

John smiled slightly and looked down at the bottle in his hand. "'Tis," he replied quietly. "Or at least that is what I heard the Captain say when we went to talk with him today."

"Then why did we..." Douglas began, stopping to hiccup loudly, "why did we carry all those dead bodies out from below? Someone else could have done that when we reached America!"

"Would you want your mother lying down there," John countered, irritated, "rotting for three more days so that some stranger could get her body and do no telling what with it?"

Douglas' face softened. The lad took another swig of alcohol and answered softly, "No."

"Those were our countrymen," John began again, looking sternly around the group. "We

have already been treated worse than the sick pig. Our dead deserve to at least be buried with dignity!”

“That is my lad!” Paddy slurred, turning up the bottle for another long drink. “I would be proud to have you for my son in law!”

John blushed brightly. He took his bottle back from one of Paddy’s friends and took a big swig. “And I would be proud to have you as my father in law, as well!”

Paddy stood up and stumbled over to the lad. He attempted to sit on the coil of rope next to John, but missed and flopped onto the hard deck instead. “Jesus Christ!” he howled, I think I broke my arse!” The fellow broke into a drunken laugh at himself. The rest of the group quickly joined the laughter.

John woke up, his head still spinning from an overabundance of alcohol. The sky was still dark, but the bright glow of the moon bathed the sleeping deck in a fuzzy iridescent glow. He felt someone standing near him. His foggy eyes and brain strained to pick out the shape of a woman standing silently beside him. A bolt of fear pulsed through his paralyzed body. He feared it was an angel, sent to spirit him away.

The figure reached gently out and stroked his face. She then leaned over and kissed his forehead warmly. “Who are. . . .” he mumbled, almost incoherently.

The figure put her finger to her lips then stroked his forehead once again. “Bye,” she said and turned away.

John’s sick stomach churned with inebriation. He tried to sit up to get a better look at the angel, but his head spun too much, making him incredibly dizzy. “Wait,” he mouthed silently, as he lay back onto the rough coil of rope. *Oh well, she did not take me away,* he thought

thankfully. *I will see the sun tomorrow.* The moonlight and stars faded as he slipped quickly into oblivion.

“John,” Mary prodded her sleeping friend. “John, wake up.”

The lad moaned painfully. He rolled slowly onto his back and opened his eyes to the early morning sun. Instantly he shut his aching orbs and wrapped his arm tightly over his face. “It is too early, leave me alone.” He moaned, weakly waving the lass off.

“John, please,” Mary persisted, “I cannot find Brigid. I have looked all around the ship.”

The agonizing lad slowly removed his arm from his face and peeked with one eye toward Mary. “What do you mean you cannot find her? Where could she go?”

“I do not know,” Mary responded, almost in tears.

“Did you check below?” John asked, rising to his elbows with a grimace. He looked quickly around at the rest of his comrades, still passed out on the deck around him. “She could have gone down there for some reason.”

“No, I have not gone down below,” the lass admitted. “But, she would have no need to go down there.”

John lay back to the deck, his head pounding with the fury of a spring gale. “God, I feel sick,” he moaned once more.

Mary looked at the bottle of whiskey that was three fourths empty. “I can understand why,” she replied halfway under her breath. “Please, John, help me find Brigid.”

The lad rolled slowly to his side and pushed himself up to a sitting position. “I need some water,” he croaked, rubbing his face with his free hand.

“Stay here,” Mary ordered, turning swiftly away.

The lass soon returned with a jug of water and the remains of a flat bread wrapped in a loose rag. Mary handed the jug to John and waited patiently for him to drink. "Here, eat this. It will make you feel better."

He took the package and opened it slowly. "I do not think I can eat anything at the moment," the lad complained, holding his rumbling stomach.

"Eat it and you will feel better," Mary directed sternly. "You need your strength."

John nibbled gingerly at the crust. After a few minutes the cake had disappeared. He took several slow deep breaths, trying to remove the cobwebs from his aching head. "Was she in her bed this morning?" he asked quietly.

"What?"

"Brigid, was she in her bed this morning?" he repeated a little louder.

"No," Mary replied worriedly. "Her blankets were empty and cold, right where she always sleeps."

Taking another deep breath, John stood slowly to his feet. "I will go search below," he acquiesced. "But, if I find her, I will not be able to carry her up right away."

"Fair enough," Mary returned, helping her friend stand. "At least we will know where she is."

John shielded his eyes from the bright, rising sun and scanned the deck. Very few passengers had arisen. "Are you sure you checked all around up here? Maybe she got up to relieve herself and got back under the wrong blanket."

"No, I have searched everywhere," Mary affirmed.

"All right then," John replied, moving toward the door to the bunkroom. He stopped after a few steps and looked quickly around the deck. "I will need something over my nose. I could not stomach the smell this morning."

Mary chuckled slightly. "I will get your old shirt." She left to retrieve the shirt that he

had used as a mask the day before.

John stood breathing deeply in the damp early morning air. The fogginess in his brain seemed to be lifting somewhat. Suddenly the memory of the vision, or dream, or whatever it was the night before, returned to him. The hazy face of an angelic young lass, kissing him on the forehead and telling him goodbye played across his memory. He tried hard to see the face, however, the alcohol had blurred his vision much too much for a clear view.

“Here,” Mary offered John his shirt as she returned behind the lad.

John absently took the garment from her. “I had the strangest dream last night,” he reminisced, still trying to put a recognizable face on the dream figure. “I think it was an angel.”

Mary smirked. “If it had been an angel visit you last night, she would have probably gotten drunk off your breath and then gotten kicked out of Heaven!” She giggled as John leered at her with bloodshot eyes.

“I have got to check below,” he growled, not in the mood to be teased. John turned toward the doorway, tying the rag loosely over his face. He could still smell the acrid odor that had permeated the cloth the day before. The lingering stench made his stomach turn. *I have got to find Brigid*, he demanded of himself, trying to combat the sudden sickness.

The door had been left propped open in order to remove as much stench as possible for those few sick remaining below. John slipped through the opening and stopped momentarily to allow his eyes to adjust to the dimness of the early morning light. His head was beginning to pound mercilessly. He moaned slightly and plodded down the stair.

The bunkroom was still too dark for the lad to see. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out one of the matchsticks that Douglas had provided the day before. John struck the sulfured end of the match against the wooden post at his side until the stick sputtered to life. He retrieved a lamp from its hanger on the post and lit the dampened wick.

John held the lantern as far as he could out in front of him and scanned the room. The

first scan seemed to show the room to be just as he had left it the night before. "Brigid?" he called quietly. "Brigid, you in here?"

Silence was his only answer. Maybe she was asleep, he thought, moving toward the first row of bunks. He dreaded looking through the beds once more. Especially the way his head and stomach felt at that moment. Yet, it was the only way he would find his friend.

"Brigid, where are you?" he called quietly once again as he got halfway down the row of empty bunks.

The searching lad worked his way back and forth through the bunkroom, checking any bunk thoroughly that seemed to contain a person. Occasionally he called for the lass, never receiving an answer. Beginning to get frustrated, John scurried down the final row of beds with no result.

"Where could she be?" he asked aloud. John stopped and leaned his aching head against a bed rail. Maybe Mary had already found their friend in some obscure corner of the deck and all his searching was in vain.

John gathered his strength and sauntered painfully toward the stair. Brigid was obviously not in the bunkroom. He climbed the steep steps, exiting to a bright, fresh morning breeze. The lad stopped, untied his mask and drew in a deep breath of air.

"Well?" Mary asked excitedly, arriving at John's side. "Did you find her?"

Taking another deep breath, the lad looked disappointedly at Mary. "No," he finally returned. "Brigid is not below. I searched every bunk. I was hoping you had found her whilst I was below." He rubbed his face briskly into his hands.

A cloud of deep worry and disappointment grew on Mary's face. "Where could she be?"

"I do not know," John replied, putting his arm lovingly across her shoulders. "Let's check the deck together. We can start at the front of the ship."

Mary nodded her approval, moving toward the forecastle stair. John looked toward his

friends and noticed Paddy had sat up with his head propped in his hands. The lad smiled slightly and chuckled under his breath. At least he was not the only one that felt as if they had fallen off a mountain.

“Well come on, now,” Mary needled, turning and waiting for John. He stepped up beside the eager lass and together they proceeded to the front of the ship.

“I will take this side,” Mary directed. “Search your side from the railing to the center of the ship.”

John nodded his understanding and began his search. Most of the forecastle was open deck with no place to hide. Except for a few coils of rope, he could just scan the entire area from where he stood.

Mary, on the other hand, walked very deliberately back and forth across the broad ship. Her eyes swept around the planking as if she might find her friend hiding in the cracks between two timbers. John watched his friend’s methodology and laughed quietly at the sight.

“Well, come on now!” Mary ordered exasperatedly. “You have hardly moved from where you first stood! We will never get this ship searched at that pace!”

Chuckling, the lad moved toward the antsy lass. “I can see the whole deck from here,” he responded brightly. “I do not think Brigid can fall between the timbers of the deck!”

“I just want to be thorough,” she hissed, scowling at John.

Mary reached the top of the forecastle stair and headed down toward the lower deck. John followed just behind the lass, shading his eyes with his hand and looking the deck over. Most of the passengers were up and around by then, with many beginning to line up at the ship’s pantry for their daily rations.

“Go that way,” Mary directed. “I will search over here, my way!” She gave her friend a playful sneer.

John strolled across the deck, searching around each fire pit, coil of rope and stray

blanket that he could find. Occasionally, he checked Mary's progress, making sure she had not found Brigid herself. He reached the wall of the quarterdeck and looked back over his path. The lad watched as Mary reached the rear of the ship soon after he did. All seemed to be to no avail.

"Where could Brigid be?" Mary cried, walking swiftly toward John. "You are sure she is not below?"

"Aye, certain," John answered, worry beginning to creep into the back of his mind. "There is no place else for her to have gone. She could not have gone in there." He pointed toward the cabins under the raised rear deck.

Mary just stared blankly across the crowded ship. "I have got to eat," she finally stated blandly, holding her thin stomach.

As if on cue, John's stomach growled loudly. "Me as well," he agreed. "We have triple rations starting today. I say we eat what we need and take the rest to the sick down below."

"Aye, sounds like a good plan," Mary agreed hollowly, still gazing across the deck. She drew in a deep breath and turned toward the pantry. "We should search the ship once more after we have had a bite."

"Agreed," the hungry lad concurred. "After we have had a bite."

John stood quietly next to Mary at the starboard handrail, his foot propped heavily on the raised gunwale. The couple watched absently as the last vestiges of the sun sank into the darkening ocean. Red and gold streaks painted the high clouds overhead, while the soft evening breeze made hardly a ripple on the gently rolling sea.

The distant tune of a tin whistle drifted lightly upon the warm currents from somewhere across the deck. A light tune it was, that tore at the lad's troubled heart. Mary reached out,

wrapping her arm tightly around John's waist. The lass sighed deeply and wiped an errant tear from her cheek.

"I do not understand where Brigid could have gone," Mary sobbed. "We have search the whole ship three more times and not a sign."

John stood silently watching the sunlight die over the bloody ocean. He took in a deep breath and grimaced slightly. "I do not understand myself," he finally replied quietly. "The sea is the only place left for her to go. Why would she do something as such?"

Mary grew very quiet as the night deepened. The first stars were beginning to peek through the evening haze, twinkling like silver points through the graying clouds. "Manannan MacLir," she called softly to the ancient Irish Sea King, "take care of our friend. Give her comfort and rejoin her with the mother she loved so much."

The incantation surprised John. He looked at the lass with a strange gleam in his eyes. "Do you believe in the old gods?" he asked quietly.

Drying her eyes, Mary held her head high and put a mask of strength on her grieving face. "I believe in whatever god will take care of our friend," she replied seriously.

John smiled slightly and pulled the lass tighter to his side. "Aye," he agreed. "The one we have right now does not seem to be very much interested in us."

The stern visage on Mary's face finally cracked. She began to sob in earnest. John wrapped his arms around the weeping young woman and pulled her tightly to his chest. The lad stroked her hair lightly as the soft beautiful voice of a siren joined the flute upon the breeze. The old, sad song moistened his eyes as the memories of Brigid flashed through his mind.

Chapter 22

John wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his sleeve and sat upon a small coil of rope between Mary and his sister Eileen. Martin sat across from the lad, sweat beaded across his forehead as well. Mary smiled warmly at John and took his hand into her own. A glint of sadness remained in her eyes, even though it had been three days since Brigid had come up missing.

John's somber face reflected the care he had been giving his countrymen for the past few days. He tried to smile back at Mary, but his heavy heart would not allow the pleasure for very long. Shading the bright, midday sun from his eyes, the lad relaxed as best he could in the sudden heat wave.

“Holy Saint Michael, ‘tis hot today!” John sighed, wiping his brow once more. “And

now the stench has gotten unbearable below once again with the heat.”

“How goes it down there?” Eileen enquired, leaning forward slightly with interest.

John looked down at his feet, hesitant to answer. He would prefer not to even think about the poor unfortunates below. He finally lifted his eyes and looked around the group. All seemed to be awaiting an answer.

“Not so well, I am afraid,” the lad replied quietly. “There are two more dead today. And the extra rations that Martin and I put together to take below can only feed a few of the sick each day. Many are now so sick that they can eat but a few bites at a time anyway. In their poor condition, they cannot take enough food to strengthen themselves. Most grow weaker by the hour.”

The small group silently pined with John. Mary squeezed the lad’s hand and laid her head lovingly upon his shoulder. “Did you not hear the Captain say we would be arriving in America soon?” the lass asked quietly.

“Aye, I did,” John responded to the entire group. “Yet, I cannot depend on that information. Especially since I have heard no more indication of our arrival.”

“I have seen several birds fly overhead,” Martin commented, attempting to offer a little hope. “We have seen no other birds for weeks. That has got to be a good sign.”

Eileen and Mary shook their heads in agreement with Martin. John quickly scanned the deep blue sky above him and agreed as well, “‘Tis a good sign indeed. Yet, we may be an hour away, a day away or a month away. We have no way to know.”

“Cheer up, brother,” Eileen prodded light-heartedly. “We will soon be in America. I cannot wait to walk on solid earth once again!”

“Me as well!” Mary agreed emphatically. “I want some fresh, cool water, a bath and some real food. Three or four nice potatoes would do for a start!”

John, Eileen, and Martin chuckled, but had to agree with the lass’ assessment. “I hear

you can do anything you want in America,” Martin added. “I want my own wee bit of land to plant a crop for myself and, of course, Eileen.” He looked coyly at the lass with a shy smile. “That is if she will take me as her husband.”

Eileen’s eyes grew wide as an expression of astonishment dawned on her tanned face. “My. . .uh, I. . .I would like that very much!” she stammered. “You should ask permission of my brother, since our Da is no longer here with us.” The lass smiled brightly at John.

“So, John, what do you think?” Martin squeaked. “Might I have your sister’s hand?”

John’s mood suddenly changed from glum to astonishment to sheer glee. He smiled broadly at his sister. “I do not know,” he teased. “I have been trying to give her away for years. But, now that I have the chance, I think she has to do that by her own task.”

Eileen beamed. She looked lovingly at Martin and grabbed his neck tightly. “I will be proud to be your wife!” A tear of elation trickled down the lass’ cheek. “Very proud.”

Mary jumped from her seat. “We are going to have a wedding!” she giggled, hopping up and down and clapping her hands. “We are going to have a wedding!” She reached out for both of John’s hands, pulled him off his perch and danced him around in a circle.

“You would think she is the one marrying!” John laughed breathlessly to his sister.

Eileen laughed, “Well, when is she?”

John’s face turned blood red. He glared playfully at his sister as Mary continued to dance around him. Several passengers began to stare toward the noisy group.

Paddy stood up a short distance across the deck and sauntered toward them, Honor followed close behind. “Ho, lads and lasses. What is all the merriment?”

Martin stood up, blushing brightly. “Da,” he started tentatively, kicking bashfully at the planking of the deck. “I have just asked Eileen to be my wife. Herself has agreed.”

Honor almost exploded. The woman leapt toward her son, grasping him tightly in a bear hug. “My, lad,” she cried, holding him at arm’s length. Tears of joy streamed down her face.

“‘Tis such grand news!” The woman released her son and pulled Eileen up from the deck.

Hugging her soon to be daughter in law tightly, Honor whispered in her ear, “May the Blessed Virgin bless and keep you! I am very honored to have you as a part of our family!”

“Thank you very much,” Eileen responded with a huge smile. “I am proud to be a part of your family as well.”

Paddy broke his wife’s hold on Eileen and took her place, offering his own blessings. Releasing the lass, the fellow turned toward his daughter. “Would not the marrying of a brother and sister together be a brilliant wedding!” He looked coyly at John.

John blushed brightly once again. “I think it would, at that,” he replied, looking bashfully at his feet. He peeked over at Mary, who stood at his side, smiling broadly. “Mary,” he started, just above a whisper, “would you honor me by being my wife?” His heart was almost exploding out of his mouth. Tiny sparkles of light danced in front of the lad’s eyes.

Mary shrieked, jumping up and down once again. She dove at John, almost knocking him over as she jumped into his arms. “I would like nothing more in all of Heaven and Earth!” the gleeful lass responded. “Absolutely nothing!”

“All right then, it is settled,” John stated matter of factly. “We shall all wed together. As soon as we can find a Priest.”

Honor and Eileen each came to hug the couple with congratulations. Paddy and Martin shook John’s hand briskly, offering their blessings.

“What a sudden change of events,” John commented as the excitement wound down. “A sudden grand change of events!”

Several gulls flew overhead, squawking loudly and several loud splashes signaled the arrival of a school of dolphins to the side of the ship. John felt rather giddy. This truly would be a start to a brand new life. He looked around the small family group with a bright smile painted across his face. Mary move beside John, taking his hand tightly. The lad looked down at her

with a smile, reached over and kissed her warmly on the forehead.

Mary took her beau's face between her hands and kissed him tenderly on the lips. John blushed once again as the rest of each family giggled and clapped. "There," the lass stated for emphasis, "'Tis sealed."

As happy and exciting as the moment was, the memory of Brigid floated across John's mind, tugging at his heart. He shook his head, forced a smile and held tightly onto Mary. Several more images of the dead and dying ripped through the struggling lad's head, sucking the joy from his very soul.

"Where are we going?" John asked, desperately trying to refocus his thoughts.

"What, has an announcement of marriage made you daft?" Martin teased, "We are headed to America!"

John scowled back at the mocking lad. "No," he corrected gruffly, "Where in America?"

"I was told it was New York," Paddy chimed in graciously. "'Tis a mighty big city."

"Aye," John agreed, "I have read that New York is larger than Dublin!"

"Larger than Dublin?" Mary repeated, wide-eyed.

"Aye, and we will soon be there," Martin added with a smile.

Paddy's forehead wrinkled with a look of disdain. "What will an old farmer like me do in a big city like New York?"

"I have heard America is a big country, with so much land they just give it away," Martin volunteered. "I want to find some of that land and build a small house and grow acres upon acres of crops." He turned to Eileen shyly. "That is if you are willing, Eileen."

Eileen smiled shyly. "You are my man and I would be proud to help you farm acres of land. Our Da always said, 'land is the only real wealth.' He hated that the English took our family lands away. Now, in America, maybe we can get back what we deserve."

Paddy smiled broadly. "My, what a smart, brave lass! You will do our family proud and

give us many strong and wise grandchildren!”

Eileen blushed hotly. “My place is at Martin’s side,” she replied shyly.

“Maybe we should all look for some of that land they are giving away,” John chimed in.

“We are to receive one pound per person on arrival to America. Surely that will buy our passage to somewhere that they have land.”

“Aye, lads and lasses, we shall stay together and make ourselves landholders once again.

No more tyranny from the English! We will once again be a free people!” Paddy preached, staring out across the bow of the ship. “America,” he sighed.

“America!” the rest of the group chimed.

John, Mary, Martin and Eileen stood together at the ship’s port railing watching the antics of a friendly pod of dolphins as they darted in and out of the ship’s wake. The creatures seemed to have such a grand time, jumping through the frothy water. Sea birds had become plentiful in the skies during the last few hours. The creatures darted to and fro, sailing on the growing breeze.

The sun was beginning to cast long shadows across the deck, signaling the end of another day at sea. John’s heart felt gladness for the first time since he left his homeland. Maybe America would be a good thing after all. At least there would be no more English to keep him and his countrymen enslaved. Maybe he could actually own acres of land somewhere in this big, new country.

Mary and Eileen shrieked and laughed aloud as three dolphins leapt high out of the water just in front of them. “‘Tis such a brilliant show!” Mary cried, laughing playfully. “Do you think they have Silkies in America?” The lass giggled at her own joke, prodding John with her

elbow.

“I would not know,” John replied snidely, “I have not seen a Silkie. I would not recognize one if she fell on me!”

“You would be the one to love having a Silkie fall on you, now, would you not!” Mary teased mercilessly.

“Look,” John shouted, pointing as another dolphin jumped high out of the air. He hoped to distract the woman before she got started.

The ploy seemed to work, as the lass clapped and laughed at the playful creature. Many people had begun to line the railing to watch the grand show. There were oohhs and aaahs and laughter all along the deck. There had not been as much merriment on board since the music and the dance that seemed so long ago.

It felt very good to John to see all his fellow passengers regain a bit of their hope and happiness. Everyone seemed to have a sense of their voyage ending soon. The bright smiles upon their faces, the sparkles of life in their eyes were the most wonderful things the lad could see right then.

Suddenly, from the crow's nest high above the deck, a sailor's voice cried out strong and clear, “Land ho! Land ho!”

“Where away?” the Captain called back from the rail of the quarterdeck.

“Off the starboard bow!” the sailor answered loudly. “Just on the horizon.”

A shot of adrenaline raced through John's body. “Land!” he repeated to Mary, his eyes wide with excitement. “We have come to America!” He took his future wife in his arms, twirling her dizzily around himself.

A huge cheer arose from the deck. These were not a seafaring people, and the prospect of having their feet planted once again upon dry land sent waves of relief and ecstasy through the passengers. The sweet sounds of musical instruments soon filled the air, followed quickly by

dancing feet.

“Come,” Martin prodded, “Starboard is the other side of the ship. We shall go see if we can see America!” He took Eileen’s hand and weaved through the crowd to the railing on the opposite side of the craft.

John took Mary’s hand and followed closely behind. The railing was already heavily occupied with Irish people longing for a sight of their new home. John found a small opening and directed Mary before him to the rail. He pushed tightly up behind her, trying to see the shores of the new land. “Can you see anything?” he asked the lass excitedly.

“No, not yet,” Mary replied over her shoulder. “I can only see the ocean at the moment.”

“Just keep watching, we are bound to see land soon!” John said, shading his eyes from the reflection of the sinking sun.

Even the perpetually playful dolphins could no longer distract the attention of the passengers as they gazed patiently toward the sunset. The slow, steady rise and fall of the ship seemed to clock the time. The music had since died and now all of the eager passengers were pressed tightly into a quietly expectant mass at the forward handrails.

“Look! There! You can see it! You can see land!” someone shouted at the very bow of the ship.

A murmur arose through the crowd as the passengers craned their necks to see their new country. “Aye, now I see it too!” another voice shouted.

John held tightly onto Mary, straining his eyes against the setting sun to see the shoreline. Then the gray shape of land appeared at the base of the sky as the ship topped the crest of a wave. “There, I saw it!” John shouted. “Land, there!” He pointed out across the waves for Mary to see. “When we reach the top of a wave look right there.”

The ship bottomed in a trough, sending spray flying through the air. Slowly, it seemed, the ship rose upon another crest, lending an unmistakable view of the shoreline. Many

passengers shouted, cheered and sighed as they caught their first glimpse of the New World.

“I saw it!” Mary screamed, giggling hysterically. “I saw America!” The lass shuddered with joy in John’s arms.

With the rise of each wave, the coast grew closer. The brilliant evening sky painted a perfect backdrop as distinct shapes of the distant shoreline began to appear. John looked across the dimming horizon as tiny points of light began to emerge far in front of the ship. Yet the nearest section of coast still seemed sparsely settled.

Slowly they crept toward the twinkling lights of the distant city. John watched the darkening shoreline as the ship altered course slightly and began to parallel the mostly unoccupied beaches. Looking over the bow of the ship and to either side, the dim lights of the city seemed to spread out across the shoreline ahead of them for miles.

The sight almost took John’s breath. He stood in awe as the immenseness of the great mass of civilization began to dominate his imagination. His heart raced, pounding in his temples.

“Holy Mother of God!” John swore. “New York is huge! Look, it goes on for almost as far as you can see!”

Awe stricken, Mary just nodded her agreement. She pulled John’s arms tightly around her shoulders. “Where will we go now?” she finally asked quietly.

“I do not know. Only tomorrow can bring that answer,” John responded.

Mary quickly crossed herself and shivered. “I am afraid,” she admitted.

“I think we all are,” John tried to comfort her. “We have just got to be strong.” He looked out over the approaching cluster of lights once again and sighed deeply. “I wish my brother and father could be here with us to see this.”

“I would like to meet your brother some day,” Mary responded quietly.

“And I would like you to meet him as well,” John agreed lovingly, “How far is Australia

from here?"

Mary shrugged, "I do not know," she replied, "Probably far away."

Sighing once again, John shifted his weight and took a place beside Mary at the crowded railing. "I will have to find out," the lad determined.

Slowly, the ship sailed toward the mouth of the harbor. The warm evening breeze and gentle rocking of the vessel acted as a sedative to most of the passengers. Few words were spoken as the outline of a small island drifted slowly past. Soon a small pilot boat sailed up to their side. After a brief exchange between the two Captains, the small boat passed the ship, leading the larger vessel into their own familiar waters.

Sailors began to scurry up the rigging, readying the sails for reefing. Their cheerful voices were evidence that another successful voyage was nearing completion. Captain MacMillan stood at the quarterdeck railing, bathed in the light of several lamps. Attending the Captain was his Quartermaster and Boatswain. Both junior officers reflected the poise and professionalism of their senior.

A large orange, full moon peeked over the eastern horizon, casting a golden glow on the buildings at the edge of the shoreline. John was beginning to pick out individual points of light emanating from the windows of the nearest buildings. Even the brightly painted facades of the distant structures began to come into view, washed in the bright moonlight.

The Boatswain began barking his orders, directing the sailors overhead to reef the sails and slow the ship. The loosened canvas began to flap loudly in the rising breeze. Quickly the sailors gathered the raised sails and bound the bottoms tightly to the booms. The jibs and spinnakers were lowered entirely, reducing the forward momentum of the large ship dramatically.

They were headed directly toward a gap in the huge mass of lights. For the most part, the ship was still paralleling the shore, gaining only a small angle toward the lights of the city. Time

seemed to stand still and John was beginning to get impatient. The slower pace made the final leg of their voyage seem an eternity.

Mary trembled once again, grasping his hand tightly. "How will we ever find our way around such a huge place like this?" she asked, concern quivering in her voice. "I think this city is bigger than all of Ireland!"

John chuckled slightly. "Aye, lass," he comforted her. "'Tis a large city. But we shall manage. We always have and we always will."

"You are a fine man, John Walsh, and I love you very much!" Mary snuggled deeper into the young man's arms.

John smiled warmly into the night, watching the shoreline drift slowly by. "And you are a fine lass," he finally returned. "I will be proud to have you as my wife."

The moon rose quickly, gaining a high position in the star filled sky as the ship rounded a sharp point of land to the starboard. The lights were so thick and bright now along the shoreline that they dimmed the stars overhead. John did not know such a thing was possible.

The small pilot boat slowed ahead of them, directing the officers of the Cushla Machree to do the same. The Boatswain barked a new set of orders, instructing his sailors to lower all but the main sails completely. Their forward progress quickly dropped once again.

A long row of tall masted ships suddenly came into view. John's breath was taken away again. He had never imagined such a large congregation of ships in one place. It looked almost as if he were looking through a forest of winter trees. *This is indeed a New World*, he thought.

The waterfront was lined with wharves and buildings. Long piers protruded far out into the waters of the calm bay. Oil lamps lined the sides of the piers, illuminating the figures of the seamen scurrying up and down their lengths.

The whole waterfront was bustling with people. John had never witnessed the amount of activity that was happening on the docks, and it was night! What would it be like in the daylight

hours? Some ships were readying to disembark while others were being loaded or unloaded. Tons of cargo lined the wharf. He could only imagine what far ends of the world those goods originated from.

John swallowed hard, grasping Mary's waist tightly. "Would you look at all this?" he marveled. "Look up, you can hardly see the stars for the lights of the city!"

Following the lad's lead, Mary gazed up into the dark sky. A look of overwhelm soured the lass's face. She closed her eyes and buried her face into John's shoulder. "I am mighty afraid," she squeaked, trembling.

"Me as well," John confirmed. "Me as well." His stomach turned over and his pulse was racing beyond control.

The Quartermaster yelled across the deck, his booming voice demanding the attention of the passengers. "All of you passengers may spend this night on board.," he began, his Orkney accent grating across the night. "However, at first light you shall collect your belongings and disembark. By midday, all passengers should have left the ship." The officer stopped, looked around the deck and exchanged a few quiet words with the Captain. "There will be a hospital wagon at the dock tomorrow morning," he continued. "They will take all the infirmed into quarantine. If you have family members that are ill, it will be your own responsibility to care for their needs.

"You will also be responsible for your own food tomorrow, as the ships stores will not be open to the passengers." The Quartermaster stopped once again and cleared his throat. After a moment of thought, he continued, his voice erratic as if he had to force out the remaining words. "Many of you have money due you upon arrival. There will be a warrant officer stationed at the head of the gangway tomorrow morning. Give him your name and he will give you the money due you."

The passengers began to murmur. Tension and excitement washed quickly across the

deck. This was their last night together. Most of these people would never see each other again.

John felt rather grievous that he had not socialized more and gotten to know his fellow passengers better. Yet, unlike most of his culture, that was not his way.

The Master of the pilot boat signaled the Cushla Machree into an open slot along the crowded wharf. Several men stood on the pier awaiting their arrival. The Quartermaster brought the ship around, lining up with the dock. The Boatswain barked more orders to trim the remaining sail. Their forward progress had slowed to a crawl. Yet, after masterful direction, the tall ship slipped easily up to the dock.

Sailors scurried, tossing lines to the waiting portsmen and raising the remaining canvas. Quickly, the ship was secured in her berth and the seamen battened the sails and rigging. Two official looking fellows stood on the quay, requesting the gangway be extended for their boarding. Several sailors sped to their assistance. The two gentlemen strode up the gangway, and paying no attention to the passengers on board, marched rigidly across the crowded deck. Quickly they bounded up the steep step to the raised quarterdeck. The party then disappeared with the Captain into the private quarters below. The two English passengers sat quietly next to the wheelhouse with their bags at their side.

The two Port Agents quickly reappeared, carrying a large moneybag. The portly English passenger stopped the Agents, chatted quietly with both of them and turned to pick up his bags. The two Englishmen then followed the Agents down the steep ladder and back across the deck toward the gangway.

The Irishmen crowding the lower deck parted sluggishly for the group. The businesslike Agents led the way as the Englishmen followed close behind. The Irish passengers scowled hotly at the overweight Englishman. Several of them spit at the porky fellow as he whisked past.

“Stay back you imbeciles,” the Brit hissed vehemently. “Get away you waifs!”

The second Englishman chuckled at his cohort, shaking his head piously. The small

group scampered straightaway down the gangway, putting as much distance as possible between themselves and the mob on board. The Irish passengers taunted the Englishman until he faded out of sight down the long wharf.

“We need some music!” someone on board shouted. “We are in America, it is time to celebrate!”

Calls of agreement sounded from all around the deck. Soon, the pipers began to blow a faced paced jig, followed quickly by the fiddler. Passengers gathered around the musicians, leaving plenty of room for others to dance. The sound of loudly clapping hands joined the musicians, thumping wildly to set the beat of the tune.

“Come on!” Mary directed, excitement burning in her eyes. “It is time to dance!” She grabbed John by the hand and led him quickly through the crowd stopping just before the musicians. The lass hiked her skirt slightly and stepped off a faced paced jig. John tried to follow, but, even his nimble feet could not keep up with the shrieking lass.

John howled with laughter as several more passengers joined in the fray. Eileen and Martin quickly joined in, dancing wildly beside their siblings. The music suddenly changed pace to a dizzying hornpipe, followed by numerous other jigs and reels. The mood on deck was frantic with excitement. Even the dock had begun to fill with people listening and dancing to the music that played onboard the ship.

It was a grand time for all, this arrival in America, a time for wide-eyed celebration and revelry. The voyage had been costly, but the past was behind this group. All eyes and hearts were looking to the bright future ahead. The land of opportunity awaited. Anything was theirs for the taking, or so they had been told. Their days of sedition and slavery were gone forever.

John laughed and gasped for a breath. The frantic pace of the dancing had quickly worn him down. He waved Mary off as she tried to keep him dancing with her. The lad plodded tiredly to the edge of the crowd. The full moon shone brightly high overhead, casting a silvery

sheen across the calm waters of the harbor.

Moving to the quieter confines of the starboard handrail, the lad took several deep breaths and leaned heavily against the railing. As his pulse began to subside, he looked across the dark waters of the port toward the ocean they had just left. A calm sense of peace had begun to warm his heart. He thought of his brothers, wishing they had come with him to these grand shores. He hoped Australia was as hopeful a place as America and that Peter would find a place there.

His thoughts then shifted to his father. *I hope things are doing fine for you, Da*, he thought, a small twinge of loneliness reaching for his heart. *May you find peace and happiness wherever you are*. Even Brigid's lovely face played across his memory. She was Ireland to him, the Ireland of the Irish. John fought back a silent tear as their short, wondrous time together played through his recollections. "Mother Brid," he prayed quietly to the ancient Mother Goddess of the Irish, "Please take care of your namesake. Give her peace, happiness and rest forever in Tír na nÓg."

Mary walked quickly up behind John, her breathing rapid and erratic. A huge smile was plastered across her face. "Why are you here all by yourself, my love?" she asked, panting heavily. "It is time to celebrate!"

John smiled. "I shall be there directly," he replied warmly. "Just come to catch my breath."

"Come on, I want to dance with you some more before the music stops!" the lass pleaded.

Turning from the railing, the lad took one last look down the channel. A beautiful vision of green hills and soft rain shot across his memory. He paused, his heart tugging toward the sight. Quickly, John closed his eyes and fought the urge to reminisce. "Good bye, Ireland, my home," he said quietly, "I hope I shall see you again some day." With that, the spell was broken. The lad took Mary's hand, leading her back toward the grand celebration.

The End

Éireann go bráth!