

## SAOIRSE

20 JUNE, 1857  
TEXAS

First day in our new home, I helped bury my brother in that hard Texas ground, next to my uncle's fresh grave. I was twelve.

Only my cousin Jack and myself were present for the service. Sweat dripped down our backs as the sun beat down on us with a fury I had never felt in Ireland. Jack wasn't so much affected, having been born in this hell. He was tall, and strong, and already looked more like a man than a seventeen-year-old boy.

I swayed on my feet and leaned on the shovel to keep myself from swooning.

Jack grabbed my tingling arm. "Get yourself inside, Saoirse." His voice was rough, but his eyes were kind. "I'll finish here."

I stared down at the half-covered coffin, gripping the shovel tight enough to get a splinter, and shook my head. I couldn't just leave Aidan like this.

Jack held out a canteen of water. "Go on, girl. Get in the shade, at least, before you get sun-stroke."

But I wouldn't release the shovel, not 'til he sighed and wrenched it from my sweaty grasp. He pushed the canteen at my chest, and gave me a small nudge towards the trees that bordered the creek.

I stumbled away, stealing one last look behind me. Aidan's grave would soon be covered, full.

I felt naked and empty.

It wasn't any cooler in the shade, but at least the sun wouldn't be scorching my pale freckled skin. I found a great big oak and crumpled beneath it. Leaning my head back against the trunk, I did my best to fight back a sob.

Tears made Da cross, and I promised Aidan I would be good from now on. No more crying, no more fussing, no more speaking out of turn. I would do as I'm told and behave myself, and not cause them any more trouble and heartache. Then maybe, perhaps, they might forgive me. One day.

I shut my eyes and listened to the sounds that drifted with the hot breeze. The bleating of the sheep in our pasture. The Scissor-tails squeaking above me. The singing of the slaves in our neighbor's fields across the creek.

The sound of a boy weeping.

I drew my knees to my chest and buried my face in my folded arms.

Declan hadn't spoken a word since our brother was killed. To hear his anguished voice now was almost more than I could bear.

I used to hear Declan late at night, his muffled sobs echoing through the damp chill of the old house back in Galway, when he'd gotten on the wrong side of Da's foul temper. But this sound was different. I wanted to shut him out, but I'd made another promise. The most important of all, for Aidan had begged it of me with his dying breath. Take care of Declan.

From deep in the trees behind me my brother groaned. Then, to my alarm, he retched.

I pulled myself to my feet and leaned against the tree for support, listening for him again. He gasped and began to wheeze.

"Declan?" I called out in a small voice. I didn't expect an answer. I was the last person on earth he'd want to see right now. Still, I inched through the woods, calling for him again.

"Declan, are you all right?"

With each step my heart raced faster, until panic was choking my throat and I began to run, stumbling past gnarled bushes that snagged my skirts. I tripped over a root and sprawled in the dirt, skinning my arms and tearing my stockings at the knee. I wanted to lay there and cry, curl up around my broken heart and shut out this cruel nightmare. But I pushed myself

up and took such a deep breath it made my chest ache. “Declan Callahan, you answer me this instant!”

He responded with another groan, much closer than before. I clawed my way to a stand and shoved frantically through the trees until I came to a clearing, nearly tripping over my brother as he emptied the contents of his stomach onto the bank of the creek.

“Declan!” I scrambled to his side and smarted my skinned knee against an empty glass medicine bottle. I snatched it up. A heavy, cold dread slithered through me, and I dropped it at once. “Declan, what have you done?”

He only moaned. With all my might I pushed him, ‘til he was flipped on his back. I couldn’t hold back the tears this time.

It was hard enough to look at Declan before, since he shared Aidan’s face. Twins, they were. Same auburn hair, same olive eyes. But now a look of death was upon his face, with his ghastly complexion and blue-tinged lips. All I could think about was the way the light left Aidan’s eyes. I couldn’t watch Declan die, too.

“Jack!” I sobbed, gripping Declan’s hands. They were ice cold. “Jack, please, help me!”

He must have heard me shouting earlier, for he burst into the clearing before I could take another breath.

As soon as Jack met my gaze, I knew I’d lost another brother.

“What’s happened?” He pushed past me and checked Declan’s pulse.

I handed him the bottle.

Jack swore softly, studying it. “Laudanum. And the fool drank every bit.”

“Will—” I gulped. “Will he—”

Jack scooped up Declan in his arms and struggled to his feet. He didn’t even bother to reassure me. I’m not so certain he could have. He carried my brother into the house and all the way upstairs, without a word, until he lay Declan upon the bed. Even then he hardly looked at me. “Stay with him.” He swept out of the room.

I climbed up on the bed beside my brother. He was barely breathing now, his chest rising and falling so slowly. I pressed my warm palms against his clammy cheeks. His eyes stared unfocused past me as I leaned over him.

“You’re not going anywhere,” I whispered. “You hear me? I’ll not be losing both of my brothers, Declan. So you best pull yourself together now. I need you.”

He didn’t even blink.

Boots thudded in the hallway, followed by a lighter pair of steps. I looked up to see Jack striding into the room, a beautiful young Negro girl at his side.

Jack gestured toward her. “This is Abigail. She’s—” he looked at her, blushed, and ended his sentence with a cough.

“A friend,” Abigail said, offering a little smile. She came further into the room and set an empty basin on the nightstand before wrapping her arms around me in a tight hug. “We’ll keep watch over Declan while Jack fetches the doctor. All right?”

Before I could let go she nodded at Jack, and he was out of the room quick as lightning.

Abigail pushed me away gently. “Why don’t you take those pillows and put them behind Declan? We got to keep him up and awake. Get this poison out of him.”

I trembled, but I did as instructed, and we had my brother propped up against the headboard just in time for him to retch into the basin Abigail placed in his lap.

“Good,” she whispered, gripping his shoulder. “Good.”

We watched him anxiously, but he didn’t get sick again. He kept nodding off to sleep, and we kept waking him, which would have made him angry, if he weren’t so sleepy.

I paced by the door, wringing my hands.

After a while Abigail turned to me, and I could see a tinge of fear in her expression. “Maybe you should run and fetch your parents, sweetheart.”

“They—they told me not to bother them—” The door opened behind me, and I scrambled out of the way as Jack and the doctor strode inside.

The man practically shoved Abigail out of his way and dropped his bag on the bed by Declan’s legs. He reached for my brother’s face and inspected his eyes, clicking his tongue. “What is it he’s taken?”

Jack produced the empty brown bottle.

The doctor didn’t even look at it, but began rummaging through his bag. “And you said he consumed how much?”

Jack frowned at the medicine. “Can’t be sure, Doc. But it was empty when we found it. Had to have had at least six ounces left.”

The doctor stopped suddenly. “Six?”

Jack spoke in a low tone. “At least.”

The bag clicked shut. “I’m sorry,” the man said, looking anything but apologetic. He sighed heavily. “But there’s little else I can do here but pronounce the boy dead.”

“What sort of a doctor are you?” I cried, charging towards him. “You’re supposed to help him. You’re a devil!”

“Saoirse!” Jack lifted me with one strong arm wrapped ‘round my waist. “Wait outside!”

I kicked and struggled as he carried me out the room, screaming curses at that blasted physician. Jack dropped me in the hall and tried to push me aside so he could shut the door, but I clung to the doorframe.

Abigail stopped him with a hand on his arm. No words passed between them, just an entreating look from her, and he relented.

I stumbled to my knees. She helped me to my feet.

Jack marched over to that charlatan of a physician and shoved a finger at his chest. “Do your job,” he growled. “Don’t you got anything that might help him to bring up all that poison?”

The doctor rolled his eyes, but began searching through his bag again.

Abigail gently led me back into the room, and I sat on a trunk, staring daggers at that no-good fake. He gave Declan a foul-smelling concoction that made him sicker, and my brother was bent over that basin for the next hour while I cowered at the foot of the bed.

After it seemed Declan had nothing else left in him, the doctor left with a grumble about fetching the undertaker. I was too spent to shout at him again.

Abigail sat beside me, and offered a tired smile. “Don’t you fret, sweetheart. God’s watching over Declan, you can bet on it. Do you want to pray with me?”

I shook my head. I never heard much about the good Lord before, save Christmas stories about the baby Jesus. I’d never given Himself any more thought than I did to tales of Oisín and the land of Tír na nÓg, and I was sure He wouldn’t listen to me now.

He didn't last time.

Abigail's eyes were kind, but sad. "It's all right. I'll pray."

Declan fell asleep soon after. Then all we could do was wait. Jack went outside to finish laying Aidan to rest. Abigail reluctantly left me to start supper, and so I kept vigil by Declan's side, alone.

Mam never came in to see him. She was still bound up in her own grief, locked away in her room. Da came in once. He said nothing. Didn't go near the bed. Wouldn't look me in the eye. He hadn't since the day before Aidan was murdered.

A few hours later, Declan woke himself up with a fit of coughing. I gave him a sip of water, as Abigail instructed.

"What are you doing here?" he muttered, his tongue thick and his speech slurred. "Get out."

I lifted my chin. "Get up and make me."

He only glared at me and fell back asleep.

The next few days were the same. Abigail and Jack did their chores as I stayed by Declan's side, watching him sleep, giving him water and soup. And all the while the house mocked me with silence. I sat beside Declan in his sickbed, and a whimper escaped my lips. A fearful, childish whine.

Aidan's name.

If only he would reappear, come through the bedroom door and tell me that it was all a cruel joke. I'd pretend to be cross with him, of course, but 'twouldn't last long. I never could stay cross at Aidan. He would hold me, and sing to me, and tell me everything would be all right. Then he would tell me about all of the beauty and adventure we'd find in our new home. He would keep Mam from crying, and Da from drinking, and all of us from fighting. He would keep us living.

Mam once told me that Aidan's name meant little fire. And that was what he had been for me. A bright, lively wisp of a boy who made my heart glow whenever he was near. But he was dead. My fire was gone. And my heart was cold.

All I had left was Declan, and he hated me.

“You killed him, you know.” He scowled at me with red-rimmed eyes and coughed. “It’s your fault he’s dead.”

Those words, hardly more than a pitiful croak from his raw throat, made my stomach twist.

“If you hadn’t been such a selfish little brat—” He clenched the quilt in his hand as he struggled for breath. Tears streamed down his cheeks. “If you’d just stay put, he wouldn’t have followed you.”

“And where were you?”

Declan blinked at me. “What?”

“You saw me sneaking out, and you didn’t stop me.” My face burned. “Aidan was the only one to come looking for me, and you let him go out alone!”

Declan paled. “I was asleep—”

“Liar! You’re a liar and a coward. The least you could do is admit it.”

Declan turned his face away. His breathing worsened. Mam had a meaning for his name, too. It was an older name, older than the river Shannon, she declared. But as she understood it, it meant full of goodness.

She must have been mistaken. Or else missed the mark something terrible when she named him. Full of something, to be sure, but ‘twasn’t goodness.

“Why are you still here?” Declan spoke through his teeth. “Go and be useful, for a change.”

I tumbled off the bed and stared at him, clenching my fists. Wanting to stomp from the room, but determined to stay at his side. He needed me, even if he didn’t want me. Even if I didn’t want him. He was hurting. But so was I.

“Declan, I’m—”

“Out!” Declan reached out his arm and swiped at the nightstand, knocking the glass of water and my book to the floor. The effort left him wheezing.

But my pity was just as spent. “I hate you, Declan Callahan! You’re a sniveling coward. And you can be getting your own supper.”

I whirled and ran from the room before I started to cry, and stood frozen in the hall. A heavy weight pressed on me from all sides. Aidan was barely in the ground, and I was already breaking my promises.

I didn't really hate Declan, I couldn't. Because he was right. It was my fault, though not in the way he thought. I did run away that night. But I was following Aidan—not the other way 'round. He was trying to go back to Ireland, and I was too selfish to let him go. It was dark, and I got lost, and there was someone with a gun—the next thing I knew, my brother was dead. Shot through the heart, protecting me. All because I couldn't let him leave. If I told Declan the real truth, it would truly break his heart.

I know very well what my own name means. Saoirse. 'Tis the Irish word for freedom. Da always said Mam was half-mad when she named me. Most days I agreed with him, because I felt anything but free.

The sound of a hammer echoing across the yard broke into my thoughts, and I welcomed the distraction. I ran downstairs, heedless of the clamor I made, and bolted out the back door.

Jack wrestled with a fence post near the stables, trying to mend the damage from a storm last spring. The fiercest he'd seen, he told me on the way from Galveston. A twister ripped the land apart. Splintered fences, uprooted trees, and even blew a wall out of the barn before claiming the life of his da.

Uncle Colin's grave had hardly been cold before Jack made the trip to fetch us. And as I watched Jack work, I couldn't help but notice how alone he was, too. There we all were, falling to pieces, with only Jack to pick them up, and himself struggling with his own broken heart.

He sang softly as he worked, a lullaby in his mother's tongue. She was an Indian woman—Choctaw—but she passed on when he was a lad. He never talked about her much. I strained my ears to hear the pretty little song.

Jack stopped singing abruptly to curse and kick the obstinate post. He slumped on the ground beside it, taking off his hat to run his hand through his dark, raggedly shorn hair before burying his face in his hands.

I didn't have the heart to go to him with my own pain. I was about to turn away and retreat inside, when Abigail called out to him.

She emerged from the shadows of the stables to kneel next to Jack and hold out a canteen of water. "You need to take a break," she said, while Jack drank greedily.

His response was softer than I could hear.

"I don't care how much needs done." Abigail lifted her chin. "You can't do it all alone."

Jack said nothing, but his hat tipped down again and he stared at his knees. I crept forward, and crouched by the garden gate to listen as they spoke quietly. A strange sort of cricket—Jack called them cicadas—buzzed in the dead foliage beside me. The bushes rustled, but Jack and Abigail didn't notice.

She suddenly jumped back. "Jack, no! If Master Colin—"

"Don't call him that," Jack snapped. He coughed and looked away.

Abigail sighed. "If your pa had wanted me to be free, he'd have seen to it."

"He meant to! He said so. He—he..." Jack faltered. "He didn't intend on dying young, Abi."

"It's all right," she murmured. "Go on, ask your uncle. But don't hate him when he says no. You don't need all that hate."

The cicada buzzed again, but this time, the noise didn't stop. I glanced down to see a thick brown snake coiled and rattling inches from my fingers. I sprang away with a scream and tripped backwards, landing sprawled on my back with the sky straight overhead. The snake rattled louder. I kicked and scrambled away.

I got to my feet and Jack grabbed me by the collar. With one hand he threw me behind him, and with the other, fired a revolver at the serpent.

I trembled behind him with Abigail's arms wrapped tight around me.

"Rattler?" she called out.

Jack inched towards the garden and kicked at the dirt. He holstered his gun. "Dead now."

I collapsed on the ground, sobbing. Abigail was beside me in an instant, gently shushing me. Even Jack ran back to us.

He knelt in front of me and began to inspect my leg. "What's wrong? Are you bit?"

I tried to tell him no, but I couldn't form the words.

"What's the matter?" Jack's brow furrowed. "Is it Declan?"

I cried harder, and I hated myself for it.

"Want me to take you back inside, Honey?" Abigail stroked my hair.

"I don't," I managed. "I cannot bear that place any longer!"

Jack sat back on his heels and wiped his brow. "Finally got tired of that ass of a brother

mistreating you, did you?"

"Jack!" Abigail hissed.

Jack ignored her. "Don't you listen to a word Declan says." He stared at me for a long moment. "It wasn't your fault. Do you understand me? Tell me you understand, Saoirse."

"I do," I lied. 'Twould have been easier to blame the murderer, had he been caught. But I never even saw his face.

Jack passed me his canteen and made me drink. "What were you doing out here?"

I swallowed. "Looking for you."

Jack's mouth tilted in a smirk. "In the bushes?"

"I didn't hear anything!"

"Hogwash, you spying little devil!" Jack laughed. He rose and helped Abigail and me to our feet. "If you hadn't been screaming and flailing you'd have heard a little more, too."

Abigail stopped cleaning my face with her handkerchief. "Jack!"

The smile had gone from Jack's eyes, and an iron determination replaced it. Abigail shook her head once, firmly, but Jack didn't so much as blink. She sighed and dropped her chin, and he looked back down at me.

"What..." I began hesitantly, "what were you talking about?"

"Meeting," he answered simply. "And I was telling her you ought to come with us tonight."

Abigail looked up again. "Jack, please. We can't involve her in that."

"What? It's only prayer."

"It's not allowed, and you know it."

"Oh hush," Jack said. "It's church, Saoirse. But out here, see, all the men in charge aren't too keen on any of their slaves gathering together, even for prayer. So we have to do it without them knowing. You can keep it a secret, right?"

I started to nod when I thought of my promise to be good. But I could see so much of Aidan in Jack, that I couldn't help but think he would have approved.

And if I kept it a secret, well, what trouble would it really be causing? Prayer was good, wasn't it?

I allowed myself to smile. "I can, I will!"

“Even from Declan,” he said carefully.

Abigail was wringing her handkerchief now.

I rolled my eyes. “Naturally.” But then I bit my lip, eyeing the pile of timber by the stables.

“On one condition, now.”

Jack smiled. “And what's that?”

“You let me help you with the work 'round the farm. And you teach me how to shoot snakes!”

He pinched my skinny arm and laughed. “Well, I'll take what I can get. Tomorrow though. For now, you get inside and get yourself something to eat. I'll be up later to feed your ungrateful brother. Miss Abi'll take you on back to the house.”

“I ought to lock you up when we get there.” Abigail threw a sharp glare at Jack, and steered me by my shoulders towards the porch. “Keep you from getting into any of this fool trouble. Thanks to you two, my morning prayers are going to take twice as long from now on.”





THREE YEARS LATER...



## SAOIRSE

1 JULY, 1860  
TEXAS

“It's too damn hot to eat anything, you're making me ill.” Mam nearly shoved the tray right out of my own hands and began to fan herself with a limp newspaper.

I forced the sweetest smile I could muster. “Are you not just a little hungry, Mammy? You ought to try and eat a bit of breakfast.”

She was out of bed this morning, at least, but only made it as far as her armchair, still dressed in her nightgown. Her red-gold hair fell in loose waves about her thin shoulders. She looked like a porcelain doll, swallowed up by her high-back chair, as beautiful and delicate as the unfinished lace that lay in her lap. Most days were better than this one. Some were worse. But today was Aidan's birthday. Declan's, too, though it wasn't as if she remembered that.

Mam lifted her face to scowl at me. “Didn't you hear me? Get that out of my sight! Where's that Negro girl? At least she listens to me.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from snapping back. Took a deep breath, as Abi advised. Spoke slowly. “I told her to rest. It's hotter than Hades today.”

Mam dropped her hands in her lap and looked out her window with a deep sigh. She had a perfect view of our shriveled, brown garden. Dead, like everything else in Brookfield.

We hadn't had a drop of rain since April. Crops were dust. Enormous cracks were forming in the dry land, and the term blade of grass had taken on an entirely new meaning for me.

But the worst was the dreadful heat, a heavy sort that filled my lungs and robbed me of

strength. No wonder my tiny mother wilted. Every movement took tremendous effort. It made the days long and slow, and the nights often unbearable. It was enough to drive every one of us mad. But what did she really know about it? She lounged in the house day after day while Abigail worked herself to death.

“This whole rotten country is afire,” Mam mumbled. “I don't think I'll last the day.”

I parted my lips, ready to tell her that she had no right to wilt and whine and wallow in self-pity. But my mam faded away again, leaving only a shell. Some days I wondered if her spirit had simply stayed behind in Ireland, leaving this pale corpse to haunt our new home.

Instead I set the tray down on the dresser and took the tea to her, kneeling by her chair. “You certainly won't if you let yourself waste into nothing,” I said sweetly, and held out the teacup. “Please, Mam. At least drink this.”

Mercifully she took it, but continued to stare out the window.

I sat crouched in silence. I'd long since run out of ideas to get her out of the room. Even asked her to give me the piano lessons she was always threatening me with back home. Or knitting. Or embroidery. Any of the horrifically boring activities she loved so well. Most mothers would be forcing their daughters to spend the afternoon on such tedious tasks. Readyng them for marriage, or some-such nonsense.

Well, marriage was not something she likely expected for me. There were no prospects in Brookfield Texas, though I'm sure my da constantly scoured the region for a willing soul to sell me off to.

I wasn't the prettiest girl in the country, by far. Plain is the word. This used to upset me. As a young girl, I envied my mother's petite figure with her dainty curves. But no, even at fifteen I was a twig. My gowns were all ill-fitting and I had no breasts to speak of. Instead of wavy red hair, mine was straight. Ink-black. I was as pale as she, but my face was made of hard lines—a strong jaw, sharp nose, thin lips.

My eyes were the only feature I cared for. A fierce, bright, blue. But I admired them more for their appearance of intelligence, than beauty. Not a bit of me is as feminine as my mother, but I cared not a whit. Any boy my age within a hundred miles was stupider than the last.

My mother made a sort of choking sound and I braced myself for another of her episodes.

But she suppressed her sob and breathed deeply.

I reached up to tuck a loose curl behind her ear. “Mam? Would you like me to fetch a book for us to read?”

“No,” she said in her far-away voice. She pinched her eyes closed. “Leave.”

I flinched. I was used to her ignoring me, but she never sent me away. I pulled myself to a stand and hovered beside her, unsure of what to do.

A door slammed downstairs.

Mam lifted her head wearily. “Tell your father to stop making such a racket, please,” she grumbled. “It’s giving me a headache.”

“I’ll tell him,” I sighed, making my way towards the door. Of course, I really would do no such thing. I wasn’t so foolish.

“And take the food with you!”

I ignored her, and let the door close behind me. Downstairs, a muffled baritone voice boomed from behind my father’s closed study door.

Our neighbor. Nathan Reeves.

He owned the farm on the other side of the creek and claimed to be an old friend of my uncle Colin. Supposedly they fought together in some war against the Mexicans, but I didn’t put much stock in the man’s boasting. Didn’t matter what he was saying, or what his mood was, Reeves always sounded like an angry dog, barking his way about town. A bloody boorish nuisance. But to Abigail, he was the devil himself. Her former master, before my uncle bought her.

Years before we even thought of leaving Ireland, I’d heard of slavery in the Americas. I had all manner of ideas about what it looked like. Awful fantasies of chains and beatings, men and women being used like beasts of burden. But there were no chains ‘round Abigail’s ankles. There was no burden upon her back. She did not work under the lash. She seemed to have more in common with my old governess, though Jack made me swear to tell no one that Abigail knew her letters.

But every time Reeves visited our house, he looked on Abigail as if he had rights to her very soul. ‘Twas in his eyes that I first found Slavery, and upon finding it, I felt an ember of outrage

take root inside my heart.

I hurried downstairs to check on Abigail, and found her hiding in the parlor. She about leapt onto the sofa when I walked inside.

“Oh! It's you!” She pressed her hand against her chest. “I'm losing my mind.”

“You should have hidden in my room.”

“I was about to make a run for it.” Abigail dabbed her shining neck with her handkerchief. “But I figured soon as I tried to go up those stairs he'd come out of that study...”

“What's he even doing here?”

“No idea,” Abigail sighed. She nodded towards the ceiling. “How's your ma? Has she eaten?”

My face soured. “She hasn't. And don't you be trying to coax her. Sure, and she's a grown woman. She'll eat or she'll starve. Her choice.”

Abigail gave a halfhearted grunt, which was her way of giving up without agreeing. She looked too exhausted to argue. But she remained, as always, astoundingly cheerful, even with Reeves in the next room. “So what trouble are you getting into today?”

I tossed up my hands. “I've finished the only chores anyone ever lets me do. So reading, as usual! Unless you're finally ready to show me how to cook.”

“You are banned from that kitchen!” Abigail laughed, pointing a stern finger at my nose. “I don't care if I end up six feet under, I'll come back and haunt it.”

“You could teach me to do it proper, you could.” I sank onto the sofa. “You should, anyhow. Shouldn't be doing all that alone. 'Tisn't right.”

Abigail shrugged. “Not sure it'll matter if Jack isn't able to get your pa that loan. Down to half the flock already. This summer gets any worse, the earth will open up and swallow the farm whole.”

“Well, heaven forbid Da actually sells any of this gaudy furniture to keep us from starving.” I gestured in disgust at the richly decorated parlor. “Proud, stubborn fool.”

“He may be wrong, but he's still your pa.”

“But he's—”

The front door slammed again and we bolted upright. Boots stomped into the hall. I recognized the gait, and leapt to my feet just as my cousin appeared in the doorway. “Jack!”

Jack was a frightful mess, covered in the dust of the road. He still wore his hat, which he promptly removed when he saw Abigail. His long hair, grown out again after he'd finished grieving for his da, fell tangled about his shoulders.

He nodded. "Ladies."

I ran up to him and threw my arms around him, not minding the dirt or sweat. He kissed my cheek, leaving it dusty, too.

"Well?" I asked, still hanging on his neck. "How did you fare in Fort Worth, then?"

Abigail crept closer.

Jack brushed me off with a playful swat, and turned his gaze on her as he spoke. His voice was husky. "Got the loan. Uncle Brian won't like it, but it gives us time. We keep all the flock, all the land. You," he added awkwardly.

Abigail looked at her feet.

"But what won't Da like about it?"

"Well, for starters, the fact that I got it after he told me not to." Jack's frown deepened. "But we didn't have much of a choice."

"He'll understand," I said.

Jack stole another glance at Abigail, and both quickly averted their gazes.

I grabbed my cousin's shirt sleeve, pulling him close. I whispered just loud enough for Abigail to hear. "So, you'll be asking him again today, will you?"

Jack pulled back and smiled tightly. "I'll do my best."

I stood on my toes to kiss his cheek. "Ádh mór ort!"

"Ah, watch your mouth. Your pa will have your tongue if he hears you speaking Irish."

"Fine, fine. 'Good luck.'"

"That's better."

"'Tisn't, actually."

Jack waved me away. "Behave yourself. Please."

I flinched, chastising myself. Much as I hated to admit it, he was right. Still, I never was very good at behaving. "I don't know why Da's so hard about it," I grumbled. "In Ireland we couldn't speak English. Here, we can't speak Irish. He's mad, he is."

“He's your pa,” Jack and Abigail said at once.

'Twould have been amusing if they weren't always saying it.

I would never call my da a kind man, but he was usually a fair one. He did well by us, and by our tenants in Ireland. He saw us go bankrupt rather than turn any of them out on the road, when it would have been more profitable to turn their little farms into grazing land. He was proud and just—without his drink, that is. When he found the bottom of his bottle, he became sullen and cruel, and the twins had often worn the marks to prove it.

But when we came to America—when Aidan died—Da lost what was left of his soul. When he spoke, and those clumsy English words tumbled off his Irish tongue, I hardly recognized his voice. It was as if someone else entirely spoke through him. And now he threatened to switch us if he heard us speaking our mother tongue, taking a bit of our souls too.

Jack looked into the hall and sighed. “Well, better get this over with. You two stay out of trouble.”

“Jack!” I caught his arm. “Are you hunting this afternoon?”

“I am,” he drawled, “but alone. Need you to stay here and keep an eye out for Abi.”

“I'm fine, Jack,” she called from behind me.

“See? She's fine. Let me help.”

“Not discussing this, Saoirse.”

He strode down the hall, knocked on the door to my da's study, and disappeared behind it without another word.

“Grand,” I muttered to myself. “We won't discuss it, then.”

\* \* \*

Jack walked with his chin tucked and his eyes staring forward, unblinking. He squinted out past the brim of his hat, tilted low over his brow. I had to jog just to keep up with his long strides. But that was far easier since I'd changed into a pair of Aidan's old trousers I kept hidden underneath my mattress. It was the first day I felt brave enough to try them.

And I'd never felt freer in my life.

Ahead of us was the great oak tree beyond our barn, towards the edge of our property. He aimed for the fields beyond it when a barn owl called from high up in the oak, and he changed his path to go wide 'round the tree rather than pass beneath a single branch. Owls, to Jack and his mother's people, were something akin to banshees to the Irish. Heralds of death. Bad luck, in any case. A silly superstition, I thought, but it made it easier for me to catch up to him.

I finally matched Jack's stride, and scowled at his profile. "Well? Aren't you going to answer me, then?"

He muttered something I couldn't understand. I reached out and slapped him with the canteen I carried, but he took it without even a glance in my direction. When the toe of my shoe found one of the gaping cracks in the earth, he paused to catch me from falling.

I threw myself somewhat ungracefully in front of him. "Aren't you going to tell me what happened?"

"Keep your nose out of it, Saoirse," Jack mumbled, trying to push past me.

I planted my palms into his chest.

He stopped and sighed. "Look, it's just a bunch of boring business. You don't want any part of it."

"And what if I do? This is my family too. You've no right to leave me out if it."

"No one is leaving you out."

"Then let me help."

"I don't need your help."

I took a step back, nearly tripping in another crevice. He reached out to steady me, but I jerked my arm away. I didn't need his help either. Of course, my stubbornness only gave me a bruise on my tail bone as I landed hard on my backside.

Jack knelt beside me and stared straight into my eyes. I caught a glimpse of pain, but he quickly masked it with a lopsided smile. "What in the Sam Hill are you wearing?"

I blushed. "Trousers."

"Trousers," Jack echoed, and shook his head with a laugh.

I arched my brow. "Aren't you scandalized?"

"Scandalized? No. Surprised? Definitely not. Amused? Yes."

“Oh, good. All I'm here for is your amusement,” I muttered. “At least that's something.”

“Will you quit your grousing?” Jack stood and pulled me to my feet with a grunt. He put his hands on his hips and sighed. “Listen, Nathan Reeves was in your pa's study—”

“I know that—”

“—and I don't want you having any dealings with that snake. Period.”

“Why, don't you think I could handle him?”

“No, I do. That's what worries me.”

“Jack, what happened in there?”

My cousin pressed his lips together tightly, and I saw his eyes glisten. He coughed, and glanced at Abigail's cabin. “Reeves tried to take her away.”

“What the devil does he want her for?”

Jack stared back at me with a look that made my bones quake.

My mouth went dry. “But you asked Da for her freedom, right? He listened this time, didn't he?”

“You really think I had the chance to ask with Reeves in there?” He kicked at the dirt. “You think your Pa would've said yes?”

“What—what did he say to Reeves?”

“No, ' thank the Lord,” Jack whispered. “The loan saved her, Saoirse. But next time around, if this drought keeps up—”

“She'll be free by then.” I grabbed Jack's hand. “Ask him again, he's got to give in!”

Jack's cheek twitched.

I dropped his hand. “You'll ask him again, won't you?”

Jack's voice was low. “I didn't say that.”

I felt my heart split open like the earth beneath my feet. I struggled to find my words. “But she—Jack, you—I thought you loved her.”

“Where'd you get an idea like—?”

“Oh, save it. It'd be a fool who couldn't see you're both mad for each other,” I rasped. Jack passed me the canteen. I spilt half a mouthful trying to swallow with my tightened throat.

“All the same,” he said through his teeth, “keep your mouth shut.”

“So, you admit it?”

“I ain't admitting nothing!” Jack's drawl thickened. “Keep quiet, you hear?”

“Why should I, when you're keeping quiet enough for the both of us?”

Jack grabbed my hands and pulled me closer. Though his grip was firm, his words were gentle.

“Listen to what I say, carefully,” he said. “Abi's safety—the safety of this entire family—means more to me than her freedom. Do you understand me?”

I snatched my hands away. “I doubt Abigail would agree.”

“You have no idea, Saoirse. None at all.”

“You...” My anger subsided as a thought began to form. “You're talking about Reeves. What can he do to us, Jack? How is it any of his business?”

“Everything in this town is his business. You know that.”

“Three years ago you wouldn't have given a second thought to that troll.”

Jack looked at me as if I was a simpleton. “A lot's happened in three years. Or are you forgetting what happened up in Virginia last December? 'Cause Nathan Reeves sure hasn't.”

“Harper's Ferry?” I scoffed. “We're no John Browns, Jack. Nobody's starting a revolution here. It's just Abigail's freedom. One person.”

“John Brown was just one person, at first.”

I made a face. “With guns and a lot of crazy talk.”

“Not so crazy as you might think,” he muttered.

“Jack!”

“I'm just saying, this slavery business isn't going to go quietly. Might take crazy men like him to make a difference.” For a moment, his eyes darkened, but then he shook his head. “But not 'round here. Not a chance. So let's just keep our heads down and our mouths shut, got it?”

I grabbed his arm. “And just how safe do you think Abigail would be if Da sells her to him?”

Jack collected himself, and that mask of resolve fell back over his face. My shoulders drooped. Our discussion wasn't simply finished, it had never even happened.

He jerked his chin towards the house. “There's a book waiting for you. My satchel. Hope it's what you were looking for.” He tilted his head. “That is, if you still want to give Declan his

birthday present.”

“And maybe I don't,” I muttered.

Jack shrugged. “You know that boy gets on my very last nerve, too. But I still think it'd be good for the both of you. Couldn't make things any worse.”

I sighed. “Sure, and you're probably right.”

“Course I am. Get on, now. You go make sure Abi isn't working herself too hard. I don't care how much she fights you.”

I nodded. The sun was getting too high anyhow, and I felt a tingle under my skin where the sweat crawled down. I turned to trudge back to the house.

Jack tugged on my elbow. “Don't forget about Meeting tonight.”

I glanced back, and couldn't stop the grin from spreading across my face. “As if I could!”

“Well, just be sure you don't forget to put your clothes back on,” Jack snorted. “Last thing we need is to be caught at our *clan-destine* prayer meeting with a crazy, trouser-wearin' Irishwoman.”

## WESTLEIGH

JULY 1, 1860  
PENNSYLVANIA

My feet itched to dance. Steady heart-beats from the bodhrán quickened my pulse. Being a terrible dancer, however, I was content to watch the revelry from my safe spot against the wall. Stomping feet, lilting pipes, and the wild reel of a fiddle saturated the room with a chaos of sound, punctuated occasionally with shouts of enthusiasm from the dancers who packed the floor of the tavern. The sounds mixed in the thick air with the smells of cigar, sweet bread, and stout. So bombarded were my senses that a warm headache began to buzz through my skull.

There was nothing the people of Dove Hollow enjoyed more than one of David Kavanagh's birthday celebrations. The man who raised me was well-respected, beloved by all. But I'm certain the real reason everyone came out was for the food and dance. Just about the entire town—and half of western Pennsylvania it seemed—were packed elbow to elbow inside Bischoff's tavern.

George Bischoff himself was at his counter, waving his hands high above his head as he told one of his jokes. I couldn't hear the punch line, but from the burst of laughter that followed, it must have been a good one. George noticed me and called out, his voice barely rising above the din. "Westleigh! Is that pirate here yet?"

I shook my head, and turned my attention to the front door.

I promised David that I would keep watch for his old friend. Eoghan was once a shipmate from my da's past life on the sea—a giant, tattooed, weather-beaten Galway man with fading red hair and a few gold teeth. A few years back, Eoghan retired to shore life in Boston, but every July

he would come to our little western Pennsylvania valley to see David for his birthday.

I relished Eoghan's visits. He always brought some interesting trinket and wild story from his years on the sea. Last year, as a belated gift for my own fourteenth birthday, he brought me a dog from the Pyrenees mountains. Wilberforce, as I now call him, had quickly grown to a massive size. Though how the animal found his way from Europe to Boston and in the possession of an old "pirate" from Ireland, I have no idea.

"As if you could miss that man's entrance!" someone shouted near my ear. Allison Horner, our mayor's youngest son, was standing at my shoulder. "Eoghan's a beast. Go and dance, already!"

Allison was a lanky seventeen-year-old with more charm and vivacity than wit. He came from an old and prominent family, whose members are spread all over the county. He was also my closest and oldest friend, which meant that I could count on him to be at my side whenever and wherever he decided to cause trouble next. There were not many things Allison couldn't convince me to do, especially when he wore the big stupid grin he was wearing now.

"Dance, dance!" He poked me in the ribs and jerked his head towards a nearby table, where two pretty brunettes stood. "Look, the Moore sisters are here. Ellen says her sister's been waiting all afternoon to dance with you."

Allison's sweetheart, Ellen, raised a lace-gloved hand to wave at us. As I waved back, however, her younger sister turned and scowled. I dropped my hand and resumed my watch of the door.

Allison slapped me on the shoulder. "Oh, don't be such a sourpuss. Bridget was giving me that look, not you."

"What have you done now?"

Allison sighed dramatically. "I promised to find her a dance partner. Not my fault she thought it would be Jonas."

I groaned. "See? She fancies your brother, not me."

"Well, unfortunately for her, Jonas is out back 'fancying' the Verner girl."

I dared a glance back at the sisters, and caught Ellen's apologetic shrug. "I'm dreadful at dancing," I muttered.

"It's 'cause you never do." Allison slipped back through the crowd toward Ellen. He swept

her into his arms and took off for the dance floor as a new reel began.

Bridget stood on her tiptoes to scan the room for Jonas. She didn't look my way again.

A hand patted my arm. Lucy Bischoff winked at me. "They're all silly. Far too silly for an old soul like yours."

I smiled. "I would ask you to dance, but I think Da might—"

"That's sweet of you." She shook her head, flaxen curls bouncing by her ears. "But you know he won't, little one."

"He's too proud. Nobody would care about his limp."

"David Kavanagh is a good man." Lucy's eyes were soft and full of love. "Allow your papa this one vanity. Besides, you don't know I would say yes if he asked me."

I grinned at her teasing, and changed the subject. "Your brother finally let you enjoy the party?"

Lucy made a face and rubbed her hands on her apron. "Ugh! I told George that if he made me pour one more drink, he would wear it. I cannot stand the smell."

"Neither can I."

"Good boy." Lucy tousled my hair affectionately, and my heart sighed with an old ache. She was as close a mother as I would ever know, and David had been sweet on her for as long as I could remember. Yet for whatever reason, she remained Miss Bischoff, our unlikely physician, while David remained a bachelor. I knew better than to pry.

My birth parents died before they reached America's shores. My father passed not long after they left Ireland, and my mother died giving birth to me on the deck of that doomed ship. David had been traveling with them, and promised her to raise me as his own.

Of my parents David could only tell me their names—James and Maggie—and that they had come from Galway, as he had. James was a doctor, from England originally, with no family for David to write to concerning his fate. Of my mother's origins he knew even less.

The subtle sound of bells snapped my attention back to the door. I stretched myself to my fullest height, which was no real height at all, and I caught sight of Eoghan over the tops of the heads in front of me.

A path cleared between us as he bellowed out a greeting. "Westleigh! Grand to see you, boy!"

He crossed the room in three strides and threw his arms around me, lifting me from the ground in a tight embrace before dropping me again. "Would you look at you? You're growing too fast, you are. Timothy? Tim, get in here! Come meet the lad I was telling you about."

Eoghan pivoted and reached behind him, and I stared as he practically dragged a young black man with widening eyes into the room. More than a few heads turned to eye the stranger. He was the first man of color any of us had ever seen. Even I found myself gawking.

Timothy seemed young, naught but five and twenty. He wore a fine coat and spectacles, and clutched a new leather satchel to his chest as he nodded at me with a strained smile. "Good afternoon," he said.

"This is Westleigh Kavanagh." Eoghan's heavy calloused hand landed on my shoulder, and I snapped to, jutting out my hand and nearly knocking the satchel from his arms. Timothy took my hand with no small amount of surprise.

Eoghan grinned from ear to ear. "This is David's boy. Doesn't talk much, but he's a good lad, like I told you. Best there is."

Timothy nodded, pulling on his damp collar. He glanced around the room, wincing at the eyes fixed on him with far more suspicion than curiosity.

I felt a twinge of shame.

Timothy cleared his throat. "I, uh, is it possible to get something to drink?"

"Good idea! Been a long road," Eoghan laughed. "Westleigh, take care of our friend here while I find the birthday boy. Where is the old fox?"

I pointed towards the musicians. David was among them, playing his fiddle.

Eoghan hardly had to lift his chin to scan the room. "Ah, found him. Timothy, I'll let you get acquainted with young Mr. Kavanagh, here. Back in a minute, boys."

Timothy looked miserable. I touched his arm and pointed towards the bar. He stepped on my heels twice as he followed me through the dense crowd. I asked for two cups of tea from George as Timothy fidgeted beside me, still gripping the satchel.

The music stopped suddenly, and we turned with the rest of the room to see Eoghan standing on a chair in preparation for a toast.

Timothy shook his head. "Eoghan doesn't do anything halfway, does he?"

Beside Eoghan, David leaned slightly on his shillelagh club, laughing. Despite the cane, he looked younger than his thirty-six years. His face was youthful and bare, his smile pleasant. He was tall, like Eoghan, but slender. Strong, but not rough. His hair was dark, black as pitch, with not one strand of grey to be found. The only sign of age was in his stormy blue eyes, which looked at times as though they held ancient secrets. Yet there was a spark of boyish mischief in them, too, that often reminded me of Allison. My chest swelled with pride as I watched him.

Eoghan had finished his speech. A new fiddler took up his instrument, and the dancing resumed, but not before Eoghan and David made their way back towards us. My da leaned heavy on his blackthorn walking stick, but even still, he fought to mask his limp.

“Here he is,” Eoghan announced, holding his arm out towards Timothy. “David, this is my good friend, Mr. Timothy Lewis. Tim, this is David Kavanagh, the finest gentleman I’ve ever had the privilege to know.”

“Ah, save your blarney,” David teased his friend. He shook Timothy’s hand. “So, you hail from Boston as well, do you?”

“Uh, yes, I do,” Timothy stammered. “Born and raised—”

Eoghan cleared his throat. “It’s right stuffy in here, Davy Boy. And I can’t hear a blasted thing over that banshee that calls himself a piper. Say, you have any of that special whiskey back at your place?”

“Stocked and ready for you,” David chuckled. He stretched with a sigh. “I’ve had my fill of revelry for the day, anyhow.”

David threw his arm around my shoulder and smiled at me. “Why don’t you escort Eoghan and Mr. Lewis back on to the house, and I’ll be right behind you. Have you seen Lucy?”

“She’s probably dancing with another fella.”

David flicked me in the ear and gave me a playful shove. “Ah, get on with you. I’ll be right along.”

We pushed through the crowd, and Allison called out from the dance floor.

“Wait!” He dragged poor Ellen along behind him as he ran over to the door. “Where you off to so soon?”

“Home,” I replied, indicating our visitors.

Allison grinned and stuck out his hand to Timothy. “Allison Horner. And yes, everything you'll hear about me is true.” He winked, and gave me a light punch in the shoulder. “I'll invite myself in later.”

I nodded. It wasn't as if I could tell him no.

Allison waved at us, and swept Ellen back out on to the dance floor.

I was about to apologize to Timothy for my eccentric friend when I felt a pair of eyes on me. I glanced up to see Allison's father staring in our direction. He rarely smiled, but the way he looked at us now made the hairs on my arms stand on end. I reached for the door.

I could still feel the mayor's scowl on my back as we left the tavern.

\* \* \*

Timothy was not fond of dogs, which was a shame, because Wilberforce thought the world of him. Then again, Wil adored just about everyone he met, no matter how much—or how little—they cared for his particularly obtrusive form of adoration. And I don't think the poor beast had the slightest notion of just how big he was.

No sooner had Timothy and I seated ourselves on the parlor sofa did Wilberforce leap upon our laps. He shoved his wet nose in Timothy's face, sat on my knees, and planted his paws on Timothy's chest. His fluffy white tail nearly knocked the spectacles off my face as I tried to call him off.

The front door slammed.

“Wil!” David said sharply from the foyer. Wilberforce was across the room in a second. He perched himself on David's armchair and turned his head lazily towards his master as my daughter entered the parlor. David chuckled and rubbed the dog's ears as I handed Timothy my handkerchief.

“Davy, where've you hidden it?” Eoghan called out from behind the cabinet door.

“Quit your snooping, you'll break something.” David limped over to help Eoghan fish out a glass and pour the drink. He took none himself, as usual.

Timothy leaned over to me as the older men spoke. “What's the matter with his foot?”

“Injured it long ago,” David answered him. “It’s not always so bad, but I’ve been up and about a lot today.”

“You broke it more than once,” Eoghan corrected.

David sat on the arm of his chair. “What can I say? I’m a clumsy sort.”

“And stubborn,” Eoghan pointed at him. “But I still can’t believe they made you sheriff, of all things. The Hobbling Lawman.”

David grinned. “No one else would take the job.”

Timothy shot a nervous look at Eoghan, but my uncle had turned away.

David, however, caught the glance. He studied both of his guests, and drew in a long breath after a moment of awkward silence. “Well, now,” he said softly. “I wager it’s time for a bit of storytelling, Eoghan.”

Eoghan grunted and threw back the last swallow of his drink. He cleared his throat as he began to pour another.

“Nothing much to tell you, Davy. Timothy came with me from Boston, as I said. He’s looking for work. You’re about to lose your worker to the world of higher education, and will be needing a new one. Simple as that.”

David’s brow knotted. “You and I know it’s not so simple, Eoghan, and I think Mr. Lewis would agree.”

Timothy swallowed. “I don’t want to cause any trouble in your town, Mr.—”

“David,” my da corrected. “Just David. And if there’s any trouble to be had, Tim, I can promise you won’t be the cause of it.” He leaned back and folded his arms. “I’ll put you up, of course. We’ve plenty of space, it’s just me and my boy here. But for working, I can’t afford to pay you. Westleigh’s leaving, this is true, but there’s tuition to be paid.”

I squirmed. College. I both desired and feared it more than anything. The wide world was tugging at my heart. At first I believed I was meant to be a missionary, but I wasn’t sure now. I was supposed to leave in just a few weeks for Pittsburgh, but I wasn’t ready. I couldn’t bring myself to tell him. Not after all he’d done to make it possible for me to go.

“Well, I figure you’ll be able to help Tim find something,” Eoghan said.

“There’s something you aren’t telling me.” David looked straight at Timothy with his piercing

eyes. "What's got you so nervous, son?"

Timothy opened and closed his mouth a few times before answering David in a cracking voice. "Well, wouldn't you be?"

Eoghan approached David's chair. "Our trip from Boston wasn't as uneventful as we'd have hoped." He whispered. "We ran into a couple of bounty hunters, Davy. Got harassed a bit. Timothy has his papers, but you know that doesn't mean anything to those jackals."

Timothy held up his satchel, and my heart wrenched, as I'm sure David's did. All this time, Timothy had been clutching freedom to his chest.

David's face fell. "It's getting more and more dangerous for freedmen," he murmured. He stood and walked over to Timothy to shake his hand, and held it for a moment this time. "You are welcome in my home for as long as you please. I can take you back to George tomorrow, see if he's got any work for you. Or any of the farmers outside of town. There's a few good fellows here might have something."

"I'll take anything, sir."

David returned to his seat. "And I won't tolerate any slave catchers, marshals or otherwise, coming 'round to bully anyone in my town. I don't care what they say. So you stop worrying, now."

Timothy seemed to take his first breath since arriving in town. "Thank you, Mr. Kavanagh."

"David, please."

"Grand!" Eoghan slapped Timothy on the back, nearly sending him to the floor. He poured himself another drink, swaying as he did. "Glad that's settled. Davy, you sure you don't want any of this?"

"How much have you had?" David hobbled over to the cabinet. "And you know I don't touch the stuff."

"Not since that one night we were docked in Liverpool, eh?"

David shot Eoghan a look, and my uncle immediately clamped his lips together.

The front door opened and closed, and I heard Allison call out from the foyer. "I'll take a glass!"

Eoghan was holding one out by the time Allison bounded into the parlor, but David slapped

Allison's outstretched hand away. Eoghan shrugged, and downed it instead.

Allison grinned. "It was worth a try." He shooed Wilberforce and plopped into the armchair. My dog could hardly sit still at Allison's feet, pawing at him for attention. Allison scratched behind Wil's ears as he spoke to Timothy, regaling him with stories of he and his brother's antics while I turned my attention to my da and Eoghan, hoping to catch part of a tale I had not yet heard.

Eoghan's head bobbed up and down, and his gestures grew wilder as the evening wore on. "I did, I did. Saw ol' Rory up in Boston, of all places. Jus' last month." Eoghan's words were starting to run together. He burst into a random fit of laughter. "Ye remember that old goat?"

David raised his eyebrow as he watched Eoghan refill his glass. "He's still alive?"

"Sure, an'that man is too mean for Heaven and too good-hearted for Hades. But hear, now!" Eoghan's drink sloshed on the carpet. "You'll never guess what he told me. He started t' go on and on about news back home, and guess what he says? Says Brian Callahan left Galway for Texas. What d'ye think of that, now?"

David's expression changed so quickly that I nearly leapt to my feet. By the time Eoghan noticed, the room had gone silent. Eoghan turned away from all of us, suddenly very interested in the wildflowers on the fireplace mantle.

"Da?" I struggled to sound casual. "Da, who is Brian Calla—?"

"Westleigh, you and Allison get Mr. Lewis set up in the guest room, please," David said roughly. He tried to smile. "It's getting late."

Before I could protest, he reached over and smacked Eoghan in the arm, and jerked his thumb towards the hall. Eoghan turned obediently and lumbered out of the parlor, my da on his heels. They crossed the foyer, and the library door slammed behind them.

My stomach hurt. Even Wilberforce whined at my feet.

Allison was already creeping towards the foyer. "Want me to snoop?"

"No!"

"Who do you suppose—?"

"I don't know," I said, rubbing my temples. My headache was twice as strong, now.

"Did you see how furious he looked?"

I stared at the closed door. “He looked wounded.”

“And furious.”

David didn't like talking about his past. Even Allison knew that. And he certainly didn't like his instructions ignored, either. I cleared my throat. “Let's do as he asked.”

“I could just listen as we walk by, really slowly—”

“Allison!”

“Fine, fine! But don't you want to know who the Callahans are?”

I was shaking my head before I realized I was lying.

As we passed by the library on our way to the stairs, I shoved Allison ahead, but found myself slowing ever so slightly to listen. All I could hear was the rumbling bass tones of their voices, wordless and grave.

After we got Timothy settled in, and I managed to chase Allison away for the evening, I paused by the library once more. Lamplight flickered and danced underneath the door. I could hardly hear them at all.

Heart in my throat, I crept closer and pressed my ear against the wood. Only Eoghan spoke now. By the cadence of his words, though still indefinable, I thought he might have been praying. In all of our years acquainted I never thought of Eoghan as a pious man. Especially since he was usually intoxicated.

But stranger still was the soft sound beneath his prayer.

It was the sound of my da, weeping.