

ONLY WITH BLOOD

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BLOOD

THERESE DOWN



LION FICTION

*For God, who makes all things possible, and for my
children who never fail to inspire me.*

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Published by Lion Fiction
an imprint of
Lion Hudson plc
Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road
Oxford OX2 8DR, England
www.lionhudson.com/fiction

ISBN 978 1 78264 135 3
e-ISBN 978 1 78264 136 0

First edition 2015

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the UK, May 2015, LH26

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks go to my colleague, Andrew Jackson, who helped me find the title of the book. And to Pam Rhodes, for all her encouragement.

*“The altar of liberty totters when it is
cemented only with blood.”*

Daniel O’Connell

CHAPTER ONE

It was cold. Frost stopped the breath of the land, seized the breath of those who moved upon it. Winter would come early and it would be harsh. Jack Flynn thanked God for a good harvest for the cows would need early hay. Lately, he felt more keenly the pain of rheumatism in his hands. This creeping infirmity and a cough which daily grew fiercer were insistent reminders to Flynn that he could no longer put off marriage if he were to have sons to inherit his land. The alternative of selling to strangers the land his great-grandfather had purchased over a hundred years before was unthinkable. And so, this evening in 1943 at the age of forty-three, though he would rather have faced any kind of physical test of his courage, he put on his only suit and set off on foot towards the village of Dunane and the house of Malachai Brett, the matchmaker.

“Jack Flynn, come in, come in.” Malachai Brett was a small, wizened man with a red nose from too much poteen and a cap and braces without which it was impossible to imagine him. His hands were raw and gnarled with years of picking rocks, handling baling twine and rough ploughshares, but their gestures were expansive and he greeted his visitor with a ready smile. He was, though, greatly puzzled by this visit from Jack Flynn, who, in thirty years of neighbourly acquaintance, Malachai had never seen down a pint or laugh out loud.

“Will you have a drop of the hard stuff with me, Jack? ’Twill drive out the cold.”

“No.”

“Of course, of course – ’tis early, right enough. Will you have tea?”

“No, no.”

Jack shifted uneasily, spat into the open grate, then spoke. “I want to get hitched, Brett. I have enough money and land...” He could not go on. Malachai struggled to suppress an amazed guffaw but he checked himself – he had seen what a thump from Jack Flynn could do to a mocking face. He could not, however, think of anything to say in response to this most unexpected of announcements. After what seemed a long time, Jack turned to face the matchmaker, fully expecting to see him purple with suppressed laughter. Instead he found only a mildly bemused expression and Brett’s eyes fixed on the hearth.

“Well?” barked Jack.

“Well,” answered Malachai distantly. Then he seemed to arrive at definite thought. “Did you have anyone in mind?”

“That’s what you’re for!” came the gruff reply. The clock in the corner ticked smugly and the shadows grew longer as the early winter evening seeped across the village. Malachai busied himself adding coal to the fire, poking it into embers till it smoked and caught.

“Now, Jack, forgive me, but you’re no young fella.” Without turning to face him, Malachai registered the sharp rise of Jack’s head and he continued quickly, “So we have to be careful – extra careful – about this match. You don’t want an auld one that’s no good for... breeding.” Malachai met Jack’s eye, risked a conspiratorial wink, regretted it, and moved on. “Now let’s see... there’s Nancy Madigan, over near Darcy’s. She’s not a bad catch – ten years in the convent at Cashmel and a fine pair of hips on her. I’d say she’s good for a few years yet, Jack.” Jack was startled at the image of Nancy Madigan swaying full-hipped through his milking parlour, stirring stew on his range with her wisps of carrot hair and plump, veined cheeks. People would say it was all he could get.

“She will not do.”

“Ah, now, Jack,” began Malachai slowly, beginning to relish a little Jack’s discomfort and intrigued by the idea that Flynn was

finally succumbing to carnal desire, “it never pays to be too hasty. Nancy’s a good woman. She’ve a fine strong back on her and she’d make a fine mother. She’ve a hundred or two coming to her, too, when her auld fella goes – won’t be long, now.”

“I don’t want money. Who else?” The clock ticked itself to sleep. Malachai rose from his fireside chair, wound the clock, and lit a gas lamp.

“Is it a looker you’re after, Jack?” Jack scowled more intently at the fire. “Well, now,” continued Malachai, already seeing the incredulity on the faces of the other men as he related this extraordinary episode over a few pints at the local bar, “that’s a different league altogether. Tell me, Jack, was it a young one you were looking for?”

“For crying out loud, Brett, will you stop your coddling around!” Jack rose from his chair and rounded on Brett so that the matchmaker leapt backwards in alarm, dropping his taper. “You’re like a dog sniffing round a heap of dung with your stupid questions. It’s a simple enough request, isn’t it?”

“Ah, now, Jack, calm down. It’s not often I have to do all the asking! Usually, the man have someone in mind at least, or else, it’s the father who comes, looking for a match for his son.” Malachai, seeing Jack’s jaw clench, did his best to feign matter of factness but Jack did not miss the tremor in his hands as he retrieved the taper and put it back in its tin on the press. “Now I’m only trying to help you, Jack.”

Flynn crossed the room and threw open the door with such force it smashed against the wall and made the little window pane shudder in its frame. In the doorway he turned.

“To hell wit’ you, Malachai Brett! Sure what could the likes of you do for a real man, anyways?” With his pride momentarily restored by this show of bravado, Jack Flynn set off to his lonely farmhouse. The door shut, the fire roaring like laughter in its grate, Malachai hugged his knees in anticipation of relating this meatiest of events to his wife and sons when they returned from evening mass.

* * *

The following evening saw Malachai in his usual corner seat of the little bar in Dunane, surrounded by sceptical farmers. “I swear to ye, lads, he be after a woman to warm his old bones. She have to be good-looking, too.”

“Did he mention any names?” asked one listener.

“He did not. I suggested Nancy Madigan, but he turned up his nose – ‘She will not do!’” Malachai adopted Flynn’s snarl, narrowed his eyes, and scowled at each farmer as Flynn had scowled at him the previous evening. The imitation was a good one, capturing the tight-lippedness and barely controlled fury which seemed always to set Flynn apart from his fellows. The listeners laughed.

“Who the hell would want to marry him anyway, the dirty auld beggar – and him past forty?” enjoined a younger man who would have liked the means to marry himself but was some way off yet.

An older man, married with several children, added, “Sure, would he know what to do with a woman, Brett? Could you show him?” More raucous laughter. A few became uncomfortable at the turn the conversation was taking and glanced nervously at the door as if Flynn could walk in at any moment, though he hadn’t been known to do so in twenty years.

“Away wit’ you, O’Riordan, you dirty dog,” replied Malachai, determined to regain his position as respected narrator. “What he does wit’ her is his own concern and none of mine.”

“’Tis a skivvy Flynn is looking for – nothing else. He’ve no time for the rest of it,” said another quietly, from the depths of his pint.

“Ah, he’s not a bad-looking man now,” mused Malachai. “A fine dancer and a handsome man in his youth.”

“What?” The young man spoke again, inexplicably piqued by this turn of events. “Sure he’ve less hair than Malachai, now, and a scowl on his puss, boy, would stop a clock!” The company

erupted in laughter at this petulant put-down and someone slapped the young man on the back.

“Don’t worry, Dan – he’ve no chance against you in these races.”

“He’s big, mind,” conceded the lugubrious man from his pint mug. “I wouldn’t like to take him on.”

A new voice carried clear above the others from the bar. “Have he much brass, do you think, Malachai?” The company turned to observe Mick Spillane, leaning against the bar and listening with increasing interest to the banter.

“Well, now, Mick,” began Malachai in his best narrative tones, “he must have a fair few shillings in it for he’ve no one to feed except himself and he never drives a cow back home from market. That farm was paid for a long time ago. Then his auld fella must have left a tidy sum...”

There was a silence during which the older, weather-beaten men considered how well off they’d be without their families to feed. And in that moment, the germ of a plan took root in Mick Spillane’s head. Mick had four daughters and no sons. Times were hard and two of the daughters were still at home. The elder, Maureen, was no looker and likely to take the veil. The youngest of his daughters, on the other hand, was a willful one with a mane of dark hair and a brain beneath it which was causing Mick considerable consternation. She would not, she insisted, be married off to some ignorant culchie. She would, she declared, go to Dublin and study at Trinity. “She will and her foot!” thought Spillane and snorted into his pint. “Malachai,” he said at last, resolutely wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and indicating outside with a jerk of his head, “a word.”

* * *

In 1921, aged twenty-one, Jack Flynn had been part of a flying column which ambushed and killed four Black and Tans posted to the village of Cappawhite. The column had been instructed by Michael Collins himself, and by the time the ambush occurred,

the men were as familiar with the press of a rifle as a ploughshare on their shoulders. That was the high point of Jack Flynn's life. Now in his forties, life was a maelstrom of labour in all weathers, long, lonely evenings and dark, quiet mornings. He had immersed himself in hard work, firstly intent on impressing his brutish father, then on making more money than any of his fellow farmers.

Immediately following the murders of the four "Tans", Jack imagined he had achieved heroic status in the village. His vicious temper, he was convinced, would be regarded as the mark of a Republican activist of the highest calibre. He half expected Michael Collins to knock on his door and recruit him to the cause. His inability to relate to anyone on a social level Jack chose to view as evidence of an intellect disdainful of trivia. But within a year, guilt had usurped the triumphalism he had felt following his part in the Cappawhite ambush. He woke sweating from nightmares in which he relived that night and heard with a clarity he could not consciously recall, the pleas for mercy and cries of terror uttered by the four men whose lives he and his comrades had extinguished. Alone and with no one to reassure him of his righteousness in dispatching enemy occupiers who had undoubtedly committed their own acts of atrocity, Jack grew increasingly saturnine and depressed. More than anything, he was ashamed that he had shot men in their beds. No matter how much he tried to justify to himself what he had done, he could not escape the fact that there was no bravery in killing men who could not defend themselves.

Jack threw himself entirely into hard work and abandoned all attempts at social intercourse. No one invited him to drink in the local bar, and, in spite of his good-looks, no girl had the opportunity to soften the line of his mouth with a life-giving kiss. His only part in village life was when he drove his horse and cart to the chapel on Sunday mornings. He had never missed mass.

Jack never discovered exactly what had happened to his mother. She disappeared when he was a small child. His father, one still-black morning, had left for the fields as usual. Jack had listened to his sighs and curses as he heaved himself out of bed, the heavy tread of his boots to the ladder, the descending knock of boot on wood. Then there was silence, broken intermittently by the hiss of spilt water on the hob, the clatter of metal on metal as he made his tea and the bang as he set his tin mug upon the table. Finally, there was the resounding thud of the door slamming shut and the house shuddered into breath. But on this occasion, his mother did not quietly open Jack's door, tread lightly across his room, and part the curtains on the early morning. She did not turn to his bed, smiling broadly, and say in a half-whisper, "And how's my Jack? There's porridge and nice, warm milk in it for good boys – come on downstairs now, pet." She did not bend to kiss him, her plait curling around the nape of her neck and falling against his face, tickling.

He had waited. He waited and waited until the sun clearly burst through the curtain gaps and he could hear the hens scratching and cackling in the yard. When the voice of Tom McCormack the dairyman called his father's name and asked him for the churns, Jack began to panic. This late and no sign of his mother! Leaping from his bed, he ran into her room. No sign. Heart thumping, he descended the ladder to the kitchen. It was cold. The range had not been stoked and the porridge can was still hanging in the corner. He reached for the door handle and heaved the heavy oak door towards himself. Then, using his right hand, he pulled himself around it to stand uncertainly in his night shift, not daring to cry out her name. No one noticed him. No one came. He turned and went back inside, pushing the great door away from himself and shutting out the metallic clangs of churns being hoisted onto Tom McCormack's cart, the gruff exchanges of his father and Tom Mac as they calculated the day's milk value.

Shivering with cold, Jack hauled himself up the ladder and climbed back into his bed, covering his head against the light. If he just waited long enough, she would come. He remembered his father, a few days later, on the only occasion of near-tenderness he could recall, roughly taking Jack on his knee and saying in a tone jarringly confidential, “Remember this, Jackie-boy, women are dirty, treacherous whoores and they rot a man’s soul, d’you hear me, soneen?” Jack had nodded, wanting to disagree, to say that Mammy was not those things, but he did not dare. “Good boy,” ended the brief homily and his father had ruffled his hair. Suddenly overcome with sorrow and disarmed by the moment of rare warmth, Jack had been unable to prevent the screwing up of his face and the outpouring of hot tears.

“When is my mammy coming back home?” He had hit the floor with a thud and began to bawl, his mouth a startled tunnel from which issued at once all his childish despair. Rivulets of snot poured with tears around the curves of his mouth and chin while his tiny chest heaved with the effort of drawing breath. “Mammy, Mammy!” he gasped again and again until his father roared, “Will you stop your wailing, you scut! Your mammy’s not coming back, d’you hear me? She’s not ever coming back so get that through your thick skull. Get used to it.” Jack had stopped calling, but, still sobbing, he pushed himself up on all fours, then to his feet. He crossed the kitchen to the ladder and the sanctuary of his bed. He never cried aloud for her again. Forty years later, as he walked his cows back to the field after milking, Jack spat at the memory. He had never dealt with the terrible grief at losing his mother so suddenly and inexplicably. It waited for him, just below consciousness. He often woke from dreams of abandonment.

Over the years, he had come close to hating her. He understood that somehow she was to blame for his fear of womankind. Now, Jack was sure that Brett would have told the whole parish of his wish to wed. He blushed in the biting wind and lashed at the nearest cow’s hindquarters. Her startled lowing set all ears

twitching, and the herd’s heavy shoulders moved faster away from the man and towards the sanctuary of their frozen field.

* * *

Caitlin Spillane was seventeen when her father decided she would marry Jack Flynn. She was a beauty with a quick wit which caused her teachers to shake their heads in lamentation that she was not a boy, for surely it was a shame to waste such a brain. She had come top of all the pupils in the local school in her Intermediate Certificate examinations. Her bold assertions that she would try for a scholarship to Trinity College, Dublin, only made her mother laugh disparagingly. “You will do no such thing, Caitlin Spillane! Set your mind on simpler things. Farmers’ daughters do not go away on their own to Dublin or England. Unless of course you’d like to be a nun, like Maureen?”

“I will not!” Caitlin would reply and toss her lush hair as if to defy the very notion that such beauty could be shorn and denied. She planned to consort with educated men – doctors and politicians, city men with suits and pocket watches and shiny shoes who had manners and washed themselves regularly. She would look at her father, at his filthy boots and the streaks of cow dung down his trousers, the baling twine keeping them up, and she would try to remember the last time he had washed more than his face and hands. He would catch her scowling at him in disgust when he spat in the fire or wiped his sleeve across a running nose.

“What are you scobbing at?” he’d demand gruffly, nonetheless reddening at her evident revulsion.

“Oh, nothing,” she’d reply in a tone which left little doubt she meant precisely that.

* * *

At night, Caitlin would sit before the large mirror in the room she shared with her sister, Maureen, and brush her long shiny hair. “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself, preening in front of the

mirror like an auld jackdaw?” chided Maureen irritably, hitting her pillow in a gesture which indicated her wish to sleep.

“Isn’t jealousy a sin, Maureen?” came the tart reply, addressed still to the mirror.

“Who’s jealous? Aren’t you fierce proud now, of yourself, for a culchie’s daughter, Caitlin? A little humility wouldn’t do you any harm, so it wouldn’t. And pride cometh before a fall – don’t forget that, miss high-and-mighty.”

“Ah, cop onto yourself, Maureen. Read your Bible.”

* * *

The milking over for another day, Jack eased off his boots and then sat contemplating the fire, a mug of strong tea in his hand. But this night, the sharp rap of hawthorn stick on oak jolted him from his choleric reverie. He was so unused to the idea of a visitor that he struggled to make sense of the sound which had shocked him. Wits gathered, he strode to the door and swung it open. Malachai Brett stood before him, obsequious but with the flint of an advantage in his eye. The big man blocked the doorway, light seeping around his heavy frame. “What the hell do you want, Brett?”

Undaunted, Malachai assumed the confidence of an important messenger. “Let me in, Jack,” he said quietly. “I’ve some very interesting news for you.” Jack, curious in spite of himself, stood back to admit the matchmaker. “This is cosy, now, Jack,” continued Brett, surveying Jack’s filthy kitchen.

“What do you want, Brett – spit it out.” Suddenly weary, Jack rubbed his forehead with an aching hand. The rheumatic pain in his knuckles was severe enough that even this movement caused him to wince.

“You recall our conversation the other day?” began Malachai, in as assertive a tone as he could manage, given the scowl on Flynn’s face. “Ah, will you sit down, for the love of God, Jack, and hear what I have to say?” Jack sat heavily, eyeing Malachai all the while. “I’ve been doing a bit of discreet research, Jack, and I’ve

found the very young one you’ll want.” Malachai allowed himself a wide grin which showed his sharp black and yellow teeth. Like an old fox, thought Jack.

“Who?”

“Caitlin Spillane - Mick Spillane’s youngest. A rare young one. Sure she haven’t left school yet, and she’s fine looking, boy.”

Jack struggled to remain calm. “I don’t know her,” he growled.

“Jack, Jack, you’re a hard man! Have you not seen her? She be at mass every Sunday with Mick Spillane and the rest of them. She’s a good girl, Jack – she’ve a fierce brain in her head, they say.”

“It’s not her brains I’m concerned with,” Jack spat into the kitchen grate. “Can she cook? Can she clean? Can she milk a cow?” He rose, walked over to the centre of the room, and faced Malachai square on. “Can she keep her mouth shut and keep out of my way when she’s not wanted? She won’t be needing brains around here, Brett.”

For the first time, Malachai started to appreciate the enormity of what he was doing. He could not proceed in making a present of this young girl to this tyrant. A joke was a joke and there were the makings of a very good next instalment of this compelling tale for the amusement of the men in the pub, but there was nothing funny about the turn things were taking. He would have no further part in the sacrifice. “Now, Jack,” he began, getting slowly to his feet and making towards the door, not a little concerned that his progress may be impeded, “I’ll leave you in peace, so. Obviously, I’ve made a mistake. She’s not at all suitable. Sorry for the trouble, now. Good night.”

Malachai’s withdrawal of the girl could not have worked better to hook Jack once and for all, if it had been planned. “Where are you going, Brett? I want more information!”

Malachai paused and half turned towards Flynn. “I wasn’t entirely honest with you, Jack. I was trying to do Mick Spillane a favour, but to tell the truth, this young one is bad news. She’ve a

sharp tongue on her and she's fierce proud and as vain! A man of your... stature wouldn't be bothered with a scut like that. I think Spillane is half-afraid no one will want her, the mouth on her. I'm sorry, Jack. Good luck."

"I want to see her, Brett."

Malachai heard the determination in Jack's voice. Well, if Flynn and Spillane negotiated the dowry between themselves, at least Malachai would not get his commission. There was some relief in that.

"I don't think it's a good idea, Jack," replied Malachai with as much dignity and wisdom as he could convey in his tone. Then, with one hand on the door handle, he placed his cap on his head with the other. "Good night to you now, Jack." And he stepped outside.

"Go on, clear off, Brett!" shouted Jack after his back. "Who needs you, anyway? I'll see Spillane myself!"

For answer, Malachai did not turn around but raised his hand in acknowledgment, nodding sagely at the expected response. "Ah, well – God's will be done," he consoled himself quietly and, turning his collar up against the biting wind, quickened his pace home.

* * *

There had not been the feared reprisals after the Cappawhite ambush in 1921. The bodies were removed by Tipperary police around nine o'clock the following morning. They had discovered them at the barracks in the pitch dark of the previous night but fled home, terrified, lest they met the same fate. English soldiers arrived in Cappawhite about a week later, walked through the main street, and went into the bar in the evening, scrutinizing every man's face. None met their eyes. Those who had killed the Tans had come from a range of villages within a ten-mile radius of Cappawhite. Very few people could have said with any certainty who the men were who had pulled the triggers. And those who could would have died themselves before denouncing them.

At daybreak following the murders a group of silent villagers had climbed the hill to the Cappawhite barracks to see the corpses of the Black and Tans. Boys crossed their arms and contemplated the wounds, the glassy open eyes. Women covered their mouths and blessed themselves, whispered things to each other. Someone had fetched the priest from Dunane. Father Kinnealy, twenty-eight and inexperienced, had been in on the conspiracy from the start, burdened by a series of confessions before the murders. He paced up and down, making the sign of the cross over each dead man, fighting nausea but eager not to alienate his parishioners. The son of a Cashmel accountant, he was wholly unprepared for the rawness of rural life, yearned for the sanctuary of his books and the seminary study hall. One of the "Tans" was found fifty yards from the rest, his clenched fists full of scree. Someone had shot him in the gut and there was no telling how long it had taken him to die.

* * *

The night Malachai Brett brought news of Caitlin Spillane, Jack's nightmares began again. He woke sweating and rigid with fear from a horror which survived unconsciousness. He dreamt of babies, the slaughter of the innocents. They lay helpless in the road, chubby arms extended, hands dimpled as he had seen them in Madonna and Child pictures, but they had calves' heads and their eyes rolled in piteous fear. They were cold and naked and desperate to be comforted. At first Jack was beside himself with concern, maddened by his inability to help these calf-children for he didn't have a clue how to bring them solace. He thought of bringing them hay but they needed milk. Where were their mothers? He could not provide them with sustenance. Where were their mothers? He looked around crazily, his ears full of the desperate bawling of the cow children. A man approached. He wore boots and the customary drab garb of the farmer. He carried a pitchfork. Jack thought he was his father, but couldn't be sure. He might, he thought, be the cow children's father. The man

stood over the babies and raised his pitchfork. “What are you doing?” Jack cried, horrified at the man’s intentions.

“It is for the best,” the man had stated. “They’re no use, as you can see.” With that, he brought down the prongs of his pitchfork and, with one swift motion, impaled a cow-baby through the belly where it wriggled and screamed in agony.

“Stop, please, stop!” Jack had screamed, but the man pitched the child away behind him and set to killing the next. Blood ran over Jack’s boots and down the road, and he was assailed by a terrible grief. He woke sobbing.

* * *

Caitlin Spillane played the accordion beautifully. The local boys would watch her long white fingers, sure and nimble as they pressed and spanned the keys. They coveted the way she looked at the keys as she played, as if she cared for them in the tenderest fashion. She played at local dances, but few of the young boys danced to the waltzes, jigs, and reels which flowed from Caitlin’s accordion. They grouped awkwardly around her, hands in pockets, waiting for her to finish and occasionally plucking up the courage to ask her to dance. But Caitlin cared little for the longings of farmers’ sons and labourers. Sometimes she danced with them, but on summer nights she was more likely to pack away her instrument, give it to her father for safekeeping, and leave the dance hall alone. She preferred to walk home rather than wait for her father to stop drinking and drive her there in his horse and cart. That way she could indulge her reveries in rare solitude and peace. Caitlin’s disdain for ordinariness did not go unremarked by the local women. “Just look at that young one,” they would whisper, watching her as she whirled absently across the floor in the awkward embrace of some red-faced ploughboy. “You’d think she was a queen, boy, the puss on her! Isn’t vanity a terrible thing?”

“Sure ’tis. And her sister Maureen the quietest young one you’d ever come across and a grand girl wit’ it.”

“Give me Maureen any day of the week.”

Caitlin knew their sentiments and did not care. She would be eighteen and sit her Leaving Certificate exams the following year. Then, then she would be free. She was quite sure she could win her scholarship to Trinity. She knew that it was practically unheard of for a girl, let alone a rural girl, to go to university but her grades would be so good they would not refuse her. She would read a science, become a doctor, find a cure for a tropical disease – leave forever the world of cows and farming. And the clothes she would wear! Fitted bodices and skirts, elegant gloves and shiny, pointed shoes. And then, who knew? Europe? America? A marriage of minds with a handsome doctor? She would swap her accordion for a harp or a piano, and an audience of farmers for genteel gatherings of cultured people.

* * *

Sunday, and Jack strode up the aisle of the village church to his usual pew on the right, near the altar. But this particular Sunday he did not stare stonily ahead for the duration of the service. He stole quick glances to his left, then behind him in an attempt to catch the sloping shoulders and thick, greying hair of Mick Spillane. He barely registered the uncertain nods of acknowledgment as his eyes scanned people’s faces or the heads bending together to exchange surprised whispers at his uncharacteristic behaviour. When at last he located Spillane he scrutinized the two mantillaed heads to Spillane’s left. Now, which one was Caitlin? The girls were of equal height and both followed the mass in their missals, holding the books open with white gloved hands. Jack gave up and looked ahead again. He realized at last that his behaviour would have attracted attention and every one would know he was interested in the Spillanes. “Ah, to hell with them all!” he thought, though panic gripped him and his heart raced.

After mass, Jack made his way to the end of the pew with more haste than usual, genuflected and crossed himself stiffly, then strode with his heavy steps down the aisle and into the

autumn sunlight. He remained standing outside the church, nodding cursorily when people saluted him as they filed past. When at last he saw Mick Spillane he swallowed hard and greeted him with, “Are you right?”, his direct gaze leaving no doubt as to the intended recipient of his words.

“Jack – hullo there. Fine day.”

Jack reddened, unable to make any more social headway let alone express his purpose in stopping Spillane in his tracks. Spillane looked puzzled for an instant. He moved first one shoulder then the other to let people file past him as he stopped before Flynn. Then realization dawned. Malachai Brett had said he would speak to Flynn about Caitlin. Mick hadn’t bargained on being caught like this though, in public, not ten paces from his family, none of whom he had informed of the plan he was hatching to marry his youngest daughter to this man near his own age. Both men shuffled awkwardly. Spillane bent his head and spoke to Jack through barely parted lips.

“Is it Caitlin you’re wanting to talk about? I haven’t told her yet. Are you interested?” He looked up and searched the vivid, tormented eyes.

“I haven’t seen her yet, have I?” came the uncomfortable reply. Mick thought for a moment, looked around briefly to ascertain the whereabouts of his daughter, then called to her.

“Caitlin, come here a second. Say nothing” – the last injunction to Jack, who hardly needed warning.

Caitlin, puzzled that her father should be talking to the miserable old devil, Jack Flynn, took her leave of the school friends with whom she had been talking and approached her father. At once, Jack saw she was exceptionally pretty and she carried herself well – straight back, head up.

“What?” she said, nodding briefly to Jack then focusing on her father’s face. From that one word, Jack picked up her lack of respect for Mick and he straightened his back, assuming a stern expression.

“When is the next ceilidh? Aren’t you playing?” asked Mick.

“Yes. Why?”

“Isn’t it enough that I’m asking?”

Jack coughed to give his breath an outlet. Caitlin frowned and searched her father’s face for the meaning of this exchange but found only a warning in his eye to mind her manners.

“Next Saturday, at Dundrum,” she said sullenly, turning her sully gaze on Jack. She didn’t know why she was being asked to perform in this way; her father knew well enough when the next ceilidh was for he had already arranged to meet several people there. She watched a flush spread across Jack’s face. He had never struck her as one to blush. For a second, Jack met her eyes and was startled by their brightness.

“Is it alright if I go, now, da?” Caitlin asked, as politely as she could manage. Spillane was evidently pleased with his daughter’s behaviour. A man must be seen as master of his household.

“You can.” He did not catch the curl of her lip and the scorn in her eyes as she turned away from him but Jack did and he could not resist a smirk at Spillane’s expense. When she nodded at Jack to take her leave he regarded her levelly, nodded back. How clear and blue her eyes were, how lustrous her hair as she tossed it over her shoulder and walked away. There was not much fear in her.

“Well?” enquired Spillane, with the confidence of a man parading stock at a market.

“She will do,” said Jack, “but she’s spirited. She needs a few jerks on the reins, boy.” Spillane was surprised. Jack was shrewder than he thought.

“I wouldn’t lie to you, now, Jack.” Spillane became ingratiating. “She’s got a... way with her, alright, but nothing the right man can’t cure. Sure, she’s no match for the likes of you, Jack. No problem at all.” He eyed Jack and watched with satisfaction as Flynn straightened up under the flattery. “Do we have a bargain?” he ventured.

“We do.” And the two men shook hands, once, firmly, feeling the strength of each other’s grip.

“I’ll discuss terms with you later, so.” Mick regarded his boots, put his hands in his pockets. “There’re plenty would jump at Caitlin given half a chance, Jack. She’s a rare young one. I hadn’t thought of matching her now ’til Malachai said you might be interested. ’Tis a favour, really.” He looked up. Jack narrowed his eyes and curled his lip.

“You’ll get what she’s worth.” Jack walked away to where his horse was hitched and mounted his cart. He began the drive home. Mick watched him go for a few seconds, then rubbed his hands in sudden excitement. He had solved several problems at once; he had become comfortably well off, he had avoided the possibility of having to waste money on some half-baked scheme cooked up by Caitlin to get educated – and he had finally shown her who was boss.

* * *

For the rest of that day, Caitlin Spillane moved through Jack’s thoughts “like a fine filly”, he decided, “a filly in need of a master”. He drove his cows back to the field after milking, barely aware of the biting frost or the pain in his hands. The cows moved with a leisurely gait, the pungent warmth from their tightly packed bodies comforting in the darkness. Every now and then one of them would snort or low as if in need of reassurance in the pitch stillness. At the gate they paused patiently while Jack moved around them to open it, then they filed through as one. This night, Flynn felt keenly the loneliness he usually suppressed. As the last cow passed through the gate, he reached out with near tenderness to touch her rump. His cattle were indifferent to him and his welfare; he was part of their routine as they were part of his, yet there was comfort in that.

CHAPTER TWO

“Come on now. Come on wee Jack – no time for dawdling, darling – we must be back before dark to do your daddy’s tea.” Jack ran to his mother, face screwed up against the sun, curls bobbing, hands outstretched. “Sure, you’re too big to carry, Jack! How can Mammy carry a big boy like you?” Yet she lifted him all the same, using his momentum to whirl him off the ground and round twice in the air before she hugged him to her, crossing her arms under his backside. She kissed him once, twice, in the hollow of his neck, making his tummy tingle, and he squealed and chuckled in delight. “Come on, now, pet, let’s hurry.” She put him down, picked up her basket in her right hand, and grasped his soft hand with the other, which curled inside hers like a flower.

* * *

In the landscape between sleep and wakefulness, Jack followed himself and his mother down the road on a visit to his Aunt Maisie’s house in a village called Golden, seven miles from Dunane. They walked and hitched rides from passing farmers, fortified by milk from a jar and soda bread, which she carried in her basket. He wondered why the village was called Golden, but his mother didn’t know. She guessed it was because a beautiful lady had once lived there, who was the pride of the county, and she had long golden hair to her knees, which shone like the sun. All the men flocked to catch a glimpse of her, and her name was Mary. But it was just a guess, and she would smile at the wonder in his round eyes and the squint on his face as he tried to look

into her face in spite of the sun. “What happened her?” he had asked as they were jostled in some donkey cart.

“Well, ’twas very sad, for Mary got sick and died when she was still a young one, and no one was able to marry her.” But when she saw the distress on his face, she soothed him with promises that Mary with the gold hair was in heaven, and happy, for she was closer to the sun and with Jesus and all the angels.

She used to sing for him. She had a lilting, sweet voice, and she sang mournful ballads when he was tired. He would lie in his bed and watch her eyes. Sometimes they filled with tears, but she would clear them away and smile again. He loved to lose himself in the pictures conjured by her songs: of ladies weeping in fields of flowers and men on horses, riding away from love and into battle; children and maidens succumbed to untimely deaths or were exiled from the land they loved. But the one which moved her most, she told him, was about a lady who was turned into a swan and doomed to live alone on the River Moyle, until Jesus allowed her soul to enter heaven. He dreaded that tune, for always it meant she was unhappy. But there were other days – like the ones when they went to Aunt Maisie’s house – when she would be blithe and the songs would trip from her lips: light, rhythmic airs in which leprechauns schemed to keep their pots of gold or lovers conspired to meet by moonlight. She would pick him up and whirl him around and he felt happy that she was happy.

“You know what, Jack?” she would sometimes say. “You and I are songs. We are – everyone is.”

“Yeh,” he would answer, not understanding but eager to please her, and she would laugh, tousle his hair.

“One day, you’ll understand. We all need someone to sing us, Jack. If no one sings us, sure we get forgotten about, we fade away. I’ll never let that happen to you.” How wistful she became, and he would frown, unable to follow her. “I’m going to sing you, like the beautiful song you are. And if you change, I’ll learn you and sing you all over again. Sure we’ll sing each other, you and me, will we?”

* * *

Aunt Maisie was his mother’s aunt and kindly beneath her sharp tones and alarming jowls. Her husband was long dead and her children had moved away. She was enjoying her freedom. She made cakes which melted in your mouth, and blackberry jelly like Jack had never since tasted. She stood by her range, one brown-spotted hand holding the handle of the kettle with a tea towel as it came to the boil, the other gripping her ample right hip. When the tea was made and the bread jammed, the cake cut, his mother would sit and talk in low, unfinished sentences, mindful of Jack’s presence. Sometimes she would begin to cry and Aunt Maisie would tut and pass her a handkerchief, saying, “Ah, now, pet, now pet.” She would turn to Jack, wipe the jam from his cheeks, and distract him with bric-a-brac from worm-riddled drawers: yellow photographs of unsmiling men, old tobacco pipes, and prayer books with pictures of chubby angels rolling their bulging eyes heavenwards. Often, she would stuff one of the pipes with tobacco and light it with a match from the mantelpiece. He would watch her, fascinated, through clouds of rich smoke, as she rocked and nodded and soothed his mother until his eyes grew heavy and he slept on his mother’s knee, comforted by her warmth, though still troubled at the sadness she kept for Aunt Maisie. One visit, the last one, he had awoken to hear Aunt Maisie urging his mother to come and live with her. Sure, wasn’t there plenty of room for herself and the young lad – and the baby too, when it came. They’d be grand. And she could stay in the cottage when Maisie passed on, for the boys had their own houses now. He had come to quickly, turned to look upon the weary, bowed face of his mother, searching it for the meaning of these words. “So, you’re awake, are you, pet? Did you have a good sleep?” Had he misheard? He continued to look curiously into his mother’s face. She smiled at him, rubbed his head. “Ah, sure Maisie, how can I?” was all she said, and he rested his head against her breast once more, puzzled by the ways of these women.

A memory or a story he told himself? No, real enough.

Aunt Maisie had come to the house, once, after that last visit. His mother had flustered and turned red, wiping her hands repeatedly on her apron, hardly daring to look at Jack's father while she rushed around making tea, cutting bread. "Don't fuss, child." Maisie sat down at the table and parted her knees beneath her widow's dress, planting her walking stick firmly between them. She produced a pipe from somewhere beneath her shawl and to the horrified fascination of Jack's father had packed it leisurely and lit it, drawing the smoke with backward gulps through her puckered lips, like an ancient fish. She seemed oblivious to his incredulous stare and wholly unperturbed by its heat. Smoke curled around her head like conjured mists. He shifted uneasily because he could no longer see her face clearly. She glared at him and spoke through teeth which clasped her pipe stem. "How are you, Mairead?"

"Oh, grand, Aunt Maisie, very well," said his mother, dropping the lid of the teapot and bobbing after it as it wheeled giddily around the kitchen floor on its rim.

"You don't look very well to me." Jack had looked quickly towards his father, whose eyes were narrowing in suspicion of conspiracy. He wished Maisie would go away. Didn't she know what always happened? "Where did you get those bruises, child, on your face and arms? Sure you look like someone's been belting the life out of you, and you in your condition." Still, Maisie did not take her eyes from Jack's father's face. Jack looked at the farm dog, skulking under a chair, muzzle on its paws, eyes rolling from one voice to another. He wished he could crawl under a chair.

His mother seemed almost to have swooned. She sat down heavily, fighting for breath, her trembling right hand on her bosom, as though to steady her heart. She could not speak.

"How would you like to come home with me, Mairead?" Maisie continued. Jack saw his father's hands tighten into fists. The dog turned its head towards a wall, curled into a ball, feigned

sleep. "Go and pack." There followed an agony of silence in which the dark forces of Maisie's and his father's fury gathered like storm clouds in the kitchen.

"Get out of my house, you old witch!" The first words spoken by his father brought a sort of relief, like the first crack of thunder in static air.

"I will go when Mairead has answered me and not before." Jack's father sprang to his feet and, with a sweep of his arm over the table, sent saucers spinning across the kitchen. They smashed in bright, white pieces. The dog whined, smacked its jowls, curled more tightly into itself.

"Sean, for God's sake!" His mother's plea was barely audible. She clutched at her swollen belly with eyes closed, dreaming this violence away.

"Get this creature – this, this... harpie out of my house or I swear to you, now, I'll wring her auld neck!" His father's voice had assumed a hysterical pitch. Yet, he did not advance on Maisie, who betrayed no feeling, her only concession to the physicality of things being a lowering of her pipe and an adjustment of the grip she had on her walking stick. Jack's father actually seemed wary of Maisie; she was old enough to be his mother. Maisie began to speak again. The steadiness of her voice made Jack's father seem like a child having a tantrum.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, carrying on like this in front of the child, and your wife about to have another? God help her! You know, it's men like you, Sean Flynn, are the scourge of Ireland. Ireland will be a bog, and that's all, with men like you in it! Nothing good – nothing good..." And here Maisie lost the evenness of tone she had preserved to that moment. She leant on her stick, using it to lever herself to a standing position, before she continued, "... will ever come of Ireland until the likes of you learn how to treat a woman with respect!"

Jack's father danced closer to her, fists raised like a boxer. She did not move but jutted her chin towards him and banged

the table with the side of her left hand, the pipe still gripped in his fist. “Give me a Sassenach any day, boy, for if they’re soft as mud, they know how to look after a woman.” Then she added loudly, “Are you coming wit’ me, Mairead? I will not ask again.” Jack moved towards his mother, distraught yet emboldened by Maisie’s lack of fear. He had never seen anyone – let alone a woman – so unaffected by his father’s fury.

“Go on! Get out, the pair o’ ye, stinking whoores! To hell wit’ you! And you too, huh?” He turned his fury on Jack, who now clung to his mother’s skirt, staring dumbly at his father’s mad eyes.

“Jack, pet, come wit’ me. Come on to Maisie.” Jack looked at his mother for the signal to obey, willed her to give it. It did not come.

“Mammy!” he insisted. Roused by his voice, she reached for him, held him close.

“We cannot come, Maisie. Go on, before it gets too dark.”

“You’re a fool, Mairead. He’ll be the death of you and the child will be ruined. I’ll go, so.” And Maisie turned her back on all of them, then leaned on her stick to open the door. The dog made a dash for outdoors and freedom. Maisie climbed into her donkey cart and drove away.

Jack’s father cursed and broke chairs into smithereens. He smashed photos of Jack’s mother and ornaments she had brought with her from her girlhood, and he ground them to powder with the heels of his boots. He caught Jack’s arm and hurled him across the kitchen, splitting his lip on the leg of the table, which finally got him what he wanted, some sort of defiance to justify the violence.

“For God’s sake, Sean, leave the boy alone!” his mother shrieked and lurched from her chair after her son, wiping the blood from his face with her apron.

“Don’t ever tell me what to do in my own house, you whoore, you – d’you hear me? Do you?” He menaced ever closer, spittle

flying from his mouth, clenching his teeth. The first blow shook them both, knocking her sideways, and Jack sprawled on the floor with her. She had to curl into a ball on the floor to better protect her belly from his boot and Jack, having pushed himself onto all fours, watched as she cradled the unborn child.

Eventually, he left them alone and disappeared to the bar, “to clear his head of stinking women and the stench of treachery,” he said. Jack and his mother clung to each other for a long time on the floor for fear he might change his mind and return. But something had hardened in Jack’s heart against his mother. She should have taken him and gone with Maisie.

* * *

Mick Spillane decided not to tell Caitlin, or his wife, of the bargain he had struck with Jack Flynn, until terms were agreed. He was surprised at the ferocity of his anxiety every time he imagined breaking the news of her fate to Caitlin; there was no telling what she would do. And then he would become angry; she would do as she was damn well told. Yet he could not escape the feeling that he was doing something very wrong. He sat alone in his kitchen drinking poteen by the range, drowning memories of Caitlin as a girl, Caitlin on the day she got the results of her exams, Caitlin as she filled a room with accomplished music, the very voice, it seemed, of her youthful hopes and dreams. Then, with the determination of a murderer he conjured images of Caitlin in her blackest moods, the set of her mouth, the defiant toss of her head, and worst of all, the contempt which made her blue eyes smoulder when he told her off. “Brazen scut!” he slurred aloud to himself and swigged at the poteen. “Good riddance to her,” and he slumped into oblivion.

* * *

The days were grey and cold. A bitter wind cut through the milking parlour. Still October and there was not a leaf left on the trees and the cows flared their nostrils across an unyielding

expanse of ice in the water trough. Every morning at six o'clock Jack was in the field, breaking the ice and opening the gate to his patient cows, herding them up the road to be milked. The pains in Jack's shoulders, in his back, and particularly in his hands were almost unbearable at times on these freezing mornings. He looked at his knuckles, raw with cold and barnacled with callouses, and fought the panic at not being able to straighten his fingers anymore. How could these hands caress the flesh of a girl less than half his age? He thrust the thought from his mind. No details, just the blanket of duty, necessity. Abraham took him a handmaid when he needed a son. Jack would do likewise. The thought that he would have to talk to her terrified him as much as the thought of touching her. She was bright, so Malachai had said. But how sharp could a seventeen-year-old girl be? If she would only treat him well, that would be enough. And a little company in the evening. He imagined her rocking and singing quietly as she sewed something before the fire in the kitchen.

Jack had been bright. There had been none brighter in the village in his day. The likes of Spillane and Brett couldn't hold a candle to him. But his father had wanted him in the fields from dawn till dusk, ploughing furrows, making hay, sowing seed, picking rocks, digging trenches, harvesting beet, milking cows, rounding up calves for market. The chores were endless, the work merciless. In the end, so as not to miss school, Jack had risen an hour before his father, was in the fields by four, had done half a day's work by eight and was walking the two miles to the village school. As soon as he got in from school in the evening there was more work to do. He couldn't do his homework before seven in the evening and was usually so exhausted that he fell asleep on his books, filthy with sweat and dirt, his face often streaked with tears of frustration. And still, he did well in his Intermediate Certificate.

It was in the year that followed, studying for the Leaving Certificate, that he could no longer cope. It seemed his wit and

ability to assimilate information in spite of obstruction had reached its limit. In order to succeed it was necessary to put in hours of hard work, grappling with close pages of fluent Latin and mathematical theories which could build new dimensions for his mind to explore if only he could be allowed time to fashion them. His father never said a word but his steely eye was enough to let Jack know any slacking on the farm would be noted. To ignore such warnings was to invite close-fisted blows of full force, or even a horse whip across the shoulders. Always the threat was the same: there would be no farm to inherit if Jack did not work on it. The thirst of the land must be slaked; the thirst for knowledge could dry up Jack's brain for all his father cared.

The truth was that his father was terrified of losing his farm. If his son left him for university, for a finer life, then who would look after the land? Who would plough the fields when he could no longer uncurl his misshapen hands? The purpose of the cycle was never questioned and happiness was no more a consideration to him than it was to his cows. And Jack never thought for a moment that he might really have a choice. He had dropped out of school, and although one concerned Christian brother had visited his father to express his regret, there was never a real hope that the boy would return. Jack poured his learning into the soil, reciting aloud Latin declensions and accounts of Punic wars, mathematical formulae and verses of poetry in Gaelic and English. The greedy furrows closed on and smothered them. He had been about Caitlin's age, then. It was strange how now he could not remember how to distinguish one declension from another, could not, now, even vocalize thought with ease. He had learned to live silently, speaking only to communicate basic needs. Just like his father.

* * *

By seven o'clock, the milking was done and Jack stood in the yard, pumping water over his boots before going inside. It was dark and there was more frost in the air. Once inside he boiled

a pan of water on the range, poured some of it into an enamel bowl, took a small mirror from a drawer in the press, and sat down at the table to shave. Several times he nicked himself with the barber's blade and cursed through a beard of soap. He eyed the thin wisps of greying hair as they fell across his forehead, and he recalled with sudden sadness his youthful good looks. How far they were from the weathered complexion and wrinkles he contemplated now! How would she like him for her husband, she who was so young and fresh? He cursed his age, the pain in his hands, and reflected that he and Caitlin might have been an ideal match were he twenty years younger. But he wasn't ready then. He was ready now. Well then, he must face with courage whatever this course would bring.

* * *

Caitlin stared into a mirror and brushed her long black hair, killing time while Maureen finished her evening chores, and then both were to ride together in a neighbour's cart to the Dundrum ceildh. She was wearing her best dress, made by her mother years ago, for her oldest sister's wedding. It was of cotton with a rather faded blue floral print and it had long sleeves, a loose round neck, and hung straight to her calves with a tie-back hanging at each side, to be made into a bow at the back. Maureen had one exactly the same. Caitlin pulled the bow tight, to accentuate her flat belly, her small waist, then tied back her thick hair with a blue ribbon, so that it would not fall over her accordion and impede the dance of her fingers across the keys. As she stooped to lace her black boots, then flung her shawl over her head and around her shoulders, she told herself that it would not be long before she swapped these poor clothes for finery. Descending the crude wooden stairs, she met Maureen.

"Hurry up, would you?" she instructed as they passed. "I'll be late."

"Well, you could always lend a hand, Caitlin, did that occur to you?"

Caitlin did not answer. She did not really care if she was late. The music could start without her. She carried on into the kitchen where she leant against the range. When Maureen came running down the stairs again, she too was wearing her blue floral dress, except that on Maureen, the dress looked comfortable. She had removed her tie-backs and wore it straight, hiding her feminine curves lest they should inflame men to sinful thoughts. Maureen's plainness was made austere by her scraped-back hair. The contrast with Caitlin was striking.

"Ah, Maureen, take off the dress, will you? You know I'm playing tonight, sure, I don't want you in the same dress."

"Aren't you awful sure of yourself, that anyone will notice what you've on? You're not the Queen of Sheba, you know."

Caitlin pushed away from the range and thrust her face towards Maureen. "And you're not the Blessed Virgin, you know!" She mimicked her sister's prim tone. "Sure if you had any sort of chance with the men, you'd never be entering the convent." Even as she observed her sister crumple, Caitlin tried to analyse why it was they so hated each other.

"How dare you say such things to me, Caitlin Spillane! You are as cruel!" Maureen spat the words through tears. "You wait, Caitlin. The day is coming when you get your come-uppance, lady. 'Tis worse you're getting!"

"Yeh, yeh, Maureen." Caitlin leant back against the range, feigned nonchalance. "Are you ready or what? Maher will be waiting."

"I'm not coming – isn't that what you wanted to hear?" announced Maureen, wiping tears from her eyes. "Go on your own. I'm not coming with you anywhere."

"Ah, now, Maureen, cop on!" But Maureen was running back upstairs and Caitlin heard their bedroom door slam shut. She would get in terrible trouble for this when Maureen spilled all to her parents – as she always did. Well, she had to go. Caitlin shrugged her shoulders, lifted her accordion, and went to the

back door. Before she left, she turned and shouted in the direction of the stairs, “Are you coming? Pat Maher’s below at the cross.” She hesitated for a few seconds, but when there was no response, she left. Lying face down on her bed, Maureen sobbed aloud as the door slammed.

* * *

“You’re late, what kept you? Where’s Maureen?” Mick Spillane approached his daughter as she rushed into the dance hall, flushed after her freezing donkey cart ride from Dunane to Dundrum.

“She decided not to come.” Caitlin took off her shawl, moved away from her father. Mick followed her, suspecting another row between his daughters.

“Why didn’t Maureen come?” he insisted. “Where’s Maher?”

Caitlin lifted her accordion onto her shoulders, adjusted the weight, avoiding eye contact with Mick.

“She’s tired. Maher’s tying up his horse.”

A fiddler, a flautist, and an ancient man with a bodhran were about to strike up a reel. They stopped as she approached and assisted her in mounting the platform. The gathering dancers clapped her arrival. Mick eyed her from halfway across the dance hall and thought to himself that this was the last time the little scut would rub poor Maureen’s nose in it. He slurped his beer and turned away from the stage as his youngest daughter pressed the first chord of the opening reel.

* * *

Jack’s cart bumped and rattled over the loose stones of the Dundrum road and his horse’s ears moved like antennae in the dusk, picking up the strains of music which emanated from the dance hall ahead. Jack was reminded of the night at Cappawhite. That was the last time he had attended a ceilidh. Several of the men from the South Tipperary column had gathered at the Dundrum ceilidh and, on a few nods from the leaders, had taken their leave. Outside, they had climbed wordlessly into a hay wagon and felt

under a large tarpaulin for their rifles. Under cover of darkness and a load of hay, they had passed an uncomfortable half an hour before the horse stopped and the driver banged on the side of the wagon – the signal for the all clear to dismount. Tonight Jack was as nervous as he had been then. In spite of the cold, his hands slipped on the leather reins. “Ho, there!” He urged his horse faster towards the music, anxious to get this over with.

He had decided to meet Spillane at the ceilidh in order to discuss terms and, at Spillane’s suggestion, get a closer look at Caitlin without her suspecting she was the focus of his attention. He entered the dance hall to a lively jig, running a finger inside his starched collar as if he could lessen its grip. The dancers were becoming intoxicated by music and drink. Caitlin was enjoying herself, in spite of the enthusiastic stamping and the extravagant winks of her fellow musicians each time she looked towards them for a cue. When the jig was at its height, the dance floor a-spin with villagers, heads thrown back or inclined to the floor in the interests of dynamics, Mick Spillane downed the last mouthful of his pint, wiped his mouth, and walked over to greet his intended son-in-law.

“Are you right?”

Jack nodded, took the extended hand, squeezed it, let it drop.

“Well?”

“Will you have a drink, Jack?”

“Er, no t’anks. No.” He nodded to Mrs Spillane, who could not prevent a raised eyebrow and a quick look askance at her husband. Jack Flynn never went to ceilidhs, and she was more than a little bemused at this late alliance of her husband with this antisocial loner. There was, historically, no love lost between them.

“We can’t talk here, Jack. Will we step around to the bar?” But Jack was staring at the stage. The jig ended and Caitlin looked up from her accordion to acknowledge the clapping crowd. She smiled warmly. She was lovely to behold. “Good luck of her, boy,”

Mick thought to himself, but he reached for a flask of poteen in his inside pocket and gulped 'til his throat was aflame.

Jack moved forward slowly. Caitlin spoke a few words with the band and they fell back, leaving her at the front of the stage. She fanned her accordion, pressed a major chord, and to everyone's delight began to sing a lively ballad. The dancers drew closer and began to clap; a few linked arms and spun to the lilting rhythm. Her voice was clear and strong, the glissandos sure. Her confidence and beauty wove a web around her the men could not resist. The married ones watched her, savoured her youth and sweetness with each draught of beer they took, while the wide-eyed admiration of the boys made women nudge each other and nod at their mesmerized sons. Young girls stole glances at their partners and lost confidence momentarily in their own allure.

"Sure, wouldn't anyone get the attention if they sat on a stage and played the accordion?" they whispered to each other.

"Who is she, anyhow? Is she from Dundrum?"

"Dunane. That's Caitlin Spillane." Her name was associated with jealousy and longing, though she was oblivious to the stir she caused.

Jack took in every detail of her. The shining hair, the slope of her nose, the full lips. There was a healthy pink flush to her cheeks and her skin looked almost downy, it was so soft. And her eyes. Every now and then, she would look up from the accordion keys as she sang. Her eyes were a china blue and her lashes thick and black.

A sudden nausea assailed Jack. His collar was too tight; he was too warm. He had to get outside and get some air. Fifty yards or so from the hall was a fence and Jack leaned on it, resting his head on his forearms. On the clear cold air, strains of Caitlin singing "The Rose of Tralee" reached his ears and he breathed more softly to hear her. Raising his head, he tried to focus on the icy stars. Inside the dance hall, Caitlin finished singing to tumultuous applause. She bowed graciously and tapped out an

introduction to "The Siege of Ennis", a rousing reel for which she was re-joined by the other musicians.

Mick Spillane was annoyed. Where the hell was Flynn? He was eager to agree terms, finish this transaction. He dared not think how it would be in the house between the promise and the wedding. He would think of that later. He caught sight of Malachai Brett, who was sitting at a table and drinking with his wife. Malachai returned his nod then looked away quickly. He had seen Flynn watching Caitlin, knew well what was transpiring. He wanted nothing to do with it. Mick found Jack outside.

"Well?"

"I will give you five hundred pounds, no more."

It was more than Mick had hoped for. He tightened his stomach muscles against the excitement. Five hundred pounds would see him comfortable for a long time.

"A good price," he stated, careful not to betray his surprise.

"It is what she is worth, is all."

"Grand. And when will the wedding be, Jack?"

"I don't know. I'll leave that to you."

"Right. Well. Shake?"

"Haven't we done that, Spillane? I said I would give you the money."

"Well..." Mick put his hands in his pockets, scuffed the dirt surface of the road with his boot. "Are you coming back inside? Have a drink at least to seal a bargain?"

"No. I'll away."

"Good luck, so, Jack – I'll be in touch."

Jack turned and walked towards his waiting horse and cart. It was done.

"Miserable devil!" thought Spillane, spitting on the road. He reached again for his poteen flask, shuddered from the heat of the liquor and the icy breeze which chilled him as he stood in his rolled-up shirt sleeves. How was he going to break this one to herself and Caitlin? Another swig. Ah, to hell with it! Wasn't a

man the master in his own house? Spillane walked back up the road and towards the warmth and lights of the dance hall.

CHAPTER THREE

The ceilidh over, Caitlin and her mother rocked unevenly in the cart which Mick drove home.

“You played grand tonight, pet. Didn’t she Mick?” Mrs Spillane could not see Caitlin raise her eyes to heaven at the appeal for her father’s approval.

“Aye,” was all Mick replied.

“What a pity Maureen never wanted to take up the music,” Mrs Spillane mused.

“Sure, Maureen have her eyes on higher things.” Mick accompanied his observation with a flick of his whip across his horse’s rump.

“Maureen is a different young one altogether to Caitlin, Mick. There’s no comparison.”

Caitlin took satisfaction in the platitude because it irked her father, while wincing inwardly at her mother’s failure to detect the illogicality therefore of her first statement. Mick just “hmped” loudly, urging the horse on. They continued in silence for a while, the light and warmth of the ceilidh fading from their faces in the dank November night.

“Caitlin, I want you to start doing a few of Maureen’s chores. You can start with the evening milking tomorrow,” said Spillane with calculated evenness. She rallied at the assault, in spite of herself.

“That’s Maureen’s job! You know I have to study in the evenings! Why can’t Maureen do it?” She shrugged off her mother’s restraining touch in the darkness.

“Don’t you, lady – don’t you adopt that tone of voice with me! Maureen is to enter the convent soon and needs time to