THE AMERICAN WAKE:

A FICTIONAL

NOVELLA

by

Aubrey Fineout

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Project Approved:

Supervising Professor: Matthew Pitt, M.F.A.

Department of English

Karen Steele, Ph.D.

Department of English

William Gibbons, Ph.D.

Department of Music

ABSTRACT

"The American Wake" is a creative thesis written in the form of a novella. The story follows the lives of a fictional Irish immigrant family in 1912 as they leave their homeland in search of a better life. The family settles in a coal-mining town in rural West Virginia, searching for a way to fit within the strict societal structure of the American South. Irish traditions begin to merge with Appalachian folk music, creating a fragile new aesthetic that can bypass racial prejudices and bring the impoverished coal mining hollow together.

However, life in America is not quite as golden as it appears, and soon the family finds themselves caught in the midst of a brewing struggle between fellow miners and coal bosses. When a mine explosion rocks the community, the Irish family is forced to choose a side in the coming war, risking everything in a country that is not their own.

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The American Wake

My grandda used to rock me back and forth outside our old whitewashed cottage, whispering tales in my ear. Sometimes he'd tell me true things about how he and Gran used to live in a house with glass windows and blue china. But on long autumn eves, Grandda would stare out into the twilight and spin the tale of Balor and the Evil Eye, lowering his voice to a scraping menace when Balor locks his daughter in in the *Túr Mór* on the Isle of Toraigh. When frost curled up the lane and threatened to freeze our noses, Grandda would pull his chair inside and speak of the Dark Times and how he'd watched a mother sell her children to keep from starving. Grandda's stories sunk to the bottom of my stomach like mossy stones, the weight of our history seeping into my bones.

After he finished his tale, Grandda would shake himself as if waking from a spell and run his gnarly fingers through my hair. "Don't be sad, love," he'd say. I'd look into his milky gray eyes and he'd tap the spot over my heart where God put my soul. "Keep our stories in here and they'll never die."

But even I couldn't keep Grandda's chest from trembling and going still.

Heather pushed against me in a rough purple wave, scratching my legs as we waded into the field. I held tight to my da's burly hand as the box came by carrying my grandda, propped on the shoulders of faded Baileársa men. I couldn't see my mam, but I knew she was somewhere close, silent and hard in her worn black bonnet.

The men set the box down as gentle as they could, but I still heard the thump. I squeezed my eyes shut and started down my Hail Marys so the Devil wouldn't snatch me for being so near death.

"Lass." My da patted my shoulder to stop my muttering. "Will you sing for your grandda? The one I taught you?"

I leaned into Da's side, his rough wool coat scratching against my cheek. "I can't, Da," I said weakly. "Grandda can't even hear me in that box."

Da crossed his arms over me and whispered in my ear, "No one else can sing as well as you, lass. Your grandda was a great man in Donegal. It'd honor him if you'd sing before he's put in the earth." He hummed a pitch so I could get my bearings and then nudged me forward.

I closed my eyes as a brisk wind caught my hair and swept it across my face. *A chréatúirín leóinte is brón liom do dhreach…* I sang quietly, nodding my head with the lilt of the verse. I paused to swallow and then started on my favorite part. *Didery aighle dam dodle di am the dam dam…* The words rolled smoothly off my tongue like sea glass. My da joined me, his voice coarse, but rich like a peat bog. The woman next to me began to sing the familiar chorus and soon all of Baileársa formed a circle around my grandda's rough casket, singing the tale of *An Lacha Bacach.* Our voices rose together, lifting Grandda's spirit into the heavens like smoke from pagan fires of old.

"Well done, lass," Da murmured after our last note died. Men snatched off their caps as Father began to pray for Grandda's soul. "I found this for you," Da whispered, pushing a stem of heather into my fraying buttonhole. Instead of the usual purple, the bell-like flowers were white with crimson centers. The blooms glowed against the dark gray of my coat.

"For luck," Da added. I breathed in the flower's tart scent and wrapped my fingers over his.

"Aye, Da. Grand luck."

Ireland was never the same to me after Grandda's funeral. Mam's eyes were swollen and red for weeks, though I never saw a tear. My brothers and I tried to cheer her by gathering bunches of her favorite dog violets and daisies. Da even bought a lavender ribbon for her hair. But it seemed Mam held a grudge against the land itself—not even ribbons could tempt her to smile.

I scuffed my boots in dirt as I walked next to Mam, wildly swinging our empty egg basket. "I feel almost rich today." I skipped to catch up with Mam's long strides. "Mrs. McGinley gave me two pennies for sweeping the Arkwright's kitchen yesterday. Two pennies!"

Mam nodded like she heard me, but stopped short at the newsstand. "Let's see that, lad," she told the boy selling the stack of papers.

"Two p," the boy said, tipping back his cap like he owned the street.

My mam put her hands on her small hips and bent down like a pecking goose. "George O'Neill, I sold your mam the last of our eggs for half price, so."

"Aye, Mrs. O'Donnell," George muttered as he offered Mam a fold of smudged gray paper.

"Just taking a gander." Mam turned her back to George and flipped open the paper. "I'll hand it right back."

"What're you looking for?" I asked at her elbow, trying to make sense of the marching letters.

"Last week I received a letter from my great aunt in Dublin." Mam snapped the paper as she turned the page. "She said there was an advertisement for able-bodied miners in a place called 'West Virginia.'" Mam's voice shook a little, but she didn't sound afraid. "The mines are

searching for lads since they out and kilt their own in that war. They might even help pay for our voyage and—aye!" She pointed to the bottom left corner. "That's it." Mam glanced down the street and then swiftly ripped the section out of the paper.

"What're you doing, Mam?" I asked in surprise as she stuffed the advertisement into her apron pocket. Paper was an extravagance and I'd never seen Mam deliberately tear a sheet in my life.

"Hush, Clare." She folded the paper neatly and turned back to George. "Bless you, lad," she said coolly. "Are there any more Dublin papers?"

George pulled his cap down over his eyes and crossed his arms. "Only one more of the November 1911."

Mam leaned toward me. "You said you had two pennies?"

"Aye, from Mrs. McGinley…but that paper's almost four months old, Mam. You can't be wanting it."

Mam put her hand out like the blind beggar that stood outside our parish every Sunday. "Be quick about it, Clare."

I dug my fingers into my pocket and pulled out two small coins. They were cold against my palm. "Here." I dropped them into her hand and turned away as she picked up the paper. I pushed my hands into my empty pockets, scowling at the back of Mam's head. I'd earned those pennies fair and had as good as spent them on a string of sweets.

I grudgingly followed Mam down the lane, trying to keep my big toe from poking through the hole in my left boot. What did American mines have to do with us here in Baileársa? If only I could read the advertisement for myself. Mam always said she'd teach me to read some day, but I stopped asking after Grandda died.

"Why'd you buy the paper, Mam? You always said they were luxuries we couldn't afford."

"There are plenty of miners looking for work in Baileársa and I want your da to have a chance to answer the advertisement first." Mam folded the paper into a fat square as we walked, hiding it under her shawl. "That bogger Declan O'Carroll won't beat us out this time, no."

Da used to be a miner in County Cork, but the mine ran out of coal and he headed north to look for work. That's when he became a day laborer and met Mam. Da said mining was in our blood fierce—O'Donnells had been mining since the time of St. Patrick. "Some people are made to walk under the earth," he'd tell my brothers and me with a wink.

"I thought you didn't want Da to mine again," I said, coming up to Mam's side. "You said it's a danger."

"Clare…" Mam's voice dropped as she said my name, lips straightening into a tight smile. "It's not a matter for weans." She shook her head. "Don't tell your da about the paper. Let me tell him in my own way."

I sighed. "Aye, Mam." I was eleven—hardly a *child*.

"Good lass." Mam gave me a quick kiss on the crown of my head and then picked up her pace. "Feed the chickens when we get home, will you, love?"

"Aye, Mam," I said again. I'd been feeding our hens since I could walk and selling eggs soon after. It wasn't hard since we had regular buyers, but feeding the hens enough grain to keep them fat and laying during the cold season was a struggle fierce. Sometimes I wondered if they ate better than we did.

"This could make him smile again, Clare," Mam breathed, her words so low I barely caught them over the wind.

Could mining do that? Da's old pickaxe hung above our hearth, blackened with soot and covered with bunches of wild herbs Mam had hung to dry, but I'd never seen Da use it. He worked for our landlord as a handyman, gardener, and sometimes even an entertainer for our landlord's extravagant English company. I used to follow Da to the Big House and watch through the rippled glass windows as he sang ballads and airs for the lords. He'd explain what a sean-nós was try to show them how singing in the old style, in our native Gaeilge, connected us to our ancestors. The toffs smiled to our faces, but smirked at our backs, laughing in amusement as if they were watching a cockfight.

My twin older brothers, Séamus and Graham, were coming back with me from harvesting wild ramsons one evening when we heard shouting from inside our thatched cottage. We left our buckets by the chicken coop and hunkered down, creeping to our thin door.

"Colm, I've lived my entire life in Donegal. I don't want to die here like my da. My mam's dead and my sister's dead and Ireland's a hateful place to me. Éire killed my family, Colm." Mam's voice was low, but brittle like a piece of shale that could shatter in a moment.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," Séamus whispered, raising his dark eyebrows. Our parents never disagreed in front of us.

"Don't take God's name in vain!" I gave Séamus' side a quick jab to remind him God could send him straight to the pit of Hell.

"Stop being so holy, Clare," Séamus hissed, rubbing his stomach.

"Quiet." Graham frowned at us and leaned closer our house's whitewashed walls.

"What do you want me to do, lass?" came Da's soft voice.

"You always said you loved mining. Be a miner in America where at least our children will have the chance to make something of their lives." Something slammed down on the table—probably Mam's wool carders—making another knick in the wood. "Our children are out picking garlic for the Arkwright's table because we can't pay rent! Graham and Séamus are fourteen and have no prospects. We can hardly afford to feed the lads anymore."

Da didn't say anything for a moment. "I stopped looking for mine work because you asked me to when I married you, Máiréad."

"You quit mining because no one would hire you," Mam said flatly. "Every man and his blind uncle can hold a pickaxe. Ireland will never recover from The Hunger. We'll always be caught in the wake, trying to earn enough to have food at the end of the week!" Mam began to sob, her words coming out in rasping breaths. "I don't want our children to grow up in a famine, watching their friends and family wither until only dust is left."

I looked at Graham, but he was staring at the ground. Séamus put his hand on my knee, but didn't say anything. We'd heard our mam scream and shout and curse before, but never actually *cry*. My chest grew tight like there was water crawling into my lungs as we waited for Da to speak.

"We'll go," he finally said. "Wherever you want, we'll find a way and we'll go." All was quiet for a long moment.

Graham pulled me back by my collar. "Let's leave them be." We crawled away from the door and scampered off into the tree line that bordered our landlord's cornfield. I perched on a rotting stump and dug my toes into the carpet of dead leaves beneath me. "Do you think we'd really leave Ireland?"

Graham leaned against a tree and crossed his arms, looking out over the cornfield. “Plenty people have. Grandda said his best mate rowed all the way to Scotland during The Hunger."

Séamus shrugged. “I’d rather go to America. I heard they have so much land they give it to anyone who wants a slice. It’d be an adventure—like those sagas Da used to sing about.”

“You’re an eejit, you are.” Graham glared at Séamus. “America already won her independence from Britain, and we should do the same. We should stay and fight.”

“Don’t be a holy Joe,” Séamus retorted as he sat down next to me on a log. “A war like that will split Ireland in two. Mam’s right—it’s best we clear out now.” Séamus looked at me. “What d’you think, Clare?”

I smiled to myself, right proud I knew something the boys didn’t. “Mam ripped an advertisement out of the paper a couple of months ago. It was about a coal mine in West Virginia that’s searching for miners like Da.”

“She ripped it?” Séamus rubbed his nose, smearing dirt across his face. “Mam’s pure knackered.”

“Where’s West Virginia?” Graham asked.

“I dunno. Some place called Blue Hollow.” My stomach rumbled as I finished the words and I pushed my fists into my middle. My stomach would stop making noise if I held it long enough.

Séamus slid off the log and pulled me after him. “Jesus, I’d eat the backdoor buttered. Let’s go see if Old McGinley will give us any slops.”

Mrs. McGinley was a hunched, sour-faced woman who cooked for Lord and Lady Arkwright. She grew up during The Hunger and had no children of her own. All the kids in

Baileársa knew Mrs. McGinley would give out scraps when children came begging, but my brothers and I had first rights because Mrs. McGinley was Mam's fourth or fifth cousin removed. We were family.

By the time we ventured back home with our spoils, Mam was weaving in the corner and Da was mending a mule's harness for Lord Arkwright.

"About time you're back." Mam didn't look up from her tight strands.

Graham dumped the sack he carried onto our notched table. "We brought tattie farls for supper from Mrs. McGinley. She said we could have some peas on the morrow, if we wished."

Séamus snorted. "Seems Lord Arkwright's daughter doesn't care for her English peas, hi."

Mam looked around at us, her gaze coming to rest on the small sack of farls. "Damn the peas." Her voice was thin, but sharp like a newly sharpened loy. Mam hunched over, hiding her face in the folds of her skirt without making another sound. Da calmly set his tools on the table and cocked his head toward the door.

Graham sighed and picked up the sack. "Come on." Séamus and I followed him into the garden. We sat in dirt as we munched on bread, watching the sun sink like a rock tossed in a pond.

"Mam hasn't got her full shillings," Séamus said around his mouthful of bread.

"She'll be fine." I pinched up the crumbs that'd fallen into my lap. "Da'll calm her."

"I've heard Americans don't like Irish," Graham said suddenly.

"Now where'd you hear that?" Séamus smirked at me and rolled his eyes.

"I keep my ears open instead of my arse. Jack McGuiness and Harry Irwin were talking about it at the pub the other night. They've got family over there and they said Americans don't like to hire Irish, so why is this Blue Mine looking for Irish workers?"

I shrugged as I wrapped up the last half of my farl for breakfast tomorrow. "Does it matter? I don't suppose we'd actually leave Ireland."

Séamus ignored me, scowling at Graham as if he'd betrayed him. "Why didn't you take me with you to the pub?"

"'Cause you're a bogshite, Séamus." Graham sounded like he meant it, but the corners of his mouth turned up like a sly cat's.

"You—" Séamus launched himself at Graham, pinning him on the ground. Graham hooked his legs around Séamus' middle and tried to pull him off, but Séamus was too quick. Golden dust curled around my brothers as they wrestled, catching the last rays of the Irish sun.

"You gombeen," Séamus said between his teeth as he tried to keep Graham from pulling down his trousers. I snatched up the last pieces of tattie cake as the boys rolled toward me, a walloping ball of legs and arms. Séamus began to laugh as Graham targeted his armpits, and soon the two were sprawled on their backs, panting at the peeping stars.

"Harry said he'd serve anyone who can hold their ale," Graham finally said, chuckling as he wiped his face with a dirt-streaked sleeve. "A man can't get plastered like you do."

"I don't…" Séamus started, but the door opened and our da came out. He stood on the threshold a moment looking down at us, but I couldn't tell what he was thinking. The night hid his face.

"Were you earwigging?"

"No, Da, we'd never listen in." Séamus laughed from his spot on the ground.

Graham whacked Séamus' shoulder. "Don't be thick."

Da rubbed his hand across his face and then spoke. "Your mam and I have made a decision. We'll be moving to America. There's a mining opportunity, and the coal company is going to lend us money for the passage."

The tattie farls tumbled out of my skirt, dropping into the weeds. We were leaving Ireland? O'Donnells had always lived in Ireland. Even when Grandda's fellow Irishmen left County Donegal like drowning rats during The Hunger, he stayed on knowing he'd die here. Grandda told me once only true Irish had strength of will like his. But our family must've lost our strength somewhere amidst the rows of corn and rotting black potatoes. For the first time since Grandda's death, I thanked Mother Mary and the stars above he wasn't here to see us leave the home he'd carved out of the land he loved.

The next morning, Graham, Séamus, and I hauled buckets of wild ramsons and a dozen fresh eggs to Mrs. McGinley's kitchen at the back of the Big House. We'd barely put our buckets down when Séamus told Mrs. McGinley we were swimming for America.

She didn't seem surprised—we certainly weren't the first family to leave Baileársa—but I didn't expect her to look as grim as she did. "Ye band of gurriers. At least I won't have to save you cake no more." Mrs. McGinley pushed her wiry hair back under her stained cap and wiped her forehead as if it were a warm day, though it was cool in the Arkwright's stone kitchen.

"You won't miss us?" Séamus prodded, leaning against the counter like a larking schoolboy.

"I'll be glad to be rid of you." Mrs. McGinley snorted as she turned away to inspect our ramsons. "My niece Roberta and her lad went to America—the Montana area—to mine. She

used to write, but not so often now." Mrs. McGinley slapped a garlic head on the counter and I jumped.

"What happened?" Séamus asked as he slipped a slice of apple into his pocket. I shot him a glare for his sinful thievery. It was one thing to steal from the Arkwrights, but Mrs. McGinley was family.

"She turned American, that's what. Her letters were always smudgy with coal dust, and I told her if she didn't want to take time to write me proper, then she'd best stop writing all together."

Séamus snorted. "That's all? Jesus, what if the Virgin Mary sent you a note with dust on it? I'm sure you wouldn't shirk her."

Mrs. McGinley smacked Séamus upside the head with a garlic bulb, but he just laughed and ducked away. I would never get away with such a pert comment. Séamus had a way of charming people blind so they didn't see what an eejit he was. I tried to not be jealous, but it was rough when you were supposed to do everything you were told, and your empty-headed brother was still favored.

Mrs. McGinley patted Séamus' cheek and handed him a bruised pear. "You're going to be in the middle lands for a long while yet if you keep speaking to your elders like that, lad."

"What did Roberta say about America?" Graham asked, steering the conversation back to facts.

"Not much." Mrs. McGinley's lips turned down like she'd tasted briny water. "Alls I know is: the longer Roberta stays in *Montana*, the less Irish she becomes. She never did have the Irish constitution."

How could a person become *less Irish*? I knew that'd never happen to me—Grandda's stories were intertwined with my soul and I carried our history within me. I smiled at the thought and looked to Graham, but he'd already turned his attention back to unloading the rest of the ramsons.

Mrs. McGinley roughly patted Séamus' shoulder like she knew he'd always be Irish. "Anyhow, I sent Roberta off with an American wake 'fore she left, seeing as how her mother was dead, the Lord rest her soul." Mrs. McGinley peered at me. "Is there anyone to give you a wake, lass?"

I shook my head.

Mrs. McGinley gave me a gummy smile and smacked me hard on the cheek. I tried not to flinch, but Mrs. McGinley always scared me a bit with her tiny wild eyes and bare gums. "Well, a course not—they wouldn't know how it's to be done. I'll give ye one."

Mrs. McGinley invited the whole of County Donegal to our cottage the day before we left for the docks at Sligo Bay. She told me she even ventured to invite Lord Arkwright, but I kept an eye out and he never turned up on his proud, white gelding. Graham said it was just as well since Lord Arkwright didn't belong amongst "true sons of Éire."

Mam and I spent the week wringing and plucking half our laying flock so Mrs. McGinley could stew them up in a large kettle that hung over the peat fire next to our cottage. I could smell steaming potatoes and onions from my spot next to the hencoop as I waited for the guests to arrive. I pulled my feet up under me as the warbling cries of the thrush sounded across the fields. It was a warm evening and it felt like every other May I'd lived through—as if we weren't sailing tomorrow, making for a country we'd never known.

Da and the boys had spread a new coat of whitewash onto the mud plaster that held our house and one window together. I'd never seen our cottage so snowy—like elderbush blooms in the summer. Mam stood a little ways off from our cottage as the guests arrived, looking embarrassed of its smallness, but Da stood at the door and smiled a welcome that made up for Mam. I couldn't tell how many people came, but they all brought a dish of stew, a jug of brew, and an empty stomach.

Most of the people were older with wide lines in their faces like a ditch after a rainstorm. Everyone was crying and singing and carrying on like we'd never see them again. Mrs. McGinley even baked a pie special for us filled with minced lamb because she knew I was partial to mutton. She hugged me into her stomach and made me promise to write to her. I told her I would as soon as I learned my words, and Mam nodded and promised Mrs. McGinley the rest of our laying hens as a gesture of goodwill.

One of Da's friends from the pub—Harry Irwin—brought his fiddle and Da took out his bodhrán and began to give the heartbeat of a jig—my jig. Da said he always played *Out on the Ocean* for me alone. Our guests organized into a dance, though most of the men, and some of the women, were already washed up on black stuff and smoking fingers of tobacco.

I perched on the threshold of our cottage, watching the merrymaking and wondering why Mam and Da wanted to leave it all behind. We were Irish; we belonged in Ireland, didn't we? I surely didn't want to turn American like McGinley's niece. I'd only met one real American in my entire life. He was a guest of Lord and Lady Arkwright three summers ago. I remembered him using abrupt, curt words and never taking time to listen to Da's songs. I heard the man call us "white niggers" one time when Mam and I were in Baileársa selling eggs on market day. I

didn't know what it meant, but Mam's cheeks grew red and she gave his back an eyeful of Irish wrath.

"Move over a bit." I looked up as Graham sat down next to me, balancing his second glass of dry stout. "What're you doing over here?"

I tucked my feet under me and smoothed my skirt. "Just watching," I told him.

"Don't you want to say goodbye to your mates?"

I shrugged. "Don't really have those."

"I thought you and that Chloë from down the lane?"

I shook my head. "We just don't fancy the same things. I showed her a sean-nós Da taught me and she said I was thick for trying to sing songs in Gaeilge. She said she wants to move to England when she gets older and drink out of china teacups."

"I see."

"Her family hardly ever goes to mass—I think they're soupers in secret. And when she does go to mass, she stares at Séamus like he's made of sweets. I don't have time for her anyhow."

Graham and I silently watched the dancers as they twirled around each other, clapping with Da's rhythm. Séamus was there too, drunkenly dancing with Patty Campbell—the floozie who sat behind us every Sunday. Séamus looked fine in his waistcoat and neat breaches that frayed at the knees. He tossed back his ruddy head, laughing as Patty whispered in his ear. I wished a wart would grow between her weasel eyes.

I turned to Graham. "Aren't you going to say *your* goodbyes?"

Graham shrugged, staring down into his nearly empty cup. "Already did. Told the lads that if Éire decides to fight, I'll stand with her."

I didn't think one boy could make much difference in Ireland's independence, but I didn't tell him so. Graham's face was already too old for his age.

My brother set his pint on the step. "Don't be down, Clare. America will be an adventure. You'll see."

"I'm not down."

"No? Looking at you would bring tears to a stone." He nudged me with his elbow. "Want to dance? You'll likely not get a better offer."

I grinned and took Graham's outstretched hand. He swung me around until I was laughing and the world was spinning—no Ireland, no America, just a blur of people and colors and sounds.

Lord Arkwright rode down from the Big House the next morning and shook my da's hand from the back of his white gelding. I stared at the black spot in the middle of the gelding's chest as Lord Arkwright wished us good fortune and told us he was right glad he didn't have to evict us for not paying rent. Mam cringed and shut her eyes tight as he talked, but didn't respond. I hoped I'd be as strong and proud as her someday.

We each packed a bag, boarded up the one room cottage my grandda built, and sailed out of Sligo Bay on a boat more crowded than a pub the day after Lent. Mam didn't even look back as the last strip of Ireland faded into blue waves. Da leaned on his pickaxe and began to hum a ballad I didn't know the words to. I watched the sun fill in the lines on his face until his skin was a harsh white like the bleached shells I used to collect on the shore of Donegal Bay.

I tugged on his elbow. "Why don't you play your bodhrán, Da? I'm certain we'd like to hear."

Da glanced at me and then pushed his lips into a smile as he tapped the deck with the head of his pickaxe. “I gave my drum away, lass. Won’t be needing it.”

I nodded as if I understood, but I felt something boiling in me, threatening to spill over like a blistering kettle. Why hadn’t he told me? Jesus, I would’ve taken out my good dress and stuffed the drum in my sack. How could he give our bodhrán away? It was the finest thing we owned, passed down from his grandda. That bodhrán carried the beat that brought Mam and Da together back when Da was a lad busking on the streets for a bite of stew. The thought of our drum resonating in someone else’s hands made my chest feel tight and strangely empty like I was a hollow bone the village dogs had picked over. I knew Da’s music could never fill me up again.

I put my elbows on the rail with my back to Da, frowning against the glare of the water as Ireland melted into the ocean. I swore on the sinking waves that someday I’d come back and find Da’s drum. The circle of wood and skin was tied to his soul and I didn’t know if we could be whole without it.

Blue Hollow

The expanse of the Atlantic seemed to never end, our heavily packed ship bobbing along like a fat cork. At first, the water was a shining blue that matched the shade of Mam's wedding gown—the color that welcomed me every time I ran along the white shores of Gweebarra Bay. But as our ship steadily plowed toward America, the water grew darker until it was no longer blue, but gray-green like dying moss. My twelfth birthday came and went as Mam stayed in our third-class quarters, knitting new stockings for me with yarn she took from one of her old jumpers. Da played cards with the men while my brothers and I made up stories and pretended we were pirates attacking English merchant ships. The salty wind chapped our cheeks and lips until they bled. I kept a sharp eye out for icebergs like the one that'd sunk the giant ship back in April. Graham said it was too late in the year for icebergs, but I told him if the *Titanic* could sink in April, we could sink in May.

I was helping Mam scrub underclothes one morning when our neighbors—a young couple from County Mayo—pounded on our door, shouting that America had been sighted. I bolted out the door and fought my way up the stairs and onto the deck.

"Clare!" Graham pushed through the crowd and grabbed my hand. "We've got you a spot. Quick, now." He pulled me behind him, cutting a path through the thronged deck. Graham took me up to the bow where Séamus waited, hanging out over the water like a sea bird.

"We've got a right fair view, aye?" Séamus said without turning his head.

"Aye," I breathed. A nippy wind swept across the water, biting through my thin dress as our ship waded through low clouds that hung suspended over the harbor. We pressed against the rail, silent and straining as we searched for the Lady of Liberty we'd heard so many tales of. The crowd jostled and I tripped forward, smashing between Graham and a dark haired boy who

grabbed my arm to steady me but didn't seem to speak a bit of English. I nodded my thanks and turned my gaze back to the bow, squinting through the fog.

"There—I see her!" The deck erupted in voices, howling in languages I'd never heard before. The boy shrieked and hit Séamus hard on the back before rushing off to find his family. The Lady was robed in mist, but her green eyes seemed wise and kind and she held her torch high, greeting us like an old friend.

"Our first American welcome," I yelled in Graham's ear. He nodded like he'd heard, but his face didn't change expression. He wore the hard look Da sometimes had when he knew Sir Arkwright was coming for rent. Séamus and I left Graham at the bow, squeezing through the crowd to get a good view of the city herself. Buildings taller than mountains rose out of the island, pushing to the clouds in graceful spikes.

"It reminds me of the story of the Tower of Babel," I yelled to Séamus. I'd told Mrs. McGinley about it one time in exchange for a mouthful of fresh cream. She'd said the story was just a legend, like the tale of the Bunworth Banshee, but I didn't know if I believed her. If I were God and all my wee humans were trying to be grander than me, I'd mix up their tongues too.

Séamus squinted at the building in front of us, craning his neck to see the top. "Hi, which tower?" He never paid attention in mass.

Someone pressed against my back, pushing me even closer to the rail. I turned as Mam leaned over me, gazing out at the city with eyes as wide as a child seeing her first sunset. Mam's hair tugged free of the tight bun she normally wore, auburn wisps dancing and jerking in the sea breeze. Mam turned and smiled at me with every feature on her tired face. "New York. The most modern city in the world, Clare. If we have a chance at life, it's here." Mam put her arm around

my shoulders and held me close. Her body quivered against me, but her fierce smile seemed more excited than cold.

Séamus turned away from the rail. “What’s that tower you were telling me of, Clare?”

“It’s in the Bible, heathen. The people of Babel wanted to be gods, so they built a tower that would reach heaven, but God twisted their tongues up and made them speak different languages so they couldn’t understand each other. That way they never got to heaven.”

Séamus laughed. “Do you think Americans talk to God from up there?” He pointed at the cluster of buildings across the harbor.

I glanced at Mam. She was stilling holding tight to me, but her gaze was farther away than Ireland. “I dunno, but I’m sure they’ve got a fairer chance than us.”

We finally docked and were funneled off the ship and into a building that looked like a stately red castle, surrounded on all sides by choppy water. The solid ground felt tipsy beneath my feet as we made our way through the line, carrying our sacks on our backs. Men with hats and official-looking coats looked over each passenger, checking to see if they were ill, or strange in the head. Several of the people in front of me were taken out of line and herded into a corner. They each had an X marked in chalk over their right shoulder.

The small girl in front of me clutched her faceless doll as the official looked into her eyes and shook his head. “We’ve got a CT under twelve.” The man scrawled letters on her coat collar and pushed her aside. “Take her back,” he told one of the men patrolling the grounds.

“No!” The woman behind me broke out of line and rushed toward the child. She let out a string of words I couldn’t follow and scooped up the girl, furiously rubbing the chalk letters.

The official nodded to the guard. “Return them to their ship.”

I looked back at Graham as the guard dragged the woman and child away. My brother nodded at me and tried to smile, but I knew him too well to believe the gesture. “What’ll happen to them?” I whispered.

“The child’ll be sent back. She was marked with eye disease and America doesn’t want immigrants with ailments.”

“Sent back?” I repeated.

“Aye, back to the port she came from.” Graham nudged me forward as the official waved for me to come. “Be brave, Clare,” Graham whispered.

I stood up tall as the man asked me my name and country, showing him I was right in the head. I took deep breaths when instructed and touched my toes with perfect ease and without huffing, unlike some of the older women. The official peeled up my eyelids and looked in my eye sockets, just like he’d done to the small girl. After he made a few notes, he said I was “as healthy as a horse” and waved me on.

I clinched my hands around my skirt as the rest of my family was examined, praying to Mother Mary for mercy. They made it through one-by-one, none touched by chalk. After Da was cleared, we were all taken to a roped off area where several other Irish families silently waited, mouths tight and brows low. I huddled with Séamus and Graham while the other children—all boys—eyed us curiously. The kids were so skinny the bones stuck out of their faces, making them look like ghouls. I hoped I didn’t look like that. I hadn’t seen my face in a long while, but I prayed Mrs. McGinley’s cream kept me from looking shrunken.

I don’t know how long we stood there whispering to each other before an American man approached us. He wore carefully combed hair that was so shiny it looked wet. “You’re the coal-crackers?” he asked, looking down at a sheet of paper.

"Miners, yes, sir. We've come to work for the Blue Hollow Mining Company," Da said, his voice solid.

"Right, the name's Johnson. I'll call out your family name to check that you're here, and then I'll show you where to catch the train."

"Train?" Da asked.

"How did you think you'd get to West Virginia, boy?" Johnson laughed like he was scorning a child as he called out our names, mispronouncing even the simple ones.

Johnson tucked his pencil behind his ear and raised his voice. "I'm going to show you where to catch the train. Keep close and don't get caught by any of those damn Irish runners. Sly bastards—don't believe a thing they say."

Johnson herded us through dirty streets filled with people of every color from black to pink. It was like walking through a living quilt. I even saw Chinamen who made me stop and gape because I'd never seen anyone with such sharp eyes. A boy no older than me grabbed Da's arm as we passed the mouth of an alleyway. The boy's face was crusted with soot and he had a soiled bandage wrapped around his head. "You're Irish, mister? Need work or lodgings? I can help."

Johnson turned and grabbed the boy by the back of the neck. "I told you to stay away from my shipments," he hissed in the kid's face. Johnson shoved him back into the alley and pushed us forward. "Keep clear of the runners!" he shouted. "Pack of liars."

By the time we made it on the train, Mam was out of breath and Da tightly gripped his pickaxe as if making ready to use it. He didn't say anything, but I watched him curl his fingers until his knuckles turned white. Johnson saw the last of our group onto the train and then tipped

his hat to the conductor. I climbed up next to the window as Johnson walked back the way we'd come, whistling as he passed our boxcar.

Mam and Da spoke with some of the other Irish miners as we sped through the outskirts of the city, going faster than I thought possible. We rushed past fields covered with tents of all shapes and colors, and little towns with white steeples sticking out of their centers. Though the other Irish families were going to West Virginia like us, they were destined for different mining towns—they wouldn't be going to Blue Hollow. I wondered if we'd ever see another Irish soul again.

The speed of the train and the heat from all the bodies packed in one box made me yawn, even though my stomach was yowling like a lost kitten. We hadn't had a proper meal in days. I kept dreaming about Mrs. McGinley's last mutton pie with its steamy crust and brown sauce. Perhaps a kind lady would bake us a welcome pie in Blue Hollow filled with only blue fruit and topped with little sugar crystals. It was nearly time to pick the ripe frachóg fruit that grew high up on the cliffs overlooking Donegal Bay. Every year we'd make tarts and cakes and sometimes the Baileársa lads would make bracelets for the lasses they liked, weaving a tight cuff out of the gnarled stems.

"Blue Hollow" sounded nice—as if faeries had come and painted the valley indigo just to mystify mortals. But when we finally rattled into town in the back of a coal wagon, I saw that it wasn't blue, and faeries had never been there. Everything was soot and coal dust—it touched everything, clinging to brick and wood like barnacles to a boat. We passed a dingy grocery shop, two square buildings that had crosses on them, and a building that might've been a school, or maybe just a shed—I couldn't tell. I prayed to Mother Mary it was a school. Perhaps I could

finally learn my letters. The mining company seemed to occupy the rest of the town's gray buildings, sprawling from north to south in a dull, soot-covered line.

"Where are the people?" I wondered aloud.

The driver laughed at my question. "They all be underground little miss."

"One good wind and that shop would fall over," Séamus whispered to me. "This town looks like it was built by a horde of weans."

Graham glanced at the wagon driver and leaned closer to Séamus. "They began mining soft coal here only a few years ago and there aren't enough experienced men to work the mine. The coal company had to import foreign miners."

"Who told you that?" Séamus asked.

Graham folded his arms. "That's what the men were discussing on the train while the two of you were conked."

Séamus opened his mouth to retort, but the wagon stopped in front of a grove of sagging wooden shacks.

"This is it, folks. Irish Row." The driver pulled the reins sharply, yanking the two tired mules to a halt. "The one at the end of the line is yours." Graham jumped out of the back of the wagon and helped me down as Séamus grabbed the five sacks we'd stuffed with our belongings. The wagon rolled on without us, leaving long muddy tracks in the lane as we stood in front of our new home. It was built out of drooping wood with a sheet of ruffled tin holding up one side of the porch. The steps up to the front door looked rotten and the top step was nearly split in half. I glanced at the house next to us, wondering if we'd been taken for a lark, but it looked about the same.

Mam came up behind me and put her arms around my shoulders. “Don’t look so grim, Clare.” She laughed softly. “You remind me of what I looked like when my da told me we had to sell our land. It don’t seem like much, but life’ll be good here, it will.”

I nodded. “I know, Mam,” I said. But truth was: I didn’t know. None of us did.

I climbed gingerly over the rotten fence next to our new house, landing on the other side in a patch of spongy grass. I could hear Mam, Da, and the boys unpacking inside as I surveyed our new land. The crooked fence surrounding the garden backed up to a dense wood that towered over the house with trunks older than my grandda. A clothesline strung from a wooden pole shivered in the wind as I kicked off my pinching shoes and dug my relieved toes into the grass. Lumpy plow lines cut through the dirt as if someone had tried to make a garden out of the weedy earth. I spotted peas, squash blossoms, strawberries, blackberries, and something with leafy heads like carrots. Mam would like that. She’d always wanted a true garden of her own.

I knelt in the dirt and plucked the ripest strawberries—only three were red enough to eat without souring my mouth and two had snail holes in them. A bird with gray wings and sharp, black eyes swooped in front of me, landing lightly on a fencepost. He stared at me for a moment and then opened his throat and trilled three shimmering notes—pure and clear like the air in Gweebarra Bay.

“You like to sing, do you?” I asked the bird as I dropped the ripe strawberries into my skirt. “Have you heard this one?” I hummed a pitch. “It’s about a lad who’s so rich he can marry whomever he pleases.”

Buachaill Ón Éirne mé 's bhréagfainn cailín deas óg

The bird cocked his head at me as if impressed. I grinned and started on the second line.

Ní iarrfainn bó spré léi tá mé fhéin saibhir go leor

'S liom Corcaigh da mhéid é, dhá thaobh a' ghleanna 's Tír Eoghain

'S mura n-athraí mé béasaí 's mé n' t-oidhr'

ar Chontae Mhaigh Eo

I stopped short as I noticed a girl waving from the tree line. She darted into the garden, her blue checked dress fluttering around her skinny knees. “You must be the new miners. Straight from Ireland? Can you speak English at all?”

I nodded, trying not to stare. The girl’s skin was as dark as blackthorn wood. “Aye. Where are you from?”

The girl laughed, flashing white teeth and pink lips. “Just ‘cause I’m black don’t mean I’m not American.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“You white and ain’t American. I can practically smell the green on you, girl.” She came toward me and I fell back on my rear in the mud. “Hell, I’m not going to eat you. I heard you singing—it was real good. I like to sing too.”

I pushed myself off the ground. “Really?”

“Sure. Blue Hollow’s a singin’ place. Here.” The black girl held out a parcel wrapped in greasy brown paper. “My ma works at the general store. She don’t own it—the coal company does—but she gets to take home food that’s begun to turn.”

I took the parcel with both hands. “Thank you.”

“That’s a slab of bacon. Don’t wait long to eat it. Started going green yesterday.”

I scrambled to my feet, balancing the strawberries on top of the meat. “You could come meet my family? They’re inside.”

“Can’t.” The girl drew a line in the dirt with her bare toe. “I’m not actually supposed to be here. Sloane and Davis don’t like coloreds and Irish mixing ‘cause he’s afraid of what we might do.”

“What’d we do?”

The girl peered down at me. “Say, you interested in politics, girl?”

I shrugged. “I suppose?”

“Good. I got myself a revolution, see. You can be part of it too.” The backdoor banged as Séamus came into the garden and the black girl took off faster than a wild hare.

“Mam found a pot to make stew—who was that?” Séamus stared after the girl.

“I forgot to ask—she just sprang out of the bushes.” I held up the parcel. “Gave me a cut of meat.”

Séamus snatched a strawberry out of my pile and put the whole thing in his mouth—leafy hat and all. “It’s not three bad here. Pretty girls bringing meat, strawberries in the garden—and honest to God the house isn’t as rotten as it seems on the outside.”

The house smelled of pine and axle grease and the floorboards squeaked when I walked across them, but it was bigger than our cottage in Baileársa and had four windows instead of one. It also had a small loft above the kitchen where Séamus, Graham, and I could sleep. The boys claimed the space by the ladder, so I moved to the back of the loft, crawling to keep from hitting my head on the rafters. It was a tad damp, but I just pretended I was a fox exploring a burrow.

Séamus told Mam the bacon came from "an angel" and she sighed but asked no more—Séamus was notorious for finding "angel food" back in Baileársa. Graham, Séamus, and I explored the woods behind Irish Row while Mam cooked up a watery stew of squash, bacon, and carrots and Da sharpened his pickaxe on the porch. We found bunches of flowers and a few berries in the woods, but saw hardly any animals. No rabbits, or deer, or even many birds.

"Where do you suppose they went?" Séamus wondered.

"Hiding?" I suggested.

"I bet they were eaten," Graham said, peering up through the branches. "Remember when Baileársa had a drought and everyone turned on the woods and ate up all the animals?"

Séamus dismissed Graham with a laugh. "You weren't even alive last time Baileársa had a drought. That was twenty years past. Stop trying to act like you're older than me."

"Mam did say I came out first," Graham snapped. "And I'm not a bogshite who can't hold his ale. That's why Da and the lads talk to me as an equal."

Séamus lunged at Graham, but tripped over a tree root and tumbled to his knees, grabbing at Graham's ankles as he fell. Graham took off toward Irish Row and Séamus sprinted after him, yelling words he could've only learned at the pub.

I trailed behind, trying to figure how many rosaries I'd have to say to save Séamus' soul. *At least thirty*.

"Hey, Green Girl!" I turned to find the strange black girl from the garden running up behind me. "Have a minute?"

I sidestepped toward Irish Row. I could see the house from here. "Mam'll be looking for me."

"I only asked for a minute. Are you in, or not?"

"What?"

"My revolution. You can't tell no one. We're a secret society that brings rightful justice down on the coal company whenever we can. We're the true law here." The girl lifted her chin with pride. "Heard about the coal cart theft last month? That was us. And the egging of Sloane's house? That was us, too."

I shook my head. "Who's Sloane?"

The girl stared at me a moment, eyebrows pinched together in an unforgiving frown. "Come find me when you've picked a side, Green Girl." She turned to leave but I caught her arm.

"Wait, what's your name?" I asked, trying to not look down at my hand. I'd heard stories that Negros' blackness could rub off on you.

"Ginger. Ma named us all after spices."

"I'm Clare. Thank you for the bacon, Ginger."

"I go by Gin and the bacon wasn't from me. Thank my ma." Then she was gone.

Even though I thought she was odd and a bit scary, Ginger seemed keener on being friends with me than Chloë ever was. I'd even touched her skin and stayed white. After supper, I followed my brothers up to the loft and crawled to my spot in the back. I heard Da humming a ballad down below as Mam cleared away the tops of the carrots. I adjusted the sack under my head and curled into a ball, fitting into the small space between the roof and the floor. Maybe Séamus was right about West Virginia. We were given food and a house, and I was asked to join a secret clan. Perhaps this would be my Land of Opportunity.

Shouts and thundering knocks woke me before the sun had time to rise. “Up, boyo! J. H. Sloane don’t wait for no coal-crackers.”

Another voice joined, “I heard they’re so fresh they still have green behind their ears.”

“Wake up, lad! There’s work to be done and arses to be kissed.” The man’s words sounded Irish, but his accent was angular and clipped.

I crawled over groggy Séamus and Graham and watched over the edge of the loft as Da grabbed his pickaxe from where it leaned against the hearth and opened the door to a crowd of miners.

“Keep your voices down, lads. My family’s asleep,” Da said quietly.

“Not now, they’re not,” one man scoffed. He handed Da a lamp and a bridle. “Your mule is waiting at the mine. You’ve got to care for it yourself and buy its feed—the company can’t be bothered.” The man craned his neck around Da, peering inside our house. “You’ve got a family? That’s no good. These be troubled times.”

Da moved into the doorframe, blocking my view. “How do you mean?”

The men laughed in a chorus. “What a fresh coal-cracker. And we thought you a company man.” The laughter died like flickering embers. “You’d best figure which side you’re on before you’re caught in the middle.”

“Quiet, O’Connell,” another man barked. “Work starts in fifteen. Let’s go.”

Da glanced back, his eyes finding me hanging over the rail. “Look out for your mam,” he told me before following the men out the door. I listened to them march down the creaky front steps, clambering like a herd of sheep. I waited until everything was quiet and then slowly climbed down the loft ladder.

I tiptoed to Mam’s blanket by the hearth. “Mam?” I whispered, kneeling beside her.

"Everything's fine, Clare. They're just making certain your da's a son of Éire."

I didn't think that was what they wanted to know. "Which side are we on, Mam?"

"We're on God's side, Clare. Always God's." Mam reached out and squeezed my hand like she used to when I was little. "Sleep, child. Nothing'll harm you."

I nodded and backed away as Mam turned over to face the hearth. I knew I couldn't go back to sleep, so I slunk out to the garden to eat some of the prickly blackberries that grew in a tangle on the one remaining fencepost. After getting stuck a few times, I learned out how to wiggle my fingers through the thorns to the sun-ripened berries. I ate until I was full and my hands were stained a purple fit for King Solomon. There were still plenty of berries left on the bush so I grabbed the greasy brown paper from Ginger's bacon and filled it with berries. We O'Donnells might be poor, but we had manners and I knew how to be neighborly.

I set off down Irish Row, mud squishing between my toes, turning my feet black like Ginger's. I didn't know where she lived, but I remembered seeing her mam's grocery shop in town. I began to smile as I neared the grocery. Mam would be right proud I returned the gift all on my own.

"Green Girl!" Ginger sat on the porch of the shop, scrubbing dirt off a stack of carrots. "What're you doing here?"

I held up the paper cone full of berries. "I brought these for your mother."

Ginger looked down at my bare feet and yelled, "Ma, come out here!"

A woman with a wiry black bun and tired eyes pushed open the screen door and stepped onto the porch. "I told you to clean those somewhere else, Ginny."

"I will Ma," she said, but didn't make any effort to move.

"Can I help you, miss?" Ginger's mam asked.

"Oh no, I just came to thank you for the bacon and give you these." The lady frowned a little so I added, "I picked them off the bush in our garden, see." I didn't want her to think I stole them. I'd hardly ever thieved back in Ireland.

Ginger's mother glanced down the street before she took my bleeding, purple bundle. "Thank you." She quickly climbed back up the steps. "You have a nice day, honey."

"She don't want to be seen talkin' to you," Ginger said as she jumped off the porch.

"Why?"

Ginger laughed. "You's white, she's black. Hell, I didn't think you were blind, girl. The coal boss don't want us plotting."

I waited for Ginger to continue, but she just turned back to her carrots. "Do you want something? I got work."

I leaned toward her. "I want to be part of your revolution."

"Hell, girl!" Ginger leapt off the porch and grabbed my arm. "Not in the middle of the street." She tugged me into a narrow lane behind the shop, jerking my wrist until I thought it'd come off.

"Mary and Joseph—let go!" I demanded. I tried to not look surprised when Ginger dropped my wrist and backed away, but I felt victorious like an osprey snatching a fish from the sea. Back home, the boys never listened and Mam always talked over me, but here my words seemed to have power.

Ginger glanced behind us. "We're a secret group—only the bravest kids get asked to be in it. I'm the Grand Master—that's like the queen. We'll give you a trial to see if you're worthy to be one of us. No guarantees just because you brought my ma berries."

"You don't have to be American to be in the clan?"

Ginger shook her head, ruffling her frizzled hair. “No miners and no company sympathizers. Don’t care what you is, so long as you follow orders and stay true.” Ginger stuck out her skinny black hand and I shook it quick and hard like I’d seen Da do.

“Meet me outside Irish Row tonight at sunset.” Ginger turned to leave, but held my gaze, eyes sharp and white against her skin. “Don’t tell a soul. Remember.” She disappeared behind the grocery, leaving me alone in the alleyway.

I let out a sigh and leaned against a pile of wooden planks, digging my toes into the muddy ground as excitement tingled through my body like the warmth of a fire. In one day, I’d become a revolutionary. My brothers would never believe it. They’d spent their childhood playing soldiers and shooting imaginary men in the woods, but now I’d been chosen above them—singled out and given a secret.

The Story Keeper

I waited at the end of Irish Row, crowding into the shadows behind a leafy walnut tree. I'd be able to see anyone coming, but they wouldn't be able to see me. No one had talked much at dinner—Da could hardly keep his eyes open and Mam kept listing off repairs the house needed. I was too busy imagining what part I'd play in Ginger's revolution to mind. After Mam and Da bedded down, it wasn't hard to convince drowsy Séamus that I was only stepping outside to use the toilet.

Evening insects called to each other, chirping and clacking like a horde of blutered boys. My stomach flipped over, churning the turnip and lichen I'd had for supper—even my fingertips were tingling. What if Ginger's friends didn't like me? Kids back in Baileársa didn't even bother to greet me when we passed on the lane. I pretended I didn't care and turned up my nose at them, but I wanted to have someone to wave to in America.

I leaned against the tree trunk, crunching empty walnut shells with my big toe as I waited for Ginger. The night air tasted warm and moist like Mrs. McGinley's suet pudding. She used to give us each a slice at Christmas, topped with egg custard and a splash of brandy butter. I could almost taste the pudding crumbling apart in my mouth, the strong scent of brandy burning my nose as I swallowed.

"Hey, Green Girl."

I spun around, almost tripping over tangled tree roots. Ginger stood behind me, a mocking grin on her pink lips. "You ready?"

"Jesus, you scared me."

Ginger took my arm and pulled me into the nearby woods. "The others are waiting."

"Where are we going?" I whispered.

"You'll see." Ginger kept her eyes straight ahead, flitting across the damp forest floor with toes as light as faeries. She was like Oonagh—the woodland goddess.

Ginger rounded a tree covered with leafy climbers and then stopped so quickly I ran into her back. I fell against the trunk, grabbing at the vines as I slid toward the ground. Ginger laughed, teeth flashing in the periwinkle twilight. "We're here."

I squinted through the crawlers at the dim rectangular structure in front of us. "What's this?"

"Our boxcar." Ginger brushed away the vines, revealing a rusty sliding door. She tapped three short bursts against the frame, the sound echoing off the metal.

The door cracked open, lantern glow spilling into the forest. "That you, Gin?"

"Let us in, Colin."

A freckled-faced boy with disheveled yellow hair pulled us into the train car, scanning the woods behind us like he was warding off banshees. The boy rolled the door shut behind us, sealing out the night. Ginger sat down on the straw-covered floor next to a boy with skin the color of steeped tea, and slipped a head lantern on over her braids.

"Hello." I brushed my hair behind my ears, trying to smile at the solemn faces staring up at me. "I'm Clare," I offered, watching naked flames dance above their eyes.

Ginger nodded and pointed to the dark-skinned boy next to her. "This is Franklin, Colin, and Molly."

The girl Ginger introduced last flashed me a quick smile and sniffed loudly, rubbing her smudged arm over her nose. "Hi," she mumbled.

"That's the whole gang," Ginger finished.

"Nice to meet you, Clare," the yellow-haired boy said, patting the floor next to him. "You can sit, if you'd like." His words carried a slight, familiar lilt.

"That'd be grand." I knelt next to the boy—Colin—trying to keep my skirt from coming up over my knees. "Are you Irish?"

He shrugged. "Born there, but been here longer than I lived there."

"What's you good at?" asked Franklin—the tea-colored boy.

"Huh?"

"Like a talent." Molly pulled her knees up to her chest. "I can walk through the woods without nobody hearing me. Franklin's real smart—good with numbers. And nobody's better at setting fuses than Colin." Molly glanced at Ginger. "You can't be one of us if you don't got a talent."

Franklin shook his head. "Like Davis—all he does is order men around in his steel-toe boots. That's no talent."

"Mr. Davis is the company foreman," Molly whispered to me.

"Davis' talent is cajoling," Ginger said stiffly, glaring at Franklin. "Let Clare speak."

I hesitated, wondering what to say. I wasn't sharp like Graham or funny like Séamus. Da always said my greatest strength was my voice. "I can sing," I said at last.

Franklin let out a snort of laughter, but Colin nodded at me like my talent was acceptable—noble, even. "She can be our *seanchaí*—our story keeper." Colin handed me a headlamp as if the matter was closed.

"Story keeper?" Molly echoed.

"A bearer of lore and protector of clan history. Nearly every village has one back in Ireland."

Ginger nodded, absently twisting a piece of straw between her fingers. “My mamaw used to make up songs about our family, singing them while she worked so we’d never forget who we were.”

Molly jumped up, nearly knocking me over as she grabbed a small metal box from the corner. She opened it and took out five glass jars filled with clear, sloshing liquid. “I’ve been saving this for something special.” Molly handed me a jar. ”Let’s make a toast.” I unscrewed the lid and sniffed the contents. It smelled like turpentine and rust.

Ginger grabbed a jar and lifted it up until the flame in her lamp reflected off the glass. “To the union, to the revolution…” Ginger glanced at me and smiled like there was a secret between us. “And to our story keeper.”

“The story keeper.” Colin and Molly lifted their jars to their lips.

I closed my eyes and tipped the jar, allowing a stream of liquid to pour into my mouth. The drink burned my nose and made tears smart in my eyes as I forced myself to swallow. Jesus, it was strong, but I took another gulp, my belly warming as my new friends laughed and clinked their jars with mine.

I snuck home before anyone woke, but Mam seemed to know I was up to something. She sent the boys to town, but kept me home, making me stand over a pot of boiling wash, stirring the clothes with a thick branch so they wouldn’t burn. I asked Mam why *I* couldn’t go to the shops and she said I “wasn’t a lad—that’s the why.” I scowled, griping under my breath as I slapped a pair of trousers over the sagging clothesline. I’d prove to Mam how important I was some day, and she’d change her tune faster than a cat on scissors.

Mam and I had almost finished filling the clothesline by the time Graham and Séamus hurdled the leaning fence and jumped onto the back porch.

Mam kept her eyes on the wash. “Did you bring grain?”

Graham shook his head as he settled onto the step. “Wouldn’t give us any. We don’t have American money, and the lady said we couldn’t have shop tokens yet. The miners get paid scrip with each ton of coal they bring out of the mountain.”

“But we saw a smart-looking lass, though.” Séamus winked at me and I glared at him. “She even talked to me, she did.”

“What’d she say? Clear off?” I retorted, resentful of the blisters forming on my palms.

“Clare!” Mam whacked her stick on the edge of the kettle. “Watch your tone.”

Séamus laughed at Mam’s warning. “Hi, that girl’s going to dance with me at the céilí on Sunday, she is. She called it a ‘field hollering,’ but she described it like a céilí. Food, dancing, music—imagine going to a céilí in America.”

My breath caught in my chest. *A céilí in Blue Hollow?* In Baileársa, the whole village would gather in the field by our parish and everyone would wear their best dresses made by their grannies. Musicians and singers would perform first, setting the tone of the evening, while the men helped themselves to draughts of cider and beer, and the women gossiped. The storytellers would come out when the fire was dying and the embers glowed like a will-‘o-the-wisp in the night. I’d performed with Da once at our céilí when I was seven. He played his bodhrán and I sang, just my voice with his beat like an ancient war song.

Graham, Séamus, and I kicked through the underbrush, trying to skip over any hidden thorns as we waded into the woods. The wide leaves above us seemed to trap the heat, holding the warmth over us until our shirts stuck to our backs.

"What d'you think Mam thought we'd find in here?" Séamus swatted the black flyers buzzing around our ankles.

"She said to find something for dinner, and that's what we're doing," Graham said shortly. Small birds chattered in the branches, scolding us for disturbing their perches.

"Maybe we can set some traps?" I offered.

"No use. I already told you—this wood's been overhunted. Most people can't afford the shops, so they look to the woods for food."

"At least we've got a garden."

Graham snorted at my ignorance. "That garden won't even feed us through autumn. We'll have to go to the shops."

"But we've got to have money for that."

"Aye, Clare. We know." Séamus glanced back at me. "Graham and I are going to sign up to work in the mine. The shop lady said we'd get more scrip if we did. You've got to swear not to tell Mam yet."

"You don't even know how to mine!"

Graham yanked a vine out of his path and made his way around a gigantic tree stump. "There are lads younger than us working. Da says it's in our blood."

"Stupidity is the only thing in your blood," I huffed.

"What's this?" Graham dropped to his knees and swept his hands over the ground, shoving away dead leaves and scrambling beetles. Séamus and I crowded behind as Graham

reached into a shallow hole and pulled up a small wooden crate. The top slats crumbled apart as he set the box on the ground.

"Holy Mary." Séamus let out a slow whistle through his teeth. Tarnished brass gleamed between rotting leaves like glowing eggs in a nest.

"Are those—?" I began.

"Pistols," Séamus interrupted, digging through the straw. "And dynamite?" He withdrew a brace of mud-colored sticks that had a long string hanging out the end like a tail.

"They're around fifty years old," Graham said, hefting a pistol in his palm.

"How do you know?" I picked up a pistol. It felt unwieldy and dangerous, but also smooth as a ribbon against my fingers. I wondered how many men the weapon had killed. I shivered and let the pistol fall back into the box.

"See this buckle?" Graham dropped a heavy brass object into my palm.

I rubbed my thumb over the clouded metal, cleaning dirt from between the letters. "It says *CSA*."

"Aye." Graham nodded. "It's from the American war back in the '60s. Harry Irwin told me about it. The Americans killed each other over money while we starved to death."

"Let's show them to Da." Séamus reached for the box, but Graham grabbed his arm.

"No—wait." His eyes narrowed as he took the buckle from my hand. "I think we should bury it again."

"But couldn't we sell it?" I leaned against the tree, twirling my fingers into the climbing vines. "It could bring a fair penny…maybe you wouldn't have to work in the mines for a while yet?"

Séamus and Graham glanced at each other as if they were sharing a thought. Séamus shook his head. “Graham’s right. This lot could come in handy later.”

“You can’t tell Mam, Clare,” Graham said pointedly. “I know you don’t understand, but you’ve got to keep your mouth shut.”

“You don’t—” I started, but Séamus interrupted.

“Calm down, lass. He didn’t mean any harm.” Séamus dragged me away from Graham, keeping his fingers tight around my wrist. “Graham doesn’t mean to be hard. He’s just thinking ahead.” He moved his hand to my shoulder. “We’ve got to stick together, Clare.”

I rolled my eyes, but nodded slowly. “Aye, Séamus. We will.”

By the time we tramped back to Irish Row, an old gray mule stood tethered to the railing on the back porch, slowly grinding the last of the strawberries between its teeth. “Da’s home!” I sprinted the rest of the way to the house, gathering my skirt tight to my waist as I hurdled the fence. I barged through the back door, nearly tripping on a raised floorboard.

“We found lichen, Mam.” I dropped my skirt to below my knees before rounding the corner into the kitchen.

Mam stood with her back to me, snapping twigs to add to the fire in the stove. “Grand. I’ve a set of turnips for mash.” She glanced back, giving me a frown as she noticed my skirt. “It’s not wolf lichen, is it? That’ll kill us all.”

I rolled my eyes. “No, Mam. I know what wolf lichen looks like.” I tossed the moss on the counter. “Where’s Da?”

“In the front,” she said, examining the lichen. “Don’t disturb him, Clare.”

I was already rushing out the door. Da sat on the top step of the porch, staring down the long, quiet lane that led to the heart of Blue Hollow. His hair was ruffled and wet as if he'd just rinsed it, but his shirt was striped with soot. I perched next to him, pulling my knees up to my chest.

"How was it to be mining again?" I asked. "Is it like you remember?"

"It's a different world down there, Clare," Da said slowly. "Men go down all shades of brown and white, but at the end of the day, we all come up black." Da let out a short laugh. "I still have rhythm in my pickaxe—that'll never change. But these American lads…they work in fear and anger I haven't seen the likes of since the Dark Days." His voice trailed off as if he were talking only to himself.

I hesitated a moment and then asked, "Does that mean we'll be going back to Ireland?"

Da finally looked at me, the corners of his mouth turning up. "No, lass." He ran his hand over my hair, mussing my braid, but I didn't mind. "That we won't."

Mam made me starch collars until my fingers were stiff so we'd look proper when we attended mass on Sunday. It didn't do a stitch of good for Séamus—his collar drooped and wrinkled as we plodded down Irish Row, trying to keep from stepping in horse turds and muddy puddles. As we neared the grocery where Ginger worked, I caught the faint sound of a chanting melody—rhythmic and swaying like the beat of Da's drum. I couldn't make out the tune or the words, but it sounded as if a large crowd was singing together at the top of their lungs. I took off, following the noise through the middle of town. Mam shouted for me to slow down and walk proper, but the music grew louder, drawing me toward it. My feet pounded the earth in time with the tune as I started to make out words within the melody.

I ain't gonna study war no more.

Study war no more.

Ain't gonna study war no more.

I rounded the corner, following the words to a whitewashed building surrounded by a dense grove of trees. I hesitated as I neared the door. The very ground seemed to vibrate from the strength of the music within. I crept onto the porch and pulled the door open wide enough to see inside. People clapped their hands, swaying back and forth with the beat. "Yes, Jesus!" a woman on the back row shouted, lifting her hands toward the ceiling. It was Ginger's mother.

Gonna lay down my burdens, down by the riverside.

Down by the riverside.

Down by the riverside!

The music was like a dance, a cry, and a chant all at once. I'd never heard anything so fervent and wild before. I spotted Ginger at the front of the group, swaying in time with the music and clapping her hands to make a beat. The words tugged at me as I opened the door the rest of the way. I didn't know what the song was about, but I wanted to be part of it.

Someone grabbed my arm as I tried to step over the threshold and dragged me back. "Clare, that's not our church." Graham panted as he pulled me down the steps. "That building's for Negros. Ours is on the other side of town."

"The music…"

"It's not ours."

I followed Graham back to where Mam and Da waited, but I couldn't stop thinking about the miraculous music I'd heard. It might not've been *our* music, but I wanted it to be.

The evening wind toyed with my hair, tossing it across my lips as I skipped through the forest. I'd seen Colin at church and he told me the céilí would be in the clearing behind the Negro church after sundown, but we hadn't seen any clearings yet. Mam and Da followed behind the boys and me, arms locked together like they used to when I was a small child.

As we neared a clump of thick trees, I caught the faint murmur of a drum pounding with the flickering keen of a fiddle's quick strokes. "We've found it, Da!" I tore through the underbrush, the notes pulling me to the source. I stumbled out of the tree line into a circle of warm light. A hearty fire blazed in the center of the meadow, welcoming me into its fold.

"I see you've found us." Colin appeared at my side, the blaze illuminating his grinning face. "Ginger said to keep an eye out for you. She can't come tonight 'cause her ma needs her, but I'll show you around." I followed him through the trampled grass to a great log that stretched from one side of the fire to the other.

"You're singing tonight," Colin told me as we sat on the damp wood. "I'll play my whistle with you, if you'd like."

"Singing what?" I raised my voice over the blare of the fiddle. "I sing the old songs in the old style—without all this." I gestured to the musicians beyond the fire.

Colin chuckled and smoothed his cap, making the blond tips of his hair stick out over his ears. "You're like my mam—used to having things a certain way? Here we all play and sing

together." Colin glanced up as the band started a reel. He winked at me and my middle twisted. "We also dance together."

Colin pulled me off the log and swung me into the forming circle of dancers. I'd seen plenty of dances back home at Baileársa céilithe, but no one ever asked me to dance before. Séamus was the dancer in our family.

"I don't know how!" I shouted over the din.

"Never mind that—follow my lead." Colin grabbed my left hand and a woman I'd never seen before took my right as we began to skip in a circle, feet pounding with the beat of the reel. Colin took both my hands and spun me around so quick I nearly slipped in the grass. "Slow down, you tosser!"

"Too fast?" He smirked and hooked his arm through mine as the other dancers skipped arm-in-arm in a circle.

I raised my chin. "Not at all." Colin and I rejoined the circle, frolicking around the fire like the mischievous fae folk in Grandda's stories. I began to smile as my feet found the rhythm, moving with the bodhrán. I pulled Colin with me as the beat sped up, pushing the dancers to spin faster and kick their legs higher. I almost felt I was home again, dancing while the sun sank behind the cornfields.

The band finished the reel and everyone clapped and shouted for another, but Colin and I broke out of the circle and made our way back to the log. I sat down, panting and smiling. "Thanks for that."

"You're lying if you say you've never danced before."

My face warmed. "You think I'm good?"

"Quare bad, I'm certain," came Séamus' voice from behind. He plopped himself next to me on the log, forcing Colin to move down. "And who's this, Clare? You've already got yourself a lad?" Séamus whistled through his freckled lips. "Quick work baby sister."

"Get off, Séamus," I hissed, but Colin was already reaching out to shake my brother's hand.

"Colin. I live just down the lane."

"Aye. I've seen you lurking 'bout my sister." Séamus crossed his arms, refusing Colin's hand. "You'd better watch your back, lad."

I gave Séamus a quick shove that almost sent him toppling off the log. "Don't mind him," I told Colin. "He doesn't know his arse from his elbow."

Séamus nudged me in the side. "Look at them lasses." He pointed across the clearing to where a group of black girls was sitting, giggling behind their hands as they watched us. Séamus jumped off the log. "Wish me grand luck, Clare."

I grabbed his arm as he started toward the group of girls. "Stop chasing tarts!"

Séamus shrugged my hand off, eyes fixed ahead like he was bewitched. I scowled as Séamus sauntered off, the patch in the seat of his trousers showing just under his jacket. *What an eejit.*

"Ready, Clare?" Colin took a crudely made whistle from his pocket, fingers flitting across the holes in a silent tune. "The boys said we can have a go now."

My heart began to patter as I looked around the crowded field. I spotted Molly and Franklin drinking out of cups next to a tall stack of kegs that didn't look like they held water. What if they laughed at me for singing in the old way? I'd never worried about what the girls

back home thought, but here in Blue Hollow, I cared how Ginger, Molly, Franklin, and Colin saw me—especially Colin.

"I don't know what to sing," I told Colin as he polished the whistle with his sleeve. "I haven't sung since my grandda died," I added quietly. "He and my da taught me the old ways before I could walk."

Colin smiled as if he understood. "You know *My Lagan Love*?"

"Aye, Grandda used to sing it to me."

Colin nodded to the man playing the bodhrán and moved the whistle toward his lips. "I'll start so you'll know where the tune's set," he whispered. Colin put the whistle between his lips and let the lilting melody spill across the field. People stopped laughing and turned to listen to the boy with the whistle, the reedy cry piercing the heavy smoke and rising toward the heavens. I joined the whistle, my voice low and trembling as I sang the first verse.

Where Lagan streams sing lullabies

There blows a lily fair.

The twilight gleam is in her eye,

The night is on her hair.

I turned toward Colin as my voice grew stronger, adding notes of my own between the haunting tune. I was on Grandda's knee again, staring into the dancing flames of the turf fire as the wind howled through the deep Irish winter. As long as I could sing, I'd keep him alive through song. I was his story keeper. As Colin wove his notes with mine, I closed my eyes and turned my lips toward the sky so even the souls in the stars could hear our offering.

And like a lovesick lennan-shee

She hath my heart in thrall.

No life I own, no liberty,

For love is lord of all.

I opened my eyes as I started on the last line, finding Da across the field—a proud silhouette against the climbing flames, standing arm-in-arm with Mam like it was their wedding day. I thought I saw him smile as I opened my throat to reach the high notes and the gesture made me fierce glad I'd agreed to sing. I'd brought Da's smile back.

Colin and I slowed as we neared the last line, drawing out the phrase until our notes died together. All was still for a moment as if everyone was holding their breath, waiting, and then someone began to clap and the field erupted with whistles and roars calling for me to sing again.

Colin pocketed his whistle and leaned toward me. "I think they liked it."

I bobbed down in a curtsy like I'd seen Mrs. McGinley do in front of guests, and moved away from the band, making straight for Da. "Could you hear me?"

He reached out to me and I leaned into his side, pressing my face into his ribs. "Aye," came his muffled voice above me, warm and proud as the day I'd sung in front of all of Baileársa at Grandda's wake. "We heard you."

The blue June deepened into a vibrant July as the secret path between Irish Row and the revolutionary boxcar began to show signs of wear. Wednesday evenings were full of secrets, moonshine, and laughter. We hadn't taken action yet, but we had plans—glorious visions of

revenge, justice, and freedom. Even Franklin started to nod at me when I passed him on the street. Before the month was out, Graham and Séamus broke the news to Mam that they were enlisting in the mine, and after a long, cold silence, she nodded like she'd known all along. Mam and I were left alone during the day, tending to the garden and fixing up the house the best we could without Da and the boys. My arms turned pink and freckles sprouted on my nose as my palms grew familiar with a hammer's neck.

Mam saved up our scrip at the grocery and brought home a big copper drum kettle and a clothes wringer that cranked like a charm. After Mam made her first batch of soap out of ashes and tallow, her kettle never cooled. Mam's starched collars and prim hems brought customers from as far as the next county, eager to use the services of an Irish mammy who charged half the price of the other washerwomen. I tended our garden while Mam worked at the copper kettle from *fonyahaun* until the sun sank behind the mountains. Her hands turned red, then purple from the lye and heat, but I smiled as I watched her fierce arms turn the wringer crank. My mam had the strength of Éire in her whether she wanted it or not.

One night at a gang meeting, Ginger asked me to read aloud a newspaper clipping about coalminers in Pennsylvania. I stared at the page and then stuttered on the first word, trying to sound it out, but Colin quickly snatched the paper and read it himself to save my cheeks from the slow red burn that crept across my face. I'd been made their story keeper and I couldn't read a word. After that, Colin came over every other day and sat at our kitchen table, showing me how letters strung together made words and words had meaning. Sometimes the letters seemed to float around, mixing themselves up like mischievous sprites. I tried to catch them and bring them back to the page, but I couldn't always get the letters to stay put.

"My ma says books open the world to you," Colin would tell me when I wanted to give up. "That's why you've got to learn your letters good."

After several weeks of his patient teaching, I read my first sentence out of the book of Psalms. "And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water." It was short and didn't seem to mean anything, but it was mine.

After ten hours in the mine every day but Sunday, the boys and Da came back at nights with black faces and quiet mouths—only the creases around their eyes remained white. I'd never found anything that could shut Séamus up—Lord knows I'd tried—but Blue Hollow had done the impossible. Or so I thought, until a few weeks later when Séamus burst in the door, sweat dripping down his face in gray drops.

"There's to be a strike," Séamus gasped between breaths.

"Here?"

"Aye—Mother Jones kicked over the nest and there's naught to be done."

I'd heard Molly and Franklin talk about Mother Jones—she was a burly Irish grannie with a tight white bun and a severe tongue that ignited strikes wherever she went. Molly said even the company operators feared her power.

Mam swung the backdoor open with the force of a gale wind, her face the color of killarney berries. "Was there a quake? I thought I felt the ground quiver. Where's your da?"

Séamus shrugged. "Just a bit of a cave-in. Davis has us raising posts so quick, there's no time to check if they're sound. Old Dennis McNabb got his leg stuck under a rock, but the lads have already got him out. Don't worry for us, Mam." Séamus hung his arms around Mam's neck and gave her a sooty smack on the cheek.

"Paint Creek miners already went on strike, demanding fair wages," Séamus continued, eyes gleaming with excitement. "The UMWA is supporting them. Cabin Creek joined and we've just heard that Eskdale miners have thrown in their lot as well. We've got a fighting chance!"

I hung a single white stocking on the clothesline that night, even though it wasn't Wednesday, signaling the gang I had news. I waited until my brothers began to snore before climbing carefully down the ladder, sneaking through the kitchen, and out the front door. I scampered down the worn path by the chestnut tree, ducking under branches and jumping over fallen logs.

I knocked three quick taps on the boxcar door and Colin pulled the rusted door open with a groan. "Jesus, this door's a menace."

I threw Colin a secret smile as I climbed into the boxcar and put on my headlamp. The rest of the gang was already there with headlamps lit and faces grim.

"So you heard about the possible strike," Franklin said dryly. "That's hardly *news.*"

"You already know?" My pride deflated as my friends nodded.

"Almost everyone does," Ginger said. "Blue Hollow miners been threatening a strike for three years now."

"But Séamus says it's different this time," I insisted, eager to prove my story's worth. "Paint Creek miners already went on strike. All we've got to do is convince our das to join."

Franklin laughed, the sound bouncing off the boxcar's metal sides. "It ain't that easy. The coal company only pays in scrip, and most of us don't got enough cash to sit out a strike."

"What about the union?" Molly ventured. "They said they'd help Paint Creek miners."

"But we ain't Paint Creek," Ginger scoffed. "We's too south for the UMWA."

"We could post a letter?" I offered.

Colin shook his head. "We're on our own, Clare. If the UMWA could get to us, they would, but the companies are too strong down here."

"So what do we do?"

"We wait." Ginger's lips turned down like she'd tasted something sour. "Keep your ears to the ground. The miners are holding a meeting in the meadow to talk things over. After they make a decision, we can take action. Meeting over."

We snuffed our headlamps and climbed out of the boxcar one-by-one, dropping into the darkness.

"My ma said there's a new shipment of lye coming tomorrow," Ginger told me as we walked through the woods, dodging patches of moonlight that'd give us away.

"Aye, I'll tell Mam," I mumbled, still embarrassed my white stocking had proved to be stale news.

"You like cherries, don't you? Colin found a big ol' wild cherry tree near the colored church last year. He told me the fruit was just 'bout ripe now. We was gonna go pick some tomorrow, if you wanna come."

I kicked a thorny vine out of my way as we neared the tree line. Ginger always seemed to find a way to remind me she knew Colin better than me. I knew they'd been friends before I came, but we were all friends now. I shrugged the thought away. Colin liked me, I was certain. He always came on time for reading practice, and sometimes walked with me when I delivered Mam's starched collars to the rich ladies up on Huckleberry Avenue. We'd race home and he'd

always pretend to pull up short of breath to let me win. What other lad would let a girl best them?

Instead of turning left at the fork in the trail, Ginger kept on with me, heading toward Irish Row. “Did you need something?” I whispered as we neared the chestnut tree at the end of the lane.

“You coming cherry picking or not?”

“I don’t know,” I said crossly. “Mam might need me and she’s got—”

“Shh!” Ginger pushed me to the ground as a group of men passed by, carrying torches and drunkenly muttering as they marched toward town. They wore long white robes with red markings on the chest, and some carried wooden crosses like a priest at mass. Hoods covered their faces, but they had roughly cut holes for eyes.

“Be still,” Ginger mouthed as the men swerved toward us. A pair of boots with steel toes tramped by, close enough to reach out and touch if I wanted.

I waited until the torches turned into fireflies on the horizon before crawling out of our hiding spot. “Jesus, what was that?”

Ginger pushed herself off the ground and moved onto the road, watching the retreating lights. “It’s the Klan. We haven’t seen them in years.”

“What clan?” I asked, peering down the road.

Ginger shook her head and darted back into the forest. “I’ve got to get to African Row.”

I hesitated, looking back toward Irish Row. Another hour wouldn’t matter—I’d never be missed.

“Come on, Clare!” The urgency in Ginger’s voice jolted me and I plunged back into the forest, following Ginger’s bobbing braids as she wove through the trunks toward African Row.

Gray smoke danced in the air like taunting spirits, billowing up from flaming wooden crosses that dotted the gardens along African Row. I didn't see any robed men, but there were deep gashes in the ground next to the crosses, and white letters painted across the front door on my right. I tried to sound out the letters like Colin showed me. *D-E-A-T*...

"Mama!" Ginger shouted, taking off down the street.

"Wait, Ginger!" I sprinted after her.

Ginger turned, the flames casting a long shadow across her face, making her eyes hollow. "Go home, Clare."

"I can help, or I can…"

"No—you don't belong here. Go home." Ginger ran up the steps to her house and shut the door tightly behind her, leaving me standing alone next to the grove of burning crosses.

The wood blackened and turned to ash as I struggled to read the dripping white words on Ginger's house. "D-E-A-T-H T-O T-H-E N-E-G-R-O," I spelled aloud. My stomach dropped into my toes as I finished the sentence. I almost wished Colin hadn't taught me so well.

Ginger's mam greeted me as I opened the shop's door, her smile as kind and broad as the day I met her, no trace of the terror of last night. She sat behind the counter, fanning her flushed face with a newspaper. "Ginger ain't here, child. I sent her out on a delivery."

I let out a breath, almost relieved I didn't have to face Ginger. "I'm here for a packet of needles and a spool of white thread." I ran my fingers along the counter top, digging my fingernails into the notches in the wood.

"Just a minute, honey." Mrs. Simmons knelt behind the counter, sorting through the thread. "Only white?"

"Aye—yes." I twisted my hands in my skirt as Mrs. Simmons wrapped the thread and needles in brown paper.

"I'll put it on your tab." Mrs. Simmons took a pencil from behind her ear and licked the tip. "Your mama need anything else? Tell her thank you for that pie she brought the other day—shoo, yo' mama can cook."

"Aye." I licked my lips and glanced around the shop, trying to keep from looking Mrs. Simmons in the eye. "Perhaps a bit of flour or a packet of pins?" I mumbled at the floor.

"What's that, honey?"

Guilt bubbled up into my chest. "I'm sorry," I blurted, the words coming out louder than I meant them to.

Mrs. Simmons looked up, eyes widening at my sudden outburst. "Clare?"

My lips began to tremble as Mrs. Simmons stared at me with her warm brown eyes. "I saw the burning crosses. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to help, but Ginger told me to leave." Tears splashed down my cheeks.

"Oh, honey." Mrs. Simmons came around the corner and pulled me into a hug. "It's all right. The crosses are gone now and there's only a smidge of burned earth." She stroked my back like Mam used to when I was sick.

"But the words on the houses…" I didn't know what I would've done if someone had written that on my wall.

Mrs. Simmons hummed, her ribcage resonating against my cheek. “People do terrible things out of fear. They ain’t never lived in a world where whites and blacks can get along and they don’t know if they’d like it.”

“But didn’t you fight a war to free blacks? Franklin said Mr. Lincoln was his hero because he ‘set God’s people free.’”

Mrs. Simmons chuckled and smoothed her hand over my hair. “Oh honey, that war be about everything but slavery. Free the colored, put hatred in their hearts, and give ‘em a cause to fight for. Now how’s that gonna fix the world?” Ginger’s mam smiled down at me, her skin glowing like sun on brown sugar. “But honey, slavery don’t start with chains—it starts with your *mind.*” She tapped a soft finger against my temple. “You remember that.”

I took the paper package and tucked it into my apron pocket as I jumped down the wooden steps. It felt good to tell one of my secrets. Ginger’s mam, with her cool fingers and warm hugs, had almost made it all right. Before coming to Blue Hollow, I had no secrets of my own, but now I had so many I could barely keep them straight.

I was about to step into the street when a car full of men sped by, dust spinning in their wake. They wore bowler hats and gray coats with bronze stars on the breast, and each carried a rifle, tips pointed skyward as if they were ready to shoot even at God. Four trucks followed behind, carrying dozens more gray, armed men toward Blue Hollow Mine.

Ginger appeared at my side as I watched the gray mass of men swerve down the ribbon of road. “Guards.” She spat in the dirt. “Sloane has gone and hired mine guards. It was probably Davis’ idea. He’s the one who really runs that hellhole—the Klan devil,” Ginger whispered under her breath.

I'd heard Da and the boys talk about Foreman Davis before—how he tightened wages, extended hours, and pushed men until they collapsed—but I'd never seen him myself until last night. The memory of his steel-toed boots tramping past us still made my chest tighten.

Ginger looked down the road and then leaned toward me. "We've got to act," she hissed. "The miners are divided—they didn't decide nothin' at that meeting last night. The gang's got to stand together. Be ready to act." Ginger trotted up the stairs to the grocery like nothing had happened, but my heart pattered wildly.

I turned toward Irish Row, too eager to hold back my grin. We were going to act.

The Tower

It was five days before Colin hung a rag out his window. I'd noticed it when I ran down the lane to walk Da and the boys home from the mine. The new guards enforced ten full hours of labor, even though the men were only paid for eight. Graham and Séamus were arguing about the possibility of war between the miners and the company operators when a fluttering cloth caught my eye. Colin's window was dark and the sign was the smallest bit of fabric—just long enough to have a tail—but the sight made me smile. The gang would meet tonight.

Franklin leaned forward and spread a scrap of newsprint out on the floor. "This is the west entrance to the mine." He took a splintered pencil and drew a rough square. "This—" He drew an X right next to the square, "is where the watchtower is. The Baldwin-Felts men made my father haul the last load of lumber up there this morning. He says the tower'll be done tomorrow."

I peered at Franklin's drawing. "What do they want a tower for?"

My friends turned to me, lamps glaring in the darkness of the boxcar. "A tower is like an overseer," Ginger hissed.

Franklin crossed his arms as he stared at his sketch. "Jivvy Cove Mine built a watchtower last year to keep miners from *unionizing* during breaks—some boys got shot up tryin' to fight back, but the tower done been built. That ain't gonna happen to us." Franklin looked up, nearly blinding me with his lantern. "Have you ever hated anyone, Green Girl?"

I frowned at the name. Did Franklin really have to remind me that I still wasn't quite one of them? Molly smiled at me sympathetically, but didn't say anything.

Franklin snorted at my silence. "Well?"

There was a boy in Baileársa who knocked me down and stole my eggs once and I thought I hated him, but Graham told me the boy wasn't worth hating. He was hungry and so were we—at least we had chickens. Many people had less. Graham said the only people worth hating were the Arkwrights. The English had taken our lands, our culture, and our people—they deserved it.

"Aye," I said at last.

Franklin turned back to his drawing. "Good. So you'll help us blow up the tower. Got any dynamite, Colin?"

Colin shook his head. "Not since the mine guards got here. They check the miners' pockets."

Explosives? "I can get you some," I said quickly, eager to prove my worth. "There's a box in the woods—my brothers and I found it."

Franklin nodded. "Meet us at the west mine entrance."

"I'll go with her," Colin said.

Ginger pulled off her headlamp and blew out the flame. "Let's go."

I took Colin's hand and pulled him down the lane behind our houses. The moon hid behind a cloud, covering us in shadows. "In here," I whispered when we got to the tree line. I waded through the underbrush at the edge of the woods. "There was a massive tree with moss all over it—the gray sort," I told Colin as we picked our way through the forest, dodging vines and jumping over logs.

"That's where the sticks are?"

I nodded. "How'd you learn to use explosives?"

"My da. He's a blaster. I used to help him, but then I had to stop."

Colin used to work in the mines? Franklin wasn't a miner because his left arm hadn't formed properly as a baby—Molly told me that after church one day. That's why Franklin always hunched when he walked. No one had said anything about Colin, but he was the only fourteen-year-old boy I knew who didn't go into the pit every day. "What happened?" I asked.

"Is that it?" Colin pointed to a tree directly in front of us. It towered over the other trees, reminding me of King Saul in the Holy Book.

"Aye." I dug at the base of the trunk, scattering wormy leaves as my fingers brushed the top of the box.

Colin knelt next to me as I pried the lid off. He let out a quiet whistle when he saw the pistols. "Those've got to be—"

"Fifty years old," I finished proudly. "They're from the war." I moved the pistols aside and pulled out the sack of dynamite. "Will this work?"

Colin opened the burlap mouth and took out a stick. "These are pretty old," he said at last.

"Think they'll still work?"

Colin stood and reached out to help me up. "We'll soon find out."

I stared up at the unfinished tower, watching Colin wrap a brace of sticks around one of the tower's legs. He moved slowly and carefully, pockets bulging with the ancient explosives. Colin looked small and frail from down here, as if the wind could carry him off at any moment.

Molly ran up to me, panting as Colin climbed above us. "I checked the entrance. No guards yet. Ginger and Franklin are keeping watch on the road."

"Think he's about done?" I asked.

"Stop fidgeting, Clare. Colin's fine. We've done this sort of stuff before."

"You've blown something up?"

Molly shrugged. "Not exactly, but we've egged Davis' house and cut holes in his tires, and that was when he had a pol-ice man stationed at his house. We're practically professionals."

Molly might've considered herself a professional, but I certainly didn't. Thieving a crust of bread was one thing, but blowing up a building was an entirely different matter. My heart thumped along like a rabbit chased by a fox as Colin fastened the last stick.

Colin dropped to the ground, landing hard on his feet. He stumbled toward us, urgently whispering, but I couldn't make out his words. Molly and I ran to the base of the tower, tripping over piles of discarded shale.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Guards—coming from the north," Colin gasped. "I have to set the fuse."

"Do it!" Molly urged.

"I need at least a minute, but the fuse isn't long enough. I won't be able to get away before it blows."

"What can we do?" I asked quickly.

Colin's gaze strayed behind us. "I need something that'll burn, but not too fast. Like string, or cloth—hell, even dry grass."

I grabbed the hem of my skirt and ripped the thin fabric until I had two long strips. "Here." I handed the fabric to Colin. "It'll burn."

Molly tore off her skirt and handed it to Colin. "Might as well burn mine too."

Colin began to twist strips from the two skirts together, fingers quick, but steady. “Get to the forest. You’ll want cover when this blows.”

I took Molly’s arm and ran to the edge of the woods, crouching in the tall grass.

“Where’re Ginger and Franklin?” Molly whispered loudly in my ear.

“I don’t know,” I said tightly. Colin moved away from the tower, still twisting the fabric together.

“But they should be here by now.”

“I said I don’t know.” Colin struck a match against the bottom of his shoe and held it to the fabric until the spark caught. He stood there, watching the flame lick greedily down the twists of cloth. Why wasn’t he moving?

“Run,” I whispered. Colin didn’t move. The fire was getting closer to the tower. “Run!” I shouted.

Molly slapped her small hand over my mouth. “Shut up, Clare! They’ll hear.”

Colin turned and sprinted toward us, his feet barely touching the ground, but the flame was faster. Crimson clouds bloomed into the still night as the spark found the first cluster of dynamite. A wave of heat rushed over my face as timbers exploded, raining splinters and debris across the field. Colin crawled toward me, keeping his head low. I leapt over the bank of grass, seized Colin’s arm, and pulled him into the tree line as the sky erupted in flames.

Black smoke rose above the tower in a relentless, climbing column as sparks took hold of the dry wood and swelled in the breeze. The sight reminded me of the ashy crosses along African Row, but instead of fear, this fire made my chest warm with pride. There was a righteous beauty in the flames—the way they reached for heaven, flickering red, yellow, and blue—always

hungry, never satisfied. The blaze seemed brighter than the sun, lighting the clouds like a prayer candle.

"You've done it, Colin!" I shouted. "The tower's falling."

Molly jumped up and down, whooping as burning lumber crashed to the ground in a shower of embers. I glanced away from the steeple of flames as Colin began to cough, his shoulders heaving with the effort. "Colin?" I put my hand on his back.

"Can't…breathe…," he gasped, doubling over.

Molly grabbed Colin's arm and motioned for me to take the other. "It's the smoke—we've got to get him away."

Ginger and Franklin ran up as Molly and I made it to the dirt path that led from the mine to Blue Hollow. "His lungs," Molly said softly.

Ginger took Molly's place and pulled Colin's arm over her shoulders. "We'll take him back," she told Molly. "Get out of here. The place is crawling with guards."

"Think he'll be all right?" I asked at last. Ginger hadn't said a word to me since we made it to the other side of town. Though Colin had stopped coughing, his breaths were short and shallow as if his lungs were full of sawdust instead of air.

"He'll be fine," Ginger whispered. "It's happened before."

"When?"

"He used to work in the mines—first as a breaker, and then a door boy—but after three years, his lungs couldn't hold up so his mama made him quit."

"Three years?"

"Yep, started when he was nine."

I looked down at Colin's blond head. Some of the older men in Blue Hollow hacked and wheezed like Colin. They sat on the back row in church so they could leave if they had a fit. Some of them were missing fingers, arms, or feet from where the mountains they loved had crushed them.

I hoisted Colin up as he began to slip. The old miners didn't see mining as the curse that'd blackened their lungs and taken their limbs, but as a source of pride. They'd brag about how their das and granddas and great-great granddas were all miners and how they'd carried on the family trade.

"If it were good enough for Pa, it be good enough for me," one man had said, tongue hissing between his four remaining teeth.

Ginger and I helped Colin up the steps to his house and set him down on the porch. "I'll get him some water." Ginger grabbed the bucket off the top step and sprinted to the water pump.

I propped Colin against the side of the house. His eyes were closed and his skin a pasty white, but he was still breathing. "Can you hear me?" I whispered.

Colin's head moved—just barely. "You'll be just grand tomorrow, you will," I told him, pushing back the lock of hair that hung over his forehead. "I wish you could've seen the tower come down. It was so beautiful—like a moving picture."

Tonight, we'd staked our own burning cross, and I knew the smoke would last much longer than the scorch marks on African Row.

"Someone blew up the tower—clear off the ground!"

I tried to hide my grin as Mam and I passed a group of men huddled outside the white church, whispering about last night's mysterious fire.

"What do you think about the tower burning?" I asked Mam, keeping my tone light as if I didn't know a thing. Colin hadn't come to mass this morning, but I saw his mam and she said he'd be grand before long. I'd sighed in relief, even though Ginger had told me as much. Colin wasn't a lad to give up without a struggle.

"Reckless gurriers, they be," Mam hissed under her breath. She gathered her skirt to step over a mound of horse turds. "Probably didn't even stop to think 'bout the consequences."

I smoothed my sticky palms down the front of my apron. That was true—we hadn't. It'd just seemed so *right*, I hadn't even thought about what might happen after. "But what if they were trying to help?"

Mam grunted. "Well, they certainly picked a foolish way. If anything, they made it worse. There'll be ructions." She looked at me, gaze falling to my skirt. "Why didn't you wear your good dress, child? It's the Lord's Day!"

"I—I lost it."

"Lost it? You've only got one other, you fool-headed child." Mam opened her mouth to say more, but Da came up between us and kissed her on the cheek. "Don't interfere, Colm."

"Trouble with my lasses?" Da gave me a knowing wink.

I moved away from Mam's sharp gaze and linked my arm with Da's. "I've been thinking. There's a céilí next week and Colin's da plays the bodhrán in the band—not as fair as you 'course—but I want to ask Colin if his da might lend you the drum? Then you and I can play and sing together like old times."

Da smiled down at me, the skin wrinkling around his eyes. "Wouldn't hurt to ask, I suppose," he replied. I grinned back, realizing I'd missed his sure smile. Every day Da and the

boys left before dawn and came home far past sundown. Blue Hollow had changed me into a tower-burning revolutionary and Da didn't even know.

A man clapped Da on the shoulder. "Davis asked me to gather the miners. Meet at the east building in five minutes."

Da sighed and unhooked his arm from mine. "All right, John."

"I want to come too, Da," I said stubbornly.

Da chuckled gently. "You're not a miner, love."

"But you are. I want to hear what Mr. Davis has to say."

Da's eyebrows rose in surprise at my sudden interest. "All right. Tell your mam you're coming."

I sat in the dirt next to Graham behind the crowd of miners. I flipped up the hem of my skirt to fan my face from the smothering heat. "Jesus, I wish Davis'd hurry up," I told Graham.

"Whatever he says'll be quare bad. After last night, the Baldwin-Felts men haven't stopped patrolling—I even saw a few come down Irish Row. They mean to catch the lads who started the blaze."

"They won't," I said hastily.

"No?" Graham looked at me sharply as if he realized my secret. He lowered his voice and turned his gaze back toward the mine. "If you know something, keep it close, Clare."

Right then, I wanted to tell Graham—let someone else carry the burden of my secret. But what would I say? *Brother, I've become an arsonist—but the good sort.* Before I had a chance to speak, a man walked out of the building, surrounded by a cluster of bowler hats. He was soon

hidden behind the crowd of miners, but I could hear his voice—calm, but also hard like the slate Graham and Séamus broke off the coal Da chipped out of the mountain.

"That's Davis," Graham told me softly.

"Good afternoon, men. I wanted to handle this situation reasonably and peacefully, but am forced to take action after last night's attack."

The crowd was completely silent, waiting for Davis' judgment on a crime I'd helped commit. The pride I'd felt last night dissolved.

"As many of you know, I am acting as head supervisor of the BHMC until Mr. Sloane's return in September." He paused. "I will not tolerate any sort of disobedience—civil or otherwise. My informants are compiling a list of known union sympathizers. If you fear your name is on the list, report any information you have on union gatherings and your name will be erased. I will reward as surely as I punish." Davis dismissed the miners without another word. He didn't need to say more—the threat was clear.

"He's trying to turn us against each other," Graham said tightly.

"But he won't, right?"

Graham rubbed his hand over his chin. "He might." A crease furrowed between his eyes. "I'd like to see that list," he said softly.

My breath caught in my chest. "You suppose your name's on it?"

"I don't know, Clare." Graham shook his head and forced a smile in my direction. "Don't worry."

But I did worry. I couldn't let my brother be blacklisted on my account. Something had to be done, and quick. As soon as we got back from town, I took off my shoes and hung a single stocking on our clothesline.

I adjusted my headlamp as Franklin sketched the layout of Mr. Davis' office on a scrap of paper. "We can get in through the window here. The lock's been broke for years." Franklin tapped his pencil on his knee as he turned to Ginger. "You and I can hoist Clare and Molly up and they can search for the list."

"Are you certain this'll work?" I asked. "I only thieved small things like bread and sweets back in Ireland."

Ginger sighed impatiently. "Hell, Clare. Do you want to save your brothers or not? I'm betting Frank and Molly's fathers are on the list too. We all agreed the only way to get rid of it is to steal it ourselves."

Molly leaned over, squinting at Franklin's drawing. "I went to the saloon after church today to deliver some of my daddy's shine, and there were some of those bowler hat detectives there, drinkin' at a table in the corner. I heard them say something about delivering a list tonight at sundown. If we're gonna do it, we've got to do it now."

"I think we should talk to Colin," I said hesitantly. "We always say we make decisions as a group."

Franklin shook his head. "Colin's always had bad lungs. He don't get a say tonight 'cause he ain't here. Are you turning yellow, or what?"

"I'm not afraid," I said shortly. "I just don't want anyone else to get hurt."

Ginger nodded. "We've got to act quick before Davis gets back. I saw his car leave toward Charleston an hour ago."

Molly stood, scattering hay. "I'm in." She turned to me, waiting for my response.

I'd wanted to steal the list, but now that we were about to do it, I felt something cold and hard in my gut, warning me.

Ginger rolled the door open and looked back at me. "Coming?"

I sat on the edge of the boxcar, twisting a piece of straw between my fingers. "I don't think—" A loud *crash* cut off my words, echoing through the darkness and disrupting the still woods.

"What was that?" Franklin whispered.

"Run!" Molly leapt out the opening and thudded onto the ground. She cried out as she tried to stand. "My foot's broke," she gasped, crawling away from the boxcar.

Guards materialized between tree trunks, sprinting toward us carrying rifles and lanterns. Franklin scooped Molly up and took off deeper into the forest. I stood in the boxcar, watching in a daze as the lights closed in.

Ginger grabbed my hand and yanked me forward, towing me along behind her. "Come on, Clare!" Ginger urged as she sped through the bracken. She let go of my hand and disappeared through a small opening in the undergrowth that bordered the tree line, her black skin and hair blending with the dark trunks.

I tried to memorize the spot, pushing my legs faster as I leapt over a fallen log. *Almost*... My fingers brushed against bark as a guard grabbed me from behind and threw me down. My head cracked against the ground, nearly knocking me senseless. The guard's lantern swung in drunken arcs, blinding me as I struggled to sit up.

"Hold still!" the guard commanded. His fingers dug into my arm as he pulled me up and pushed me toward Irish Row, but I could only think about making it to the tree line. I sunk my teeth into the tender skin under the man's wrist. He cursed and dropped his lantern, the light

shattering against a stump. “You little bitch.” The guard backhanded me across the face and I slumped down next to the shards of glass, my face tingling.

“Take her to the foreman,” someone said. “He’ll want to question her.”

I stared at the dirt between my toes as Mr. Davis silently watched me from behind his desk. Two of the hired guards stood on either side of me, holding me as if I were Burke and Hare. The one I bit cradled his wrist, glaring at me warily. “So after we caught her, we brought her to you, sir,” the guard finished.

“You can leave,” Mr. Davis said quietly. The guards clicked their heels together and filed out of the room, shutting the door tightly behind them. Mr. Davis clasped his hands and leaned forward, peering at me under heavy brows. “Do you know who planned the attack last night?” He waited for me to answer. I crossed my arms and smeared some of the mud on my foot onto the plush rug under my chair.

“The guards tell me there were at least five of you in the boxcar.”

I shrugged.

Mr. Davis sat back and sighed. “I am not going to hurt you, Clare. I simply need information.”

I looked up as he said my name. He knew who I was?

Mr. Davis’ lips twitched at my surprise. “I make it my business to know everyone in Blue Hollow. Your father is Colm and your brothers are Séamus and Graham. They are good workers—you must be proud.”

“I am,” I said quickly.

Mr. Davis nodded. “But would they be proud of you for undermining their jobs?” His voice was so calm and gentle, as if he’d talked with twelve-year-old girls before and knew just what to say.

“Do you understand?” he asked me.

“Aye.” I could only whisper.

Mr. Davis opened his desk drawer and took out a gold pen and a crisp sheet of paper. “Either tell me the names of the others, or I will have to terminate your father and brothers’ positions at the BHMC.” Mr. Davis uncapped the pen and let it hover over the paper, ready to spill ink.

My throat squeezed shut. I tried to swallow, but my spit wouldn’t go down. If Da and the boys couldn’t mine, we’d be thrown out of Blue Hollow. Everything we’d worked for would vanish—the house Mam and I fixed up, the garden I’d coaxed to life, the washing business Mam built, the coal Da and the boys broke their backs for, carving it out of the mountain ton-by-ton. The weight of Blue Hollow crashed down on me and I slumped in my chair, unable to sit up.

Mr. Davis’ dark eyes seemed almost kind as he watched me. “How about this: I’ll list off names and you nod when I get one right.”

“No.” The word sounded weak even to me.

“You are not like the others, Clare. I want to help you pay for your mistakes so your family can continue to work in Blue Hollow. Is that what you want?”

I nodded slowly.

“Good. We understand each other.” Mr. Davis looked down at his paper. “Blair Finnegan? Jake Henderson? Ginger Simmons?”

Mr. Davis' eyes met mine and he nodded as he wrote *Ginger* in big, flowery script across the top of his paper. How did he know? I must've blinked, or nodded, but I didn't remember moving at all.

"Thank you, Clare. Only three more names now."

"Two. There were only four of us." I couldn't save Ginger now, but I'd save the rest of the gang if I could, even if it meant turning in innocents.

"The guards say they saw five." Mr. Davis tapped the pen on his desk.

"Well, they be mistook," I said stubbornly, staring the foreman straight in the eye with the nerve of a badger.

Mr. Davis sat back, seeming surprised at my resolve. "Very well. I would like the last two names."

Mr. Davis kept me locked in his office until he was satisfied he'd written down all the names, and then he sent me home, warning me to speak to no one. I kept a stiff lip until the guards released me next to the white church. Tears brewed in my eyes, blurring my vision as I loped recklessly into the night, sprinting away from the paper that recorded my shame.

I woke up the next morning with a fierce headache and an eye more purple than black.

"Jesus! What happened to you?" Mam exclaimed as I walked into the kitchen.

"Fell off the ladder," I said quickly. Mam laid her warm fingertips against the tight skin around my eye and I winced.

"I won't have a daughter of mine fighting, no," Mam said sternly.

"I wasn't fighting, Mam. I just fell." I crossly pushed her hand away. "Leave me be." I rushed out into the garden and began to pull the weeds that threatened my carefully groomed rows. Carrots started to come up with the weeds, their dirty orange bodies lying helplessly in the mud as I began to tear up everything green in sight.

"Clare, stop!" Mam rushed down the porch steps and pulled me back, cradling me against her as muddy tears ran down my cheeks. "What's wrong, lass?" Mam asked gently.

I sniffed, my breath coming in hiccupping gasps. "I'm a Judas, Mam. They'll never forgive me."

Mam patted my back until my tears stopped. I almost wished she'd taken me to the kitchen, sat me down, and refused to let me leave until I told her the truth. "But I did it for you," I'd say and Mam would shake her head, eyes cold and pitiless, but I'd catch a flicker of gratitude in her hard stare and know my family was worth the loathing.

But Mam didn't take me to the kitchen and make me confess. She dusted me off, cleaned my face, and told me to go find my friends—she'd take care of my chores for the day. I wandered aimlessly down Irish Row, taking no pleasure in the mud squishing between my toes, or the friendly morning glories that greeted me from Colin's fence posts. I swallowed hard and walked faster, wanting to put as much distance between Colin's house and me as I could.

"Hello there, lass," Colin's mam greeted me from their porch as I ran by. "Colin's not here. Try the grocery."

I waved and kept running, past the farrier shop, grocery, and the black church until I found myself in the céilí clearing. I sank down on the log where Colin had first asked me to dance and sobbed until my throat was raw.

The sun had begun to set by the time I started home and I was grateful for the shadows that hid me from Colin's house as I crept down Irish Row. I dragged myself up the steps to my house and opened the door.

"Clare, child, where have you been?" Mam pulled me inside. "Colin's been looking the world over for you." Mam put her arm around me and took me into the kitchen. Colin sat at our table, a thick slice of untouched bread in front of him. My feet froze when I saw him.

Colin caught me in a hug, pulling me close. "Mam said you came by this morning and she told you to go to the grocery, but you never got there." I looked down as Colin stared at my black eye. "Glad you're safe."

"Aye," I mumbled.

"Tell her why you came, lad," Mam said quietly. There was an ancient sadness in her tone I hadn't heard in a long while—not since Sligo Bay disappeared into the gray water of the Atlantic.

Colin dropped his arms. "Eviction notices were posted today, Clare. There was no real reason given—just orders to be out within a week."

"Your family…" I trailed off. I hadn't said a word to Davis about Colin, Molly, or Franklin. They should be safe.

Colin nodded slowly. "We're one of them. Ginger and Franklin's families got the notice too. They've been blacklisted. No other mines in the area will hire them."

I backed away from Colin. That couldn't be right—had Mr. Davis betrayed me? I turned to Mam. "Did we?" I asked, the words catching in my throat.

Mam sighed and shook her head. "Not yet."

Colin looked down at me, his gray eyes dark like gathering storm clouds. “We’ll be packed by Sunday.” He leaned in as if to give me another hug. “Don’t do anything stupid, Clare. Keep your family safe,” Colin whispered.

“Here, lad.” Mam loaded a loaf of bread and a basket of our vegetables into Colin’s arms. “Take them. For the journey.”

“Thank you, Mrs. O’Donnell.” Colin moved toward the door and I ran to open it for him.

“I’ll walk Colin back,” I called to Mam as I hurried down the front steps, rushing to catch up to Colin.

“How’re you? Ginger said you could hardly get out of bed yesterday.” I took the basket of vegetables off his arm so he’d only have to carry the bread.

Colin smiled ruefully. “I’m not as bad as all that.”

“I’m right sorry about your family. I don’t know how Davis found out your name.” I bit my lip to keep from telling Colin the rest.

Colin shrugged. “There are other mines. I reckon Blue Hollow was never meant to last.”

“Where will you go?”

“There’s a tent village ‘bout ten miles or so from here. Evicted miners from other local mines have gathered there until they can find work again.”

I remembered the blur of fabric and people as we passed a tent village on the train that’d brought us to West Virginia. Living in a field like a herd of cattle wasn’t a life for anyone. “I’m sure your da’ll find work soon.” I tried to sound assuring, but we both knew the truth.

Colin took the basket from me as we neared his house. “So long, Clare,” he said with a short laugh. He turned his head and coughed, the sound rough like stones scraping across Mam’s washboard.

"Will you come to the céilí on Sunday?" I asked when he caught his breath. "You and your da could play one last time."

Colin nodded slowly. "I'll ask. Thank your mam for these." He lifted the goods in his arms.

"Goodbye, Colin," I called as he disappeared inside. The miners would soon be returning from their thirteen-hour shifts—one of the rewards from the tower burning—but I stood rooted to my spot on the lane, trying to reason myself free of the guilt I felt as twilight fell around Irish Row. Grandda used to say something about how family was the cornerstone of life and everything else must be built on it. "Protect your own, and they'll protect ye," he'd say, puffing on his crude pipe. I'd protected my family—Grandda would be proud—but I felt as if I hadn't looked after my own, and for that, I was ashamed.

I made a vow in the middle of the muddy lane, swearing to our Holy Mother that I'd never betray another soul, no matter the cost. The people of Blue Hollow were my own.

Slán Abhaile

After the eviction notices were posted, it felt as if the whole town was holding its breath, waiting to see who'd make the first move. Miners went to work before the sun had time to rise, muttering under their breath as guards searched their pockets. More eviction notices were posted as neighbors reported neighbors, and friends turned against friends. I tried to work up my courage to visit Franklin before his family left, but every time I started down Irish Row, my feet turned to stone. Even though I hadn't given up Franklin's name, the mess of guilt in my stomach made me feel as though I had.

We went to mass on Sunday and Mam cribbed about the lack of Latin in America like she always did, while I dreamed about the céilí that'd take place that night. The thought of a field hollering usually brought smiles to the tired faces of Blue Hollow miners, but as I looked around at the congregation, all I saw were grim lips and heavy eyes. It was as if a somber gray cloud had descended on our town, bringing fear and mistrust.

"Latin's the language of the Lord," Mam said with terse lips.

"Aye, Mam." I sighed as we walked past the grocery. A quick movement caught my eye and I looked up. Ginger waved at me from the back alley, the motion sharp and urgent. "Uh, I've got to do something, Mam. I'll catch up."

Mam glanced back at me, but kept walking toward home. "Hurry, Clare."

I looked around to make sure there weren't any spying eyes, and then sprinted to the mouth of the alley. "Ginger, I have to tell—"

Ginger swung around and socked me hard in the shoulder, my skin throbbing from her bony knuckles.

"Jesus!"

"You're a damn traitor," she spat, eyes narrowed in anger. "I trusted you and you saved your own skin." She laughed harshly. "I hope you're pleased with yourself."

"I didn't tell," I said stubbornly, rubbing my shoulder. "I didn't give up the names. I mean…he knew yours already. But I didn't tell him the rest, I swear."

Tears smarted in Ginger's eyes as she glared at me, chin trembling. "Get out of here, Clare."

"I told you I didn't—"

"Go away!" Ginger shouted, coming toward me like she was going to punch me again.

I backed away, holding my arm. I couldn't blame her for hating me. "I'm sorry," I said softly as Ginger ran down the lane, kicking up her feet as if the dust would blow me away.

The August heat pressed down, smothering us as we trudged along the overgrown trails, making toward the céilí clearing. I led the way, keeping an eye out for Davis' spies, but the woods were still with only an occasional rustle as the squirrels above us jumped from branch to branch. The music had already started by the time we arrived in the meadow. Molly's da stood alone under a massive oak, tapping his toes against the dirt as he softly played a reel on his fiddle. He slowed until the tune died, letting his bow slide across the strings with barely enough weight to make a sound.

He nodded at the small crowd that'd gathered. "Thanks, folks. This field holler'll probably be the last for a while. Make the best of it." Molly's da walked past me and into the woods, heading back toward town. I looked around for the other musicians, but none had come. Everyone huddled in small groups, talking quietly amongst themselves as if they were afraid the mine guards were hiding in the trees.

I remembered the first Blue Hollow céilí with the roaring bonfire and the dancing and the line of musicians under the oak, blaring jigs and singing what Ginger called "jubilees." There I'd sung with Colin and his whistle, so eager to prove my worth and show that I mattered. The memory was faded and dim like an aged photograph—it all seemed so long ago.

Da put his hand on my shoulder. "How 'bout a song? "

I scanned the crowd for Colin, but didn't find him. "But you don't have a drum."

"Never needed one before." Da winked at me. "*The Rambler from Clare*? Just the two of us?"

"But Colin said…"

"Just sing with me, lass. For old time's sake?" There was a gentle sadness in his tone that made me look up.

I smiled and took Da's hand. "Aye. Like the old times."

Da closed his warm fingers over mine, his calloused palms scratching against my skin. "You start," Da told me. He patted his leg to give me a beat.

I added my toes to the rhythm and started on the verse.

I am a young fellow that's very well known,
I've wandered throughout Ireland, the County Tyrone.
For work I've been searching, through Cork and Kildare,
But there's never a job for the Rambler from Clare.

Da's strong voice joined on the second verse, singing below me as I reached the top notes. Mam watched us from the front of the gathering crowd. Darkness hid her face, but I knew

she was smiling—a real, broad smile like she used to give Da when I was small and Ireland was still her home.

I've been throughout Ireland with no brogues on my feet,

I was stranded in Sligo with nothing to eat.

So in desperation, I borrowed my fare

And said goodbye to Ireland from the Rambler from Clare.

People began to clap and whistle along as Da and I plunged into the third verse, singing over the cheers of the crowd.

On the boat leaving Ireland I went to a bar,

where a big red-faced agent stood at a jar.

"Guards!" The shout echoed through the meadow, breaking our rhythm. Mams grabbed their children and ran into the forest, scattering like a flock of sparrows. Da lifted me off the ground and raced after Mam, following her fleeing form into the shadowy woods.

"I can run, Da," I told him as he stumbled through the undergrowth. Da set me down and grabbed my hand in one motion. We chased after Mam as she gathered her skirts and swerved through the woods like a hunted fox, hurdling logs and plunging through thick groves of bushes.

Mam slowed as we neared the narrow footpath behind our house. "This should be far enough." She hunched over her knees, panting. "Jesus, we gave them a run." Mam chuckled as she turned toward us.

"Aye," Da agreed, "it's been nigh on twenty years since you've run from the law."

"Mam?" Séamus and Graham ran up behind us, their stunned expressions reflecting my own.

Da slung his arm over Mam's shoulders as we walked through our garden. "Your mam used to be a thief." He grinned as he said the words, as if telling a joke.

Graham grunted in disbelief. "You're codding us."

Mam glared at Da and pushed her damp hair back from her face. "I stole chickens when I was a lass—just a few. Father Dominic absolved me," she added quickly.

"Is that where our flock in Baileársa came from?" Séamus asked, almost laughing in his surprise.

Mam let out a short breath. "I suppose."

Da pulled open the backdoor for Mam and grinned at us. "Aye, that's how we met. I was busking on the street when a lass scurried by with a hen under each arm, running like the Devil himself was on her tail. When the magistrate asked me if I'd seen a chicken thief, I told him 'no, sir, not today I haven't.'"

Mam turned and whacked Da on the arm. "Stop making a spectacle of me, Colm."

Da followed Mam inside and landed a kiss on her temple. "That's when I knew I'd marry your mam."

I stayed in the garden as my family retreated into the house, laughing and carrying on like Davis' guards hadn't just chased us. They all looked so happy. Blue Hollow seemed determined to split itself apart, but Mam and Da held it together for me with an invisible spell of laughter and stories and music.

A lilting breeze came down the lane, cooling my cheeks as I climbed onto the back porch. As I reached for the knob, I noticed a slight movement above the doorframe. There was a piece of paper or cloth nailed to our house, fluttering like a moth in the wind. I stood up on my toes and caught the paper, ripping it off the nail. Was it an eviction? I unfolded the letter, squinting in the moonlight as I sounded out the words.

Sorry I didn't get to say goodbye. The guards are coming to take us all to the edge of town and see us off. Ginger says you're a traitor, but I don't believe her. Stay safe. I'll see you again someday.

Colin

I sat down hard on the top step of the porch. Colin was gone. He had taught me to read, unlocking the mystery of words and revealing the power behind ink. I could give him nothing in return—not even my complete honesty. I hadn't betrayed my friends, but to save them, I'd willingly betrayed others. The guilt gnawed at me, warming my cheeks and churning my stomach. I was almost glad I wouldn't see Colin again. I didn't deserve friends like him, Ginger, and Frank. I couldn't bear to see their faces as they were forced to leave the town they'd called home.

I gently smoothed Colin's note and tucked it into my apron pocket. "*Slán abhaile, mo chara*," I whispered to the silent garden.

The days after the broken céilí were silent. Birds stopped warbling and women didn't pause to gossip on the street. People kept their heads down as if they were afraid to look anyone

in the eye, lest they see a spark of rebellion and report them to Davis. A new lady with a tight gray bun from the next county took over the grocery, and charged us twice the scrip for soap, but Mam worked at her copper kettle, cleaning dresses and starching collars as if nothing had happened.

"Take these over the ridge to Mrs. Bloomsdale," she told me on Thursday, bundling a neat stack of dresses into my arms.

"By myself?" I usually walked with Ginger or Colin when I took Mam's deliveries all the way past Blue Hollow Mine to Huckleberry Avenue, but Colin was gone and, though I'd seen Ginger and Molly skulking around town together, I knew they wouldn't come with me. Ginger had poisoned Molly against me, and no matter what I said, they looked at me as if I were Davis himself. At least when we lived in Baileársa, I didn't know what it was like to have true friends. But here, I'd had friends who'd trusted me and even liked me, and I'd lost them all in one night.

Mam knelt down until we were eye-to-eye. "You're a brave lass, Clare. I need you to deliver the dresses so I can make a few extra pennies. These dark days won't last forever, no. When they end, we'll be ready."

I hoisted the dresses in my arms as I walked through town, trying to keep the fabric from sticking to my hot skin. No wonder Blue Hollow had gone mad—a hell like this would put anyone out of their minds. Mosquitos buzzed around my legs, taking little nips at my skin as Blue Hollow Mine came into view. Heaps of coal and slate turned the ground black around the mouth of the mine, poisoning the green things until they faded to gray. Several guards stood around the gaping entrance, rifles propped casually on their shoulders, eyeing me as I passed.

I stuck my tongue out as the bowler hats turned their backs on me, satisfied that a little

girl with a stack of dresses wasn't worth their attention. Ginger would've laughed and called the guards names that would shrivel my tongue if I tried.

I let out a slow breath as I made my way around the bend in the road. Ginger was my very first friend in America. She'd stuck up for me and given me a place in Blue Hollow—I couldn't let her leave without saying goodbye. If I finished Mam's deliveries in time, I could find Ginger and sit her down and make her listen. She didn't have to forgive me today, but I wanted her to know the truth. Perhaps someday she'd let me be her friend again. The thought made me smile for the first time since the tower burning.

I began to softly hum *The Rambler from Clare*, disrupting the stillness of the sweltering afternoon. The birds might've lost their voice, but I hadn't. I started at the same place where Da and I'd been interrupted at the céilí, throwing my head back and singing to the blazing sky.

Farewell to my comrades wherever they be

Likewise to my sweetheart, young Sally Magee

Our ship she is ready, and the wind it blows fair

He is gone, God be with him, the Rambler from Clare.

The ground seemed to quiver under my feet and I tripped, losing my grip on the dresses. I dove after them and snatched them out of the dust. Mam'd have my hide if I soiled the fabric. A distant roar bellowed behind me and I turned as smoke and ash plumed into the sky, soaring over the tops of the trees, reaching for heaven in heavy, curling fingers. *The mine.*

I tore down the road as the steam whistle blew, the sound sharp and urgent as if it too was afraid. I came around the corner and slid to a stop. Smoke thicker than air billowed out of the

mine entrance, hiding the sun as men screamed and shouted in the darkness. I sprinted into the cloud, cupping a hand over my mouth as the coal dust sank into my lungs.

"Da!" I shouted as men rushed past me, trying to escape the smoke. "Graham—Séamus!" One of the black bodies turned as I yelled.

"Clare?" The man grabbed me around the waist and pulled me away from the mine.

"Let go!" I screamed as his arms tightened around me. I kicked him in the shins and beat him with my fists, but he wouldn't release me.

"Stop it, Clare!" He grunted as I punched him in the stomach. "It's Graham."

Graham? I stopped hitting and looked up, peering at his unfamiliar face. The man's hair looked black and his face was covered in coal dust, but I knew his voice. I put my arms around Graham as he carried me to the edge of the road. "Where're Da and Séamus?" I whispered hoarsely.

"I don't know, Clare. I don't know." Graham's arms shook as he set me down. "I was with Séamus when it happened." Tears traced down his cheeks and dripped off his jaw in black drops. "Da is down there," he whispered tightly. He kissed my forehead with trembling charcoal lips. "Stay here." Graham rushed back into the melee of men as I watched helplessly from the road, unable to even form a prayer for my da and brothers.

Two figures came toward me out of the smoke, one limping badly and leaning hard on the other. "Séamus?"

"He'll be all right," Graham told me as he lowered Séamus to the ground.

"A rock fell on my leg." Séamus grimaced, his teeth bright against the coal dust as he tried to pull himself into a sitting position. "Near broke it."

I hugged him to me, kissing the top of his black head like Mam used to when we were babes. “You eejit.” I laughed, my hands shaking in relief. “Did you find Da?”

Graham looked back at the mine. “He’s not out yet.”

“I’m sure he will be soon,” I said quickly. “We can go home and Mam’ll spend her pennies and we’ll have meat for dinner.”

Séamus and Graham glanced at each other as if they knew something I did not. “Da was in the shaft, Clare—inside the mountain,” Graham said slowly. “I saw him go down, just minutes ago.”

“What do you mean?”

“The explosion…it came from below, Clare.”

“But he might’ve gotten out,” I said stubbornly.

“That section’s buried under two tons of rock,” Séamus said flatly. “It’ll take days to dig out.”

I shook my head and wiped my nose, forcing the tears back. “Then I’ll wait right here until they find him.”

Graham stared at me, eyes heavy and dark as if he knew the truth and was waiting for me to find it. “Fine,” he said at last. “I’m taking Séamus to town—the doctor’ll need to set his leg.”

“I’ll be here,” I called as my brothers hobbled down the road toward Blue Hollow. I sat in the dirt as the miners’ wives came running into the clearing. Some were wailing, but others had faces carved from granite, as if they’d faced terrors before and the cloud of soot could not frighten them.

The sun sank under a brilliant blanket of red, gold, and purple as an unnatural stillness settled over the valley. Even the crickets didn't venture to trill. I crossed my legs under me and leaned against a trunk of a friendly tree as I listened to the faint clinking sounds of metal against stone. Graham shifted next to me. "Want any water?"

I shook my head even though my tongue was swollen and my throat felt caked with coal dust. Men had been working to clear the mineshaft for five hours now, but they hadn't found any bodies. My da and three other men were still missing, concealed by slate, coal, and fallen timbers.

"Do you think he's singing?" My voice rasped and I coughed.

"What?"

"Da. He'd be singing. I know it." I kept my eyes on the lanterns surrounding the mine entrance, scanning for any movement. I wanted to be the first to see Da come out of the mountain.

After five days, my arms were scorched raw and thin layers of burned skin peeled off my nose. I scratched the itching bumps that covered my legs until they bled and crusted over. Graham stayed with me most of the time, only leaving to get water and food. He told me Séamus' leg was healing under Mam's watchful eye, but I couldn't make myself leave the mine. On the seventh day, Graham returned from town with the news I'd dreaded for a week.

"There's to be a wake, Clare, for Da and the other three miners. Davis called off the excavation. The men are exhausted and we've got to move on." He sighed, the sound long and low as if he were trying to convince himself instead of me.

"No." My voice was very quiet and small.

Graham put his arm around my shoulders as we stared at the entrance to the mine. “It’ll be tomorrow morning behind the white church. Da would want you there.”

No. Tears spilled out the corners of my eyes and found their way down my singed skin, stinging as they dripped off my chin.

I watched from behind the trunk of a large pecan tree as my family walked toward the church. Graham led the way, helping Séamus keep upright as he balanced on one leg. Mam held her head high and stared straight ahead, eyes dry. She wouldn’t shame Da by wailing or screaming—she was strong for all of us.

I darted out from behind the tree and closed my hand over Mam’s cold fingers. She pressed my hand and I felt a slight tremor in her fingers as we stepped into the cemetery behind the white church. There was a hole dug in the ground, but no bodies.

The priest prayed and I crossed myself out of habit as the three other widows began to weep. One of the women came forward carrying a tarnished watch with a cracked faced. Her hands trembled as she lowered the watch into the shallow grave. “For John,” she said softly as she turned away.

I looked up at Mam. “Do we have anything for Da?”

Mam’s face was rigid as she shook her head. If we were in Ireland, I’d have put in Da’s bodhrán or his playing cards, but here in Blue Hollow, we had nothing to give.

I walked toward the open grave, stopping when my toes reached the edge. “My da had a fine voice,” I said tightly. “He taught me to sing before I could talk. So I have something for him.” I glanced back at Mam. “For all of us.”

Mam's forehead rippled into a frown as she clenched her jaw, refusing to let tears spill. I might not be strong like her, but I could be brave in a different way.

I started singing softly, my voice cracking between notes.

Born and raised in a small Irish town

With a tune on his lips and never a frown.

Eager to mine and find his own way

He came to Baileársa one fine day

There he met a maiden fair

and made a home, though kitchen bare.

But the mountains called and beckoned him away

So he took his family and sailed from Sligo Bay.

He mined under the earth with rhythm in his hands

Always working to fill the coal tram.

His daughter she loved him and begged him to stay

But the work was not done and The Company wouldn't pay.

He left his sons and went down the shaft

But even he could not foresee the coming blast.

My Da, he knew there was no way out

So he sang 'til the end—of that there's no doubt.

I have nothing to give but one simple tune

that my Da taught me one fine June.

"Lass," he said as he took my hand,

"never sell your soul, no matter the demand."

So I'll march in the streets and sing to all who'll listen

Of my Da and his drum and the mine that killed him.

How his bravery urged me to stand and fight

Opposing those who do not do right.

I paused and took a breath as Mr. Davis walked toward our gathering, a frown creating a deep chasm between his eyes. I sang my last two lines slowly and as loud as my dry throat could manage.

If we band together, uniting hand-in-hand

The Company cannot overcome the workingman.

I stepped away from the grave and returned to Mam. Her cheeks were wet, but she was smiling fiercely. She wrapped her arm around me and pulled me close until I could smell the lye on her shirt. "He'd be right proud," Mam whispered.

A wavering, reedy note broke out from the huddle of widows as one of the women repeated my last two lines, singing the words with a trembling throat. The women around her joined in, their weak voices combining into one strong cry.

If we band together, uniting hand-in-hand

The Company cannot overcome the workingman.

They repeated the words over and over as they moved out of the cemetery and marched through town, crying and singing with righteous anger about the men who'd been taken from them. Mam and I followed, holding each other close as we sang up and down Blue Hollow's streets. Da's gift to me had been his songs and stories, and now, I'd finally given one back to him. But my song wasn't just for Da—it was for all of us. The women around me sang of their husbands, sons, and fathers, one tale representing us all. As I looked around at the miners' wives walking and singing beside us, I realized the ones we lost would never truly die because they lived on the lips of others.