

Maren had not been able to keep track of what ground they had covered on the long journey. Father Seanán had often turned around from his place behind the steering wheel to make sure that she was doing all right, but the thin nun with the pinched face who sat stiffly in the passenger seat did not glance in her direction even once. Maren wished she had been able to ask more questions, but any time she ventured to speak, she was met with only silence or a terse, "Questions will be answered later."

She leaned back against the hard leather seat of the ancient vehicle and tried to keep her fear from rising to overcome her. *Questions will be answered later!* she thought in disbelief. *These people come and take me from my school, telling me there is some urgent matter I must attend to, and then stuff me in a car and drive for hours to who-knows-where, and they refuse to answer my questions?*

She shook her head, refusing to permit herself to become frightened. There would be a simple answer, she was sure of it, and if she allowed herself to give in to worry, she would put herself in a panic for nothing. The fact that her father and mother were not with the priest and the nun worried her most of all; what if they had been injured, or killed? What if the only reason her questions were not being responded to was because the answers were too horrible to bear? Or Faolán; Father Seanán knew of her feelings for him. What if something had happened to him, and Father had taken her away from the school so that she would not break down crying in front of her classmates when she heard the news?

The thoughts whirled through her head, but stubbornly she shook herself and looked out the window. The dark paper that had been taped over the glass gave her no view at all for the first part of the journey, but after a while she had picked at the lower edge enough to make a small hole she could look through. There had been nothing spectacular or even interesting in the view; Maren could have been looking at any part of Ireland that was not in the middle of a city. Several times they had passed through parts of towns, but none that she recognized.

The long-faced nun glanced at her and suddenly snapped, "Keep away from the window!"

Maren jerked upright and hastily put her finger over the hole she had made. "I'm sorry...I was just trying to see where we were."

"Sister Líadan has told you already, Maren," Father Seanán said patiently. "We will answer all your questions later. Please, just do as you are told." The nun resumed her position of staring stiffly forward, and Father Seanán tossed Maren a warning look that said no more would be tolerated.

She closed her eyes. *Oh, what am I doing here?* she wondered sadly.

After another hour, the car came to an abrupt stop, and Maren's eyes popped open. She rubbed at her face, surprised that she had been able to fall asleep. Father Seanán had gotten out of the car and gone around to open the woman's door for her, but the nun pushed the handle before he could reach it and stepped out, her long legs hidden beneath her voluminous black skirts. Father Seanán's matching black cast an ominous air about the pair.

“Okay, little lady. Up and out.” Seanán opened the back door for her and reached in a hand to help her step forth from the car. The nun watched sullenly, her air of impatience signaling that she believed Maren needed no help.

The instant her feet touched the ground, she swayed and nearly lost her balance. Rubbing her eyes again, she looked up at Father Seanán with a wry grin. “My legs have fallen asleep, Father,” she said with an embarrassed laugh. “I’ll be all right in just a minute.” She started to stamp her feet on the ground, feeling the tingles in her legs and feet as the blood rushed back to her extremities. The nun gave her a disgruntled look and began stalking away down a long stone path.

Maren’s eyes followed her. They had parked beside a large stone building, and the iron gates above the entrance proclaimed it “High Park Convent”. Maren looked at the large statue of the Virgin Mary and crossed herself automatically, though she had to lean on the car to keep her balance. Father Seanán looked thoughtful, and then took her hand. “Come, Maren. We need to show you to your room.”

She looked at him in shock. “My room?” He strode ahead, obviously expecting her to follow, and she did, loping along beside him as her eyes searched his face for answers. “What do you mean, Father? What room? Why are we here?” He did not reply, and frantically Maren gazed around, looking from the neat sections of packed dirt that would be obviously be filled with glorious blossoms in the springtime to the long cobblestone walks. A slight movement caught her eye and she glanced upward, to see the small, pale face of a young girl watching her from one of the many windows lining the walls. As Maren’s gaze fell on her, the girl jerked her head away from the opening and disappeared, her wrinkled, blanched hand pressing against the rippled glass for a fraction of a second.

*Her hand...* With a start, Maren realized she must be at one of the Laundries. “Why have you brought me here, Father?” she cried, panic filling her voice. “What am I doing here?” When he didn’t respond, she planted her feet squarely on the stone and called to him. “I will not move another step until you tell me why you have brought me here!” she called in what she hoped desperately was a commanding tone.

Inside, she felt anything but commanding. Her heart raced frantically as she realized the implications of her presence here. They were going to force her into washing other people’s laundry, like old Mr. Bannon’s bloody aprons! “No! I won’t stay here! I won’t!” She turned and began to run back to the car, urgency pushing her to get away, to anywhere she possibly could. Before she had taken two steps, however, Father Seanán had grabbed her around the waist, pinning her arms to her sides and yanking her back down the long path with him. The nun, who was waiting at the large wooden doors, stood with her arms crossed and a look of annoyance on her face.

Maren kicked and screamed, her long blond curls flying and her skirt swinging around her flailing legs as she tried in vain to make the priest let go of her. His face was a study in concentration, but she could see the hurting in his eyes. “Father, please! Let me go!” she begged, trying to pull her wrists out from under his strong arms. “How can you do this?” Tears began to

fall from her eyes, and she tried to make him look directly at her. “Father...please...” Maren began to sob, no longer worrying about how it would look for her to be afraid.

There was no accident, nothing “requiring her attention”. Her parents were fine, at home, waiting for her to return from school, and most likely worrying that she had been gone for so long. The thought of her mother’s anxiety filled her with anger. “You can’t do this! Leave me be! I need to go home to my mother!” She kicked at Seanán again and again, not bothering to try to control her tears as he forced her through the doors where the nun had been waiting.

By the time they had walked through the foyer and down a long hallway, Maren’s cries had diminished to an occasional whimper. It was useless to try to resist Father Seanán’s strong arms around her; he would have her where he wanted even if she had continued to protest. The nun had been joined by another one, with a figure much rounder and a face much gentler than the first one’s. She laid a hand on Maren’s arm and lifted her chin to look into her downcast face. “Let us help ye, little one,” she whispered. “I am Sister Grania, and this is Sister Líadan.” The dour-faced woman gave a short nod and kept walking, until they reached a large door that led into some type of office. The room was sparsely furnished, with a large desk sitting in front of a worn leather chair. Two other chairs, ladder-backed and looking extremely uncomfortable, sat placed in front of the desk. Líadan walked in and held the door for the other three. Maren sniffled and furtively glanced around, reminded of a principal’s office.

Sister Grania helped Maren out of Father Seanán’s strong embrace and led her to one of the stiff-backed chairs. “Here, now: you sit down and relax for a moment. We’ve just got a few things to say, and I suppose you’ve got a few questions yourself you’ll be wanting answers to. Well, now’s the time.” She settled her motherly figure into the other chair, while Líadan crossed behind a desk to sit in the large leather chair. Father Seanán closed the door behind them and stood with his back to it.

Líadan was the first to speak. “Do you know why you are here, Miss Bradigan?” she asked coldly. Maren shook her head. “Answer: ‘No, Sister,’” the nun snapped.

“No, Sister,” Maren mumbled into her lap. Líadan scowled but chose to ignore the annoyance.

“Then perhaps Father Seanán would be kind enough to explain to you.” She gave Seanán a nod, and he took a step forward, discomfort written all over his features. Wringing his hands in front of him, he smiled awkwardly down at Maren. She stared up at him with tears running down her cheeks.

“Maren, it has come to our attention that you were perhaps getting a little too – friendly – with a certain young man your father has working on his farm.” He looked into Maren’s eyes, which widened in alarm.

“Do you mean Faolán? We haven’t—“ Líadan cut her off.

“I suggest that you do not complicate matters by speaking,” she stressed in chilly tones. Maren hung her head again and waited for Father Seanán to continue, her mind racing and her pulse quickening at the thought of Faolán. What could he have to do with this?

Seanán cleared his throat. “No one is saying that you’ve done anything, Maren. But at your age, we must be careful not to allow our young girls to get themselves into situations where they might – well, situations that might be dangerous to them. It has been noticed by others in the community, and your mother herself, as you have told me.” Maren shook her head numbly, knowing that nothing she could say would change things. “In these situations we have often found it necessary to remove the girls from the sources of temptation, so that they do not end up as many of the other girls who reside here.” She looked back up at him, and he nodded. “Many of the young women you will live with here in High Park have conceived babies out of wedlock, some having given birth, others in early or late stages of pregnancy. It was my decision”—he cleared his throat again—“to remove you from the enticement of Faolán Ó Ciarmhaic, in order to spare you the difficulties that many of these girls are now going through.”

Maren jumped out of the chair. “But I haven’t done anything! I never even told him—“ Another look from Sister Líadan silenced her, and she sat back down. Her mind was confused with all the thoughts raging within. Father Seanán had *decided* to bring her here, to escape the fate of pregnancy out of wedlock? But she had never even *thought* of such a thing with Faolán. She had dreamed of marriage, of someday having his babies, of loving him and being loved...

Her mother’s voice drifted back to her: “*Sins of the heart are as bad as sins of the flesh...what it can lead to will condemn you...The Lord is disappointed in you.*” For a moment her heart sank. Was she really as guilty as Sister Líadan’s glare seemed to assert that she was? She shook her head in frustration. No, it wasn’t the same thing! She didn’t believe that looking at Faolán the way she had was a sin. How could Father Seanán even think that she could end up in that situation?

Here she was, though, in a strange place where she would be treated as though she was a sinner, as though she had committed indiscretions she couldn’t even have dreamed of. Well, she would have to show them that they were wrong. Maren lifted her chin stubbornly. “What will I be doing while I’m here?” she demanded.

The two Sisters exchanged glances. “You will earn your keep,” Sister Grania said slowly. “We have rules here, which we expect will not be disobeyed. You will wake at five, attend Mass, and then come to breakfast. After breakfast you start work in the Laundry.” Maren shuddered, but listened as Grania continued. “After work you will attend supper in the dining hall, and then retire to your room for the night. Lights out is at nine o’clock.”

Maren thought about her options, and decided that fighting would only worsen her predicament. Deciding that what Grania was saying sounded none too difficult, she looked up defiantly and tried to smile. “I think I can manage it,” she whispered, her voice trembling despite her resolve.

Father Seanán looked down at her with a semblance of pride, and then put a strong, wrinkled hand on her shoulder. “It won’t be too bad, Maren,” he soothed. She looked up at him, and his eyes were kind.

“When—when will you be back to take me home?” she managed.

Glancing away for a moment, he looked back into her eyes with a weak grin. “When it is time,” he said consolingly. “Maren, we all must do penance for the wrongs we have committed.

Here you will learn how to guard your heart against the evil that all men possess. You will learn the sanctity of your body and your womanhood. When you have learned the right way to go about your relationships, you will go home.”

It was a small comfort, but Maren thought that it wouldn't be too difficult to convince the nuns that she had learned her lesson and would no longer look at Faolán Ó Ciarmhaic like a hungry dog looks at a bone. She squeezed the priest's hand as she asked in a trembling voice, “And...do my parents know where I am?”

He stood up and came to her side, kneeling before her. “Don't worry about anything any more, Maren,” the old priest comforted her. “I will take care of everything.” Smiling at her for a long moment, he said, “It is time for your confession, Maren. We are ready to hear of your need for forgiveness, and then you may receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation.”

Maren fought the rage and panic that welled up inside her at the priest's words. She had to remind herself forcefully that she had decided to cooperate with Father Seanán and the nuns, and that objecting to her first confession inside the convent walls would definitely not be a good start. She heaved a deep breath and nodded.

Seanán stood and walked back to the chair he had left, sitting down and facing at a slight angle from Maren. “You may take your time for Examination of Conscience and Silent Reflection, and let us know when you are ready.” The nuns stepped back a respectful distance, but missed nothing as their eyes darted from one to the other of them. Maren steadied herself, squeezing her eyes shut. She was quiet for a few minutes, knowing that she was expected to mentally go over all her sins since her last confession and pray heartily before confessing. The nuns watched closely. After a moment of wondering what in the world she should be reflecting on, she opened her eyes and nodded, signaling that she had examined her conscience and was ready for confession.

Father Seanán came to her side and put his arm around her, helping her to her feet and moving her across the room to where a bright red curtain hung on a wall. She allowed him to lead her as he lifted the curtain to reveal a small antechamber, where candles burned dimly and a large wooden crucifix stood prominently displayed. Maren recognized that this room was one specially set aside for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and she must be respectful.

She made the sign of the cross over her chest and said automatically, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.” When Father Seanán nodded, she began the familiar routine of ritual confession that she had done many times before in her young life.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been...” For a moment she paused, wondering what time it was and unsure of how long they had actually been traveling in the car. Deciding that they couldn't possibly have been gone long enough for it to be Thursday already, Maren continued: “...three days since my last confession.”

“How have you sinned, my child?” Father Seanán asked softly, his fingers moving to his cheek.

She hesitated, working to concoct the best confession she could in order to appease the three who listened so intently. “I have sinned with my heart and with my mind, Father. I have

looked at a young man with lust in my eyes and delighted in the feelings I was having. I have desired him to hold me and...touch me.” One of the nuns gave a derisive snort of disgust, and Maren winced. She hated the pictures her confession put into her mind. It made the feelings she had for Faolán seem so dirty and sensual, instead of what they were: pure and loving. Tears filled her eyes. She had wanted his love, not his lust, and she knew that he felt the same. It was these three who were making it a crime to feel fondness toward someone of the opposite sex.

She began to cry, and the two nuns looked at each other with satisfied faces, believing, she supposed, that she was so overcome by the severity of her sins that she could stand it no longer. Knowing that her tears were helping her with her confession, Maren didn't try to keep back the sobs as she continued. “I have done wrong, Father! I know I have. I desire to rid myself of the filth inside me.” She cried harder, despising her words and feeling as though she was betraying Faolán. Putting her face in her hands, she rocked back and forth on the chair, crying uncontrollably.

She was vaguely aware of Father Seanán reading a passage from the Bible, but did not try to listen to what he was saying. He waited until she was finished crying, and when she looked timidly up at him, smiled. “You have done well, Maren. Your penance is to work here, at the convent laundry, until such time as it is determined that you are ready to go home.”

Maren nodded, knowing she was to accept the penance and thank him, but she couldn't bring herself to speak. Father Seanán seemed to understand, for he stood up and gave her absolution, saying, “God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son, has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” He genuflected as well, and Maren's right arm automatically made the motion.

Maren sniffled back, “Amen.”

“Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good,” Seanán intoned.

“His mercy endures forever,” Maren mumbled in reply.

“You are dismissed in the peace of Christ.” Seanán placed a hand on her forehead, and then stood back as the nuns appeared on either side of Maren to escort her from the room. They each took a candle from the desk and walked out. As they led her down the long hallway, Maren's thoughts were jumbled, but she did manage to form one clear thought:

*“If I have been 'absolved from my sins' like he said, then why am I still here?”*