

Far From Home

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Extract

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Chapter One



Offaly 1919

‘KITTY, DA WANTS TO speak to you. He’s in the parlour.’ Thirteen-year-old Annie Doyle’s voice was full of curiosity as she relayed her father’s instruction. Her dark brown eyes were fastened on her elder sister’s back; Kitty was washing the dishes in the big earthenware sink and their younger sister Bridget was drying them and stacking them on the dresser.

Kitty paused, up to her elbows in greasy water. A frown creased her forehead. Da knew she had so many chores still to complete. Since Mam had died two years ago it had fallen to her to keep house and with no electricity or piped water it was far from easy.

‘Did he say why he wants to see me and in the parlour no less?’ she asked.

‘He did not. Sure, isn’t it Sunday evening and doesn’t he always go into the parlour after supper and read his Bible?’ Annie shot back. She’d just known that Kitty would be difficult about this summons. ‘Am I to go back and tell him you’re too busy?’ she demanded, knowing full well that Kitty would never defy their father. He was strict with them all. He always had been, even when Mam had been alive, but at least he was fair.

Kitty wiped her hands on her coarse calico apron and shook her head. ‘You will not! I’ll just take off this apron then I’ll go.’

‘Ah, Kitty, ’tis probably only some small matter. Nothing to cause a fuss about and I’ll finish the dishes,’ Bridget, always the peacemaker, intervened.

Kitty smiled at her as she undid the apron strings and then tucked the few wisps of her long straight blond hair that had escaped from her chignon back into place. Bridget, at ten, was a rather plain child, she thought. Her grey eyes always seemed to be filled with apprehension and she had a habit of twisting her light brown curly hair around her finger when she was upset. She was also shy, and Kitty knew that Bridget missed her mother dreadfully. Even more than Kitty herself did.

‘Aren’t you a little treasure but this one here can help you, she doesn’t seem to have anything else to do, unlike myself!’

Annie was stung. 'I have plenty to do. Isn't it my turn to bring in the turf this week?' But her protest fell into empty space; Kitty had already left the kitchen. 'Here give me that cloth and I'll finish up while you put all that clean delft back on the dresser.'

Bridget did as she was bid. 'Did Da look . . . angry?' she asked tentatively.

'He did not. He looked, well, serious though. As if there was something important on his mind.' Annie wrung out the dishcloth and began to wipe down the wooden draining board.

'He was worried about the work on Mr Harwood's carriage, I heard him say so to Reverend Joyce after the service this morning.'

'So did I. He said it was really the work of a coachbuilder but as there isn't one for miles around, he'd just have to do his best to sort out the damage. Aren't the gentry careless with their belongings? Sure, that carriage must have cost a fortune, wouldn't you think they'd be more careful with it and not go driving it into gateposts? Da's a blacksmith and farrier, not a carpenter or coachbuilder.'

Bridget carefully propped the large blue and white meat dish up on its edge at the back of the dresser shelf and nodded in agreement. The Honourable Mr Charles Harwood was the most important and influential man in the district, but a man whom

she'd often heard described as 'a reckless, hard driver'.

Annie tipped the last few sods of turf into the range and looked around the kitchen. Everything was tidy. Kitty would have nothing to complain about when she came back. The big table in the centre of the room was covered in a green and white gingham-patterned oilcloth, which had been wiped down. In the middle of the table was a large bowl of russet apples that had been gathered from the small orchard at the back of the house. The chairs, all of which matched, had been neatly pushed into place. The range had been black-leaded yesterday and on the mantel above it was a plain, serviceable clock and a few china ornaments that Mam had bought over the years. Beside the range was Da's armchair, complete with a bright patchwork cushion, where he sat after supper every night – except Sunday. On the narrow bookshelf beside it were a few books and his pipe rack and tobacco jar. On Sundays, though, the pipes and tobacco remained on the shelf and the chair stayed empty. Sunday was a special day, he always said. It was the Lord's Day. Annie sighed and picked up the two large buckets that stood beside the door to the yard. Special day or not, the range and the fires had to be tended. She hated having to drag the buckets of turf from the open-fronted shed beside the forge back to the kitchen.

There was no help for it though. Coal was scarce and expensive and the electricity had not yet reached the rural areas of Ireland.

It was Bridget's job to fill the lamps and trim the wicks. Da had a fierce mistrust of candles, saying they were dangerous and pointing out the number of fires that had been caused by candles left unattended or carelessly handled. There was at least one oil lamp in every room of the house and the paraffin for them was stored in a large metal drum at the far end of the orchard, well away from the house and the forge that adjoined it.

When Annie returned to the kitchen with the turf Bridget was still alone, sitting close to the lamp on the side table, trying to thread a needle. Da insisted they spend Sunday evenings in some useful form of occupation and Bridget was reluctantly making a new quilt for her bed.

'Is she still in there with Da?' Annie demanded, stacking the turf box that stood next to the range.

Bridget nodded, her eyes wide with unease. 'It must be something very important, Annie. Have you no idea what he wanted?'

Annie shook her head slowly and sat down opposite her sister. Da had given her no inkling of what he wanted to speak to Kitty about but she was now beginning to feel as anxious as Bridget. What had

Kitty done or not done that merited such a lengthy lecture?

Crossing the hallway on her way to the parlour Kitty had stopped by the half-moon table on the top of which reposed a large aspidistra in a plain white china pot. Above it hung a mirror. As she gazed at her reflection, she wondered did she look older than her sixteen years? Had the extra work and responsibilities that she had had to shoulder these last two years caused the worry lines to appear on her forehead? She had never been classed as pretty but she didn't consider herself unattractive. Mam had always said that both she and Bridget were like 'ugly ducklings' that would one day turn into beautiful swans. Mam had always sounded so sure, so convincing when she'd said it that Kitty had come to believe it. It was just a matter of waiting. Annie was considered to be the beauty of the family. She took after Da with her dark brown eyes and thick dark curly hair. Kitty tried to smooth out the faint lines on her forehead with her fingertips and pinched her cheeks to give them some colour. Would she ever fall in love and get married and have children of her own? Would she ever be allowed to go anywhere to meet a nice lad or would she always have to stay here and keep house for her da?

‘Ah, will you have some sense, Kitty Doyle! Sure, it won’t be an easy matter for any of us to find a decent lad!’ she admonished herself.

They were different to almost all their neighbours. They were Protestants in a country that was staunchly Catholic. They attended a different church: the old grey stone church a little further up the lane set in a field and surrounded by ancient, lichen-covered gravestones, the interior of which had none of the ornate trappings of the Catholic church at Killina. It was referred to as Rahan old church because it had been there for centuries, and the fact that it had been founded by a Catholic saint didn’t seem to upset the present Protestant worshippers. The Doyles attended a different school to their neighbours’ children too. It meant a long walk almost into Tullamore town itself and that was hard in winter when the snow was thick on the ground and the frost sparkled on the hedgerows. Of course only Annie and Bridget went to school now; she’d left when her mam had taken ill. She sighed. No, it wouldn’t be easy for any of them to find a husband in the parish of Rahan. Of course Da was a much-respected man, he being the only smith and farrier in the parish and everyone needed his services at some time. Da! She sucked in her breath. What was she thinking of standing here, gazing at her reflection and thinking about husbands and the like when her da

was waiting? If he wasn't cross before he certainly would be now after she'd kept him waiting for what must be nearly ten minutes.

She knocked quietly on the parlour door before entering. 'Tis sorry I am, Da, to have been so long. I was just finishing the washing up.'

Thomas Doyle looked up from the passage he had been reading and laid the heavy Bible down on the top of the carved sideboard. 'Sure, I'm aware of the work you have to do, Kitty. Sit down, child.' His tone was not sharp.

Kitty sat on the edge of the overstuffed hide sofa. This room was only used once a week at the most but she dusted and polished the furniture regularly and the carpet was swept each week too. It was a fine room, she thought, one Mam had taken great pride in. The walls were covered in an embossed paper and were hung with pictures in fine mahogany frames. In addition to the sideboard and the sofa, there was a china cabinet, a plant stand, and under the window, which looked out over the small garden and the laneway, was a brocade-covered chaise. The window was covered with a white cotton lace curtain for privacy and heavy maroon chenille curtains for the practical purpose of keeping out the draughts.

Her eyes strayed to the top of the sideboard. A large, handsome brass and crystal lamp gave a good

light. Beside it were photographs of herself and her sisters, and her da's parents stiff and formal in old-fashioned clothes. She frowned. There was something missing. For an instant she couldn't remember what it was and then a look of puzzlement filled her eyes. Where was the photograph of her parents on their wedding day that usually had pride of place in the centre?

'Kitty, I have something of great importance to tell you,' Thomas Doyle began, seeing the look of consternation that had crossed his daughter's face as she looked in vain for the photograph he had just an hour ago removed. He knew this wasn't going to be easy. He had practised all week in his mind the words he now had to speak. She was a good girl, a sensible girl, a dutiful girl but she was growing up; soon she would be a young woman and would need a husband of her own. He didn't want her to become an old maid like his sister Julia. Kathleen wouldn't have wanted that either. Poor Kathleen. She'd been a good wife and mother but, well . . . life must go on. He leaned forward, his large, calloused hands resting on his knees. He wasn't a tall man, standing only five feet ten in his stockinged feet, but he was broad-shouldered and strong. His once dark hair was now tinged with grey and his cheeks were veined and ruddy from long hours spent over the fierce heat of the forge. He was,

he hoped, a devout man and not heartless. He had all their interests at heart.

Kitty was staring at him, biting her lip. She had a terrible feeling that what he was about to say would somehow upset them all. ‘What is it, Da?’ she asked quietly.

‘I’m to be married again, Kitty. Hester Smythe has agreed to be my wife. I . . . I’m still in my prime. I’m not yet fifty and . . . and I have no son to follow in my footsteps.’

Kitty felt as though she had been slapped across the face. Instinctively she drew back, gripping the arm of the sofa tightly. ‘Da!’ It was a croak more than an exclamation of dismay and shock. ‘But, Da! We . . . I . . . keep house just grand!’ she stammered.

Thomas crossed his arms across his chest. He had expected this reaction and had steeled himself. ‘You do indeed, child, but there’s more at stake here than just “keeping house”.’ He paused; he couldn’t bring himself to try to explain to her that a man had needs other than those of a meal on the table, clean sheets on his bed, clean clothes on his body. ‘The good Lord saw fit to send your mam and me three daughters but no sons and a man *needs* sons. Hester is a good woman, a young, strong woman and it is as though I have been given a second chance to have the son I have always wanted. And there is something else, Kitty.’

Kitty was shaking her head, unable to take in the fact that soon Hester Smythe, a woman over ten years her da's junior, would be coming into this house to take her mam's place. She had seen her a couple of times lately, at church, which she had thought was odd. Hester lived in Tullamore and it would have been easier for her to attend church there instead of travelling the nine miles to Rahan. Now, it was abundantly clear just why she had made that journey. Kitty hadn't liked her either. She was tall and thin to the point of boniness, with a long face that reminded Kitty of Paddy Molin's old horse, a face framed with lank, mousy-brown hair. She had pale, insipid blue eyes that missed very little and she had no conversation to speak of.

'She . . . she's to be my . . . our stepmother?'

'She is so but, Kitty, I could not ask Hester to be my wife and to come and live here when I have three daughters at home. No woman would agree to that. So, I have arranged for Annie and Bridget to go and live with your Aunt Julia in Tullamore and you are to go to Harwood Hall. Mrs Harwood has very kindly agreed to take you and you will learn to be a lady's maid to Miss Elizabeth Harwood. There will be other duties as well but nothing you are not capable of.'

Kitty surged to her feet although the room seemed to be revolving sickeningly. 'No! No! Da, you can't do

this to us! You can't send us away because . . . because *that one* doesn't want us here! This is *our* home! We're your daughters, you can't treat us like this!

Thomas got to his feet. He hadn't expected her to take it so badly. 'Kitty, listen to me! It isn't just because Hester can't be expected to come in here with the three of you living here. I'm thinking of you. I don't want you to stay at home, become an old maid, nor your sisters either. With Julia they will be nearer to school, nearer to employment when they leave. You will have a grand position up at the Hall with the gentry, and the Harwoods *are* gentry. Where Miss Elizabeth goes, you will go too and in time you will meet a good man of your own faith. Don't forget the Harwoods are Protestant too.'

A wave of hurt and anger surged through Kitty. 'Don't try and fob me off with those excuses, Da. You don't care! You don't want us. *She* doesn't want us. And you're afraid you'll lose *her*! Lose your chance of a son! Oh, I hope Mam comes back to haunt you for driving us from our home.'

Thomas turned his back on her. She would come to accept the situation in time and to see that he really did have their welfare at heart. He picked up the Bible from the top of the sideboard. 'I want you to tell your sisters of this matter, Kitty.'

It was yet another blow and she clutched the

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window sill for support. Her shoulders sagged and at last bitter tears welled up in her eyes. ‘You . . . you coward! You . . . selfish, pathetic coward!’ she gasped as she stumbled from the room. Never in her life had she spoken to him so disrespectfully, but now she didn’t care. He deserved it.