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## *March 1859*

Keara Michaels hauled the heavy bucket up from the well and set it on the rim for a moment. Panting from the effort, she scooped up a few mouthfuls of water, then dipped a fold of her skirt into the bucket and used it to wipe her sweaty face. She had been digging last year's potatoes out of their rapidly-dwindling mound, which was heavy work for a scrawny, underfed girl of sixteen, but they were all hungry and her mother was too far gone with the baby now to dig.

Her father should be helping more, but he'd gone off to visit his cousins in the next village from where he could just as easily get to his work as stable hand at the big house. He always went away when her mother was near her time and Keara was old enough now to resent this. He'd be back once the baby was born, though, choosing the name and strutting around as if he'd carried the child in his own belly, especially if this one turned out to be the boy he was praying for.

Keara had no illusions about her father, no illusions about anything very much, but she did have a few dreams still: a full stomach, a proper cottage with paved floors, not beaten dirt, and a separate bedroom for the children to sleep in, where they wouldn't hear their parents carrying on. She looked down at her skirt with its tears and ragged hemline and added another

small dream: decent clothes to wear.

Father Cornelius said she was being greedy to dream like that and should accept her lowly station in life as the Lord's will. But she couldn't. And she never would! Some folk had so much while she and her family had so little. It just wasn't fair!

She'd wanted to leave home and get a job, because there was no real work for her in Ballymullan, but her mother wouldn't be able to manage without her. Besides, many people from the nearby villages had gone away to work and had never come back again. Imagine never seeing her sisters Mara and Ismay again! The mere thought of that made Keara shiver. So she got day work here and there, whatever she could—weeding in the fields, helping with the harvest, lending a hand when someone had a new baby, and lately helping with the washing and scrubbing up at the big house.

And when she did earn a few pennies she spent them quickly on food for herself and her mother and sisters, because if she didn't, her father would take them from her and spend them on booze. She made it plain whenever she accepted a job that she wasn't going to do it unless the money was paid to her and not her father.

It was one of the many reasons her father hated her.

Mara came round the corner just then, hugging the rag doll their mother had made her and smiling when she saw her sister. She was small for seven, much smaller than Keara or Ismay. Was it any wonder? She'd never eaten well in her whole life, for all Keara's efforts to bring home more food.

Suddenly a scream rang out from the cottage and the girl jerked in shock, nearly knocking the wooden bucket back into the well. Her mother only screamed like that when she was having a baby. The rest of the time her mother was so quiet you'd hardly know she was there.

*Not yet!* Keara prayed. *Please, God, not yet. I'll be good. I'll say a hundred Hail Marys, but don't let the baby come yet.* She'd wanted to clean up the cottage before her next brother

or sister was born and get the wrapping cloths washed and aired on the line. “Go and find Ismay! Quick!” she told Mara and when the child ran off, she picked up the bucket. Heedless of how the water sloshed and splashed over her bare, muddy feet, she began to lug it towards the house.

Inside she found her mother doubled up on the straw mattress in the corner, hands clutching the belly that jutted out so far from her thin body, face twisted into a mask of pain.

“Is it coming now, Mam?” Keara dumped the bucket hastily near the door.

Her mother nodded without opening her eyes. “Aye, it is that. An’ just as quickly as they allus do, thank God. Fetch Mrs Raney, will you, love?” She groaned and rolled into a tight ball.

Ismay came rushing into the cottage. “Is it—”?

“Go and fetch the midwife,” Keara said. “And take Mara with you. I’ll stay with Mam.”

Ismay nodded and left quickly. At eleven she was old enough to help protect their little sister from the worst a life like theirs had to offer, their father’s kicks and blows and their mother’s painful childbirths. Two babies had been born dead since Mara, poor white little things that had come early. Her father had buried them at night in a corner of the churchyard. Her mother had wept for days. There had been a brother after Keara, too, but he’d died just after his first birthday, and another sister after Ismay, but she’d only lived a few short weeks.

Her mother groaned. “Eh, I’ll be glad to be shut of this one. I’ve ’ad such a belly-warch for t’past few days.”

Keara had seen her rubbing her swollen stomach several times lately and muttering to herself. The pains must be really bad because her Mam only spoke with such a strong Lancashire accent when she was really upset. The rest of the time Betsy spoke softly, trying to imitate the way the other villagers talked, doing her best to fit in as she had for all the years since Mick Michaels had brought his pregnant young wife back with him to the small Irish

village. The folk of Ballymullan were kind enough to her, but she wasn't one of them.

"Hold on to my hand, Mam," Keara urged, but Betsy was beyond hearing, grunting with the pain as she started to bear down. The baby would soon be born, the girl guessed. She only hoped Mrs Raney would come quickly.

When she heard footsteps, she groaned in relief, but looked up to see only Ismay standing in the doorway.

"Mrs Raney's out at her daughter's. They'll send her when she gets back." She hesitated. "Will I stay and help?"

"No, you're too young." Keara knew her mother didn't want the younger girls seeing her like this. She didn't want any of them there, but there was no help for it this time. "Best if you take Mara away till it's over."

She went to stand for a minute by the door, watching her sisters trail off down the lane, with Ismay holding Mara by the hand and Mara still dangling the rag doll from the other hand. It was like looking at younger versions of herself. Everyone commented on how alike the three of them were, with their father's dark, curly hair and the Michaels eyes. Oh, you could never mistake those eyes, folk said, such a bright blue and framed in long, dark lashes.

With a sigh Keara went back inside and began to get the cloths out.

Betsy looked up between pains. "Will Mrs Raney—be long?"

"She's out, Mam. They'll send her over as soon as she gets back."

"Nooo! The baby's coming now."

The last one had come fast, as well as early, but it had been born dead. Keara had cradled its limp little blue-white body in her hands and wept over it.

She knelt by the mattress. "I was with you last time, Mam, so I know what to do."

"Eh, lass, you're too young for all this."

Keara forced a smile. "I'm all you've got, so."

For the next few minutes, Betsy alternately screamed and groaned, then was delivered suddenly of the baby. She lay back panting. “What is it?”

“A girl.” Working efficiently, remembering what Mrs Raney had done last time, Keara knelt to pick up the baby and smack her sharply on the backside.

“Is she all right? I can’t hear her crying.”

“She’s not breathing, Mam.”

“Smack her again.”

“She’s—not made right, Mam.”

“Show me.” Betsy stared at the still little body with its over-large head, touched the face gently with one hand, then closed her eyes wearily. “Tie off the birth cord, then wrap the poor thing up.”

When Mrs Raney came hurrying down the lane, she praised what Keara had done and set about tidying the mother up, frowning at how weak poor Betsy still was. “You shouldn’t let him use you any more,” she whispered. “You can’t go on like this.”

“How can I stop him?” Betsy asked, tears welling anew in her eyes.

“I’d kick him where it hurts if it were me,” Mrs Raney said bluntly. But she knew even as she spoke that Betsy Michaels would never be able to prevent her husband doing what he wanted, because she was a gentle soul. As for Mick, he might be a fine figure of a man, but handsome is as handsome does, Mrs Raney always thought, and he was a selfish devil, as well as unkind and a bad provider.

She caught him on his way home later that day and told him to his face that if he didn’t leave his wife alone, he’d be raising his children without Betsy’s help.

“What would you be knowin’ about such things?” he sneered. “You’re not a doctor.”

“I had the divvil’s job stopping the bleeding today. Have ye seen how pale she is?”

He walked on without a word and would have ignored her warning completely had a

widow from Dublin not come to live in the next village the following week, a woman past childbearing who missed having a man in her bed and made it plain how attracted she was to Mick.

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The next day Diarmid O'Neal, the estate manager, sent down five shillings from Mr Mullane to help with the expenses. Since he had married his new, rich wife, he had started this custom and the villagers blessed him for it.

"It's little enough," Theo had told Diarmid. "Half a guinea for a live child, five shillings for a dead one."

"It's a big help for them, though your father must be turning in his grave." Old Mr Mullane had been tight-fisted where his tenants were concerned, but had spent lavishly on himself, wasting the family fortunes so that his son had had to marry an heiress.

Theo lived in Lancashire most of the time now, because his wife didn't like Ireland, but he came over regularly to visit Ballymullan, occasionally bringing her with him.

No one liked the landowner's wife, who was plump and well-fed, and even so always looked miserable. How you could be miserable with a full belly, a fine house and beautiful clothes, they didn't understand.

Keara kept watch for the money, intercepting the lad bringing the five shillings then hiding it quickly before her Da got back from work.

Not even a sound thrashing could persuade her to hand it over to him, because she knew exactly what he'd do with it. Go down to Benny Noonan's shebeen, which was an open secret in the village, and treat his friends to as many drinks as the money would buy. Lords of Poteen, Mrs Raney called them with a sniff of disgust.

"Give that money to your Da, love," Betsy whispered from her bed as the beating continued.

But Keara would tell him nothing, just continued to wail loudly every time her Da hit her, because that usually made him stop more quickly.

“Ye’re an ungrateful little bitch,” he said at last, shoving her across the room. “That’s what happens when a man’s wife only gives him daughters.” He ate half the potatoes Keara had cooked then went out to drown his sorrows with his friends.

Only then did Ismay bring Mara back inside. “Did he leave anything for us?”

“He ate half of them, the greedy pig.”

The two sisters looked at each other in dismay, then down at the bowl of boiled potatoes. Keara carefully divided up what was left and took one plate across to her mother.

Betsy pushed it aside. “You have them, love. I’m not hungry.”

“You need to eat, Mam, or you won’t get better. If you don’t eat yours, I won’t eat mine.”

When they’d finished their meagre meal, the three girls went to bed, cuddling up under the ragged blankets as Keara told them a story. After Ismay and Mara fell asleep, she lay awake for a time, hunger cramping in her stomach, wishing she could find proper work, wishing her father would look after his family better.

He didn’t come back that night. She heard her mother weeping quietly, but didn’t say anything. Her mother only wept when she thought no one else would see or hear her.

Keara only wept, or pretended to weep, when her father slapped her, because weeping didn’t get you anywhere.

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Her father returned home for his breakfast, raging at them when there was nothing to eat. He slapped out at Keara as he passed her. “I’ll be having that money out of you tonight,” he snapped, then slammed out of the cottage.

Only when he was safely at work did Keara go to the top end of their potato field and dig up the coins. She hurried to the village shop and consulted Arla about how best to use the

windfall. After much serious discussion they decided on a loaf and some cheese, half of which Keara would come back for the next day, because Da was very partial to cheese and was inclined to eat the lot if he found any.

With the money that was left Keara bought some flour, because they could use it to eke out the potatoes. Since her father neglected their small field, it never produced quite enough for the family's needs. The girl's mouth watered at the mere thought of potato cakes made with part flour, part mashed potato, then cooked till crispy on the griddle. They'd be best eaten hot with butter, but the Michaels family didn't see much butter. They'd had it occasionally, though, and Keara could think of nothing nicer.

"That one has a wise head on her shoulders," Mrs Lynch said to the next customer.

"She'll be needin' it in that family," the other woman said sourly. "Mick only gets wilder as he gets older and that poor little wife of his has never been able to manage him. Have you heard about that widow giving him the glad eye?"

"Sure, who hasn't? And did you see the bruises on that girl's face and arms today?"

"I did, I did. He's hitting *her* now as well as the mother."

They both shook their heads and made tutting noises, but Arla could not get the memory of the child's gaunt face out of her mind. Keara was so thin she reminded Arla of her own daughter, Shealagh, who had died in the great potato famine, oh, it must be ten years ago now. Shealagh had caught the fever and simply faded away. Since that dreadful time, Arla had regularly adopted a village girl as protégée. She and her husband didn't have much to spare, the good Lord knew, for it was a tiny village and the shop didn't bring in a lot of money, though they did all right with their smallholding because Brian was a hard worker, unlike some. But they could spare enough to help one child at a time in memory of Shealagh.

The priest said it was a blessed act and certainly the doing of it helped ease the maternal ache in Arla's heart as nothing else could, for the famine years had stopped her monthly

courses, so that she'd never been able to have another child.

The last girl she'd been helping had left the village only the week before to take up a position in service, her body stronger for the good food Arla had given her, able to read and write properly, too. The priest taught the village children their letters in his little afternoon school, but no one did very well because they were more often needed to help out at home, so Brian always had to help their protégées improve their skills.

With a nod for a decision taken, Arla went to inform her husband.

"Isn't Keara a bit old?"

"You're never too old to learn."

"Will we go and tell her tonight, then?" he asked indulgently.

"I'll have a bit of a chat with her meself the next time she comes in."

For this child was special, Arla just knew it. There was something about Keara's clear gaze and firm lips that said she would not allow life to simply toss her where it would.

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In the large, comfortable house in Lancashire, Theo Mullane found the bedroom door locked against him when he made his way carefully upstairs after consuming a bottle of wine.

Lavinia had threatened to do this if he came to her bed again, but he hadn't believed she'd have the courage to carry out her threat. A soft blancmange of a woman, Lavinia, who had brought him a good dowry, but little else, not even a child. And stupid with it. He had not realised just how stupid until he'd had to live with her.

He scowled at the door. If his dear wife thought he'd trot meekly off to his own bed, or put up with her threatening him, she was far and out. He smiled grimly as he crashed his strong body against the door. It gave a little and with a laugh he continued until he had kicked it in.

In his master's bedroom next door, Dick Pearson heard his mistress begin to scream and beg her maid not to leave her. Fat lot of good that would do the silly bitch!

“Get out of here this minute, Mary, if you value your job!” Theo snapped to the maid once he was inside and gave her such a dark look she scuttled to the door with a squeak of fear.

He slammed the door after her, though it didn’t close properly now, and strode across to the bed. As he stood looking down at his wife, he wondered if this was worth it. But apart from the money, his main reason for marrying had been to get children and he would not be denied his rights.

“You’ll not do that again,” he told her, thumping one hand down on a small table for emphasis and causing an ornament to leap off it on to the floor with a tinkle of broken china.

Lavinia shrieked, pulled the covers up to her neck and began weeping.

“Shut up!” he roared.

She continued to sob even more loudly and before he knew it he’d slapped her face. He stared down at her, annoyed with himself for losing control like that, but she’d drive a saint to sin, this one would, with her wailing and moaning, her utter selfishness. “Shut—up!” he repeated, giving her a shake instead.

She hiccupped to a halt, staring at him in shock. “Theo, no!” she pleaded, her pale blue eyes welling with tears. “I hate it.”

“Lavinia, yes!” he mocked, scowling down at her. There were no strong colours to the woman: light hair, neither brown nor blond, pale skin, marked with red now where his hand had hit her, and those small eyes that peered out from the folds of flesh as if terrified of what they saw. “If you ever try to deny me your bed again,” he said slowly and distinctly, “I’ll have the door removed from your bedroom permanently.”

“You’re unkind,” she moaned.

“Faugh! What’s unkind about a man sharing his wife’s bed? I want sons to my name. Which means getting them on you, for you’re the only wife I’ve got, heaven help me.”

“I’m not strong enough yet. It’s only a few months since the last miscarriage.”

“The doctor says you’ve had long enough to recover. Now, since this door is no use at present, we can either do the act here publicly or we can go into my bedroom. Your choice.”

Without a word, every inch of her plump body proclaiming her martyrdom beneath the voluminous and very ugly flannel nightgown, Lavinia led the way next door to his room. There, she lay like a piece of dead fish beneath him while he completed the act that would, he prayed, give him a living child this time.

Afterwards she left his bed without a word and he heard her muttering angrily as she washed herself, then the springs of her bed creaked in protest as she climbed into it.

Theo lay awake for a long time, staring into the darkness. He’d been wrong to marry Lavinia Hardwick, but his father had pushed him into it by showing him the disastrous state of their finances. And her father had offered him a ridiculously large dowry—he now knew why—to marry his stupid daughter. So for the sake of keeping Ballymullan Manor he had acquiesced, though only on condition that the dowry be paid to him and not to his father. Which had caused further quarrels and arguments.

But a vigorous man like him needed a warm-blooded woman, not a faded creature who cringed if you so much as brushed against her. And he *must* get an heir or what sense was there in preserving the estate? Besides, he loved children, desperately wanted some of his own. And he wanted legitimate ones, too. No good ever came from begetting bastards and he’d been careful not to plant any in his casual encounters.

In her room Lavinia lay awake for a long time, angry with her husband and wishing, as she had wished ever since the marriage, that her father had let her bring Nancy with her. Nancy had been her nurse, then her maid, and she had felt safe with her. But her father said it was time she stopped depending on that old hag and had pensioned Nancy off.

Which wasn’t fair. Nothing was fair. She wept herself to sleep, sobbing loudly till Theo came to the door and roared, “Shut up!”

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When Keara entered the shop the following day, Arla exchanged smiles and nods with her husband. She served the girl, watched her place her meagre purchases in the frayed sacking bag, then folded her arms across her breast and asked, “Have you a moment? I’d like a bit of a chat with you.”

Keara nodded, surprised by this invitation.

“Good, good. Will you come away into the back, then, and share a pot of tea with me?”

She gestured towards the rear of the shop.

Keara stopped in the doorway for a moment to take it all in, awed at this honour because very few people got invited into the Lynches’ back room. She had only caught glimpses of it before. It was set up like a little palace, with a stone-flagged floor, a real linen cloth on a table whose carved legs shone with polish, two rocking chairs upholstered in crimson and a proper rug to set your feet on, bought from a shop, with coloured patterns on it. “Ah, it’s a grand room, this is, Mrs Lynch, grand.”

Arla glanced round in satisfaction. “Well, I do like to keep things nice. Now . . .” She explained her proposal, watching carefully to gauge Keara’s reactions (mostly open-mouthed astonishment) and ending with, “So—are you happy for me and Brian to help you, then?”

Keara stared at her with tears brimming in her eyes, unable to speak for a moment. She knew, the whole village knew, that the Lynches had helped Breda and Colleen and Mona, fed them and taught them things so that they could find good jobs in service. But she had never expected them to choose her as the next girl. She had to swallow hard before she could get the words out past the lump in her throat, “Oh, Mrs Lynch, I’d be so grateful!”

“You’ll eat the food I give you here in the house,” Arla went on. “No taking it home to share with your family. If I had enough for them as well, I’d feed them, too—sure, I’d feed the whole village if I could.”

Keara blushed. She had indeed been thinking that maybe she could slip the odd morsel out for her sisters.

“I know ’tis hard, but we want to make sure *you* get the benefit.” Arla relented a little at the disappointment on the girl’s face. “But I dare say there may be a scrap or two for Ismay and Mara from time to time.”

“Thank you, Mrs Lynch.”

“Brian will teach you the reading and the writing. I’ll teach you your manners and proper housekeeping and a bit about the world.” For Arla had been a maid in Sligo before her marriage and knew the ways of the gentry.

Keara closed her eyes in ecstasy, then opened them to say hoarsely, “I’ll never let you down, Mrs Lynch, I promise. I’ll work hard, learn as much as I can.”

“Bless you, don’t I know that already.” Arla took off her apron and picked up her bonnet, tying it firmly beneath her chin. “I’ll walk home with you now, shall I, and we’ll tell your mammy together.”

But to Keara’s horror, Da was at home as well, for he’d been kicked and knocked out by a new horse, so they’d laid him in a cart and driven him home to recover. She could see at a glance that he was in a foul mood, so she plucked at Arla’s arm to gain her attention. “Could you come back another time, Mrs Lynch, when Da’s not so—upset? He—he might not like your offer.”

Arla looked at her in surprise. “Now, why ever should he not?”

Keara hung her head, unable to explain how unreasonable her father could be and how he’d taken against her even worse since she’d kept back the birthing money. He’d been getting at her in every petty way he could since then, enjoying making her life miserable, and didn’t she have the bruises to prove it!

Arla led the way into the house, confident of her offer being accepted with a flattering

degree of gratitude. She exchanged greetings then spoke her piece.

Glowing, Mick listened and before anyone could speak, said flatly, “No. We thank you for the kind thought, Arla, but it’ll be better if you find someone else, someone more deserving than this one.”

Keara felt tears rise in her eyes. How could he do this to her? And why? Surely he’d benefit as well when she was able to get work as a maid at the big house and earn a steady wage?

Betsy laid one hand on Mick’s arm, only to have it tossed off again. “Mick, don’t do this!” she pleaded.

He jumped to his feet, wincing as his head thumped with pain. “I said no!” he roared. “Am I the master in my own house or am I not?”

His face was so congested with fury that Arla took an involuntary step backwards, then another.

Keara rushed outside, sobbing loudly.

Arla followed, finding no sign of the girl. She walked slowly home, baffled by Mick’s reaction.

Inside the cottage Mick stood and smiled like a big contented cat which had just eaten a bird.

“Why in God’s name did you do that?” Betsy asked.

“Because as long as she lives under my roof, that daughter of yours needs to learn to obey me. I *will* be master in my own house!”

Unable to bear the sight of him a minute longer, her eyes blinded with tears, she headed towards the door, ignoring his roar of, “Come back here this minute, woman!”

Mick was left to enjoy his victory on his own, the bandage not yet pinned in place around his head and already unravelling. “I’ll show them who’s master!” he muttered, then sat down suddenly as the room spun round him.

When he felt a bit better he went round to the lean-to at the back, got out his bottle of poteen and took it inside. Taking a big swig, he sighed in relief. Nothing like a drink to help a man through hard times.

“That learned her, the bitch!” Smiling, he gulped down another mouthful of the fiery spirit.

A little later when Ismay poked her head round the door, he roared at her to get away out of here.

After he'd emptied the bottle, he fell asleep at the table, his head on his arms.