

Chapter 1

Ireland: May 1868

Ismay Deagan watched her mother touch the letter that had arrived from her brother in Australia; it had been sent down to their cottage from the big house. Ma was tracing the lines of the address because Bram had written the words and it was as near to touching her eldest son as she could get.

The sight of her mother's anguish upset her, so Ismay said loudly, 'Well, aren't you going to open it?'

With a sigh, her mother handed it to her. 'You read it to me.'

Ismay took the sharp kitchen knife and carefully slit the top of the gummed envelope, scanning the words quickly. It said almost the same as the last letter. Her brother was doing well, making a good living as a trader and ... 'Oh, his wife's near her time for birthing the child. That's three months ago. She'll have had it by now.'

'And I'll never see the poor little soul,' Ma murmured. 'Will they even make a Christian of it in that heathen land?'

'Why do you keep saying that? Bram told us there's a Catholic church in Fremantle. He keeps saying he'll take us all out to live with him when he's more settled, so you *will* see his child. He's going to be rich, my clever brother is.'

But her mother shook her head. 'I don't care how rich Bram gets, I'm too old to be going to another land. It'd kill me, I know it would. And anyway, I have children and grandchildren here. I'll not be leaving them. If he gets rich, he should come home to live in Ireland and buy a bit of land for himself. That way we could all be happy.'

'He likes it there and he makes more money there. If he offers, I'm going to join him in Australia.'

Her mother straightened up and gave her an angry look. 'Will you never learn, girl? Your father told you last time and I agree with him: you'll not be allowed to go. I'm not losing any more of my children.'

'With so many, I don't see how you'll miss another one or two,' Ismay muttered, but she took care not to say it aloud. Her father had given her the belt last time for insisting she was going to Australia. He'd hurt her, too.

Da hadn't hit his children this much when they were all young, but then Bram had been around to jolly him out of it. Since her brother had left, Da always seemed to be angry. She couldn't help wondering if he was jealous of how well his son was doing in Australia.

While Da was beating her last time, he kept saying she was a wild one, had the devil in her, and he was going to drive it out. She wasn't wild. She just wasn't ... meek.

They'd brought the priest in afterwards and Father Patrick had gone on and on about the fifth commandment, 'Honour thy father and thy mother.' Well, her parents should be kinder to their daughters if they wanted to be honoured.

She realised her mother had said something else. 'Sorry? What were you saying?'

'Is that all Bram wrote in the letter?'

'No. He's sent some more money for you to Mr Kieran at the big house. He'll give it to us when he gets it, like last time.'

'I'd rather Bram used the money to come back himself.'

Ismay was sick of hearing her say that, sick of her mother closing her mind to the world out there, which must surely be more interesting than their muddy little village. Some said it was pretty, with the lough just down the road. The ducks were welcome to that. There were hills around them and green winding lanes, but she never got the

chance to climb the hills or wander the countryside because Da wanted his daughters safe at home.

And there might be pretty stone houses in the village and a church with stained-glass windows, but their cottage had only two rooms, the thatch was rotten and the walls were crumbling and damp.

Her father appeared at the door, home from his day's work on the farm belonging to the big house. Most of the family worked for the Largans and the cottages they lived in belonged to the Largans as well. Da looked exhausted and his shoes were filthy, but he still walked the muck in, didn't he, even though her mother had just swept the floor.

Ismay didn't know why Ma fussed so much when the floor was made of beaten earth. She looked round angrily. The stables at the big house were better built than this though, give Mr Kieran his due, since his father died and he became the owner, he'd made sure the roofs were all watertight and given everyone a new barrel to catch the rainwater for drinking.

Mr Kieran said he'd be building new cottages, too, when he could afford it.

No one called the new master Mr Largan because they still remembered the old master and his cruelties. There were whispers that he'd wasted the family money, but Mr Kieran would still have more money coming in each year than Ismay's family would see in a lifetime.

She had to sleep in the roof area and share it with her two younger sisters and three younger brothers. It was reached by a rough ladder in the corner and she sat on the lower rungs sometimes of an evening. Ah, she was too old to be sharing with the boys. She had to get undressed under the covers of the girls' bed, and sometimes the boys would egg one another on to tug the covers off, because they were at the age to be interested in women's bodies.

'Read the letter out to your da,' her mother said, so Ismay went through it all again,

taking care not to make any comment that might upset him.

'He still thinks of us, our boy does.' Da sniffed away a tear. 'But he's so far away, we'll never see him again.'

'Father Patrick says it's God's will.'

If Ismay heard her mother say that once more, she'd scream, so she would. And as for the priest, he was a fat old man and lazy with it. He was always saying things were God's will. Well, his life was easier if he didn't have to try to change things, wasn't it?

She wanted to change them, oh, she did, she did! Especially her own life, which was nothing but hard work and little to show for it because Da took all her money and boozed away half of it. It wasn't fair when all she had to wear were rags.

If Bram really did give them a chance of going to Australia, she was going to take it, whatever Ma and Da said or did. She'd get Mr Kieran to help her. Surely he would?

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Comment [P11]: ine break

On Monday, when Ismay went to do her weekly stint in the laundry of the big house, she was summoned to the housekeeper's room.

'What have I done wrong?' she asked the laundry maid, terrified she was going to be dismissed.

Ginny gave her a shove. 'Go and find out what she wants. It's not my place to tell you.'

Mrs Jamieson looked at her across her big desk. 'I've had good reports about your hard work in the laundry, Ismay.'

She relaxed a little. So she wasn't in trouble.

'Now that Mr Kieran and his wife are in charge here, things are starting to settle down and we need a new housemaid. I thought you might suit.' She stared at her, head on one side, assessing. 'You'd have to live in, though.'

'I'd love to live in,' Ismay said at once, feeling excitement bubble through her. She only had bits and pieces of work here and there, like most people in the village. That was

one of the reasons why her parents wanted her to get married as soon as possible, so she'd be off their hands. If she got a live-in job, maybe that'd do and they'd stop nagging her.

'We'd have to provide you with the right clothes, but Mrs Largan says she'll do that because Mr Kieran prefers to employ people from the village.'

'I'm very grateful and I'll work hard.'

'Good. I'll speak to your parents, then. Come and see me tomorrow afternoon and we'll find some decent clothes for you.'

Outside the housekeeper's room, Ismay leaned against the wall and sighed happily. At least she'd have a proper bed to sleep in from now on and decent clothes to wear, even if the maids did have to wear those silly caps.

When she got home, she told her mother what had happened.

'But you're going to marry Rory Flynn. Your father said it was all arranged with the priest.'

Ismay stared at her in shock. 'I told Rory last month I didn't want to marry him, and I told Da too.'

'Your father says you have to marry him. And why wouldn't you? He's a fine catch, Rory is. He's been waiting for you to grow up. He's always wanted you. And he's got a good place as cowman on the home farm. You'll never go hungry if you marry him.'

No, but she'd die of boredom. He hardly had a word to spare, whatever happened, and he had big, thick-fingered hands. She wouldn't want those touching her. He'd pretended to bump into her last week after church and grabbed hold of her. She'd thought she'd be sick. 'Well, I'm not going to marry him. I don't like Rory.'

'What's not to like? He's a fine, sturdy young man.'

Ismay wriggled uncomfortably. 'I'm not talking about that sort of liking. It's ... I don't like him touching me.'

'Oh, that! You'll soon get used to it. It's quickly over and done with. The men need it.'

'How can I get used to it when him touching me makes me shudder?'

'You'll have to. Your (Why small D when it's his name, for all practical purposes?) da's set on the marriage.'

She took a deep breath. 'I'm *not* marrying Rory Flynn.'

Ma shook her head sadly. 'Your da will find a way to make you. He always does.'

'Not this time.'

But she felt nervous about telling him, wished her brother Bram was there to help her.

When Da came home, there was much whispering in the corner, then he crooked a finger at Ismay. 'What's this I hear about you going to work at the big house?'

'Mrs Jamieson offered me a job as housemaid and I said I'd like that.'

'Well, you can just tell her you've changed your mind. You'll be getting married in a few weeks and then you'll be busy looking after your husband and having his babies.'

'I told Rory and I told you last month, I don't want to marry him.' She felt shivery at the sight of the anger on his face but nothing would make her agree.

'You'll marry him, my girl, if I've to carry you to the altar myself.'

'You can carry me to the altar, but you can't make me say the words.'

'Are you defying me?' He began to unbuckle his belt.

This time she didn't let him hit her, but ran out of the house and was off down the lane, with him chasing after her, yelling for her to come back. When the yells faded behind her, she stopped to listen but there was no sound of pursuit. She'd always been able to outrun people.

It started to rain, so she went to shelter under a tree, tears in her eyes. She wasn't going back to a beating, but where could she spend the night?

In the end she went into the church, slipping in by the side door and crouching down

in a side pew when the priest came to say his final prayers. She'd stay here overnight and Da's temper would have died down a bit by the next day.

But it was a long, cold night, and although she found some old floor rags to cover herself with, she didn't sleep much.

If Da didn't stop saying she had to marry Rory, she'd run away for good and all, she would so. Better to be a beggar than wife to Rory Flynn, with a baby every year and nothing to hope for but thumps and grunts.

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In Australia, Bram Deagan stared down at the bundle in his arms, his eyes full of tears of joy. His son, his first child. He looked at his wife, lying exhausted in the bed after a long labour. 'He's beautiful.'

Her smile was glorious, though her face was pale and she looked exhausted. 'He is, isn't he?'

'You've had a hard time of it, my darling.'

She shrugged. 'I'll soon be better.'

'Your wife needs her rest now,' the midwife said.

Bram planted a kiss on the baby's soft cheek and handed him back before bending to kiss Isabella.

He'd hired the best midwife he could find and, even so, she hadn't been able to ease the pain or shorten the labour. As it went on and on, he'd scandalised her by going into the birth chamber to comfort his wife. Well, he couldn't bear to listen to Isabella's moans and cries of pain without wanting to be with her.

They'd better not be having too many children, he thought as he went downstairs to his makeshift bed. At thirty-one, Isabella was old to be having a first child. There were ways to limit families and – whatever the priest said – he was going to use them.

'Arlen.' He said it aloud, the name they'd chosen for if they had a son. It meant

pledge, and he saw the boy as a pledge of his love for Isabella. It was also an old family name and had been his grandfather's. He liked that, too.

He didn't want to call the child after his father. Sean Deagan could be harsh in his ways, especially with the girls. Well, Da had had a hard life and had the worry of too many children to provide for, so there was some excuse, but Bram sometimes wondered how his sister Ismay was getting on without him to stand between herself and Da.

Peacemaker, his mother had called him, and he did try to be that. Fighting and quarrelling was such a waste of time.

Within a year or two he'd have enough money to send for his parents and as many of his brothers and sisters as would come to Australia. They'd soon find jobs here, he was sure. The Deagans weren't afraid of hard work.

Sally, who was helping out in the house, smiled at him from the kitchen, and little Louisa put down her cup, showing a milky moustache. He hadn't meant to keep the child. She should be with her mother, Isabella's cousin, but (Have changed the laundry maid's name to Ginny) always had some excuse for not taking her daughter from her first marriage to live with herself and her second husband.

Ah well, he could afford it, and he'd grown fond of her.

When Ismay risked going home the next morning, she was relieved to see her mother out working in the garden, making the most of the late vegetables. She slipped into the cottage to wash and change her clothes quickly, putting on her Sunday best, the only other clothes she had. Then she went to hide in the woods until the afternoon, keeping an eye on the activity in the big house to work out what time of day it was.

Once she was sure it was time, she made her way up to the rear door, ravenously hungry now, but relieved to have escaped her father. She was going to beg them to let her stay.

The housekeeper looked at her in surprise. 'Why have you come to see me, Ismay?'

'You asked me to, Mrs Jamieson. You said you'd find me some clothes for my new job.'

'Your father came to see me this morning to say you couldn't take the job after all, because you were getting married. Surely you knew that?'

Ismay couldn't speak for a moment, she was so shocked, then she grew furiously angry and the words tumbled out. 'No, I didn't know it because it's not true. Da wants me to marry Rory Flynn, but I've said no again and again. I can't stand the man and I'd rather run away and beg on the streets than spend my life with him.'

'Oh. I see. But I don't think we can go against your father's wishes.'

Ismay couldn't hold back the tears, which wasn't like her, but then her hopes had never been so badly crushed before. 'If Da tries to make me marry Rory, I swear I'll run away. I will so.'

'Calm down, girl. No one can make you say the words to marry a man.'

'Da will try. He'll beat me senseless if he has to. He tried to give me the belt last night and I ran away. I had to sleep in the church and I've not had a bite to eat since I left you yesterday. Please give me a chance to be a maid here, Mrs Jamieson. I beg you.'

The housekeeper frowned. 'Look, I'll speak to the mistress and perhaps Mr Kieran too, see what they think. Go and wait in the kitchen. Ask Cook for something to eat. Tell her I said it's all right.'

Ten minutes later, her father erupted into the kitchen and stormed across it towards her. 'I thought I saw you making your way here and I was right. You're coming straight home with me, my girl.'

Ismay ran behind the big table. 'I won't. I'm not going to marry Rory Flynn.'

'You'll do as I say.' He lunged round the table, but she was faster. Only she bumped into the kitchen lad, who was carrying a bucket of water, and spilled it all over the floor.

'Stop this!' Cook yelled. 'Get out of my kitchen, Sean Deagan.'

He didn't pay her any heed. In the confusion, he'd managed to catch hold of Ismay and now he clouted her hard across the head.

For a moment, she saw flashing lights, then she screamed and tried to wriggle out of his clutches. But though he wasn't a tall man, he was strong. He started dragging her towards the back door, with her still screaming at the top of her voice and pleading for someone to help her.

Just as they got to the door, a voice called, 'Stop that at once!'

Da didn't let go of her, but he did swing round at the sound of his master's voice.

Mr Kieran walked across the kitchen. 'Let go of her, Deagan.'

'She'll run away if I do, sir.'

'She'll stay here. Won't you, Ismay?'

His icy gaze speared her and she bobbed her head. You didn't defy the landowner, not if you wanted to stay in your cottage. This man might not be as bad as his father, but he still had power over their lives.

'Now,' Kieran went on. 'We'll go to the housekeeper's room and talk about this quietly and reasonably. Someone send for my wife, if you please.'

Cook pointed one finger and the kitchen maid slipped out of the room.

Mr Kieran turned round and led the way along the corridor to the housekeeper's room, without even looking back to make sure he was obeyed.

'You just wait till I get you home, Ismay Deagan,' Da whispered.

She didn't reply, skipping forward to stay out of reach of his clenched fist.

In the housekeeper's room, Mrs Jamieson gave up her seat behind the desk to her master and stood to one side. She pointed to a spot beside her and Ismay moved across to stand there, feeling a bit safer now.

Surely they'd not give her back to her father?

'Please stand to that side, Mr Deagan.' Kieran glanced at the girl. She was a slip of a thing and she looked terrified. She was going to have a black eye. The skin round it was already puffy and darkening. Her father must have clouted her good and hard. He didn't approve of beating women.

Mrs Largan came in and looked at her husband questioningly as the housekeeper pushed a chair forward for her.

'We have a domestic matter to settle, my dear, the one we were discussing earlier, and I'd value your advice.' He waited until she'd settled next to him. 'Mrs Jamieson, perhaps you can explain what's going on?'

'I can tell you, sir,' Deagan said.

'I'd prefer my housekeeper to explain.'

His words were calm enough, but you wouldn't want to cross him when he looked like that, Ismay thought, for all he was usually smiling and kind. Only, if he told her she was to marry Rory, she'd have to disobey him as well; she'd just have to find the courage somehow.

Once Mrs Jamieson had explained the situation, Kieran turned to Mr Deagan. 'Is this correct?'

He nodded. 'It is, sir. It's a good match and I intend to make sure she weds him.'

Kieran's wife whispered in his ear and he turned to Ismay. 'Are you with child?'

She gasped and her mouth dropped open in shock. 'No, I'm not, sir. I've never lain with a man, never.'

Kieran studied her for a few seconds. He believed her. She hadn't the face of a liar. He turned back to the father. 'If she's not with child, why is it necessary for her to marry Flynn?'

Deagan shuffled his feet. 'I want her settled, sir, living here in the village near her

family. She's a wild one, Ismay is, picked up some fancy ideas at that school. I don't know why your father ever allowed it to be opened. Teaching girls to read is a waste of time when all they need to know is how to look after their families.'

Kieran frowned. He firmly believed in teaching everyone to read and most families were grateful for a little education. Even his father had admitted that he needed people working for him who could read and write. But there were plenty of men still who shared this man's views on educating women.

His wife made a sound in her throat that sounded like irritation. He knew Julia would be annoyed by Deagan's statement. She intended to make sure the girls on the estate got the same chances of an education as the boys, because it was already clear who the priest and schoolmaster favoured. Educating girls was one of her pet projects, and he'd support her in every way he could.

The Deagan lass was staring at them pleadingly, her face white and pinched, except for where it was bruised. He'd told himself he must stay impartial in this quarrel, but he couldn't help feeling sorry for her. 'Ismay, why don't you want to marry Flynn? Your father's right, he'd make a good provider with that job.'

'I don't like him, sir. I never have. He used to pester me when we were children, but I can't bear him to touch me. Anyway, my brother Bram is going to send us the money to join him in Australia and I want to do that. There's nothing for me here but hard work and babies, beggin' your pardon.'

'Her mother doesn't want to lose any more of her children to that dam— er, cursed place,' Da said, his deep voice growling with anger.

Kieran looked at his wife as if inviting her to speak.

'I think it'd be best if Ismay stayed here at the big house for a while,' she said quietly. 'If there's no baby on the way, there's no need for any of us to act in a hurry. We can work out what to do for the best once tempers have cooled.'

Deagan looked furiously angry. 'Begging your pardon, ma'am, but she's *my* daughter and it's for me to say what happens to her. I'm not trying to kill her, just marry her to a decent fellow. What's wrong with that?'

'How old are you, Ismay?' Kieran asked.

'Twenty-two, sir.'

'Why are you not married already? Most village girls are by your age.'

Deagan answered for her again. 'Because she's full of silly ideas about love, that's why. It's all because of those books she reads. I'll tan her hide if I ever catch her with another book in her hand, and Rory says the same.' He glared at his daughter. 'You are *not* going to Australia, my girl! Do you want to break your poor mother's heart?'

Kieran wasn't having that. 'I'll thank you not to shout and make threats in my wife's presence, Deagan. And we'll let your daughter speak for herself.'

Da opened his mouth and Ismay's breath caught in her throat at the anger in his face. He snapped his mouth shut again, but the look he gave her made her shiver. He'd kill her if he ever got her alone. She couldn't go home now, whatever happened.

'Why are you not married?' Mr Kieran repeated.

'Because I don't want to live in a hovel and have a baby every year. I want more than that. If I go out to join my brother in the Swan River Colony, he says he can find me work in his shop. Bram's doing well there, sir. That'd be decent, interesting work.'

'Well, your brother does sound to be doing well, I must admit. He and my brother Conn are partners. I had a letter from Bram myself only this week. It's not just the shop, you know. He's set up as a trader and is importing goods from Singapore to the Swan River Colony.'

She frowned. 'Isn't that the same as a shop?'

'Yes. Only bigger.'

She beamed at him. 'Well, there you are. He'll definitely have work for me.'

Julia intervened again. 'You'd go out to your brother, even though it'd upset your mother?'

'She has seven other children living round here, Mrs Largan. And grandchildren. It's not as if there'll be no one left to look after her in her old age.'

Kieran studied her. She spoke passionately, expressing herself well. She looked intelligent, too. Even now, her eyes were sparkling with life when she talked about joining her brother, and the housekeeper said she was a quick learner. 'I think my wife has the best idea, Deagan. We'll let Ismay work here at the big house for a while and think about this whole thing again once we've all calmed down.'

As the man before him opened his mouth, still looking angry, he held up one hand. 'I'm not prepared to argue, Deagan. Your daughter's reached her majority.' He saw the other didn't understand this and explained. 'She's past twenty-one, so she has the legal right to make her own choices.'

'She's still my daughter and always will be.'

Julia interrupted quietly but firmly, 'Mrs Jamieson, will you please take Ismay to the maids' quarters.'

Such a sensible woman, his wife, Kieran thought. He thanked heaven he'd met her.

Deagan took a step forward as if to prevent Ismay leaving. Kieran moved quickly round the desk to stand between them. For a moment all hung in the balance, then the man stepped backwards again.

But the expression on his face worried Kieran, and he saw the girl shiver as she moved past her father, keeping as far away from him as she could. Kieran could understand that. He too had been afraid of his father, another violent and unreasonable man.

No, let the poor girl have her chance of a better life. Rory Flynn could find himself another wife.

When they were up in the servants' area of the attics, Mrs Jamieson asked quietly, 'Is it worth all the fuss, Ismay? Is it worth losing your family for?'

She bowed her head, not wanting to upset the housekeeper.

'Well?'

Pulling her courage together, she looked up. 'I don't want to lose my family, Mrs Jamieson, but I won't marry that Rory Flynn, whatever anyone says or does. I've known him since we were children and never liked him. He was always following me around, staring, and he was the worst bully in the village. He's grown into a rough brute without two thoughts in his head apart from cows and having a drink with the other men. What sort of life would I have with him?'

The housekeeper surprised her by patting her on the shoulder. 'Well, then, you seem to know your own mind. We'll have to find you something else to do with your life. We aren't in the dark ages, after all, though I sometimes wonder, I do indeed.' She sighed then said more briskly, 'Right, let's be finding you some clothes. Before you change into them, Ginny will need to check you for lice.'

Oh, the humiliation of being led out to the laundry, immersed in a tub in a small room to one side, used by the servants for their weekly baths, then having her hair gone through with a (stet – special combs were used to remove nits, and they were called fine took combs) fine-tooth comb by the senior laundry maid. She couldn't help sobbing at that.

Ginny patted her damp shoulder, laughing. 'Oh, get away with you, Ismay! You're not the first girl to come here lousy and need cleaning up.'

'But I've tried so hard to keep myself clean.'

The other woman patted her again, more gently, a comforting touch. 'You've been living crowded together with your family. It's not your fault you're lousy. Now stop

weeping, for glory's sake.'

Her father, Ismay thought bitterly. It'd be him. He was always scratching himself and Ma had to nag him to change his clothes every month.

That must have been why she'd been kept to the most mundane of tasks when she helped in the laundry, fetching and carrying for the other maids, not let go near the clean clothes or the ironing. The shame of it!

When she was clean and dry, she was given underclothes. They were hand-me-downs, but finer than she'd ever worn before. She'd seen the frilled and lace-decked garments of the family when they were being washed. The family and upper servants had so many clothes it made your head spin.

Now, she was the proud owner of three chemises made of soft cotton, with no holes in them at all Stet. Can't see why it needs changing. – well, maybe just a little one, which had been skilfully darned, and three petticoats, one of yellowed flannel for warmth, two of cotton and oh, oh, one had a narrow row of lace round the bottom. She touched that gently with her fingertip.

And as well, there were two skirts and three bodices, with a jacket to cover them, and a big fine shawl too.

She put her head in her hands and wept for sheer joy at being so decently dressed.

'What's wrong now?'

'I'm so h-happy.'

'You silly girl!' But Ginny smiled and patted her back again.

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When Ismay had left, Deagan shuffled his feet and muttered something. Julia looked at her husband. 'I'll leave you to settle matters here.'

Kieran gave her a pleading look. 'Stay for a moment or two. Deagan may have questions to ask.'

The man looked at them both truculently, bottom lip jutting. 'I still want her to marry Flynn. It's the sensible thing to do.'

'Not if she's taken a dislike to him, surely?' Kieran said.

'Dislike, indeed! It's for me to tell her what to do. Father Patrick is standing ready to marry them. *He* approves of the match.'

'Does he know she doesn't want to marry Flynn?'

'Of course he does, but he says it's up to me to say what she does. Your father wouldn't have let her get away with defying me (Stet. I need to show that he delays adding 'sir')... sir.'

It was the wrong thing to say. If there was one thing Kieran was determined about, it was that his father's arrogant ways should be replaced by kindness towards those who depended on him. 'Your daughter isn't obliged to obey you in this matter, as I've already explained.'

'She will if she knows what's good for her. You don't know the girl, Mr Kieran. She's a wild one.'

'Then we'll be relieving you of a burden by taking her off your hands. No! No more arguments. She's to stay here as maid and you'll get half her wages each quarter day. And don't worry, we'll make sure she stays respectable.'

Deagan scowled even more blackly. '*Half* her wages? They should all come to me by rights.'

Kieran bit back an even sharper response. Would the man never be satisfied? 'She'll need to keep some of the money to clothe herself decently.'

'But sir—'

'Enough! If you value your job and your cottage, you'll accept my decision. My wife needs another maid and your daughter isn't prepared to marry Flynn, whatever you say or do. Get back to your work now.'

When Deagan had gone, he turned to his wife. 'You'll keep an eye on her?'

'I will.'

'She'd better stay away from her family till they've accepted my decision.'

Julia leaned across to kiss his cheek. 'It was the right one, Kieran darling. I don't believe in forcing young women to marry men they dislike. It happens in our class too. I'm so lucky I met you – and that you had your own money, so your father couldn't meddle, as he did with your brother, forcing poor Conn to marry that dreadful woman.'

Kieran smiled at her. 'I'm also lucky Father didn't want me living too near and interfering in what he was doing. But I'll never forgive him for falsifying the evidence that got my brother transported. How a man could do that to his own flesh and blood, I'll never understand. What Conn must have suffered!'

She squeezed his hand in a mute sign of sympathy and it lifted his spirits, as it always did, to have her by his side. He had a long way to go to repair the damage his father had done to the family estate, but with her by his side, he'd bring it back to prosperity and gradually replace those dreadful tumbledown cottages.