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A Sister's Promise



Anne Bennett

ANNE BENNETT

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To my eldest grandson, Kynan Wilkes,
with all my love

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ONE

‘Molly, they will come no quicker with you running to the window every five minutes,’ Stan Maguire told his granddaughter.

‘I know, but I can’t help it,’ Molly said, turning so quickly her dark brown plaits slapped either side of her face. Her large brown eyes were sparkling. ‘Dad has been left for flipping ages and I’m dying to see Mom.’

‘Well, think what it’s like for young Kevin,’ Stan said. ‘Must be a sight worse for him, and your flitting about does him no good at all.’

Molly immediately felt contrite because she knew her grandfather had a point. Her mother, Nuala, had been in hospital for nine terrifying weeks, when the cold she was trying to work off turned into pneumonia in the middle of February. She had very nearly died.

When the hospital said she was well enough for visitors, Molly had been allowed to go because she was over twelve – in fact she had turned thirteen a few days before her mother had been taken to the hospital. She would go with either her granddad, Stan, her father, Ted, or Hilda Mason, their next-door neighbour and her mother’s best friend. Not that anyone had been able to go often, for visiting was only allowed on Wednesday and Saturday evening for one hour, though her father could also see his wife for two hours on Sunday afternoon.

Still, Molly had seen her and rejoiced as she watched her improve though at first her recovery was so slight she would wonder afterwards if she had imagined it. And then one day she had gone in to find her mother propped up in bed instead of prone, her beautiful hair tied back from her face with a ribbon, and wearing the peach-coloured bed jacket her father had bought for her. She also wore a wide smile for Molly, despite the fact her face was as white as lint and her eyes heavy with fatigue.

When Molly felt her mother’s arms encircle her and she had drunk in the familiar smell of her, she had sighed in contentment. She knew in that moment that she would recover and that was what she had told Kevin when she got home. He had let his breath out in a loud sigh and Molly realised he had been worried that he would never see his mother again. She knew he had missed her sorely. He had had his fifth birthday in March and when they had asked him what he wanted he said the best birthday present he could have was to have his mommy home.

However, from the day Molly assured him their mother was getting better, Kevin had marked the days off on the calendar and today, Tuesday 23 April 1935, was circled in red. He had been fizzing all day, like a bottle of pop. Molly thought it a shame that her mother hadn’t been allowed home before Easter but the hospital hadn’t thought her well enough. Kevin had been disappointed at first and he had saved part of the chocolate egg their father had given them both the Sunday before to share with her. Molly thought that really good of him because, like Molly, he had given up sweets all through the forty days of Lent anyway. He must have sorely wanted all that chocolate.

Molly was glad it was still the holidays though because she had been able to help Hilda make a big spread to welcome her mother home. While her mother had been ill, Hilda had taught her to make all manner of things, and it was nice to be able to practise, but she just wished now they would hurry up.

Kevin came in from the kitchen with a mug of milk Hilda had poured for him and wiped the milk moustache from his upper lip before saying, 'Why d'you think they are so late, Granddad?'

'I don't rightly know, lad,' Stan said, for he had thought they would have been here more than an hour ago. 'Maybe they had to see a doctor before your mom could leave and there was a wait, like. But don't you fret, they'll be here as soon as they can be, I'm sure.'

Hilda was just as anxious as the family to see her dear friend Nuala back fit and well again, but she also had duties at home. 'I'll come in again when I see them arrive,' she said, as she covered the food on the table with clean tea towels to keep it fresh, before putting on her coat. 'Now I'm off to get the old man's tea, but don't fret, I'll be back before you know it.'

Molly smiled at the neighbour that she had known all her life. Hilda had been a great help to her when her mother had first become sick and had tended the whole family along with her own. And Molly often thought it was a good job that she had. Her paternal grandmother, Phoebe, had died when Kevin was just a baby and Molly had missed her very much. There was really no one else, for her father had been an only child.

She had thought then that maybe her granddad would make his home with them, and so had her parents, but he insisted on staying in the little two-bedroomed terraced house in Gravelly Lane that he and his Phoebe had moved into the day they were married all those years ago. Molly's house was in Osbourne Road, which was no distance away at all, and her grandparents had been a major part of her young life.

This didn't change essentially after her grandmother died. Ted would still take his father for the odd pint a couple of evenings a week and to watch the Blues play at St Andrews of a Saturday, and every Sunday he came to dinner. However, he was an independent man, who would allow the family to do no more for him. He looked after himself: cooked, washed for himself, kept the house like a new pin and grew much of the family's produce in his garden.

Molly knew there was family on her mother's side, on a farm near a place called Bunrana in Donegal, Ireland. Her mother had pointed it out on a map, but they never heard from them and she often said that the Great War had fragmented the family.

'I'll tell you now, Molly there was nothing great about it at all,' Nuala had told her daughter. 'Dear God! "Terrible War" might have been a better name for it. Almost every country in the world was fighting and men went in their droves to join up. I've never understood why. Even my own youngest brother, Finn, marched off with the rest and then lost his life at the Battle of the Somme in 1916. But, even before Finn's death the people in Ireland were starting to feel a bit cheated, I suppose, because they had been promised Home Rule if Ireland was to support Britain in their fight against Germany.

'When there was no sign of it, and the Irish boys began to die in large numbers, or were ferried home blinded or with severed limbs, there was that uprising in Dublin the Easter of 1916. Anyway, I've told you all this many times before.'

'I know, but tell it again,' Molly would say each time. 'It's like a fairy story. It was after this Great War, this Terrible War, you came to England, to Birmingham?'

'Yes. Well, things in Ireland were anything but stable after the uprising. There were troublesome years ahead. It began after the war with factions looting and burning down people's houses and shooting anyone they didn't like the look of. The mistress got a bit jumpy about it and, to be honest, I didn't blame her one bit. Anyway, the upshot of this was they decided to go back to England. They owned another large house in a place called Sutton Coldfield and they offered me the chance to go with them.'

Molly knew all about Sutton Coldfield. On occasions, she had been taken to Sutton Coldfield's park on the little steam train from the station at nearby Station Road. The park was enormous and

even had roads running through it. Rippling streams fed the five large lakes, and there was also woods and pastureland. Unless a person actually lived in Sutton Coldfield, they had to pay to get into the park.

‘I was nineteen years old by then,’ Nuala would say. ‘And of course mad keen to see England, but I didn’t think for one minute that my parents would have let me go. But for the troubles, I think that would have been the case. As it was, they said I would be better out of Ireland for a few years.’

‘And there you met Daddy,’ Molly would usually shout at this point.

‘Not just like that I didn’t,’ Nuala would say. ‘I hadn’t gone to Birmingham to net myself a husband and anyway, there was little opportunity. My employers kept a weather eye on me and in a way were stricter than my parents. Followers, which was what they called boyfriends then, were discouraged. It was the summer of 1921 before I even saw your father as I went walking with the kitchen maid in Sutton Park one Sunday afternoon and he asked if he might walk along with us.’

‘He was a hero, wasn’t he?’ Molly would ask every time.

Nuala would always shake her head and say sadly, ‘Believe me, Molly, all of those poor men who had fought in that war were heroes.’

But Molly knew her father, Ted, had got a special medal because he had crawled into no man’s land to save his commanding officer, a man called Paul Simmons.

‘I couldn’t just stand by and do nothing,’ he had told Molly. ‘We had been chatting before we went over the top and the man told me he’d had two brothers and both had copped it and he was the last, the only remaining son so, for the sake of his parents, as much as anything else, he would like to make it back. All that came back to me as I saw him lying there in the slurry of mud and blood of no man’s land and I went out to get him. We both came through it, and all he had to show for it was a gammy leg. Though now he walks with a limp, many live with far worse.’

The point was too that when the war was over, Paul Simmons did not forget the soldier who had saved his life. Before the war, Ted had been a gun maker, working alongside his father from the age of twelve. It was a fine living then, for they exported their guns all over the world. When war broke out, the orders increased, although by then Ted was in the army.

After the war, though, no one wanted guns in any quantity any more and Molly’s father and grandfather were out of work, like thousands of others. Stan said he wouldn’t be bothered chasing the few jobs there were. He was getting older and had savings – for during the war he had earned well and invested wisely, and Phoebe had always been a good manager. Added to that he had the vegetables growing in the garden and a small pension, so they got by.

Molly’s father, though, had been in dire straits until he was sought out by Paul Simmons. His own father owned a brass factory, but he wanted to retire and hand it over to his son. Paul had no objection to this, but he first set out to find the man that had saved his life and see how he was placed. The result of that was Ted was taken into the office and very soon became the young factory owner’s right-hand man.

Molly knew that her mother liked Mr Simmons. She also admired him for paying the debt back, as it were. ‘Oh, I know your father saved his life and all,’ she often said, ‘but that was different. It was a war situation. Once the war is over, such actions are often forgotten. We could never have married at all if your father had been unemployed. I mean, I doubt that I would have been let, for he said that he wanted no hole-in-the-corner courtship. He went to see my employers and asked their permission for him to walk out with me.’

‘I think they found out everything there was to find out about him before they agreed. They were only concerned for me, I knew that, for they were good employers and didn’t want me sinking into poverty. Believe me, it was easy enough to do at the time.’

Molly knew it was, because her father had explained it all to her when she had asked him about

the disabled and blind men that she had seen in the Bull Ring, selling all manner of things from trays fastened around their necks.

‘They, Molly, are like flotsam from the Great War,’ Ted had told his daughter. ‘We were told that we were returning to a “land fit for heroes” and we found out it was a myth and that all most had to come back to was unemployment and poverty.’

And it wasn’t just the soldiers either, for Molly had seen the many ragged and barefoot mothers and children with pinched-in faces, and arms and legs like sticks, skulking around the market. ‘If it weren’t for a quirk of fate and the integrity of Paul Simmons, you and Kevin could easily be like one of those children,’ her father had told her. Molly had shivered at the thought.

‘I bet your employers were glad that Daddy had such a good job,’ she had said to her mother.

Nuala nodded. ‘Yes, they were. Your father was driving by then, because he said Mr Simmons found driving difficult with one leg shorter than the other.’

Molly knew her father loved driving, which he said he had learned to do in the army. Each morning he would cycle over to Mr Simmons’ house, which was in Edgbaston, and drive him to the factory or any other place he wanted to go to in his car. The car her father drove was called a Phantom, which he considered was just about the best car in the world, and made by a firm called Rolls-Royce.

Earlier that day, just after lunch, he had driven it into the street to show them because Mr Simmons had given him leave to fetch his wife home in it. A crowd had gathered on the pavement to see this phenomenon, cars being uncommon then. Kevin had been pop-eyed with excitement.

Ted had winked at him and said, ‘Might give you a ride in it later, mate, if you play your cards right, like. Might give you all a ride if I decide that I like the look of you, for Mr Simmons has given me the rest of the day off.’

Molly shivered in excitement because she would just love that. Ted caught sight of that shiver, grinned at her and said, ‘What d’you think of it, Moll? Ain’t she just the business?’

Molly had to agree that it was indeed a fine car – not that she had ever seen much to compare it with, but she knew that this was really something special. It was long and low, with a large bonnet on the front and painted glossy black with burgundy doors, its large headlamps and even the radiator sparkling like silver in the spring sunshine. Even the tyres were different and painted white on the sides.

Molly noticed her father’s face full of pride as he ran his hand over the body of the car, which he looked after with such meticulous care. ‘You must be a clever man to know how to drive that,’ Molly praised him.

‘Ain’t nothing to driving, Moll,’ Ted said airily. ‘It’s just the other silly buggers on the road that you have to be careful of. And,’ he’d added, waving an admonishing finger at her, though his eyes had sparkled with amusement, ‘when your mother comes home, don’t you be letting on that I said the word “bugger”. God, she would be at my mouth with the carbolic.’

Molly and Kevin laughed at that mental picture and Stan said with an emphatic nod, ‘Aye, she would that.’

Stan was immensely proud of his son, landing such a good job and being in a position to provide properly for his family, but cars scared the life out of him. In his opinion they were dangerous and went far too fast.

‘Thanks for the offer of a ride, son,’ he said to Ted, ‘but I won’t be taking you up on it. I prefer to keep my feet firmly on the ground.’

‘So, you are too windy to come for a spin later?’

‘Aye,’ Stan said calmly, ‘though I would prefer to call it sensible. A tram ride is exciting enough for me.’

Ted shrugged. 'Well, no one's forcing you. But the children will appreciate it anyway. And now I must be away to fetch Nuala, for she is desperate to be home again.'

They had all watched until Ted had driven out of sight.

'He must be a kind man that Paul Simmons,' Molly said, going back into the house. 'Fancy Mom coming home in such style.'

'Aye, fancy,' Stan said with a grin, lighting up a cigarette. 'Your father always says he's generous to a fault.'

'But Daddy always thinks the best of people,' Molly said. 'And he is always so nice and kind himself. Isn't it strange, Granddad, that Mom's parents didn't want her to marry him?'

'Well, we must assume they didn't,' Stan said. 'They had never met him, of course, because from Nuala writing that first letter, saying they wanted to become engaged, she never heard a word from any of them again.'

'Mom said it was because she is a Catholic and Daddy a Protestant,' Molly said.

'That's what it must have been, right enough,' Stan said. 'But it was so silly because Ted isn't even a Protestant. I mean, he's a nothing. Thinks religion is all eyewash, as I do myself. When we came here from Fermanagh, neither Phoebe nor me ever went near either church or chapel again. I sent Ted to Sunday school while he was a lad, like, because if he was to choose later, then he had to know what the options were. When he was about fifteen or sixteen, he said he didn't want to go any more and that was that. But he would have never stopped your mother practising her religion.'

'She wrote week after week, after the first letter, and never got a reply,' Stan said. 'She was all for going over once to see them face to face, but she was nervous. As she said, if her parents wouldn't even write to her, they wouldn't be likely to give her much of a welcome and indeed might not let her in through the door at all. Anyway, in the end, she never went.'

'I don't blame her.'

'I don't either, and Ted said he would abide by her decision, but the silence has just gone on and the family in Donegal, might as well not exist.'

However, none of them in Birmingham was aware that when Nuala's parents had received the first letter she had sent, her father had died of a heart attack, the letter still clutched in his hand as he toppled from the chair to the stone-flagged floor. Her mother, Bidy, was almost consumed with bitterness against her daughter, whom she felt was responsible for her husband's death.

She elected to cut Nuala off from the family. Not only did she not write, she also forbade any one else to contact her either and so Nuala knew nothing of the death of her father, whom she had loved so much. Nor did she know that her brother, Joe, unable to stand the atmosphere in the house any more, had taken himself off to America. That only left Tom, the eldest, still on the farm.

'It's sad, though,' Molly said to her granddad. 'Do you think she still misses her parents – or her brothers, anyway?'

'I reckon she is used to it by now,' Stan said. 'Ted told me that in the beginning she used to talk about them a lot. As the years passed, she would say she often wondered if her brothers had married, and that it was sad for you to maybe have Irish cousins that you would never ever know.'

'Well, I'm glad Mom didn't let her parents stop her getting married, anyway,' Molly had declared stoutly, 'for me and our Kevin have the nicest and kindest parents anyone could wish for.'

'Oh I don't think either of them ever regretted it,' Stan said. 'Like me and Phoebe were, they are happy and easy with each other. Your father has been like a lost soul without your mother and now soon she will be here again and everything will be back to normal.'

But the minutes ticked into hours and there was still no sign of the car. Stan sat in the chair and smoked one cigarette after the other, anxiety tugging at him.

He opened his packet of cigarettes again and was surprised to find it empty. 'Will you pop down

to the paper shop and get me ten Park Drive, Moll?’ he said. ‘I must be smoking like a chimney. I’m clean out.’

Molly didn’t want to stir from the house until her parents came through the door, but it wasn’t as if the paper shop was miles away. It was only in Station Road, which Osbourne Road led into, and it would take her no time at all, if she ran. So she said, ‘All right, Granddad’ and took the half a crown, he offered her.

Molly had scarcely left the house when Stan saw a policeman striding up the path, and his stomach gave a lurch. Telling Kevin to stay where he was, he went to the door, his heart as heavy as lead.

The young and very nervous policeman licked his lips before saying, ‘I am looking for a Mr Stanley Maguire.’

‘You’ve found him,’ Stan said, in a voice made husky with apprehension. Policemen didn’t come to anyone’s door to impart good news.

When the policeman said, ‘Could I come inside, sir?’ Stan said, ‘I’d rather not have you in just now. I have my grandson in there and he is only five years old. Perhaps you’d better state your business here.’

The policeman wasn’t used to imparting such news and certainly not on the doorstep, but he could quite see the man’s point of view. He gave a slight shrug of his shoulders and said, ‘I’m afraid, sir, there has been an accident involving a Mr Edward Maguire and a Mrs Nuala Maguire. Your name was among their effects. I believe they are your son and his wife?’

Stan nodded solemnly and let his breath out slowly, while the news seeped into his brain. Hadn’t he feared something like this when they were much later than expected? ‘How are they?’ he asked.

‘I’m afraid, sir, the accident was a fatal one.’

Stan couldn’t take that in. ‘Fatal?’ he repeated. ‘You mean they are dead?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Both of them?’

‘I am afraid so. They died instantly, so I believe.’

‘But how ...? I mean, what happened?’

‘They were in collision with a van,’ the policeman said. ‘The doctors think the van driver had a heart attack and died at the wheel and the van then crashed into your son’s car.’

‘Dear Almighty Christ!’ Stan cried. Tears started in his eyes and began to trickle down his wrinkled cheeks.

‘Is there anyone I could call for you, sir?’ the policeman said, worried for the man, who had turned a bad shade of grey.

‘There is no one,’ Stan said, realising at that moment how alone he was. There was no one left but him and the children and the burden of responsibility joined that of sorrow and lodged between his shoulder blades weighing him down. But he faced the policeman and said, ‘It’s all right, I will be fine. I shall have to be fine, for my son and his wife were the parents of the wee boy in the room there and I shall have to break the news to him and his sister.’

‘If you are sure, sir?’

‘I’m sure,’ Stan said, but he wiped his face with a handkerchief before he went in to face his grandson, who looked up at him bewildered and a little frightened.

Kevin had wondered who was at the door and normally he would have gone out to see, for in fact few people knocked in that street, but as he neared the door, the serious tone of the conversation unnerved him, though he couldn’t hear what was being said. So, instead of going out to them, he stole up the stairs and into his parents’ bedroom where the window was a bay and, even with the overhang of the door, a person could usually see who was there. Kevin could see the

policeman clearly.

In Kevin's short experience of life, policemen spelled trouble. Even when you had no idea you were doing anything wrong, they could usually find something to tick a boy off for. He didn't associate them with breaking bad news, so when his grandfather returned he was back in the room and he asked apprehensively, 'What did the copper want, Granddad?'

Stan looked at the child and he wished with all his heart and soul he could protect him from what he had to say, but he knew he couldn't. He sat down beside Kevin and put an arm around his shoulders as Molly burst in. She had spotted the policeman leaving their door as she had turned the corner and sped home as fast as she could.

Older and wiser than Kevin, she knew that the police did other things than box the ears of errant and cheeky boys. She cried, 'What is it? What's up?'

She saw that tears were spilling from her grandfather's eyes and her hands were clenched so tightly at her sides that she was crushing the cigarette packet she hadn't been aware that she was still holding. 'Please, please,' she begged, sinking to her knees before her grandfather. 'Please tell me what's wrong.'

Stan tried valiantly to stem the tears and he lifted Kevin onto his knee and snuggled Molly beside him, his arm encircling her as he broke the news as gently as a person could, that their parents had been killed in a car accident.

Both children looked at him in shock. Molly thought there must be some mistake, it couldn't be true, of course it couldn't.

It was the howl of sheer unadulterated agony, which preceded the paroxysm of grief that Kevin displayed, that started her own tears as she cried out for such terrible loss. The pain of it seemed to be consuming her whole body.

And that is how Hilda found them, as she told her husband later. 'Sodden with sadness was the only way to describe it and no wonder. Almighty Christ, how will they survive this, the poor wee mites? I feel the grievous loss of one of the best friends I ever had, but Molly and little Kevin. God Almighty! Isn't life a bugger at times?'

Many thought the same, for Hilda had not been the only one to spot the policeman at the Maguire's door, especially amongst those neighbours on the look out for the car, ready to welcome Nuala home. Now those same neighbours gathered in the house, feeling helpless at the sight of such heartbreaking grief, but feeling they needed to be there. The party tea all set out seemed such a mockery now.

Most of the rest of that day was a blur for Molly. She remembered people trying to get her to eat something, but she wasn't hungry. She was filled with sorrow and anguish, but she drank the hot sweet tea that they pressed on her, because it was easier than arguing with them.

Other people came – first the priest, Father Clayton, his own eyes full of sorrow. But he could do nothing for them and when he offered to pray with Molly because it might ease her, she turned her face away. She had no desire to pray to a God that allowed her parents to be killed in such a way. When her mother had been very ill with pneumonia and it was feared that she might die, Molly prayed night and day. She knew of families that said the rosary each night for Nuala's recovery, there were Masses said, and Molly was not the only one who started a novena. When Nuala passed the crisis and they knew that she would survive, everyone was praising the power of prayer and saying how good God was. Hilda even said, 'He didn't want to take your mom, see. He knows she is needed far more here.'

And she was. But now it was as if God had been playing one awful and terrifying joke on them all, letting them think it was going to be all right, that her mother was better and was coming home and then ... not content with taking just her mother away, He had taken her father too. He had had

the last laugh, after all. She wanted to ask the priest why He had done that, but she couldn't seem to form the words. All her thoughts were jumbled up in her head and she was also suddenly unaccountably weary and Kevin was shaking from head to foot.

The next thing she remembered was the priest was gone and Dr Brown was there, though Molly had no idea who had sent for him. He gave Kevin an injection and almost immediately he curled on the settee and went to sleep. No one, not even her granddad, suggested that he be put to bed, and a neighbour went upstairs and took a blanket from one of the beds to put over him.

Molly refused the same injection that Kevin had and the doctor left her some tablets. She didn't want to take those either but her granddad prevailed upon her to try. 'They may help, Molly.'

Molly just stared at him, for she knew that nothing would help the despair that she was filled with. But afterwards, when the pain became unbearable, she did swallow two of the tablets hoping they would blur the edges of it a bit. Within minutes, she felt as if she were one side of a curtain and everyone else was on the other and she was totally disconnected from all that was happening.

She could see through the curtain, so often knew people were speaking to her, but her mind couldn't seem to make sense of what was said and she was utterly unable to make any sort of response. So when Paul Simmons called in to express his deepest condolences, that much she knew only by the look on his face. She didn't understand a word he was saying and that was her last memory of that dreadful, terrible day.

TWO

When Molly awoke next morning, she felt like she was fighting her way through fog. Her eyelids were heavy and her whole body felt sluggish. She wondered for a second or two what was the matter with her. Then suddenly, how she felt was of no account, as the memories of the tragic events of the previous day came flooding back. However, she had no recollection of even mounting the stairs, never mind getting undressed and into bed. Pushing back the bedclothes, she realised that she hadn't a nightdress on at all, just her slip.

She glanced at the clock and saw with surprise that it was past ten o'clock. As she heaved herself out of bed, she heard Kevin give a sudden, harrowing cry.

Stan had refused medication, feeling he owed it to the children to stay alert and in full charge of himself and his emotions, but that meant he had slept badly and in snatches, and it showed in his drawn face and rheumy bloodshot eyes. He was the only one awake in the house when the policeman had called earlier that morning to ask if he could go down to the hospital to formally identify the bodies, and that he would send a car.

No way did Stan want to look on the dead bodies of his son and Nuala, but he knew there was only him and so he nodded. But the children had not woken and he explained that both of them had been sedated the previous evening. There was no way he would go out without telling them, and so it was arranged for the car to come at half-past eleven when he was sure the two would be up and about.

Before either of the children were astir however, a bevy of neighbours were in the door, including Hilda, asking Stan if they could help in any way. Hilda readily agreed to mind the children while Stan went to the hospital. When Kevin woke up, though, and Stan told him of the arrangements, he had been distraught and it had been his cry of distress that Molly had heard.

'I don't want to be left behind,' Kevin was crying to his granddad as Molly entered the room. 'What if you don't come back either?'

Molly quite understood Kevin's concerns and so did Stan. He knew the time was gone when he could have heartily reassured his grandson that of course he would come back. Instead, he said, 'You are right, Kevin. We will all go up to the hospital and I will just pop round and tell Hilda that.' And Molly saw Kevin give a sigh of relief.

With the children deposited in the waiting room, Stan followed the white-coated doctor down the long hospital corridor to the mortuary, his heart hammering in his chest. At the door, the doctor said, 'Before you see the bodies, I think you ought to know that with the impact of the crash, they were both thrown through the windscreen, so their faces were very badly injured. Your son was not too bad, but your daughter-in-law's injuries are extensive. We have done our best to clean them up, of course, but there is only so much you can do.'

Stan swallowed deeply and then nodded. 'I understand.'

'Are you ready?'

Are you ever ready for such a thing? Stan thought, but he said, 'Aye, yes.' He squared his shoulders and again tried to swallow the hard lump lodged in his throat. 'Let's get it over with.'

Ted's face was a mass of small cuts and black-grey bruises, and he had one massive jagged cut that seared the whole length of his forehead and another running diagonally from the corner of his right eye, across the bridge of his nose to the left-hand corner of the mouth. But all the blood had been wiped away and, though it was upsetting, Stan was able to nod at the doctor and say, 'Yes, that is my son.'

Poor Nuala was a different matter all together. When they removed the sheet covering her face, despite the fact that he had been warned, Stan staggered and it was the doctor's arm that steadied him. Her face was just a blooded mass of putrefying flesh and he felt the bile rising in him even as he nodded at the doctor.

He barely reached the yard outside before he was as sick as a dog, vomiting over and over into the drain until his stomach ached and his throat was raw. Then he straightened up and wiped his face with his handkerchief, knowing he had to return to the children and pretend everything was all right, or at least as all right as it could be in the circumstances.

However, the policeman assigned to sit with the children, took one look at Stan's haggard face and said, 'Sit down for a while. You look all in. I'll fetch a cup of tea.'

Stan was glad to obey and more than glad of the reviving cups of tea the young policeman brought for all of them. He couldn't remember when any of them had last eaten, for he had not touched the party food and he knew the children hadn't either.

Some of it was stored away in the cupboards at home – the women had seen to that. Anything that wouldn't keep, he insisted the neighbours take, rather than it be thrown away. Although he had been too overwhelmed to do anything himself, he had been pleased that all sign of the welcome home party was gone by the time he had got up that morning. The children had wanted no breakfast and Stan, who hadn't been able to eat either, had not insisted, and so was gratified to see that at least they were drinking the tea.

It was as Stan was draining the cup that he remembered Nuala's parents and knew despite anything that had gone before they still needed to be told. Of course they both might be dead and gone now, and Nuala's brothers off to pastures new, but he had to find out. He hadn't any idea how to go about this so he mentioned it to the policeman.

'I know so little about them you see other than their name, which is Sullivan, Thomas John and Bridget Sullivan. They have a farm in a place called Buncrana in Donegal. I'm sorry there's not any more to go on, but there was a falling-out when their daughter, Nuala, married my son, basically because he was a Protestant and Nuala and her family were all Catholic.'

'In these country districts it will probably be more than enough,' the policeman said. 'And, as they are Catholic, if all else fails the parish priest will know who they are. We'll see to that and without delay, so you don't worry about it.'

Later that day, there was a smile on Bidy Sullivan's face as she shut the door on the young guard who had come to the door to tell her of the untimely death of her daughter and son-in-law. She thought Nuala had at last paid for her father's death. It had taken some time, but since the day she had held her dying husband in her arms, she had prayed for something bad to happen to her daughter.

Tom, was nervous of his mother's smile. It wasn't an expression he saw often and it usually boded ill for someone, so he asked tentatively, 'What did the garda want?'

'He came to tell me the thing I have wished for many a year,' Bidy said. 'Your sister, Nuala, and her husband have both been killed in a car crash in Birmingham.'

Tom felt a momentary pang of regret and sadness. The eldest boy, he had been twelve when Nuala was born, had left school and was already working in the fields with his father from dawn to

dusk. He well remembered the tiny, wee child and how she had grown up so slight and fine-boned she was like a little doll. Biddy had never let the boys play with their little sister, but she hadn't needed to say that to him, he wouldn't have dreamed of playing with her, he knew his hands were too big and too rough.

And now she was gone, killed in a car crash, and his mother saying it was what she had wished for years. His mother was a strange one, all right, but what she had said this time was just downright wicked.

Tom seldom argued with his mother, but this time he burst out, 'Mammy, that's a dreadful thing to say.'

'She killed your daddy.'

'You can't be certain of that,' Tom protested. 'And even if it was her news that hastened Daddy's death, she didn't know. It wasn't her fault.'

'Well, I think differently and I am glad that she has got her just deserts at last,' Biddy said with an emphatic nod of her head. 'And if you have eaten your fill, shouldn't you be about your duties and not standing arguing the toss with me?'

Tom knew there was no use talking to his mother when she used that tone – he would be wasting time trying – so with a sigh he went back outside. And when a little later, he saw her scurrying away from the house, he didn't bother calling out to her and ask her where she was bound for because he knew she probably wouldn't tell him.

And she didn't tell him until he had finished the evening milking and was sitting at the table eating a bowl of porridge his mother had made for supper and then her words so astounded him his mouth dropped open. 'You are going to Birmingham tomorrow,' he repeated.

'That's right.'

'But have you even got the address?'

'Aye, the guard gave it to me. I suppose I can ask for directions when I am there. I sent a telegram for them to expect me anyway.'

'But, Mammy, what are you going for?'

'Why shouldn't I go?'

'Because you never did when Nuala was alive,' Tom said. 'Why go now when she is dead?'

'I'm not going for her, numbskull,' Biddy snapped, 'but to see the set-up of the place.'

'Set-up of the place?' Tom queried. 'What are you on about?'

'There are children, more than likely,' Biddy said. 'And if there are children they are going to no Protestant to rear. They will come here to me and be raised in the one true faith.'

'Here, Mammy?'

'Well, where else?'

'I know but ... well you have never cared for children,' Tom said, adding bitterly, 'at least you told me that often enough when I was growing up.'

'I don't care for children much,' Biddy said. 'But I think I know where my duty lies.'

Tom remembered his life as a child and young boy in that house and the scant attention and even less affection he, his brothers and his elder sister, Aggie, had ever received from their mother. The only one petted and spoiled was Nuala. However, after the letter and his father's death, bitterness against Nuala seemed to lodge inside his mother, where it grew like a canker, getting deeper with every passing year. Tom had little hope that any children Nuala had would receive any love or understanding from his mother. He could only hope there was no issue from that union.

* * *

Stan looked at the telegram in his hand and could scarcely believe that, after all this time, Nuala's

mother was coming here. Like Tom, he thought it a pity she hadn't ever made the journey when Nuala had been alive.

However, he told himself maybe she was sorry now for the stiff-necked, unforgiving way she had been with her daughter. She must be indeed to want to show her respect by turning up for the funeral, set for Friday. It would be good too for the children to realise that he wasn't the only living relative that they had. He loved them dearly but he had worried what would happen to them if he was taken ill.

Maybe this woman, their own grandmother, would be a comfort to them, especially to Molly. It was important, he thought, for a girl to have a woman's influence in her life.

'Any answer?' the telegraph boy asked.

'Oh, yes,' Stan said, for he would not have the woman arriving without any sort of welcome, so in his reply he said that both he and the children were looking forward to her coming and if she gave him the time of her arrival he would be at New Street Station to meet her.

Molly too was pleased because it would be a link with the mother she still missed so very, very much.

'D'you think she is sorry now about the quarrel?'

'Aye,' Stan said. 'I'd say so. Why else would she be coming?'

'Mmm, I suppose ...'

'What are you fretting about now?'

'What will happen to me and our Kevin, Granddad?'

'Why, you'll stay with me of course.'

'We won't have to go to no orphanage?'

'Not a bit of it,' Stan told her. 'Why should you do that when you have a fit and active grandfather up the road willing and able to see to the two of you? And now you have other grandparents too and your uncles are probably living there as well don't forget. Your grandparents live in the country, on the farm your own mother grew up on. Wouldn't that be a fine place for you to go for a wee holiday?'

'I suppose,' Molly said again.

'There is no suppose about it,' Stan said firmly. 'Now you get on your feet and give me a hand cleaning up the house. It would never do for your grandmother to find fault, and anyway that Mr Simmons said he would come to see me this evening.'

Stan was very impressed with Mr Simmons, even though he was slightly awed by such a fine gentleman bothering with the likes of them. He quite understood how it had been between him and Ted, though his son had said it didn't work with many of the toffs at the front. They might be quite pally while they were in the trenches together, but once out of uniform, all that was forgotten and they'd hardly bid the ordinary soldier the time of day.

Stan knew that full well. That's how it was with toffs, and he thought that with Ted dead, any debt Paul Simmons thought he had owed to him had been paid and well paid.

However, Paul didn't see it like that at all. He had been terribly upset when he had heard of the double tragedy, and to honour Ted's memory he felt he should at least show some care for his children. He knew that the family would now be in dire straits with only Stan's pension and possibly the pittance given by the government to live on, and he was arranging for an allowance to be paid to the family, rising annually until the children should be twenty-one. That is what he told Stan when he called.

Stan was bowled over by such generosity, but too worried about how they would manage to think of refusing it. Now he knew financially, at least, they would get by and thanked the man gratefully.

Stan knew he had to be strong and practical for the children. There was to be no more crying, at least in front of them. ~~The terrible, dreadful thing that had happened to their parents had to be put behind them because they had their whole lives yet to live and he knew Ted and Nuala would want them to do that.~~ However, even by now, their grief and Kevin's dependence on him almost overwhelmed him. He looked forward to Biddy Sullivan's arrival and hoped she might stay on for a little while after the funeral and help him with them.

When he saw the woman alight from the train and stand uncertainly on the platform the following evening, Stan knew he didn't like the look of her. She was dressed in black from the hat perched upon the grey hair to the old-fashioned button boots on her feet. Stan had expected that the woman would be in mourning, but what he didn't much care for was the expression on her face.

He castigated himself soundly. Here he was making judgements on this poor woman he had never met, who had travelled over land and sea to see her daughter finally laid to rest. What did he expect, that she would leap from the train with a whoop of joy?

He approached Biddy with his arm outstretched and a smile of welcome on his face. Biddy watched his approach with a cynical smile that twisted her lips into a grimace, but Stan didn't see that, though he did note that the woman was very tall and very skinny. Everything about her was thin, so that her sallow cheeks, either side of her long, narrow nose, were sunken in. But it was her eyes that shook him, for they were as cold as ice. He plainly saw the malicious intent there and his heart sank. He doubted there would be any help forthcoming from this quarter.

She ignored Stan's hand and instead, in the sharp, shrill voice that Stan fully expected her to have, snapped out, 'Are you Stanley Maguire?'

'I am,' Stan said, extending his hand to her again. 'And I am very pleased to meet you at last, though I would have preferred it to have been on a more pleasant occasion.'

Biddy looked at Stan's hand as if it might be a snake that would leap up and bite her, and Stan let it fall to his side as she said, 'I have no pleasure in meeting you, Mr Maguire. Indirectly, you were the cause of all this. If you had exercised full control of your son, you would not have let him marry my daughter.'

Stan was irritated and annoyed by Biddy's inference, but still he excused the woman and bit back the sharp retort that had been on his lips. She was likely tired, he told himself, and suffering still from grief. Certainly the lines running either side of her nose and pulling her mouth down in a sag of disapproval spoke of strain of one kind or another. And, he told himself, when a death occurs of a loved one, especially a death so tragic and unexpected, it is surely natural to want to blame someone. Anyway, it would hardly help things to have a slanging match with Nuala's mother only minutes after her arrival.

And so instead of the counterattack Biddy might have expected, Stan said gently 'Come now, this is neither the time nor the place to discuss such matters. Let us get you home, and rested and a cup of tea and a meal inside you, and then I will answer any question you wish to ask.'

Stan's reply took the wind out of Biddy's sails a little bit, for she had braced herself for an argument. She had no option but to follow Stan, because he had picked up her case and begun walking away with it. In actual fact, though she never would have admitted it, she was glad that someone had come to meet her. She had never gone further than her home town before and she'd been flustered by the throngs of noisy fellow travellers, strangers all to her, and the boat with its throbbing engines and hooters blasting out black smoke into the air, tossing about in the turbulent water until she had been dreadfully sick. And there were also the panting trains, with their screeching whistles and the noise of the wheels clattering along the rails and now she was glad to alight from the train and just as anxious to leave the noisy smelly platform.

However, once outside the station, Biddy was totally unnerved by the volume of traffic, the like of which she had never seen before, especially the clanking, swaying trams, careering up and down the road alongside the buses and lorries, vans and cars. And there was a smell – dusty, acrid, full of smoke and very unpleasant – that seemed to have lodged at the back of her throat.

The pavements too were filled with hurrying, scurrying people. She had told her son that she would ask for directions, but she knew she couldn't have easily asked directions of these serious-faced people, who all looked as if they were in a rush to be some place.

No one took the slightest notice of her and Stanley Maguire either, but then this was a city, Biddy told herself, and strangers were not a novelty, not like back home where every strange face was noted and the person interrogated gently until the townsfolk had ascertained what he or she was doing there.

She was glad to get out of the mayhem and into the relative quiet of the taxi Stan had hailed, though she commented sourly as she climbed into it, 'A taxi. Huh, you must be made of money.'

Stan said nothing for he wouldn't be drawn into a sparring match. Hoping to engender some sympathy for the grieving children at least, he told Biddy all about Molly and wee Kevin, and how upset they had been; how they were looking forward to meeting her. But she made no response of any sort. By the time they reached their journey's end, Stan was exhausted and filled with trepidation and knew he would feel happier when Biddy was making the return trip.

'Now,' Biddy said to Stan that night with the meal over, Kevin in bed and Molly left drying the dishes in the kitchen, 'you're telling me that this house is not yours at all?'

'No,' Stan said. 'This was Ted and Nuala's place. I moved in to help Ted care for the children when Nuala went into the hospital. After the funeral, I am going to look into the legal position of keeping this on, transferring the tenancy while the children are dependant. I think it would be the best thing because my house has only two bedrooms, you see, and this has three. Apart from that, all the children's friends are around the doors, and the neighbours have been kindness itself.'

'You don't need to trouble yourself with any of that,' Biddy snapped. 'And you definitely don't need any more room, because I am taking both children back to Ireland with me.'

Stan felt as if the breath had suddenly left his body and he slumped back in the chair. It was the very last thing that he had expected and the very last thing he wanted. The woman didn't seem even to like children and had reduced Kevin to tears more than once since they had met, because of both her sharp tongue and her total lack of understanding of what the child was still going through.

'You can't do this,' Stan said. 'I am their grandfather and have as many rights as you – more in fact, because I know the children, whereas they are strangers to you and that was through your own choice.'

'That is neither here nor there,' Biddy said. 'The children had a Catholic mother and therefore they need a Catholic upbringing.'

Stan felt his heart plummet because he knew the power of the Catholic Church. Ted had refused to turn before marrying Nuala, and Stan had been proud of him for not bowing to the quite considerable pressure from the priests, but Ted had had to agree to marry in Nuala's church and to bring any children up as Catholics. He had no bother with this, and supported Nuala in her faith, though he had very seldom darkened the door of the place himself.

'They have had a Catholic upbringing,' Stan protested desperately. 'They have never missed Mass on Sundays or the Holy Days, and they have been baptised into the Church and attend Catholic schools. Last year Molly was confirmed, and has made her First Communion. What more do you want?'

'She did that because Nuala was alive and Catholicism was drummed into my daughter from the

day she was born,' Biddy said icily. 'What chance have they got to continue that, living here with you, a Protestant?'

'I'm not a Protestant,' Stan said. 'Religion makes no odds to me. I went to Sunday school until I began work and then never went to church again until I married Phoebe, and we brought Ted up the same way.'

Stan was unaware that he had made things worse for himself, cooked his own goose, as it were.

An outraged Biddy spat, 'It just gets worse and worse. You, Mr Maguire, are a heathen and I will not have my grandchildren growing up with a heathen. Whether you allow them to practise their religion or not isn't the issue. It is a matter of example. Why should they go to church when you do not? No, I'm sorry, I would be failing in my Catholic duty if I left the children with you. I will have a word with the priest after the funeral and see what he says about it.'

Stan felt the blood in his veins turn to ice. He knew he could indeed lose the children if the priest backed Biddy. And why wouldn't he? In his experience, Catholics stuck together over religious issues and the Church's power was immense.

Molly, drying dishes in the kitchen, had no idea of the turn the conversation was taking in the living room, but she was disappointed enough anyway. She had had such high hopes of her maternal grandmother and hoped she would help her cope without the love and support of her parents. However, when Molly first saw her grandmother come in with her granddad, she thought that Biddy looked grim rather than sad.

But, she remembered her mother saying she shouldn't judge people by the way they looked. She had also said that although her parents had been cross with her for marrying her father, before that they had loved her very much, too much perhaps. And so, when Molly met her grandmother, she told her quite truthfully that she was pleased to meet her at last.

Biddy just gave a grunt, which was hardly encouraging but Molly was sure she would feel better with food inside her and she was proud of the casserole dish she had produced with the help of Hilda. But Biddy seemed not to like it at all. She said the meat was tough and the vegetables stringy, the potatoes should have been on longer and the gravy was tasteless.

This was the tone of the conversation around the table, broken only by the way she was continually finding fault with Kevin. She ordered him to sit up straight, use his knife and fork properly, to eat his dinner, not just move it around his plate, wipe his mouth and definitely not to talk with his mouth full. Really, Kevin couldn't seem to do right for doing wrong and it wasn't just what her grandmother said, but the snappy way she said it. Molly wasn't surprised to see her little brother's eyes brimming with tears more than once and he had seemed quite relieved to be going to bed.

Molly too was relieved to be away from the woman for a while and had readily offered to wash and dry the dishes. But once in the kitchen, she tried to excuse her grandmother: she was likely tired because she had had a long journey. Molly finished drying the dishes and put the things away, made a pot of tea for the three of them and took it out on a tray.

She didn't notice the uncomfortable silence, nor the stricken look on her grandfather's face, for she decided she would try harder to get to know her grandmother and concentrate on the one link they had, the one thing she would like to know about.

As she handed her a cup of tea she said, 'Can you tell me, Grandmother, what my mother was like as a little girl?'

Biddy's lips pursed still further and she almost spat out, 'Aye, I'll tell you – not that you'll want to hear it, for your mother was a bold and disobedient girl. She showed scant regard for her parents, was only interested in pursuit of her own pleasures and even went against the teachings of the Church and married a man of another faith, or as I have found out today, a man of no faith at all.'

The words were said with such malice that Molly recoiled. It was the very last thing that she had expected the woman to say, and she suddenly knew that her grandmother wouldn't be one bit sorry she hadn't made it up with her daughter before she died. She somehow doubted she had ever felt sorry about anything in the whole of her life.

'Of course,' Biddy went on, 'we only have ourselves to blame for the way Nuala turned out for we both spoiled her. When she wrote that letter saying that she wanted to marry a non-Catholic, Thomas John was so shocked he dropped dead of a heart attack. So that is your fine mammy for you, the sort who kills her own father.'

Tears were now pouring from Molly's eyes and Stan put his arm around her. 'Here, here, the child doesn't need this sort of carry-on. Have some compassion, woman. If you spoke the truth and what Nuala wrote in the letter caused your husband to have a heart attack, then I am sorry, but you must see that it was the last thing in the world that Nuala would have wanted or expected to happen.'

'She knew he would be upset. She wasn't stupid.'

'She wasn't cruel either,' Molly burst out. 'She wouldn't mean that to happen.'

'Your opinion wasn't asked, miss,' Biddy snapped. 'Nor is it welcome, and I will thank you not to speak until you are spoken to. To spare the rod is to ruin the child totally and I see that that is what has happened to both you and that brother of yours. Well, there will be none of that with me, I'll tell you. I will put manners on the pair of you if it's the last thing I do.'

Molly stared at her. What influence could she have on either of them? After the funeral this horrible woman would go back to her own life on the little farm in Ireland and Molly would live with her granddad and gradually come to terms with her loss and help her little brother to cope too.

'What do you mean?' she said, almost challenging.

Biddy heard the tone and it annoyed her. She would soon have that temper knocked out of her, she thought. 'I'll tell you what I mean, my girl,' she spat out. 'When you come to live with me over in Ireland, you'll find life no bed of roses.'

'Come to live with you in Ireland?' Molly repeated, managing to hide the shiver of distaste that ran through her. 'I don't know you. I'm not going to live with you. I'm staying here with Granddad and so is Kevin.'

'No, that's where you are wrong. You are a Catholic because of your mother, who at least started you off on the right road, and you must be reared as a Catholic.'

'I don't care about being a Catholic,' Molly shouted at Biddy. 'And there is no way I am coming to live with you,' adding, probably unwisely, but too upset to care, 'I don't even like you very much.'

'Your likes and what you want will not come into this at all,' Biddy snapped. 'And there is no good turning on the waterworks,' she went on, as tears of helplessness squeezed from Molly's eyes. 'You will find they don't work with me.'

Molly turned anguished eyes to her grandfather. 'Granddad,' she cried. 'Say this isn't true. We're going to stay with you. You promised.'

Stan's eyes slid from Molly's to Biddy's gloating ones and then back to Molly, and because she deserved the truth he said, 'I may find my hands are tied in this.'

'Oh, Granddad, no,' Molly cried, and flung herself into Stan's arms.

As he held the weeping child, he glared at Biddy and knew when she took the children from him she would also take away his reason for living.

THREE

Stan was astounded at the numbers who attended the funeral of Ted and Nuala on 26 April. Paul Simmons had helped him make all the arrangements and had insisted on paying for everything. He had closed the factory as a mark of respect, but even so, Stan was amazed by those from the workforce who attended. Ted, Paul said, was very well thought of by everyone who met him, and many of the men who'd shaken Stan by the hand and commiserated with him on his loss said similar things. So also, it seemed, was Nuala liked and the pews were packed with neighbours and special friends of hers, mothers she met at the school gates, and those from the Mothers' Union she used to attend regularly. Many were in tears.

Added to this, all of Paul's family came too – his father and mother, and two sisters and their husbands, all of whom still remembered what they had owed to Ted. They seemed genuinely shocked by his death and that of his young wife. Not that it was spoken of openly and certainly not in front of the children, who had both insisted on attending.

Molly had remained dry-eyed, her distress and sense of loss too deep for tears, though she held on to Kevin's hand to take comfort from the child as well as to give it, as the tears dribbled down his cheeks ceaselessly.

As they stood at the graveside, they were warmed by the bright sun shining down from a sky of Wedgwood blue, and somehow this made the tragic deaths even more poignant. As the clods of earth fell with dull thuds on the coffins they seemed to reverberate in Molly's brain. Dead! Dead! Dead! Kevin's sobs became more audible and Bidy moved towards the child purposefully, but he pushed her away and turned instead to his grandfather. Stan held the little boy's shuddering body tight. He didn't urge him to stop crying either thinking he had a good enough reason to break his heart.

He envied him in a way because he would have liked the opportunity to go home now and lock the door and cry his eyes out. Instead, he knew he had to lead the mourners to the room at the back of the Lyndhurst pub which Paul Simmons had booked, and make small talk with the people who had come to pay their respects.

When he'd first been discussing the funeral arrangements with Mr Simmons, Stan, who had thought the mourners would only amount to a handful, said he intended to invite them back to the house. Mr Simmons had said he thought a room at a pub might be better and Stan, not up to arguing and certainly not with a toff, had agreed reluctantly.

He had thought though the few people he had anticipated coming would look silly and maybe feel out of place, but it wasn't that way at all. He looked at the crush of people around him in the room the pub had allocated them and was glad he had agreed. Kevin still held tight to his hand as Father Clayton, who had said the Requiem Mass, approached them.

Father Clayton liked Stan, with whom he was not above sparring and joking, as he had liked Ted, and thought them fine men. He couldn't understand for the life of him why they hadn't turned Catholic and embraced the one true faith.

That day though, Kevin's large brown eyes still swam with tears as he turned them on the priest and demanded, 'What did God want with my mammy and daddy?'

Father Clayton didn't have an answer that would satisfy the child. 'We don't understand the ways of God, Kevin.'

'Not even you?'

'Not even me.'

'Well, then,' Kevin said. 'What's the point of it all? That means that God can go round doing what He likes and you just say we can't understand and that.' He stamped his foot suddenly and cried in a high voice full of hurt and confusion, 'I want to know. I think we needed Mammy and Daddy much more than He did.'

'Kevin!' The name was said like a pistol shot.

Kevin jumped and his eyes were full of foreboding as he watched his grandmother approach. 'Now you see the level of my concern that I explained to you this morning when I called in to introduce myself and arrange an appointment?' Bidy complained to Father Clayton. 'The child has not even been taught how to address a priest correctly, and as for questioning the ways of our Good Lord, well, words fail me totally.'

Before the priest had time to reply, Stan burst in, 'I think Kevin has a perfect right to ask what manner of God it was at all who allowed his parents to be taken away, and who else to ask but the priest? So you just leave him alone.' He turned to Father Clayton and went on before Bidy could speak, 'We're taught that God loves us, aren't we? Well, He sure as hell didn't show much love to poor Nuala and Ted. That's how I feel and so I know exactly what young Kevin means.'

So did Father Clayton, and he was glad he had been the one assigned to take the Mass and not Father Monahan, for he would have torn the child to ribbons if he had been silly enough to say those things in front of him. As for Stan, a non-Catholic, Father Monahan would have a total lack of understanding for his pain. To Father Monahan, Catholicism and the pursuit of it was all that mattered. He was like the maternal grandmother, just recently arrived from Ireland, no doubt a devout and ardent Catholic, but not a woman he could take to at all. Father Clayton turned to her now as she burst out, 'D'you hear that, Father? Blasphemy, and before the child too. As if I could leave a child in a home where such views are felt and, even worse, expressed. The sooner I get them both to Ireland the better I'll like it.'

'Come now ...' the priest began soothingly.

He got no further, for what the women had said had penetrated Kevin's brain. He had been shocked into silence when she had shouted at him, but now he said, 'What do you mean about going to Ireland?'

'Just what I say,' Bidy almost hissed. 'You and your sister are coming to live with me.'

'Oh no I'm not! I ain't,' Kevin cried desperately. 'I'm staying with my granddad, I am. Aren't I, Granddad?' He appealed as Stan stayed silent. 'Tell her, Granddad. Go on, tell her.'

'Ah, yes, tell me?' Bidy mocked.

'Have you no shame?' Stan demanded of her coldly. 'We have just buried the child's parents. You might be holier than I am, but there isn't a kind bone in your body.'

'But it ain't true, is it?' Kevin cried. At the grave expression on his granddad's face, he felt suddenly cold, afraid and lonely as he insisted, 'Say it ain't true, Granddad. Tell her.'

'May your God forgive you,' Stan said, picking Kevin up in his arms, 'for I will struggle to do so.'

Father Clayton watched Stan stride across the room and knew he was going to go somewhere quiet and explain to the child that his suffering was far from over yet. That now he had to go to some alien place with a woman he was so obviously scared of and live there until he was adult and could choose for himself. And tell him too there wasn't a damned thing either of them could do about it. The priest felt suddenly terribly dispirited and heavy, as if his body was filled with lead.

‘They’re both wilful, those children,’ Biddy said fiercely. ‘Too fond of getting their own way and totally disrespectful.’

‘You don’t think it’s just that they are both still in shock and missing their parents, and maybe a little afraid of the future?’ the priest put in mildly.

‘I don’t go along with all this psychological claptrap,’ Biddy said. ‘Their parents are dead and gone, and that’s that, and it is obvious they will have to live with me. I am putting myself out too, you know? Do you think I want to start rearing children at my time of life?’

‘Then why do it?’ The words were out before the priest could stop them.

Biddy stared at him coldly. ‘I would have thought you of all people would not have to ask that question,’ she said, ‘I know my duty and do not approve of my grandchildren being brought up with a heathen.’

‘Stan Maguire is no heathen,’ Father Clayton said quite heatedly because the woman was annoying him greatly.

‘I don’t see how you can say that so categorically when the man worships nowhere and neither did his son,’ Biddy said. ‘As far as I am concerned that makes him a heathen and I do not want my grandchildren brought up by one such as him. I am surprised that you are not similarly concerned. I think I need to talk to your superior about this and I fully intend to do that.’

Father Clayton knew that Father Monahan would see things exactly as she did, and when she complained about his attitude, as he knew she would, he would be hauled over the coals himself. That in itself wouldn’t matter if anything had been achieved by his interference, but he knew it hadn’t. He sighed. Sometimes he found it difficult to follow the Church’s teaching in blind obedience as they were taught they had to, for he often found issues were not so black and white. He couldn’t help wishing that, regardless of Stan’s religion, or lack of it, the children could be left with the grandfather they loved.

Molly had watched the altercation and knew by her grandfather’s determined strides across the room with Kevin in his arms that he was hopping mad about something and the same something was making her brother cry. She sighed as she followed them, for she didn’t have to be a genius to guess what it was all about.

On the way in, Stan had noticed a couple of chairs set against the wall in the foyer and he sat down in one of these and set about telling Kevin what was going to happen to him and Molly, and why, despite his promise to them, he would be unable to fight against it.

That is where Molly found them and her heart constricted in pity for her distressed little brother, who was weak from weeping.

He turned anguished eyes towards her and said in a voice almost broken with sadness and disbelief, ‘Molly ... has our g-granddad told you wh-where we’ve got to go and – live?’

Molly nodded, and kneaed down beside Kevin and held his agitated hand between hers. Her heart hammered in her chest, her mouth was very dry and she felt the familiar lump in her throat, and willed herself not to cry.

‘But ... don’t want t-to live with her,’ Kevin said. ‘Sh-she’s horrible. I want to ... stay with G-Granddad.’

‘So do I,’ Molly said fiercely. ‘I hate her as much as you do, but I am not afraid of her and you needn’t worry, because I will look after you, fight for you if I have to.’

Kevin looked at the sister who had always looked out for him before and said, ‘Promise?’ He didn’t know if he believed in the power of a promise any more. Hadn’t his granddad promised? But it was all he had.

Molly said without any hesitation at all, ‘I promise, Kevin. I swear it on the Bible.’

‘Ah, Molly,’ Kevin said, and he leaned towards her with a sigh and she put her arms around him.

As Stan's arms encircled both children he felt a sharp pain in his chest. So, he thought, this is what it feels like when a person's heart is broken in two.

* * *

After the funeral was over, Biddy made her way to the presbytery and Father Monahon who had been expecting her. He listened to her proposals to take the children to Ireland and fully approved. In fact, he couldn't see any viable alternative. In his opinion the sooner the children were removed from the clutches of their grandfather the better. Their immortal souls were at stake.

'I'm gratified that you feel the same as I do,' Biddy said. 'At my time of life it is not easy to tie myself down with the worry and burden of raising children again, but I know where my duty lies. I must say, I was surprised that your curate didn't share your view on this matter,' she went on as Father Clayton entered the room.

Father Monahon's cold eyes slid over to the younger priest as he asked testily, 'Is this true?'

'In a way,' Father Clayton admitted. 'Mrs Sullivan has just said she would find it difficult raising the children. Added to that, they seem so happy with Stan. They have both just lost their parents and are naturally distraught over it. I thought perhaps taking them away from everything that was familiar ...'

'You thought,' Father Monahon mimicked mockingly. 'That's your trouble, you think too much. As a priest, you don't have to think, but you do have to obey the teachings of the Church. It might be good for the children to get away from memories and get some healthy living and country air into their lungs, but that is neither here nor there. If they are upset, that is the very time when they would need the comfort and support of the one true church and a loving grandmother to bring them up correctly.'

Father Clayton knew there wasn't a loving bone in Biddy Sullivan's body and he knew too that wouldn't matter a jot as far as Father Monahon was concerned. If she lashed the children mercilessly, verbally, physically or both, she would still be considered a fine woman in his superior's book, if she saw to it that they attended Mass and the sacraments.

Father Monahon shook hands with Biddy and said, 'I would suggest that you see the authorities as quickly as possible and set all this in motion. Rest assured, you will have my full support.'

Father Clayton said not a word. There was nothing left to say.

That night, Kevin had a horrific nightmare. As he was sharing his granddad's bed so that a room could be given up to Biddy, Stan was quick to comfort and reassure, but long after his granddad had fallen asleep again, Kevin had lain wide-eyed, for though he ached with tiredness and his eyes smarted from lack of sleep, he was afraid of closing them.

Next morning, Kevin was listless his face was as white as a sheet, his eyes were red-rimmed. But Biddy didn't believe in children having a lie-in. There was no time to lay about on a farm and the sooner they got to grips with that the better. Biddy had a host of jobs she wanted Molly to do and she listed these at the breakfast table. As well as the shopping and cooking, Biddy wanted her to tackle the family wash and then clean the house from top to bottom.

Molly said nothing, though she looked across the table to her grandfather and saw him purse his lips. He hated the thought of his granddaughter working so hard all day. The child was no slouch anyway and had been tremendous with her mother so ill in hospital, taking on a lot of the housework and cooking. Both he and his son had given the child a hand. And then, of course, there was always Hilda, who had showed what a true friend she was.

Biddy, however, had taken an instant dislike to Hilda and told her firmly that her help was no longer required, not that she intended to fill this gap herself. She did nothing but carp and complain

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