

Prologue

Lizzie

Ballaarat, Australia 1855

My prison garb was freshly-laundered and I had washed that morning.

I gazed up at Mr Redmond Barry from the dock and sat very still, hoping my face gave away nothing of my thoughts. Strangely, I was calm and took the time to observe the florid cheeks and stern expression below his more kindly eyes. He had a formidable reputation in the colony and I wondered how he would determine the next part of my life.

The judge returned my scrutiny just as impassively and I could not help colouring slightly as his eyes bored into mine.

I knew I was no beauty. The harsh Australian climate over the past sixteen years had seen to that. My fair Irish complexion had vanished, leaving in its place a spider's web of creases in a field of freckles. My light auburn hair, which every morning I drew neatly into a bun at the nape of my neck, was now bleached and streaked with grey.

My life in Australia had been harsh but no better or worse than countless other Irish women who had been sent out to Van Diemens Land for drastic yet minor offences.

I knew Judge Barry had seen many like me in his time. Were we bruised and battered victims to him or desperate criminals? I suspected the latter. I continued to return his gaze, allowing myself not a glimmer of hope. I fully expected the worst and anticipated no mercy.

Yet despite this, for a moment I sensed a tenuous connection between us. It was as if he discerned something more to my case and was willing me to speak. Was he pondering on life in the colony and seeing that it was most often depressingly unfair, especially to women? I doubted it. Staring back unflinchingly until his expression turned from curiosity to resignation, I provided him with no satisfaction.

He sighed and regarded his papers again. His moment of reflection had passed.

‘Elizabeth Darling, please stand for my verdict.’ He waited while I drew my small form up to its full height.

‘I have listened to the accounts of your crime from both the police and the witnesses. I have similarly listened to your friends and to your own account. Now, by the power invested in me by the Governor of Victoria, I will pass judgement on you.’

Part 1

William

Ballinagh, Co Cavan, Ireland 1836

Chapter 1

Ours was a good family and we had a happy home. However we were luckier than most, I need to say that at the outset. We had a fair-sized piece of land that had been in our family since 1766, thanks to my great-grandfather who came over from Scotland and settled here in County Cavan. Because he was a Protestant he gained a lease from his absentee English landlord.

It was Great-Grandfather Darling who brought the first chickens across the Irish Sea and established our poultry business. He strongly believed that these five-toed birds, coloured white with a rose comb, were first-rate layers and provided the best meat. It's only recently that they've come to be called Red Dorkings. Great-Grandfather also grew crops and potatoes on his land but everyone in Ireland grows potatoes. It was the poultry that made the real difference to our family.

Stubbornly he hung onto his lease before passing it down to his son. Fortunately, the hens always enabled him to avoid the hanging gale – that's a horrid English law which puts you forever behind with the rent and therefore open to eviction - as the steady income from both his chickens and eggs allowed him to always pay his rent on time. So his landlord was always well satisfied to leave the tenancy in our family.

Ever since the hateful Penal Laws were imposed on us back in 1695, the rule in Ireland has been that the eldest son in a Protestant family inherits the whole of his father's property or lease, whereas in a Catholic family the land or lease must be equally divided among all his sons. This was the Englishman's way of pushing the Catholic Irish aside and giving the power to those they wanted to prosper. It was still the same when I was growing up and I believed it was grossly unfair.

But it did mean that our religion definitely worked in my family's favour for, as Protestants, we still were reasonably well off while, all around us, our Catholic friends grew poorer and poorer with each passing generation as their plots of land were carved up into ever-decreasing parcels.

However my family's profitable farm was never going to be mine, as I was the third son. There were seven of us Darling children and I was unluckily born fourth. My oldest brother, Hugh, worked on the farm and would inherit the lease when Da passed on while the second eldest, Patrick, was already away from home, studying to become a minister in our church. Unfortunately, I had neither Hugh's fortune nor Patrick's ambition.

But I did want some land of my own one day. Nothing big of course but large enough to support a wife and raise a family. Yet in my heart of hearts I knew even this would probably not eventuate as, in Ireland, younger sons and daughters of farmers were certain to always remain poor. The best I could realistically hope for was steady work on our home farm for board. I was lucky Da had the poultry, as this kept both Hugh and me in work all year round. Without that, I would have been forced to find work with someone else and, most probably, that would have been for only part of the year.

My older sister, Nancy, was already away from Ballinagh, in service under Squire Gordon in Dublin. Lizzie was due to begin work for the Earl of Longford at Streatham Hall in County Westmeath as soon as she turned thirteen. Both the girls' appointments were due to Da's good name and his connections around these parts. They would never have been accepted otherwise.

My two youngest brothers, George and Owen, were still at school in Cavan.

I lately had just passed my eighteenth birthday and, to celebrate the event, I had arranged an evening with some of my friends in Ballinagh's only tavern, situated beside the Market House. The gathering was nothing special as we usually met for a pint or two once a week and that chilly February evening began as many others had before it.

Because my four Catholic mates were not near as well set up as me, I already had told them I would stand the drinks that night even though it was my

birthday. We were close, having schooled in the village and grown to manhood together. Their differing religion to mine had not dented our friendship.

They worked at various farms around when they could but this was usually only at planting and harvesting. All of them earned a little extra cutting turf for their own families and for others. Peat cut from the bogs was plentiful around our parts - and mostly free if you knew where to cut it - so no family, even the dirt-poorest, needed to go cold during the long winter months.

Bernie McGrath was my special friend, but Alex Keelen, John Hagen and Andrew Callaghan made up the circle. I had been getting Bernie out of scrapes ever since we started school together. Even though he was the one who always came up with an idea for mischief, he was not near as strong as me and I invariably had to take over when things went wrong. His soft nature meant he was always the first to apologise or back away when someone suffered from our adventures. The other three boys also liked him a lot and often protected him as well.

To my dismay that night in the tavern, soon after their first pint, Bernie steered the conversation to abduction as he had so frequently of late. I sighed inwardly and contemplated my glass. I was heartily sick of hearing about these escapades although Bernie and the other three were obviously enraptured. Under Bernie's prompting, they now imagined an abduction to be a grand adventure, a light-hearted prank which would spice up their lives. They seemingly dreamed endlessly of taking part in one.

I wanted none of it, partly because I had a dim memory from when I was a young lad of a man being hung in Cavan for just such an offence but mainly because, for the most part, I was very content with my life.

Yet I was willing to humour them up to a point. After all, they were my friends. And from stories we had heard recently, abductions nowadays were not truly considered crimes despite the fact that the law still said otherwise. Occasionally they even had successful outcomes, with the girl more than willing to marry her man.

I sipped my ale, still with only half an ear on their conversation, and sat gazing across the bar to where Da and one of his friends were chatting. Da was fully

engrossed in his conversation, though I could tell by his companion's florid cheeks and waving arms that he was having difficulty in making Da see things his way. I smiled for I had inherited Da's serene nature. We were both willing to sit quietly and ponder while others around us worked themselves into a state.

'William, pay attention! We're discussing your future here, boyo.'

'What?' The mention of my name brought my attention back to my friends and I looked over at Bernie. 'What would you be saying, Bern?'

'We have found just the right girl for you, Will! Now that you're a man, it's high time you took for yourself a wife.'

Little did I know then that this bold talk by my friend on this night would form into something very real and that Bernie was setting us on a course that would change all of our lives forever.

I laughed and sipped my ale. 'Really, Bernie? I don't think so.'

'No, I'm serious and all, Will. Listen up.'

'Oh, all right. And who might you be thinking of this time, Bern?'

As he had always done since he was a small boy, he wrinkled his nose at me and winked, a merry smile creasing his lips. He had beguiled me before with just that look. 'Catherine Rourke.'

'Catherine Rourke,' I repeated. 'And who might she be?'

'For your information, Mr Darling, Miss Catherine Rourke is a young woman recently settled with her father a few miles out of Cavan on the Cootehill Road. She is seventeen and quite the beauty. And, as she is the *only* child of Captain Rourke himself - a recently retired sea-captain - she is heiress to his property, an amount estimated to be in the region of £200. However, and more to the point, Captain Rourke's father and older brother recently died of the cholera so the captain has lately inherited the family farm of round thirty acres.'

'You mean the Hilldale farm? Where old Mr Rourke died last summer?'

'Aye, the very same. Now, might you be interested in such a match?'

I shook my head and raised my eyes skyward but he was not to be put off.

‘It would be just a lark, Will. Something exciting to brighten up this dismal time of year. We’ll wear the customary white shirts to carry out our derring-do.’ His eyes pleaded with me to at least consider it.

‘No, Bern. Not for me. If you are wanting some excitement, you go ahead and get her yourself. I remember a man getting himself hung for an abduction.’

‘Oh, Will, that was years ago and he did a real crime. This would be only a bit of fun. Come on!’

I continued shaking my head.

‘Will, we’ve decided. It can’t be me. You must go first.’

I shook my head again but humoured him by responding. He was like a dog at a bone. ‘Have you now? And why should I be the lucky one?’

‘Because we’ve taken a vote and chosen yourself.’

‘Hmm. And what if I don’t agree? Why would you be giving this beautiful young woman – if she is indeed beautiful – to me? If she’s such a prize, surely you would be wanting her all to yourself, Bernie McGrath?’

‘No, not at all, not at all. You are the oldest, my dear friend William, so we must have you married off first. After that we can work our way down the line to me. Besides, you are much more of a catch than any of us, boyo.’

I stared at the three other lads in turn and saw they were all nodding in agreement. I shook my head. I still wanted no part of it. ‘You’re really serious about this?’

They all grinned and raised their glasses to me.

Unwisely, on the spur of the moment and still far from convinced, I decided to let them have their little fantasy, at least for a while longer. I sighed. ‘Go on then, tell me your plans.’ I still didn’t believe they would seriously contemplate pulling off a heist of their own.

‘Aye, it’s high time we began planning our own little abduction,’ Bernie went on, grinning at my capitulation. ‘We are all wanting to be married and all, each

settled down with a little wifey to warm our bed. And now young Catherine has fallen into our laps, so to speak. So what do you think of our plan, young Will?’

I sat there gazing at my friend, trying to work out what was going on behind those black, twinkling eyes. ‘I am truly lost for words, Bern.’

Next I regarded the others. ‘You’re all stark raving mad. I didn’t think you’d ever truly be serious about actually doing it.’

‘Aye, we are all of us serious,’ answered John. ‘We were talking about it on the way to the tavern tonight.’

I shook my head again. ‘You’re all daft, the lot of you!’

‘Do I take it that you’d be not at all interested in our plan?’ asked Bernie, pretending hurt.

‘Come on Will, it would be just for fun,’ added Alex.

I sipped my second ale, considering all they had said. I didn’t want to be involved but right at that moment I couldn’t see any real harm in it. ‘And it would only be a bit of a lark, you say? If this Catherine Rourke were not in agreement with our plan, we would let her go again?’

Bernie was pleased I was finally taking a real interest. ‘Oh, aye, of course. We don’t want any serious trouble. But she may be willing and all, especially if she’s already made your acquaintance.’

‘Oh, and how do you imagine I will be able to manage that?’

Bernie grinned. ‘I’m sure an enterprising young man like yourself will come up with something. Surely you could somehow contrive a meeting?’

Shaking my head again, I made a face at my friends. It didn’t sound at all likely. But maybe it would be a bit of fun and all. I would think about it some more. Maybe it would all work out. Who was to know? Perhaps this Catherine Rourke would fall for my charms and consent to marry me. I might get my piece of land after all. Strange things did happen sometimes...

No, that wouldn’t happen. Fairy tales don’t happen to farming boys.

