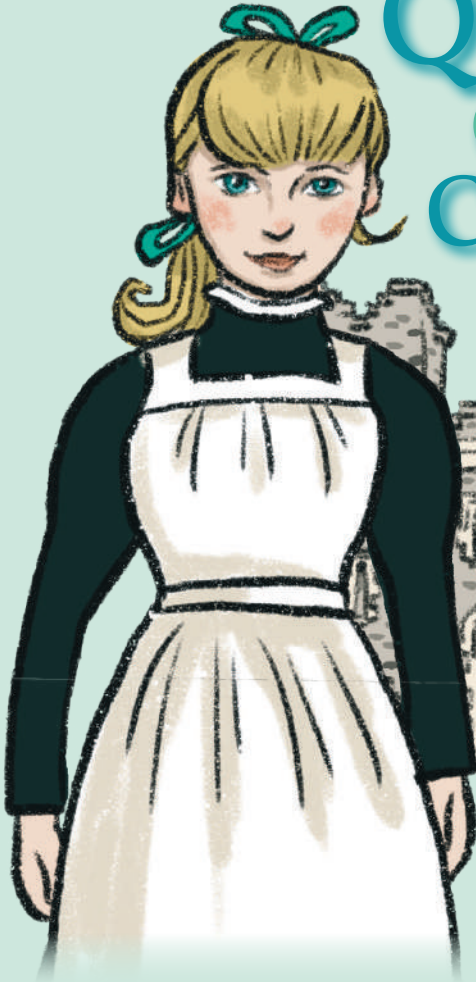


SORCHIA

QUEEN OF THE CASTLE



One girl's adventures
through the formation
of the Irish State

Nicola Cassidy
Illustrated by Sophie Coyle

*Sorcha, Queen
of the Castle*

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This book is a work of fiction. References to real people, events, establishments, organisations or locales are intended only to provide a sense of authenticity and are used fictitiously. Characters, incidents and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination.

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1912

Síocháin
(Noun: Peace)



Chapter One

Sorcha O'Neill felt the butterflies bounce in her stomach as she stood, beside her mother Bríd at the servant's entrance to Bellingham Castle. Here she was! Right at the castle itself. Up close! She could touch it! Never before had she been past the lodge gate in the centre of the village. For most of her twelve years, she, like the rest of the villagers she knew in Castlebellingham had only ever peered longingly through the narrow carriage gates, wondering what delights lay inside the castle that gave the County Louth village its name.

She had dreamed often, of what it might be like to actually live in a turreted, crenelled home like this. Most of those dreams involved being Lady of the Manor, like Lady Bellingham herself. She imagined herself in the castle motor car, zooming up the driveway in furs. Today, she stood here as a servant girl. But it was real. Sorcha reached out and touched the crumbling limestone render around the door her mother had just firmly rapped, feeling the roughness beneath her fingers. Much of the render had already fallen away in clumps around the large wooden door. Another piece fell to the ground.



“Stop that,” her mother poked her, forcing her forward a little, just as the door swung wide open.

Sorcha straightened herself and felt the butterflies leap in a fluttery dance.

“Good morning Mrs. Adams!” said her mother, a brightness to her voice that Sorcha was not used to.

“Mrs. O’Neill,” nodded the housekeeper, frowning, taking Sorcha in with her hooded, wrinkled eyes.

Sorcha felt Mrs. Adams glare at her from top to toe and back up again.

She shuffled nervously and couldn’t help but lower her gaze.

“Come in then,” said Mrs. Adams a weariness to her voice.

The housekeeper stepped back to allow them entry to the castle and Sorcha felt her mother poke her again in the back, forcing her forward into a corridor off a large busy kitchen.

A cacophony of smells hit Sorcha’s nose; bones boiling for stock, putrid and stinking, sausages frying in a large pan, spitting at the cook who stood prodding them. A smell of cabbage permeated everything, or was it drains? Sorcha spied a young boy, coming out of the kitchen lifting a heavy metal bucket. Ashes, she presumed, from the enormous black range she could see, the biggest she had ever laid eyes on.

“I’ll bring you into the scullery Sorcha. You can leave her to us now Mrs. O’Neill, there’s plenty for her to be doing.”

Sorcha waved to her mother who nodded and gave her a quick smile before turning to leave the noisy kitchen corridor behind. For a moment Sorcha wanted to call out to her, to tell her not to leave, for she felt so very nervous and out of kilter.

But, the back door clicked closed. Here she was, the local girl in the big house. What would the day bring?

Mrs. Adams led her into the kitchen. “Let me see your hands,” she commanded.

Sorcha put out her hands, feeling them tremble as Mrs. Adams examined them closely.



“We take personal cleanliness very seriously,” said Mrs. Adams. “Dirty hands spread sickness and disease. Please keep them clean at all times.”

Sorcha nodded, glad she had seen to have a bath last night and scrubbed at her nails as her mother had ordered her to.

She followed Mrs. Adams into the scullery,

stepping down a step into the dark, damp room where the housekeeper handed her a long rubber apron and a cap. Mrs. Adams pointed to the three huge porcelain washing up sinks. Dishes, pots and pans were piled high.

“We could have done with you last week if I’m being honest,” said Mrs. Adams. “I just hope Eva makes a quick recovery.”

Eva Collins was the scullery maid at Bellingham Castle who had come down with rheumatic fever last Saturday. Sorcha’s Granny, Mamó Caitlín, who had the cure for many ailments had been called to her bedside and pronounced the young girl to be very seriously ill and urged that she be taken to hospital in Dundalk.

James Morgan, who owned a car in the village, took her there for free, seen as Lord Bellingham had been away in the castle’s motor car on business.

Prayers were offered up at Sunday morning mass for the poor girl’s recovery.

And while she battled a roaring temperature and slipped in and out of consciousness the dishes kept coming into the bowels of Bellingham Castle.

It was Sorcha’s mother who had put in a good word for her seen as it was that she had a connection with

Sir Henry Bellingham himself; they were both in the Gaelic League together. When Sorcha had arrived home to her mother who was beaming and waving a note from Mrs. Adams, housekeeper telling Sorcha to come to the servant's entrance of the castle the next morning at eight o'clock, Sorcha had squealed with delight.

"You can take the few days off school, till Eva's recovered," her mother told her. "It won't do you any harm and it'll be nice to earn a few bob ahead of your summer holidays."

Sorcha would finish up primary school in June. It was still to be decided what would become of her. Mamó and her mother wanted her to continue her education at St. Vincent's in Dundalk but her father said it would be a waste they could ill afford. "Education is all very well," he said, "but what good is it in the long run? It's skills she needs, not books."

Sorcha didn't really mind either way. Mamó told her she had brains like her mother and it would be a shame to waste them. "I'd love if you became a teacher," she said. "And you could teach all the children Gaeilge and the poems and stories I've taught you."

Mamó was forever telling her tales of times past, of the Donn Cúailnge, the brown bull of Cooley, of

Cú Chulainn and Ferdia and Queen Medb. Sorcha thought of the school master who she'd had for most of her primary education and couldn't imagine doing that job, which mostly seemed to involve shouting at boys and girls for "Ciúnas!"

Sorcha didn't want to be a teacher. She didn't want to work in shop or a post office. She certainly didn't want to work in a cold fish market like Mamó Caitlín had done in Belfast.

There were jobs in Woolsey's brewery she knew for women; secretarial and book keeping roles and as both her brothers Cathal and Liam were already working there, and her father Austin was a manager, she suspected it would be quite easy for her to find work there too.

But she didn't really want to do that either.



There was only one job, if you could call it a job, that Sorcha wanted to do. It was a silly dream she knew, but the only thing she'd ever really longed to be was Lady of the Castle, just like Lady Lelgarde Bellingham, the head of the household of this sweeping majestic building she now stood in.

When her mother had shown her the note telling her to report for work at the castle she felt as though

God had been listening in on her secret prayers. Or maybe it was Saint Brigid!

Sorcha put the apron over her head and fastened the straps behind her back. It hung heavy on her small shoulders. She put the cap on her head and tucked her hair in neatly.



The apron reached all the way down her shins.

“Now it’s quite simple really,” said Mrs. Adams. “Rinse the dishes here ...” She pointed to the porcelain sink on the right. “And wash them here.” She pointed to the other sink on the left. “Take care not to slam the dishes in, we like to keep our crockery intact, thank you very much. You can steep the large pots and pans, especially anything that’s been baked, in that trough over there. The cook will look after a lot of the heavy pots and pans, but there’ll be plenty to keep you going.”

Sorcha could see that. She looked to where Mrs. Adams was pointing; there seemed to be buckets and basins everywhere.

“Dry as you go, you’ll need the room. Now let me show you where to stack things.”

Sorcha's head began to spin as she concentrated hard on Mrs. Adams' words.

Stewpans, braizing pans, stock pots, fancy cutters, toasting forks, pudding moulds, strainers, colanders tartlette tins; how was she supposed to remember not only what everything was but where everything went?

"Piping hot water for very dirty utensils please," said Mrs. Adams. "Luke warm water is no good. I will not have Lady Bellingham wiping grease from her fork!"

Sorcha nodded furiously, trying to keep up.

"When you've this lot done, wash out the tubs with soap, soda and water. And make sure you wring out the cloths to dry properly."

Sorcha nodded again.

"Don't let anything down the sink. Water only. The girl before Eva let all sorts down the drain and we're still dealing with the smell."

Right, thought Sorcha. Water only. That must be why the drains were still stinking. "If you need to check on anything, you can ask the cook or find me. Now no dawdling, get to it."

Mrs. Adams waved her hand in the air. Sorcha rushed to the sink and turned on the tap. It was time to get to work.



It didn't take long for Sorcha's back to start aching as she lifted heavy pots and pans into the basins to soak and scrubbed hard at crusty sauces and vegetables in hot water. Porridge had hardened like cement onto three pots and she thought she might never dislodge the baked on oats.

She felt sweat gather on her cheeks and her hair fall out around her face as she washed and scoured and scrubbed and dried. Just when she felt she'd made a little headway into the mountain of dishes, the cook brought another mound of dishes into the scullery.

"Luncheon service," she laughed, when she saw Sorcha's stricken face. "Get used to it!"

Later, as Sorcha's stomach growled with hunger, Mrs. Adams called her to a large common room off the kitchen corridor where a long wooden table was laid out with a bulky tureen of soup and a plate of sandwiches.

Sorcha savoured the thick mushroom soup and gobbled the corn beef sandwiches quickly.

“I see you’ve worked up an appetite,” said Mrs. Adams.

Sorcha nodded, feeling shy as the staff all turned to look at her.

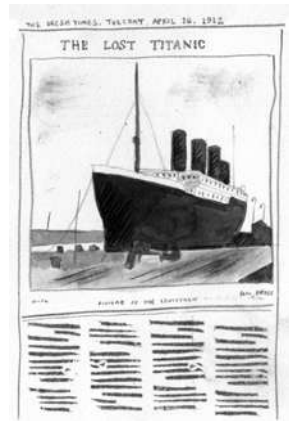
“She’ll soon build up those arms,” smiled the cook.

“Well, I’m just glad you got somebody,” said Julia Adams, who was Mrs. Adams daughter and held the sought-after position of lady’s maid to Lady Bellingham. “A house cannot run without a scullery maid.”

Mr. Lyons, the butler, did not address Sorcha, or even seem to notice she was there at all.

For the entirety of their luncheon he pored over the Freeman’s Journal newspaper, eating and reading in silence. That was until he made quite the exclamation.

“My goodness!” he said, startling Sorcha, who was still feeling quite nervous in her new surroundings. “The Titanic’s been lost!”





Julia Adams clamoured from her seat to read over Mr. Lyon's shoulders, something he did not much appreciate, as he snapped the paper away and cleared his throat.

"They said she was unsinkable!" said Mrs. Adams.

"They tempted God," said Julia. "God showed them."

Mr. Lyons read out loud from the paper.

"Feared loss of over one thousand lives. World's largest liner collides with an iceberg. At 2.20am the Titanic foundered. The Carpathia is proceeding to New York with survivors."

"The water would be freezing," said Mrs. Adams.

Sorcha felt terribly sorry for the people tossed into the icy sea. She had a fear of water and would never jump off Annagassan Pier like her brothers loved to do in the summer. When she was younger she would paddle and even dip her whole body at Port beach and sometimes at Salterstown, but she had never gone out of her depth, being far too afraid that she would slip under the water and never be seen again.

Just like those souls on the Titanic.

“Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha,” said Sorcha.

“What?” said Julia, not understanding.

“Never mind,” said Sorcha. Sometimes she forgot herself and spoke Irish out loud, especially when she was thinking of something sad or upsetting.



Mr. Lyons threw the newspaper on the table and got up to leave.

Sorcha reached for it and quickly glanced at the Titanic article, gleaming the details. Beside the Titanic story was a large headline reading “The Country and Home Rule Bill, Measure Heartily Endorsed, Congratulations to Mr. Redmond.” Sorcha started to read it, as her brother and mother were forever discussing the topic.

“I’ll take that, thank you very much,” said Mrs. Adams, snatching the paper away from Sorcha.

Embarrassed, Sorcha scuttled back to the scullery.

All afternoon she worked, washing, scrubbing, soaking and drying.

Her hands were sodden, the skin puckered on her fingers. Her feet were sore from standing on the wooden slatted mats.

When Mrs. Adams came to her at half past six and told her she could go home, she was very relieved. There were still dishes piled up, but as dinner had yet to be served to the Bellingham family, she had begun to accept that there would always be dishes coming. It was a never-ending task.

Sorcha realized, as she removed her apron and cap that she had not even got near the back stairs that led to the upper levels of the house.

There had been no chance to explore, no grand tour and not so much as a whiff of Lady or Sir Bellingham. When she'd received Mrs. Adams' note telling her to come to the castle, she had imagined she would pass by Lady Bellingham in the corridors perhaps and the thought had filled her with joy.

Now after a day of scraping and slopping in the sink, she realized she might never see Lady Lelgarde at all. She would wash her dishes. And that might be all.

The butterflies that had filled her stomach that morning as she and her mother had walked up the back avenue of the castle, were now gone. In their place was hunger and weariness.

She was exhausted.

She left quietly and kept her head down as she walked down the avenue, past the grand stable house, this time alone. Blackbirds, robins and a raucous thrush called from the trees.

The evening was bright, a welcome relief from the dim, murky light of the scullery. Sorcha thought about

the coins she would earn for her work over the next few days and felt her spirits brighten.

It didn't really matter that she was a lowly scullery maid really. What mattered was that she had a job in Bellingham Castle.

Even if it was only for a few days.

Even if it was terrifyingly hard work.

Sorcha felt her sore back adjust as she walked taller towards the village and her home on Brewery Street.

She felt almost grown up.

Nodding at a few neighbours who passed her by as she rounded the corner towards home, Sorcha smiled to herself and imagined they were her subjects.

“Citizens!” she said out loud, giggling to herself. “My citizens!”

When she came in the door of her own kitchen Mamó Caitlín chuckled by the fire.

“Ah!” said Mamó, smiling. “Seo banríon an chaisleáin!”

Sorcha liked the sound of that.

Yes, it had a very nice ring to it.

Sorcha, Queen of the Castle.





Chapter Two

Sorcha's Granny, Mamó Caitlín was born in the heart of Belfast City to a family of Fadgies not long after the great potato famine. No one was exactly sure of the year, because they didn't record births officially back then and so Mamó always knocked a few years off her age. She said it was her privilege.

The Fadgies (nicknamed after 'A Pháidí because of the way they addressed each other) had come from the Gaeltacht in Omeath, and only spoke in English when they had to. They worked as fruit and fish sellers in the markets and had settled in Belfast after their potatoes rotted in the fields dug during 'An Gorta Mór'.

Mamó said the great hunger had caused the tears of the ‘daoine bochta’ of Cornamucklagh and Lislea and Ardagh to run down the mountains and fill Carlingford Lough right up and that was why it ran so deep. When Sorcha was younger, she believed everything Mamó told her, but now that she was getting older, she was beginning to realize that some of her words were not true and were only stories. It was hard to tell what was true though. Especially when it came to things like fairies and curses and the saints.

Life as a Belfast Fadgie was tough, with early starts in cold weather at the Smithfield markets and hands in and out of ice all day. The houses where they lived around Hercules and Charlemont Street were tumble down and dirty and crowded to the brim. Belfast, with its shipyards and textile factories and iron and engineering works tempted people from all over Ireland in search of work and even as far away as mysterious places like Lithuania and Russia. The babble of many accents could be heard around Smithfield all day and into the night. The Fadgies brought their own language with them and formed a small Gaeltacht right in the heart of Belfast. Even though Mamó Caitlín understood English and could speak it well, she always preferred to speak Irish when she could.

Mamó came to help Sorcha's mother Bríd in Castlebellingham after she was born. She had come to help with each of her grandchildren, with Cathal and Liam too, but when Sorcha was born, she had stayed for good and never returned to Smithfield in Belfast. She said she was too old and too cold to be bothered. She also said her heart was in Louth and Sorcha knew this to be true, for she had encouraged Bríd to marry a Louth man in the first place, even though, Sorcha had come to see, in Mamó's eyes, it was the best thing about him.

Mamó had a soft spot for Sorcha and called her 'a stóirín'. She had raised her on gentle lilting ballads, songs from Oriel, a special and wise place of poets and storytellers, most long forgotten. "We mustn't forget," she told her. "We must keep the stories alive."



Father said Mamó was maudling.

Mamó said father was a fecking eejit.

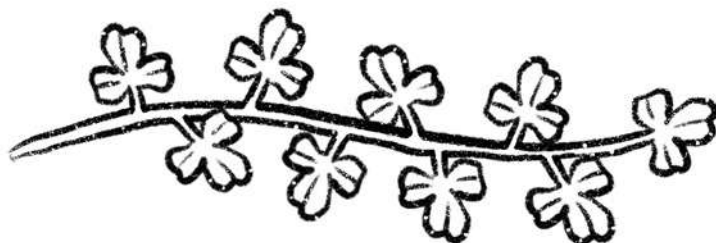
Mamó had only ever spoken Irish to Sorcha and so she could switch from English to Irish whenever

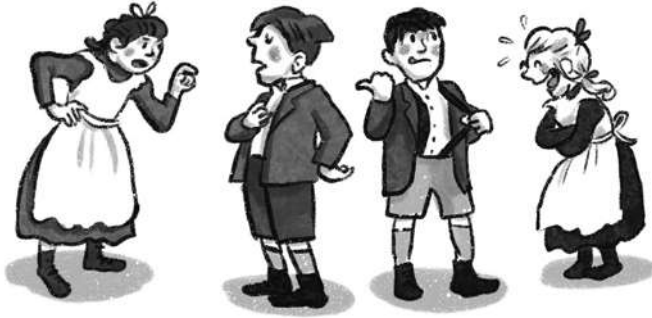
she wanted to. Mamó and Bríd spoke Irish at home, often to the annoyance of Sorcha's father, Austin, who had no Irish at all. Nobody spoke Irish in Castlebellingham and Sorcha found herself blushing whenever Mamó addressed her 'as Gaeilge' in the shops or on the street outside the house.

She didn't think the language was much to be proud of. In school, Sammy Armstrong told everyone it was a backwards language only spoken by Fenians and stupid country people after he had overheard her and Mamó speaking it in the post office one day, which his family owned and where he was required to help out.

"What good is Irish anyway?" he said in the school yard, his voice nice and loud so everyone could hear. "What good is it in England or America where all the jobs are? Irish only holds you back."

Sammy had plans to go to London to be a banker. Geraldine Reilly said it was because Sammy loved to count money but it was always other people's money.





“What would you know?” Geraldine had responded her hands on her hips, drawing herself up tall to face Sammy. “Irish is the language of our ancestors, of the High Kings of Ireland.”

“Not mine,” scoffed Sammy.

He was right there, thought Sorcha. The Armstrongs had moved from England when Sammy was a baby.

Mamó always told Sorcha she was descended from the High Kings because she was an O’Neill, but she always followed it up with, “Though, I don’t know what happened since.”

Mamó was not a great fan of her son-in-law, Austin O’Neill. Neither, was he a fan of Mamó.

Geraldine had pushed Sammy Armstrong that day, right in the shoulder and he had run off with his face

all red. It was nice to have Geraldine as a friend. She always stood up for Sorchá, no matter what.

“A stóirín,” said Mamó when Sorchá came in the back door of the house after her first day as a scullery maid in the majestic Bellingham Castle. A smell of stew filled the kitchen. Her stomach ached for it. She was bone tired.

“Sit yourself down now and tell me all about it,” said Mamó as she busied herself spooning stew from the pot for Sorchá.



“Oh Mamó,” wailed Sorchá and she plonked her head onto her arms on the table. “I’m pure worn out.”

Mamó let out a cackle of laughter.

“Are you now?” she said.

“I think I washed a thousand plates,” moaned Sorcha into her biceps. “And the pots, you’ve never seen anything like the pots. It’s like they’re cooking for an army.”

Mamó put the bowl of stew down in front of Sorcha and she lifted her head when she caught the aroma.

“My legs are numb. I don’t know if I can go back tomorrow.”

“Now, now,” said Mamó. “It’s only your first day. You’re not used to such hard work. The body will adjust.”

“They just kept piling the dishes up and I couldn’t get through them all and I’m not sure how happy Mrs. Adams was with me.”

“She’s delighted with you. She’ll be firm like any good housekeeper. You keep your chin up. A good rest and you’ll be right as rain.”

“I don’t know if I can go back tomorrow.”

“Arra, now whist,” said Mamó. “You always said you wanted to work in the castle. And now your dream has come true.”

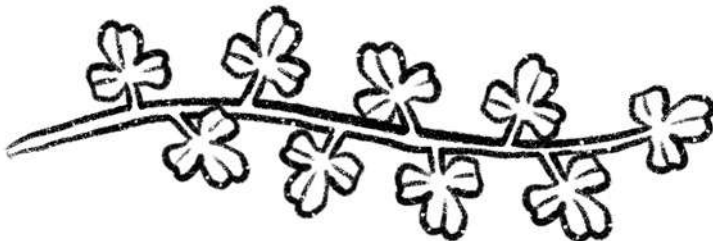
Some dream, thought Sorcha. She had dreamed of long flowing dresses, and hair like Rapunzel that hung down out of a towering window. Not towering piles of stinking pots and plates.

They heard the key in the front door and listened as Sorcha's father Austin made his way through the hallway. He wore smart leather shoes that click clacked on the mosaic tiled floor. Austin never used the back door like Sorcha or Mamó or Bríd did. He thought it common and liked to be seen on Brewery Street opening the wide Georgian door into the large red brick house that came with his managerial job in Woolsey's brewery.

Mamó said Austin had notions. Sorcha suspected she was right.

"Is she gone out?" Austin asked, as he rounded the kitchen door, his eyes roving the room for his wife.

"Gaelic League meeting," said Mamó.



The Gaelic League was one of Bríd's favourite activities and she had become heavily involved in the local committee as they made progress in promoting the Irish language in all sorts of ways.

"I think Eoin MacNeill is visiting tonight," said Mamó.

Austin shrugged.

Eoin MacNeill, an Irish history professor at UCD had founded the Gaelic League with another academic called Douglas Hyde and the members very much looked up to him. In just a few weeks a new school to teach Irish to teachers would open in Omeath, where Mamó's family had come from. They were all invited to the grand opening of Coláiste Bhríde.

"Do you think they called it after Mammy?" asked Sorcha of Mamó. "Coláiste Bhríde?"

"Not at all," said Mamó. "Sure, they called it after the great Louth saint, born and raised here."

Saint Brigid.

Or course, Sorcha hadn't really thought of that. And when she did think of it, it made sense, that Mamó with her longing for her ancestral home in the Cooley mountains, had called her only daughter after the great saint, born at the Hill of Faughart.



Austin seemed irked that Bríd was not home again.

He pulled out his chair with force and sat at the table, waiting for Mamó to serve him up his tea.

Mamó spooned him some soup she had heating in another pot and he ate it slowly, taking out his newspaper and folding it smoothly onto the table. Austin read the Irish Times. “A good protestant’s paper,” Mamó called it.

Father was not a protestant, but in the brewery where he worked, most of the managers were. Mamó had once told Sorchá that Austin felt he was an outsider and was always trying to fit in. This made Sorchá feel a bit sorry for her father. Perhaps it was

why he was often in a bad mood when he came in from work.

“Sorcha had her first day in the castle today, Austin,” said Mamó, in English.

Sorcha’s father looked up.

“Oh, that’s right, I forgot. How did you get on? Didn’t get into any bother I hope?”

His words stung Sorcha a little. It was as if he expected her to do badly.

“I washed plates all day. And scoured pots. And soaked dishes in hot water and soap flakes.”

“Ha!” scoffed Austin. “A hard day’s work.”

“She’s worn out now,” said Mamó.

“Won’t do you any harm,” said her father.

“I didn’t see outside the scullery,” said Sorcha. “Well, apart from the big kitchen which is about the size of this house, Mamó!”

“Oh, I’d say it is!” smiled Mamó.

“I’d like to see the bedrooms. And Lady Bellingham’s wardrobe. And the toy room!”

“I’m not sure they have a toy room,” said Austin. “I fear the children are quite grown up.”

“Well,” said Sorcha. “I’d still like to see what they have.”

Austin looked at his daughter.

“A working woman and still interested in toys!”

Sorcha felt a blush creep up her face.

Mamó looked at her kindly.

Later, as she and Mamó did the dishes together after Austin had retired to the front room to finish his paper, Mamó whispered to Sorcha, “Never mind your father. He never had a day of fun in his whole life. He was born a grumpy old so-and-so. You’re still only a girsha. Don’t mind him.”

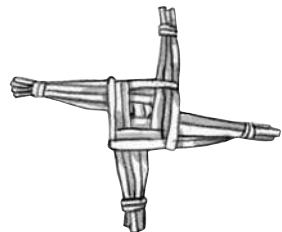
Sorcha smiled.

Mamó always made her feel better.

And somethings just sounded better in Irish.

Seanchrúncha.

Grumpy old man.





Chapter Three

Eva Collins did not get better. Not in April of 1912 or May or into early June. As each day passed and Sorcha stopped counting the amount of dishes and pots and pans that passed under her hands to be washed, she thought about the girls and boys she sat beside in school.

There were only a few weeks left of term. Sammy Armstrong would be going to a boarding school in England, somewhere outside London in the countryside. He said the school had a history of sending students to the best banks to train. Geraldine

started calling him ‘Barclays.’ Geraldine was going to St. Vincent’s in Dundalk but only for a few years after which she would leave and take up a job, probably as a secretary.

When it was clear that Eva Collins would not be going back to Bellingham Castle for the foreseeable, it caused an argument between Sorcha’s parents. Bríd wanted Sorcha to leave the dishwashing job and finish primary school and like her friend Geraldine, go on to secondary school. Austin said there was no point and that she was better off where she was.

“Do you realise how scarce work is?” he said, as her parents raised their voices in their bedroom. Sorcha listened to the muffle through the walls. “Leave her where she is. In a few years I’ll get her into the brewery.”

And so, the decision was made. Not that Sorcha had any choice in the matter. She didn’t know if she wanted to stay washing dishes in Bellingham Castle, or move onto the brewery when she was older. Her brothers didn’t particularly seem to like the work there; Liam complained that he felt like a slave and their father was always working late and in a very irritable mood when he came home.

Still, Mrs. Adams seemed happy that she was staying on and while she never gave her a compliment, Sorcha

knew that she was getting better at knowing where everything went and what all the many utensils, containers and cooking equipment was for.

Over time she came to understand the running of the house, from the rhythm of the kitchen, to the pace of the meals and menus, to the deliveries and stocking of the pantries and larders. From listening in the common room, she learned from Mr. Lyons about the wine cellar, from the groundsman Mr. Andrews about the gardens and lawn cutting and planting, from Mr. Wallace, the groom about the horses and livery and the coaches and how he didn't care much for the Bellingham's motor car driven by the chauffeur Mr. Tuite.

Mrs. Adams ran a tight ship and had been with the family ever since Lady Lelgarde Bellingham, who was Sir Henry Bellingham's second wife, had come to live at the castle in 1895. Sorcha liked Mrs. Adams, but was afraid of her sharp tongue and watchful eyes that never missed a thing. She loved when Julia Adams, Mrs. Adams' daughter and lady's maid to Lady Bellingham told stories of life upstairs, of the balls she had been to, of shopping expeditions to Dublin, of the hunt season and summer season, of small bits of gossip from various local families. She always seemed to know who was getting married, who *should* have been getting married and who *was* married but

were acting as if they were not married at all. It made Sorcha's head spin.

Through Julia, Sorcha came to know what families lived in what houses in the area and who the Bellinghams were friendly with. They often visited their relatives the Bellinghams in Dunany, the Fosters at Glyde Court and the Plunketts of Louth Hall at Tallanstown. On occasion they would venture to the Fortescues of Stephenstown House and the O'Reilly's at Knockabbey Castle in Ardee.



Sir Henry was an important man as he had been appointed Lord Lieutenant of Louth just the year before, which meant he was the crown's representative in the county.

Great change was underway on the estate as the Land Acts and Labourers Act had seen much land transfer to tenants away from direct ownership by landlords, like Sir Henry. This was very good for the tenants, as they could gain ownership of the acres they had farmed for generations and build new houses. The landlords got a payment from the government in return.

Sir Henry and Lady Bellingham were very charitable and spent much of their time trying to better the lives of their tenants and others.

Sorcha, through her avid listening in the common room and from comments she had picked up at school and at home knew that the Bellinghams were well liked and well respected. Sir Henry had care for the land and its people. He had an interest in Irish culture, was a member of the County Louth Archaeological Society and was in the Gaelic League with Sorcha's mother which was how she had come to work at Bellingham Castle in the first place. And, something Mamó liked very much about him and commented on as she blessed herself when she saw him and the family depart in their car for mass in Kilsaran: he was a converted Catholic.

Mamó liked to bless herself a lot.

She had pointed out all the religious icons built by the Bellinghams over doorways and set into tiles on the houses in the main street and told Sorcha Sir Henry was the nearest they'd probably ever get to God. That was because Sir Henry had served as private chamberlain to three popes. Sorcha's favourite icon was the Madonna and Child, surrounded by



coloured yellow fruits and flowers on one of the widow's cottages at the entrance to the castle.



When the day came for her class mates to graduate from sixth class at the end of June, Sorcha was allowed to take a longer lunch break so that she could visit the school house for the very last time. As it was the last day, there was no school work to be done and the master had his students cleaning and scrubbing

shelves, desks, floors and windows after a school year of crowded, crammed in learning. Geraldine and Sorcha took the dusters outside to wallop the chalk dust from them.

“All I ever do is clean!” said Sorcha.

“I’m so glad you came in for the last day,” said Geraldine from behind a fog of white chalk.

“Part of me wishes I was going to school with you Ger,” said Sorcha. “In Dundalk. It sounds exciting really.”

“Ah,” said Geraldine wisely. “I don’t intend to stay too long. Daddy says if I just do two years, I’ll be fourteen

then and it'll be much easier to find work. I wish I was earning already like you!"

Sammy Armstrong, struggling under the weight of a pooch desk grunted his way backwards out the hall door, followed by a smiling Tommy Bell. "Put your back into it Sammy!" cried Tommy.



The girls giggled.

Sammy put the desk down and furrowed his brow.

"It's heavy!" he said.

Tommy picked up a scrubbing brush from a pail of water standing ready in the yard and began to scrub down the desk. Sorcha had always liked Tommy, with his ready smile and affable manner. He teased but always in jest. He was never cruel. Not like Sammy Armstrong.

"There's the Queen of the Castle now," Tommy said, nodding towards Sorcha.

Sorcha felt herself blushing.

"Come on over here and tell us what it's like."

Sorcha and Geraldine brought their dusters with them.

“Hard work!” said Sorcha. “That’s what it’s like!”

“And you wouldn’t be used to that Sorcha,” said Sammy, drying off the patches where Tommy was scrubbing.

“Shutup Barclays!” said Geraldine. “If there was work in the bed you’d lie on the floor!”

Sorcha saw Sammy’s cheeks redden in embarrassment.

“My uncle does be telling me, all about the castle,” said Tommy. “Mr. Tuite. He’s the chauffeur up there. He said he might be able to get me a few shifts when I’ve done my apprenticeship.”

“Tommy’s starting at Moonan’s motor garage,” said Geraldine, staring at Tommy’s head which was bent in concentration over his task.

Sorcha could very well imagine Tommy with his head in the engine of a motor car.

“He already knows how to drive,” said Geraldine.

Geraldine seemed to know a lot about Tommy.

“I know Mr. Tuite,” said Sorcha.

Tommy looked up at her and smiled.

“They say London had a continental climate,” interjected Sammy. “Because it’s so near France. So, I suspect I won’t need to bring my winter woolens with me!”

Geraldine rolled her eyes.

“I’m sure you’ll make a very good bank manager,” said Sorcha kindly. “One day.”

Sammy looked surprised by her kind comment.

“One day,” he said.

Who knew what the future held?

Sorcha hoped it would be bright.

As she made her way from the school back to the castle, Sorcha thought that they sure had a lot to look forward to. School would end for everyone and work would come their way. As long as they didn’t take any big boats to America, where killer icebergs floated around the ocean, they would be safe. They would be able to hand up to their parents, and maybe start buying their own nice things.

Sorcha thought of Tommy Bell with his big smile and floppy hair in his eyes.

She had caught Geraldine staring at him. She would like to see him again, sometime. She hoped with school being over they would get a chance to.

Back at the castle Sorcha tied on her apron and sighed as she spied the tall tower of dishes from luncheon service.

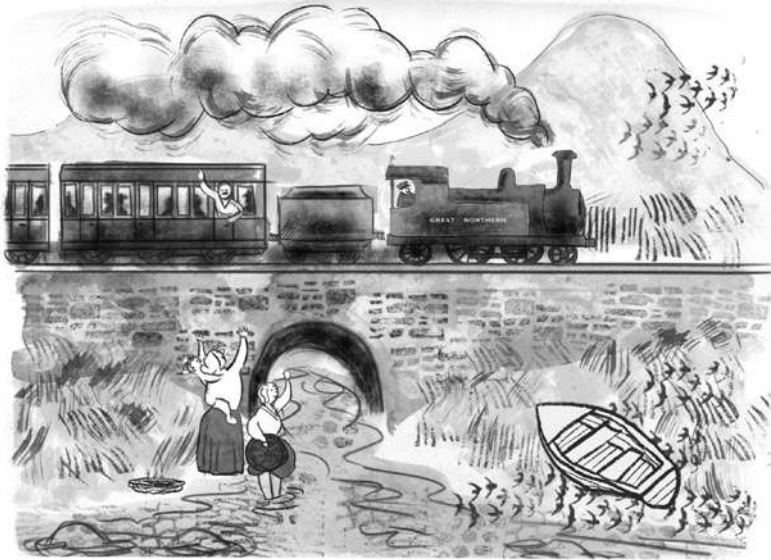
What would the next decade bring?

Mamó said the tea leaves were reading that there was trouble on the horizon. Sorcha hoped she was wrong, but in all Mamó Caitlín's years of reading the tea leaves, she had never once been wrong.

What kind of trouble, wondered Sorcha?
Nothing that would affect them, she hoped.

Sure, what kind of trouble could happen in their little peaceful village in Louth?





Chapter Four

In August, the whole O'Neill family were invited to the grand opening of Coláiste Bhríde in Omeath, right in the heartland of where Mamó Caitín's family were from. Sorcha's father did not want to go and in the end he was called into the brewery on the very day when they were all to travel by train.

Sorcha's mother said it was a pity. Mamó said, "An áit a mbíonn an dólás bíonn an sólás in aice," which meant that every cloud has a silver lining. She was in a great mood after that.

Sorcha helped with the picnic basket and flasks and along with her mother and grandmother, she and her two brothers Cathal and Liam, set out for Castlebellingham train station. It was nice to be travelling as a family. And, secretly, Sorcha was glad her father was not going with them, as they could all speak Irish, free as they liked.

Cathal was Sorcha's oldest brother and at seventeen was working hard in the brewery to follow in his father's footsteps. Austin said Cathal had all the makings of a good manager and if he served his time and concentrated hard, he too could work his way up and make his family proud. Liam, on the other hand, was not so keen. He had been in trouble many times for being late, for being absent when he was supposed to be manning the bottling line, for mixing up labels and twice, for fighting.

Liam said it wasn't his fault and Sorcha believed him. Some of the men at the brewery teased both Liam and Cathal, not only for being Austin's sons but because they were Catholic and because Liam, in particular, spoke Irish all the time. Bríd had bathed the scratch on his forehead the first time, but the second time his eye had turned purple and black and he'd had to take some time off because their father said it looked shameful. He said if it happened again, Liam would lose his job, permanently.

Austin and Liam often had disagreements. Sorcha hated to hear them arguing. Cathal could usually calm them both down, as he had a kind and logical manner about him. The problem was that Austin and Liam were like two magnets repelling each other. They had nothing in common. A bit, Sorcha often thought, like Austin and Bríd.

It was a beautiful summer's day as they boarded the train at Castlebellingham station. Sorcha sat quietly in her seat, holding the picnic basket in her lap. The train pulled off for Dundalk, where they had to disembark and change trains to Newry. The Irish Sea had turned a deep imperial blue and their conversation quietened as all their eyes were drawn out to the horizon. The train made its stops at Bellurgan and Bush, and stood for a time at Greenore, where many passengers were disembarking and climbing on with large cases and trunks. Sorcha wondered what it must be like to take the ferry from Greenore to Holyhead, to see the sights of England and maybe even further beyond.

“You know if partition went through, we'd be coming up to the border now,” said Liam wistfully, as he looked out across the Mourne Mountains. “County Louth meets County Down. And over there, Armagh, also separated.”

“What would the border look like?” asked Sorcha.
“Would it be a fence?”

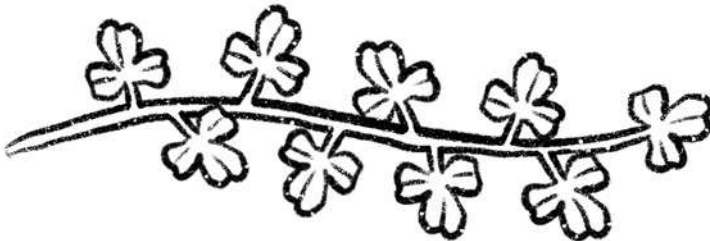
Liam laughed. “Huh, maybe,” he said. “But hopefully it won’t come to that. We want Ireland to remain as she is, an island, top to bottom.”

“Not quite as she is,” said Cathal.

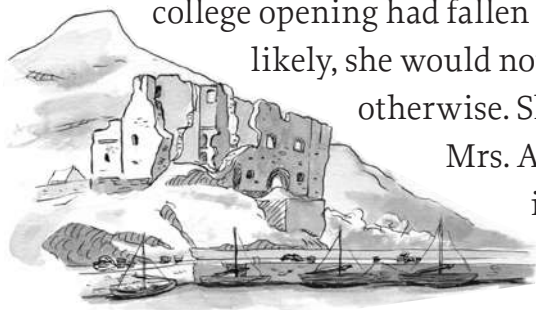
“That’s true!” said Liam, laughing. The two brothers had been talking a lot recently about what the Home Rule Bill might mean in real terms. That July, Edward Carson, the Irish Unionist parliamentary party leader had brought his supporters to the streets of Ulster protesting the Bill. The Home Rule Bill had been placed before the House of Commons in April, around the time Sorcha first starting working in the castle. The Unionists wanted to remain under the crown. A proposal to exclude four counties; Antrim, Down, Armagh and Derry, the counties with many unionists, had been discussed in parliament.

Liam said it would be a disaster.

Cathal said it might be the only working solution.



At Carlingford some tourists climbed on, and Sorcha half wished they were getting off there as she very much liked the little village with its quaint port and King John's Castle looming. That castle was much older than Bellingham Castle. It was medieval and crumbling and nothing like the beautiful home and estate she worked in. She was very glad that the college opening had fallen on her day off, as



likely, she would not have been able to go otherwise. She didn't think

Mrs. Adams has much interest in the Irish language and its teaching.

Finally, past Carlingford, the train trundled into Omeath train station and Sorcha felt the atmosphere rise as they all stood up to disembark. "Ho ho," said Mamó, smiling as she carefully hauled herself onto the platform, supported by Liam's outstretched hand. Mamó took a deep breath as she stood at the station, taking in her surroundings.

"Abhaile," she said, her eyes closed tight.

Jarveys waited outside to take them up into the mountains and Sorcha felt sorry for the poor horse as she watched the animal struggle up the hill. As they climbed higher and higher, Sorcha looked back



down towards the lough and realized what a beautiful place this was to live in. No wonder those ‘daoine bochta’ had cried when they’d left during the famine.

Coláiste Bhríde stood at Woodhouse, resplendent against the mountain scrub, its limestone facade smooth

and proud looking, its arched fantail windows glinting in the sun. Outside the school had gathered a large group of men, women and children, as well as many clergymen in their black cassocks and tunics. Bríd pointed out Cardinal Logue, who stood surrounded by an attentive circle, in his red robes. Sorcha heard the babble of voices ‘as gaeilge’ and felt a tingle. Never before has she seen so many gathered speaking their mother tongue. Mamó beamed as she climbed down from jaunting car and immediately found a cousin she had not spoken to in decades.

“A Mháire, a stór!” she cried out. Sorcha caught Cathal and Liam’s eyes and they giggled. “She’s come home to roost,” said Liam. Soon Sorcha was being made twirl for many other distant relatives as they all admired how big she had grown, how much she looked like Bríd, and in turn Mamó, how she was

working in Bellingham Castle now and how good her Irish was, considering it was not spoken anywhere outside the home.

“Things are changing though,” commented an older great-uncle with a toothless smile. “Soon, we’ll be speaking Irish all across the country!”

When Eoin MacNeill appeared, a babble went through the crowd and they parted as though welcoming Moses himself. He wore steel rimmed spectacles and a high mandarin collar and tie. He looked quite stern to Sorcha, like her old school master but Bríd seemed very pleased to see him. “He gave up his summer,” she told them. “To teach for free.” They watched as he made his way through the crowd and shook many hands. “A great man,” commented Mamó.



A large blue Rolls Royce pulled up and Liam whistled. “Such a lovely motor.” They watched as Sir Henry Bellingham and his wife Lady Lelgarde got out. Sorcha felt herself stiffen. “Could have given you a lift,” Liam poked Sorcha in the arm. “Stop it,” she said, unnerved.

She watched as her mother Bríd moved forward to speak with them. Sorcha felt terribly shy. Here were her employers, on this scenic mountainside, and she

was closer to them than she ever got in their own home.

Bríd and Sir Henry spoke in Irish and Sorcha marvelled at her mother's ease with such an important man. Mamó put on the voice she used when speaking English, a type of high-pitched, grand voice, which made Sorcha want to laugh. She watched in horror as Mamó approached and addressed Lady Lelgarde herself. "Do you know my granddaughter Sorcha? She's one of your employees. Doing a fine job by all accounts."

"Oh," said Lady Bellingham and she reached out her hand to pat Sorcha's. "Are you in the kitchen?"

Sorcha nodded and felt the heat rise up her jaw.

"Scullery, Ma'am," she said.

"Oh, that's right. I had heard. And how are you faring my dear? Not working you too hard I hope?"

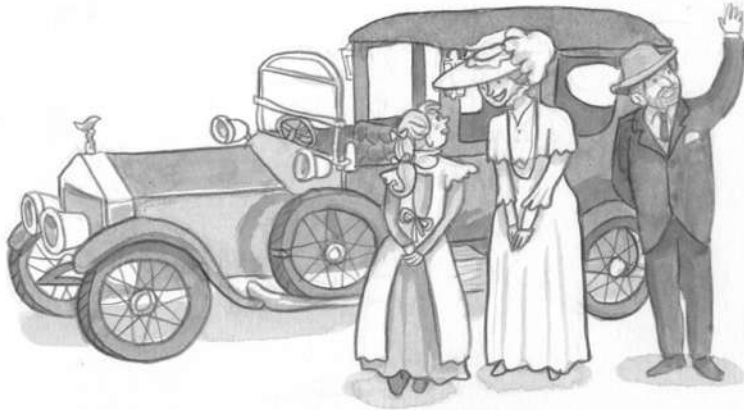
Sorcha looked at the ground, embarrassed.

"No, m'lady," she said. "I very much enjoy it."

This was not quite the truth. The work was hard and Sorcha found her days long and tiring.

“And you are a Gaelgeoir?” asked Lady Lelgarde.

Sorcha nodded. Lady Bellingham’s accent was so different to the voices all around her. She had been born in England and came from a very wealthy family.



“Yes, my mother is in the Gaelic League with Sir Henry.”

Lady Bellingham smiled.

“I do love this interest,” she said, looking around her at the crowd. “Sir Henry has many passions, not all of which I understand.”

Mamó guffawed far too loud at the joke.

Liam threw his eyes up to heaven.

Sir Henry was moving on and he tugged on his wife's sleeve, which Sorcha noted was made from the softest light velvet.

Lady Bellingham's eyes lingered on Sorcha for a moment, before she gave her hand a final pat and moved away with her husband. Sorcha looked after her longingly. How regal the woman looked.

“Is maith liom í,” said Mamó. “Not all airs and graces like some.”

A priest dressed in a cassock stepped forward onto a small platform that had been erected for the occasion. He cleared his throat as a vibration of ‘shush’ and ‘ciúnas’ echoed through the audience. The priest, Rev. M. J. Quin of Carlingford, President of the college, welcomed everyone to the historical hills of Omeath and said no better place could have been chosen for such an important institution.

“It was here that Hugh O’Neill, Earl of Tyrone, fought his final battle against the English, at the woods at Fathom,” he said. Mamó elbowed Sorcha in the side. Despite her cantankerous relationship with Sorcha’s father, Mamó was proud that Bríd had married an O’Neill and that somewhere, running deep in her grandchildren’s veins was the ancient bloodline of a Gaelic Lord.

“For three hundred years, the Irish speaking districts of Louth, Monaghan and Armagh were cut off from the other Irish speaking parts of Ireland, hemmed in by the pale in the south, while in the North lay the Ulster plantation. Omeath is now the last stronghold of the Irish tongue and it is wonderful that six hundred years after the enactment of the Statute of Kilkenny which forbade the use of Irish within the pale, Gaelic is still commonly spoken under the shadow of the roofless Norman castles that surround us.”

Sorcha saw that Cathal and Liam were engrossed in the priest’s words. She had only visited the area when she was younger on a day trip with Mamó and her mother, yet being here, on the mountain, knowing it was the homeland of her grandmother’s family and hearing the Gaelic language spoken all around her, made her swell with pride.

Reverend Quin next requested Cardinal Logue, patron of the college, to the platform to make his official address. A rally of cheers and rapid applause welcomed the Cardinal. He smiled at the applause, but Sorcha thought him quite a fierce looking man. In spring, she had been terrified when he held out his hands over her head at the altar during her confirmation. Geraldine Reilly told her all high-up

clergymen were the same: the closer they got to God, the more terrifying they got.

Sorcha listened as the Cardinal spoke in a firm and authoritative voice. “A good Donegal man,” whispered Mamó.

Now it was Bríd’s turn to throw her eyes up to heaven. Mamó loved to hear a Northern accent.



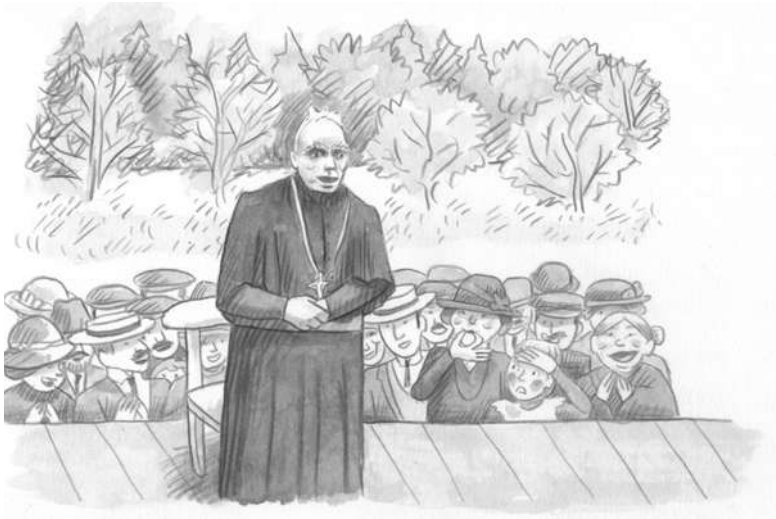
Cardinal Logue told them of coming to Louth in 1886 and not hearing a word of Irish spoken. “Sometimes when the older people met on the road, they would address each other in Irish, just to show they knew it, but no young Irish people were speaking it. The language was sick. It was dying. Now, the Gaelic League has given a new impetus to the study of

Irish. I hope the establishment of this college will put a stop to the disease in this part of Ireland.”

A fresh round of applause broke out. Sorcha could feel a deep stirring inside her. If a man as important as Cardinal Logue could say such words then who was Sammy Armstrong to mock her whenever she spoke their native language in Castlebellingham?

Rev. Quin next invited Eoin MacNeill to the platform and Sorcha watched her mother clap furiously.

Mr. MacNeill said it was a miracle that the language had survived in the district considering how close the area was to industrial towns, a railway and port. He told of how the college would now be sending teachers out to national schools all over Ireland and there was no reason why the teaching programme would not be a success. “The old people and the middle-aged people and the young people will rally to the college and it will rally to them and together we will restore and establish the Irish language in honour and high estate as it was in the days when the region, that North-East side of Ulster from Clonard to Dromore and Bangor was the light of the world!”



A furious round of applause broke out to cheers. Sorcha looked at Mamó and saw her wipe a tear from her eye. Her mother wolf whistled, much to Cathal's embarrassment. With the speeches finished Sorcha followed her family as they went into the rooms of the college to explore and fetch some refreshments to add to their own picnic basket. Outside an uilleann piper started up and two girls began a hornpipe on the platform.

"We should be more involved," Sorcha heard Liam say to Cathal. "We should do something, about the language. Play our part."

"Are you going to become a teacher?" mocked Cathal. "I hardly think you'd qualify going on your school results."



Liam scowled.

“There are many ways to help the cause,” said Liam.
“You just have to step up.”

“Off you go,” said Cathal. “I’m sure Eoin MacNeill
would be delighted with your company.”

Sorcha watched as Cathal crossed the room to bring
a hot cup of tea to Mamó Caitlín who had found a
chair and was happily chatting to another long-lost
relation.

Liam stared after him, his face narrowed and his
eyes glinting.

Sorcha wished her brothers could get on better. She thought that now they were both working and had become young men that the boyish fighting and jealous rivalry would have dissipated somewhat.

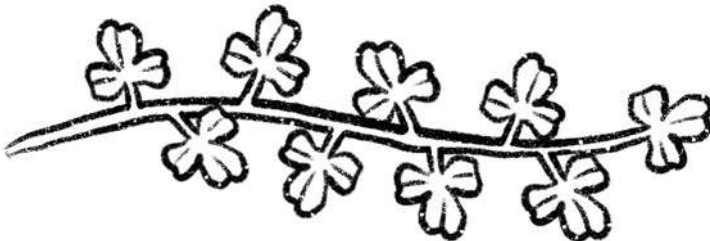
But she could see by Liam's demeanour that it had not.

Sorcha leaned over and squeezed Liam's shoulder.

"I think you'd make a great teacher," she said, warmly.

Liam looked at her, snorted and smiled.

"You're a good girl Sorcha," he said. "But you've a lot to learn about the world."



1914

Cogadh
(Noun: War)



Chapter Five

The volunteers drilled in complete co-ordination, legs and arms moving in a stiff march to the tune of a piping band. Sorcha looked on in awe. Each contingent carried a large banner in front and all the men wore belts and bandoliers, wrapping around their bodies.

They looked so proud, she thought. So very strong and proud.

Thousands had gathered in the Grove Field at Castlebellingham. Sorcha had never seen so many people. All day, volunteers had trooped in from Louth, Meath and Monaghan, thronging the streets, their heads held high as they made their way to the Feis, a

day of Gaelic games and competition, complete with a military parade of the Irish Volunteers organised by the Gaelic League.

People flowed from the train station, where extra trains had been provided to carry spectators and those taking part. Bicycles, cars, motor cars and motor cycles pushed their way through the crowds. Sorcha felt very lucky to be living right in the heart of Castlebellingham; she barely had to walk around the corner to get there.

She had awoken to the hum of activity in the village that morning and her excitement had grown all day. She had pleaded with her parents to allow her to go to the field early, just so she could see what was happening. They had finally relented and set off at midday.

“There they are, Liam, Cathal!” she cried as her brothers came into view in the parade. Bríd clapped, while Austin looked on. Mamó wolf whistled. It was a true talent, thought Sorcha, because no matter how hard she tried, she could never make a noise come out like that when she blew on her own fingers.

She waved and waved as the Castlebellingham Corps marched by and she saw Liam’s eyes twitch and catch hers. He gave her a slight smile. How magnificent he

looked, she thought. Cathal kept his eyes forward, intent and serious.

The Irish Volunteers had formed officially last year in November 1913. Edward Carson's protesters against Home Rule had formed themselves into an official militia called the Ulster Volunteer Force (the UVF) and following a strongly worded article by Eoin MacNeill saying nationalist supporters should do the same in the Gaelic League's newspaper, *An Claidheamh Soluis*, the rival Irish Volunteers, in support of the Home Rule Bill had been formed.



Liam and Cathal had signed up immediately. The movement was intended to be inclusive and while they trained to drill and build up a disciplined army, they were formed for defense and protection only.

“Don’t they look handsome?” said Bríd as she watched her sons march off around the corner of the field.

“Too handsome,” said Mamó. “They’ll have all the wanton young ones of the village after them.”

“Mamó!” admonished Bríd.

After the Castlebellingham Corps, came the Dundalk volunteers, whose numbers swelled to over 600 and took some time to troop by the spectators. They were accompanied by motor dispatch riders. After the Drogheda branch came the Dunleer Corps who led their troop with a banner accompanied by two members carrying silver swords aloft. After Dromin, Dromiskin, Drumconrath, Killanny, Knockbridge, Louth and Monasterboice, Sorcha strained to see the Stabannon half company as the men were followed by a troop of nursing corps, dressed in white robes.

“Don’t they look marvellous?” Mamó said to Sorcha, nudging her in the back.

They did. They got a fierce round of applause and Sorcha noticed three wives whacking their husbands on the arm for looking for too long. Sorcha looked to her father, but the only expression he had on his face was one of boredom. He really looked as if he’d rather be somewhere else.

The Feis had opened with competitions in Irish dancing, history, poetry recital, storytelling and Gaelic conversation. Sorcha had not taken part, but she knew she would have done well in the conversation considering she spoke it fluently at home. She thought it would not be fair on those who

were only learning Irish through Gaelic League circles though and so she was happy to observe and enjoy the joyous occasion.

Bríd was excited to hear Douglas Hyde speak, for he was a founding member of the Gaelic League and quite the hero in her eyes. They gathered as near as they could to the podium, but with the sheer numbers of spectators, they struggled to hear what was being said. A dramatic hush fell over the crowd as they listened intently.



“Come with me,” whispered Bríd and she reached for Sorcha’s hand and pulled her through the crowd, weaving with speed till they got nearer to the stage.

“A nation without its language is like a dog without teeth!” proclaimed Hyde, his voice much clearer now in Sorcha’s ears. “Like a spealadóir without his scythe! Like a soldier without his rifle! We have a great many soldiers before us without rifles but we will soon put music into their trumpets, put teeth into their dogs so that they bite when necessary and put rifles into the hands of our soldiers from one county to another!”

A huge round of applause broke out. Sorcha was sure she could hear Mamó wolf whistling behind them again.

“Today, coursing and surging through the blood of Ireland, is a spirit of pride, both of race and nationality that makes us hold our heads aloft and step forward like men. It is the right thing to see the Volunteers of Ireland and the body of Ireland supporting the soul of Ireland - the Gaelic League!”



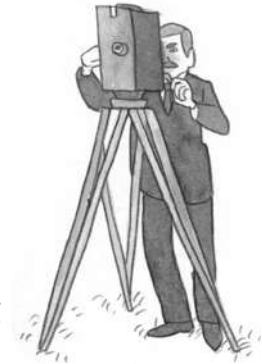
Out of the corner of Sorcha’s eye, she spotted John Bell, older brother of Tommy Bell, who she’d barely seen since she’d left school two years ago. She’d spotted him at mass the odd time and seen him walking through the village on occasion but she’d heard he was very busy with his job an apprentice mechanic. When the crowd parted a little, she saw that Tommy was in fact standing right beside his brother and she felt a flutter in her tummy. She hadn’t expected to see him. He had grown taller she noticed and had his hair cut shorter. She looked back to the stage, forcing her eyes to look away. He had become so handsome. No wonder

Geraldine was always talking about him whenever they met.

“The smoke and dust and confusion of the land war has now passed and home rule is almost decided,” said Douglas Hyde, his voice and clear and confident. “When these two questions are out of sight, Ireland will sit down to do her business in her own way and the very first question she will have to ask herself will be how to become Irish again?”

As Hyde moved onto the subject of Irish teaching being thwarted by officials in Dublin Castle and her Majesty’s Treasury at Whitehall, Sorcha felt her eyes drift back to Tommy Bell. To her surprise he turned his head and looked directly across at her and smiled. She turned immediately back to the stage and vowed not to look left or right until the whole Feis was over. He had looked at her! He had smiled!

“Look,” said Bríd and she pointed at a man who was standing behind what looked like a large box on three legs. “See, a camera, that man is committing the day to film.”



Sorcha scrunched up her nose. The man looked as if he might be preparing to release a bird from its box. She had heard about moving pictures, but had never

seen one. Julia Adams had once seen the wedding film of Augusta Bellingham, Sir Henry Bellingham's eldest daughter at a party she had attended in Scotland with Lady Bellingham. Sorcha was too young to remember Augusta's wedding, but she had always known about it, as it had been such a big day for the village. Thousands had turned out to follow Augusta's wedding procession to Kilsaran, as she officially became the Marchioness of Bute and observe the glamour and fashion of the nobles who had been invited to attend. Secretly, Sorcha thought how horrid it must have been to work in the castle that day as they had held the wedding banquet for hundreds of distinguished guests. Imagine the amount of washing up over those days!

Bríd clapped loudly as Hyde finished his speech with a rousing statement of protest against how Irish was taught in National Schools by "the arbitrary action of English Lord Commissioners of his Majesty's Treasury". Sorcha could see that her mother was buoyed by the speech and riled up by the scholar's words.

Sorcha ducked behind her mother, hoping that the Bells would move away quickly. Bríd turned and led her back towards where they'd left Austin and Mamó.

“Could barely hear a word!” said Mamó when they found her again.

“He spoke wonderfully,” said Bríd.

“Terrible to be old,” said Austin and the three women knew that he must have understood what they were saying, even though he protested that his Irish was poor.

Mamó scowled.

“There’s a nursing exhibition,” said Sorcha. “Can we go?”

Bríd nodded. Austin cleared his throat.

As they pushed their way through the dispersing crowds, Sorcha spotted Geraldine ahead and called out to her. Geraldine turned back and smiled and hooked her arm through Sorcha’s.

“Isn’t it just wonderful, a stór?” said Geraldine.

Geraldine never used Irish and Sorcha was quite taken aback at her friend’s new found love for the language. “I’m so proud to be Irish today, aren’t you?”

Sorcha saw Mamó roll her eyes so far back in her head that she looked like a walking banshee. Mamó did not have much time for Geraldine. Sorcha always

defended her friend, but she knew she could be silly sometimes. “Full of airs and graces, that one,” she said whenever Geraldine visited.

“She’s not a bad egg,” Bríd would intervene, keen that Mamó was not too hard on Sorcha’s friend, for she only had the one.

“Could you not find a nice Gaeilgeoir, someone in the Gaelic League circles?” Mamó prompted her.

But for all her airs and graces, Geraldine was fun too and always made Sorcha laugh.

Besides, she had well-earned the friendship with her fierce defense of Sorcha in school over the years.



The girls, followed closely by Sorcha’s family, watched the nurses demonstrate how to bandage up broken arms, broken collar bones, how to apply pressure to bleeding wounds and dress cuts, grazes and burns. The injured volunteered their own fresh and half healed wounds and Sorcha saw her father turn away and heave, when a farmer took off his rubber boot and rolled down his sock to reveal an oozing ulcer.

“Good God,” muttered her father.

Sorcha was not at all queasy and was quite fascinated by how gentle the nurse was with the man and the relief he seemed to get when she had applied a sterile powder and fresh dressing.

“Sorcha! Oh Janey Mac, Sorcha, there he is, over there!”

Sorcha looked to where Geraldine had nudged and pointed and saw that Tommy and John Bell were making their way across the field. She felt the flutter in her stomach again. What was happening to her? Why did she feel so drawn towards Tommy and at the same time, utterly repelled? As if his looking at her might turn her into a fine pile of dust?

“Tommy!” roared Geraldine. She broke into a sprint, taking Sorcha, in utter mortification with her. “Tommy!”



Tommy turned and smiled when he saw the two girls.



“Isn’t it great craic altogether?” Geraldine began. “The crowds! I’ve never seen so many people in one place. It’s really putting our little village on the map isn’t it? So how have you been, is the car business going well? I heard you’ll be qualified next year and that your uncle was setting up his own garage and you’d be well set up, is that right? What about the castle, did you ever get a few shifts there? Sorcha’s still working there in the kitchen, aren’t you Sorcha, washing dishes for the Bellinghams? I’m finished school now, so I am, just having a little break before starting my secretarial course in August.”

Geraldine stopped to take a breath while Sorcha felt a blush rise in her cheeks. Why was Geraldine babbling like that? She was making a complete show of them both. And she didn’t care for the way Geraldine had spoken about her job in the castle.

“Whoa Geraldine, slow down there or you’ll give yourself a hernia,” Tommy said.

Sorcha giggled and felt her friend flinch beside her.

“Who’s this now,” said Tommy’s brother John, holding out his hand to shake Sorcha’s.

“Sorcha,” said Sorcha, stepping forward. Anything to interrupt the unshakeable Geraldine. “Sorcha O’Neill.”

“You know Sorcha,” said Tommy, explaining to John. “Her father’s a manager in the brewery.”

“Oh,” said John. “Austin O’Neill?”

Sorcha nodded. She wasn’t sure if this was a bad or a good thing.

“Some show today,” said John amicably.

“Are you not marching yourself?” asked Sorcha.

John nodded. “I’m not a volunteer, but after today, I’m thinking of joining up.”

“My brothers Cathal and Liam were marching,” said Sorcha.

“Oh, that’s right, I was in school with Cathal,” said John.

John was darker than Tommy, with thick eyebrows and piercing blue eyes. His features were narrower and he was not as handsome as his younger brother, but he was quite striking none-the-less.

“Pity they don’t take girls,” said Sorcha.

“You could join the nursing corps,” said Tommy.

Sorcha laughed again.

“Maybe,” she said.

“I haven’t made it up to the castle yet,” said Tommy.
“It’s been very busy at the garage.”

“There’s an awful case of scabies going round,”
blurted out Geraldine. “You’d want to be careful like,
it’s terribly contagious.”

The three looked in amusement at Geraldine and
Sorcha saw her friend’s face redden.

“Well, see you later ladies,” said John moving away.

“Yes, see you,” said Tommy. His eyes lingered on
Sorcha before he turned away.

“Slán a bhuachallí!” cried Geraldine.

She turned and looked at Sorcha.

“Scabies?” said Sorcha.

“I couldn’t think of what else to say!”

“But scabies?”

“I know.”

“Bad.”

“Right? It’s just his eyes. He’s so handsome, it puts me off!”

“Whose eyes?” asked Sorcha.

“Tommy’s!” said Geraldine, indignantly. “Who did you think I meant?”

Sorcha thought of John’s pupils, the whites of his eyes crystal clear under the July sun.

“John has nice eyes too.”

“What a family,” swooned Geraldine.

Together the girls made their way back to Sorcha’s parents where Mamó was complaining that she needed a seat after all the commotion.

“There’s a cake stall,” said Sorcha looking around. “I’ll get you a cup of tea, Mamó.”

Austin yawned and said it might be better if they all headed home as things were starting to wind down anyway. Sorcha wasn’t too sure of that; the crowds were still swelling and a brass band from Drogheda had just begun a recital.

“You go if you like,” said Bríd. “I want to wait for Liam and Cathal. You missed Sir Bellingham, Sorcha. He walked by a few moments ago.”

“A great man,” said Mamó.

“Well, he must be delighted with the day,” said Bríd.

The Feis was taking place in the Grove field which Sir Bellingham had allowed to be used for the day. And he'd given generously to the organising committee.

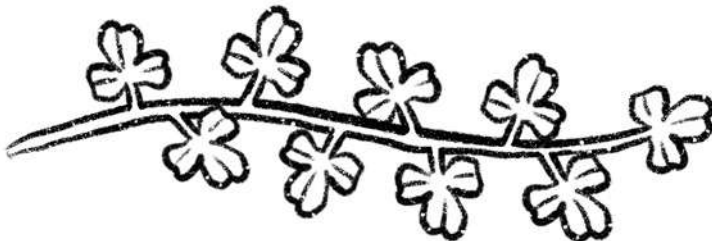
“You know a lot of great men,” said Austin as he dusted off his trousers and checked his pockets.

“And a lot of weak, insufferable ones too,” said Mamó as he walked off, under her breath.

Sorcha giggled.

“What did she say?” asked Geraldine.

“Never mind,” chorused Sorcha and her mother Bríd, together.





Chapter Six

Not long after the Feis in the Grove Field, Sorcha heard about talk of war. With chatter in the common room at the castle and her father reading excerpts from his newspaper by the fire each evening, she came to understand that there was trouble on the continent. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne and his wife Countess Sophie had led Austria to threaten war with Serbia. There had been a diplomatic crisis as countries shuffled to align their allegiances. Austria sought the backing of its ally Germany against any force that might come from Russia, who were allied with Serbia. When Russia mobilised forces, Germany sprung into

action. Britain, who had been playing peacemaker, and was semi-aligned with Russia and France, now feared that Germany would overrun France.

One sunny August morning, Sorcha came to work, and donned her apron as usual. She felt there was a funny atmosphere about the place. At lunchtime an urgent babble echoed round the table.

“What’s wrong?” Sorcha asked Molly, the housemaid and the only person she could really address, as she wasn’t too far above her rank. Overhearing her, Mr. Lyons the butler put down his newspaper with a slam on the table.

“War!” he cried. “War!”

Britain had given Germany an ultimatum to withdraw its troops from Belgium by 11pm on 4th August 1914. When the deadline passed without a reply, Britain officially declared war on Germany. Sorcha wasn’t quite sure what it all meant. She spooned her soup into her mouth and listened intently at the back and forth around the table.

Mr. Lyons seemed to have the most to say on the matter, having fought in the Boer War in 1901 in South Africa. He was irritated and raised his voice throughout the lunch. Mrs. Adams gave him stern

looks and at one point recommended that he lowered his voice. Sorcha had never seen so much tension.

The groom Mr. Wallace said that if there was a war, he had no problem serving his country.

Mr. Andrews, the groundsman asked him which country?

“Ireland of course,” said Mr. Wallace.

“But this is not our war,” said Mr. Andrews.

After more heated words about what might have happened had Britain remained neutral, what might happen on the Continent should Germany continue to march and how if in any way, it might affect them all in County Louth, Ireland, Mrs. Adams clapped her hands and suggested they leave talk of war aside and finished their lunch in peace.

“I fear peace is no longer in our possession,” muttered Mr. Lyons.

After a final withering look from Mrs. Adams, he harrumphed, cracked out his paper and remained silent for the rest of their break.

Sorcha did not like to see such animosity in their common room. Generally, they all got along very well and she liked her time there, being served the odd

treat by the cook when there were leftovers. She was now so accustomed to her job that she had her own methods of soaking and cleaning and had become rather quick at getting tasks done. She could put away all the dishes, pots, plates and cutlery with speed and what's more, she knew all their names and what they were used for. The cook said she was a quick learner and could consider asking to be trained in the kitchen. From time to time, she helped with some food preparation when needed.

But, Sorcha was not destined for cookery. On the same day that war was declared in Europe, Mrs. Adams summoned Sorcha from the kitchen and asked her to remove her apron and put on a fresh one. "Lady Bellingham wants to see you," she said, her eyebrows raised.

"Me?" said Sorcha, her hand on her chest.

Whatever for? What could the lady of the castle want with her, a simple scullery maid?





With the usual butterflies fluttering in her stomach, Sorcha followed Mrs. Adams up the back stairs, where she had only even been allowed go up when they were doing meet and greets for special guests at the front of the castle. Mrs. Adams continued on up another flight of stairs, which led to a skylit long, wide, carpeted corridor. The bedroom wing.

Sorcha glanced at the paintings in gilded frames along the walls.

“Mind your manners,” warned Mrs. Adams. “Only speak when you’re spoken to. And let me see your hands?”

Sorcha proffered her palms as they walked. With all the soaking and detergent they were rubbed raw, but the one thing they were, was clean.

“Come along,” said Mrs. Adams after she knocked on Lady Bellingham’s bedroom door and was urged in.

“Ah, Mrs. Adams,” said Lady Bellingham. She was sitting at her dressing table and Julia Adams was putting the finishing touches to her hair. The room was bathed in light from the enormous windows.

“Thank you Julia,” she said and Julia stepped back and nodded her head. “You can leave us,” she said with a wave of her hand.

Sorcha watched as Julia left, while Mrs. Adams stood by her side.

“You too Mrs. Adams,” said Lady Bellingham.

Sorcha sensed the housekeeper stiffen at being dismissed and watched a look of puzzlement cross her face before she left, reluctantly. She felt a wave of panic rise within her. Why was she being left alone with the lady of the castle? Surely Mrs. Adams should stay?

Lady Bellingham turned and smiled at Sorcha, her eyes taking in her face and cap.

Sorcha couldn't help but notice that the woman's eyes were ringed red.

“Sorcha, am I saying that right?”

Sorcha nodded.

“Yes Ma'am.”

“Very good. You are getting on well I hear? Mrs. Adams can't fault your work?”



“Yes Ma’am.”

“My husband is very fond of your mother. He says she is a very bright and intelligent woman.”

It pleased Sorcha to hear her mother spoken of in such high terms. She had never really heard any compliments about her mother before; they certainly never came from her father.

“I have been quite taken by the work of the Gaelic League. The Feis was quite extraordinary,” said Lady Bellingham. “Did you attend?”

Sorcha nodded. Of course she had attended. The newspapers were saying there were ten thousand people there. She would never have missed such a spectacle.

“To that end, I’ve been thinking and Sorcha, I was wondering?”

Lady Bellingham leaned in closer.

“Can you keep a secret?”

Sorcha nodded furiously.

Goodness! What kind of secret? Nothing terrible she hoped!

“Well, it’s like this see. I ... I ... I’d like to learn a bit of Gaelic.”

Whatever Sorcha had been expecting Lady Bellingham to say, it was not that.

“Ma’am?” enquired Sorcha, unsure of how to respond.

“Yes, you see my husband can speak it and he’s so involved in the Gaelic League and with his birthday this month, I thought it would be a nice surprise. I’d like to write a little speech and deliver it at his birthday dinner. Although, with all this conflict going on now, I’m not sure where we’ll be at.”

Sorcha saw tears threaten her mistress’ eyes and realised the redness must have been from crying before.

Lady Bellingham looked up at Sorcha.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s quite knocked me for six. I really didn’t think it would come to this. Roger has already telegraphed.”

Sorcha was confused.

She had seen the telegram boy at the back door earlier. Mrs. Adams had brought up the telegram on a silver tray. Seeing her puzzlement, Lady Bellingham’s face softened.



“He’s set to return to join the Royal Field Artillery in Dundalk. I presume Edward will do the same. Return home that is, to prepare.”

Sorcha knew little of Edward who was posted in the British Embassy in Guatemala. He was the eldest son of Henry Bellingham and Lady Bellingham was his step-mother. All four of Sir Henry’s children had been born to his first wife, Constance. He had erected a large wooden crucifix in Constance’s memory on a mound beside the ornate lodge gate at the front of the castle, made from an original royal oak after it had blown down in a storm. Edward’s brother, Henry’s youngest son, Roger, came to visit the castle often with his wife Alice Ann as he was based in the Viceregal Lodge in the Phoenix Park where he was aide-de-camp to the Lord Lieutenant.

It was easy for them to visit by train.

Roger had two children, Roger Junior who was three and Constance who was only two. Mrs. Adams said they brightened up the place, but Sorcha sure thought they created a lot of extra work and washing. Mrs. Adams liked to fuss and ensure the nursery was aired out ahead of their stay. And so, it turned out there was a toy room in Bellingham Castle after all.

The young Bellinghams were regulars on the Dublin social scene and Alice Ann wore beautiful clothes and

jewellery. She sent Julia Adams into quite a tizzy when she visited and gave the ladies' maid much gossip to impart to her mother over the common room dining table.

“Do you have brothers?” Lady Bellingham asked Sorcha.

“Two,” she replied. “Cathal and Liam.”

Lady Bellingham hung her head and looked sad. Sorcha wasn't quite sure what to make of it all.

A silence hung in the room, until Sorcha bounced on her heels, at a loss at what to do or say. Lady Bellingham seemed to snap back to her senses.

“Now,” she said, her tone much more forthright. “I do want this to be a secret. And the only way to do that is to keep this between you and me. There are eyes and ears everywhere, and I don't want my plan to get back to Sir Henry, whatsoever.”

She looked quite stern.

“No, Ma'am,” said Sorcha, shaking her head, solemnly.

“I feel you are quite trustworthy, Sorcha,” said Lady Bellingham.

“Yes Ma’am,” said Sorcha, nodding now to agree.

Sorcha wondered if by eyes and ears, Lady Bellingham meant the Adams’ and in particular, Julia.

“So, what I was thinking is that we get you out of that scullery. If you were a housemaid you would have reason to be in and out of this room and in private, we could begin our discussions in Irish. Mrs. Adams is forever putting forward the case for an extra housemaid and I think this will work just fine. What do you think?”

Sorcha felt as though she might fall down out of her standing.

Housemaid? And to attend the lady herself?

“I know we could just simply write and translate the speech, but I would like to learn a little conversational Irish, to be comfortable. In fact, sometime, I might like to attend a Gaelic League meeting! For now, I think this will be a lovely surprise for Sir Henry. It’s his birthday in less than three weeks. Do you think that will be enough time?”

Sorcha nodded.

“Yes Ma’am, I’m sure it will.”

“Good, that’s settled then. I’ll tell Mrs. Adams to find a new scullery maid and as soon as she’s in place, we’ll start. How is it you say, thank you very much?”

“Go raibh míle maith agat,” said Sorcha.

“Gorov meela mala gut?” said Lady Bellingham.

Sorcha laughed.

“Nearly Ma’am!”

“We have some work to do,” she smiled.



As Sorcha left her mistress’ bedroom, she stopped for a moment to look out the window overlooking the castle grounds and felt a tingle rush through her. How beautiful it all looked from up high.

How beautiful the world looked now that she was moving up in it.



Chapter Seven

There was much discussion of the war at home in the evenings in Brewery Street. Austin read articles from the paper out loud and they all listened intently.

“I don’t like it,” said Bríd. “It doesn’t bode well.”

Austin was not so downbeat. As hundreds of thousands of men mobilised, he saw opportunity.

“McArdles in Dundalk look set to secure a contract,” he said one evening over his soup at the kitchen table. “There’s no reason why Woolsey’s couldn’t do the same. Have you any idea how much those boys would like a good drop of Irish beer?”

Mamó wrinkled her nose.

John Redmond, the Leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party had pledged that the Irish volunteers would act as defenders of Ireland against any potential invasion.

“We could defend ourselves and all the British troops here could feck off and go and fight a real war,” said Liam, also slurping on his soup. “There’s no reason why the Volunteers couldn’t take over the barracks here in Dundalk. We’d be well able.”

Dundalk barracks was one of the largest in the North East and had about 500 soldiers, most of them English, of the Royal Field Artillery stationed there. Drogheda barracks at Millmount, with its distinctive Martello tower that dominated and overlooked the centre of the town, was mostly used for recruiting and training, but could accommodate a garrison of about a hundred men. Most of the men who stayed there were army reservists from different parts of the country who came for annual training.

Recruitment offices had opened in Dundalk and Drogheda for local Irish men who wanted to sign up to the British army to fight on the continent. The turnout so far however, had been poor. Sir Henry was a vocal advocate urging men to consider signing up.



When it was discovered that Captain Roger would be leaving from Dundalk for France on 20th August with the 28th Brigade of the Royal Field Artillery, Lady Bellingham decided to hold a farewell dinner as well as an early birthday celebration for Lord Bellingham at the castle.

“Though it doesn’t feel as though there is much to celebrate,” she said, wistfully as Sorcha helped her with her final written speech. She wrote out ‘cugga’ and the Irish word ‘cogagh’ beside it for ‘war’. She wrote out ‘choked a-wall-ya slawn’ for ‘teacht abhaile slán’, which meant ‘come home safe’. She found that the Irish spelling was of no use to her mistress and so she always wrote out the sound of the words first, followed by the correct spelling.

Each time Sorcha had been in a room alone with her mistress over the past fortnight or so, she had spoken to her in Irish and taught her simple phrases and vocabulary, correcting her pronunciation as best she could. Lady Bellingham used a dictionary which she hid away carefully in a locked box as she attempted to write out her own draft speech before they finalised it.

It was a great relief for Sorcha to get out of the scullery. Mrs. Adams gave her a fresh black dress and white apron and cap, which felt so much more comfortable than the heavy washing up apron she had

previously used. While the cleaning work could be hard, as the castle was so large, it often felt an easier load than the scullery and she noticed her hands and nails had begun to heal as they weren't plunged in detergent and hot and cold water all day.

Bríd was pleased that she had moved up a rank. Her father asked how much more money she'd be bringing home.

The dinner was set for two nights before Roger Bellingham was due to embark for France. Sorcha could sense that her mistress was quite nervous - not just about speech she would be making - but for the occasion that it was in itself; seeing her step-son off to the continent for war.

“All will be well, Ma'am,” Sorcha encouraged. She was never sure quite what to say, being as it was that she was only fourteen years old and not yet learned in the ways of the world.

The day after the dinner, Sorcha reported to work and was surprised to be greeted by Mrs. Adams who called her, ‘Our little Irish scholar’. “So that’s what you were up to all this time! I thought there was a conspiracy out to get me!” Sorcha had no idea what Mrs. Adams meant, but, it turned out that word had got round that she, the lowly housemaid had been

teaching the mistress a ‘cúpla focal’ and by all reports, the dinner and speech had been a resounding success.

“I have no heed in Irish,” said Julia, jealously as they got ready for Roger’s farewell. “And neither do most people.”

Julia Adams was wrong in that, thought Sorcha. She suspected the lady’s maid resented the intimate time she and Lady Bellingham had spent together.

After breakfast, the staff all gathered at the limestone steps of the front door of the castle in clean uniforms to form a guard of honour for Captain Bellingham. Dressed in his military uniform Captain Roger shook each of their hands.



“This is Sorcha, who taught me the Irish,” said Lady Bellingham.

“And what a fine job you did,” he said, pumping her hand up and down. “My father was quite bowled over!”

Sorcha felt her cheeks redden. Captain Bellingham was so handsome up close and she felt overwhelmed that he would think so highly of her.

As the chauffeur Mr. Tuite pulled away in the motor car carrying Roger away to war, Sorcha noticed a tear in Mrs. Adams' eye. She couldn't see Lady Bellingham up close but as their son disappeared down the driveway, Sir Henry Bellingham wrapped his arm protectively around his wife's waist. Everyone was downhearted.

A month later in late September, John Redmond, Leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party addressed a Volunteer meeting in Wicklow and caused outcry when he urged the volunteers to actively sign up to the British Army to go abroad and fight. This was different to defending Ireland against invasion; it meant fighting for Britain, in the name of Britain as part of the British army.



“Treason!” cried Liam after their father had read out Redmond’s Woodenbridge remarks from the newspaper. “How can he call himself a nationalist?”

Cathal, always more measured, said Redmond must have made his speech as a support measure to the Home Rule Bill which had now been passed by the House of Lords but immediately put on hold until the war was over.

“And I suppose you’ll be signing up, will you?” said Liam, antagonizing his brother.

“If I have to, I will.”

“Aye, always doing what you’re told,” said Liam.

“No,” said Cathal, firmly, looking his brother in the eye. “Because I’m not a coward.”



At the word coward, Liam jumped up and knocked his chair back with a crack to the floor.

“You say that again!” Liam growled as he jumped towards Cathal.

Cathal remained, unmoved.

“Boys!” said Bríd.

“That’s enough!” said Austin, raising his voice.

Sorcha felt a pit of worry rise in her stomach. Her brothers had always argued, but as the war swirled and tensions had risen among the Irish Volunteers, things seemed worse than ever before.

“Liam, leave this room at once,” said his father.
“You’re not beyond the stick you know.”

When he was younger, Liam had often been beaten with a stick by his father for insolence.

Cathal, rarely, had required such punishment.

Liam glared at Cathal, before turning, picking up the chair to right it and slamming the kitchen door loudly as he left.

Sorcha caught Mamó Caitlín's eye. She pursed her mouth and Sorcha knew her grandmother was upset by the argument too.

“All this talk of war,” she said in English. “It doesn't do anyone any good.”

Over the following weeks it became clear that Redmond's words had caused much divide, so much so that the volunteers, who had marched together as one at the Feis in the Grove Field on 12 July, split. Eoin MacNeill formed a branch of the volunteers who became known as the 'Irish Volunteers' and set up a new headquarters in Dublin. The original volunteers who followed Redmond became the 'National Volunteers'.

Edward Bellingham arrived home to Castlebellingham on 30th September to rejoin the Royal Dublin Fusiliers. Another dinner was held ahead of his departure, but this time there were no big

speeches as Gaelge. It seemed Lady Bellingham was terribly distracted.

“It feels like everyone is going away,” Sorcha said to Mamó one evening after work. Geraldine had told her that her brother was thinking of signing up, especially if the payment was increased for soldiers as he had a wife and two small children and work was scarce.



Sir Henry formed the Dundalk War Relief Committee to assist families who had soldiers wounded in the war. Filled with a sense of responsibility, and Sorcha realised as she assisted her mistress in her endeavours, a need to do something good, Lady Bellingham

set up a branch of the Red Cross and fundraised for an ambulance to send to the front. She organised first aid and nursing classes, which Sorcha also took alongside Bríd. Mamó, who had the knack for healing and still used herbs she gathered and grew for her own poultices and concoctions was pleased to see them improving their knowledge of caring for the sick.

“You never know when you might need it,” she said forlornly.

As Christmas came and the war that everyone had said would be well finished by then showed no such signs of abating, Cathal told his family over Stephen’s Day dinner that he had come to a decision.

“I’ve been thinking of it a while and I wanted to wait for Christmas to come and go before I told you all,” he said. “I’ve signed up. I’m going the 2nd January. It’s the right thing to do, though I’m sure not all will agree.”

Sorcha’s mouth dropped open and she looked straight to Liam for his reaction before glancing at her mother and father.

Liam, whose hands were under his chin, sat back in his chair and looked down. He said not a word.

“Son,” said Bríd, a quiver to her voice as she began to speak.

Cathal put up his hand.

“No, a Mhaim,” he said. “The decision’s been made. The brewery will sign me off. You’ll get some of my pay. And I’ll know that I played my part.”

From the corner of the kitchen, in her favourite chair, where she always sat came a tiny, shriek of a sob. It was Mamó Caitlín.

“Mo theaghlach bocht,” she said. “Is mór an náire é.”

It *was* a terrible shame for the household, thought Sorcha.

Everyone was going away.



1915

Tubaiste
(Noun: Tragedy, Disaster)

Dundalk Democrat

Saturday 13th March 1915

The death of Captain Roger Bellingham, news of which was received on Tuesday last, has not only plunged into mourning his family and many friends, but deprived Louth of one who seemed destined to take a leading and worthy part in the public life of the county in the future.

Captain Roger Charles Noel Bellingham was the second son of Sir Henry Bellingham, Bart., H.M.L. On leaving college he received a commission in the Royal Field Artillery and served for some time in that arm. He relinquished active military duty to take up the post of aide-de-camp to the late Lord Lieutenant, the Marquess of Aberdeen. The duties of this office brought him into intimate touch with people of all classes and conditions, not only in Dublin, but in many other parts of Ireland. Warmhearted and enthusiastic by nature, he took the keenest personal interest in the multitudinous good works in which Lord and Lady Aberdeen were interested during their second Viceroyalty. His name was associated with that of their Excellencies in every movement with which they were connected for the betterment of the conditions of living of the poorer classes in this country.

Captain Bellingham himself was a man of most charming manners and manifest sincerity of disposition; who easily won the affection of those around him. He and his wife and children spent a considerable part of each year in Co. Louth either at Castlebellingham or at their pretty places at Dunany and White Mills. For some time before the outbreak of war he had suffered from an affection of the heart such as might cause little inconvenience to one leading a sheltered life, but which must have made a vigorous campaign in mid-Winter almost certain death for him. Nevertheless though he knew this, with the high courage which was a fixture of his nature he insisted upon obeying what to him was the clear call of duty.

Our readers will remember that a couple of years ago he attended the great Home Rule demonstration in Dundalk, taking his place on the platform and afterwards at the dinner. He was an intimate friend of Mr. Redmond and other leading Irish members and a warm admirer of their policy.

His family will realise perhaps more than any others that Roger Bellingham has died as many others have died and will die in this war, a hero and a martyr.

May his soul rest in peace.

1916

Éirí Amach
(Noun: Rebellion)



Chapter Eight

Sorcha carefully cut the brown gauze into a long strip, snipped off the threads and rolled it up into a squat sausage. She added the bandage cover to the pile she had created in the past hour. A mountain. Beside her, her mother Bríd worked on a haversack, firmly sewing a buckle strap to the front of the fabric bag. A stack of finished haversacks sat in front of her mother, their work, industrious and concentrated, saw barely a word spoken between them as they got on with the tasks they had been set.

The bottom four haversacks of Bríd's pile had been sewn by Mamó Caitlín at home, keen to lend a hand and be involved. Quite what they were involved in,

Sorcha was not sure, but she did know it was exciting. An air of anticipation hung over the Gaelic League meeting rooms at St. Leonard's where tonight, Holy Thursday, the Dundalk members of Cumann na mBan had met.

Something was afoot.

Yesterday, Angela Mathews, the leader of the Cumann, had travelled to Dublin on business and had arrived back to their meeting all a jitter. The Cumann had been meeting at St. Leonard's every Tuesday and Wednesday since February to carry out the instructions from the organisation's headquarters in Dublin. Angela had called Deirdre Mathews, who was her niece and Bríd into the kitchen area, where they had huddled, talking in low voices. When Bríd returned to the large table they all sat around Sorcha realised they

had forgotten to make their tea. She looked at her mother who wore a half smile on her face as if she'd been told the most wonderful news.



Sorcha, as the youngest member of the Cumann, knew better than to ask what they had just been discussing. As an auxiliary unit, formed to support the cause of Irish liberty and the Irish Volunteers, she understood that some of the work the Cumann carried out had to be done in secret. It was important that everybody played their part and did not ask unnecessary questions. Bríd was on in the inner circle. Perhaps Sorcha would be one day too.

“Ah, Dr. Clarke,” said Bríd, as the gentleman doctor knocked and opened the door of the meeting room carrying a large cardboard box. “They’re in here,” she said. She stood up and opened the door to a smaller meeting room next door. The voices of Angela and Deirdre Mathews quietened as soon as she opened it and Dr. Clarke was ushered in.

Bríd returned to her haversack sewing. She had been in a charged mood since Angela’s return from Dublin yesterday evening. Sorcha couldn’t quite determine what was happening, but whatever it was, Mamó seemed to be in on the secret too, because she had sewn four haversacks since last night and accompanied her mother to Drogheda today on errands.

Sorcha had come in from her day at the castle, tired, as the household was preparing for the end of Lent

and Easter and Mrs. Adams had her deep cleaning and polishing everything in sight, to find Mamó and her mother's shopping all tied up in neat brown parcels on the table. Mamó was steeping her feet in a basin of warm water.

“What are all these?” Sorcha had asked, lifting up the light bundles.

“Such a hilly town, Drogheda,” said Mamó wearily, rubbing her calf. “My legs are distraught!”

“Good girl,” Bríd had answered, quickly swiping the parcels into two large shopping baskets, while looking at the clock. “Take these to the back hall. We'll take them with us this evening.”

Sorcha had done as she was told and also noticed the clock. Her father would be home from the brewery soon. She'd lifted one of the parcels as she'd moved the baskets and saw it was stamped by Hamilton, Day & Co. Medical Hall in West Street. Medical supplies, she'd realised.



Bríd often hid things out of sight from Austin. Sorcha's father did not approve of his wife, and in particular, his daughter, having anything to do with a group that offered close support to the Irish Volunteers. But Bríd and Mamó were staunch

nationalists and always had been. And Sorcha found as she'd read the various newsletters they brought home, as she attended theatre plays by Lady Gregory and Dino Boucicault and listened intently to rousing lectures in Dundalk Town Hall that she shared the same thoughts and beliefs too. Ireland, as its own country, in its own right deserved to be free. Ireland demanded and must become a republic.

When the Dundalk branch of Cumann na mBan advertised for members in February 1916, Sorcha begged her mother to bring her.

“Everyone has something,” she said. “Liam has the volunteers; you have the Gaelic League and the Cumann. Daddy has his bridge club.”

“What do I have?” piped up Mamó. “You don't see me going anywhere?”

“Mamó, you drop into every house on this street every night of the week, chatting till midnight! All I have is work!” said Sorcha, exasperated.

“You have your friends,” said Bríd.

“Geraldine? I never see her anymore, not since she got her fancy boyfriend and job.”

Which was true. Geraldine, having spent two years at St. Vincent's as planned had started as a junior clerk

at P.J. Carroll & Co. Tobacco factory and had recently been promoted to telephonist in training. Each time Sorcha bumped into her, which was less and less these days, she had trouble recognising her. Geraldine seemed to spend most of her wages on clothes and had even started wearing her hair up high in a pompadour style. She looked so much older and glamorous compared to Sorcha. She was stepping out with a young man called Mark Usher who also worked at the factory. Sorcha thought him nice enough, but he didn't have quite the spark that Geraldine had about her. Sorcha wondered did Geraldine keep up with him, simply to say she had a boyfriend.



“I don't think any young woman should be joining this Cumann,” said Austin as they sat around the kitchen table “Why? To be indoctrinated? It's no place for a young impressionable girl.”

Sorcha didn't think she was impressionable.

She was bored though.

“The Cumann do useful things Daddy,” said Sorcha. “Like first aid and ... and writing articles and things.”

Sorcha knew that the Cumann did a lot more than rolling bandages and scribing informative newspaper columns.

They did drilling the same as her brother Liam did with the volunteers, who were now regularly marching in uniform around the town. And, as the Cumann believed in force if necessary, they trained their members in how to care for rifles and handguns. The best bit of all, in Sorcha’s opinion



and something she longed to do desperately, was target practice! But she couldn’t tell her father that. Of course, she could not.

“Let her go if she wants,” said Bríd. “She’ll be with me and will hardly come to any harm.”

Austin harrumphed.

“There’s a ladies’ bridge club too Sorcha,” he said. “Could do with new blood.”

Sorcha rolled her eyes away from her father's gaze. She could not be caught being insubordinate.

“Full of aul codgers like you,” muttered Mamó, following up her insult with her usual little cackle. As she still spoke only Gaelige at home, Austin could never really confront her.

“So I may go?” said Sorcha.

“You may,” said Bríd. “I’ll put in an application for you this week. As long as they don’t think you’re too young, you should be all right.”

The Cumann had to agree to the admittance of new members to protect the work they were doing. Some applications were refused outright if there was any doubt as to the intentions of the applicant.

“I’m sure the daughter of Bríd O’Neill will pass the test,” said Mamó drily.

Bríd was well respected in Cumann na mBan. She was fearless and energetic and as a fluent Gaeilgeoir, was well considered and an asset to the members of the Cumann, some of whom didn’t have good Irish but wanted to speak it. It was greatly encouraged within the organisation.



“Can I get a uniform?” asked Sorcha. She longed to don a heavy military jacket, with lapels and pockets and strap a leather bandolier across her chest.

“If you make one yourself!” said Bríd.

Sorcha looked to Mamó Caitlín.

Mamó winked. She had a great talent for sewing, knitting, crocheting and dressmaking. Sorcha felt a little tingle rush through her.

And so, Sorcha was warmly welcomed to her first meeting of the Dundalk branch of Cumann na mBan in early March 1916, wearing her brand-new uniform, which Mamó had sewn together furiously for her once her acceptance had been notified by Bríd.

Sorcha loved feeling like a grown young woman, helping to make the tea, joining in all the adult conversations, making herself useful and advancing her skills, particularly in first aid, at the meeting rooms in St. Leonard’s. Dr. James J. Clarke from Jocelyn Street attended a number of times to give lessons and help the women practice field medicine. Sorcha and Bríd already had a good foundation in first aid with the lessons they’d taken under Lady Bellingham when the war broke out.

Since the death of her step-son Roger Bellingham, Lady Bellingham had intensified her efforts to support those affected by the war and threw herself into a series of fundraising events. She organised gate collections, subscriptions and farmers' produce sales, with all the proceeds going to the Red Cross. As well as making first aid supplies, rather like Sorcha and Bríd had been doing with Cumann na mBan, she was helping the Red Cross fundraise towards a new local war hospital. Sorcha had watched her mistress pour her grief into her charity work and distract herself with trying to do good every day. Sorcha, and the rest of the household, couldn't help but admire how the Bellinghams had coped with the death of the beloved, handsome Roger.



In St. Leonard's, Dr. Clarke opened the door of the small meeting room and came back out with cardboard boxes piled high. He was followed by Angela and Deirdre Mathews, carrying baskets. Bríd stood up and pointed to their labours on the large table.

“Do you want us to pack these too?” she asked.

“Can you drop them to us later?” said Angela.

Angela owned a stationery and book shop on Clanbrassil Street and lived above the store with her widowed mother.

“Not a bother,” said Bríd and she began to pile the bandage covers and haversacks into more baskets. Sorcha couldn’t help but wonder what exactly the supplies would be needed for. She knew they weren’t being sent out to the front, to France. Was a secret hospital being set up?

When the members had finished their work, Bríd and Sorcha packed away the items and bid goodbye to the other women. They left St. Leonard’s carrying the supplies they’d made in their baskets and stopped by Angela’s shop, with Sorcha waiting outside while Bríd delivered the goods, running up the stairs to the quarters where Angela lived and dashing back down again in just minutes. As they climbed on their bicycles for home, Sorcha felt an urge to ask her mother what exactly was happening, but knew, as a good sister of Cumann na mBan, that she should not.

Discretion, honour, dignity.

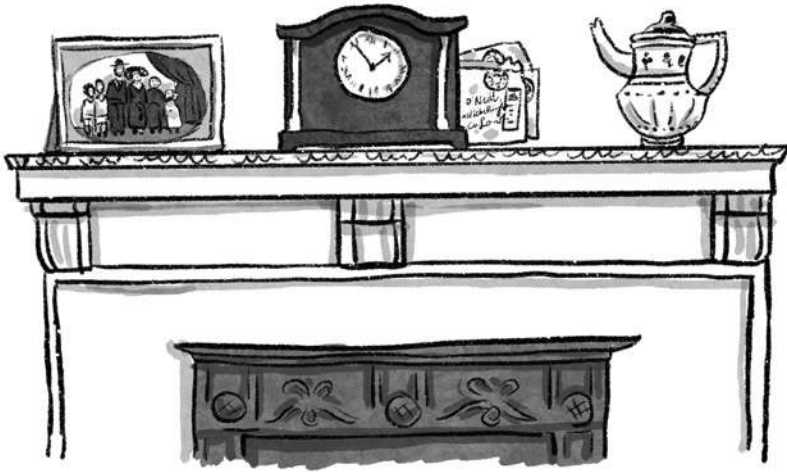
These were the traits of a woman fighting for Irish freedom.

And at sixteen, Sorcha did feel like a woman.

A woman of the republic.

A patriot.





Chapter Nine

After Cathal signed up and left for the continent early in 1915, an unspoken pact was reached in the O'Neill household. He would not be spoken of again. There would be no wondering where he was, or discussion of his battalion or news shared from other families in the area whose sons had also gone to war.

As each report rolled in of another man lost, the silence tightened. The newspapers carried the names of the dead and the Dundalk Democrat and Drogheda Independent went into detail about the young men who had left families behind. Almost 250 Louth soldiers had already lost their lives.

Austin stopped buying the papers. The only literature that came into the house were the nationalist pamphlets Bríd brought home. For news, Sorcha had to listen at work, or try to swipe Mr. Lyons' paper whenever he'd finished with it.

When Cathal's letters arrived, dog eared and muddied, they were left on the high mantle above the stove and behind the clock. They were there to be read by anyone who wanted to, but they were not to be discussed. When the last letter had arrived, Sorcha did not even know it was there, until she noticed one day that the envelope behind the clock looked slightly fresher.

Cathal's letters were short and spoke not of the fighting his battalion was engaged with but of the intricacies of their day; of rats as big as cats, of water up to their knees, of their longing for the safety of their billets away from the front line, for a bath, for home cooking. He missed Castlebellingham dreadfully, he told them. He longed to see the sea,



the blue horizon at Annagassan and smell the wet meadows of the fields at Stabannan and Dromiskin. He asked after Sorcha, about how she was faring at the castle and said he hoped she was ‘warming her backside in front of a giant marble fireplace’.

When Sorcha read his letters, tears filled her eyes. She had never been particularly close to Cathal, but he was her brother and he was kindly and she was terribly afraid that something would happen to him. She wrote short letters back to tell him of all the small happenings in the village, of her distancing from Geraldine, of their brother Liam, who was out night and day with the volunteers now, of her work with Cumann na mBan.

Bríd was still upset by Cathal’s departure, not just because he had put his life on the line, but because he had done it as part of the British Army. She saw it as a betrayal, as did, and especially so, Liam. Part of her mother’s decision to join Cumann na mBan, Sorcha often thought, was to try and make up for her son fighting for the empire.

But, Bríd’s embarrassment was rare. Her sentiments were not the sentiments of most local people. Hundreds of Louth men had joined the British Army alongside Cathal, their numbers far outstripping those who had joined and marched with the National or the

Irish Volunteers. As it stood, the National Volunteers had more or less given up their campaign, while the Irish Volunteers had barely a hundred members in the area.

The war had helped the economy as the army pay was a boost for families who had faced years of unemployment. Farmers sold their animals and produce to feed the armies, the brewery and cigarette factories sent out large orders and even the railway service made profits on each soldier who travelled on their service.

Austin, while proud of his son, was terribly worried that he would not come home. His way of dealing with the fact his eldest son, the one most like him in manner and looks, was risking his life, day after day on the continent, was to ignore it. He took on longer hours at the brewery working furiously to keep up with the extra supply demands the war had brought. The longer hours left him tired and even grumpier than usual. Sorcha felt that her parents had nothing left in common. Some days it seemed they didn't even share a word.

Good Friday passed in a whirr of activity at the castle. The whole household attended the stations of the cross with Sir Henry and Lady Lelgarde Bellingham, most cycling the mile or so to Kilsaran



Church, ahead of the castle motor car. Sorcha always found the stations moving, watching the young man from the village playing the part of Jesus, carrying a heavy wooden cross on his back as he made his way down and then back up the church, stopping at the stations depicted by huge wooden framed oil paintings.

She thought of Our Lord and the torture he had endured and the sacrifices he had made. Jesus had died for the sins of others. Jesus was willing to put his life on the line, for his beliefs. She couldn't help but think of the various members of the Cumann who she knew would put their own lives on the line for their one cause of Irish freedom. Was she willing to step up too? She wasn't sure. She suspected Bríd was. And Liam. But was she brave enough?

Her thoughts of Christ and the Cumann were interrupted abruptly when Sorcha glanced sideways

and realized that a tall, well-built RIC constable had slipped into the pew and was sitting right beside her. She felt herself go cold. The secretive work of the Cumann had to be kept from any members of the RIC; they could report them and even, perhaps, have members arrested. She listened as the man prayed and saw that he had a book of Irish prayers clasped in his hands, over which were draped well-worn wooden rosary beads.

She didn't know an RIC constable would speak Irish! She had seen the man cycling about the village, and once overheard him chatting to Mrs. Armstrong in the post office. He had a Donegal accent, the type Mamó Caitlín had a great grá for. She found it hard to concentrate on the remainder of the stations of the cross knowing that a member of the police force was so close by. She was glad when the mass ended and she could scuttle back to the castle.

There was no meat served on Good Friday and as the Bellinghams were strict Catholics, Sorcha and the rest of the staff followed their lead in fasting. There was only one meal served at 12 noon, a dish of sowens, which was soaked, fermented oatmeal and not very appetising. As Sorcha's stomach grumbled all day, she remembered the sacrifice the Lord had made, and pushed on through her hunger.



Mamó was steeping her feet again in a basin by the stove when Sorcha got in from work. She and Bríd had been working in the vegetable patch planting cabbages and turnips, as it was said they would be plentiful if planted on Good Friday. Mamó had also sewn a large patch of garlic for her medicines, as Good Friday garlic was known to keep hens healthy and cure consumption and terrible coughs.

As there was no food to be had, Sorcha instead took a cup of warm, sweet tea. As she drank it, she watched her mother and grandmother and noticed how they exchanged glances, as if they had a secret that no one else could know. It was all a little unnerving. Austin got in from work late and fumed that Liam had taken off earlier from the brewery without telling anyone.

“Where is he?” he said, his voice raised, when he discovered that Liam had not come home either. “I

mean ... is he trying to lose his job? There's only so much covering up I can do for the chap!"

Bríd tried to calm her husband and soothed that something must have come up and urged him not to be hard on their son.

"Why don't I run you a bath, a stór?" she offered.

Sorcha was surprised by her mother's affections. She didn't usually act so kindly towards Austin.



Later that night, Sorcha heard Liam creep into the house and go to bed. When they awoke the next morning, Liam had already left again. Austin, on discovering that his son would most likely not be showing up for his half day of work on Easter Saturday at the brewery was livid.

“What does he think he’s doing?” he spouted angrily over his porridge. “What could possibly be more important than work? Putting money in your pocket! It’s like he’s trying to get dismissed!”

Sorcha wondered where Liam had got to, but suspected it had something to do with the volunteers. They had been drilling and marching this week, all around the back yard of the John Boyle O’Reilly Hall and out onto the street, up and down through the town. In the same way she had felt proud on the day of the Feis when she had seen both her brothers march in the Grove Field, she always got a stab of pride to see the handsome, cheeky Liam march by with the volunteers. Liam had sometimes stayed out late with volunteers before, but he didn’t usually miss work over it.

Sorcha left for the castle, ready for another day of scurrying about the house and attending to her mistress’ and Mrs. Adams’ needs. Now that she had been working at the castle for four years she

had become a trusted member of staff and Lady Bellingham had developed quite the soft spot for her.

Julia Adams, Lady Bellingham's lady's maid did not have such affections however and often snapped at her and pulled her up on her work. She called her a 'silly girl' and once even smacked her on the head, when she had knocked over a tray accidentally.

Sorcha didn't tell anyone how Julia acted towards her, because she was afraid it might reflect badly on her and show up the mistakes she was making. Instead, she always tried to do her best and not make any errors. She tried to be the tidiest, most efficient house maid there could be.

When Sorcha came in from work on Saturday evening, Liam had not yet arrived home. Austin prepared for his bridge night; they met in the large, elegant home of the General Manager of the Brewery, Mr. Charles J. Thornhill, while Mamó Caitlín put on her good blouse to go and play cards with the Butterlys up the street.

Bríd announced that she had to go to Dundalk on a last minute errand.

"Now?" said Austin, looking up at the clock. "What kind of errand? Don't you ever stay home, woman?"

Bríd smiled. “A quick one. The Gaelic League need some pamphlets for distributing tomorrow at a rally in the hall and I said I’d bring them in.”

“Can’t it wait till tomorrow then?” said Austin.

“Arra, I’ll be back before you know it,” said Bríd, buttoning up her coat and taking her hat from the hook on the kitchen door.



Sorcha knew that Pádraic Pearse, Director of Organisation of the Irish Volunteers was due to speak in the town hall on Easter Sunday night. She was very much looking forward to the talk and knew it would be packed out with nationalists keen to hear what the Commandant had to say.

Sorcha watched Bríd lift a box from the back hall and knew immediately that there no pamphlets in it. Instead, there were the extra haversacks Mamó had been sewing and some more bandages and wadding they’d prepared away from Austin’s eyes.

Bríd left for the train and Sorcha passed the evening reading by the fire. She was just about to retire to bed, when the back door opened and her mother and Liam

returned together. Sorcha offered them something to eat and cut small slices of meat off the freshly baked Easter ham as an indulgence after yesterday's fasting. As she buttered crusty bread, they heard the key in the front door and Sorcha felt everyone straighten up as they realised Austin was home.

“Ah,” said Austin when he came into the kitchen and sat down heavily to unlace his shoes. “The prodigal son! Saw fit to bring yourself home, did you?”

Sorcha thought Liam looked tired, and yet there was a brightness behind his eyes.

“Austin,” said Bríd, her voice firm. “Ask the lad no questions and he'll tell you no lies. He has been on republic business, that's all you need to know.”

Austin harrumphed.

“Do you know how many young lads would murder for the job he has? He's ready to throw it all away. He's ungrateful! Running round all week with these volunteers! Playing soldier! If you want to fight, go join your brother and be a real man!”

His words shocked them all.

“And as for you ...” he said, turning to Bríd. “You’re making a show of me, going here, there and everywhere. Your republican cause! I’m sick of it all!”



A dreadful silence hung in the kitchen as they waited to see what Austin did next. They watched as Austin stood up and left the kitchen, slamming the door behind him and stomping up the stairs.

“Are you all right son?” asked Bríd.

“I’m more than all right Mother,” said Liam.

Sorcha looked from each to the other, unnerved by her father’s temper and his words. But Bríd was forthright and unmoved. She did not seem in the slightest bit put out by her husband’s tirade.

“Sorcha,” said Bríd. “Cut a big lump off that ham, there’s a good girl. Liam needs sandwiches made up. Find me the flask too will you and fill it with milk? In the morning we’re going to Dundalk, early. Make sure your uniform is clean.”

“On Easter Sunday?” said Sorcha. “But what about mass?”

“Some things are more important than mass,” said Bríd.

As they never missed mass, especially on Sunday, especially on Easter Sunday, Sorcha was taken aback.

Perhaps, this was what all the preparation had been for?

Perhaps, tomorrow all would be revealed?

Perhaps, tomorrow ... was the day?





Chapter Ten

On Easter Sunday morning, Bríd and Sorcha donned their Cumann na mBan uniforms and made their way by bicycle from Castlebellingham to Dundalk. Liam had already left before them. Still, Bríd had not told Sorcha what was happening.

As they got closer to the town, Sorcha noticed Irish Volunteers, some in uniforms also travelling on their

bicycles. A motor car passed, followed by another. Bríd said not a word as they cycled quickly towards the centre of Dundalk. In Market Square, Sorcha saw that many volunteers had lined up and were standing about. Bríd pushed on past them and they made their way down Clanbrassil Street towards the John Boyle O'Reilly Hall.

Outside the hall, men and women were stopping, hopping off their bicycles and laying them against lampposts and the walls of the shops outside. As it was Sunday, none of the shops were open and apart from the buzzing hall, the rest of the wide shopping street was deserted.

“What’s happening, a Mhaim?” Sorcha finally got up the courage to ask. She didn’t want to seem like a silly girl, making her way into the hall, unaware of what she was walking into.

“Today’s the day,” said Bríd, finally admitting to the secret she’d been carrying.

She tipped Sorcha poignantly on the arm.

“Today, the men march out. Today, we rise.”

Sorcha’s eyes widened.

For so long, she had heard whispers and mutterings about such a day. She had attended many a lecture

where the speaker outlined what had to be done for Ireland to gain its freedom. The Cumann and the Volunteers had been preparing for this, some members she imagined, for years. Today was the day!

Inside the hall, Sorcha found a well of bubbling excitement. Men were fitting bandoliers on and picking up what looked like rifles with bayonets. On closer inspection, Sorcha could see that they were not guns at all, but gun barrels with garden shears fastened to them. Crude weapons, homemade.

Sorcha was called by Nellie Clarke, a fellow member of the Cumann to assist with a production line packing rations, adding crackers, tins of corned beef and small slivers of brown bread to haversacks.



“They need three days’ worth,” Nellie said, “but some men barely brought anything.”

As the ration lines cleared and the men moved out Sorcha noticed that boxes of medical supplies were being removed and loaded into a motor car. One of the boxes she recognised as the one Bríd had left home with last night on her town hall ‘errand’.

“What about Pearse speaking in the town hall tonight?” wondered Sorcha out loud to her mother, as she buckled up a haversack. “There won’t be any volunteers to see him.”

“There’ll be no Pearse,” said Bríd. “Sure, he’ll be in Dublin where the rising will take place. Don’t you see, my love? It was a ruse. So much has been a cover. We had to throw the authorities off the scent and let them think that all the volunteers would be gathering in Dundalk tonight! So very clever really.”

Sorcha felt disappointed that she would not be seeing Pearse speak tonight but thought how crafty it was for the leadership to let on that nothing was afoot. As she watched the medical supplies being loaded, she suddenly realized that the bandages she and other members of the Cumann had been making were in anticipation of the casualties that might result from any such rising. Why else would they need medical supplies? They expected blood. Injury. Violence.

Sorcha looked out through the barred window at the back of the hall, her eyes searching for her brother. What was he marching into? What would become of them? And would they in the Cumann be marching too?

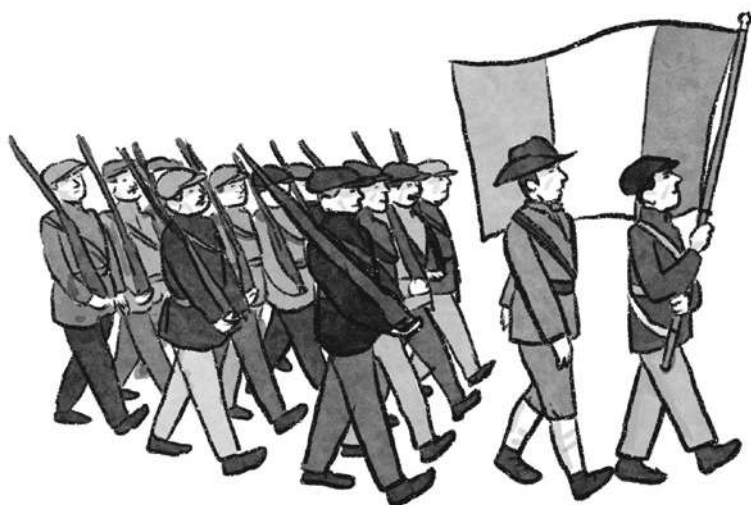
Before she got a chance to ask, a whistle was blown and the last remaining men were ordered outside. Just

before ten o'clock, the members of Cumann na mBan formed themselves into a guard of honour as the men, one hundred and twenty of them, lined up into a column in Market Square.

Sorcha felt her heart beat as she spied Liam towards the back.

“Are we going too?” she asked her mother.

“No,” said her mother firmly. “Our orders are not to march. But that doesn’t mean we won’t be useful.”



With a tri-colour raised in front of the troop, Sorcha felt her heart soar as the men marched by, solemn and serious, proud of what was to come.

“Are they going to Dublin?” asked Sorcha, thinking that they were going the wrong way.

“They are going to declare the republic at the Hill of Tara,” said Bríd, her eyes shining. “The rising will begin at 7pm tonight!”

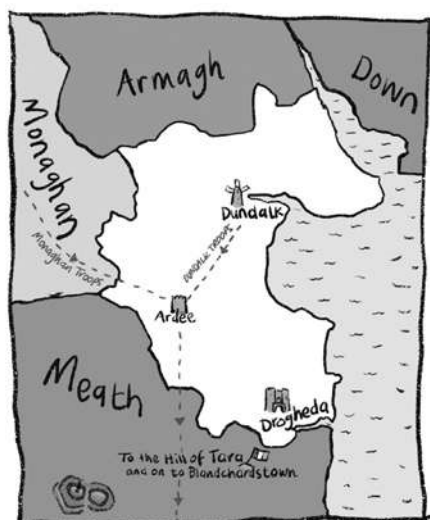
Sorcha thought what a long walk it would be, but marvelled at the plan. The Hill of Tara was where the High Kings of Ireland had once sat. She felt as though she were witnessing history, right before her eyes.

“Couldn’t I follow?” she said. “On my bicycle? I would very much like to see that.”

“We have our orders,” said Bríd. “Now, let’s clean up and then maybe, we can have a well-deserved cup of tea.”



After the men had left, the women of Cumann na mBan sat around in the John Boyle O'Reilly Hall, talking openly about what they had just witnessed. Some, like Sorcha, had not been given any information that a rising was due to take place. Others, like Bríd in the inner circle, could finally discuss what they knew.



They talked about what victory might look like, how, if the plan worked, they would be raising tri-colours all across the country, maybe even tonight! Sorcha learned that all across Ireland, volunteers were mobilising and rising up. The plans had been signed off by a military council

of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, led by Pádraic Pearse himself and conveyed to the commanders of the volunteers only in recent days. It was paramount that the secrecy remained if they wanted to take the British Army by surprise. The Louth Volunteers would meet the Monaghan Volunteers at Ardee where they would arm themselves with National Volunteer guns. They would then march after declaring the republic at Tara to Blanchardstown, to seize the railway and

prevent British troops pouring in from the large military base in Athlone. Volunteers from Fingal, Kildare, Wicklow and South Dublin would help form a whole protective ring around the city.

“Arms are coming from Germany,” said Margaret, an older member of the Cumann, who rarely spoke and who Sorcha was quite intimidated by. “I’ve heard 20,000 rifles. With that amount of support, we are sure to take the upper hand.”

Sorcha tried to imagine what 20,000 rifles looked like. She had yet to fire a gun, despite begging her mother and Liam to let her even hold a weapon.

Before lunchtime Bríd and Sorcha gathered themselves up to go home. There was nothing they could do for the moment only wait. They bid goodbye to the other members and made their way outside with Angela and Deirdre Mathews. As they pushed their bicycles slowly up the street, they watched a motorcyclist approach them at speed, his engine sounding like an enraged bee, echoing between the buildings on the street. The motorcyclist, noticing their Cumann na mBan uniforms, screeched to a halt.

“I’m looking for Angela Mathews,” he said, lowering his scarf from around his face.

Angela stepped forward.

“The volunteers have marched out?” he asked her.

She nodded.

“I have a despatch. I need to get it to them.”

Angela looked up and down the street.

“Well, they were going to Ardee. Then onto Slane. You could probably catch up with them?”

The rider looked exhausted.

“I have to get back to Dublin. Do you think you could get it to them?”

Angela looked doubtful.

“Who is the despatch from?”

The rider fumbled with his leather bag before producing a small handwritten note. Angela took it and read it, then gasped a little.



“Is it true?” she said.

The rider nodded.

“We would need to have it confirmed,” she said.

The motorcyclist said he would leave it in her hands and thanked her before turning his motorcycle around.

“What does it say?” asked Bríd.

Angela, looking slightly ashen now, handed the note over to Bríd.

Sorcha read it over her mother’s shoulder.

The handwritten note had an address embossed on the white paper: ‘*Woodtown Park, Rathfarnham, Co. Dublin*’. The note was dated 22 April 1916 and read: ‘*Volunteers completely deceived. All orders for tomorrow Sunday are entirely cancelled. Eoin MacNeill.*’

“What are you going to do?” asked Bríd.

“Well, we’ll have to confirm it really is Eoin’s signature before we do anything,” said Angela. “It does look like his writing but I couldn’t be a hundred per cent.”

“Father Macardle would know,” said Bríd, thinking now of the co-founder of Coláiste Bhríde in Omeath, who worked very closely with the UCD professor and would surely have passed much correspondence.

“I’ll bring it to him,” said Angela. “And if he confirms the note, we’ll have to get word to the volunteers.”

“Why would Eoin MacNeill call things off?” said Bríd, shaking her head.

“He must think they have no chance,” said Deirdre Mathews, quietly.

Sorcha thought of Liam, out there marching now to nowhere.

“A mess,” said Bríd.

“Aye,” said Angela. “You’re not wrong there Bríd, you’re not wrong there.”





Chapter Eleven

When Father Macardle confirmed that the despatch was indeed genuine and had come from the Irish Volunteers Chief of Staff Eoin MacNeill, Angela took the note straight to Sean MacEntee, one of the leaders of the local branch. MacEntee still happened to be in Dundalk having stayed behind to secure further arms after the volunteers had marched out towards Ardee.

Angela told Bríd, Sorcha and Deidre when she returned to her home above the stationery shop in Clanbrassil Street that MacEntee had found the message hard to believe.

“He said it couldn’t be true.”

“What is he going to do?” asked Bríd.

Angela told them that McEntee would travel towards Slane to see if he could meet up with the contingent and discuss the matter with Donal O'Hannigan and Paddy Hughes, the other officers in charge of the Louth Volunteers.

“I suppose they’ll try get word to Dublin,” said Angela. “They want to hear the order from Pearse himself.”

What had started so promisingly had ended before it had even begun. So much for the declaration of independence at Tara, thought Sorcha. What could have been a moment in history had vanished right before their eyes. Sorcha wasn’t sure she had ever felt disappointment like it. Her mother too was deathly quiet. With no further news forthcoming, Bríd and Sorcha eventually decided to head home.

“He’ll be waiting to have dinner,” said Bríd, referring to Austin.

Sorcha knew that Mamó would be waiting for news. She realised Bríd must have told her all about the rising plans, which was why she had helped collect medical supplies from Drogheda and made haversacks.

As they cycled out of Dundalk again, Sorcha thought she could sense an atmosphere in the town, as if

rumours were swirling and people were holding their collective breaths. The two women spoke not a word as they wearily made their way home. Mamó was delighted to see them but disappointed to hear about Eoin MacNeill's note.

“A pity,” she said. “That’s a real pity now.”

Austin, miffed at his family’s morning and afternoon absence, made do with a quiet, reserved dinner together in the front dining room. Mamó had managed to heat up the Easter ham, and served it with warm potatoes and white sauce. Austin did not question Bríd about her day’s activities, as if resigned to his fate as the husband of a revolutionary. He only asked if Liam would be home to which Bríd answered honestly that she did not think so, but perhaps tomorrow.

Sorcha went to bed tired and forlorn. She wondered where Liam would spend the night? She wondered from which county would all the hundred or so men look up at the cold, wet, April sky? Would it be from County Dublin, where they should have been? County Meath, at Tara, stopped in their tracks? Or County Louth already on their way back home?

The next morning Bríd was up before Sorcha and gave her tea and bread for breakfast.

“I couldn’t sleep,” said Bríd.

“Me neither,” said Sorcha.

She’d had a restless night, worrying about Liam and all the other men.

Sorcha felt sorry for her mother as she watched her move about the kitchen, deep in thought. The concern was etched on her face. Two sons, Sorcha realised, gone to war.



As it was Easter Monday and a public holiday, Sorcha had been given the day off from the castle. She had expected, before yesterdays’ events, that they might have done something with the day; taken the train on a jaunt or perhaps gone to the mountains with Mamó for a picnic. They all felt paralysed now waiting for news.

Austin rose late around eleven am and went out for a morning walk, before even taking breakfast. Mamó complained of pains in her legs and said she would stay in bed.

“Let’s go to Dundalk,” said Bríd, eventually, standing up and taking her coat off the back of the kitchen door. “I can’t take it anymore, this waiting and wondering. Let’s see if any word has come back.”

Dutifully, Sorcha put on her coat and hat and climbed on her bicycle outside. The cool air hugged their faces, the chill turning Sorcha’s nose and cheeks pink. Bríd cycled at speed and Sorcha could see she was agitated.

Up ahead, they noticed that a checkpoint had been set up at the junction of the Dublin Road, manned by National Volunteers and RIC constables. One of the volunteers, a young statuesque man stopped them as they approached.

“Where are you going ladies?” he asked.

“What business is it of yours?” said Bríd.

Sorcha felt suddenly quite afraid.

“There’s been a lot of movement today. Would you know anything about that at all?” said the man.



“I would not,” said Bríd smartly. “And I don’t know what you’re doing here with your checkpoint. We’re free to go about our business without being pestered by the likes of you.”

“And what sort of business would that be exactly?” asked the man.

“Let us through. Can’t you see I have my daughter with me and we’re just going on our way?”

The man looked Bríd up and down before turning his eyes to Sorcha. He looked into their bicycle baskets, lifting up a parcel Bríd had in the front, and searching underneath it. Somewhat satisfied, he stepped back and they climbed up onto their saddles and cycled off again.

“Traitors,” said Bríd as she pedalled off. “If they were any use they’d be with the real volunteers, instead of supporting the likes of the RIC.”

Beyond the checkpoint the town was eerily quiet. There was still a sense of anticipation, Sorcha realised, a sense of waiting and watching. When they got to Clanbrassil Street, there was no movement and the John Boyle O’Reilly Hall was locked up. They decided to go to Angela Mathews’ home and rapped on the front door.

The shop was locked and Sorcha stared at the display of colourful books in the window. Under the counter inside was where Angela stored the nationalist publications they helped distribute such as *Honesty* and *The Irish Citizen*. The door opened almost immediately and Angela looked a little rattled.

“Come in,” she said, ushering them up the stairs, before putting her head out past the door and looking up and down the street. Upstairs, in the cosy rooms where Angela lived, Deirdre Mathews and Nellie Clarke sat at the table.

“We’ve just had a visitor,” said Angela. “A woman called Julia Grenan. Of the Inghinidhe na hÉireann branch in Dublin.”

“Oh?” said Bríd. “Is there word?”



“Yes,” said Angela. “From Pearse himself.”

Bríd raised her eyebrows.

Angela opened up a small piece of paper and handed it over to Bríd.

Bríd read it and looked shocked.

“Dublin is in arms,” she read out loud now for Sorcha’s benefit. “You will carry out your original instructions. We strike at noon.”

A silence descended on the room, before Sorcha said, “So it’s back on?”

The rest of the women nodded their heads.

“I said I would get word to the Monaghan branch as Julia was needed back in Dublin,” said Angela.

“There’s a checkpoint,” said Bríd. “They stopped us, at the Dublin Road junction.”

“They’ll be watching all entry points to the town,” said Deirdre. “They’ll know the men are on the move.”

“And what word of them?” asked Bríd.

“They turned back overnight in Slane and we have reason to believe they are on the march back to Dundalk. Lots have dispersed though. Thinking it was all off,” said Deirdre.

“If they get to the checkpoints they’ll be arrested,” said Bríd.

“We must go to them then,” said Angela.

“They could come in two ways,” said Deirdre helpfully. “Either from the Dublin Road or round by Blackrock.”

“I’ll cycle out the Dublin Road,” said Angela. “Deirdre, you stay here with Bríd in case we’ve any more callers. Nellie, you take the Blackrock Road. We can meet at the gates of Clermont Park and that way, in a loop, we’ll have caught them if they’re coming.”

“Can I come?” Sorcha piped up.

Angela considered her for a moment.

“Actually yes, you and Nellie are young. Two young women out riding their bikes on a bank holiday might not look as suspicious.”

“What about the despatch?” asked Deirdre, holding up the note Julia Grenan had brought. “Should you take it with you?”

Angela shook her head.

“No,” she said. “They could search us. The officers, if we find them, will have to take our word.”

Bríd looked at Sorcha as Sorcha put back on her hat and coat. Sorcha could see her mother was terribly worried.

“I’ll be back soon Mammy,” said Sorcha, reassuringly.

For a moment, Sorcha could see a flash of something in her mother’s eyes. Was it fear or pride?

“All right,” she said. “Be safe, won’t you?”

Sorcha nodded.

She joined Angela and Nellie outside and they cycled off before splitting up to go their separate ways. Sorcha panted as she pedalled furiously after Nellie. It wasn’t just the speed they were cycling at that left her

out of breath; it was the enormity of the task she had been given too.

The rising was back on.

And now, Sorcha O'Neill, a lowly housemaid at Bellingham Castle, was playing her own real part and acting as a true Irish auxiliary.

She had never felt so excited.

She had never felt more alive.





Chapter Twelve

Sorcha had to pedal hard to keep up with Nellie. Nellie glanced back over her shoulder every so often, to check that Sorcha was still with her. When they reached the checkpoint leaving Dundalk at the Blackrock junction, a young dark-haired volunteer stopped them.

“And where are you going, ladies?” he asked.

“We’re going to visit my cousin, to see her new baby, in Dromiskin,” said Nellie, quickly.

“Is that right?” said the volunteer, walking around her bicycle, inspecting them. “Take off your hat,” he

said and he pointed the long rifle he was holding, which had a bayonet attached to it, at her shoulder.

As Sorcha looked at the young man, she realised with a start that she recognised him. It was John Bell, Tommy's brother who she'd been in school with. His striking blue eyes now stared formidably at Nellie.

Nellie took off her hat and showed that she had no message or papers tucked inside it. Relief washed over Sorcha that they had not brought the message from Pearse with them. As he turned to Sorcha, John Bell recognised her as she lifted her face to him.

"Miss O'Neill," he said. "What are you doing out this direction?"

"We're going to visit her cousin," she said, nodding at Nellie.

Suspiciously, John walked around their bicycles, examining them up and down.

"You haven't brought anything for the baby?" he said, peering into their empty baskets.

"No time. My cousin hasn't been well. We're going to give a hand. She lost a lot of blood," said Nellie.

“Right,” said John, a flicker of a grimace across his face. Sorcha suspected he didn’t want to hear any more gory details.

“How’s your brother doing?” he asked.

“All right,” said Sorcha. “We had a letter a few weeks back. It’s not very nice out there in the trenches and I suppose he’s wanting to come home.”

“I mean the other one,” said John. “The one who’s already home.”

Liam.

“He’s fine,” said Sorcha coolly.

She didn’t like being questioned by this young man who had organized himself into a position of authority. He was not an RIC constable. Why did he think he had the right to detain them?

“He’s spending a lot of time marching up and down the roads I see,” said John.

“I don’t pay much heed,” said Sorcha, nonchalantly. “Sure, aren’t I kept busy enough in the castle as well you know. Now, if you don’t mind ...”

Annoyed, Sorcha climbed back up onto her bicycle and pushed past John Bell, forcing him to stagger

back. She saw out of the corner of her eye an RIC constable watching and so she sped away as fast as she could.

Nellie, quickly, followed her.

“Nosy so-and-so,” said Nellie, when she caught up with her. “How do you know him?”

“I know his brother,” said Sorcha, thinking of the lovely affable Tommy, who she only rarely saw, his work in the garage keeping him so busy. She wondered if he was a National Volunteer too, like his brother. The split between the National and Irish volunteers had caused a horrible, sometimes vicious divide. People who were previously friends or even brothers had become enemies.

“Who they think they’re protecting those National Volunteers, huh?” said Nellie. “The British Army? The RIC? Traitors!”

The air was still fresh and cool as they cycled out by the bay, with its mudflats and grey horizon. A curlew flew up over the promenade as they passed and Sorcha marvelled at its long scythe beak. Blackrock was busy as they cycled through, the small café and The Clermont Arms Hotel bustling with revellers enjoying the public holiday.



As they left Blackrock village behind and made their way onwards towards Clermont Park, the gates of the large estate house at which they were to meet up with Angela, Sorcha wondered if they were too late and had missed the troop on their way back. Could they have come a different way? Would Angela get to them on the Dublin Road?

And then, as they came to the bridge crossing the fat brown River Fane, Nellie cried out.

“There they are!” she said. “Up ahead!”

Sorcha looked to see a bedraggled looking column wearily marching towards them. Gone were the hundred and twenty men. Up ahead was only a small group of thirty or so. Nellie cycled in front of the group and raised her arm.

“Stop! Please!” she said.

She hopped off her bicycle and held it as a barricade in front of the men.

Sorcha stopped beside her, but did not get off her bike.

A tall, handsome man stepped forward who Sorcha recognised as the commandant, Donal O'Hannigan. He had been training the men over the past few weeks in drilling, marching them up and down the town. Now, they all looked weary and footsore and O'Hannigan was grey in the face, with dark shadows under his eyes. The men had been on the march since yesterday morning, their failed rising apparent in the many return miles they had stomped.

“Dundalk is surrounded by checkpoints. If you go there, you'll all be arrested,” said Nellie. “It's a trap!”

In the distance, Sorcha saw a motor car approach. The road was muddy and the car seemed to slip and slide. As it drew nearer, Sorcha recognised the man beside the driver as Sean MacEntee. Everyone waited and watched as MacEntee got out of the car to speak with O'Hannigan.



Sorcha realized by O'Hannigan's expression that he was only learning that the rising was officially back on. He put his hand to head, took off his cap and rubbed his eyes and forehead hard. At the back of the group, Sorcha spotted a familiar outline; the shape of a young man's head, neck and shoulders.

"Liam!" she said and she moved her bicycle round to the side of the group.

"Sorcha!" he said and he stepped out of line and approached her.

He put his hand on her arm in greeting.

Sorcha saw that he looked thoroughly exhausted.

"Dublin is in arms!" she said.

As her words spread to the other volunteers at the back of the group and MacEntee's and O'Hannigan's conversation was relayed from the front, a murmur and mumble rose through the group.

"You can't go into Dundalk," said Sorcha. "There're checkpoints everywhere. We came to tell you that."

The group now fell out of line and formed into a circle around their commanders as they received instructions as to what to do.

“Change of plan!” said O’Hannigan, in a loud, booming voice. “We will commandeer the necessary transport and we will make our way towards Tara as we intended yesterday. These young ladies tell us Dundalk is not safe. We will stop at Castlebellingham for provisions instead. Arrest those RIC men who follow us. Use whatever force is necessary!”

Sorcha watched as a small group of men approached the two RIC sergeants who had been following them on their bikes and were now seated at the side of the road, waiting for the men to move on. They looked shocked when the volunteers pointed their bayonets at them and told them they were under arrest.

“Go home,” said Liam. “We’ll make our way to Bellingham and then we’ll move out, but you need to be careful. Go on home now.”

Liam gently pushed his sister on the shoulder.

Sorcha could feel the palpable weariness of the men, who, so close to home, now had to turn back, a full day later, and begin their journey all over again.

“I’ll get Mamó to make you up soup or stew,” said Sorcha, brightly.

Liam looked longingly and pityingly at her.

“There’ll be no time for that,” he said.

Together, Nellie and Sorcha cycled past the volunteers and the arrested RIC men. Sorcha said goodbye to Nellie who was going onto Clermont Park to meet with Angela and pushed on along the Dublin Road towards home. Her heart thundered in her chest as she cycled faster and faster. She remembered that Bríd was still in Dundalk waiting on news. What news she would have to tell her when she saw her!

At home, Sorcha was glad to find Austin was in the front study with his book. She gushed to Mamó about what had happened.

“I can’t believe it,” said Mamó. “All that way and back again. What are they doing up there in Dublin?”



Sorcha looked out the window for signs of life in the centre of the village, but as her view was a little obstructed, she had to go out the door and up the

street to keep watch. A short while later, cars started to arrive into the village and the sound of voices and commotion began to echo.

“They’ve arrived!” Sorcha gushed when she ran back inside to Mamó.

Mamó handed her a wrapped package of sandwiches and a flask for Liam.

“Run up there and give that to him,” said Mamó. “See will he call in for a hot sup of tea.”

As Sorcha made her way up into the centre of the village, she watched as the volunteers knocked on the doors and windows of shops and ordered that they be opened. They wanted food and fuel. About fifteen cars in all had rolled into the village and Sorcha wondered where they had sourced them all.

The road from Dublin had been busy with motorcars as she’d cycled home, driven by chauffeurs with ladies and gentleman dressed in elegant hats coming from the Fairyhouse races. She wondered if the occupants were now standing at the side of the road scratching their heads in their furs and finery, wondering why exactly their cars had been taken from them?



Sorcha saw the frightened look on her neighbour's faces as the volunteers waved their bayonet guns about, looking for supplies. She felt quite sorry that it had to be this way.

A crowd of onlookers had gathered on the green in the centre of the village. Sorcha saw that the two RIC sergeants arrested earlier had been put standing by the railings, while two village RIC constables had also been arrested and were now standing beside them, looking somewhat confused.

Sorcha searched the marauding volunteers for sight of Liam. She held his package of refreshments, wondering where he could have got to. She hoped the volunteers wouldn't make their way up the avenue towards the castle. While the Bellinghams were

supportive of Irish autonomy, she doubted they'd take kindly to being held up at bayonet and forced to hand over their luxurious motor car. She felt very conflicted about the whole thing when she thought of her employers.

A tall RIC constable on a bicycle rode into the village from the direction of Gilbertstown straight into the group of volunteers. Sorcha recognized the man as the tall Gaeilgeoir from Donegal who had sat beside her in the pew in church on Good Friday. He was ordered to get off his bike and hand over the documents he was carrying. At first, the constable would not comply, but when a revolver was held to his head, he calmly climbed off his bicycle, laid it against the railings and dropped the envelope he had on his person into the outstretched hand of the volunteer. He was put standing with the other arrested RIC men, with another volunteer keeping them all under armed watch.

Sorcha spotted Liam, further up the street, helping to load jerry cans of fuel into the boot of a motor car. Quickly she walked towards him, waving. From the direction of Dundalk came another motor car, stopping at the barricade the volunteers had created in the centre of the village. Sorcha saw that the man

in the back of the car was an army officer of some kind, a Lieutenant perhaps judging by his gold-braided uniform.



“Out of the way!” roared the man, in a loud, Northern Irish accent. “What is the meaning of this? Let us pass!”

The volunteers closed ranks and O’Hannigan stepped forward and put his hand up.

“Identify yourself!” commanded O’Hannigan.

“Dunville, Lieutenant Robert, Grenadier Guards. Not that it’s any of your business!” replied the man.

“Anything to the whiskey people?” said O’Hannigan.

“That is none of your business either!”

“That must be a yes, so,” said O’Hannigan. “Out! Out of the car!”

“I will bloody not!” said Dunville, agitated at such an instruction. “How dare you! Make way and let us pass. I have a boat to catch!”

Sorcha watched the altercation in trepidation. Didn’t the Lieutenant understand how serious this was? That there was a rising in action?

“Get out of the car,” ordered O’Hannigan again, this time in a low voice.

Around them, the volunteers’ motor car doors and boot lids were shut tight. They were preparing to move out. Sorcha sidled up to Liam just as he hopped into his own car and handed him over the package from home.

“Go raibh maith agat,” he said and he looked at her kindly.

Behind him, Sorcha saw that the standoff between Dunville and O’Hannigan was continuing. When a volunteer ran up to the Lieutenant and pointed his gun directly at his head, Dunville, alongside his driver, reluctantly left the car.

“You’ll pay for this!” he said. “Fenian hooligans!”

The officer was put standing beside the RIC men against the railings.

“Time to move out!” called O’Hannigan, seeing that all the cars had been freshly stocked and supplied.

Suddenly the sound of gun shots rang out.

Sorcha, by instinct, dropped to the ground, the flask she was still holding cracking on the pavement. Liam jumped out of the car and covered her with his body, flattening her against the footpath. They both lay there for a moment before Liam asked her if she was all right?

She nodded under the weight of him. Liam pulled himself up off the ground and looked out over the side of the car. Timidly, Sorcha pulled herself up too and looked to where the gunshot seemed to have come from. Two of the RIC constables had run across the road away from the green and the sound of gunshot fire. The tall constable who Sorcha had been in church with was slumped on the ground. Shocked, his two colleagues hunkered down beside him.

“McGee!” they roared. “Charles, can you hear us?! Charles!”

A pool of red black blood, seeped onto the road where he lay.



Lieutenant Dunville, had also dropped to the ground at the railings. He sat up, holding his arm.

“You shot me!” he cried out. “You shot me!”

“Move out!” shouted O’Hannigan as he glanced quickly left and right beyond the barricades.

Up ahead the first cars in the convoy moved off.

O’Hannigan climbed into his own vehicle and waved at Sean MacEntee who still stood on the footboard of his car where he had just been about to climb in when the shots rang out. MacEntee looked quite stricken.

“We have to go!” said O’Hannigan. “Leave it!”

Liam quickly jumped into his vehicle and he managed to squeeze Sorcha’s arm before his car drove off up the main road, past the tall trees and round the corner, out of sight. The remaining cars followed, leaving a trail of heavy exhaust fumes in their wake.

“Call the doctor!” roared one of the constables attending to McGee. Sorcha could see that the injured man’s eyes were open and blinking but he looked to be in terrible shock. A girl from the village who Sorcha knew to be related to Eva Collins, who she had replaced when she’d first started at the castle, knelt and whispered an act of contrition in his ear.

“How dare they?!” roared the Dunville, cradling his arm and moaning now. “I have a boat to catch. How very dare they!”

When Sorcha looked down she realised she was still holding the broken flask. Unsure of what to do, she turned on her heel and raced the whole way home. When she got inside, she fell into Mamó Caitlín’s arms and burst into tears.

“A stór,” said Mamó. “Whatever’s the matter? What’s all the commotion? Did I hear a gun shot?”

The kitchen door opened and Austin stood, watching his daughter cry into her grandmother’s arms.



“I don’t want to shoot a gun anymore Mamó,” sobbed Sorcha, muffled against Mamó’s chest.

Mamó rubbed Sorcha’s head and told her to shush.

“I told you nothing good would come of this,” said Austin, a frown on his face. “I told you all this republican business would only cause trouble.”

“There, there,” said Mamó.

“You wait till your mother gets home,” warned Austin. “There’s going to be changes around here, mark my words.”

1917

Téarnamh
(Noun: Recovery)

Dundalk Democrat

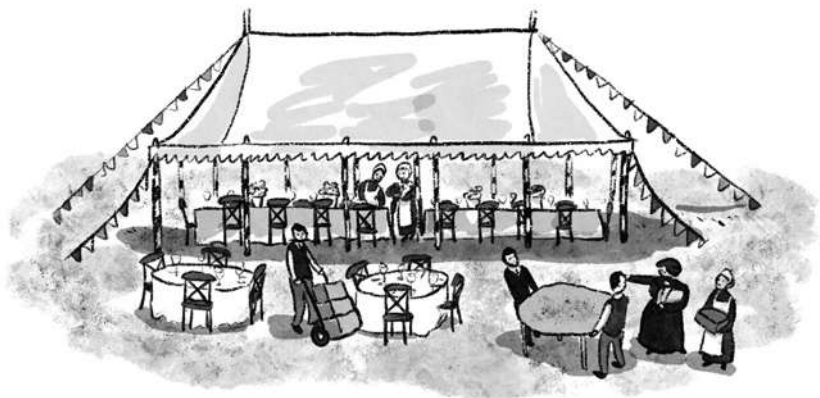
Saturday 23 June 1917

LOUTH PRISONERS RELEASED

The local men sentenced in connection with the rebellion arrived in Dundalk from Dublin on Monday evening. They were met at the station by the Emmet band and large crowd in which lads and lasses in their teens were especially numerous as well as a number of young men from the country who arrived in town on bicycles. The men drove through some of the streets in a brake (carriage) followed by the band and the crowd, the juvenile element of which enlivened the night with cheering and oohing as certain houses were passed. Songs were indulged in en route. The brake made a halt in Park Street where speeches were delivered by Messrs McEntee, McMahan (Ardee) and P Hughes, U.D.C.

LOUTH FEIS FOR DUNLEER

Tomorrow, all who can commandeer a vehicle of any description will make their way to Dunleer for the Feis, which promises to be the greatest event of its kind held in Louth. The programme provides a varied treat of five hours' duration. There will be dancing, piping, whistling and liling go leor. The language competitions have never been better patronised. The Feis commences at 2 o'clock and it is hoped that Mr. Eoin MacNeill President of the Gaelic League will be present.



Chapter Thirteen

The summer season was in full swing at Bellingham Castle. Lady Bellingham was throwing a high summer party and the castle was a flounder. Mrs. Adams was at her very worst, barking at anyone who came near. Red-cheeked and persistently blowing a wisp of hair away from her forehead, the staff knew to keep out of her way.

Ladies and gentlemen from all the surrounding houses and beyond, even as far as Dublin and Wicklow were coming to the castle to stay. There would be games during the day if the weather was fine and even if rain did move in, tea tents had been erected on the lawn to allow everyone a great glut of sheltered fresh air.

Lawn parties presented particular strains for the staff of Bellingham Castle. There would be easily crumpled linens to press and white parasols to clean and scrub after being jammed into the muddy lawn. There would be white stockings and pale leather shoes to take care of, shade to be provided if the sun did come out, and food, hot and cold to be trundled far from the kitchen.



Julia Adams was also on the warpath. And because of the work Sorcha did in the corridors and in the bedrooms, in the hallways and large looming rooms of the castle, fetching and cleaning, polishing and scurrying, it was impossible for her to keep out of Julia's way.

Sorcha could never quite work out what she had done to annoy or offend Julia Adams so terribly over the years, but the woman seemed to have developed what could only be described as a remarkable dislike for her. Sorcha could never do anything right. And whenever the coast was clear and nobody was looking,

Julia had a habit of saying nasty things directly to her and in general, making Sorcha feel very bad in herself.

After Liam had been arrested and interned for his role in the uprising, Sorcha worried that she might lose her job at the castle. The rebels through their actions were seen to have damaged both the local and national economy and anyone associated with them were looked down upon. In particular, those with fathers and husbands fighting in the great war were very aggrieved at what the rebels had done. When photographs of Dublin in charred ruins had been published in the newspapers, Sorcha had been jeered at in the street.



“Happy now?” said old Mrs. Thomas, as she’d carried her heavy basket towards Armstrong’s post office one day. “Good riddance to that brother of yours and you’d be better off telling your mother to stay in the kitchen where she belongs. Your father’s a soft one, aye,” she’d said as she had shuffled off.

Sorcha had remembered that both Mrs. Thomas’ sons were fighting in France and her grandson too, who was even younger than Sorcha was. How he’d even got admitted to the army, she wasn’t sure, but he must have lied about his age.



Austin was very, very angry about the whole affair. He was embarrassed at Liam’s arrest and detention and he was outraged

that Sorcha had been put in danger through what he considered both Bríd and Mamó’s revolutionary actions. The death of Constable Charles McGee had shocked the whole village and four men: Sean MacEntee, James Scally, Frank Martin and Denis Leahy had been court martialled for the murder of the Constable, the attempted murder of Lieutenant Robert Dunville and for taking part in an armed rebellion and waging war against the king. Three of the men

had been sentenced to death, commuted to penal servitude for life, while Scally received ten years' hard labour. The evidence put forward could not conclude who exactly had fired the fatal shot. Liam, for his part, had been detained for taking part in the rebellion and sent to prison in England to be held until the crown saw fit to release him.

Austin banned Bríd from any republican activities and he forced her and Sorcha to give up their Cumann na mBan membership. There was to be no more talk of a 'free Ireland' he said. Bríd would return to her duties as a wife at home and Sorcha would get on with her work in the castle.

Sorcha was sure Lady Bellingham would take her aside when Liam's arrest and detention had been printed in the newspaper and inform her that her services were no longer required at the castle. But she had not. Not a word had been said. The only thing that had worsened was Julia Adams behaviour towards her, although Sorcha was certain there had been much chatter about her when she wasn't at the common room table. The staff of the castle were never slow to share a piece of gossip.

For the first few months after the rebellion Bríd had stuck to Austin's wishes. All through 1916, she had not attended any meetings, she had not engaged with any

of her Cumann na mBan associates and she had even refrained from the Gaelic League, missing the local Feis and the events held at Coláiste Bhríde in Omeath. She baked and she cooked and she cleaned the house in Brewery Street and Sorcha watched as her mother wilted before her eyes, dehydrated and starved of the activities that gave her life.

As the summer sun came out from behind thick, white clouds, Sorcha carried a bundle of fresh sheets towards a guest bedroom in Bellingham Castle. Mrs. Adams would be inspecting the bedrooms shortly after lunch ahead of guest arrivals and she was under pressure to complete the work. Sorcha had grown used to the many events held each year at the castle and while the work was hard, she had become very efficient at her job. Mrs. Adams had a trust in her now that she did not wish to break. From behind, Sorcha heard footsteps running towards her and she turned to see the scullery maid, Ethel, breathless, approaching her.

“Your mother is at the back door,” she whispered. “She’s in a bit of a state. You better go to her before Mrs. Adams sees her.”

Mrs. Adams was meeting with Lady Bellingham in the drawing room, going over all the arrival details and guest requirements for the party. Sorcha, still

holding the sheet bundle, ran ahead of Ethel, down the stairwell, into the bowels of the castle, past the kitchen and to the back door.



Bríd stood there, white faced.

“A Mhaim,” said Sorcha. “What is it?”

Something was wrong.

Mamó?

“Sorcha,” said Bríd and she put out her hand and gripped Sorcha’s arm, pulling her out the door and into the back

yard. “I need you to come home, now.

Your father, he’s ... he’s hysterical. I didn’t know what else to do. You must come and see can you talk sense into him!”

Sorcha could see the cook watching, through the window. Never before had Bríd come to the castle like this. Her mother was usually calm and collected.

“Wait here,” said Sorcha.

Stepping back inside to fetch her coat and hat, Sorcha abandoned her sheets on the boots table and told the cook that she had a domestic emergency.

“Tell Mrs. Adams I’ll be back as soon as possible!” she said.

The cook raised her eyebrows at Sorcha. Scurrying off on what was the busiest day of the summer season was quite the move.

“We need to be quick,” said Sorcha, as she guided her mother out of the yard and down the long avenue that swept from behind the castle towards the widow’s cottages and out onto the main street. They both broke into a trot, past the commotion of the tea-party tents in the near distance on the front lawn.

“What happened?” asked Sorcha, her heart thumping in her chest.

She was shocked to see tears in her mother’s eyes. Bríd never cried. Not when Cathal had left for war, not when Liam had been arrested and taken away to England, not when she’d once badly cut her hand with a sharp carving knife.

“I think he’s finally lost it ... with our activities. He’s thrown Mamó and me out!”

“What!?” said Sorcha, incredulously. “Are you serious Mammy?”

“I am!” said Bríd. “He’s gone quite mad!”

Last Christmas, David Lyold George had become prime minister in Britain and granted an amnesty to rebellion detainees, seeing Liam set free and returned home to Dundalk. Austin had refused to let Liam back into the house and he had been forced to take a room in Market Street in the centre of Dundalk. Knowing her son was such a short distance away, Bríd had taken to going to see Liam in secret over the past few months, bringing Sorcha with her on occasion.



A series of concerts to celebrate the release of detainees saw Bríd break her ban on attending republican events again and Sorcha knew her mother was active again in both the Cumann and the Gaelic League as her demeanour changed from being lowly and forlorn to energised and impassioned. One morning Sorcha found a ‘Sinn Féin’ pin, hidden in her mother’s stocking drawer, which she was raiding for

clean socks ahead of going to work. She feared that her father might find it, but she understood Bríd's motives all the same; her mother had come back to life now that had connected back with the cause.

It didn't take long for Sorcha and Bríd to reach their large red brick house on Brewery Street and Sorcha was shocked to find Mamó on her hands and knees in the side yard, crawling across the gravel gathering her belongings that had evidently just been flung out the back door.

From an upstairs window, Sorcha watched books and newspapers emerge, raining down like a meteor shower, the hardbacks landing with a thump on the ground.



“He found pamphlets,” explained Bríd. “*Seditious literature*,” she said, her voice mocking the way Austin spoke. “He went searching after someone told him at work they’d heard I was at last weeks’ rally!”

On 22 July 1917, the men who had been sent to prison for the murder of Constable McGee had been released and vociferous welcoming receptions had been held in Drogheda, Clogherhead, Dunleer and Dundalk to greet them. Sorcha had not attended the rallies but her mother had with Liam. That must have been the

report that came back to her father. It was a grave mistake, she realised, for Bríd, an event too far.

Austin was hopping mad.

Sorcha hooked Mamó's elbow and helped lift her off the ground.

She was white in the face and seemed shaken.

"I think he's finally cracked," she said. "He's a mad man!"

Carefully and quietly, Sorcha made her way into the house and up the stairs.

She knocked gently on the bedroom door, where she could hear Austin pulling out drawers and moving furniture.

"Daddy," she said, as she pushed open the door.

Austin was red in the face, two white spots on his cheeks. He didn't even hear Sorcha till she called out to him.

"Daddy!" she said, in a louder voice. "What are you doing?"

He turned to look at her, surprised.

“I’ve had it!” he said. “That’s it! I warned her, I told her, didn’t I? I said if there was any more, ANY MORE, I would bring an end to it.”

He took out a basket from under the bed and upended it. Sorcha watched in horror as piles of *The Irish Nation* and *Honesty* scattered on the floor.

Austin lifted a newspaper and scrunched it, bringing it close to Sorcha’s face.

“Look at these!” he said. “Right under my nose. I suppose you’re in on this too!”

Sorcha looked sheepish. She could not admit to her father that yes, she had been aware of her mother’s slip back into republicanism and that she too had been visiting Liam and attending the odd event behind her father’s back.

“Daddy,” said Sorcha gently. “Please, you’re scaring us all.”

“I’ll give you scared!” said Austin.

He went to the window and threw the newspapers down, a fresh downpour of literature for the garden.

“She’s had her chance and she’s blown it,” said Austin, spittle flying from his mouth. “I’d been made a mockery of. People are laughing at me at work! They

think I don't have any idea where my wife is ... and they're right!"

Austin pulled out another basket and rummaged through it. To Sorcha's horror, her father unearthed a set of Sinn Féin pins. Seething, he flung them at the wall, and they ricocheted like pebbles off the bedroom wall.



"Mamó is no longer welcome here," said Austin. "She can go back to Belfast and live with whomever she wants. Your mother can follow her! I won't be made a mockery of anymore! That goes for you too. If you want to live here, you live by the rules. I don't want to hear of a Cumann or a march or a fundraiser or a rally! And I don't want to hear another word of Irish. We speak English in this house. And that's the end of it!"

With that, Austin marched from the room and slammed the door. Sorcha ran to the window and saw her mother and grandmother desperately trying to collect their books and belongings and gather them up into a suitcase that Austin had already flung skywards.



Bríd looked up to Sorcha and she shrugged her shoulders in defeat.

She had not been able to calm her father down.

The rage that had been building for years had finally erupted and there was nothing she, nor her mother, nor her grandmother could do.

Austin had spoken.

The rules had been laid down.

Mamó and her mother were out.



Chapter Fourteen

After Bríd had left with Mamó to catch the train to Belfast, Sorcha had no option but to go back to work. Austin had left for the brewery, still red in the face and muttering to himself, but at least he had stopped throwing things. Sorcha imagined the poor brewery workers would be in for it all afternoon.

She had swallowed the tears that threatened her eyes and scuttled back up the avenue, feeling as though she might collapse from the pain in her chest. Mamó and Bríd, gone!

Mrs. Adams pursed her lips but did not admonish Sorcha for her absence. She seemed to understand that something terribly upsetting had happened. Instead, she listed a lengthy set of tasks for Sorcha to complete and Sorcha threw herself into them with gusto, concentrating on her work and pushing all thoughts of her broken family from her mind.



It was hard to erase the vision of Bríd and Mamó though, tearfully packing up their belongings and hugging her goodbye. Bríd said they would stay with Sorcha's uncle Peadar in Belfast and that there would be room and she was not to worry.

But how could Sorcha not worry? She had no idea when her mother would return. If she wasn't allowed carry out her activities or be part of the Gaelic League or even speak her native language, what was there for her in Castlebellingham? Sorcha was practically grown up now and well able to fend for herself. She had her own wage coming in, which had increased year on year. Sorcha had no idea what the future held for her family and she felt ever so nervous and afraid. When her mind slipped from her task of scrubbing

or folding or dusting, she felt the overwhelming thoughts swirl. At times it felt as though an elephant were sitting on her chest; she was filled up with worry.

That evening, the afternoon lawn party rolled over into a raucous dinner and soirée. Sorcha stayed late, helping with whatever she could, even assisting Ethel in the scullery with some drying and stacking dishes.

“Shouldn’t you be making a move home?” said Mrs. Adams, when things began to wind down.

Sorcha looked forlorn. What awaited her at home? Her angry father still fuming after today’s confrontation? She wished she could stay over in the castle, wake up there in the morning, having not had to face Austin at all. But that was not a possibility. The castle was packed with guests and the staff quarters filled to the brim with the extra ladies’ maids and footmen who had arrived, luggage in tow with the celebrating parties.

Reluctantly she left the castle, walking home as slowly as possible in the dark, dragging her boots on the ground. The air was still warm from the day’s heat, a scent of honeysuckle in the air. She found it hard to believe that Mamó and Bríd would not be at home to welcome her.

In the kitchen, she found Austin sitting over the remnants of a meal he'd prepared for himself, a solitary sandwich sitting on a plate, pushed over to the chair where she normally sat.



“Sorcha,” said her father, when she came in the door. “There’s a sandwich there, if you’d like it?”

But Sorcha’s appetite was gone.

“No thank you, Daddy,” she said, in English.

“Sorcha,” said her father as she walked through the kitchen, making her way for the stairs and the sanctuary of her bedroom. She turned around to face him, her head hanging. She could feel the tears threatening, they were going to burst forth now that she was home and the absence of Mamó and Bríd could truly be felt.

“What happened today ...” said Austin. He stopped, as if he couldn’t find the words. “I’m sorry it happened that way. But it’s done now.”

Sorcha stood, staring at her booted feet, then nodded a little.

Austin observed her, his bravado that had frightened them all earlier, seemingly evaporated.

Sorcha wanted to get out of the kitchen, away from his intense glare.

“She’ll be back,” said Austin. “She’ll come back when she cools down.”

Sorcha wondered who her father was referring to, Bríd or Mamó? Either way, it was Austin who needed to cool down, certainly not her mother or grandmother.

“I’m very tired,” she said, her voice weak.

“Of course,” said Austin, “Go to bed. I’ll see you in the morning. Don’t worry too much about dinners and the like, I can look after myself.”

Austin’s dinners had been the last thing on Sorcha’s mind. She took the stairs two at a time and threw herself on the bed, where she let the hot, sorrowful tears stream, out, out and down her cheeks, warming the pillow where she’d buried her face.

This morning her family had been almost complete.

Now, it had been totally shattered apart.

What would the future hold for them all?



And why did everything in life have to be so difficult?



Three days after Bríd had left for Belfast, Sorcha received a short letter in the post from her to say she would be staying up north for the foreseeable, as Mamó had been quite weakened by the journey and, she wrote in Irish, “it would be best if I took a wee break from home”.

Sorcha thought it wasn't just the journey that had weakened Mamó but the terrible falling out in the family and the actions of Austin. He had greatly upset them all, and now Mamó had lost her home and Sorcha did not know when she might see her again.

Sorcha had cried when she got the letter and then swallowed her tears and got back to work. She began to stay later and later at the castle, no longer enthused to return home to the cold



bosom of the kitchen and the absent chatter of her grandmother and mother. She missed them both terribly, and as the weeks began to pass, she could tell,

even though he would not admit it, that her father was finding the house, lonely, cold and quiet too.

Austin acted kindly towards Sorcha, trying to engage her in conversation and making her soup and sandwiches and boiled potatoes in the evenings. His diet was simple as he had never been trained in the kitchen, but Sorcha ate at the castle and refused his food, the only protest she could muster. She lost weight with worry and became gaunt in the face.

One day in early autumn, Sorcha was making her way through the village to post a letter to her mother at her Uncle Peadar's address in Belfast when she bumped right into her old friend Geraldine Reilly.

“Sorcha O’Neill, as I live and breathe!”

“Hello Ger,” said Sorcha, glumly.

It was hard to appear happy these days; her life had become a circle of drudgery, waking, working, sleeping, and rising to do it all over again. Some Sundays she visited Liam, telling her father she was meeting up with Molly, the housemaid from the castle. The truth was, she had no real friends and there was little joy to be had; nothing it seemed could lift her spirits.

Sometimes they cycled out to Gyle's Quay and got an ice-cream. Liam, like Sorcha had lost weight and he never spoke about his time in prison in England. Sorcha felt her brother was protecting her. He'd heard that Bríd had joined a local Sinn Féin branch in Belfast and had become very popular, being as capable and hard-working as she was. Sorcha worried she might never see her mother again, if she settled and was happy up North.



“Jaypers, you got lanky,” said Geraldine.

“Thanks,” said Sorcha, sarcastically.

“Well now aren’t you the very one I wanted to meet,” said Geraldine. “What are you doing with yourself these days? Are you still washing up at the castle? Things have been non-stop for me and sure aren’t I a fresh, single and eligible young lady now!”

It had been a very long time since Sorcha had caught up with Geraldine, but Bríd had told her that she'd heard her long-term romance with her factory beau had come to an end.

“He didn't want to marry her,” Bríd whispered over tea one evening.

“Not surprised,” Mamó had said. “She'd bend the ear off a bat-eared fox!”

“A bit like yourself!” Bríd had admonished her mother.

Now Geraldine stood, smiling in front of Sorcha.

“Have you heard of the Cúchulainn Dance Club? You must have, sure isn't it something to do with the Gaelic league or you Irish speakers or whatever?”

Sorcha nodded. She had heard of the dance club in Dundalk, as her brother Liam often attended. While the dancing took place, the Irish Volunteers held meetings in the back rooms of the John Boyle O'Reilly Hall. The club was a cover.

“Well they're having a dance on Friday night and I'm only dying to go but I can't go on my own, obviously, so I was thinking, who else would go only Sorcha O'Neill! You'll go, won't you? We can get the bus into town. I'm not cycling, I have new patent heels!”

Sorcha nodded nonchalantly, her melancholy seemingly unable to offer any argument for or against the idea.

“Tremendous!” said Geraldine. “Call for me at seven and wear something nice, won’t you? Though not too nice! Don’t want you to outshine me!”

With that, Geraldine went on her merry way, and Sorcha was left blinking, before ambling her way towards the post office. At the door of the post office, she looked up the street to the very spot where Constable Charles McGee had fallen, blood seeping from his coat, a terrible memory of the Easter Rising just eighteen months before.

Geraldine seemed quite oblivious to anything sad or tragic or real.

She lived in a dream world.

Perhaps Sorcha needed a bit of that too.

Perhaps Sorcha needed some Geraldine think.





Chapter Fifteen

The John Boyle O'Reilly Hall was nearly full. Geraldine pulled Sorcha by the hand, straight to two empty chairs by the wall and they sat, trying to blend in, taking account of all in front of them. The men had gathered in one group, while the women stood in another, all in their best Sunday clothes.

Geraldine studied the men, while Sorcha eyed up the women. There were many she knew! Comrades from the Cumann and others from the Gaelic League. She felt her spirits lift. There was a great atmosphere in the room and she relaxed a little, now that she was here.

“Sorcha,” said a voice and Sorcha looked up to see Nellie Clarke standing right in front of her. Sorcha stood up and gripped Nellie’s arm.

“Nellie!” she said. “I haven’t seen you since ...”



Sorcha remembered Easter Monday 1916, when they had both saved the volunteers from imminent arrest. That terrible day had changed everything.

“Yes,” said Nellie. “It’s been a while.”

Nellie said hello to Geraldine, but Geraldine looked right past her, as if Nellie was getting in the way. Geraldine’s eyes were firmly trained on the men of varying ages, dressed in flatcaps, some in neckties, many still wearing their jackets, despite the building heat in the hall.

“You’ve been laying low,” said Nellie to Sorcha.

“Yes,” said Sorcha, sheepishly. How could she explain to Nellie about her father? How he had banned her and her family from all activities? How she was terrified to be caught at the dance that night? How her mother and grandmother had been banished?

“We’ve all had to be quiet,” said Nellie. “But things are lifting a bit now. There’s plans to start drilling and marching again. And our numbers are growing.”

Sorcha imagined that if the volunteers were to start drilling on the streets again, Liam would be firmly among their ranks.

“My Mam’s gone up North,” said Sorcha. “I told Daddy I was going to a knitting class.”

Sorcha bent over and took two knitting needles and a ball of yarn from her bag to show her.



Nellie burst out laughing.

“Whatever we comrades have to do! It’s good to see you. Maybe you can call on me sometime when you’re in town?”

Sorcha knew where Nellie lived, not far from Angela Mathews’ stationary shop.

“I’d like that,” said Sorcha.

Geraldine leapt from her chair and grabbed Sorcha’s arm.

“Sorcha!” she hissed.

Sorcha waved goodbye to Nellie and turned back to Geraldine.



“He’s here!” said Geraldine, a great big beam on her face. “He’s actually here!”

At the top of the hall, the session players were tuning up their instruments, a violin, scratching and a bodhrán player tapping out low beats. Geraldine took Sorcha by the hand and marched her straight over to a group of young men, waiting for the dance to start.

“Hello!” said Geraldine, smiling, showing all her teeth.

The crowd of men parted and Sorcha saw the reason why Geraldine had brought them to the dance hall in the first place. How could she not have realized? How

could she not have cottoned on to Geraldine's new found interest in this republican dance meeting?

Tommy Bell.

There he stood, taller now and, Sorcha had to admit to herself, even more handsome than she had remembered. He smiled, like a gentleman, but he didn't seem too particularly pleased at Geraldine's forwardness.

"Geraldine," he said coolly and he put out his hand for her to shake.

"What a surprise to see you here," said Geraldine.

It was not a surprise, thought Sorcha. Geraldine knew well that Tommy's father and uncle were active in republican circles and there was a good chance that Tommy Bell would be at this dance.

"Sorcha!" said Tommy, spotting her now. He pushed past Geraldine a little and put out his hand.

Sorcha shook it, gently, feeling shy.

"You look lovely," said Tommy.

Sorcha pushed a wisp of hair behind her ear. She had worn her hair down, plaiting only a braid as a hairband around her forehead. She had worn her best

dress and put on some of her mother's perfume. It was nice to feel spruced up, seeing as she spent most of her time in her housemaid's uniform.

As Sorcha and Tommy spoke, Sorcha could feel Geraldine glowering.

The music burst into life and a collective 'yoo!' went around the room as the crowd scrambled for a dance partner to start the set dancing. Tommy gripped Sorcha's hand and said, "Will you have a dance?"

Sorcha nodded, smiling.



Tommy swept her out onto the dance floor and Sorcha could only glance behind at Geraldine who stood, open-mouthed, gaping at her. A man with big beefy hands and red cheeks reached out to ask Geraldine to dance and reluctantly she accepted, lest she be left standing in the centre of the room, partner-less.

Tommy was a wonderful dancer. He swung Sorcha round and round till she was dizzy and when they stopped for a cup of tea, they got to talking. Words tumbled from Sorcha's mouth. She told Tommy of the castle where she worked day and night, of her dream of climbing the

ranks to be ladies' maid, how the current maid, Julia Adams, was ever so mean to her most days. She spoke of her worries for Cathal at war on the continent, how Liam's detention had cast a shadow on the family, how her father had outlawed all republican activity in the household and, the worst part, driven her mother and grandmother away. She found herself welling up as she spoke of Bríd and Mamó, wondering how they were faring in Belfast and Tommy put his hand on her knee to comfort her.



He told her she'd a lot on her plate and that she was a strong young woman to be shouldering it all. In turn, he told her of the falling out with his brother John, who didn't believe in the republican cause and how this too had caused a rift within his own family. Two brothers torn apart by their beliefs, something Sorcha knew only too well.

She remembered John Bell and his cool glare as he'd stopped her and Nellie at the checkpoint on Easter Monday last year. He seemed so different to Tommy, so reserved and distrustful.

“Liam’s not allowed home,” whispered Sorcha. “And my father doesn’t know I visit him.”

Tommy squeezed her hand again.

Sorcha had wondered whether she might see Liam at the dance, though, she imagined, if he was there, he was likely to be one of the volunteers, plotting in a back room somewhere.

When the music started back up with a fast reel, Tommy swept Sorcha out onto the floor again and he did not leave her side, except to offer Geraldine a dance, who had scuttled off to the safety of the tea table looking quite stricken altogether. Tommy said he felt quite sorry for her.

Later, as the evening wound down and the dancers grew tired, Tommy told Sorcha how much he’d enjoyed her company that night. She had enjoyed his too and she felt a thrill rush through her as she felt the weight of Tommy’s palm in hers.

“Would you consider stepping out with me, Sorcha?” he asked, staring at the floor, his eyes searching the floorboards, before lifting them to Sorcha’s face, his brow furrowed. Sorcha could see that he worried as to what her answer might be.



Behind them, Geraldine stood with her arms folded and her mouth pursed. An older man with grey flecks in his hair was chattering in her ear about a septic tank he was going to install. She did not look one bit happy.

But Sorcha, after these past few hours dancing and talking with Tommy felt on top of the world. For the first time, in a long time, her sprits had completely lifted and she couldn't keep the smile from her face as butterflies danced in her tummy.



“I’d like that,” she said shyly as she squeezed his hand. “I’d like that very much Tommy Bell.”

Dundalk Democrat

Saturday 24 November 1917

Dundalk Prison on Saturday night last had but a solitary prisoner – one Frank Thornton, who had been sentenced at Belfast for drilling in Drogheda. All of the 65, who had been landed here on the previous Tuesday, had been liberated during Friday and Saturday, their adoption of the hunger-strike plan having been responsible for their release. At midnight on Friday, 30 of the prisoners got off. These left on the midday train. Half an hour later a half dozen drove from the jail and when these had left town by the afternoon train the authorities decided on releasing all that remained of the original bunch. At 7 o'clock, Austin Stack, who had acted as leader during the strike and who had formulated the demands of the imprisoned Sinn Feiners was released with six others. These left on the 8.15 Dublin train on the same night. They were escorted to the station by about 150 Volunteers, marching in fours and by members of the O'Rahilly Football Club. Outside the Imperial Hotel cheering was indulged in and then the "Soldier's Song" and "Easter Week" were rendered. At the station a similar proceeding was gone through. Stack declared that if re-arrested the prisoners would continue to strike until the demands formulated had been granted. After a fortnight's housing of Sinn Fein hunger-strikers, Dundalk Prison is now empty. Whether we are to have another supply of prisoners detained here is not yet known, but on Thursday evening a lorry-load of bedsteads and bedding was deposited with the Governor.

1918

Réabhlóid
(Noun: Revolution)



Chapter Sixteen

Chatter and laughter echoed about the cavernous Dundalk Town Hall. A queue had formed ahead of the meeting, the crowd snaking down the street. Tonight, crowds of women had come out to hear the lecture, many accompanying their beau or arriving with sisters and cousins.

Sorcha had held the crook of Tommy's arm as they made their way slowly into the hall, taking their seat

as near as they could to the tall stage. The atmosphere was electric. Tonight, Countess Constance Markievicz, the leading republican and renowned icon to women would speak!

With the hall packed to capacity, the doors were closed and a soft hum rose of anticipation. “There she is!” said Sorcha, straining her neck. The countess, tall, and willowy, her hair swept in a low pile on her head made her way up onto the stage. Cheers and roars filled the room.



Sorcha clapped manically. Markievicz had been second in command at Stephen’s Green during the Easter Rising in Dublin and the only woman to be court-martialled afterwards for the role she played in the rebellion. She narrowly escaped execution after her death sentence was commuted to life in prison and she’d spent time in Mountjoy Prison, Holloway Prison and Aylesbury Prison, before being released last year in 1917 along with other rebellion prisoners under amnesty. Bríd kept a newspaper clipping of the countess in military uniform and pointing a gun between the pages of her Bible. To Sorcha, she was a perfect Republican. And now, she was in Dundalk!

The countess put her hands up as the crowd cheered to quieten the audience. “Thank you for such a warm welcome to Dundalk,” she said. “It’s clear we have here before us many fine republicans. And,” she said, as a hush fell, “I feel a certain spirit here with us. Perhaps it is the spirit of our forefathers, those who fought and fell for the cause. I feel, perhaps, they hover here with us tonight!”

Another great cheer went about the hall. Markievicz had captured every person in front of her. They widened their eyes and opened their ears, lest they miss a syllable of what the countess had to say.

“What we want is a free and independent Republic!” the countess cried in a loud, clear voice. Her accent reminded Sorcha of Lady Bellingham. Liam told her once that the countess had grown up on the west coast of Ireland in a large sprawling house called Lissadell and that she was the daughter of a Baronet, just like Sir Henry Bellingham. Like the Bellinghams, the countess had a great affinity with the poor and sometimes used her motor car to collect turf from the Dublin mountains to distribute to the tenements in the city.

“It was Connolly who always said that political freedom was not worth having while slave classes remained! The Republic we want is the Republic in

which all would get equal chances of education, in which all classes would have a fair share of the goods of the world!”

The countess turned to the issue of conscription, which had been in force in England, Scotland and Wales since early 1916. Changes in the law would now see young men in Ireland forced to join the army for the first time. Voluntary enlistment, like Cathal’s, had long since dried up and the allied armies were stretched to their limit to withstand a massive German offensive. The British army was in dire need of reinforcement but the extension of conscription would mean certain death for thousands of Irish men.

“Today, we face the fight before us, to prevent our Irish boys being conscripted,” said the countess. A deep hush fell on the room, as the spectators leaned forward to listen. “If the Irish people fight that fight in the proper spirit and win, we will also win for Ireland her freedom, for which she has cried out for centuries! And I tell you boys ... I face the issue of this fight, with the certainty, that we are going to win it!”



Sorcha jumped up to her feet. She cupped her mouth and roared. Tommy too, stood up tall beside her, wolf whistling loudly.

“She’s some woman for one woman,” whispered Tommy.

She reminded Sorcha of Bríd.

“When I grow up,” said Sorcha to Tommy, above the cheers of the crowd, “I want to be just like her!”

“What are you talking about, Sorcha O’Neill,” said Tommy. “Sure, you are grown up!”





After the lecture, Sorcha and Tommy cycled home from Dundalk Town Hall to Castlebellingham. Tommy lived outside the village with his parents and he always made sure Sorcha got home safe. They spent all their free time together, but with Tommy's long hours in the motor garage and Sorcha's work at the castle, this consisted mainly of weekend walks and cycles together as well as the dances they could escape to at the John Boyle O'Reilly Hall.

Since Bríd and Mamó's departure, Austin had gone rather in on himself and as Sorcha still avoided most meals with him, he had come to realise what a dreadful mistake he had made. He wrote letters to his wife, asking her



to forgive him for his hotheadedness, saying things would be different if she came home, but Bríd had told SORCHA in her letters that she could not bring herself to come home to the house on Brewery Street where she could not truly be herself.

I miss you terribly, my child, she wrote. But there is no point in me coming home, if I cannot practice my beliefs or must hide my deeds from your father. I have joined the local branch of Sinn Féin here in my district and there is a lot of work to be done. Mamó has settled back in and reacquainted with some old members of the Fadgies. She chatters away to her heart's content.

SORCHA pined to see her mother. She hoped that something would change her mind and she could one day forgive her father for his actions and come home.

Austin had come to know that SORCHA was stepping out with Tommy Bell and while he would have preferred that she be chaperoned, in the circumstances this was nigh on impossible. While SORCHA and Tommy held hands in public, they never did so in the village or near the house.

As SORCHA waved goodbye to Tommy and walked with her bike up to her house on Brewery Street, she got the sense of some activity inside. Setting her bicycle by the back door, she observed silhouettes

moving in the kitchen and heard the chatter of voices. Her father had company! Who could it be?



Cautiously she opened the door into the kitchen to be greeted by the sight of her father with Doctor O'Hagan and a man in army uniform. He looked like an officer of some sort.

“Goodness!” said Sorcha alarmed. “What’s going on?!”

“Sorcha!” said her father. “It’s yourself.”

Well who else would it be, thought Sorcha. She did live here after all!

“Hello Sorcha,” said Doctor O'Hagan. The doctor had given training at the castle when the war first started and he had been called to the scene of Constable

McGee's tragic shooting during the Easter Rising. Sorcha had felt a little wary of him ever since, for fear that he might say something about her being in the village that day, or to question Liam's part in the rebellion.

"Sorcha ..." said her father, touching his head in agitation. He had something to impart, but what?

"What is it, Daddy?" she said, agitated. Had something happened to Liam? To mother? To Mamó?!

"Why don't I show you?" he said.

The doctor and army officer nodded.

Leading the way, Austin left the kitchen and walked up the stairs towards the front bedroom.

Sorcha followed her father, leaving their guests in the kitchen.

As her father pushed open the door of the front bedroom he said, "You should brace yourself Sorcha, you might get a fright."

Sorcha walked into the room to a smell of disinfectant and a nauseating stink.

It reminded her of something rotten, like bad meat.



On the bed, his entire face bandaged, with just his nostrils showing was a man with dark hair. Some of it, she saw, had been singed away.

“Hello Sorcha,” said the voice behind the bandages.

Sorcha looked down the bed and saw in horror that there was an empty space where one of the man’s legs should be.

“Hello Cathal,” she said, tears filling her eyes.

“Hello Sorcha,” he said. “I’m home. Well, most of me!”

“Yes,” said Sorcha, tearfully, laughing slightly at Cathal’s dark joke. “I’m glad you came back.”

“Me too, sister,” said Cathal, “Me too.”

Sorcha reached for her brother’s hand and felt him flinch slightly under her touch.

“I wish Mammy was here,” Sorcha whispered.

Austin cleared his throat and said he would go back downstairs. As he left the room, Sorcha noticed her brothers’ shoulders shake and realised that behind the bandages, under the mounds of wrapping, Cathal’s tears were falling, silently, sorrowfully, as freely and as inconsolably as her own.



Chapter Seventeen

It took less just twenty-four hours for Bríd to make her way back to Brewery Street from Belfast, luggage in hand and a range of potions in her bag, packed by Mamó.

Sorcha had taken a day off work, calling up to the castle to tell them of the tragic circumstances of Cathal's injuries which he'd received when a shell hit his trench in Flanders and he'd been medically evacuated following the full amputation of his right leg. He was lucky to have survived. So many men had died of blood poisoning and infection. He had burns to his face, which they suspected would leave him very scarred, but he was alive and he had made it back home.

He was fortunate, they said. Most fortunate.

Doctor O'Hagan had left medical instructions and told them he'd visit twice a day. The army officer said that Cathal would receive a pension and thanked him for his service. Mrs. Adams said it would be alright for her to take a day off under the circumstances, but it couldn't go on indefinitely.

"Mammy will have to come home," Sorcha admitted to her father when she'd come back from the castle and together, they'd composed a telegram.

Cathal home. Badly injured. Please return.

"Write that you'll let her rejoin the Gaelic league and take part in any activities she wants," said Sorcha.

"I can't put that in a telegram!" protested her father.

"Daddy!" reprimanded Sorcha. "If you want her to stay, you'll have to say something."

Austin thought for a moment before adding, *Forgive me.*

By evening, Bríd had arrived back to the doorstep, bringing an end to her long absence and a great relief to Sorcha, who held onto her mother and would not let go.

"Daughter," said Bríd, smiling. "I've missed you."

Bríd looked like a new woman to Sorcha. Her clothes were updated and modern, her hair was styled differently and she had an air of confidence about her. She had survived in Belfast City without Austin and made her own way with her extended family. She had grown into her independence.



If Bríd was startled by Cathal's injuries, she did not show it and she set about attending to him as though she'd nursed a thousand wounded war men before. He would only remove his bandages for Bríd and so, Sorcha was shielded from the worst of his injuries. She was reminded of Mamó's utterance a long time ago that nursing skills were vital to learn, for you never knew when you might need them.

Austin, despite the shock of Cathal's circumstances was overjoyed to have his wife home. He fetched her everything she needed and organised with the chemist for Cathal's medical supplies to be delivered. Sorchá knew he would not let Bríd go again, not if he could help it and she hoped they'd seen the last of his temper.

Cathal had a long road ahead of him in his recovery. It would take months for his skin to heal and for him to learn to walk again, if walking was at all possible. At night they heard him cry out in his sleep, as though he were still in the trenches and he roared and screamed for his life. It was most upsetting and Sorchá would listen as Bríd would pad quickly across the landing and gently wake and soothe her eldest son from his nightmares.

Austin, in his newfound docility, said that Liam could visit if he wanted but when they mentioned it to Cathal, Cathal said he didn't want to see him. A chasm had been created between the two brothers; Liam had everything that Cathal did not; his body intact, his mind at rest, a future ahead of him. Cathal considered his brother a coward for he had not gone to war bravely like he had.

Bríd said to give Cathal time and that when he was feeling better, he might permit Liam a visit.

“These things come to pass,” she told Sorcha brightly.

Sorcha supposed that it might. The great rift between her parents had come to pass, although not in the way any of them expected or hoped.

She felt very sorry for Cathal and she prayed for his recovery, at night, in the morning when she awoke and throughout the day as she went about her many tasks at the castle.



In the evenings, Sorcha took to reading Cathal the newspaper out loud by his bedside. As the weeks and months passed, more and more bandages were removed and his face was fully revealed now in all its red, angry glory. The burns had turned to scar tissue, which made it difficult for Cathal to smile properly, but the doctor advised that if they followed his instructions and worked to soften the skin, Cathal would heal even further and his outlook would greatly improve.



As he healed, Cathal began to take more of an interest in the world again and the news stories Sorcha

read to him. They often talked late into the night about politics and workers' strikes, about the ongoing war and even the Irish question. Whereas previously, Liam often came to loggerheads with Cathal when discussing Ireland gaining her freedom from Britain, Cathal and Sorcha had much more measured debates.

When Countess Markievicz was arrested and imprisoned in May, alongside a hundred other leading Sinn Féin members for treason in what was called the 'German plot', Cathal said if republicans had gone into cahoots with Germany against England then it was right that they be arrested. Sorcha said that there was no such plot and that the members of Sinn Féin were being held without charge. "The authorities want them out of the way," she said, calmly. "Do you think it's right that they be held without trial?"

Trial or not, the Sinn Féin prisoners remained in jail across England.

When 40,000 women marched in Dublin against conscription in June, Cathal said it was admirable the way the women had gone about their business and he respected them for that. Bríd, who had longed to attend, but would not leave Cathal, said she hoped she had raised him to respect and admire women anyway.

"Sure how could I not admire you Mammy?" said Cathal, brightly.

They were glad to see some humour creeping back into Cathal's life. He had spent most of his days in recovery feeling very down following his harrowing experience in the trenches.



By early autumn, Cathal felt strong enough to leave his bed and Austin carried him down some days to the kitchen where he sat in an armchair by the fire and even helped Bríd with her housework, peeling vegetables or writing letters. He realised that while his legs and face had been terribly maimed, he still had the use of his hands and getting out of the bedroom seemed to lift him a bit.

Bríd always encouraged him and never let the burden of care show. She and Austin had come to a truce. She now donned her Sinn Féin pins with pride, left her pamphlets and republican newspapers in full

view and began to attend her Gaelic League meetings again. Sorcha felt the stranglehold lift and felt that she too could speak openly about her beliefs. She joined Nellie Clarke once more at the Cumann na mBan meetings and told her father where she was going, knowing that he would not protest.

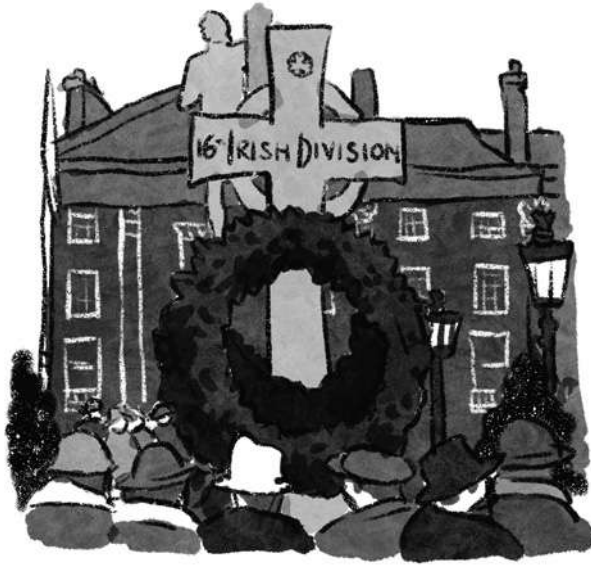
Tommy too was invited into their home and as her parents got to know him, they agreed that he was quite a fine young man for Sorcha to be stepping out with. Many times, Sorcha left Cathal and Tommy to chat and they talked about the war and republicanism, in a much more measured way than Liam and Cathal might have.

In October, Cathal took it very badly when the *MV Leinster* passenger ship was torpedoed off the coast of Dublin. Of the 813 people aboard, including women and children and many military passengers going on or returning from leave, 569 were lost.

“Are they trying to kill us all?” said Cathal, angrily. “What will it take to end this bloody war?”

The war came even closer when just two days later the *SS Dundalk*, the flagship of the Dundalk and Newry Steampacket Company was torpedoed by a German submarine as it made its way from Liverpool to Dundalk. Twenty lives were lost.

Sorcha was reminded of the Titanic in 1912, how she had once thought only tragedies like that happened in far off places like America. How things had changed and how precarious their lives had become. The war had affected so many in Louth.



When an armistice was signed at Le Francport near Compiègne in France on 11 November 1918, bringing to an end all fighting on land, air and sea, it was hard to believe that peace might hold. The Great War having lasted four years and seen the deaths of a staggering 20 million people was finally at an end. Cathal wept when Sorcha showed him the Irish Independent, which read: *End of the Great World-War, Last Shot Fired at 11 A.M (French Time)*.

For Cathal, life would never be the same again. Indeed, all of them had changed for they now knew the tragedies of war and how fragile peace could be.



As the winter winds swept into Castlebellingham and Lady Bellingham set up her elaborate Christmas trees, paper lanterns and fairy lights bought in Switzer's in Dublin, Bríd left most evenings to go out campaigning ahead of the General Election which was to take place on 14 December 1918. Sinn Féin put forward a number of candidates who were still imprisoned for the 'German plot' in England, including Countess Markievicz. J.J.O'Kelly was the Sinn Féin candidate for Louth. The party's campaign focused on the many wives and families left struggling as their spouses remained locked up in England. It struck a chord with the public and Bríd was very anxious to see what the election results would return.

The counting of the votes would take some time however and there wouldn't be a full, verified result until after Christmas.

"If we do get a lot of MPs, Mammy," asked Sorcha. "What exactly will it mean?"

“Well they won’t sit in parliament in England, that’s for sure,” said Bríd. “We would like to form our own parliament. Here in Ireland.”

Sorcha couldn’t imagine how it might work, considering many of the candidates were still in prison.

On Christmas Eve, Cathal made his way down to the kitchen table. He had managed to learn to walk using crutches that fit right under his arms and that week, he had been deemed fit enough to return to work at the brewery. Austin had secured him a job in the office where he could sit down, and already, the reports had come back that Cathal had a quick brain and was good with numbers, something which pleased both Austin and Cathal no end.

“It only took getting my leg blown off to release my inner book keeper,” he joked.

“Cathal!” admonished Bríd as her son laughed from the table.

A knock came to the back door and Bríd opened it and warmly ushered Liam into the kitchen. He carried a number of parcels and looked quite shy, crossing the threshold.

Before he started back at the brewery, Cathal had permitted his brother a visit and as they were left alone in their old bedroom together, their own armistice had been reached. Now, Liam had returned for Christmas.

“I hope they’re all my presents!” joked Sorcha.

Liam laid out the parcels on the table and nodded.

“Well, I feel I have some making up to do,” he said.

After their tea and on the countdown to midnight mass, Bríd said they could each choose a gift to open, keeping the remainder of their presents for Christmas Day.

Sorcha chose the gift that Liam had brought and as she unwrapped a beautiful leather bound notebook, Liam said, “I was thinking you might like a rouge or something like Geraldine wears but she said you’d prefer books and notebooks, that you were too bookish for make-up.”



“And why were you talking to Geraldine about what make-up I will or won’t wear?” said Sorcha, tartly. As she saw Liam’s face flush, she cried, “Oh my goodness! Are you stepping out with her?”

The whole family turned to observe Liam and his blush deepened.

“Perhaps,” he said. “She’s a nice girl!”

Sorcha didn’t know what to think. It seemed Geraldine had found a man at her Cúchulainn dance after all. How on earth had they kept that secret?

Austin rolled his eyes.

Bríd smiled and looked sadly at Cathal, no doubt wondering if he might ever get the opportunity to meet a young woman. Maimed soldiers who returned from war faced many issues outside of physical recovery.

When another knock came to the back door, Sorcha was still reeling thinking over the news about Geraldine and her brother that she did not even think who it might be.

She was taken aback to see Tommy, standing there, holding a large, heavy carpet bag.

“Are you moving in?” said Sorcha, jokingly, trying to work out what on earth Tommy was doing. Had he brought presents?

“No, but I am,” said a familiar voice in Irish and Sorcha nearly fell out of her standing when Mamó popped her head round the door.

“Nollaig shona dhuit,” she said.



Sorcha threw her arms around her grandmother and refused to let go.

“Mamó, Mamó, you’re back!”

“Be careful girsheen!” cried Mamó. “I’m an old woman! You’ll break my neck!”

As Mamó made her way into the kitchen, Bríd told Sorcha that they'd kept Mamó's Christmas visit as a surprise for her.

"Are you staying?" asked Sorcha, excitedly.

"We'll see," said Mamó, nodding at her son-in-law, as she made her way over to her favourite armchair beside the fire.

"Austin," she said.

Austin observing her warily said, "Mamó. Nice to see you back."

"Aye," said Mamó. "It is, isn't it? Now tell me, who is this handsome gentleman I found outside the house just now?"

The family all looked to Tommy, who was still standing holding Mamó's carpet bag looking mildly embarrassed.

"That's Sorcha's beau, Tommy," said Bríd. "He's a Bell, from outside the village."

"Ah, the Bells," said Mamó racking her encyclopedic brain. "Motor car people."

"That's right," said Tommy, smiling.

“Speaking of beaus,” said Cathal. “Liam has just informed us he’s doing a line with Geraldine Reilly.”

A silence fell across the kitchen, before Mamó opened her mouth and threw her head back to let out an enormous belly laugh.

“Ah, that’s a good one!” she said.

“It’s not a joke Mamó!” said Cathal.

Mamó stopped laughing.

“Isn’t it?”

At this, the rest of the family erupted into laughter.

“Oh Lord save us,” said Mamó. “Oh Jaypers, Mary and Joseph! She’s not coming for Christmas dinner, is she?!”



As Bríd served up tea and pudding, Sorcha realised they were about to have the happiest Christmas they'd had in years.

They had been through so much.

They had overcome so many challenges and now, they were altogether again, with the welcome addition of Tommy.

The year 1919 offered a fresh, new start.

The war was over.

Freedom was coming.

Surely, their future was bright?

1919

Tús

(Noun: Beginnings)

An Dáil Eireann Meets



Historic Assembly

The opening of An Dáil Eireann in the Mansion House, Dublin on Tuesday (21 January 1919) marks a new epoch in Irish History. The assembly, which was conducted with order and dignity, adopted a Declaration of Independence for Ireland as a Nation. From noon onwards crowds began to assemble in the vicinity of the Mansion House and lined up in queues down along Dawson St. and into Molesworth St. The Republican members were admitted by the front door of the Mansion House and were snapshotted as they passed by a small army of photographers. At a window overlooking the scene were the Chief Commissioner of Police and the Inspector General of the R.I.C. A large crowd remained outside during the entire sitting and cheered prominent Sinn Feiners at times. Several police in plain clothes were among the crowd.

In the Round Room

The scene inside the Round Room was a particularly animated one. The doors were opened at 3 o'clock but stewards regulated the rush and everything worked with the smoothness of a machine. Cheers again and again renewed as Count Plunkett led the way to the dais, accompanied by Cathal Brugha, Eoin MacNeill, Countess Constance Markievicz and others. Mr. Brugha took the chair as Speaker. The language used was Gaelic. The only sentence in English falling from the Chairman's lips being: "We desire there be no cheering." Speaking in Irish he said: "We have

come here today to undertake the most important task ever done in Ireland since the English entered the land and before going further we should ask help from God upon our proceedings.” The Constitution of the Dáil was read by the Chairman.

Message to the Nations

A message to the Free Nations of the World was read by Mr J J Kelly (MP for Louth): The following is a translation: The Irish nation has proclaimed its freedom and its elected members are in Council in the capital city of Ireland on the 21st January 1919. Through them, to maintain the free state of Ireland, we ask every faithful nation to acknowledge the nationality of Ireland. Ireland is reiterating to the world that she is an ancient nationality and she believes that freedom and right are the foundation and the law of nations and that it is not by force of imperial armies that the peace of Europe will be made permanent but as a result of the discipline of Governments that will be selected in every country by free will of free men.

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Donal Hall holds a PhD (2010) in history from Maynooth University. His published works include *World War 1 and nationalist politics in County Louth 1914 – 1920* (2005); *The unreturned army, County Louth dead of the Great War 1914 – 1918* (2005); *Louth - The Irish Revolution 1912 – 1923* (2019); *Ardee and the Irish Revolution 1912 – 23* (2021) and (with Dr Eoin Magennis) *Armagh - The Irish Revolution 1912 – 23* (2024).