

ALSO BY DIANE MERRILL WIGGINTON

## *Angelina's Secret*

BOOK 1 IN THE JEWELLED DAGGER SERIES

*A sweeping and engaging historical romance, Angelina's Secret has emotion, action, suspense and above all, an epic and timeless love. Filled with heroic, dashing pirates and brave, beautiful ladies, this is a fantastic read.*

—BLUEINK REVIEWS (STARRED REVIEW)

## *Isabella's Heart*

BOOK 2 IN THE JEWELLED DAGGER SERIES

*Isabella's Heart is a fun and imaginative tale of romance with strong themes of family and loyalty.* "Wigginton has created a unique series, following the mother-daughter link of strong, thrill-seeking woman.

—FOREWORD REVIEWS

## *Olivia's Promise*

BOOK 3 IN THE JEWELLED DAGGER SERIES

*Olivia's Promise by Diane Merrill Wigginton, is yet another awesome book by this author. I read it very quickly — it was like eating good ice cream, I enjoyed it that much. Olivia's Promise is an excellent read, very hard to put down. I gave it Five Stars!*

—International Writers Inspiring Change

International Writers Inspiring Change, award author Diane Merrill Wigginton, "Most Inspiring Author," 2017 for the series.

JEWELLED DAGGER PUBLISHING COMPANY

[www.jeweleddaggerpublishing.com](http://www.jeweleddaggerpublishing.com)

© Copyright 2019 by Diane Merrill Wigginton

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, electronically or otherwise, or by use of a technology or retrieval system now known or to be invented, without the prior written permission of the author and publisher.

*Designed by Fine Design*

First Edition January 28, 2019

eBook ISBN: 978-1-946146-09

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-946146-90-8

Follow Diane Merrill Wigginton at

<https://twitter.com/wiggintondiane>

<https://www.jeweleddaggerpublishing.com>

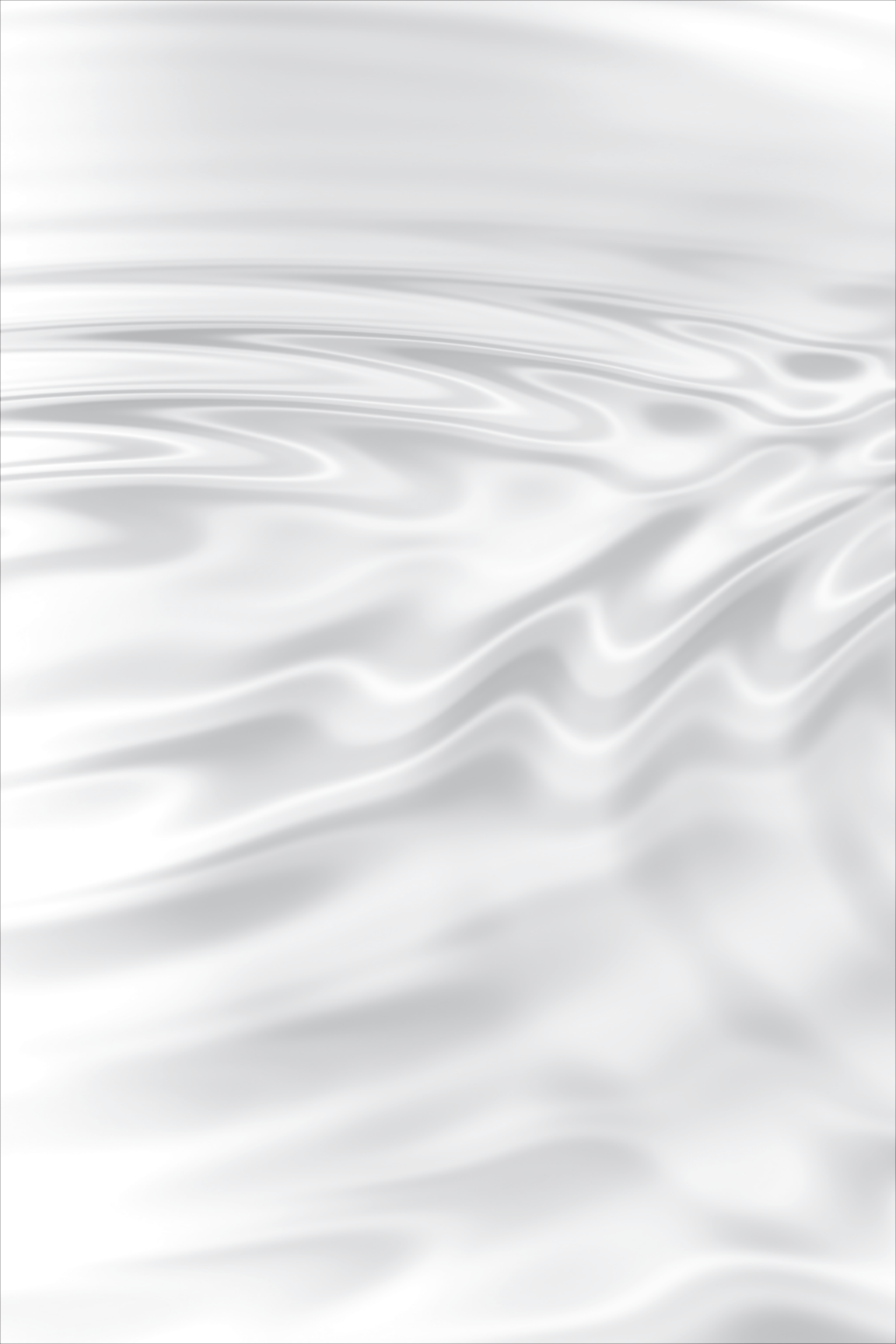
<https://www.facebook.com/AngelinasSecretBook>

<https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/8355606>

<https://www.amazon.com/Diane-Merrill-Wigginton/e/B00MS5NV38>

*I wish to dedicate this book to all those who have endured difficult times in their lives. Know that you are not alone, for we all are called on to do the difficult things in life. No one is exempt from it. That is what brings about a change in us. It was because of difficulties I suffered when I lost my brother and father in 2011 that I was able to fully realize my dream of becoming a writer. That was the catalyst that propelled me forward, giving me the courage to publish my first novel. Change is good, but it can also be painful.*

*I encourage you to embrace it, don't shy away from it. Heart break is inevitable; we all must go through it. Heartaches are also what makes us compassionate as well as human. A broken heart can be put back together again and sometimes beat better than it did before the pain broke it.*



# LARA'S STORY

---

Diane Merrill Wigginton



JEWELLED DAGGER  
PUBLISHING



# I

APRIL 27, 1854  
PHILADELPHIA WHARF  
*Lara's Story*



EVERY QUESTION BEGINS WITH a quest for answers, and every testimony of what is true begins with a test of our resolve. I am reminded of this simple formula as I stand here on this boardwalk, looking out to sea. Each life is a journey, defined by turns we take or the roads we choose or those which fate chooses for us. Some of us move from one place to another, along a well-worn path or the path less taken; it really doesn't matter much as long as it leads you home again.

Memories of my home involuntarily flash through my mind as Mama's words come back to me like a sounding board that has followed me my entire life. She would often tell my sisters and me, "Don't ever make yerself smaller to satisfy the needs of another." Mama was always insightful and perceptive when it came to her children.

Oh, how I still miss her so, even to this day. I smile to myself, wishing my ears could hear that beautiful, rhythmic sound of Mama's voice again, just one more time as a terrible memory of the last day I saw her alive flashes through my mind and I vigorously shake my head to dispel the thought.

When a heart breaks it does not break evenly – cleaving in half exactly down the middle. It breaks, jagged and rough, cutting one to the very core of their soul. And while things may appear perfectly normal to the naked eye, beneath the surface lies the real tragedy, fragmented and splintered beyond reconciliation. Heartbreak is not an innocuous pain, easily excused like a stomach ache. It is more insidious, spreading

throughout ones' system, like an infection. Merely closing my eyes to the pain does not eliminate it in the least.

Just breathe in, then breathe out and move forward, I remind myself. This simple little mantra is something I taught myself so many years ago, and it has gotten me through more than a few dire situations.

I was born Lara Flannigan, on the twenty-first day of April, in the year of our Lord, eighteen hundred and thirty-three. Mama liked to tell me it was a beautiful spring morn, the day I was born, which would have been an unusual occurrence for that time of year.

Mama also said, "I knew ye were special and destined for greatness the moment ye took yer first breath, don't ye know. Cause the sun poked out from behind the clouds with yer first breath of life. Why twere' like the Heavens above truly recognized that an angel had been born to me," she teased.

If truth be told, I believe mama told this exact story to each of her six children. But I loved hearing it nonetheless.

I was the sixth child of the seven children born to Rory and Laurel Flannigan, and I was named for my Da's mother. Our days were long and our lives were hard, but our nights belonged to us. I never knew life could be anything other than what I had experienced. My world was very small in those days, so I never missed the things I didn't have.

I am an Irish immigrant and I came to America at the tender age of thirteen, a disillusioned child, harshly mistreated by the very people entrusted with my care. I tell you this not to solicit your sympathies but to impart knowledge and gain your understanding, for I was a pitiful, angry child who was unaware of how many things in my life were about to change.

People meeting me today might say that I was more fortunate than most. Yet they would never have heard my story nor known that I suffered in silence. I did not wear my pain, like a badge of honor, but kept it deep inside of me, hidden away from the prying eyes of others.



Fear has made me keep my story to myself. I was afraid of the repercussions from the actions I took in the name of survival, when my whole world fell apart. Furthermore, I feared the behavior of peers, those who would use the circumstance of my birthplace and subsequent difficulties to hold me back or bludgeon me with my story like a weapon.

For many years I have pushed from my thoughts memories of home and all that happened there. And yet, every now and again I indulge myself with less painful memories of the past, that push their way to the surface, and I give myself permission to embrace them, loving, bold, nostalgic memories that are impossible to forget. This is especially true today as I find myself waiting, yet another day, for a ship to come in, one that I thought would never arrive upon these great American shores.

Oh, I have everything a person could ever desire. Enough food to ward off hunger for a lifetime. Good health, a beautiful home, fashionable clothes, and the love of my family. I truly have every comfort one could want at my disposal, yet still, I long to recover the missing pieces of myself torn from me the day I left my native land of Ireland. A loss that can still be keenly felt whenever I lay my head down upon my pillow at night. And even though I am far from familiar old haunts, I swear I hear the land beckoning to me in my dreams, calling from across the ocean, summoning me home to the cliffs of Dunmore Head on the westernmost shores of Ireland. Closing my eyes now, I can still recall the smell and taste of the breeze on my tongue and the tangy feel of her salty sea air as it mixes with the sweet scents of wildflowers growing on her craggy cliffs.

The memories grab hold of my soul, leaving me longing for home, even more this day.

“Ireland,” I whisper, as it all comes flooding back to me — the green grassy moors waving in the gentle breeze like waves on the ocean. I can still feel the way the grass tickled my bare feet when I walked upon it.

In my mind's eye I can see the ancient moss-covered rocks and hills that seem to roll on forever, and the overwhelmingly familiar smells of home assault my senses and kindle even more longing inside me. Peat moss burning in the hearth, the earthy smells of fresh mud coming from our simple thatched roofed dwelling, built from wattle and daub that plastered the rocks and boulders in place to form walls. The rain that often leaked upon my head in the middle of the night whenever a storm blew in just right. The way the sweet earthy tones mingled with the bitter as they played across my tongue whenever I chewed on a blade of grass.

Vivid, sweet memories wash over me, transporting me back in time as I see myself as a little girl, sitting in the middle of a field of tall grass, watching with fascination as the wind blew the grass to-and-fro. Then I see myself laughing and playing among the cliffs again with my best friend, Jamie. There are so many precious and sweet memories that I had denied myself for so long.

I swallow hard to push down the lump that forms in my throat. I can recall every ridge, crag, twig, and moss-covered rock that littered our unyielding plot of land.

There were so many afternoons spent upon those cliffs, basking in the glorious sun after bathing in the ocean with Mama and my two sisters. Alana loved tickling me just to hear me laugh while I lay upon the warm cliffs, soaking up the last glorious rays of sunlight. A cool breeze would kick up, washing over my skin, and chilling my flesh with her gentle touch. Those were the days I thought would never end, and it is those same sweet memories that now make me mourn the loss of them all the more.

I shake my head quickly, dispelling any more memories of the past as I hold back more tears, attempting to keep them from escaping. Swiping at the unfortunate few that trickle down my cheeks, I feel anxious and frustrated all at the same time.

Please do not mistake my tears for weakness, for they convey more than mere words are able and can express so many different emotions.

One should never assume that there is only one reason to shed them. There are tears caused by overwhelming grief and pain and tears of contrition. There are tears of joy and love, or tears of annoyance caused by situations that are beyond your control. Yet my tears today are a culmination of so many different emotions that are simply hard for me to put into words.

Coming back to reality, I take a moment to compose myself. Drawing in a deep breath, I turn away from the people walking by me who have stopped to stare. Quickly wiping away fresh tears as I attempt to dispel my complicated thoughts, I notice a man staring at me from across the street; I realize it's my fiancée. Suddenly I find myself wondering how long he has been standing there watching me as he steps down into the street and crosses over to me.

"Lara, my love, let me take you back home so you may warm yourself by the hearth. It really is far too cold today for you to be standing out here waiting for that blasted ship to come in. Watched pots never boil and all," he teases. "Why, this is the third day this week —"

"The fourth. But who's counting?" I inform him tersely, turning away slightly in hopes that he didn't notice my reddened eyes.

"Have you been crying?"

"Don't be ridiculous," I assert, "a piece of ash flew into my eyes and caused them to tear up," I lie.

"Both of them? Let me see," he insists, forcibly turning me to face him.

"I've already removed it." I slap at his hand. "Now stop fussing over me and leave me be. Don't you have someplace other than here to be? Like work?"

"Not today, darling. I've taken the day off. When you are the boss, you can do that sort of thing," he gloats, then smiles broadly.

"Seems someone has developed a rather high opinion of themselves," I playfully reply, trying to distract him from his original concern. "Now off with you. I can assure you that I am made of heartier stock than

you give me credit for. I'll be fine," I retort with a lift of my one brow, when he gives me one of his questioning looks that say he doesn't quite believe a word coming out of my mouth. "Surely, you know that I am not leaving this spot before the ship docks. I would not take the chance of missing it, you know. You, of all people know why this particular ship is so special to me. You couldn't pry me away from this spot if you tried," I assure him with a look of stubbornness.

He throws his hands up and replies, "I know, darling, but I had to try. So why don't I stay and keep you company?" he adds with a patient smile. "Because I have a feelin' in me bones, don't ye know, that today is the day," he jokingly mimics a thick Irish brogue, sounding utterly ridiculous while doing so.

"Oh, aye, ye have a sharp tongue on ye today, sir," I tease. I look up then down the street to ensure that no one is paying attention to us before standing on my tippy toes to kiss him on the mouth. I truly love this man standing before me, with all of my heart. And on a day like today, I marvel at my good fortune, and even at fate itself, for bringing us together. If truth be told, I felt even more blessed that I was still alive.

I look up and catch him studying me out of the corner of his eye. I could see a look in his eye that proclaimed his mind worked overtime and knew he wanted to say something but then thought better of it.

"What is it, darling?" I quietly ask, looking off towards the vast ocean for any sign of the ship.

He continues to gaze down at me a moment longer before turning his attention to the activities on the docks. Then without another word, he takes hold of my arm, leading me over to a nearby bench. I notice a basket sitting on the ground next to the bench, with a blanket resting on top.

"I was hoping you would help me pass the time as we wait by telling me a story of when you were a little girl growing up in Ireland," he suggests slyly, giving a quick side-long look.

I smile awkwardly before taking a seat, just as my knees give way, because of his unexpected request. Unfolding the blanket, he places it across my lap before taking a seat next to me; all the while his eyes never directly meet mine, even though he knows I am searching his face.

Pulling the blanket up a little higher, I turn away to hide the fresh tears that spring to my eyes. Looking out to the ocean's horizon again, I lift a hand to block the brightness of the sun. I was certain he didn't fully understand what he was asking of me in that moment because if he did, he would never have asked it of me.

The raw nerve he hits with his simple request drudges up so many feelings, sweet and precious memories intermingled with the painful ones. I realize he does not truly understand that he is asking me to journey back in time, fraught with difficulty and pain. Memories and traumatic experiences from my childhood I have deliberately boxed up, along with the things I did not dare examine too closely, for fear they would be my undoing. These memories were the most precious and devastating part of me. He would have no way of knowing his request was equivalent to opening up Pandora's Box; I have worked hard to hide that part of myself from the world ... and from him.

Closing my eyes, I sit quietly with my thoughts and memories for a moment, allowing them to flood back to me as fresh and raw as the day they happened. So many things have happened to me since Ireland, putting words to them is difficult. And yet everything is still there, just beneath the surface, waiting for me to bring them up and give life to them.

I recall everything in great detail again as I begin to speak. "Some may have considered us poor, without means to sustain ourselves, when I was a child. Others speculated that we would never amount to anything, my brothers, sisters, and me. But they would have been wrong; in my eyes, they were the ones who were lacking in substance and means. In my eyes they were poor in heart and poor in spirit. They were the ones who would never amount to anything because they could never

have imagined, for the life of them, what we as a family had. In my heart, we had everything that was important. We had each other,” I whisper. “I discovered at an early age that if your heart wasn’t right, you could never be truly happy. I had loving parents that counted their children as their most precious and prized possessions, and we looked out for one other, offering love and support to each other.”

Memories wash over me like the ocean, whirling and swirling about me, pushing me back across the Atlantic, hundreds of miles away. Back to a more innocent time, so many years before, when my life was care-free. “Every day was an opportunity for an adventure, and every night was filled with joy, laughter, and dancing as my large, boisterous family gathered around the warmth of our humble little hearth,” I say with a sad smile.

“Nothing smells quite like Ireland,” I whisper, choking back another sob as I catch myself thinking about my Mama, so bonnie and light before —well, before the tragedy.

Thinking of my family always made me sad, but I would not pull away this time. *No, not this time!* I told myself.

## 2

APRIL 4, 1846

### *The carefree days, before it all went wrong*



WHEN I BEGIN TO speak again, I barely recognize my own voice as the floodgates of emotions open up wide, pouring out feelings and thoughts in my mind's eye so quickly I can scarcely contain them all.

I found myself back in Dunmore Head, a part of the Dingle Peninsula, in Kerry County, Ireland. It was May 1846, and I was twelve years old again, standing in the cooking area of our modest, two-room home. Mama and my two sisters, Alana and Caitlin, and I worked together, preparing a special meal for Da's birthday. He didn't like a fuss made over his day because he said, "it was a waste of time." Yet, Mama felt differently about the matter and told us on more than a few occasions that Papa was full of malarkey.

Alana, who was eighteen and looked so much like our mama —tall and fair, with dark auburn hair and hazel green eyes —was promised to Newel Cummins from the next township over. They were to be wed in August, and preparations for her special day had already begun. The beginnings of a wedding dress hung on a hook in the corner of the room and the glow of young love shone on her bonny cheeks.

My other sister, Caitlin was fifteen and nearly as tall as Alana, but looked more like Da with her darker skin and chestnut hair that shone with red tones beneath her dark tresses. She had eyes fringed with beautiful, full lashes and, of my two sisters, was the most striking.

Although my two sisters were very different in appearance, they were aligned in their allegiance to one another and did everything together. They stood in the corner of the room, mixing dough for the sweet bread, rolling it in raisins and nuts before allowing it to rise. Then the bread would be baked and drizzled with a sweet glaze while it was still warm.

My Mama and I worked in tandem to prepare Da's favorite soup, potato, and fish. We made it from a creamy broth, combined with diced potatoes and onions from our garden, and whatever fish my oldest brother, Colin, happened to catch that morning.

Mama, who was always so beautiful and fair in my eyes, and once considered to be the prettiest lass in the county, was beginning to show her age. Her curly red hair, once vibrant and bold, was beginning to streak with gray. Time and hard work had taken their toll, marring her once smooth, supple, alabaster skin with brown spots and fine lines around her eyes and mouth.

I often asked Mama why she smiled so much and her answer was always the same. She'd say it was because she had been lucky enough to tame the rebellious heart of my Da, the most handsome man in three counties. Then she would add that he had blessed her life with six wonderful children, who brought her life meaning and joy. Da stood just a little taller when he heard Mama say it.

Mama loved to laugh, finding happiness in the little things life gave to her. In fact, I truly can't remember many times in her life when she wasn't laughing or smiling about one thing or another.

Colin, who was nearly twenty years old, and as the oldest son of Rory and Laurel Flannigan, was decidedly, might I add, the pride and joy of our Da. Oh, he claimed he loved us all the same, but we all knew, Colin was his favored child because he was the firstborn. Tall and strong, Colin was the spitting image of Da, with his shiny black hair, and dark brooding eyes fringed with beautiful thick lashes that drove the girls in our humble little county crazy. My brother Colin was also selfless. He felt an obligation to stay on and help the family, even past



the proper time of marriage. Da couldn't till and grow enough potatoes, while supplementing our meager income by working in town from time to time, without Colin's help. And it was important to our survival that Da earn enough money to sustain our large brood.

Da's family had emigrated from Spain and dropped in the small peninsula to populate the islands in the 1500's. His skin was brown, but not as dark as the Spaniards because his family had integrated with the locals. Mama and Da made a striking pair, one dark and the other fair, I felt I was the benefactor of this blessed union, with my dark auburn hair that lit up in the sunlight like a bonfire, and fair skin unmarred by freckles like other redheads I knew. And although I had light skin, I was blessed with the ability to turn a pleasant shade of tan when I spent any time in the sun, rather than blistering and turning bright red.

My other brothers, Mick (or Micky as we liked to call him) who was seventeen and Michael, then fifteen, were a mixed bag of light and dark, but Da's dark eyes and thick lashes prevailed throughout the three boys, unlike my sisters and myself.

Some people would make off-handed comments, calling us poor, but we were anything but poor in my eyes. We were your typical Irish, Catholic family with too many mouths to feed, but somehow we got by. Da and my brothers found work in town and occasionally hired on at one of the neighbor's farms as hired hands, tending to the crops or milking cows when they were needed. The pay was meagerly at best, still it was enough to get us through the hard times until the potato crops were ready to harvest. We could survive most anything with potatoes to fill our bellies and fish in our pot.

We lived in a small, two-room house made from rocks, mud, and grass for the walls, and a thatched roof fashioned from dried sedge and heather, tightly woven together for a roof. Most of the time the water ran off when it rained, but not always. And though the accommodations were meagerly at best, Mama and Da worked hard to make the small home feel cozy, warm and filled with love. Mama was the heart that

pumped life into each of us as well as the glue that kept us all together. I believe this was because of the love she had for Da, and that is what kept her going when life was difficult. My parents had a love that was very single-minded, putting the needs of the other above the need of their own. I never heard them speak a harsh word to one another or to any of us. Instead, only words of love and encouragement were spoken under our roof.

I could always count on Mama to make me feel better if I scraped my knee climbing over rocks or running down a hill too fast. I would come in limping with tears rolling down my cheeks and find her humming to herself as she was washing or milking the goats. And before I knew it, I would be laughing and humming alongside her as I helped her with the rest of her chores.

We rented twenty acres of unforgiving, rock infested land, which we all diligently worked, side by side; all that is, except Mama. She was the only person exempt from working in the fields, but that didn't mean she had it easier than the rest of us. In my opinion, she worked harder, washing and mending clothes and preparing all the meals.

Once I complained about there being too many rocks to move after a particularly long, hard day, only to look down and see Mama's work-worn hands, cracked and raw from the lye soap she used to wash our clothes. Placing her hands in her apron when she noticed me staring, she told me that the stones on our land were magical rocks and that they would protect us from all of life's harsh storms. I didn't truly believe her at the time, but it made me laugh and I never again complained about how hard the work was.

Most nights we gathered together after supper to enjoy one another's company. Da and Colin played their fiddles, Mama sang and the rest of us clapped along. Sometimes the older siblings taught us younger ones how to dance an Irish jig or whatever was popular at the time. Life was so sweet. I remember thinking to myself that I never wanted it to change. I was blessed beyond anything my young mind could imagine.

We had family surrounding us, potatoes in the cellar, which was really a deep hole in the ground that Colin and Da dug, with a board standing over it to keep one of us from slipping in, and summer was just around the corner. I had everything I could ever need.

“But sometimes, things have to come completely undone before they can be put back together the way they are meant to be,” Mama would say.

That evening, as we celebrated Da's special day, Mama had been quiet. She shied away from the festivities, clapping along to the music rather than singing gayly as she normally did. The fact was, I had noticed a difference in her during the past two months and I was becoming concerned.

Mama, also famous for saying, “Sometimes the seeds of happiness are sewn into the clouds of darkness,” seemed to have a dark cloud following her. Truth of the matter was that I had never truly known what a dark cloud looked like until I came into my thirteenth season. And yet, somehow, I could sense a storm was coming and it was sitting out there in the distance, just beyond the horizon, ready to storm on our happiness.

I felt the change coming in the air. Call it a sixth sense if you must, but nothing could have prepared me for the squall that was headed my way; or should I say our way. All of our lives were about to change, in a very dramatic way.

Mama was pregnant and not exactly thrilled with the prospect of another mouth to feed.

# 3

AUGUST 10, 1846

## *The day my childhood ended*



MONTHS PASSED AND SPRING turned to summer. Micky had badly injured his leg while clearing the field of rocks and boulders in March. He was using an old board as a lever when it snapped in half, causing the bolder to settle wrong, rolling over his leg and severely breaking it in two places.

Da went to fetch Doctor Griffin, who was little more than an animal doctor, but he was all our small township could afford.

Doctor Griffin came to set my brother's leg, and it was a horrible thing to witness. Afterward, I observed the doctor's face and it said more to me than his lips dared to speak in front of the family. He looked very grim before he and Da stepped outside to talk. Mama was fussing over Micky, trying to make him comfortable, so I wandered over to the small window near the door to listen to what was being said. I could hear every word. Doctor Griffin told Da that he highly recommended removing Micky's leg. That was the first time in my life I'd heard Da cry out loud.

Colin and Michael picked up the slack without complaint as Mick fought a terrible fever for more than a week. Then one day his fever seemed better and we thought the worst of it was over. But we were wrong. Micky suffered horrible pains, often crying out in the middle of the night from the infection that settled into his leg. By the end of June, Micky began to use the crutches Da made him. Each day, he would put a little more weight on the injured leg, until one day he didn't need the crutches any

longer. Unfortunately, Micky was left with a permanent limp. He never complained or let on that his leg still pained him. But I could see it in his eyes; every time he stood up or tried to walk, he grimaced.

Micky refused to let his circumstance get in his way or slow him down. I really looked up to him after that; he was the strongest man I had ever known, besides Da, of course.

Mama's mood began to improve as the months passed. She was never one to brood over things that she couldn't control and had come to accept the inevitable. As her belly continued to grow, she became slower, plagued by back pains and aches in her legs that she'd never had before with any of her previous pregnancies.

When Mama complained that she was too old to be having more babies, Da made sure he told her she was still the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. That she was even more beautiful now than the day he'd first laid eyes upon her. This would make Mama blush and she would say he was full of stuffing, which always made us girls laugh.

Alana took over running the household as well as planning her wedding that was quickly approaching.

"Ere, Mama, let me do that for ye," I pleaded.

"Hush, child, I'm capable now," she protested, "off with ye. Go on now. Go outside and play! I'm no invalid."

"But, mama, I wanna' help."

"Then be off with ye, and get out from under me feet," she insisted, swooshing the broom at me for emphasis.

"Go on, Lara, do as mama says," Caitlin added, stepping through the doorway after hanging the washing on the line. "I saw Jamie O'Brien and his little sister waiting for ye outside by the barn."

My desire to help suddenly vanished as I ran toward the door, leaving it standing wide open behind me. "Thanks, Caitlin," I hastily called over my shoulder in my rush to go play with a satisfied smile playing across my lips.

Jamie O'Brian was my best friend in the whole world and lived on the next parcel over from us. He was only a few months older than me but he always seemed so much older. We had been playmates since the day I could walk. Several inches taller than me, Jamie had hit a growth spurt three months before and shot up straight and tall like a weed in the field. He wore his rich chestnut hair slightly longer and wild these days, on account his mother was over-burdened with children and never had time to cut it. Two sets of kind blue eyes smiled at me from across the yard as Jamie and his ever-present shadow stood by his side.

Katy, Jamie's younger sister, was a sweet girl and, never one to be left behind, she went everywhere he did. Although eight years younger than us, Katy was attached to Jamie's hip from the day she was born. The O'Brian's were also a large family, but his mother passed on the responsibility of looking after the newest baby to each of her children. So, when it came Jamie's turn to look after a sibling, he took his responsibility to heart and never left Katy behind. They were inseparable.

"Good morrow to ye, Jamie," I called out my greeting. "Miss Katy, so good to see yer well today."

"Good morrow to ye," they called back in unison, pushing off the side of the barn wall, which was nothing more than a smaller version of our humble home. It housed the livestock consisting of six chickens, three goats, and one large sow that was ready to birth piglets any day now. We were considered, by most standards, to be well off. My Da was a very smart, hardworking man. It was one of the things that impressed me the most about him.

"Wanna go on a treasure hunt?" I asked, turning in the direction of the bluffs as I began to walk.

Jamie called back. "Only if I can be the pirate!" he insisted, catching up quickly to me as Katy brought up the rear.

"And I want to be the princess," Katy cried as she was forced to run to catch up, taking ahold of Jamie's hand with a large grin. She loved playing the helpless maiden.

I smiled, knowing that we were free to run the hills and bluffs or walk down to the ocean's edge and put our feet into the cool water for the next few hours. It had been a blistering hot day and I, for one, felt like my insides were melting. "Perfect! Race ye both!" I called out my challenge over my shoulder as I took off running, giving myself a head start with a carefree laugh.

"Ye are an unscrupulous cheat, Lara Flannigan," Jamie shouted, quickly pulling Katy behind him.

I laughed even harder when I looked over my shoulder and found him running to catch up as I stood at the cliffs edge preparing to traverse the steep incline. Then I paused a moment and sniffed the air. A strange smell assaulted my nose and I took a brief moment to analyze it.

"What's wrong?" inquired Jamie breathlessly as he and Katy finally caught up to me.

Pushing my concerns aside with a shake of my head, I headed down the cliff's trail with another volley of giggles as Jamie and Katy followed. "Nothing, silly," I shouted, racing down the steep trail. "Now hurry up, I hear the water calling out to me." I turned my attention back to the trail ahead of me. "First one to get wet, wins!"

"I'm goin' ta enjoy plunderin' treasures from ye today, ye fair weathered friend," Jamie protested, causing me to laugh that much harder.

Suddenly Katy squealed, slipping on a pebble, as she slid farther down the trail in the dirt. "I'm fine," she called out when I stopped to see what had caused her to scream.

"I got ye, Katy, me girl. Never fear," her ever-doting brother assured her as he lifted her up and dusted her off. "I would no' let ye fall.

Katy's little face beamed with joy. "I know, Jamie. I was no' afraid."

Racing the rest of the way down the trail, I lifted the hem of my already too short dress, trying to prevent it from getting saturated when I ran into the water. Then, momentarily lost in my own triumph, I threw my arms into the air and did a little victory dance, dropping my skirt into the water anyway. "I be the winner, Jamie O'Brien. Ha! Take that you scurvy pirate!"

Carrying Katy the last hundred feet, Jamie deposited her in the water next to me. "Only if ye like to win by cheatin'," he proclaimed, unperturbed by my gloating.

Kicking water at him, I screamed as he and Katy began pelting me back with the cool, refreshing water. The battle continued until the three of us were completely soaked through. Then finding several long sticks on the shore's edge, we began to play in earnest. Jamie was Captain Longfellow, the notorious one-eyed, peg-legged pirate who happened upon the fair maiden, Lady Katherine Cornwell, the beloved princess of the land. And I, of course, was the other fair maiden, set upon by the infamous pirate captain who took me prisoner. I was from the far-off land, yonder, across the bay, and forced into servitude. His wish was my command.

We had many small skirmishes that required more water play, and a few hideous battle cries. Then there were the pleas for help from Lady Katherine Cornwell, who was eventually relinquished by the dreaded pirate. I too won my freedom and all was well with the world once more.

We hunted for seashells, dried ourselves in the sun, then headed back up the steep cliffs to the top, happy and exhausted by our vigorous play. Jamie had to pull Katy up the last few feet and I brought up the rear as we reached the top of the path. Sticking my nose into the air once again, I noticed the strange smell was back.

"Do ye smell that?" I questioned, sniffing the air.

"What do ye think it is?" Katy asked, bringing her hand up, blocking the bright sun from her eyes.

"It smells like somethin' rottin'," Jamie exclaimed, wrinkling his nose up as he pulled his sister behind him.

The three of us continued to walk towards home, but the smell only got stronger. We didn't know it yet, but the putrid stench was rotting, diseased crops dying a terrible death.



I saw my Da and brothers standing in the middle of the field scraping at the ground and searching about for something. Curiosity got the better of us and we drew nearer to see what they were doing.

Jamie called out his greetings, "Good day to ye, Mr. Flannigan."

Strangely though, my Da didn't seem to notice us as he kept his head down.

"What's the matter, Da," I yelled before noticing the condition of the crops. "Jamie, have ye ever seen such a thing?" I turned to him.

"What is that?" Katy uttered as the three of us made our way through the blackened, rotting field of potato stems, curled over and withered on the ground.

I heard Da exclaim, "Ruined! Every stinkin' last one of them's ruined!"

The three of us came to stand next to Da, Micky, and Colin, who finally looked up at us. "What is this, Da? What has happened to the crops?"

"Blight!" he cursed, then spit on the ground as if just the mere mention of the word made him sick. "It's all rubbish. Every stinking last bit of it," he snapped, throwing his shovel down and walking away in disgust.

Slowly picking up the discarded shovel, Colin said, "It's not even fit to feed to the pig." Turning his back to us, he trailed after Da. "Come on Micky, let's go," he called over his shoulder.

My heart sank, and even though I didn't yet fully understand the implications of that word, *blight*, I soon would.

# 4

NOVEMBER 10, 1846

## *The glue that held us together*



Alana married Newel Cummins on the twenty-first day of August in a quiet ceremony attended by close family and friends. The small celebration afterward was subdued. We served fish soup, bread, and wine.

Due to the devastating loss of potato crops by us all, many who would have attended Alana and Newel's wedding didn't come.

Shortly following the wedding, Newel, being the youngest of four siblings, moved in with his parents' to help take care of them in their old age. Newel was a blacksmith by trade but he helped his folks work their land when he could.

Widespread loss of crops devastated the surrounding towns and people lost entire crops and, subsequently, their entire years' worth of income in one mighty blow. The word in town was that the loss had been greater in the western portion of the country than anywhere else, which is exactly where we lived.

What followed in the months to come was so devastating, no one saw it coming. The Government set up public workhouses so men, women, and children could labor at the most repulsive tasks possible to human-kind and for little pay. But to all concerned, next to nothing was better than absolutely nothing.

People sold everything they possessed and the poorest of us survived the first winter. The second winter would be an entirely different story.

Every workhouse opened their doors but were ill-equipped to cope with the overwhelming influx of people pouring through those doors, looking for shelter. Soon, the overcrowded conditions caused disease to run rampant, exacting a human toll that was beyond any one's wildest imagination. The already distressed populace were dying off by the cart-full.

Dysentery, black fever, yellow fever, and starvation devastated our country in the months that followed.

Our family was more fortunate than most; we had a few livestock and the sea to sustain us until aid could be sent from England. "Surely, they will recognize our plight and do something about it," I overheard Mama saying to a neighbor one day.

But the relief never came and there was never enough work to go around for all those who were in need. Maize, known as Indian corn, was a cheap substitute for potatoes and became the main staple of the poor. The only problem was people didn't have money to pay for it.

October came and went and the weather turned from bad to worse. Da and my brothers were gone for weeks at a time, staying near town so that they could obtain work. They would camp outside or find shelter where they could, refusing to stay in the workhouses. They took any job, no matter how demeaning, so they could put food on our table.

Returning home, Da and the boys had been back for two days when disaster struck our home. Da had been worried about us girls when he was gone. He especially worried about Mama, seeing how she was heavy with child. It was the 10th day of November, and Da proclaimed earlier that morning that it was time to clear the fields of any infected plant material. He had decided to store everything in the barn and incinerate the mess once the rains stopped.

Mama was nearing her time and I could see the concern in her eyes that November morning as she served me the last bowl of boiled maze, along with what little goat's milk was left, to make the concoction go down a little easier. She looked so very frail and thin to me as she served me.

We were rationed one meal a day, but I suspected that mama had been forgoing even that small luxury when she could, to ensure that Da and my brothers had enough to sustain them.

“Mama, I’m no’ really hungry this morn,” I offered, even as my belly gurgled and complained loudly. “Won’t ye please eat me breakfast?” I pleaded.

“Silly child, I already had me portion before any of ye awoke.” I could tell she was lying, even as she shoved the bowl back at me. “Now eat and then ye can help with the chores.”

“But Mama —”

“Hush child and don’t waste yer energy.” Mama insisted, straightening her spine as she closed her eyes to the pain in her back.

The rain was coming down in a gentle mist and I was mesmerized by the water dripping from the thatched roof, absently spooning mush into my mouth, when I heard Mama cry out in pain before doubling over and falling to her knees.

Jumping to my feet, I rushed to her side and knelt down beside her. “What’s wrong, Mama?” I cried, completely forgetting about my hungry belly.

Taking several deep breaths and blowing them out, she tried to smile but failed miserably. “Go fetch yer Da and tell Michael to get the midwife,” Mama insisted through gritted teeth, grabbing at her stomach again as a whoosh of liquid spilled out between her legs. I hesitated a moment. “Hurry child!” she screamed.

Running out the door and headlong into the rain without a coat for protection, panic drove me forward. I was oblivious to both wet and cold. I just needed to get help for Mama.

I was certain my Da and brothers heard me coming long before I could make out any of their faces through the rain that matted down my hair causing it to flop into my eyes. I screamed at the top of my lungs as I reached the field, where they were unearthing the rotting potatoes, throwing them into a cart to dispose of them.

I saw Da drop his shovel first, then Colin set the cart he was pushing down on the ground. Michael and Micky carried their shovels with them as they all came running.

“What is it, Lara?” Da cried, gripping my shoulders, somehow knowing the answer to his question before I uttered a single word.

“Mama,” I cried breathlessly, unable to get the rest of it out. A look of fear crossed his face and he turned and ran towards the house.

I grabbed ahold of Michael as he turned to leave as well. “Mama wants ye ta fetch the midwife. Oh, and tell Alana the babe’s comin’. She’ll want ta know.”

Nodding his head, Michael turned, running in the opposite direction as the rest of us, and I ran to catch up with Micky.

Before the rest of us returned, Caitlin had come in from milking the goat to find Mama sprawled out on the floor and helped her to bed. I was the last one through the door and found Da by Mama’s side, frantic and unsure of what to do to help her, as the boys hovered just inside the doorway, afraid to go any further.

Grabbing a blanket off the nearest bed, I walked through to the room, wrapping the blanket around my shoulders like a shawl, barely noticing that I was chilled to the bone. I could tell Mama was struggling and I wanted to help.

“What’ll we do, Caitlin?” I asked when I reached her side, trying to be as quiet and inconspicuous as possible so I wouldn’t be ordered to leave.

Just then, Mama looked up and saw me. Taking a couple of deep breaths, she said, “Come here child, ye’re old enough to help. Fetch the clean blankets and gown for the babe when it comes,” she indicated, pointing her finger to the corner of the room.

Running to do her bidding, I placed the items on a chair near the bed.

“I need ye to gather the water and put it on ta heat,” Mama insisted with a reassuring smile. “That’s a good girl.” I believe the task was more

about giving me something to do, rather than being particularly useful at the time. I ran from the room to do as I was told.

Laying the blanket over a chair I walked out into the rain to fill the pail with water, and I remember I felt afraid. I had spent my entire life on the farm and I'd witnessed many animals give birth and yet I was unsure of what to expect when it came to a human birth.

When I returned to the house with the pail of water, Da was trying to coax fresh moss and sticks to catch on fire in the hearth. I carefully poured the water into a kettle and swung it over the fire that quickly sprung to life.

"Ye're a good girl, Lara. So much like yer Mama, ye are," he mused, sounding melancholy as he stared into the fire. "Best get out of those wet clothes before ye catch yer death. Then ye be no help to anyone."

"Straight away, Da," I muttered, stepping behind the makeshift curtain to remove my soaked dress and undergarment. Something in his voice told me he was scared, but I didn't know why. Taking one of Caitlin's hand-me-downs off the hook, I slipped it on and was still buttoning it up when I rushed into the next room to see what Mama wanted me to do next.

Caitlin bathed Mama's forehead and cheeks with cool water and a rag. Mama was soothed by this as she rolled to her side and reached out to take my hand. "Come closer child, let me look at you," she called softly, waiting patiently while I complied.

Kneeling on the ground next to the bed, I was grateful she was no longer crying out. "What can I do, Mama?"

"Just lookin' into yer eyes is enough. Now don't be scared," Mama insisted, with a reassuring grimace as another wave of contractions racked her frail body. "Caitlin, get yer Da."

"Yes, Mama," she replied, quickly walking out of the room to do as Mama instructed.

Da rushed into the room and I stood up, getting out of his way as he squatted down on the floor. "I sent Colin to get the Doctor," he told her while grasping her hand.

"The midwife should be good enough. I don't need Griffin."

Shaking his head, Da kissed Mama's hand. "Not Griffin, my love. A real doctor from the next town over."

Tears of gratitude shone in her eyes as Mama shook her head. "The babe will be here before he arrives. Besides, we can no' be affordin' him."

"And I can no' be affordin' ta lose ye," Da exclaimed, wiping tears from her eyes with the back of his dirty, work-worn hand.

"Ye'll no' go losin' me, when I be right here, always, Rory Flannigan," Mama said, gently reaching out a hand and laying it upon his heart.

Then Da leaned over, gently touching his lips to hers and the tenderness between them made me smile.

Moments later, Michael came through the door with Mrs. O'Keefe, a happy woman of considerable girth. Mirna O'Keefe was a hearty woman, having given birth seven times herself. Rumor was that she had delivered the last baby herself, tying off the cord, then feeding the baby, and still managed to serve her family their evening meal on time. That was three months ago and she was already back to midwifing.

"Good day ta ye, Mrs. Flannigan," Mrs. O'Keefe called out, blowing into the room like a great storm off of the ocean as she assessed the situation and took charge.

Attempting to get up, Mama cried out in pain again. "If'n ye be claimin' it's a good day," she retorted.

"Bit of a rough morn' then?"

"One might say," Mama replied.

With a jovial tone, Mrs. O'Keefe began, "Then let us see what we can do ta change that."

Da quietly left the room with one last look back before closing the door. A few minutes later, Alana came in and walked over to where Caitlin and I were standing beside the bed.

"I was worried I'd missed it," Alana whispered as she leaned over toward us.

Mama screamed when Mrs. O'Keefe asked her to lay on her back. "Won't be much longer girls. Yer Mum is close," she announced triumphantly. "Alana, dear, get behind yer mum and help her ta push when I tell ye. Caiti, ye go fetch yer sharpest knife and ye, me girl, will take the babe from me when *he* comes."

All of us moved as one to do as we were instructed by Mrs. O'Keefe. The midwife pushed Mama's gown up even higher as soon as Caitlin returned. A strange look played across her face for just a moment and then it was gone.

"Is there always so much blood?" I innocently blurted out.

With one quick look in my direction, the midwife quashed any more outbursts from me about what was and was not normal. "Hush child and get the blankets ready."

Silently bobbing my head, I did as I was told.

"Now push, Laurel. Push hard!" Mrs. O'Keefe stressed, narrowing her eyes as Mama grunted, giving it all that she had.

Helping push from the back, Alana whispered encouraging words into Mama's ear. "Push Mama. Ye can do it."

"You can do it, Mama," I cried excitedly, stepping over to take her hand.

"Almost there, Mama. The babe's nearly 'ere," Caitlin blurted out, tears shining in her eyes.

Fifteen minutes passed and still very little progress had been made. "Take one last solid breath and push with all yer might, Laurel," Mrs. O'Keefe bellowed, her voice shaking with emotion.

Laying back against Alana, Mama looked completely spent. "I can no' do it. I have nothin' left," she cried, tears streaming down her face. "There be no more in me." The words trickled from Mama's mouth.

"Ye can no' give up now, Laurel Flannigan! That horse left the barn long ago," Mirna scolded. "Now buck up and push!"

The look in Mama's eyes was like the light had all but gone out. Shaking her head, she cried out as another contraction doubled her



over. "Please, Mama! Yer almost there," I begged. "Ye can no' give up, Mama. I can see the babe's head," I said, stepping behind Mrs. O'Keefe to cheer Mama on.

Alana pushed her forward and with one last mighty breath, Mama pushed with every ounce of reserved strength she had, and the baby spilled out into Mrs. O'Keefe's arms. Wiping the baby vigorously with a towel, then hanging her upside down, Mirna gave the baby three solid smacks to the back causing her to whimper then cry robustly.

Holding the blanket out to her, Mrs. O'Keefe placed the baby girl in my outstretched arms. "She has red hair, just like us, Mama," I proudly announced, wrapping the blanket around my baby sister the moment the cord was tied and cut.

I was looking at the baby, marveling at her tiny, perfect features when I realized everyone had gone completely quiet. Turning, I saw a strange look on Mrs. O'Keefe's face first before turning to look at Caitlin and then Alana. The three of them looked stricken.

Mama had become very still and she looked ashen. Blood was oozing out as the midwife reached around me grabbing for anything she could get her hands on to stem the flow of blood.

"Laurel, wake up!" Mrs. O'Keefe yelled, mercilessly shaking Mama, trying to wake her. "Someone get yer Da!" She shouted when the three of us stood frozen in place, paralyzed by fear.

I stared blankly at the tragedy that was taking place before my eyes. "I said for you to move, girl! Now!" she bellowed, grabbing my arm and squeezing it hard then shoving me toward the door.

Grasping the baby to my chest tightly, I feared I would drop her; my legs and arms shook so badly. Yet I still obediently made my way to the door and opened it. My eyes locked on Da's as he came through the front door carrying an arm full of fresh wood. I could no longer contain my tears. "Help her, Da. Please! Ye have ta help Mama," I cried, dropping to my knees, still clinging to the baby girl who began to whimper again.

Dropping the wood where he stood, I heard him choke back a sob as he stumbled past me. “No, no, no, no —” he repeatedly said, dropping to his knees beside Mama’s bedside.

Mama gradually opened her eyes, giving a lopsided smile then reached her arms up. “Let me see her,” she insisted weakly. “I want to hold me girl.”

I watched in horror as Da slowly turned his head and nodded for me to bring the child. Taking the baby from my arms, he placed her next to Mama and pulled back the blanket to reveal her delicate little features. She was so very tiny and frail, just like Mama.

Alana, Caitlin, and I made eye contact, and a silent message passed between us. Something was very wrong with Mama.

“Look at the baby’s graceful little fingers,” Mama marveled, brushing the baby’s cheek with the back of her boney, work-worn finger. “Will ye christen her Grace for me?”

That was the moment Da lost control. A sob slipped through his lips and he laid his head upon the pillow next to Mama’s, unable to contain his grief any longer. Leaving behind a dirty smudge upon her pillow, he finally lifted his head after a few minutes, wiping his eyes and nose with the back of his hand. Then finding the strength to speak, he said, “Don’ ye talk like that, Laurel, me love. Ye will be right next ta me when we christen our baby girl Grace,” he insisted with a loud sniff.

Mustering up strength, Mama lifted her hand and stroked her husband’s glossy black hair. “Promise me, Rory. Please,” she pleaded weakly.

He began sucking in and then blowing out the air through his mouth loudly until he regained control. Then slowly he exhaled and squared his shoulders, gazing upon his wife’s face before nodding his answer. “Anythin’ for you, love. Just do no’ leave me. I beg ye,” he pleaded pitifully.

“Tell her every day how much I loved her,” Mama continued as the tears began to roll down her face, pooling into her ears. “Will ye do this for me, Rory?”

“Laurel —” Da raised his voice slightly in warning.

“Promise me, Rory Flannigan,” Mama persisted.

Staring into Mama's eyes, he relented, "I will. But, Laurel—"

Mama reached her hand out softly touching the side of his face, causing him to fall silent as she continued, "I have loved ye from the first time I lay me eyes on yer sorry excuse of a face, Rory Flannigan. The day ye pulled me hair in class and then walked me home from school," she smiled wistfully. "Remember?"

"How could I ever forget. Ye were the prettiest girl I'd ever seen. And ye're still the most beautiful girl I've ever laid me eye upon, Laurel Flannigan. That truth will never change in me eyes. Not ever!" he fiercely proclaimed, leaning down to kiss her lips. Then, slowly standing, he lifted the baby girl in his arms, while still holding Mama's gaze, before nodding his head and stepping back a pace.

"Alana," Mama whispered, slowly turning her head to the side so that she could see my sister's face.

Wordlessly Alana leaned over, kissing Mama's cheek, her tears spilling onto her face.

"I need ye ta help yer Da with the wee babe. He's never been any good with 'em."

Stroking her cheek, Alana could no longer contain her grief. "Oh Mama, I love ye so," she softly cried, bravely trying to choke back her sorrow as she covered her mouth, then turned away.

Gently touching Alana's hand that still rested on her cheek, Mama tried to comfort her oldest daughter as she turned to Caitlin. "Caiti, me sweet girl, take care of yer Da for me," she whispered with sadness, somehow knowing that her time on earth was short. Turning her head so she could look at Da once again as she continued. "He will be no good without me."

I looked over to see Da clasping baby Grace even tighter to his chest while silent tears slipped down his dirt-streaked face. He gasped for air, quickly inhaling then exhaling several more times as the baby began to squirm and then cry softly.

Da was trying to be strong for Mama, but it was painfully apparent that he would soon lose that battle.

Mama tried to lift her head to look for me. "Lara, where's my Lara?"

Stepping forward, I kneeled beside her. "I'm here, Mama," I grasped her thin fingers, cradling them to my lips. "Oh, Mama, I'm so scared."

Squeezing my hand with more strength than I thought possible, she tried to sound stern. "I have no time for ye to be scared, child. I have so much to tell ye and I need ye to promise me ye will be strong and listen."

"Anything, Mama," I murmured softly.

"Promise me, Lara, that ye will make somethin' of yerself. Ye hear me? Ye make somethin' of yerself. I want ye to be strong and live. And if that be no' enough to keep ye goin' when things get tough, then live for me —" Mama said as a tear rolled down her cheeks. "When your life gets tough, remember I will always be with you. Remember everything I've taught ye..."

My eyes followed Mama's line of sight as she gazed up to one corner of the room. "What is it, Mama? What do you see?"

"Can't ye hear them?" she asked, a smile lighting up her face. "There's angels in the room," she began, "and they are glorious."

"Mama, look at me," I pleaded, turning her face towards me.

"Can ye no' see them? But no', of course ye can no' see them. They did no' come here for... for ye —" her words dwindling down to a whisper before ending abruptly.

"Mama! Mama!" I cried, gently patting her cheeks and shaking her as the life drained from her eyes, right in front of me. "Mama!" I screamed, shaking her shoulders harder, even though I knew in my heart that she was gone. Yet my childish mind could not accept what was happening. Laying my head down upon her chest, I could no longer feel it rise and fall. Quickly lifting my head again, I cried, "Mama, come back. Come back to me! I love ye! Mama!" I shouted with a shrill whine as I buried my head in her chest once again and roughly pulled her to me.

I heard people gasp and my sisters began to cry.

There was a mournful cry that sounded from the corner as Da collapsed to his knees and cried out for Mama.

Suddenly the door crashed against the wall and Colin stood there in the doorway frozen in place, the doctor standing just behind him. He had a look of complete shock on his face, which quickly gave way to despair as he seemed to crumble where he stood. He had just returned with the doctor and found Michael and Micky standing under the eaves of the house, trying to stay dry. The three boys entered the house together, only to learn that their Mama had just died.

Mirna O'Keefe looked very pale and shaken as she silently stood up and moved out of the way, making room for the doctor, who rushed to Mama's bedside. The stricken look on his face as he saw the bloody scene told me that there was nothing more he could do for her.

Da was inconsolable as he made his way to Mama's bedside, kneeling down next to me, still grasping baby Grace in his arms. "Laurel! Laurel, me love," he croaked as disbelief settled into the deepening lines of his face.

"I'll take the baby," Mirna said softly, not waiting for Da to respond, but removing Grace from his grasp before walking quietly from the room.

Colin lifted me to my feet by the shoulders even as I tried to shake him off and walked me from the room as well. He sat me down in a chair next to the midwife who was suckling the baby to her breast. Tears freely flowed down her plump cheeks as she tried to comfort the fussy baby with soft shushing sounds, rocking her back and forth in her arms.

I felt numb as a bone-chilling coldness spread through my body and I had to remind myself to keep breathing in and out for fear that I too would die. *Everything will be alright if you just keep breathing in and out,* I told myself.

Shock and disbelief shrouded our home as we all tried to process the inconceivable fact of what had just occurred.

Mama was gone.

# 5

## *Mama's Funeral*



RS. O'KEEFE HELPED ALANA and Caitlin prepare Mama's body, washing and dressing her before laying her out on the bed she had shared with Da as if she were merely sleeping.

Before leaving, Alana kissed Da on the cheek and took baby Grace with her, telling Da she had a neighbor who'd lost a baby boy, two days before, and would have milk to feed baby Grace. I don't even think he heard her as he sat in his chair, staring into the empty hearth where the fire no longer burned.

Da appeared to be a mere shell of the man he had been, bereaved and unable to sleep or eat. He sat in his chair staring into our empty hearth for three days. I would hear him crying in the middle of the night when he thought we were all asleep and my heart would break all over again. He seemed to be willing himself to die but his body wouldn't cooperate.

Famine was so rampant because of the potato blight that people were becoming conditioned to be cold and unfeeling. Forced to carry their family members out to the street and watch as they were loaded onto carts without coffins and dumped into mass graves; the only way people could cope was to become detached. They had learned to turn a blind eye to the suffering of their neighbors. Yet, close friends and family members gathered in our small parish church to pay their respects to my Mama. The formal funeral was such an unusual occurrence that many who showed up were there merely out of curiosity's sake as well as a need to experience normalcy, if only for an hour.

I don't remember much that happened at the services that day, but what I do recall is the Priest, Father Timothy, standing before the small congregation with his book opened to a certain page as he tried to bring comfort to us all. He began, "The Lord is my Shepard; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea..." he said hesitantly, his voice cracking, before beginning again. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no Evil: for thou art with me," the Priest's words caught in his throat as a small sob escaped his lips and then he slammed the book closed. Pulling a well-worn handkerchief from his robe pocket, he wiped his eyes, then blew his nose loudly before folding the handkerchief up with purpose and shoving it into his pocket. "These simple yet powerful words, which are meant to bring you all comfort at this time ... don't!" he said raising his voice to a loud cry. "Because they no longer bring me much comfort." Looking down at the ground, he wiped a stray tear from his cheek with the back of his hand, then lifted his eyes up to study the congregation. "And yet, you all sit here mourning the loss of a great woman, Mrs. Laurel Flannigan. You are poor and hungry, wondering when it will all end. And while I do realize you cannot feel His great love for you in this moment, let me assure you all that He is here with you and does love you. Each and every one of you! Many of you are suffering greatly, feeling as if you have fallen into a deep pit, and have become lost and alone in the vast darkness and you are unable to find your way out! I implore you ... Nay! I beseech thee. Hear my words. Put your trust in Him, your Heavenly Father, and His Son. They will lead you from out of the darkness and into the light. And yes, He will even lead you into greener pastures, for which you have been promised. Your suffering will end one day and your loyalties will be rewarded. This I do promise you," he concluded.

For the briefest moment, my spirits were lifted up and I felt lighter, my heart did not feel so broken, as the quiet weeping that had been all around me subsided. Father Timothy's words had struck a chord deep inside of me.

Yet as his sermon ended and we all stood to follow the casket outside into the light drizzle to lay Mama into the ground, the feeling quickly passed.

After the graveside services, a modest lunch was served. We'd given two chickens to the priest to perform the ceremony and they were used to make a large pot of soup, which was served up for all to enjoy. A few of the women who knew Mama well, provided the bread for the meal. Mama was so well loved and respected by our neighbors and community that there were those who were willing to make the huge sacrifice.

A ball of sorrow and anguish knotted at the back of my throat, leaving me with a numbness that went deep. Food held no appeal as I sat in my chair with a bowl of half eaten chicken soup and a piece of bread resting in my hand. That's when Jamie walked into the room and stood over me, waiting for me to notice him. I looked up into his large sad eyes then looked around for Katy, but she wasn't with him.

Placing the rest of my bread in the pocket of my coat, I pushed the soup aside as he wrapped his arms around me. "I'm so ... I'm so —" Jamie cried as he tried to console me while his own tears fell upon my shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Lara," he repeated.

The floodgates of my sorrow opened up, unrestrained, and the waters rushed out as Jamie tightened his arms around me. His own tears dripped down the back of my neck. "Oh, Jamie," I sobbed, "it hurts so."

"I know," he soothed, "just let it out," he added, placing a handkerchief into my hand while he held me tightly until I ran out of tears.

Blowing my nose, then wiping my tears away, I looked around again for his sister. "Where's Katy?" I asked, bewildered by her absence.

A different kind of pain shone in his eyes as he attempted to hold back his grief. Finally, tears began spilling from his large brown eyes



and he shook his head, unable to speak for the longest time. Then when the words did finally come, they stuck in his throat, “Katy —” he choked out before burying his face in my hair, sobbing and repeating her name over and over again, “Katy, Katy, oh my Katy,” Jamie cried, unable to say anything more.

I felt sick. Disbelief filled my mind and I clung to him. I could feel him slipping from my arms as his legs gave way and we both slid to the floor together. Our worlds had been turned upside down. Loved ones had been savagely snatched from us, far too soon, and our innocence had been stolen.

I was left feeling spent and weakened as I wiped my nose before handing James back the handkerchief he’d lent me.

“Oh, Lara, what am I goin’ to do without her?” Jamie cried, blowing his nose before looking up.

The words of my Mama came back to me in that moment. *Sometimes things must come undone, before they can be put back together again, in a different way.* But somehow, I did not feel repeating her words would bring Jamie any comfort. “Ye can choose ta give in ta the darkness, Jamie O’Brien, or ye and I can choose ta walk through it, coming out of the other side. Either way, we can no’ choose if we experience it,” I concluded, sniffing loudly before swiping the last of my tears away with the back of my hand.

Still clinging to my free hand, Jamie nodded his head. A few more tears spilled down his cheeks as he bravely gulped back all those painful emotions. He got to his feet and pulled me up. Without saying another word, Jamie put his arm around me again, before leading me to the food table, where he picked up two glasses of water and handed me one. Silently he stuffed two pieces of bread in his pocket, retrieved a bowl of soup, and walked over to join his family.

Slipping a couple more pieces of bread into my pockets, I looked around for my Da. The day was gloomy, just like my mood, as the rain continued to fall. I stepped to the back door of the church and looked

out. Da stood over Mama's grave, seemingly unaware of the wet or cold as he bowed his head.

Pushing the door wide, I was about to join him when I noticed a man walk up to him and begin to speak. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but I knew it wasn't good. Da looked up suddenly, glaring at the man. Da's face contorted as he yelled at the man, quickly looking around as if he were searching for someone. Our eyes locked and he appeared to be even more haunted than before. I felt frozen in place as he turned his back to me. I knew Da was furious about something as he continued to vigorously argue, using his hands, vehemently shaking his head and fist at the stranger. And just when I thought for sure Da was going to punch the man in the face, things got real quiet and the other man grabbed Da by the collar and pulled him in close. Suddenly Da pushed the man away and raised his voice again before the man turned and stared at me. An involuntary shiver ran up my spine causing the hairs on the back of my neck to stand on end. The man turned back to my Da and said something that made his face turn white. When the man finished, he looked over his shoulder at me one last time, then donning his fancy hat, walked away.

I felt sick to my stomach as I watched Da crumble, falling to his knees in the mud; he hunched his shoulders and began to weep. Intuitively I knew that whatever they had been discussing, it had something to do with me. What could have made him so angry and then sad at the same time that he would kneel down in the mud like that? I wondered.

I was about to join him when Da stood up and began walking down the road towards our home. Jamming his hands deep into his pockets, he never looked back at me, but simply walked away.

As I stood there staring after Da, wondering what had just happened, Alana and Newel came over, carrying baby Grace. She was completely bundled-up to protect her from the drizzling rain. Grace laid in my sister's arms so peaceful and content, it made me mad.

"Do ye want to carry yer baby sister part of the way home?" she asked, offering the child to me.

Bringing my eyes up to meet hers, I tried to be civil, but fear I failed miserably in that moment. "No, I would no' care ta hold my baby sister!" I asserted belligerently, turning my back to her to search the road for any sign of Da.

Turning back around, I observed Alana's face as it registered her shock, as if I had struck her physically across the face with my bare hand. It was at that very moment Colin rushed up behind me, slipping his arm around my shoulders and pulling me along with him as we hurried to catch up with Micky, Caitlin, and Michael.

"What was all that aboot?" Colin questioned, smoothly rolling his tongue around the last word.

"I simply did no' wish to hold the child is all," I insisted, sounding petulant, even to my ears.

Throwing his hands up in front of him as if he were defending himself, he said, "All right, all right! Don' go bitin' me head off, ye wee beasty," Colin teased, pulling back as if he feared I would truly hurt him. When I turned and tried to punch him, he put up his fists as if he were in a boxing ring and began dancing around me. "Do you wish to fight," he questioned, "because I'm pretty good at boxing," he informed me before laughing out loud.

Throwing another punch, I completely missed my mark when Colin ducked and dodged easily away from me. "Don' ye go callin' me a wee beasty, Colin Flannigan!" I warned, unshed tears of anger shimmering in my eyes, "or I swear, I'll hurt ye like yev' never been hurt before!"

"All right, all right, fine!" he conceded, slipping an arm around my shoulders, forcing me closer to him. "I'm sorry to have teased ye so, Lara. Today has been hard on us all, and ye have to know in yer heart that 'twas no' her fault."

Glaring up at him, "What was no' her fault?" I murmured.

Softening his words and his tone, Colin pulled me to a stop and turned me around to face him as he leaned his head in close to mine. "The wee baby, Grace. She did no' kill our Mother."

Defiantly shaking free from him, I stomped off, skirting just out of his grasp as he reached out to stop me. I had no desire to hear what he had to say regarding my baby sister. I blamed her for taking my Mama from me and no one could tell me otherwise. "If no' for her, Mama would be here with me today. I want nothin' to do with that baby!" I screamed over my shoulder before running off down the road, completely ignoring Colin's cries for me to stop.

"Lara, Lara!" Colin repeatedly called, trying to catch up to me. I was hurt and angry and there was nothing anyone could have said to change that fact. Mama was gone and she wasn't coming back.

Even the sea was turbulent and rough as I passed by on my way home, and the clouds hung so low they touched the water. The tide shifted and turned, smashing against the rocks like an angry woman ranting against the world, mirroring my own mood. The water sprayed above the cliffs, unable to find any other means of escape, while the wind blew the spray sideways before it returned to its original source, only to blow in a different direction upon hitting the cliffs again. I was angry at the world and would have struck out at anything and anyone who didn't have the good sense to stay out of my way. Something heavy and cold had settled in my heart and it wasn't going away any time soon. Throwing myself upon the bed I shared with my sister, Caitlin, I cried myself to sleep.

The next morning, I sat up in bed, and pulled the forgotten piece of bread from my pocket and began nibbling on it. There was no sign of Caitlin and I figured that she must have come to bed late and awakened early to do the chores.

Stuffing the last bite of bread into my mouth, I stood up and stretched, then pulled an apron from the hook, tying it around my waist and slipping my worn boots on. Then grabbing a ribbon, I stretched again and

allowed a large yawn to escape my lips before stepping out from behind the curtain separating the girls' sleeping area from the rest of the house.

Stopping short when I saw Da sitting at the table staring out of the window. He looked as if he had been sitting there the entire night. He had fixed his red-rimmed eyes upon me the moment I stepped out from behind the curtain.

"I was hopin' I would no' 'ave to wake ye," he stated. "I need to go to town, and ye have to 'ave ta go with me. Get yer coat," he ordered as he stood up then walked out the door without saying another word.

It seemed like a strange request to me, but Da appeared to be in no mood to argue. He would normally have taken one of the boys with him when he went to town and I couldn't imagine why he would want to take me instead. Slipping my coat on, I ran my fingers through my hair and quickly braided it, tying the blue ribbon around the end. Then I ran the rest of the way to catch up to him.

We walked for a long time in silence until I could stand it no longer. "What do ye need in town, Da?" I questioned, more to make conversation than anything else. An awkward silence settled between us, and I looked up to see tears shimmering in his eyes. "What is it, Da?"

Wiping his eyes with the back of his hand, he cleared his throat and tried to smile. "Ye are so much like yer dear... Mother," he coughed, trying to clear his throat. Then with a sharp inhale of air he tried to choke back his emotions.

Taking hold of his hand, I lovingly looked up into his face, "I love ye, Da."

Bringing his free hand to the pit of his stomach, he nearly doubled over as he swallowed hard, choking back another sob, then stopped in the middle of the road. "What is it, Da? What's troublin' ye?" I demanded, touching his wet cheeks with my fingers as I searched his eyes.

Quickly inhaling and exhaling, a slight sound of pain escaped from the back of his throat, then Da stomped his foot and straightened up. Suddenly, he reached out and pulled me to him, squeezing me so tightly,

I thought he would crush my lungs. "Please forgive me, Lara," he pleaded, "I need you to forgive me..." he said, kissing me on my forehead before standing up again and pulling me quickly behind him.

I felt even more confused by his words and strange behavior as I was forced to run just to keep up with him. What had he done to me that he needed forgiveness for? He had never hurt me before. He was my Da. He loved me and took care of me. "Slow down, Da. I can no' keep up."

"I won' be able ta go through with it if I slow down," he muttered, refusing to look at me.

"Go through with what?" I demanded, between breaths. "Where are we goin'? Da! Stop," I screamed, pulling back on his arm.

"We can no' stop, we are late," he insisted gruffly, reaching out to take hold of my arm, yanking on me again to follow.

"Da, I don' understand."

"I know. So, hush child and walk," he persisted, pulling me after him.

Doing as I was told, I attempted to keep up when suddenly I realized we had missed the road that would take us into town. "Da, we're goin' the wrong way," I pointed out, looking up to see his jaw set and his eyes staring straight ahead. Then pulling back with earnest, I dug my heels into the ground.

Swinging me around to face him, he brought his face down to mere inches in front of me and ground out each word. "Stop it, Lara. Just stop! I am doin' this ta give ye a chance. There be no other way. We've no more food. We will all starve. Do ye understand?"

"No, Da. No, I don' understand," I cried, feeling suddenly scared. "Why are ye doin' this? Where are we goin'?"

"The bill came due, the landlord needs ta be paid or we will all be turned out into the street," he said harshly.

I think that my young mind comprehended what he was trying to tell me, but my heart wouldn't accept it, so I blurted out, "How Da? How are we goin' ta pay the bill?"

"Ye Lara! Ye're goin' ta pay the bill," he yelled, exasperated by my naive questioning. "I was given a choice, Lara," he added, "which is no choice a 'tall."

I could hear the frustration and anguish in his words, but I also knew in my bones that what he was planning to do wouldn't end well for me. "I still don' understand, Da. Please, Da, stop. What are ye tellin' me?"

"I know ye don' understand, Lara, me girl. That's why this is so unfair," he whispered. "Unfair to be sure, sweet girl," he sobbed as his face took on a look of resolve. Clenching my arm again as he hurried down the road before he lost his nerve, she said, "and that is why I truly am sorry."

"Sorry for what, Da?"

Setting his jaw, I could see the muscles working as he clenched his teeth and tugged on my arm even harder when I tried to dig my heels in the ground again. Then as we came around a small hill, I noticed a man sitting in a cart pulled to the side of the road. He had his back turned to us before hopping down from the seat. Turning to face us, I recognized him as the same man I saw Da arguing with at the funeral. Suddenly I became desperate and began tugging harder at my coat sleeve, trying to free myself from Da's tight grasp. I suddenly had a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Let go of me!" I screamed. "Please, Da, I won' cause no more trouble, I swear it," I pleaded, still struggling to pull myself free and run in the opposite direction. But Da's grip was relentless. "No, Da! I don' want to go with that man" I screamed, "No! No! No!"

Giving me a stern look, he brought me around to face him again, gripping me by both shoulders. "Hush now," he demanded, shaking me harshly before softening his tone when I fell silent. "Hush, child."

Burying my face in his chest, I clung to him, my tears wetting his shirt as I begged him not to send me away. "I will no' eat much. I promise. And I will do more chores," I cried desperately, burying my face in his chest again. "Please, Da, please don' send me away. I will die."

Da pulled me away from his chest roughly, forcing me to look him in the eye. It was then that I saw the tears swimming in the shiny, dark brown pools of his own eyes. “Lara, me love. I don’ wan’ ta send ye away. But I have no choice,” he gently said, kissing my forehead and clasping me to his chest tightly. I could hear his heart hammering against his ribs. “Of all me wee babes, you be the most like her,” he choked back a sob, squeezing me even tighter. “And as much as it tears me heart out of me chest, I have ta send ye away. I truly hope that one day ye can find it in yer heart ta forgive me.”

I could hear and feel the pain in his words as he clung to me that last time. Those were the last words my Da would ever say to me.

Peeling me off of him, he handed me over to the man as I cursed his name while kicking at the man in an attempt to free myself. I was inconsolable and screamed out his name over and over again as I watched him walk away. Helplessly I stood there as Da disappeared from my life forever.

My grief was twofold that day as a piece of my heart died. My Da faded from view as the landlord secured me to the cart, tying my hands with a rope to prevent me from escaping and running away from him.

I can still recall the pain I so keenly felt in that moment, whenever I recall the very last time I saw Da. It was profound, raw, and cut so devastatingly deep that I avoid thinking of my Da whenever possible.