

## Chapter 5

Seamus's farm lay in a tiny hamlet two miles west of Ballyconstór. The walk through the spring fields filled with bright yellow buttercups would have been pleasant if disturbing thoughts had not filled Brigid's mind. The nostril-attacking odour of pig manure hit her before she saw the farmyard.

Nobody had cleaned up the farm animal ordure, which lay in clumps. Brigid heard chickens clucking somewhere nearby and a cow lowing, both sounds that cheered her. At the farmhouse door, Brigid shuddered. The step needs a vigorous scrub, and I bet that dog's head brass knocker has not seen polish for years. Da lifted the knocker from the cracked, chestnut-coloured paint and rapped three times.

The door opened, revealing an unshaven, rotund, balding man who wore a stained shirt and breeches. Brigid wrinkled her nose as the man led them into his parlour and examined it with a critical eye. Dust lay inches thick on every surface, with papers strewn everywhere. Brigid's senses became engulfed by grime and disorder.

'Yon colleen is bonny and has the hips for childbearing,' said Seamus. 'Sit, girl, and look at me.' The farmer leered at Brigid, his pockmarked face glittering with

beads of sweat, and Brigid's stomach lurched. She held her tongue as he cast his piggy eyes upon her and said, 'I want a pure bride who cooks and cleans, so I do,' his sneering tone mocking her.

Da nodded his agreement to the deal, and anguished, Brigid's fingernails dug into her palms. Seamus gave Da the money to finance the wedding, and Brigid wanted to say, don't take it because I'll not wed him. Lying in a bog is preferable to sleeping with this ugly specimen of humanity. To her horror, Seamus demanded she work for him unpaid for two months before calling the marriage banns, starting the following Monday. Da agreed, and a grin split across his face as they walked out of the farmyard.

Brigid wanted to put the eejit to shame for his duplicity. 'Da, I loathe him. Anyway, I have lost my faith.' 'Find your faith then and do as Seamus asks.' Brigid stilled her tongue until they reached the cottage. On arrival, she said, 'You live in sin with that woman, Maura, whom I know has a husband. I'm over twenty-one, so what right have you to sell me into marriage with a beast?' Brigid's shouts of anger hit the rafters.

Da pulled a bottle of whisky from his pocket and took a swig, taunting her with an evil gleam in his eyes. 'You fecking beast. By your behaviour with that hussy, you have tarnished

the reputation of our whole family, including Ma. I bet you want to move Maura into the cottage after you get rid of me. That's the truth.' Brigid's body bristled with rage.

Da glared at her, his face grim. 'You'll pay for your slurs on my woman friend, you insolent girl.' He undid his belt and ran Brigid for the door, but she hurriedly fumbled with the catch. Da caught her wrist, twisting an arm behind her back. He threw her over a chair and gave her three thwacks, the most she had ever had. Afterwards, Da opened his press, removed his old drink jar, and put Seamus's money in it, tightening the lid. 'You better work hard, my girl, because this cash will pay for your wedding.' Da stuffed the jar in his frayed jacket pocket.

He left the cottage, glaring at Brigid, his eyes gleaming with malice. 'You'll drink that money before the wedding, so you will,' Brigid said with resentful anger. The words slipped out unbidden, but Da did not turn around. So when he was out of sight, Brigid ran to the calm of Ma's grave, her behind stinging like a swarm of bees had taken up residence. Kneeling beside the grave, Brigid experienced the sensation of being caught, like a mouse in a trap, with no means of escape.

The next day, he resigned. Brigid set about cleaning the family's cottage and stocking up on provisions. With his brow

puckering, Padraig arrived home for dinner and asked why Brigid had become so agitated. Outraged, he said, 'I'll speak with Da. He can't do this to you.' 'Da wants to move in here with his woman friend. I bet she has refused to share the kitchen with another woman, so he married me off to Seamus.'

Padraig's eyes opened wide. 'If you're right, Luke and I won't be welcome either. If she lives here, the bint must also keep house for us.' 'Villagers will shun you if you stay.' 'I'll get the truth out of Da, so I will.' He left Brigid to find their father, his face like a thundercloud. But when he returned, he said he had made no progress with Da and had received the sharp edge of Maura's tongue into the bargain.

So, the following Monday, a forlorn Brigid reported for work. She beat the rugs, and the shower of dust choked her, got into her eyes, and made her sneeze. Thick cobwebs hung in the corners of the parlour, and it needed a stiff broom to remove them. Brigid tackled the dirt-encrusted windows with vinegar and old newspapers until they shone. But her arms ached from the effort.

She collected the water from the yard pump and heated it on the fire. She poured it into a tin bath to wash Seamus's bedding and clothing. Repulsed by the man's smell, shudders ran down her back. If possible, I would put

Seamus in Ma's boiler and his body odour-smelling washing. Brigid knew her thoughts were mere imaginings, but they pricked her conscience

. The kitchen proved challenging to clean. The range hung thick with lumps of grease, and soiled pots, pans, and dishes lay on every surface. Brigid spent an entire day cleaning and blackening the range and washing plates. Scouring and polishing pots and pans took another day. Then she scrubbed the surfaces and the flagstone floor.

The next day, Brigid discovered Seamus had delivered a supply of peat and an ill-spelt message. Peat fer the fire. Bake meet pasties. I like 'em fer dinner at noon. The note confirmed that Da had sold her as an unpaid cleaner, cook, and child bearer. She walked the two miles home each night, but Seamus never offered her a lift in his buggy as he drove to the village shebeen. Instead, he waved his whip at her, and since daylight persisted late into the July evenings, she saw his evil smirk.

Each day, Seamus came for his meal at noon and gobbled up everything, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. Brigid's stomach churned. After a few weeks, Seamus said, 'Ye cook well. I'll give ye that. Your pastry is lighter than Roisin's.' He did not praise her for anything else or comment on her cleaning

. But one morning, the farmer cornered Brigid as she kneaded dough. He grabbed her shoulders and swung her around so his hot breath fell on her face. Seamus pushed her against the table and forced his tongue into her mouth. His breath tasted like rotten food, and his body smelt of cow dung and sweat. An icy shiver ran through Brigid's body when his hands roamed her flesh, and his member grew firm, pressing against her belly. Her stomach lurched when he pulled his tongue out, leered at her, his teeth like a line of dead crows, and shoved a hand in her blouse.

Her eyes bored into his piggy ones as she jammed her knee into his privates, the place where it hurt her older brothers. Seamus let go, yelping. 'Yer bint. I'll bet you as soon as we wed.' He put one hand in his pocket and pulled out a blue stoned ring, which he shoved over her dough-covered finger. 'Ye resisted me, so I know ye is pure. This ring belonged to Roisin. Now it is yours. I shall call the banns on Sunday. I want an heir come the spring.' Seamus glared at her, his piggy eyes dark with anger. 'I'll give ye next Sunday off to spend with yer Da. Make sure he recovers from the betrothal celebrations in the shebeen. He drinks me under the table, so he does.' Seamus smirked, making Brigid's stomach churn again. I.bet. he.does;Brigid reflected..He.is.a.committed drinker?honed.by. years.of.practice;

.But terrified by his dreadful marriage prospect, she wondered how to escape..I'm a rat in the proverbial barrel;. Then, knowing that after visiting the shebeen, Da would go to Maura's caravan, not the cottage, she called on her friend Niamh for advice.

‘I thought of stealing Seamus's money and running away. But Da took it with him after beating me. What can I do now?’

‘Visit the palm reader. It worked for me.’ Niamh blushed, twisting her gold wedding ring.

The soothsayer lived in a tiny cottage that smelled of mothballs. The woman ran her fingers over the creases in Brigid's palm. ‘You'll meet a tall, dark-haired stranger who will change your fortunes.’ Her brow pleated. ‘You face many challenges in your life. I see babies. Yes, and a journey over water. Your life has a strange destiny, but it is misty.’

She looked up at her client, her violet eyes narrowed, and held out her palm. ‘Threepence, please, Missy. Come again, and I'll use the tarot cards on the mist.’ B

rigid gazed at her blowzy face and then paid her with a coin from her washing income, the bells of balderdash ringing in her ears. She would not revisit even if someone paid her. A. misty.future?.Ugh.

As the sky filled with dark, scudding clouds, she ran home. To her dismay, Brigid found Da and Maura sitting by the fire, its flames flickering shadows on the walls, newly whitewashed by Luke.

Maura held his drink money jar and shook it in Brigid's face. 'I'll accompany you to Bray tomorrow, where I know a seamstress.' Da glared at his daughter 'Your fecking bint of a sister ain't making no dress for you from your Ma's stuff.' Speechless, Brigid watched Da unlock his press. Maura put the jar in it and held her hand for the key, giving Da an icy stare. Brigid enjoyed knowing that he must spend money at the shebeen and incurred Maura's vexation.

'This is a fine cottage,' said Maura, her voice tinged with envy. 'We are off to my caravan, but I'll return in the morning. After they left, banging the door shut, Brigid thought she had the means to escape if she stole the money. But she must leave that night.

Finding a kitchen knife, Brigid prised open Da's press. The money is my payment for working as a domestic servant. She counted three ten-shilling coins and some lesser silver, and her heart leapt. The amount exceeded her expectations. Brigid had often heard the first train to Dublin whistle its departure at sunrise, and the plan came together. T



The desperate woman searched through the papers in the press for her baptismal certificate, the only document that attested to her provenance. Her eyes blurred when she saw them filed by age, with Joseph's on top. Memories of her brothers, their lives cut short, filled her mind. Brigid found her document under Dermot's. She folded the certificate and put it in the pocket of her best apron.

She wiped her wet eyes with a lace-edged handkerchief and prepared supper for Padraig and Luke, to whom she said nothing. Brigid lay alone and watched the sparkling sky as night fell. The proverbial Man in the Moon looked so benevolent that he soothed her tensed muscles. Brigid's thoughts turned to Padraig. I can't tell him about my plans, so I hope he understands what I will do. She sobbed into her pillow, cursing Da for his cruelty.

When the clock in the church struck two, she dressed, tied her apron strings, and put on her boots. She studied Seamus's ring, and the sight sent shudders down her spine. I do not know its value, but Seamus said it belonged to me, so I'll pawn it. She wrapped a shawl over her head and shoulders and tramped the four miles to the railway station by the Moon's light, arriving as the sun rose in a pink and gold glow over the horizon.

‘Be Jaysus, what is a maid doing travelling unchaperoned at this hour?’ The stationmaster stared at her face over his half-spectacles. ‘I’m travelling to Dublin to meet my aunt, who will help me buy my wedding dress. My mother is dead, you see.’ The lies slipped from her tongue like melting butter.

She held out the money for the ticket and flashed her ring in his eyes. The man gave her the ticket, sucking his yellow, crooked teeth. Brigid turned, ran to the waiting train, found an empty carriage, and sat by the window. The whistling monster clattered from the platform in a cloud of steam.

Brigid removed the ring and tied it to her handkerchief. Free from being a chattel for sale, her mind found some peace. However, a knot of anxiety remained in her stomach over her uncertain future until the swaying carriage caused her to fall asleep.