

❧ C H A P T E R O N E ❧

OCTOBER 1910

Widowed crones, their ragged skirts and shawls flapping in the rising gale like so many black crows, threw back grayed heads and keened a wild lament. Though slow of gait, they kept a dozen steps ahead of Maureen O'Reilly, the eldest daughter of their dead neighbor. Not one dared walk beside the "Scarlet Maureen," no matter that they'd been handsomely paid for their services from the young woman's purse.

Maureen didn't care so much for herself. She expected nothing more or less from the village gossips. But she did care for the heart of her younger sister.

She pulled Katie Rose, the lily flower of her family, close. Together the sisters trudged up the rocky hill, part of a bleak and broken parade, toward the stone-walled churchyard. Twice they slipped, cutting their palms, the path muddy from the morning's rain. Once past the churchyard gate, Maureen pushed to the front of the troop, lifted her chin, and set her lips tight as the prow of a ship, daring the women to snub her sister.

The Keeton brothers had dug the grave that morning, and Joshua Keeton, the second eldest, nodded respectfully toward Maureen—an act so out of village character that Maureen turned away without acknowledgment.

The priest intoned his series of Latin prayers into the wind, finishing with the "Our Father."

The Keeton brothers lowered the wooden coffin into its bed.

The priest sprinkled its top with holy water and resumed in his monotone, "Grant this mercy, O Lord, we beseech Thee, to Thy servant departed, that Margaret Rowhan O'Reilly may not receive in punishment the requital of her deeds . . ."

Maureen had attended enough wakes and burials in her twenty years that she could recite the passages by heart. But she'd never buried her mother—and that made this day different from all the rest. Shunned from normal attendance at the village church, she'd wanted this service to penetrate her heart; she'd wanted to repent and mourn the loss of her mother as deeply as Katie Rose mourned—Katie Rose, who could barely stand for the grief of it all.

But the lowering of the coffin spelled only relief for Maureen. For the seven years since her father's death, Maureen had served at the landlord's grand house as the only means of support for her mother and young sister, first as a scullery maid and later, because of her earnest work and graceful ways, as a parlor maid. When the landlord's eye fell upon her, she was barely fourteen.

His mother, Lady Catherine—a good and godly woman—had seen the lust in her firstborn's eye and taken Maureen under her wing. For six of those years she'd employed her, trained her in the ways of a fine lady's maid, kept her as safe as she could. But even Lady Catherine could not outlive her strapping, willful son. Once she was gone, so was Maureen's protection.

And that was what Maureen thought of as the priest droned on. Not so much for herself—she was beyond safety, beyond redemption—but protection for Katie Rose.

Maureen pulled a tear-matted wisp of chestnut hair from her sister's pale cheek. *Thirteen and so beautiful—too beautiful not to be noticed.* The thought pierced Maureen's heart. The sooner Katie Rose was placed under the protection of someone good and kind, someone strong and not beholden to or at the mercy of the landlord, the better. Their mother, in her last years of consumption, had not been willing to hear of it, not been willing to part with the jewel of her life. But it was up to Maureen now, and she knew what must be done. If only she could make her aunt agree.

Maureen started as Katie Rose pulled from her side, lifted a clod from the earth, and dropped it atop the lowered coffin. Maureen winced to hear the finality of the thud—earth on wood—but did the same, and the village followed suit.

The keeners began again their long, musical wailing. The small band retreated down the hill, the men stopping at the pub to drink to Margaret O'Reilly. "A fitting end," they solemnly chorused, "to a great lady's passing."

But the women, expecting a well-laid tea, followed the road round to the cottage of Verna Keithly—aunt to Maureen and Katie Rose and sister of dead Margaret O'Reilly. When the troop reached her cottage door, Verna pulled the door handle, and her nieces passed through.

The band of women, having lingered a few steps behind, hesitated, stopped, and the leader, the blacksmith's wife, whispered loudly, "She'll not be staying, will she?"

Maureen looked back to see her aunt's spine straighten as she removed her gloves.

"You'll not be expecting us to join her for tea, Verna Keithly," the cooper's wife admonished. "Surely not!"

Aunt Verna tilted her head, smiled, and said simply, "No, Mrs. Grogan, I don't believe I will" and quietly closed the door.

Maureen felt her own eyes grow wide. But her aunt smiled, wrapping a work-roughened hand round Maureen's wrist. Maureen bit her lip at the sign of affection. But the tremble threatened anyway, so she turned her face aside, whispering, "You'll live to regret this kindness to me. They won't forget, you know."

"My only regret is in not being kinder sooner." Verna turned her niece to face her and hugged her properly. "I'll do better before this night is through. I promise."

Her aunt's words quickened the hope in Maureen's heart. Perhaps she'd grant her wish, after all. Surely she'd see the need, the urgency, once Maureen explained her plan.

"Shall I set the kettle, Aunt?" Katie Rose sniffled from the kitchen.

"Please! Tea first; I'll cut the cake directly. But let's get a bit of something warm going for later. I've a good shank of lamb already roasting." She hung her damp cape on the hook nearest the door. "Good food—that's what's needed. Maureen, you scrub the potatoes. Katie Rose, cut the bread."

As Maureen passed, her aunt whispered, "Once Katie Rose is abed for the night, we'll talk. We need to talk before your uncle comes home."

Maureen looked at the clock. "He'll be closing soon, won't he?"

Aunt Verna harrumphed. "Not tonight. First round's on him—'tis the first one that loosens purse strings for all the rest. So kind and generous

of the grieving brother-in-law, wouldn't ya say?" She raised her brows in sarcasm, knotting her apron strings behind her. "They'll drink and sing and smoke and dance their hearts out. He'll *cha-ching* his till the whole night long. By then we'll have things settled."

After the washing up, when her sister finally yawned with the weariness and emotion of the day, Maureen sat by Katie Rose as the girl knelt to say her prayers, then tucked her sister in herself. Maureen knew that Katie Rose had spent the last year doing all the cooking and sewing and tucking, ever since their mam became too ill to care for either of them. No matter that her sister was nearly grown—it was good to do for her now, if only for this night, their last together.

When Maureen returned to the little parlor, Aunt Verna had stirred the fire and laid more peat, indicating a long chat was in the offing. Maureen sat down, less certain now the time had come. But she could not miss this opportunity to sway her aunt to her thinking, and so she began before Aunt Verna had taken her seat. "I've been thinking of Katie Rose and what's best for her."

"Good, then, as have I," her aunt returned.

"If Katie Rose could live with you—" Maureen began, but her aunt cut her off, shaking her head.

"Katie Rose must go—leave the village—and she must go now. Gavin Orthbridge has set his eye upon her."

Maureen felt the blood drain from her face. "He's a boy!"

"He's fourteen and Lord Orthbridge's son. He's only bided his time for Margaret's death, till the girl has nowhere to go. He's already told her he can assure her of a job in his father's house. You know what that means."

Maureen knew exactly. It meant the same for Katie Rose as it had meant for her, and there would be no escaping, not once the disgrace came upon her.

"If she stays with me, there'll be no way to save her. The Orthbridges or your uncle will see to that—especially if it means security or gold." Her aunt spread her hands. "I've never been able to change that man's course once the drink or the gold has him in its grasp."

Maureen felt that vile truth rumble in her stomach, sensed the floor drop beneath her chair. She could not imagine a life like her own for Katie Rose. It was not to be borne. “I’ll take her with me, though I don’t know how. Every penny went to Lord Orthbridge to pay for Mam’s rent and their food. I’d thought to go to Dublin, where no one knows me, and begin again, maybe work in a shop.”

“With no references.” Aunt Verna laid a practical hand upon her hip.

Maureen’s shoulders drooped. The only letter of reference she’d ever possessed was from Lady Catherine—a last effort to protect Maureen from her son. But when Maureen had given her notice, Julius Orthbridge had rooted through her things, found the letter, and burned it. *Foolish, foolish me for not simply runnin’ away!* The plan Maureen had laid such hope by now sounded feeble in her mouth. “I’d hoped to start over,” she whispered. “I wanted Katie Rose here, safe with you. Uncle owns the tavern. I thought—”

“You’re not listenin’. She’ll not be safe with me.”

“I am listenin’.” Maureen stood, angrily. “I said I’ll take her with me, then. I’ll find work for us both. I’ll go into service once more if I have to but never to be used like that again. And Katie Rose must never go into service! Never!” She bent her head into her hands. “Dublin’s not far enough to hide us both. I know Julius Orthbridge. He’ll come lookin’. And his son’s of the same cloth.”

“Sit down and calm yourself, Maureen.” Her aunt spoke sternly. “There’s another way.”

But Maureen could only see in her mind the image of a drunken, bare-chested Julius Orthbridge, could only relive that first dark and fearful night. The night Lady Catherine lay dying, when he, reeking of whiskey and bearing a globed lamp that cast its shadows up and down the walls from the open window’s night breezes, had barged into her servant’s quarters and thrown her roommate to the hallway.

No matter that her screams had rent the night and were surely heard throughout the estate, they’d brought no one—no one to help her, no one to save her from the animal intent on relieving his lust. Not then, nor any night thereafter. They were all too afraid or too beholden to the English lord.

But neither fear nor debt had bridled their tongues, and within the week the entire village had heard the gossip. Whether or not they'd pitied her, they'd openly shunned her. The image of Katie Rose facing such a night, such a life, clawed through her brain.

"Take hold, Maureen! Take hold!" Her aunt shook her, forced her into a chair. "Drink this." Aunt Verna forced something strong and vile-smelling between Maureen's teeth, something that shot a hot path down her throat and shook her awake, making her sputter and cough.

"That's better. You need your senses about you. We've not much time. You must listen carefully."

Maureen tried to focus her brain.

"Do you remember the tale your da told over and over when you were but a girl?"

Maureen barely remembered her da, though she'd loved him with all of her heart. He was part of another life, a good life she could hardly claim as her own. She shook her head.

"About the war in America—the war between the states, north and south—the American Civil War, they called it," her aunt coaxed. "He'd gone to America to make his fortune—worked in service as a groomsman for some wealthy family in New York. They had some sort of falling-out, though your da never said what. When the war called for soldiers, he served with the Union, and he saved a man's life—an officer. The game leg your da hobbled upon came because he took a Confederate bullet meant for the American."

Maureen blinked.

"I can't believe ya don't remember." Aunt Verna waited, then went on. "The officer was so grateful that when your da came home to Ireland, the man wrote him a letter, offerin' to set him up in business if only he'd return to America."

Yes, Maureen remembered. Half-fantasy, half-real—she never knew where the truth lay . . . or the letter. And what good had letters done her?

"That letter was the talk of the town, the first letter straight from America to be found in the village, and an invitation to streets paved in gold. And though never said aloud, 'twas the reason his first wife married him; God rest both their souls."

“What?” Maureen tried to push the web from her mind. “Mam said the letter was Da’s fireside tale.”

Aunt Verna pressed on. “Your da and his first wife were expectin’ their first child. They planned to sail for America as soon as the babe was weaned. But she labored early, and mother and child died before the mid-wife reached them.”

“I never heard that.”

“It was never talked about. But your da grieved mighty and walked very near the abyss for seven years or so. It would have been better if he’d returned alone to America, but he hadn’t the heart. Then, finally, Margaret caught his eye and lifted his spirit. Though I think he never loved her as he did his first.”

Maureen bristled. It was not a thing to be said the day of her mam’s burial and surely not by her mam’s sister.

“Don’t look at me so. You were not there. You did not see.” Aunt Verna sighed and stood to stir the fire again, though it needed no stirring. “Your da had saved the letter, and once he and Margaret married and were expectin’ a bairn, he wrote to the man in America again, seein’ if he was still of a mind to make good his offer.” She set the poker down. “And the man heartily replied to come on, to bring his new bride and their babe, as soon as he was born. Promised to set him up in business and treat Morgan’s firstborn as his own son. He even sent money for the passage, first class.”

“And is this another tale for a winter’s night? Because if it is, I—”

“I read the letter with my own eyes. I read it to your da because he could not read and Margaret was visitin’ our folks when he came with it from town.” Her aunt returned to her seat. “They laid their plans, and after the babe came, hale and hardy, your da sold most everything but his good name. Most importantly, he sold his land. They waited until sweet William turned three years old, to be sure he was strong enough for the voyage, and set off for Dublin. Three weeks they waited for the ship to sail—some problems with the keel that needed mendin’.”

Maureen knew the rest by heart.

“Cholera swept through the city—a plague on two feet. William died, and they buried him there.” Her aunt stopped and stared into the fire. A moment passed before she lifted the corner of her apron and swiped her

mouth. “A sweet and lovely lad.” She tucked her head to one side, and Maureen caught the shine in her eyes.

“The great ship sailed for America without your mam and da. Your mam could not bear to be parted from the country holdin’ William’s grave, and she convinced herself that God had cursed your da and his letter and the entire scheme of goin’ to America—that the Almighty made him pay with the lives of his children for the notion of risin’ above himself. She’d have no more to do with it, no matter how your da begged, no matter how he reasoned. She was sure they’d both die before reachin’ the golden shore.”

“Da owned his own land?” It was the part of the tale that Maureen could fathom least. None in the village owned so much as a grave plot, save her uncle, who owned his tavern. Lord Orthbridge owned all the rest.

“And he could have bought it back with the money saved from the voyage, but Margaret hid it, convinced as she was that it was cursed; your da became just as enslaved as all the rest to Julius Orthbridge. She was not a good wife, my sister.”

Maureen did not stir. The story rang true with every memory of her da’s bent back and white hair, of his sad retelling of the tale as he knew it—stolen gold and the lost letter—minus his wife’s deception.

“She could not risk Morgan’s findin’ the letter, so afraid she was of goin’ to America. So she asked me to destroy it and give the gold secretly to the church—none to know the giver. She said I dared risk Morgan’s wrath if ever he learned the truth—and risk the curse of death, better than she; I was barren anyway.”

Heat raced up Maureen’s neck. She hated her aunt’s accusing tone but understood. They’d both known the pain and betrayal of her mother’s selfishness. She was certain her mother had known the price Maureen paid for rent for their cottage and food, but never once had she questioned her. Maureen thought of herself as her mother’s workhorse. Her aunt must have felt something of the same.

“I didn’t do it.”

Maureen looked up. “What?”

“I didn’t give the gold to the church and I didn’t destroy the letter.” Aunt Verna stood and clasped her hands. “I knew that one day she would rot in her selfishness and that your father would need the money and the

hope. He was a good man, your da. But working for the Orthbridges did him in—that, and . . . well, the rest.”

Maureen stood. “You kept the gold? Then why didn’t you give it for our rent and food when Da died? Why did you let Mam send me to the grand house, into service?”

“I didn’t know what it would mean. I thought only that it would get you away from her. She would have turned you into herself, and I could not bear it—not for you. I didn’t know Lord Orthbridge would . . . would hurt you.”

Maureen sat down again. “Hurt me.” What could she say? “Yes, he hurt me.”

“I swear by the Virgin Mary that I never imagined it.” Aunt Verna sat down heavily. “I was foolish. I’m sorry, Maureen. I’m so terribly sorry. Margaret would not have taken the money, she was that sure it was cursed. But I should have stolen you away, sent you to America or London, to start fresh.”

The idea was so big and unbelievable that Maureen laughed, one helpless, soulless laugh. “I couldn’t have gone. I was obliged to help Mam. I would have stayed—for her and for Katie Rose.” She looked at her aunt. “There’s no way out—no end for me. First it was looking to Da’s needs after his stroke; then it was providin’ for Mam, and now I must protect Katie Rose.” How could she have hoped to escape?

“You’ll go to America and Katie Rose with you. You’ll stand up to that man and have him make good on his promise to your da. You’re Morgan’s firstborn now—his firstborn livin’.”

Maureen laughed bitterly. “You’re crazy, Aunt Verna.”

Aunt Verna’s lips pulled grim. “I’m not accustomed to bein’ told I’m crazy by a slip of a girl, and never under my own roof.”

“I’m a soiled woman, Aunt. I’m nobody’s ‘firstborn son’ or ‘slip of a girl.’ I’m near crazy myself.”

With a toss of her hand, Verna waved her niece’s melodrama aside and bent to the hearth, prying a stone from the space nearest the fire. “You should go on the stage for all of that, Maureen. You sound as dark as your mam, but there’s more to you than she ever reckoned. You’ve just forgotten what it is to hope, to have a chance at life. You’d best set your mind to put that life to good use.”

Maureen watched as her aunt pried a second stone, lifted out both, and wedged a poker beneath a third. From their opened graves, she pulled a rectangular metal box, dusted the dirt with her apron, turned a key set in the lock, and removed a small pouch and twice-folded paper from inside. She laid both on the rug by the hearth, then replanted the box, easing the bricks into place.

“There, now.” Aunt Verna looked up, smiling, and knelt before Maureen, cupping her hands. She spread the neck of the pouch, turned it upside down, and spilled gold coins into her niece’s palms. “What do you think of that?”