



## Prologue

*Ireland, March 1787*

A bird was singing. Its tone rang clear and pure through the air, breaking against the stone walls of the jail. In that joyless setting the song sounded eerily out of place.

The boy blinked. Light fell through the bars, fanning out on the floor. The straw he'd slept on smelt foul. Getting up, he brushed off a few crushed stalks. Along the walls he could make out the dirty, curled-up bodies of his sleeping cellmates. The sound of tiny scurrying feet betrayed the presence of rats. The boy still hadn't got used to them, nor to the constant, gnawing hunger. The mushy pap they served twice a day could hardly be called food, but he choked it down anyway. There wasn't anything else.

The light was gorgeous. When it shone through the bars of the window like that, it was almost tangible. Bits of dust and tiny particles eddied within it, as if in a nourishing stream. The boy stepped towards the light, reaching out his arm and bathing his hand in it.

Was his father already awake? Was he seeing this light? The boy had waited a long time outside the prison, hoping they would let his father go. Until they'd grabbed him too and thrown him into this cell. He had no idea how many days ago that was. More than he had fingers, at any rate.

Would their people wait for them? Or had they already moved on, like they always did when they weren't wanted somewhere?



A loud squeak made the boy jump. The heavy door of the cell opened. Next to him a few drowsy figures sat up. A guard peered into the dim room.

‘Hey,’ he called when he saw the boy. ‘You there, young O’Sullivan! You can go.’

His prayers had been answered! The boy stepped cheerfully forward. ‘Really?’

‘That’s what I said, isn’t it?’

‘And my father?’

‘Your father?’ In the half-light he could barely see the guard, but he had the feeling the man shrugged his shoulders. ‘Nobody tell you yet? They’ve just hanged him!’

The boy stared at the man, his stomach twisting into a lump of iron. He heard the words, but something inside him refused to understand them.

‘No,’ he murmured. ‘All he did was steal a horse . . .’

‘Oh, is that all? Listen, my lad, that’s a capital offence! If it weren’t, we’d never be rid of criminal scum like you lot. Now come on then – out you trot!’

The light falling through the window now filled the whole cell, illuminating the other men. One of the prisoners whispered something, a prayer or a curse, but the boy paid no attention. He stood rooted to the spot, unable to take a step. His heart thudded loudly.

Then the world collapsed on top of him.

# Chapter One

1799

Moira jerked awake. A storm was raging outside her fourth-floor window, rattling the shutters that she hadn't closed. She felt less trapped that way. Cascades of rain whipped against the panes. But that wasn't what had woken her. Voices, steps, the hurried pitter-patter of feet running up and down the stairs in their narrow Dublin townhouse. She was wide awake now. Throwing back the coverlet, she reached for the tinderbox and lit the candle on her bedside table. Then she flung a shawl over her nightdress and hurried to the door.

No hope there. It was locked, as always over the past few weeks. She tried to peek through the keyhole but could see nothing, as the key was in the other side of the lock. Putting her ear to the door, she thought she could hear her mother giving instructions in her piercing voice, and she rattled the doorknob.

'Mother? Open the door please!'

No answer.

More steps.

Moira started knocking. 'Please, Mother, open the door! What's going on?'

Somebody turned the key and the door opened. In the corridor stood her younger sister Ivy, her blonde hair tied in a loose bun and a lantern in her hand.

'Thank God! What's going on? I've only—'

'It's Father,' Ivy interrupted fearfully. 'I think he's dying! Come on!'

Together the sisters hurried down the stairs to their parents' bedroom on the floor below. Outside the door, which was slightly ajar, they could hear a painful groaning.

Moira knocked and immediately entered the room, Ivy close behind her. Their father lay in bed, his massive body buried under blankets, his usually rosy face ashen in the flickering candlelight.

'Father! What's wrong?'

'It feels,' panted Philip Delaney, his hands clutching the bedclothes, 'as if someone's twisting a knife around in my guts.'

'What's the matter?' Moira's voice sounded shrill. 'Ivy said you were dying!'

'Nonsense!' Her mother rose from a chair beside the bed. Despite the late hour, her hair was immaculate. 'It's just a bit of stomach ache, nothing more. Probably he had too much to eat again.' Her gaze fell on Moira's loosely hanging shawl. 'No need to go running around like a street urchin. And tidy your hair!'

Distractedly, Moira obeyed, but her hair was as stubborn as she was herself. Moira's dark locks could never be forced into the kind of tiny ringlets that framed her mother's face in Grecian style.

Ivy pressed forward. 'Where's Dr Ahern?'

'Dr Ahern is staying on the continent due to pressing family commitments. I've sent the housemaid for Dr McIntyre.' Mother's voice sounded the same as ever. Chilly and composed.

'Mr Curran's acquaintance?'

Mother nodded. 'I only hope he's of some use.' She threw a glance out of the window, where the rain was still streaming



down. 'Your father has chosen the worst conceivable weather for his little indisposition. This April is making me quite ill.'

Rapid steps could be heard. Jane, the housekeeper, entered with a copper warming pan filled with glowing peat, which she had wrapped in a cloth. She was puffing; the four storeys up from the cellar – where the kitchen was – had taken their toll. Mrs Delaney took the copper bottle and tucked it next to her husband underneath the bedclothes. The heavy man groaned, his face distorted in pain.

'I hope Bridget will hurry,' murmured Jane, while Mrs Delaney smoothed the blankets over the corpulent body. Moira caught a fleeting, somehow accusatory, sidelong glance. As if it were her fault her father was ill!

'This is all your doing!' Her mother seemed to have read her mind. 'If he hadn't got so agitated, then—'

'Eleanor, please!' Philip Delaney tried to sit up in bed, but sank back with a moan.

'Oh, she knows perfectly well it is! You're going to drive your father into the grave with your . . . your escapades.' Her mother's lips were even narrower than usual, her eyes cold.

Moira opened her mouth, a sharp retort on her lips, then closed it again. There was no point arguing.

When the doorbell rang, they breathed a sigh of relief. Jane hurried downstairs. After a while Moira heard heavy steps, then Bridget, audibly out of breath, opened the bedroom door.

'Dr McIntyre!' Her mother went over to the doctor. 'What good fortune you were able to come.'

The doctor, puffing as much as the housemaid after climbing the stairs, was about her parents' age, Moira guessed. Reddish-brown sideburns gave his face a severe, pinched expression,





which was reinforced by the heavy pouches under his eyes. This was not a man who appreciated the happy side of life, she thought. Besides, he reeked of stale sweat. Although that was hardly surprising – Bridget had fetched him out of bed in the middle of the night, after all.

Dr McIntyre set his doctor's bag down on the nightstand, his shoes leaving damp impressions in the carpet. Taking out a small pair of glasses with round lenses, he placed them on his coarse-pored nose and stroked his sideburns with his thumb and forefinger.


'If I might ask the ladies to retire for a moment.' He turned to Moira's father without waiting to see if his request was obeyed.

Eleanor Delaney shooed her daughters out and closed the door from the outside. She waited until Bridget had lit the lamps in the corridor, then sent both servants back to bed. Now only the family remained awake.

Moira's gaze moved to Ivy. Her sister, the shawl around her nightdress covering her demurely, was rearranging her hair with her fingers.


Ivy was everything Eleanor Delaney believed a well-brought-up daughter should be. The stitches in her needlework were always straight, she could sing and play the piano like an angel, and she adored pretty clothes. When she made her debut in society in two years' time, Ivy wouldn't fail to draw the attention of all the men around her. Her small nose turned fractionally skywards and many women would have given a king's ransom for her fine, naturally blonde hair. Not even their mother had such bright hair, even though she treated it with lemon juice once a week.





Moira's hair, on the other hand, was as pitch black as her mare Dorchas's coat. For her debut in March, Moira had had it cut, but more than a month had passed since then and the once carefully arranged curls were turning back into a wild mane – yet another minus on the endless list of accusations she was always hearing, alongside her lack of accomplishments and her unwillingness to play the piano or embroider pillows. To say nothing of her latest, terrible faux pas.

The candlelight in the corridor threw flickering shadows onto the walls and the thick carpet. The storm had died down, but every now and again Moira could hear a few branches knocking against the windows. She would have liked to put her ear to the door of her parents' bedroom, but Mother, who had flopped onto a stool with a sigh, would never permit it. All she could do was stand there and listen to the sounds coming from the room.



Muffled voices, then a long moan. For a while silence reigned, then the noises started up again. Moira put her thumb to her mouth and bit her nail, until she was met by her mother's reproachful gaze. Guiltily she pulled her finger back.

A soft scream made the women jump, followed by a sigh. More voices – then the door was opened.

Dr McIntyre asked the women to enter. 'A bladder stone,' he said, without any preamble. 'Got stuck on the way out. I was able to push it out.'

'Dr McIntyre, you are an angel!' Even now Eleanor Delaney still managed to sound artificial.

'And a true master of your art,' added her husband. He was pale, but sitting half-upright with a happy smile on his face, wiping a few pearls of sweat from his brow with the back of

his hand. On the bedside table lay a thin tube and the smell of some medical preparation hovered in the air. 'I couldn't have borne that pain a moment longer.'

'You must drink plenty of water over the coming hours, Mr Delaney. Water, not wine! Despite trading in it.' Dr McIntyre wiped down the tube with a rag and put it back in its case, which he then tucked into his bag. 'And you must pay better attention to your diet. Not so many fatty dishes. More exercise.'

'Yes,' sighed Mr Delaney. 'Whatever you say.'

'Nevertheless, I fear this attack of colic may not be the last. I would strongly advise you to have the stone removed.'

'An operation?' Mr Delaney grew paler still.

Dr McIntyre shrugged. 'Not a pleasant prospect, I know. But the stone is not large. If you like, I could try and get rid of it naturally over the next few days.'

Philip Delaney looked as if someone had asked him to swallow a live frog. Then he nodded. 'Please do so. Anything to spare me the knife. I'd be much indebted to you.'

'Naturally?' Moira couldn't hold back her curiosity. 'What do you mean?'

From behind his glasses, Dr McIntyre blinked at her in confusion. Evidently he was not accustomed to taking such questions from young women.

'Well now,' he began awkwardly, taking off his glasses and looking uncertain. 'I don't know whether—'

'You're absolutely right, Dr McIntyre.' Mrs Delaney came to his aid. 'It really isn't a topic for young ladies.' She shot him an ingratiating smile. A little too ingratiating for Moira's liking.





‘A capable man,’ her mother said thoughtfully, after the doctor had bid them farewell and – despite his demurs – accepted a case of the best Italian red wine. ‘What a shame he’s leaving Ireland so soon.’

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‘Of all things, freedom is probably the most precious commodity.’ John Curran took another sip of tea.

Moira nodded, her mouth full of cucumber sandwich. During the time she had been confined to her room, she had felt like a prisoner herself. Apart from Bridget, who had brought her her food, and Ivy, who from time to time had illicitly slipped in and told her the latest news, she’d seen no one.

‘We’re on the verge of a new century,’ continued Curran. ‘I hope humanity has grown a little more sensible, and remembers the ideals of the French Revolution.’

‘Are you something of a Jacobite, Mr Curran?’

He smiled. ‘I wouldn’t quite call it that, Miss Moira. But when good men don’t act, evil can continue to thrive. And some of what the Jacobites represented could very well make this world a little bit better.’

‘I know so little of the world,’ said Moira. ‘Father doesn’t want us to read the newspapers. He says it’s not suitable for a woman.’

Of course, it was equally unsuitable for a young, unmarried woman to be spending time alone in a room with a man. But Miss Egglestone, who was supposed to take care of such things, was gone and only Bridget remained in the background like a biddable ghost. Moira never thought she would





miss the old-maidish governess, but although she had never much enjoyed handicrafts and music-making, her lessons had injected a little variety into the otherwise dull, never-ending passage of days.

So she was even happier to be conversing with Mr Curran. John Curran was the father of her friend Sarah, and one of the few people who hadn't distanced themselves after the scandal. Certainly, Moira had committed a terrible – in her mother's eyes, unforgivable – error, yet if she could turn back time she would do the same thing again. Even now she couldn't suppress a grin when thinking back to the evening of her debut.

For Moira, being introduced to Society had been an onerous duty, since the endless fittings in the presence of the seamstress, her governess and her mother had eaten into time she could have spent with Dorchas. The mare was pregnant for the first time. Moira was determined to be present at the birth and prayed the date wouldn't coincide with her debut. Her parents would never have allowed their daughter to miss the ball.

But that was exactly what had happened. Shortly before Moira, made up like a princess, climbed into the carriage with her parents, she had crept surreptitiously into the stable. Dorchas's udders, which had grown significantly larger over the previous weeks, glistened and resinous drops were already hanging from her teats – a sure sign that the birth was imminent. At that moment Moira's decision had been made.

She had hardly finished the first dance before she excused herself to her partner and stole away through a back door. With the pearl necklace her mother had given her, she paid





a hackney carriage to take her home, back to Dorchas. Moira had never been so happy than at the moment when the small foal's body fell out of Dorchas's womb onto the earth and she had rubbed it dry with straw.

That her parents, meanwhile, would assume their daughter had been kidnapped and call in the constabulary, Moira had not foreseen. When Philip and Eleanor Delaney finally drove home after long hours of waiting and hoping, they had found their first-born in the stable, herself and her white ball gown covered in blood, muck and hay. Moira would never forget her mother's icy gaze when she sent her daughter to her room. As if she'd murdered someone.

The scandal was perfect. Miss Egglestone had handed in her notice the next day, and most of her acquaintances had since distanced themselves. Even some of her father's customers had disappeared. John Curran was one of the few who had stood by the family.

'Sarah always asks so many questions,' he said, tearing Moira out of the past. 'Only the other day I had to explain precisely how I got my last acquittal.' He wiped his index finger on a napkin.

Moira liked the small, awkward man, who despite his unremarkable appearance was one of the most eminent lawyers in Dublin. She enjoyed listening to him, especially when he talked about his hobbyhorse, Irish liberation. Although he was a Protestant, like they all were, he was concerned with the interests of the Catholics. Since a countrywide uprising had been brutally put down last year, he had taken on the defence of several rebel leaders – and thanks to his glittering rhetorical gifts, more than one of them had been let off. Yet nothing



about his appearance indicated he might be capable of such a thing. He was fine-boned and short in stature, with a voice that sounded like it was coming from a rusty watering can.

‘I’m afraid I couldn’t help all of them. Some of these poor fellows are being transported to—’

‘Moira!’ Her mother’s voice cut through the room like a blade. Moira leapt up guiltily. ‘I’m very sorry, Mr Curran, if my daughter has been inconveniencing you. One would think she knew better.’

‘Not at all.’ Curran rose with a slight bow as Mrs Delaney, clad in rustling cream-coloured silk, came towards him. ‘We’ve been enjoying a very pleasant conversation. Your daughter is a young woman of many interests.’

Her mother laughed sourly. ‘A little more interest in other things might become her better. But do sit down, dear Mr Curran. You too, Moira.’

Moira, who had been expecting her mother to send her from the room, hesitantly took her seat again.

‘Mr Curran has defended Hamilton Rowan,’ she burst out, while Bridget passed her mother a cup of tea.

‘Indeed?’ Eleanor Delaney showed no expression, and threw a glance at the door as if she were expecting someone. She poured a little milk into her tea. ‘Do you really feel it’s advisable, Mr Curran, to waste your time on these . . . these rebels?’ She spat out the word like an unpleasant piece of meat, then raised her cup to her mouth.

Curran inclined his head. ‘My dear Mrs Delaney, with all due respect, what would you do if your rights were being continuously eroded? Don’t you think the Catholics deserve their due?’

Mrs Delaney set down her cup with perfect grace. ‘Dear Mr Curran, let’s not spoil this lovely day with such disagreeable conversation.’

Curran did as she wished, his expression impenetrable. Moira could see his right eyebrow raise.

‘I hope your husband is keeping well,’ he said at last.

Eleanor Delaney’s features rearranged themselves into a relieved smile. ‘Oh, indeed. Dr McIntyre is with him now. I have just discovered that his efforts these last few weeks have not been in vain. Another appointment won’t be necessary.’

‘I’m glad to hear it.’

‘Yes, it was a piece of good fortune, meeting Dr McIntyre. We’re extremely grateful to him.’ She glanced again at the door. ‘Truly, we are. Ireland will be losing an excellent doctor when he leaves. The good Dr McIntyre is going to try his luck in the wilderness of the new colonies . . . What a marvellous adventure.’

Moira looked up in astonishment. She would have thought Eleanor Delaney was the last person to approve of such an adventure.

‘New colonies?’ she asked. ‘Is he going to America?’

‘No, Miss Moira,’ answered Curran. ‘To New Holland, also known as *terra australis*. But it probably won’t be quite as wild as you imagine, Mrs Delaney. Sydney has existed for eleven years now, after all, and other settlements seem to be flourishing.’ He smiled. ‘Although I must admit that nothing could induce me to move there. It’s simply too far away.’

‘Well,’ replied Mrs Delaney, ‘I’m sure Dr McIntyre will quickly become a prominent man in *terra australis*. Has he announced yet when he’s leaving us?’

Curran shook his head. ‘The *Minerva* has been at anchor in Cork for weeks. Poor Alistair.’ Curran took another sip of tea. ‘He’d already given up his practice and was about to embark when they told him the journey was going to be indefinitely delayed.’

‘It’s very generous of you to let him stay with you for so long,’ Moira interjected. Ivy had told her about it.

Curran gave her a friendly grin. ‘That’s the rule among friends. I couldn’t just throw him out onto the streets – and his successor has already moved his family into the new rooms.’

‘And Dr McIntyre has no family?’

‘No. His marriage was childless, and his wife died last year.’

‘Did the rebels kill her?’ Moira asked.

For a moment Curran looked confused, and even her mother stared at her blankly.

‘No, she . . . she was ill,’ he said. Moira heard the brief hesitation in his answer.

‘And Dr McIntyre couldn’t help her?’

‘No. There are some illnesses even the best doctors cannot cure.’

Her mother started as there was a knock on the door.

‘Come in!’ she called, setting down the cup of tea a little too hastily. A brownish puddle formed on the saucer. She didn’t seem to notice.

Jane, the housekeeper, appeared. ‘Ma’am, Miss? Mr Delaney would like to speak to you.’

Moira had never seen her mother this nervous. ‘Mr Curran, would you please excuse us?’

Curran got to his feet. He gave a dignified bow and remained standing until the two women had left the room.

Mrs Delaney hurried wordlessly up the staircase in her rustling silk gown. Her silence frightened Moira more than any fresh lecture could have.

‘Wait,’ said her mother, as they arrived at the bedroom door. ‘Let me look at you.’

With two fingers she fiddled with Moira’s hair, then she took a deep breath and knocked on the door. As they entered, Dr McIntyre stood up from his chair.

‘Father! Are you well?’ Moira’s eyes flew to the bed. On her father’s round, rosy face was a blissful smile.

‘Oh yes, my darling. I’m quite remarkably well. Dr McIntyre has simply ordered a few days’ bedrest.’

Beside him, his wife gave a little cough. Philip Delaney pointed to a chair. ‘Sit down, Moira. Dr McIntyre would like to speak to you.’

Moira looked at her father in confusion. ‘But I’m not ill.’

Her mother sighed. ‘I wish to God you were. Then there might be a cure for your behaviour!’

‘Miss Moira,’ said Dr McIntyre at that moment. He stroked his sideburns. His blotchy face had taken on a reddish shade.

‘Miss Moira,’ he said again, and cleared his throat. ‘Will you do me the honour of becoming my wife?’

‘What?’ Moira’s mouth fell open in astonishment, then she began to laugh. It was simply too absurd. Did this old goat really believe he could ask for her hand?

Dr McIntyre wasn’t laughing. ‘Your father has already agreed. If you—’



'My dear, good Dr McIntyre,' interrupted her mother cheerfully. 'I . . . we . . . we'd be only too happy!'

The laugh died in Moira's throat. She stared at her mother as if she'd just sprouted a second head. She couldn't be serious! Surely she was about to wake up and realise it had all been a nightmare.

But she didn't wake up. This was reality.

She hadn't noticed that she'd got to her feet. 'No!' Her voice sounded alien. 'No, I most certainly shall not!'

'Moira! Don't listen to her, my dear sir. She doesn't mean it like that. Isn't that right, Moira?' Her mother's voice had taken on a threatening undertone.

Moira's mind raced and her heart hammered painfully. Only one way of preventing being traded to this old man like livestock came to her.

'I . . . I'm no longer untouched,' she burst out, feeling the blood rush to her face as she said so.

Philip Delaney fell back onto his pillow with a dull thud. Her mother's features slipped, revealing pure horror. For a moment Moira was even sorry for her.

'Oh, Moira, how could you?' She sank down feebly onto the bed beside her husband. 'What did I do to deserve such a punishment?'

An awkward silence reigned; only Mrs Delaney's faint sobs filled the room. Moira stood in the middle of them, her heart thudding. She didn't want to cause her parents any fresh pain, but she had to in order to protect herself.

Only Dr McIntyre seemed unimpressed, his initial uncertainty dispelled. 'Mrs Delaney, if I might make a suggestion?'

Moira's mother gave a silent wave of her hand.





‘I have certain doubts about this statement. With your permission, I’d like to check your daughter’s claim. With a medical examination.’

‘Pardon me?’ Moira thought she must have misheard.

‘I only wish to make sure you’re telling the truth.’

‘Father!’

Philip Delaney was visibly uncomfortable, avoiding her despairing gaze. ‘You must do as he says,’ he mumbled.

Moira watched, dumbstruck, as Dr McIntyre fetched his glasses from his case, put them on and opened his bulging doctor’s bag.

‘Please, Miss Moira, if you would be so good.’ He gestured towards a corner of the bedroom, where there was a screen and an armchair. ‘It won’t take long. And if you really are no longer untouched, it won’t hurt.’

The sudden silence pressed down on Moira like a nightmare, as her heart raced.

‘I wouldn’t dream of it.’ She took a step towards the door.

A moment later her mother was blocking the door. ‘You’re not leaving this room until we’ve cleared this up!’

Moira swallowed, her head completely empty. But not for anything in the world would she allow herself to be touched by those fingers!

Her defensively raised shoulders sank down. ‘That won’t be necessary,’ she whispered barely audibly, head bowed and cheeks burning. ‘I . . . I lied.’

‘What are you saying?’ asked Dr McIntyre, who had been following the brief scene with no discernable reaction. ‘I’m afraid I don’t understand.’

‘I lied!’

‘So you’re still untouched?’

Moira nodded dumbly, the blood pulsing in her ears. A double sigh of relief came from her parents.

Dr McIntyre smiled grimly. ‘In that case, Mr Delaney, my ladies, there is nothing standing in the way of an immediate marriage.’

Moira hardly saw her parents shaking hands with Dr McIntyre and wishing good fortune on their union. She only knew that she’d taken the first step towards the abyss.