Don-Angi

It was Easter Sunday, 27th March 1853, three days after his thirty-second birthday.

Two hours before dawn, the village behind him was dark and silent. Fighting his uncertainties, the tall, well-built man dropped nimbly down into his fishing boat at the tiny harbour of Blackwaterfoot on the Isle of Arran, located in the Firth of Clyde, twenty-five miles by sea from the north coast of Ireland.

He could almost hear their voices:

"To fish on the Sabbath! Shame! And on Easter Sunday! Shame! Shame and Damnation! Nothing good will come of this!"

Overhead the clouds were thick and black with the occasional low rumble of thunder signalling another storm brewing from the southwest and racing towards the North Channel, that part of the Irish Sea which separates the North of Ireland and the Mull of Kintyre.

During recent years, the fishing had been very poor. Don-Angi (Donald Angus) was the last of the men fishing regularly, still trying to make a living from the sea. The others were devoting their efforts to crofting and weaving part-time for Mr Charles Newton, the Laird's factor. Newton was from the mainland, brought to the island to exploit the local population by renting them foot-operated looms and paying them low piece-work rates for cloth woven to his complicated patterns and strict and demanding standards.

Hanging over the islanders was the fear that the Irish potato blight would reach across the water and take hold on Arran. It was no wonder so many families had given up and moved to Glasgow or emigrated to Canada.

Ruri, his aging border collie, stood on the stone pier above the boat, looking at his master accusingly, expecting to be sent home. The man gave a low whistle and the dog dropped down into the small boat, immediately taking up his position in the prow, standing on the spare sail, well clear of the fishing gear laid out neatly with just enough space for the fisherman to move around safely. The dog knew better than to steal from the buckets of small bait fish preserved in brine, caught by fishing from the rocks over the previous week.

Casting off, he raised his single sail, playing the mainsheet in his hand to catch the breeze. It was still almost inky black with just vague outlines of the familiar shoreline to guide him. Standing with the tiller protruding between his knees, he set off into the rising tide. He was heading for the channel between the Mull of Kintyre and the north coast of Ireland, to a favoured spot in the lee of Rathlin Island, a fishing haunt he had visited many times in the past, although not always with success.

Within minutes he was scudding through the waves, feeling the swell increasing as he left the shelter of the land, sensing the fish shoaling ahead of him, increasing his certainty that the fishing would be good.

Now that he was well clear of the Mull of Kintyre, with the bow of the *Lorna Ann* butting into an increasing swell from the edge of the North Atlantic, he began to sing softly to himself. The dog looked round and yipped. Due West of the tiny fishing craft, some three thousand miles away, was the east coast of Canada.

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Hand-lining with great success, his six catch creels were filling with fine big fish, mainly cod, haddock and pollack with other species in the mix. It had been a good thing to follow his instincts, he told himself. This was his first decent catch of the new season. His bounty would be welcomed by his small community. Atlantic gales had lashed their shores week after week. Unable to boat fish, he had been putting out baited creels (lobster pots) from the rocks, catching mainly non-edible crabs and starfish with only the occasional lobster or partan (edible crab) or rock codling, not enough to make it worthwhile to sail up to Brodick to sell.

Now that he had plenty fish for them, he knew they would gladly accept the bounty of his spring catch and, hopefully, say nothing directly to his face about the fact he had been fishing on Easter Sunday.

But he knew they would talk behind his back with that mixture of envy and unspoken pity which he had grown to resent, his cold simmering rage at his misfortune manifested by a silent, reclusive demeanour that the others had slowly come to accept and so unlike the old Don-Angi of old.

Aged twenty-four when disaster struck, Don-Angi was already a stalwart of their small community. Chrissie McIver his new wife had died in childbirth leaving him with an infant daughter to care for.

Eight years had passed but his grief was still raw.

Chrissie

Chrissie (Christine) had arrived in Blackwaterfoot with her father Malcolm McIver, a boat builder from Kilchoan on the west coast of the Ardnamurchan peninsula, many miles to the north. Recently widowed, Malcolm had sold up his business and had been sailing his newest boat the *Lorna Ann* to Girvan on the Ayrshire coast, planning to sell it and retire to live there with his widowed sister Marion. Malcolm's boats were well crafted and always sold for a good price. In this plan, he was hoping his daughter might find a position as a servant in one of the big houses in the area.

During their passage, the weather had been foul with high winds and heavy seas. After a long and arduous rounding of the Mull of Kintyre, father and daughter had taken shelter in Blackwaterfoot, exhausted, wet through and chilled by their ordeal. Malcolm had always had a weak chest. Within days he had contracted pneumonia and died, leaving his only child an orphan, aged eighteen. Sarah Campbell, a spinster who had once been the local schoolteacher, who was a distant cousin of Malcolm, had taken the girl to live with her at her croft on the edge of the tiny village.

Two years before this tragedy, Don-Angi's parents had given up their croft, sold up their possessions and moved to live in Glasgow where his father was working for a coal merchant, loading and weighing sacks in his yard where he was also the night watchman, guarding the precious stocks of coal. Unmarried, Don-Angi had moved in with his elderly Aunt Sarah.

Living under the same roof, Chrissie and Don-Angi had fallen in love.

Following an exchange of letters between Sarah Campbell and Marion Blacker in Girvan, Don-Angi and Chrissie had been married. A child was already on her way but thankfully her mother had not been 'showing' at the time of the Church blessing. When Chrissie died of childbirth fever days after the healthy infant had been delivered safely at full term, local tongues had wagged condemning her parents for 'improper relations' before their wedding night.

The child was christened Margaret (Peggy) and at first Don-Angi and Sarah struggled on. Sadly, within a month Sarah was also dead from a massive stroke, which folk said was induced by the pressure of caring for her grandniece.

However, it was soon clear that Don-Angi could not cope alone. His married sister Margaret Jean took charge, informally adopting her niece Peggy and adding the infant to her own family.

As a younger man Donald Angus Campbell had once been happy, cheerful, full of fun and mischief, always willing to laugh and make a quick riposte to his neighbours. Before his loss, Don-Angi was a man most people enjoyed just being with, a man brimming with natural good humour and contentment, always surrounded by laughing children from the village, a man who sat and patiently listened to the tales from the old men down at the harbour before cracking a quick joke to bring tears of laughter to their eyes, a man who was quick to see the needs of others, always willing to do his best to help, unasked, without making a fuss or expecting or needing praise or thanks, a natural leader and 'shepherd'.

Suffering from grief, loneliness and a strong sense of injustice, Don-Angi was much changed.

Now a widower, living a bachelor life, Don-Angi took over his aunt's lease under the new Laird, a man called Sir Murray Elphinstone McCready whose main enterprise was running a steel mill supplying shipbuilders and boilermakers in the Glasgow area. Because of the timing of this change of ownership of the South Arran Estate, Don-Angi's tenancy had happened by default, without a formal lease agreement being signed, an issue which faded from memory with the passage of time.

Long Lining

As Don-Angi hauled in his long line once again, he brought aboard another heavy catch. With his creels filling he could see he would have enough bycatch of smaller fish to offer to his neighbours, taking the best to Brodick for sale at the twice weekly mart to raise much-needed cash to help him pay his overdue rent and to buy the spares he needed to maintain his boat.

Working steadily without a break under an overcast and sunless sky, he had not realised that the best of the day had passed and the afternoon light was fading. He re-baited and re-launched his line, working steadily, balancing to counter the roll and plunge of the deck under his sea boots. When it was fully deployed, he tested it by hauling in a few fathoms of line. Feeling the weight of fish, he began the retrieval process immediately.

As the last of his line came inboard, he felt the wind rise another notch. The *Lorna Ann* shuddered as she thudded into a wall of water, her prow digging into the big Atlantic swell that had been with them for weeks now. A fine boat and strongly built for just this purpose, she shrugged off the wave and surged forwards again under the power of the rising wind to meet the next big roller.

Sitting on the gunwale to balance the boat, he bailed until the water level was ankle height. During his most recent retrieval, Don-Angi had become aware he was in danger, that he should be well on his way back to Blackwaterfoot harbour and safety, but his instinct told him fish were shoaling below him. After weeks of kicking his heels and moping around the harbour staring out at the white topped rollers smashing against the shore, how could he leave this long-awaited bounty?

"Ach, it's no' that bad Don-Angi, man," he cried out over the roar of the wind, "you've been oot in far worse. Just get on wi' it an' stop your maudlin, man."

Deciding to make one final pass, he steered again towards Rathlin Island.

Now out of brine bait, he cut up the smaller fish from his catch, re-baited his long line, hook by hook.

His long line comprised over two hundred precious hooks. He controlled the outrun by trapping the line under his boot, attaching a piece of fish then raising his foot to let the baited hook slip away and bring him the next hook from the tray for baiting.

Sensing the play of tide, wind and boat speed, he made constant small adjustments by setting and re-setting his mainsheet secured by a quick release hitch and adjustments to the tiller held on a loop line at an angle. The aim was to hold the boat's head slightly off the wind but with enough way on to make his re-casting possible. If he moved ahead too quickly, he risked tearing the line of hooks through his hands un-baited: too slowly would cause the *Lorna Ann* to drift backwards causing a muddle of lines and hooks inside the boat.

All this he did with the natural ease of a practiced and experienced fisherman, born of a lineage of fisherman-farmers who had lived and worked on the land around Blackwaterfoot for generations, men of his ilk who knew the ways of this most treacherous stretch of water between the Mull of Kintyre and Ireland.

As Don-Angi threw the last part of his long-line overboard he looked around to check on the sea and the weather. His stomach churned with dread. The light was fading fast now. Like all poor folk, he had no timepiece and used the angle of the Sun to guesstimate the time. Because of the heavy black clouds, it looked like night, so dark was the sky.

The first crack of thunder came a few minutes later and with it the wind rose. He knew he should 'cut and run' but apart from the hours invested in making his long line from the finest greased twine, carefully tying and testing every knot, he was desperate not to lose his expensive hooks.

Further rumbles were followed by flashes of lightning and almost immediate cracks of thunder. Within minutes his visibility had reduced to a few boat lengths, his world obliterated by a curtain of grey, sleety rain. Then, as if by a miracle, the downpour eased momentarily and he glimpsed the frightening rocky mainland coast on his Port side, the shoreline he had seen come and go from view during his previous passes sailing up into the lee of Rathlin Island.

In the swell, waves spilled over the gunwales of the boat, spraying the fisherman with icy cold water, now rising to slosh at knee depth. Every stitch of his clothing was soaked through to his skin. Inside his sea boots, his thick oiled wool stockings were sodden, his feet numb with cold.

The bareheaded fisherman was already in the first stages of hypothermia, a medical word he had never heard. To him he was "Jist fair drookit and cauld", a situation he was accustomed to as a West Coast fisherman dressed only in two layers of well-oiled woollen clothing and a thick cotton semmit (vest). Like other subsistence fishermen of his ilk, he was operating without the benefits of an expensive rubber jacket and over-trousers or

other forms of water-proof clothing worn by men sailing far offshore in trawlers or drifters.

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Wet through, chilled to the edge of collapse, his head dull and fuzzy, he was working more by instinct than conscious awareness. With his mind slowing as his body began to shut down, he had to stop hauling every few minutes to un-lash the tiller and bring the *Lorna Ann* back round head to wind to stop her being broached. The waves were now towering above him as the tiny craft took all the angry North Atlantic was throwing at her, pulling herself up out of each trough to face the shuddering twisting torture as she plunged down again into the next deep grey-green valley. Not for the first time, Don-Angi offered up a silent prayer of thanks to his deceased father-in-law for his boatbuilding skills.

Stubbornly, he continued retrieving, working steadily and methodically, removing each fish or fragment of untaken bait before coiling his line and hooks into the wide tray secured to the eyelets of the raised platform beside his knee. Buffeted by a heaving mass of water, it would take Don-Angi the best part of an hour to get his long line aboard and his catch and hooks stowed.

When he finished, it was fully dark. Ruri was snuggled down under the spare sail, his head peeking out, his eyes watching his master. Working as quickly as his chilled fingers and body would allow, Don-Angi secured all the loose items, covered his catch creels with oiled netting and lashed them to the rings fixed to the bottom of the boat for this purpose. Surplus fish were slithering around his ankles, always dangerous but doubly so in a wildly pitching boat in a rising gale. Bailing out again, he knew he should scoop them overboard but could not bring himself to do it.

Jeopardy

The great storm of Easter 1853 was not a time when a fishing craft in peril in the North Channel could expect anyone to come to its rescue. If by unlikely chance the *Lorna Ann* should meet another larger vessel, it too would also be battened down for survival and unable to help him. Had he been thinking logically, he would have used the last of the fading light to try to find a safe place to go ashore and seek help, perhaps find a shepherd's cottage our a lambing shed to wait out the storm.

While Don-Angi had been concentrating on fishing, the storm had slowly but steadily come round to the North. Relying on his inner reckoning but confused by his tired mind and exhausted body, Don-Angi believed he must be close to the Mull of Kintyre, certain he would soon be in safer waters. In this judgement he was wildly out: he was still in the lee of Rathlin Island, being driven ever closer to the jagged coastline of the Irish mainland, an area strewn with reefs and partially submerged rocks.

Like many inshore fishermen who spent long hours alone on the ocean, he talked to himself as a way of thinking things through:

'Now Don-Angi man, it is *panic* that's the real danger for ye here lad. Ye ken fine ye have a right strong sea boat under ye. If ye keep yer heid, ye'll last out this storm fine but only if ye can just keep her aff they rocks and reefs aboot the Mull. So keep nudging her jist aff the wind wi' a wee tack noo and then an' ye'll be right fine. If ye get it right' lad, we'll get intae the lee of Arran and hame safe and sound.'

Due to the ferocity of the wind and to prevent a capsize, Don-Angi was only able to steer the *Lorna-Ann* at a maximum of fifteen points off the wind. This factor alone meant a return passage to Blackwaterfoot was not feasible. Additionally, the water level inside the boat made her sluggish. If she shipped another big wave, she was in danger of sinking.

He made a slight adjustment to both tiller and sail and kept bailing with his free hand:

'Nae bother, eh lass?'

As if she understood, the *Lorna Ann* responded to his firm hand and lifted her bow to slice into the waves with renewed energy.

Spring Catch

By late afternoon the sun was over the horizon, the stars obliterated by dark clouds scudding low overhead with the slanting downpour turning from rain to sleet and back to rain, stinging his face and hands. With his mind fogged with tiredness, Don-Angi was unaware he was slowly drifting aft, in danger of being cast on to the rocky shoreline at any moment by a sudden wind shift.

With each passing hour, his inner temperature continued to decrease, suppressing the beginnings of a fever which had started to take hold deep in his chest. Sailing now by instinct, his mind drifted back to that fateful day eight years ago.

> *It had been a cold, breezy March day, a day he judged good for fishing. He gave his heavily pregnant wife a hug and set off. Two hours later, he had been caught by a sudden storm which he had ridden out stoically, driven eastwards almost to Girvan before it eased sufficiently for him to make headway back towards Arran, reaching harbour just ahead of nightfall.*
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> *At Blackwaterfoot he found his little community subdued by sadness. Christine Campbell had died soon after birthing their daughter, due to a heavy loss of blood.*
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> *Kneeling by her corpse, his world shattered into smithereens.*

Don-Angi had never recovered from the loss of his quiet young wife, the only girl he had ever loved.

In the years that followed several of the eligible girls in the area had flirted at him but after a while they had given him up as a lost cause.

Aged eight, Peggy seemed distant, as if he was her uncle, not her father.

His only solace was to be away alone on the seas in the *Lorna Ann* where he felt a deep satisfaction in the familiar routines of setting and retrieving his long line, enjoying the familiar motion of the boat beneath his feet and the cries of the flock of swooping gulls around him as he gutted his catch while sailing home.

Selkie

With the first lights of dawn, the skies cleared a little. Rather than abating, the storm was increasing. He scanned ahead into the darkness expecting to see the Mull of Kintyre. Then, from the corner of his eye to his left he saw the mournful face of a selkie, a seal, it's almost human face riding the waves a few yards away.

Was it real?

It disappeared then popped up further away.

Now, beyond the selkie, Don-Angi spotted a tiny sandy cove, a mere slash of white gold glistening below the dark rocky coast towering over it. Dragged high up on the steep beach was a small fishing boat like his own, tied down and covered with a tarp. Seeing this boat proved the cove was a place he could land safely.

A fierce gust caught him and he almost broached. He realised he was carrying too much sail but was unable to do anything about it in the rising wind.

The seal slipped away, below the waves.

Don-Angi recalled the fireside stories of selkies luring sailors to their doom but, as he edged closer to the little bay, he was reassured it was real. Inside his head a high, sweet voice was calling:

"Donald Angus Campbell, my own Angus, come to me, come to me. My own Angus, come to me."

It was Chrissie's voice! She was the only one who ever called him Angus or used his full name as his mother had done.

Chrissie was nearby!

He threw the rudder across, ducked under the sail as it swung round then crouched over the gunwale and headed for the sliver of white sand.

Elated, an odd surge of excitement took hold of him. His heart was racing. He no longer felt alone:

'I'm coming lassie! I'm coming for ye! I'm coming lassie, stay there, I'm coming,'

Distracted, Don-Angi did not read the sudden wind shift as he neared the shore. The heavy boom came swinging round. As he moved instinctively to dodge it his foot slipped on a fish and the boom cracked against his head, hurling him overboard into the icy sea. Like most fishermen he had never learned to swim. Only his sailor's instinct saved his life. Barely conscious but gripping the mainsheet and the tray of hooks, Don-Angi was dragged through the waves behind the *Lorna Ann* as she surged towards the shore.

Closer to the cliff face the wind lessened but nearer to the shore the waves were higher, lifting the *Lorna Ann* and hurling her forward against the jagged rocks which guarded the narrow inlet. With a sickening thud the small boat was pierced just above the waterline. Momentum carried the boat high onto the beach. The next wave cast its owner onto the shore where he lay unconscious, his faced buried in the damp sand just above the high waterline, one hand still gripping the mainsheet, the flesh of his other hand ripped to shreds by the hooks he had grasped and held onto despite the pain.

Fortunately, the tide had just turned and with each receding wave his sodden body was revealed, a damaged man beside his damaged boat.

It was Donald Angus Campbell's great good fortune that he had been cast ashore onto Sandy's Bay, the only safe landing spot on this rugged stretch of the northernmost coast of Ireland.

Fiona

The boat which Don-Angi had glimpsed on the beach was the *Margaret Mary*, an older boat built by the McIvers of Kilchoan to the same pattern and high standards which had served the fishermen well for generations on both sides of the North Channel and around the Firth of Clyde. This sturdy craft had been in storage for two years since its owner Sandy (Alexander) McKeen had died in the tuberculosis outbreak which had swept along this coast from Ballycastle, taking his wife Margaret and his teenage son Fergal, leaving behind his unmarried daughter Fiona to manage his croft and run his flock of sheep.

Tuberculosis and other deadly illnesses like it had been taking their toll on the weakened population since 1849 when the Irish Potato Blight had been at its worst. This ruinous mould had started in the south of Ireland near Cork, spreading gradually northwards to Belfast and beyond.

Sandy McKeen had considered fishing to be a male preserve; in his household, women were assigned the job of gutting and smoking his catches. Although Fiona had helped her father to keep the *Margaret Mary* in good order, she had only been allowed to join him on still summer nights fishing for mackerel.

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The McKeen cottage was sheltered from the worst of the storm, nestled low in a narrow glen about half a mile from the little beach where the man lay unconscious. Fiona had been trapped inside by the storm for nearly two days and still it raged, rising and falling in intensity, bringing long spells of sleety rain and hail which battered down against the roof and walls of her but and ben cottage. Her only forays outdoors had been to feed her hens and garner their eggs and to empty the latrine night bucket.

Molly started yipping then gave a sharp little bark and ran to stand by the door.

The young woman looked up from her crochet, a recent pastime which she had been taught by her nearest neighbour, a woman of Portuguese origin. Until five years earlier, Maria-Angela Palumbo had been the Housekeeper at *Mountblow*, the name also given to the surrounding estate where Fiona was a tenant. The new laird was seldom in residence, spending his time travelling to collect botanical species from the far-flung corners of the world.

'Whit is it ma lassie?' Fiona said quietly to the collie, holding out her hand, bidding her to come. 'Surely it cannae be Maria-Angela, she wid never be oot in weather like this, wid she?'

From her Scottish parents originally from Girvan sixty miles away, Fiona spoke with a similar lilt and dialect to those living around the Firth of Clyde.

'Aye, and right you are Molly, now the wind has drappit, it's time tae get oot. We've been cooped for far too lang.'

Once outside, Fiona heard another dog barking from the direction of Sandy's Bay. Molly was already moving, running flat out along the well-trodden path towards the little beach.

From the cliff top, Fiona saw the damaged boat but not the man who lay out of sight behind it. Thinking she was looking at the *Margaret Mary*, she cried out in panic:

'For the luv of God, no ma boat tae! Please God, no' ma boat!'

She broke into a run and arrived at the beach breathless, pleased to find the *Margaret Mary* was unharmed. However, there was another boat which looked just like it grounded on the beach. And there was another collie snapping at Molly reverting to a growling stand-off with her arrival.

What did it all mean?

Rounding the damaged boat, she saw the outline of the man lying face down with the glinting trail of long-line hooks wrapped around his body, his right hand wound inside a coil of the mainsheet. From his netted creels stuffed high, she saw he had enjoyed good fishing before his accident.

'Now, sir, surely ye've no' been oot fishin' in this storm?'

Seeing the angry bruise on his head and neck, she said:

'Dear God in Heaven, he's no deed, is he?'

Kneeling beside him, she checked for a pulse. At her touch he groaned.

She used her poshest voice, the one her father had used when talking to strangers:

'Come, sir, we must get you up to the house and get you warmed. You are wet through and chilled to the bone.'

'Chrissie, is that you, ma lassie?'

'No, sir, I am Fiona McKeen, now up with you. UP!'

She hauled him upright and he staggered forwards. She grabbed at his shoulders to prevent him falling. It was only then she saw the blood encrusted sand on his left hand. Using crochet scissors from her apron pocket, she cut him free of the fishing line, leaving the hooks snagged on his clothing to be removed later.

'Come, sir, put your arm round my shoulder, lean on me.'

'Chrissie, you came back for me, my lassie. After all these long years.'

Craving

What would have taken less than ten minutes if climbing the steep path by herself, took more than an hour. The man had fallen many times, taking her down with him.

But Fiona McKeen was tall, broad and strong, well-used to hard work.

The stranger then had to be hauled upright and steadied. Then, with his arm draped around her neck, they set off yet again, tripping, slithering and skidding up the narrow pathway. As they climbed, the wind picked up, building again to a fury, bringing a return of cold sleety rain.

When they eventually reached the cottage, they were both soaked through and caked in mud. She lowered him onto his side facing the hearth with his collie licking his face. As a temporary measure, she placed her old working coat on top of him. Molly had taken up her usual spot in the ingle beside the family bed that had been her parents, the one Fiona now used to be nearer the hearth.

Throughout this ordeal, running in her mind were the many times her father had returned from fishing drenched like this stranger when her mother had put her husband into their bed in the kitchen recess then climbed in alongside to warm him with her body heat.

Moving behind the heavy curtain into the box bedroom, she stripped naked, wiped herself clean with a damp cloth, dried her hair with a towel then put on fresh clothes. Back in the kitchen, she knelt beside him. Although he seemed to be sleeping peacefully, she was wary of his stillness, fearing he was so cold he might die.

She eased him down onto his back and began the slow and awkward business of removing his sodden clothing. It was a job which could not be avoided but one she found exhilarating. Throughout, she was watching his face, expecting him to come round at any second. Eventually he was naked. She wiped him clean and towelled him dry, studying him, looking for injuries, closely examining the angry bruises on the side of his head and right shoulder then finding others on his knees and arms. Checking the pulse at his neck, she worried at is weakness. His skin was blue-grey, icy cold to the touch, almost as if he was already a corpse.

Dipping his damaged hand in a bowl of water, she bathed away the sand and blood until the lacerations were clean. Dabbing them dry, she dripped lavender oil into the deep cuts

then bound the hand with a clean dishcloth which she tied firmly in place with string from her hoard of bits and bobs. Wetting a cloth with lavender oil, she rubbed it gently into his bruises and scrapes.

Working from behind, she hauled his head and shoulders up onto the high bed. With her hands under his backside and knees, she lifted his deadweight up onto the bed, then rolled him to the back of the recess and covered him with bedclothes, adding blankets brought from the smaller, narrower bed in the box room, the bed she had shared with Fergal from the time he was a toddler.

Once more the sordid memory returned afresh of the weekend their parents had left them alone together. They had gone to Ballycastle to visit her mother's uncle on his deathbed, returning infected with what her friend Maria Angela told her later was tuberculosis.

Had these deaths been God's judgement on her for what she had done with her brother, the sin the Bible called incest?

The stranger lay silent. She held her hand over his lips. His breathing was slow and shallow. She tested his brow. It was warmer, she thought, but still worryingly cool.

Outside, the wind was rising again, battering hail against the far side of the cottage. There would be water to mop up later. The leaking thatched roof had been a problem which her father had been trying to solve for years. The walls also needed repairing but, like her father Fiona had no money to pay for this work. In addition, the sheltered situation of the cottage low in its little glen meant it was always damp.

The two dogs had settled to a truce, Molly in her corner by the foot of the kitchen bed near the hearth with the man's old dog near the door.

He's keeping a close eye on me. Guarding his master. Typical collie.

Over the next few hours she moved around the kitchen and its adjoining small scullery, working quietly, removing the long-line hooks carefully to minimise damage then rinsing the man's clothes free of salt, heating water on the peat fire to wash them through with precious soap flakes from her diminishing hoard, rinsing and squeezing them damp dry before hanging them on a clothes horse before the peat fire. She washed her own clothes and hung them beside his, smiling to herself at the thought of their underclothes side by side.

Through her small kitchen window, she saw that although the wind had eased, the rain had increased to a teeming downpour.

As she worked, the memory returned repeatedly of her mother lying naked with her chilled father.

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Standing at the edge of the bed, inside the privacy curtain, studying his face in the gloom, she lit a candle and placed it in the holder above the bedhead then eased up onto the high bed, kneeling beside him.

Watching his face, his closed eyelids, she reached across.

The man did not stir at her touch.

His pulse felt stronger although his skin was cold, too cold, she thought.

She lifted the blankets, studying his lithe, muscled body, again enjoying the sight of his bushy manhood, tempted to reach out and touch his long, sleeping penis.

No longer able to resist, she began to undress quickly, dropping her clothes onto the floor, a thing she would never have normally done. Naked, she slipped under the bedclothes, edging closer to him, feeling excited and guilty in equal measure. Lying on her side, she placed her hand on his hairy chest. He did not react. She moved her hand downwards and took hold, gently tugging, disappointed when he did not stir.

Dreaming of what might yet happen, she rose and barred the door against possible visitors even though it was very unlikely anyone would venture out in this storm. Her nearest neighbour was Maria-Angela who lived a mile away. The McCullough family who had lived two miles away had emigrated to Canada in 1848; their cottage was now derelict. The Mullens, her next nearest neighbours were a two hour walk away on the far side of the *Mountblow* grouse moor and series of wildfowl loughs which hemmed in her designated grazing land.

Her real worry was the brute Dominick O'Shea, the itinerant shepherd who had been pestering her since he had discovered she was living here alone. Dom O'Shea had a reputation for putting farm girls and widowed women in the family way. In this sort of weather, O'Shea and his cronies would most likely be drinking in the bawdy gambling pubs located in the dockyard area of Belfast, safely more than a full day's walk away.

Now in her best fleecy nightshirt, she lifted the bedclothes again, relishing the opportunity to look at his naked body. Reaching across, placing the flat of her hand over his heart, she could feel the slow thud. Slipping under the covers, she edged across, pressing her back against him, sharing her heat, hoping he would recover soon and discover her with him, her mind whirling, testing out what she might say.

This intimate contact kindled a clear memory of her mother on that long ago winter's evening, sitting up on top of her father, her eyes closed, her face smiling, her hands resting on his chest, his hands fondling her breasts, as she rocked backwards and forwards on her knees until they climaxed, unaware her thirteen-year-old daughter was watching from behind the drape in the scullery after a visit to the night chamber pail.

Outside the wind rose and the hail battered the roof and far wall. Time passed and she became drowsy, on the edge of sleep and she drifted off, her mind filled with a looping dream of riding on top of him.

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Fiona jerked awake with the familiar feeling of almost falling over a cliff edge.

She felt the man move, heard his quiet muttering. Rolling to face him, she checked again with a soft hand on his chest. His heartbeat was stronger. His skin warmer, normal.

Slipping from the bed, Fiona scooped up her clothes onto her rocking chair then padded barefoot to shutter the window, making the room dark before stacking peats on the fire, using the bellows to get them going. Both dogs were together in the hearth ingle, asleep.

Shrugging out of her nightshirt, she placed it on top of her clothes before slipping under the covers once more and pressing herself against the stranger, skin to skin as her mother had done.

His legs and feet were still icy cold.

Easing herself on top of him, she lay still, her thighs on his, their legs and feet entwined, her face nestled in the crook of his neck feeling his warm breath on her ear.

It was working. She could feel the chill leave his body. His feet and legs were warm.

The mantle clock on the dresser shelf seemed to be ticking more slowly than usual.

He stirred and his arms moved to enclose her, moving to hold her head, pulling her face to his. They kissed, long and hard. Her first proper kiss, not like the kisses she had imposed on Fergal. She felt him grow hard. Her body responded, flushing hot with desire.

He mumbled, as if drunk:

'Oh Chrissie, Chrissie, my lassie, it has been so long.'

He eased her over onto her back. She spread her legs, lifting her knees, gripping him close to her and suddenly it was happening, so much better than she had imagined in her wet dreams. By instinct she was matching his thrusts, pushing back strongly, feeling the rising pulsing surge as they found release together in her first proper coupling, an experience so much better than her guilty fumblings with Fergal who had splashed onto her thighs before entering, spoiling the moment, causing her to shove him away in frustration, then moving to her parents' bed to comfort herself alone.

After their noisy climax, they slept, fulfilled, satisfied, depleted.

Outside, as the eye of the storm swirled slowly towards the north, rising again, bringing hail in screaming, howling gusts.

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As they slept, the fever which had been suppressed by his low body temperature now took hold. His skin burned hot and sweat poured out of him, soaking the bedclothes. Delirious, he mumbled and muttered, calling out to his lost wife, seeing again her face on the seal who had saved him.

Unaware of this change in him and exhausted from her earlier struggles to get him up from the beach, Fiona slept on, gripped in a frustrating dream about her rival Chrissie, imagining a beautiful golden-haired spectre, an impish girl who skipped away into the gloom then re-appeared laughing at the edge of the bed, mocking her again before fading away then re-appearing, these scenes repeating over and over and over.

With her mind swinging between guilt and ecstasy, Fiona's dream restarted.

Hovering above the scene she watched herself undress him, wash him, towel him dry all the while studying his naked body, nurturing her plan.

Without warning the dream leapt forward and she was lying against him, then on top of him, the salty kiss, the ecstasy of their coupling and then on to the mystery of the

retreating laughing, golden haired girl who faded, her phantom passing through the locked door, taken away by the storm.

Refusal

During Fiona's return from the Easter Sunday service at the Presbyterian Church in Ballycastle, the storm had increased in ferocity becoming so violent it had forced her to cover the last few hundred yards to the cottage on her hands and knees. Although unfashionable, she had worn her father's special waterproofs, drawing disapproving glances and snide asides from the other eligible farm girls in the congregation. She was used to their prattling and ignored them.

After his near to death chilling experience, Sandy McKeen had invested in a full set of deep-sea oilskins and matching rubber boots, bought from a catalogue at a store in Ballycastle, special order items obtained from a supplier in Hull, England, expensive but guaranteed waterproof. With a build akin to her father, these oilskins fitted Fiona well.

In the normal rhythm of her now solitary life, she would have called in to have lunch with Maria-Angela, but the rising storm had prevented this. The Portuguese had described herself to Fiona as *a nominal almost lapsed Catholic*. Her attendances at the Roman Catholic Church near Ballintoy, a three-hour hike on a poor track, were irregular. For these occasions she was provided with transport from the big house where she had once been the Housekeeper. To arrange this privilege, Fiona delivered a note to the servant's door in the yard at *Mountblow.*

Returning tired and shivery to her dull, dark home where the peat fire was dead, Fiona had felt sad and lonely. Gathering Molly to her in a great hug she whispered into her ear:

'Molly ma darlin' it's just us two left now Mam and Dada and Fergal are gone ahead. But we'll be right fine here when I get these crochet pieces finished tae sell to that fancy shop in Ballycastle. Maria-Angela will help me get them right. Wi' oor eggs and a few fish caught off the rocks and a lamb from time to time, we'll no' starve, eh? Aye, Molly, we'll manage, we'll manage, of that I'm certain sure.'

Despite her reassuring words to the dog, Fiona wondered again if she should sell up and follow her father's people to Canada where they had settled on the outskirts of Halifax, finding well-paid jobs in a factory making agricultural machinery, a place where they employed women alongside men.

Staring into the glow of the peats, she recalled the marriage offer she had rejected a few months after her eighteenth birthday. At this age, most girls like her would already

be wed, often with a bairn on the way. But Fiona was not a girl who flirted and teased the lads like others.

It began after her father's visit to the market in Ballycastle to sell his male lambs. Sandy McKeen had returned with the news of a man he met, a prosperous farmer recently widowed and in urgent need of a new wife to help him on his farm and care for his small children.

Two days later, John-James McAuley came in his pony and trap from around thirty miles away, arriving just before lunch. Although he claimed to be thirty-four years old, to Fiona he seemed much older with dark brown teeth from chewing tobacco, and a dry, wrinkled, greyish-yellow skin.

Over lunch John-James proved to be a pompous boor, full of himself, boasting of his fine farm and his 'investment assets' in Canada where he had co-funded his brother who had established a haberdashery store. This grand 'emporium' was in one of the best parts of Toronto where his son (20) and daughter (19) from his first marriage, worked alongside their uncle and aunt. At this revelation, Fiona judged that Farmer McAuley had almost certainly lied about his age.

They also learned he had three children by his deceased second wife, two boys aged four and three and an infant girl, five months old.

After the meal, he had remained seated, smoking his long thin pipe then calling Fiona to stand in front of him while he looked her up and down, as if inspecting a horse or cow he was thinking of buying. Now she was closer to him, she could taste the reek of whiskey from his breath.

He made his 'offer' in a small reedy voice:

'Well noo lass, it's true whit yer Faither telt me. Aye, ye're a right fine strong young wumin wi' gude wide-bearin' hips and fine big feedin' breests. Aye, ye'll dae fine fur me., wance Ah get ye traint up. An' ye've a nice fresh face oan ye. Aye, Miss Fiona McKeen, yer big mind, but no' ower big. Big and healthy wi' it, jist whit Ah need. Aye, an' Ah've been checkin' ye oot and they say yer no' flighty an' flirty, thet yer the quiet kind and quick o' hand and mind. Aye, ye'll do right fine as the next Mrs. McAuley. So, Fiona, whit di ye say tae it then? Wi'd ye like tae be the mistress o' a fine big ferm, wi' nine milkers an' ower three hunner sheep and a flock o' aboot six hunner layin' hens?'

Although taken aback by the directness and impersonal manner of McAuley's appraisal, she well understood that for a girl like her this was a great offer, a real chance to step up in the world into a situation which might lead to benefits for Fergal and her parents.

Ploughing on into her silence, McAuley continued:

'Ye see lass, Ah've they bairnies needin' lookin efter. And Ah've a mind tae sell up and move ower tae Toronto an' expand the business. Ah've a man in mind tae sell it tae an' ma Agent is well primed to close the business so whit a need is a smert wifey tae mind the ferm while till Ah'm ready. Efter, Ah'll write and send fur ye and ye can cum awa ower tae live in Canada and bring the bairns wi' ye. Aye, yer jist the right kind o' big strong lassie Ah'm in the merket fur. So, Miss Fiona McKeen, whit dae ye say tae it, eh? Yer Faither says it's up tae ye yersel tae say nae or yea.'

Although she knew very little about this small boastful man, she did not like his looks or his arrogant demeanour and quickly decided she could never respect him, never allow his hands to touch her. Choosing her words carefully and speaking in her poshest voice, she gave her answer:

'Mr McAuley, I know from what you have told us that you are a man of good fortune, a man well respected in your Church. I give my thanks to you for your kind offer but I cannae accept it. I have plans of my own and responsibilities here that I cannot avoid. So, sir, my answer is no, but thanks very much all the same for asking me.'

The man's jaw dropped to reveal a partial set of tobacco-stained teeth and a small brownish tongue. His weasel-like blood-stained eyes almost popped out of his head. His mouth and tongue worked as if to say something but all that came out was a meaningless squeak.

He rose, shook his head, walked out of the house and clambered up into his trap, muttering:

'Uch, ye've far too big in the erse fur me onaway!'

Cracking his whip viciously across the pony's neck, McAuley disappeared over the hill, never to return.

Fiona did not linger to hear what her parents might say but made her way to visit Maria-Angela to share what had just occurred.

The Smoking Shed

Fiona was wakened by the man writhing, throwing his arms about, crying out in distress. He was covered in a sheen of sweat and the bedclothes were damp.

Copying what her mother had done when Fergal caught a childhood fever, Fiona swaddled the stranger, binding him tightly like a mummy, trusting his fever would eventually burn itself out, as it had done with Fergal.

Gradually the stranger settled and seemed asleep.

Peering out of the small window to check on the storm, she suddenly remembered his fish in their netted creels. His catch must not be allowed to go to waste.

Resetting the dead kitchen fire, she got it going with the bellows then re-filled the huge broth kettle from the pool at the nearby burn and hung it over the glow of the peats.

Donning her father's waterproofs and sea boots, she set out for Sandy's Bay through the driving rain. With both dogs racing ahead, she picked her way down the path slick with mud.

It took six trips to move the man's fish creels back to her smoking shed where she set about gutting, salting, stringing and suspending the fillets from the overhead hooks ahead of the long slow process of cold smoking which would cure and preserve them.

With the wind blowing onshore, Fiona hoped the smoke billowing from the ring of vent slots under the eaves would not be noticed by Maria-Angela in the next glen, just over the far ridge.

Surely the frail Portuguese woman would not risk the trek down the steep path in the gusting downpour.

Fiona's final act was to gather the fish guttings into her stock pot in the kitchen. After the first hour she strained the watery mix to remove 'the leavings' including fins, bones, guts, skin, eyes and darker more bitter tasting connecting tissue.

To this 'cleaned stock', she added diced potatoes, carrots, kale and neeps grown in her kitchen garden and handfuls of dried parsley and thyme and a single scoop of home made

sea salt. This done, she added fresh peats to the fire, using the bellows to bring the broth to a rolling bubble.

Back in the smoke house, using a candle and tweezers, she sifted the leavings to remove fins and bones to be buried in her compost heap, saving the tiny pieces of darker flesh, guts, skin and eyes to feed to the two dogs and her chickens.

Frugality was part of Fiona's nature, fixed in her by an entire life lived at the edge of poverty.

Fever

Two further nights and days followed while his fever raged unabated. During her vigil, she wiped his face and neck with a damp cloth. She knew he needed both water and nourishment. Without success she tried many times over to feed him soup, teasing him with tiny morsels of fish pressed against his lips. Holding his nose, she tried dripping water into his mouth from a cloth squeezed over his lips.

In his delirium he cried out:

'Chrissie, why did ye huv tae die, lassie? Ye've broke ma hert in twa.'

and

'Chrissie, oor wee Peggy is eight noo. She bides wi' ma sister an' hur man.'

and

'Chrissie, dae ye ken Aunt Sarah's deed? Ah'm living masel in her place.'

and

'Ah need ye back Chrissie, Ah cannae bide alone.'

and

'Chrissie, Chrissie, where are ye? Come tae me lass, Ah need ye.'

At other times he muttered dark and angry words, phrases repeated many times over, his side in an argument:

'Away wi' ye Newton man, ye cannae get blood frae a stone. Pay them a decent rate, why don't ye?'

and

'This cannae be right an' fair. Does the Laird ken whit ye're up tae here in his name?

and

'Naw, man. Naw! Ah tell ye fair an' true, Ah'll write tae the Laird at his fancy big hoose in Glasgow an' ask that he look intae whit ye're daein' tae these people here. It's extortion ye're working, thur's nae other word for it!

Like her parents, Fiona had never been deeply religious but in the face of this crisis, she found herself on her knees, a silent prayer forming in her mind:

'Heavenly Father, you know I am not a good Christian, a sinner, a wanton woman filled with lustful feelings. But if this man needs a wife, please bring him back to me and let me be that woman. In Jesus Name. Amen'

As another day faded into darkness, the storm raged on from the North, rising and falling, hurling waves at the rocky cliff face above Sandy's Bay, causing a cannon-like booming sound. For once Fiona was thankful for this bad weather, giving her an excuse for not visiting Maria-Angela, allowing her to continue to enjoy her dark secret without challenge.

Fiona settled to a routine, skipping out to feed her hens and garner their eggs, keeping the smoke house fire going, changing the bedclothes damp with his sweat, working at her crochet, mending the tears in his clothes made by the hooks, studying his face, listening to his ramblings, willing him to recover.

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Don-Angi stared at his dark surroundings. He discovered he was lying in a bed, behind a curtain, a dim light leaking through the join of its two halves.

A sweet voice started to hum, but not a song he knew. His first thought was that it was Chrissie until he realised this girl's tone was deeper and sweeter with an odd lilt.

There was a rustling sound and a pair of familiar merle-speckled eyes stared at him, peering over the edge of the bed. Ruri scrambled forward and nuzzled his cheek.

From behind the partly open curtain, a girl spoke to the dog quietly but firmly, not unkindly:

'Come away lad, let him rest. *Come,* away with you. Out now. *Out!* '

The curtain was fully closed. A door banged shut: Fiona had gone to feed her hens and tend the smoke house fire.

Don-Angi sensed he was alone. Apart from the wind and rain outside, the dominant sound from behind the curtain was the ticking of a clock.

He tried to sit up but drained by the fever, his body was heavy, lifeless.

The slightest movements brought sharp stabbing pains down the side of his head and along his right shoulder.

The fingers of his left hand refused to clench.

Am I paralysed?

This had always been his greatest fear. Not the sea or storms. Not hunger or pain. From a toddler he had always been fiercely independent. The thought of being permanently injured, disabled, reliant on others, was what he feared most.

Every attempted movement brought stabs and aches.

Is this a dream?

He kept trying to free himself from his 'prison' until his weakness overwhelmed him again and he let go, plummeting back into a deeper sleep, repaying the debt owed to his body for the many long hours exposed to the wild weather which had chilled him close to death.

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On the fourth day, his fever broke. His delirium was gone and he subsided into deeper, restful sleep, free of nightmares. Working slowly and gently to avoid disturbing him, Fiona unwrapped the swaddling and changed the sheets and blankets again, replacing them with the originals now laundered, ready for re-use.

As he slept, she used scissors to cut him free of her father's damp nightshirt then wiped him clean with warm water, patting him dry before wiping again, this time with lavender oil, pleased to see his bruises were almost gone. Working on him, she was enjoying his nakedness, keeping a close watch on his face, hoping he would open his eyes, smile, then pull her close.

Untying the bandage on his damaged left hand, using a candle she inspected it closely. The scabs came away easily. New skin had formed over the lacerations. To help the healing process, she formed a new padded bandage to keep his hand immobilised.

Reluctantly, after a long, lustful look at his lithe, well-muscled body, she placed the bedclothes over him and drew the curtain. Now he was on the mend, her mind was scheming ahead.

Checking through the window, she saw that although it was only mid-afternoon, under an overcast sky, it was already as dark as night, rain lashing across the yard outside. She let the dogs out and ran to the smoke house where she relit the fire. Returning, she raked out her kitchen fire and got it going with her bellows. She then called back the dogs, dried them off, shuttered her window, barred the door.

Stripping off, she washed herself with a damp cloth, combed out her hair and added a tiny drop of perfume behind each ear and between her breasts. This rose water had been her mother's, a long ago present from her father, brought after a visit to Belfast to sign the lease agreement at the lawyer's office when he took over the cottage on the *Mountblow* estate.

Wearing her fleecy nightshirt, she slipped under the bedclothes and edged close, lying on her side, watching the dark outline of his face, her hand resting on his hairy chest above his heart, enjoying his breath on her cheek.

Drifting off to sleep, she thought about Maria-Angela alone in her cottage in the next glen, wondered how she was coping.

Maria-Angela

In the summer of 1802, newly twelve years old and beginning to blossom into an attractive if slightly boyish looking girl, the orphan Sofia Palumbo was gifted to the Church of Saint Dominic in Lisbon. This huge church had recently suffered damage caused by an earthquake. In exchange Sofia's adoptive parents received a promissory note relieving them of six years unpaid rent for a church property they used to house pilgrims.

Monsignor Antonio, the local priest in charge of reconstruction, 'exchanged' Sofia for ten English Gold Guineas received from his older brother Archbishop Alfonso who was at that time based at the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Dublin. Alfonso, who hated the cold and damp of Ireland was keen to curry favour within the hierarchy of his home church in Lisbon, desperate to be invited to return to fill the vacancy as their spiritual leader.

When the payment from Dublin arrived by courier in Lisbon, Sofia was sent to Alfonso on an Irish trading ship carrying wine. When this ship docked in Cork, she was collected by a nun called Sister Agatha. With five other girls of similar age, she was sent north locked inside an enclosed wagon. At the Refuge for the Elderly just north of Belfast, Sofia and her companions were consigned to The Order of the Sisters of Mercy.

This asylum housed elderly ladies whose genteel families paid for them to be locked away because they were mentally disturbed. Most of these women were demented; a few were clinically insane and dangerous and spent their lives wearing a special uniform which bound their arms by their sides. Hygiene standards were basic; dysentery outbreaks were common and many of the inmates were incontinent.

On arrival at the asylum, the novitiate Sofia was renamed Maria-Angela and inducted into the Order. Under the harsh discipline imposed by the older nuns, the Portuguese girl was taught to obey without question. Secretly, she was already planning her escape.

In the August of her second year, Sofia took the opportunity when it presented itself. Dressed as a boy, she climbed over the wall and began walking into the darkness of an overcast and moonless night, following the road heading north, hoping to find employment and, if she was lucky, find a passage to Canada to make a new life, free of the Church.

Around noon the next day, Sofia skirted the town of Ballycastle, heading for a grand house situated on a hill overlooking a river. This property, called *Mountblow,* was owned

by Lord Crispin Chaunterley, at that time thought to be the third richest man in England, with extensive land and properties in the City of London. Due to severe gout (the Disease of Kings), Chaunterley was no longer able to ride, hunt or fish and had lost interest in *Mountblow.*

In his place he had installed his third son Sir Edwin Chaunterley to look after his interests. Edwin, aged twenty-six when Sofia arrived, was a popular host with dozens of friends from London and other parts of England visiting in an ever-changing swirl of comings and goings. Ostensibly they came to fish and shoot but mainly the came to enjoy the freedom of Edwin's famous hospitality, usually bringing their current mistresses or male companions with them for a few weeks of revelling and debauchery.

To support him in running the house Edwin relied on Bernard Starwood his Butler and Mrs Heatley his Housekeeper. To manage his father's grouse moors, loughs and rivers and to collect rents from his fifty or so tenant farmers and smallholders, Edwin relied implicitly on Partick Shaughnessy his Factor, giving him a free reign to do as he thought best.

Unsure of how to approach the grand property to ask for employment, the girl climbed to the top of a tree and watched the comings and goings of the gentry and their servants, trying to understand how the big house worked and who were the important people.

Over the next two days, she survived on bread and cheese stolen from the asylum and fruit and berries picked from bushes. Apart from her native Portuguese, she could also speak Latin with fluency, if required. During her time at the asylum, she had learned to speak passable English and had acquired a few words of Irish Gaelic.

On the third morning, after the men had ridden out to the hunt, Sofia made her way to the servants' entrance and asked for work as a stable lad. After a few minutes, the door opened again and a uniformed footman sent her to stand on the far side of the yard, in front of the stables. As she waited, she was unaware she was being observed from a small window high above her in the main house.

In time, a small dumpy woman wearing a black dress and a light blue mop cap appeared at the servants' door and beckoned to her. Later she would learn this woman was Mrs Heatley, the Housekeeper.

'Do you have a name?'

'Paolo Palumbo, from Portugal.'

Without warning, the woman slapped Sofia's face with the flat of her hand.

'No, you are the runaway novitiate Maria-Angela from the Belfast asylum. Every time you lie to me, I will smack you. If you try to run from me, I will set our dogs on you. Do you understand?'

'Yes mistress.'

'Now girl, are you a virgin?'

'Yes mistress.'

'I will take that on trust but if you have lied, you will suffer greatly. Follow me.'

The tall, slim girl followed the thickset woman along a series of dark corridors, through a kitchen busy with servants, then along another corridor and up many steps.

They stopped on a half-landing at a door marked:

Bernard Starwood: Butler

The Housekeeper tugged a bell pull. A deep, plummy voice answered:

'Ah, Mrs Heatley, there you are at last. Send her in please.'

The woman eased the door open and pushed Sofia through the gap.

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The room was dim, lit only by light from the edges of a small window covered by a thick curtain. It took time for her eyes to adjust. The room was also very warm, heated by a coal fire hidden behind a high fireguard.

The tall, chubby, pale-skinned man stood naked except for a pair of blue, baggy undershorts.

Behind him was a large leather chair which dominated the room.

"Ah, Maria-Angela, here you are at last. How delightful.'

'Sir, I . . ..'

'***Silence!*** Speak only when asked a direct question.'

He eased out of his shorts and spread his legs, displaying his private part, already engorged.

Held by his side in his right hand was a short, thin leather whip.

'Maria-Angela, take off your clothes, please.'

Sofia was slow to obey. The man lunged forward, flicked, caught her high on her left shoulder. She gasped with pain then quickly disrobed to her vest and knickers.

'Everything please Maria-Angela. No false modesty. As a novitiate, you must be well-used to presenting yourself naked at weekly inspections before Mother Superior at the asylum.'

'Ah, very nice. Just like Eve in the Garden of Eden. Now, Maria-Angela, as we know, 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness'; use the basin and towel and wash and dry your private parts. Take time and be thorough.'

The man lit a hand-held oil lamp and beckoned her to stand closer:

'Hands on hips and turn slowly.'

She completed a full revolution.

'Keep turning.'

'Stop!'

Sofia was facing away from him, looking at the window wall. She felt the side of his whip stroking the inside of her right thigh.

'Spread your feet and bend forward to touch your toes.'

She felt the heat of the lamp on her buttocks and thighs, sensed his nearness.

'Ah, yes. Perfect. Delicious.'

He extinguished the lamp and the gloom returned.

She heard him ease himself onto the leather chair then his hands gently gripped her hips and eased her down onto him. She cried out at the sharp searing pain but as it subsided, she felt herself becoming hot and needy.

His hands reached up under her arms to fondle her small breasts.

He was wearing silk gloves. The featherlike gentleness of his touch made her dizzy.

He lay back into the armchair and with his left hand on her shoulder, he rocked her gently forwards and backwards while his right hand visited each nipple in turn, tugging, rotating, squeezing gently.

He began singing softly:

Rock a bye baby on the tree top,
When the wind blows the cradle will rock,
When the bough breaks the cradle will fall,
And down will come baby, cradle and all.

As the pressure of desire built to a crescendo, Sofia responded instinctively. . ..

In the aftermath, they remained still until he pushed gently on her back. Sofia stood upright and moved away, still facing the window wall, not daring to look at him.

From his armchair he said:

'You did well Maria-Angela. You are my first ever novitiate. Now, wash yourself thoroughly and get dressed then wait outside until Mrs Heatley returns. She will give you a uniform and explain your duties.'

Starwood pulled three times on a lever. In her room far below, Mrs Heatley rose, picked up the clothes she had prepared for the girl and waddled quickly to answer his summons.

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As midnight approached, dressed as a nun, Maria-Angela sat alone in the kitchen. Earlier, she had been rehearsed in detail by Mrs Heatley and dowsed liberally with rose water.

When the bell rang from Sir Edwin's room, she decanted the hot milk into a crystal tumbler, placed it on a silver tray and followed the route she had been taught earlier

while the guests were playing parlour games in the Great Hall. Mrs Heatley had also confided that due to a severe bout of 'the pox' as a teenager, Edwin was sterile which meant that there was no risk of a child. Later she learned the Bernard Starwood had suffered the same fate.

As instructed, she knocked quietly and waited.

'Come.'

The man was very beautiful, with golden hair and blue eyes.

"My milk. Thank you. Here, stand closer so that I can see you. Yes, as Charles said, you are a beauty. How old are you?'

'Fourteen.'

'Are you a virgin?'

'Yes, sir.'

The lie came easily.

'Turn down the lamps and undress for me.'

'Yes, beautiful. Come, slip in beside me. Oh, you do smell nice, just like my Nanny.'

Sofia responded with the phrase she had been taught by Mrs Heatley who had also coached her on how she must respond when her new master first entered her:

'Sir, promise you will be gentle with me, please.'

Mrs Heatley entered the bedchamber just before dawn, gave the new girl a gentle shake, placing her finger on her lips. Wrapped in a thick dressing gown she led her charge away with the nun's outfit and underclothes neatly folded into a package and clasped to her bosom.

Later she would learn she had been judged to be 'most delightful'.

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The pattern for Maria-Angela Palumbo's new life was determined.

Her secret visits to the Butler's room continued for a further decade or so until he retired and moved back to England.

Mountblow was much changed, with fewer visitors.

Bernard Starwood was not replaced. Mrs Heatley took over his duties, assisted by Maria-Angela as her deputy. When Mrs Heatley died of a heart attack, Maria-Angela progressed to become Housekeeper.

Maria-Angela Palumbo's relationship with Sir Edwin Chaunterley intensified and, over time, she became his confidant and counsellor. The Portuguese woman understood her position and knew they could never marry but they lived openly as a couple except when the occasional visitor came to stay.

In his final years at *Mountblow*, Edwin succumbed to a combination of gout and a condition diagnosed as 'The Shakes' which made him housebound.

Following a visit from his nephew Sir Reginald Chaunterley, Edwin was removed to London for treatment.

A few years later, *Mountblow* was sold.

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Aged fifty-six, after forty years in service, Maria-Angela was retired with a lump sum gratuity of fifty pounds Sterling and an annual pension of fifteen pounds. She was also given rent free occupancy of a gamekeeper's cottage located in the valley next to Sandy McKeen and his family.

While loading her possessions before moving, Maria-Angela packed several expensive pieces of jewellery gifted by Edwin, items she had been forbidden to wear in public. She also added six of his favourite gold-plated fob watches to her cache, objects taken partly as mementos, knowing she could easily sell them for cash, should the need arise.

Although Edwin had not been much of a marksman, he did have an extensive collection of handguns and rifles from which she chose a small flintlock pocket pistol and his favourite flintlock rifle with a good supply of ammunition for both. Living alone at her remote cottage, she kept the pistol ready at her bedside, cocked and loaded. When established in her new home, she used Edwin's rifle to shoot rabbits for the pot and to protect her

vegetable patch and crops. With a good eye and a steady aim, she soon became a fair shot.

Like most of the other remote smallholders living north of Ballycastle, for kitchen supplies, candles, paraffin for her lamps and other sundries, Maria-Angela depended on a nomadic packman who came each May and September leading his string of five mules laden with goods and supplies. William Borland and his simple-minded son Archie lived in a tent which they erected at each stopover. With their goods they also brought news and gossip, keeping the scattering of families they visited up to date with developments. When required, they also carried out repairs, cut peats and cleared ditches.

Although wind and watertight, the gamekeeper's cottage had been unoccupied for several years and was cold and damp. During her first winter, Maria-Angela became increasingly affected by arthritis. This affliction made her ever more dependent on the girl Fiona McKeen, a friendship which blossomed when the girl's family were taken from her by tuberculosis.

Meeting of Minds

From the other side of the privacy curtain, Fiona heard him stir, mumbling to himself. His dog yipped. She raised her hand with an open palm and stared hard; the dog lay down again, watching her.

This was the moment she had been longing for but also dreading.

Drawing back the curtain, she sat up on the edge of the bed beside him, saw the puzzlement in his brown-black eyes.

'I am Fiona Sinclair McKeen, sir. Who are ye?"

Responding to her formality, he also used his best voice:

'I am Donald Angus Campbell from Blackwaterfoot on the Island of Arran. I was caught in a storm.'

'Yes Mr Campbell, as ye can hear, that same storm is still with us. But now it is easing, I think. Ye were badly chilled and then, when ye warmed, ye have been under a fever for four nights. I thought I had lost ye.'

'Where am I?'

'Yer in ma cottage, on the north coast o' Ireland at Sandy's Bay, near Rathlin Island, in walkin' distance of Ballycastle.'

'My boat, is she lost?'

'Damaged, but not wrecked. Holed just above the waterline. She can be repaired.'

'My catch, is it lost?'

'No sir, it has been saved and is being cured, cold smoked as we speak.'

'I must see to my boat.'

Don-Angi attempted to rise but failed.

'No Mr Campbell, ye must rest. Trust me, yer gear is safe. Mercifully, yer mast is safe but yer sail is ripped tae bits. No matter, yer spare is safe. Yer long line and hooks are safe tae. Ah huv yer line tray in the ither room.'

'My hand, what happened?'

'Later, rest is whit ye need. Yer weak a-cause ye've no eaten fur days. Ye must eat and rest but maistly ye must drink efter the sweat o' yer fever. Ah'll mak us some tea but Ah've nae milk nor sugar.'

'What day is it?'

'Ah found ye on the beach five days ago.'

'Dear God in Heaven, how has it come to pass that I have been stranded here for so long. My family will think I'm drowned, swept away.'

'Yer wife Chrissie, is it?'

'No, my Chrissie is long dead. She died in childbirth, God's punishment they say. But she gave me a daughter, Margaret, Peggy. They will think I am drowned, God's punishment for fishing on the Sabbath.'

'Yer Peggy is in Blackwaterfoot? How old is she?'

'My wee Peggy is eight. She will not understand. I should have known better. I did not tell anyone where I was going. It was Easter Sunday. It's God's punishment.'

'Aye, as ma mither used tae say, "We are all sinners, every one of us". Well, Mr Donald Angus Campbell, Ah huv made us a treat, fish broth tae ma Mam's recipe, a meal Ah've no' eaten since my faimily were taken by tuberculosis. But dinnae worry, the disease has passed on. Thur deed two years syne. Perhaps that too was God's punishment on me, for ma ain sins.'

'Is there a Mr McKeen?'

'No, sir, Ah'am a spinster, Ah live here alone. They died but Ah survived. It seems Ah might have a natural resistance to tuberculosis, accordin' tae Maria-Angela.'

Fiona left to fetch her large stock kettle from her outside larder, a room shaded from the sun by the cottage and cooled by the waters of the burn which ran in a channel across its slate floor.

Back inside she swung the water kettle aside, ladled soup for two into a smaller pot and hung it over the peats, lowering the chain to bring it closer to the glowing embers then using the bellows. While the soup was heating, she infused tea with water from the kettle.

Kneeling over him, she helped him sit up, offering to spoon the soup for him, but he was determined to feed himself.

'How did I get into this bed? Where are my clothes?'

The colour rose to her face. She looked across at his undergarments displayed on the clotheshorse beside her own. The moment passed. When she dared to looked back, his eyes were closed but his lips were smiling, making him look boyish. He caught her staring at him:

'Why is my hand bound like this?'

Reaching over, she took his left hand, undid the string, saving it to her apron pocket. She unfolded the towel to reveal the hand, slightly swollen, the palm covered in healthy scabs, flimsy, almost transparent.

'Move your fingers for me.'

He did as bid.

'Very good. Now close and open yer haund.'

He flexed his hand.

'Very good. The skin is healing well. How does it feel?'

'A dull pain only.'

'Ah suggest ye keep your haund fully open, let the air aboot it tae help the new skin grow. Ah'll rebind it later. Yer a good healer, sir, anither week should do it.'

'It seems that I owe my life to you, mistress.'

'Well now sir, be that as it may. But there is a way you might pay me back. You had a good catch, a very good catch. It is worth a great deal, if we can get it to Ballycastle, to the market. I have a cart but no donkey now. He was old and got lame and had to go too. But the cart can be wheeled. It's old but Ah keep it in good condition, just like ma faither's boat.'

'No, that catch is worth good money in Blackwaterfoot. There is a trading boat from Girvan calls in to us if we fly a green flag. But the major share will go to my people. My village is starving. The fishing has been poor. These are hard times on Arran. Many of our community have left for the mainland, mostly Glasgow, some to Paisley. Most of those who are left are older. Others have taken on weaving, working for a pittance.'

'Why no tak yer catch tae Ballycastle. Ma faither used tae sail roond, it's only aboot an hour away on a good day. Then ye might pay me for saving ye, whit dae ye say?'

'No, I rather think it must go back to Blackwaterfoot with me. I'll be gone from here as soon as I'm fit to go. But fair is fair, I'll leave a just share for your smoking and putting me up. Perhaps you could take your share to sell at Ballycastle?'

'Aye, that's jist whit Ah'll dae. Ah'm right oot o cash noo. At ma Church, they say home weavin' is the new way forward, is it not?'

'Can you not make do without this weaving? The hours of a weaver are long, the work is demanding and the wages are low. It is a hard way to make a living.'

'No, Mr Campbell. Beggar's cannae be choosers. Look aboot ye sir, and you'll see Ah'm strugglin' just tae get by. If it wisnae fur Maria-Angela I would be awa' oot o' here tae. I have no bread except what she gives me. I do have eggs in good supply and kill a bird tae share wi her noo and again. But Ah weary for ither things Ah cannae afford. There is nae milk o' my ain. Our coo was dry and hud to be sold tae the butcher. With nae fish noo, Ah huvnae ony cash comin' in and Ah've been forced to sell off my sheep to buy basics, candles, fine salt, sugar and tea, an' tae pay ma rent tae the Factor. And tae buy certified Scottish seed potatoes. Thank God, Ah've escaped the blight so far but they say it is creepin' nearer tae us every year. Ah gie Maria-Angela a haund oot roond her place, daein' heavy work and she shares her milk. Thegither we mak butter and cheese. Thank God she needs me. Some say she's rich but Ah doot it. Like me, she's frugal. If she wiznae here, Ah'd huvtae sell up. Ah huv family in Canada. They've offered to pay my passage and Ah've a mind tae accept their charity. They say they are short o' women in Halifax. If Ah could get a job, Ah could pay them back.'

'What you have said is a familiar story. From what I've heard of Glasgow, I doubt I could settle there. Maybe Girvan where I have an aunt. The problem is my wee Peggy. She's settled where she is and doing well at the school in Shiskine.'

'Aye, sir, yer trappit by yer obligations, jist like me.'

'Fiona, may I ask why you come and go with your speaking? It's like you're two different people.'

She took heed and changed back to her poshest voice.

'Yes Mr Campbell, you are right to scold me. I am a lazy speaker, taking after my father from time to time. My mother was forever correcting me. Her father was a schoolteacher in Girvan. She said he drilled her fiercely to make her always speak properly. She did the same with Fergal and me. And Maria-Angela scolds me too. Even though she is from Portugal, she speaks very clear English, learned working at *Mountblow,* where she was the Housekeeper.'

'Yes, Fiona, that's much better. I like it when you speak properly. Good English is always important, especially speaking to strangers.'

'Yes, sir, you *are* a stranger, I suppose. But surely now, after what has passed between us, we can be friends?'

Does he understand? Does he remember?

She waited while he puzzled at her request then said:

'Yes, Fiona, I agree, we should be friends. There is no need for formalities, given what has already passed over these last days while you tended to me. I see know what you mean. You must have stripped be and put me in this bed when I was under the fever.'

She blushed and he smiled:

'Yes, sir, I cannot deny it. You are fine strong, handsome man.'

She took his empty bowl, slipped off the bed and returned with another helping of fish broth.

'Donald, can you manage or will I spoon it to you?'

'No Fiona, I'll manage fine, thanks. Everyone calls me Don-Angi.'

'No sir, I shall call you Donald, after my mother's cousin Donald, the one in Canada. I only met him once. I was about Peggy's age when he came over from Girvan to try to persuade my father to emigrate with him and his family. My memory of Donald Sinclair is of a tall, strong man like yourself with the same kind dark brown eyes. He had inherited his father's farm but sold it up to make a fresh start. He did well and owns a small fleet of deep-sea fishing boats in a place called Halifax. He still writes once a year.'

'Chrissie used to call me Angus, like my mother.'

'Well, since Chrissie is no more, to me you are Donald.'

'Well, Donald it shall be. You make a fine fish broth, Fiona. Good bread too.'

'The stock and flesh are from filleting your very own fish. I've been trying for fish off the rocks but they are few and far between. They say they are shoaling far out over these last years but no one knows why. The bread was made by Maria-Angela. She has a proper oven. How I would love an oven.'

'Yes, nature is mysterious. Think on it, if it had not been for this storm, I would not be here with you. Tell me, did I see a boat on that wee beach of yours or did I imagine it?'

'Yes, it was my grandfather's boat, on my mother's side. His name was William John Kerracher, from Girvan. He called his boat 'Margaret Mary' after his mother. It's about fifty years old but still sound. It has not been used since my father and Fergal passed over, but I keep it in good condition, caulking the seams. It is my only possession of value and I keep hoping someone might make me an offer. But we have had a great illness in these parts. As I said, my whole family was taken from me. If it was not for Maria-Angela, I would not stay on here but she needs me. She has stiffness in her joints and pains in her hands and legs. She uses a stick now, even indoors.'

'Maria-Angela is Portuguese?'

'Yes, she used to be the Housekeeper at *Mountblow*, the big house which runs the estate that owns most of the land to the north of Ballycastle. She lives just over the hill, just out of sight. Almost all the other smallholders have given up their leases and moved away so it's just Maria-Angela and I left. As I said, she still has a cow and she trades me milk, butter and cheese for my potatoes, vegetables and flax which I grow for her which she makes into cloth, to sell at Ballycastle. We do crochet work too, mainly baby things. We work together. She is very good to me.'

'Fiona, your boat, do you know where she was built?'

'No, not for certain. My father always said the *Margaret Mary* was from Campbeltown. But Mamma insisted it was built on Arran. We just don't know.'

'I'll be able to tell you when I've checked it over. My grandfather was a boat builder. He learned his craft in Campbeltown then moved to Blackwaterfoot to start out on his own. As a wee boy, I helped in his boat shed. I still have all his tools.'

'Do you still build boats?'

'No, my wife's father was a boat builder. He build my boat, the *Lorna Ann*. I was always out fishing at every chance. And like you I grow potatoes, neeps and carrots, and I have a big area of raspberries which grow wild. For me, sheep are too much hard work. I've never tried flax. Maybe I should.'

'Do you have a cow, Donald?'

'No. My sister milks sixteen cows owned by the Laird's factor, Charles Newton, an obnoxious man, a bully from Paisley. She runs his dairy and supplies milk, butter and cheese for the big house but we know he sells it to other big houses too. The Laird himself lives in Glasgow where he has a shipping business, *The McCready Line* . McCready hasn't been on Arran for years. They say he is always expanding his fleet, making a fortune and that's what keeps him too busy to think of us, his tenants. He also has an interest in a steelworks and foundry. McCready has fingers in many pies, they say. Newton lives in the Laird's big house in Shiskine, lording it over us. His other ploy is to rent out handlooms. He controls everything, providing supplies, raw materials and patterns then pays a pittance for the finished pieces. I don't think the Laird knows what he is up to. It's been going on for years. If anyone steps out of line, Newton puts up their rent. He is a vindictive bully. Everyone else is afraid of him. I think he's a crook but I can't prove it.'

'More soup? Or tea?'

'No, thanks. May I use your latrine?'

'Donald, it's raining hard outside. I have a night pail we use in bad weather like this. I'll get the screen for you. Here's a nightshirt which belonged to my father. I'll go out and feed my chickens, fetch eggs, check the smoke house fire, give you privacy.'

'Thanks.'

'Would you like to have a strip wash? We have a big tub in the yard. It's how we used to do it on Saturday nights. I'll bring it in and set it up behind the screen in front of the hearth. Just give me a minute to get these peats going to heat water for you. Maria-Angela has coal. How I wish I could afford coal.'

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An hour or so later, after another bowl of broth and more bread and tea, the stranger was back in bed.

'Here, let me help you get comfortable. I'll pull the curtain and let you get to sleep. Sleep is what saved my father when he was caught in a storm, just like you.'

'Fiona, did you bring me here from the shore? Is it far?'

'About half a mile. My Molly heard your dog barking and we ran down to fetch you here. It was a struggle, you were barely conscious and when we got back here, you collapsed. I feared I might lose you.'

'You stripped me and put me to bed? By yourself?'

'Donald - it *had* to be done. Your clothes were wet through. You were chilled to the bone. Almost gone. It was touch and go. The same thing happened to my father, about a year before he died. That was not the first time but it was the worst. I think that chilling weakened his lungs. Like you, he caught a fever though you were longer recovering. After I got the chill out of you, you had the sweats for four days.'

'I owe you my life, Fiona. Thank you.'

'Well Donald, it was my duty and, to be quite honest, it was my pleasure.'

They smiled. He reached over, squeezed her hand and held her gaze.

'Fiona McKeen, you are a fine young woman.'

'How old are you, Donald?'

'Thirty-two. And you?'

'Newly twenty-two, on the first of March.'

'I suppose you are spoken for?'

'No, not yet.'

'There is a lucky man who wants you then?'

'No, not yet.'

'Ah, yes, not yet.'

He grinned broadly.

Fiona looked away, smiling.

Does he remember any of what happened?

Or was it another of my fantasy dreams?

'Here now Donald, I'll pull the curtain, let you sleep, we need to get you well again, yes?'

'Yes, Fiona. And again, thanks. You're a fine bonnie lass. Just perfect.'

Their eyes met and held. She smiled and he smiled back, grinning oddly, his eyes filled with desire like her brother Fergal when he had slipped under the sheet to find her already naked.

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After the curtains were tugged closed, he heard her humming a tune, just under her breath. He closed his eyes and turned onto his side. As he drifted off into a light sleep, he brought back the girl's image and began to examine it, slowly, considering her as a prospective wife, if she would have him.

Not small and delicate like Chrissie but beautiful in her own way.

Tall, strongly built, generous breasts, wide hips. A long tulip face.

Short, curly reddish golden hair with bold blue eyes which spoke of her Viking ancestors.

When she had leaned into help him sit up, he had smelled the familiar nutty aroma of linseed oil from her hair, lavender from her skin and a hint of rose water his Aunt Sarah had used.

Not flighty or frivolous in her talk, not like the farm and fisher lassies back on Arran who had pursued him after his bereavement. A serious, practical girl, her deft hands and quick movements reminding him of his mother.

Fiona McKeen would make a good wife, for the right man.

Would she be able to put up with his moods?

He sniffed the pillow.

This was her bed!

Had she slept beside him during his trauma?

He rolled over onto his back and spread his legs, his free hand moving to release his trapped testicles.

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Many hours later, he drifted up near to consciousness. On the other side of the curtain Fiona was moving, working quietly. The mantle clock dinged eight times. The room was lit only by the glow of the peats. For all ordinary folk, lamp oil was too precious, saved only for very special occasions.

He heard her shutter her window then lock and bar the door.

Fiona undressed and put on her best nightgown, dabbed rose water behind her ears and between her breasts.

It was inevitable that Maria-Angela would discover her secret.

Would this cause him to leave and never return?

Before drawing back the curtain, she whispered:

'Donald, I hope you don't mind but this is my bed too.'

He pretended to be asleep.

She slipped in beside him, keeping near to the edge of the bed, ready to slip out if he wakened. Sensing he was lying on his back, she moved slowly and quietly to lie on her side, facing him.

'Donald, are you awake?'

'Yes.'

He turned to lie on his side, facing her.

'Donald, I . . ..'

His finger rested on her lips.

'Shush now, lass.'

They kissed.

Their hands moved to explore.

Outside the wind rose.

Behind the fireguard the peat fire whoomphed and the embers glowed hot.

Intruder

Coming from the southwest, the wind was easing and the temperature was rising. Rain came in short heavy bursts lasting only a few minutes. The Great Storm of 1853 was nearly over.

It had been ten days since Fiona had rescued her stranger. Yet again she had put off a visit to Maria-Angela by persuading herself that her sheep were needing attention, deciding to round them up to see how they had weathered the foul weather.

With no new lambs, the balance of her flock had changed. From late November, ewes with mature yearling daughters had taken to wandering off in search of a ram. Older ewes were prone to risking the steep narrow paths to get down to the shore to forage for edible seaweed.

During her first year of lambing alone she had struggled physically, always tired, berating herself when she lost a lamb which she might have saved had she been able to keep going instead of taking respite in the cottage then falling asleep still wearing her lambing smock, sprawled in her rocking chair beside her hearth.

That first summer, she had sold all the ram lambs to the butcher at Ballycastle before the ewes came into season. Apart from the stress of coping alone at lambing, she could not afford the cost of tupping her ewes or risk in-breeding by allowing sons to breed with mothers and sisters.

With the approach of her second winter alone, Fiona decided she must sell a few of her ewe lambs to raise money for seed potatoes and to buy the basics for her kitchen larder. However, working alone with just Molly, she had been unable to 'part' these wily and almost fully grown ewes from their mothers to get them to Ballycastle mart on time for the autumn sale. Instead, she was reconciled to taking them on a tether as singletons to sell to her neighbours who, being just as poor as she was, could only offer rock bottom prices or well used items as barter, things she did not need or want. Close to begging, this made her feel demeaned, humiliated, dispirited.

As she killed and shared the occasional 'mutton' ewe with Maria-Angela, William McKeen's flock which had been one hundred and ten in its heyday was reduced now to less than forty. Most of her older ewes were in poor condition, some lame and deaf, others wayward, becoming unresponsive to her calls and prone to hiding.

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It was mid-afternoon when Fiona and Molly approached her cottage after a long difficult expedition to recover her sheep back into her holding field. Ruri had followed but had soon turned back to stay with his master.

There was peat smoke being whipped away on the wind from her chimney.

Was her Donald up and moving around?

Each day since his fever had passed, he had become stronger. The skin on his injured hand was still tender but the scars had healed completely. They had spent a lot of time lying together in bed and, as she had hoped for, he had eventually asked her to marry him. They would do this in Blackwaterfoot. She would sell up quickly and look forward to a brighter future.

Unsure if she would be fully welcomed on Arran, she had suggested the possibility of leaving Scotland and heading to Canada where they both had relatives and friends who would help. While not against her suggestion, Donald was worried about how this move might affect Peggy. Unsaid, Fiona was worried about how her news would affect Maria-Angela.

Fiona had been down to Sandy's Bay several times to inspect the *Lorna Ann,* returning to describe in detail the damage it had sustained. Donald was confident he could make his craft sufficiently water-tight to sail her back to Arran. They had discussed this issue at length resolving to wait for a fair-weather day and sail in tandem with Fiona and Molly in the *Margaret Mary* and Donald and Ruri in the *Lorna Ann*, taking with them as many of her possessions as they could safely ship.

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As Fiona neared the cottage, Ruri came out to meet them, nuzzling Molly and yipping with pleasure. The two dogs ran ahead to settle together in the ingle near the hearth.

Smiling broadly, Fiona shook the rain off her waterproof coat, the one that had been her father's, and hung it in the smoke house to dry. Smiling broadly, she entered the cottage surprised to see her neighbour seated in the rocking chair.

Donald was in bed, upright, his hairy chest exposed, holding a teacup, his eyes dancing merrily. Knowing he was naked under the bedclothes, Fiona blushed.

Maria-Angela beamed a smile:

'Well, Miss Fiona McKeen, spinster of this parish, here you are at last. I understand congratulations are in order.'

'Ah, so you have met my Donald then.'

'Yes, he has told me the whole story, after a bit of encouragement. You have found yourself a fine man, a good match. You' ll make a good life together. Now my girl, help me out of this seat. If I sit too long, I stiffen up. Perhaps we might take a little walk to the brow of the hill?'

They walked in silence until they were well out of earshot, the older woman leaning heavily on her long applewood knobstick, driving its pointed iron tip into the soft earth to gain purchase, her left hand looped into the girl's arm.

'Maria-Angela, I am really sorry that you will be left to cope on your own.'

'Fiona, my dear, dear girl, you must not worry about me. It is time for you to put yourself first. I knew you were bound to find a good man in the end. I like the idea of you going to Canada, it was an ambition I once harboured myself before I settled for my life at *Mountblow* with Sir Edwin.'

'But how will you manage alone?'

'I will find a girl to come and live-in with me. I can easily afford it. I have a good pension from *Mountblow* and money put by for my old age. In the summer, when the weather is more settled, I might sell up like you and make my way home to Portugal and enjoy a warmer climate.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. The most important thing is that you must follow your man and see where it leads you. I'm sure you will make each other happy.'

Molly and Ruri who had trailed at their heels yipped and growled.

Making his way towards them along the rough track that led from Ballycastle was the burly figure of Dominick O'Shea leading a sturdy male 'tupping' ram on a long rope, his 'sire' dog running free.

He called ahead to them:

'Hoi, now there ye are Fiona McKeen and just as pretty as a picture too. How have ye weathered the storm? And you, Maria-Angela, have you a nice bottle of Port wine to offer a thirsty man?'

Maria-Angela replied:

'Be off with you O'Shea. You are not welcome here, as well you know. We have no need of your services in these parts.'

But the man kept coming, his dog racing ahead, snarling at Molly and Ruri:

'And what is this, Fiona McKeen? You have two dogs now? And a wee thin runt he is too. You should have asked me to get you a proper dog. '

Dom O'Shea stopped a few paces from them.

'Ah Fiona lassie, ye've have a fine bloom on ye the day. Why don't we go down to yer wee bit cottage for a chat and a cup of tea. I have a proposal to discuss with you, a deal, if you like. Yer ewes get a tupping in exchange for a man-tupping, if ye catch ma meaning. Now, would ye have ony o' yer faither's whiskey left?'

At this point, the three dogs erupted into a frenzy of barking and snarling.

The big man roared:

'Get back, Oscar. Here to me and ***LIE DOWN!***'

Limping, Ruri came after the other dog, growling. Dom swung his boot at the dog's head and Ruri flew backwards and lay still, Molly now standing over him, her teeth bared. Sadly, the old dog was already dead.

Standing in his sea boots and wearing her father's nightgown, Donald shouted from the doorway of Fiona's cottage:

'Hey, you there, what's going on?'

O'Shea hissed quietly:

'Well now Fiona McKeen, who the hell is that? Are you running a wee bawdy house on the side? Is that the way of it nowadays?'

Raising his voice. O'Shea shouted back:

'You there, pack yer bags and fuck off to wherever yer from or I'll come down there and beat the bejesus out of ye. Go right now - do ye hear me? For ye get only one warning. I'll not have ye shagging on my patch.'

Maria-Angela put her ear to Fiona's and whispered urgently:

'Take my key and run. Bring my rifle and pistol. Remember the ammunition boxes too. Fly girl, while I try to delay O'Shea. Go.'

O'Shea reached into his satchel and pulled out a bottle, removed the cork then drank deeply. The whiskey bottle was dark green with a label displaying a golden harp.

Maria-Angela said:

'Is that from the *Black Horse* in Ballycastle. We used to serve it to our guests at *Mountblow*. Might I have a sip, please?'

From the corner of her eye, she saw Donald start out towards them, leaning heavily on a shepherd's crook.

'Aye, why not.'

Without looking at her, he offered the bottle which she took.

'Ah, so here he comes to make a match of it. Is he a cripple? Is that the best she can do for herself?'

Maria-Angela stepped forward and threw the remaining whiskey into the brute's eyes.

O'Shea let go of the tether and the ram, seizing its opportunity, ran off in the direction of the nearest group of sheep. On his knees and rubbing his eyes, O'Shea cursed, fumbled into his bag, pulling a long-bladed butcher's knife from its sheath to slash wildly at her ankles. Maria-Angela stepped back and swung her walking stick knob end first at the back of his head with full force. The man keeled over his eyes already glazed.

Reaching down she picked up his knife and slit his throat:

'Vermin! Good riddance!'

She stood up and shouted down the hill to Donald:

'Stop. Go back, Donald. It's over.'

Fiona returned with a sack containing the weapons.

Maria-Angela loaded both weapons. She handed the pistol to Fiona who shot Dom O'Shea's dog between the eyes as it lay beside its dead master. Maria-Angela took careful aim with the rifle and brought down his tupping ram as butted a yearling ewe, knocking the wind out of it.

'Fiona, run, use his knife and slit its throat.'

They turned and made their way back down the hill to explain everything to Donald:

'Well, Fiona, I do believe we have done our community a great service but now we must get your trap out and find a place to bury the evidence. You know what they say: *nullum corpus, nullum crimen* (no corpse, no crime).'

Concealment

The following evening Fiona returned in the gloom to the cottage. It had been a long hard day and although she was physically tired, her mind was still in turmoil. No firm plan had been finalised. The important issue was to clear away the evidence.

Would their plan work?

Wedged into a crevice in the cliff edge high above Sandy's Bay, O'Shea's corpse was buried behind a pile of rocks. This deep hidden cleft was a favourite place for wayward sheep seeking shelter in bad weather. She would add more rocks to the pile tomorrow then cover them with buckets of earth and sods of grass to add to the concealment.

The previous evening, as directed by Maria-Angela, Fiona had buried the corpses of Ruri and Oscar in the dung heap next to the cowshed. Meanwhile, down at the McKeen cottage, Donald had prepared the smoke house fire, adding a mixture of beech woodchips and heather to the smouldering peat. Stored in the chill of her larder, his own smoked fish was now back in his catch creels covered with oiled cloths to protect them, making them ready for sale or shipment.

While Fiona was dealing with O'Shea's corpse, Maria-Angela had led her cow down to Fiona's place where the dead ram was hidden behind the smoke house. Talking gently to the animal to relax it, Donald had stunned it with a sharp blow to its head with the hammer end of Fiona's axe before slitting its throat with the smoke house filleting knife, catching the blood in a pot to mix with offcuts to make smoked sausages.

Employing skills which she had learned during her early years in the kitchen at *Mountblow,* the former Housekeeper butchered her cow and the O'Shea ram, passing each piece of meat to Don-Angi for salting, stringing and hanging from the overhead hooks prior to smoking. As they worked, the Portuguese woman gently probed for details of his life, studiously avoiding discussion about O'Shea.

Inside the McKeen cottage, there was a pot of stew gently bubbling in the hearth for their forthcoming meal. The wind which had dropped now picked up, swirling the fragrant plumes of smoke out to sea.

By late afternoon, the older woman had completed her part of the cover-up and made her way back to her own cottage to wash and change, leaving Donald to clear up the bones

to be added later to Maria-Angela's dung heap. Turning to look back from the ridge where the deed had been done, she saw Fiona using a scrubbing brush and copious amounts of water to remove the evidence from the pony trap before stowing it behind the smoke house, covering it with its protective tarp.

Maria-Angela Palumbo felt no guilt or remorse for her actions. Men like O'Shea were predators bullying their way through life, imposing their will on others, taking what they wanted by force, acting outside the laws of common decency.

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That second evening, with the first part of their plan completed, they met back at the McKeen cottage, sharing a full bottle of red wine from Maria-Angela's hoard, the last of the six dozen bottles she had taken from *Mountblow* on her retirement. Uncorking it, she dispensed the rich dark wine into three crystal glasses, part of a set of six also taken from *Mountblow.*

During the meal the man and girl had remained silent, subdued, lost in their own thoughts, trying to make sense of recent events, fearful of what might now transpire.

With the meal over and the dishes washed and cleared away, Don-Angi and Fiona sat in the upright seats at the small kitchen table. The older woman was seated in the rocking chair with Molly lying across her feet, asleep. From her large shoulder bag, the woman produced a bottle of Port and dispensed full measures into their glasses.

'Well, here's to justice delivered at last. Good riddance! Long overdue. The brute O'Shea will not be mourned by anyone. Now, Donald, you say that within a few days you will be able to get the *Lorna Ann* repaired sufficiently well to allow you to escape.'

'I'll need to check myself but from how Fiona has described the damage, yes, it can be repaired, provided we choose a good day.'

'Good. The sooner you two are away, the better it will be. Now, Fiona, I suggest you write a forfeit letter giving up your cottage. Do it properly - just say you can no longer afford the rental . . ..'

Fiona interrupted:

'Donald says you've killed your cow. Does that mean you will be coming with us when we leave for Blackwaterfoot? We're taking both boats. It'll be tight but I'm sure we will manage.'

'No, Fiona, I have a different plan. This is my opportunity to go back to Portugal. In my mind its was always warm and sunny in Lisbon. Now, as you know, I have my pension allowance. Sir Edwin set it up as an annuity paid quarterly which as you know, I collect from the Ballycastle branch of the Belfast Banking Company. It is a generous allowance and I have saved most of it, so I have ready cash to pay for what I need to do. My April instalment is waiting for me there as we speak and when I go to collect it, I plan to arrange for the Belfast Bank to pay my quarterly payments to me in Lisbon. When I get there, I'll choose a bank and get them to make contact.'

'But Maria-Angela, will you be fit enough to travel alone?'

'Fiona, you know my story, or most of it. You know I was only twelve years old when I was sent here by my Church. So, you know I can look after myself, don't you? I plan to be in Lisbon by early June. I'll ask Jean Wishart who was my deputy housekeeper at *Mountblow* to accompany me. She's back with her parents in Ballycastle with her two unmarried sisters and their bastard broods. It is the old story of the willing worker put upon, making a living as a day servant for the gentry to earn enough to keep her family together. I'm sure she'll jump at the opportunity to come with me, at least as far as Cork. And if she wants to sail with me to Lisbon, I'll give her a permanent post as my maid. I'll arrange for a private carriage to transport us to Cork, one large enough to carry my most treasured possessions. My hope is the sunnier warmer climate there will relieve my stiffness and aches and pains. As I have only modest needs, living in Portugal should be quite affordable.'

'You've been planning your move for a while then?'

'Yes, I suppose I have. Earlier today, before I discovered Donald in your bed, I was planning to ask you to come with me as my maid, but clearly you have struck a better deal. I have a new plan for you both if you are agreeable. But first, shall we have a pot of tea? I've brought you some of my special tea, all the way from Ceylon.'

Settled, the Portuguese woman said:

'I'll buy your sheep and hens and anything else you want to leave behind. I'll pay in cash, English pounds Sterling. I'll also pay you for your pony trap but I want you to burn it. Getting blood stains out of rough, unvarnished wood is almost impossible. I'll give you a fair price for everything you are forced to leave behind. When you are safely away, I'll add your household contents to mine and get Clancy's the Auctioneers from Ballycastle to organise everything. I'll write to the new owner at *Mountblow* advising I am quitting my cottage too then deliver both letters together and. . ..'

*'The **new** owner?'*

'Were you not notified that the *Mountblow* estate has been sold again. I had a letter just before the storm advising me that my former privileges have been cancelled. The new owner is a man called McCready, from Glasgow.'

'Is he Sir Murray Elphinstone McCready, do you know?', asked Donald.

'Here, read the letter for yourself.'

'Yes, that's him, the very same man. McCready is my landlord too. He owns half of Arran. And look Fiona, McCready is sending Charles Newton here to *Mountblow* as the new factor.'

'Oh Donald, isn't he that terrible man you told me about?'

'Yes, the very same. Well Maria-Angela, we are all well out of here if Charles Newton is coming to lord it over this place. As I have told Fiona, Newton is a vile, heartless man, ruthless, all business. He sees no harm in oppressing the ordinary working man in pursuit of increased 'productivity' and profits. And no doubt he will pressurise all the tenants into hiring his looms, paying them a pittance for the articles he wants woven. Hopefully this means McCready and Newton will loosen their stranglehold on Arran. Ach, they tell me this is the way of it in Glasgow with its hundreds of new manufacturers competing to outdo each other. The old ways are being swept away, driven by men crazed by naked greed.'

'Donald, be that as it may be. No matter what you may or may not have to face on Arran, at least you will have Fiona by your side. Now Fiona, your forfeit letter to the new Factor resigning from the lease on your cottage; may I suggest you back date it for 21st March, the last day of the Spring Quarter. I'll say you quit this cottage when you gave me the letter that same day and headed off for Belfast. Since today is Friday the 8th of April, your letter will show that you were long gone before O'Shea vanished. Leave it with me and I'll make sure it gets delivered to this man Newton but not until a few weeks after you have gone. I'll also spread the rumour that you went to Belfast to catch a ferry to Liverpool to care for your elderly Aunt Agnes.'

'But Maria-Angela, I was at the Easter Sunday service in Ballycastle, and everyone saw me. And I don't have an Aunt Agnes. In fact, I don't have any relatives in Liverpool, not that I know of. And I don't have any money left to pay my rent. I'm two quarters I arears.'

'Fiona, Fiona, forget what you owe. Did the last Factor ever think of helping with your repairs? No, he did not. I doubt they even have proper records. And the half-wit Michael O'Shaughnessy who took over from his father could hardly read and write far less count. And will anyone remember you were at that Easter Service? Even if they do, I'll insist you left the cottage on the 21st. Confusion and contradiction like that is usual, normal even. The point is, it merely serves to put them off your trail, should they wish to try to find you. The main issue is we can never be sure O'Shea did not brag that he was heading this way to bed you, can we? Hopefully, they will assume he changed his mind and went off after someone else when he found your cottage empty. And whatever happens after your gone, we don't want them to know where you are. I predict that by the summer you and I will be history, long forgotten in these parts. And from what Donald has told us of the new Factor, we will not be the last to quit the *Mountblow* estate.'

'But how will you organise all this, you can't walk to Ballycastle, can you?'

'No, but when the Borlands come in May then I'll send the boy to *Mountblow* with your letter and mine and then to Ballycastle with another letter to Clancy's and one to Jean. I expect Clancy's will be pleased to get everything sold up quickly if I agree a fair percentage as their fee. As I said, I hope to be in Lisbon by the early June, if not sooner.'

'Maria-Angela, everything seems to be happening all at once. I can hardly take it all in. Thank you for helping us. You are so wise. I'll miss you so much.'

'Here, help me out of this chair and I'll be on my way and leave you to yourselves. Now, now, Fiona. No more hugs lass, save them for your man.'

'But why don't you stay and sleep in my old bed?'

'No, I want to get home. Come up to me late tomorrow morning and we'll get our letters written and sealed ready to dispatch when the Borlands come. Now, will you help me up over the hill please?'

'Of course. Of course. Now, sit up there on that kitchen chair for me and I'll lace up your boots.'

Don-Angi waited by the door:

'Here we are Maria-Angela, let me help you into your coat. At least it's dry at last. And with the wind set from the southwest, it's warmer too. Thank you for saving my Fiona from that brute. Let me give you a hug. Ach, you are a fine woman. And brave too.'

Dowry Gift

Free of his fever and eating heartily, Donald's strength and mobility returned day by day. Using a shepherd's crook with Fiona in front to steady him, he made his way slowly down the steep path to Sandy's Bay. Using William McKeen's toolbox and spare timbers, Donald repaired the damage sufficiently to make the *Lorna Ann* sea-worthy enough for light winds.

Most of the heavy lifting to carry her chosen articles down to the boats was done by Fiona. Donald took charge of stowing the open deck cargo items, covering them with oiled cloth tarps then tying everything down securely to the ring bolts set in the floor and gunwales. This done, they settled to wait with growing impatience for the right day.

Both boats were fully loaded, Donald's with his smoked fish and Fiona's with the smoked meat from the lamb and the cow. Aboard the *Margaret Mary*, Fiona also had her family kist, a large oak chest in which she had carefully packed her best clothes and the deed box containing her family papers and family Bible. Hidden among her clothes was a small ornately carved jewellery box, a parting gift from Maria-Angela which she had described as her 'dowry gift'.

Before locking this box, Maria-Angela had displayed each item in turn, explaining that in Glasgow it should be possible to sell the jewellery and timepieces for a good price, perhaps as much as £100 Sterling, a dizzying sum beyond the imagination of Fiona McKeen.

Before locking the box, Maria-Angela offered her final piece of advice:

'Fiona, trust me, please. I have listened to your Donald carefully and believe Blackwaterfoot will not be the best place for you or for him. He has too many bad memories there, too many old conflicts unresolved, too much bitterness for you to overcome to make him whole again. As you will understand, you will be an incomer, treated with suspicion at every turn, the locals ever looking for faults in you.'

'Yes, I know what you mean. It *is* a worry. His sister seems to be quite fierce and bossy. But we'll manage somehow. Donald has a good cottage he took over from his aunt when she died. We could get some sheep and maybe a cow again. Perhaps even a pony and trap.'

'No, no, Fiona, I strongly advise you do your best to get your Donald away to Canada. Your dowry money should enable you to make a good start over there and build a good life. From what I've heard and read, Canadians are a kind and openhearted people who are well-used to welcoming new settlers into their communities. However, if you do stay on Arran, I'm sure in time you will make a good fist of it.'

'Maria-Angela, I know we will face challenges wherever we end up but I'm sure we will overcome them. Your dowry money will make a big, big difference. Thank you.'

'Yes, I hope so. But I strongly advise you keep this gift as a secret until the right time. If his people on Arran or Girvan or Glasgow suspect you two are rich, they will try to get their share from him. I suspect he would be easily persuaded to help them. It's in his nature. Although it might seem like a lot, I want you to put this money to good use for your life together. I *don't* want to learn it has been frittered away on others.'

'Yes, I know what you mean. It *is* a worry. Donald has very strong views on equality and opportunities for ordinary folks like us.'

'Well, I've had my say and so, my dear, dear Fiona, may your God go with you. Write to me in Lisbon. Send your letter to me at this address and it will get to me eventually. Isn't it quite amazing how letters seem to be able to travel the world.'

The older woman placed the slip of paper inside the box, locked it, reached up on her tiptoes, placed the tiny key on its silver chain around the younger woman's neck then kissed both cheeks before pushing her gently away:

'God speed, my dear, dear girl.'

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On Thursday 14th April, taking advantage of a steady south-westerly breeze they waited until late morning for a favourable tide run through the North Channel then set sail, Fiona wearing her father's waterproofs and sea boots.

From the ridge above the McKeen property, near the spot where she had dispatched O'Shea, Maria-Angela watched until the tiny boats disappeared over the horizon then made her way back to her own cottage.

Homecoming

It was late afternoon, growing dark, when the two boats were spotted from the shore at Blackwaterfoot. As they drew nearer, a crowd gathered to greet them.

Leading the welcoming party were the McHendry family, led by Don-Angi's sister Margaret Jean and her husband Callum. Donald's daughter Peggy was seated on her uncle's shoulders. Only Peggy and the younger children were calling out, cheering and waving. The older children and the adults were grim faced and silent.

Donald called over to the *Margaret Mary*:

'Fiona, there's something amiss here. This is not right. Go about and standoff for a bit with your head to wind, over there in yon calm patch. I'll go ashore and find out what the problem is. It might be illness.'

As Donald stepped ashore at the harbour, his teenage nephew Andra (Andrew) McHendry caught his painter then leapt aboard deftly from the pier, making the *Lorna Ann* secure fore and aft, riding gently against the soft oiled-cloth fender bags at her mooring.

Running his hand over the damage to the hull, admiring the repair, he said:

'Aye, Ye did a grand job oan this, Uncle. Ye've no' loast ony o' yer boat-building skills then. Whit happened?'

'Later Andra. I'll tell you everything later. Now, make a start getting those creels ashore, there's a good lad. Their full of smoked fish. Get a few of your laddies to help you and take two of the creels around the houses and make sure everyone gets a fish or two, eh? There's a good lad.'

Callum approached and beckoned Don-Angi away from the landing place. In a low voice he said:

'Don-Angi, we never thought to see you again. We all thought you were lost in the storm. I have terrible bad news for you, man. But not here, come up to the house.'

'No Callum, now out with it. Is this about illness? Is my Fiona at risk?'

'Fiona?'

'My new wife-to-be, out there, in her own boat.'

'No, Don-Angi, it's not illness, no, thank God. Go ahead, call her in. But NO! Hold, man, where is she from? You know how it is in these days with tuberculosis and the potato blight. Is she safe and clear?'

'Callum, take my word for it, you have no worries on that front. I'll explain it all later but I will not move from this spot until you tell me what all this is about.'

Callum turned to his wife now standing beside him, ready to support him:

'Margaret Jean, take the children up to the house, lass.

'But Callum . . ..'

'*Do as you are bid, wife,*' he growled. Then in a softer tone: '*Now*, please, lass.'

Raising his voice, he said to the onlookers:

'As you will understand, I must have a private word with Don-Angi. Every one of you go now to your homes and give us some privacy while I break the news. Thank you.'

The two tall men waited until they were alone:

'Don-Angi, you must understand, we thought you were dead these last weeks. Indeed, if the truth be told, we thought you had committed suicide, God forbid. We think Newton got the word you were missing. He came here last week, looking for you. He said Sir Murray had instructed him to evict you. He said you are well behind with your rent payments. Is that true?'

'Yes, three quarters in arrears, like most of the others around here. I wrote to Sir Murray in February, explaining my situation, promising to clear my debt as soon as I was able. As with my previous letters to him, I got no reply.'

'Well, Don-Angi, two days later, Newton sent his gang of bailiffs with two big carts. Six of them. They weren't from Arran, these men. They sounded as if they were from Glasgow. They were aggressive, itching for a fight. They carried cudgels and they were wearing pistols, quite openly. They took every scrap of furniture and all your tools, anything of value. Newton had said he would sell them by auction in Brodick but word

came back that the bailiffs had shipped them over to Glasgow, so we'll never know what prices they fetched. While they were loading your aunt's harmonium, Margaret Jean went to the door to ask for your personal papers and books. But they refused to let her in, sent her away, telling her to get off the Laird's property. A few minutes later, they rushed out, locking both doors and stood by, looking guilty. Within minutes your place was ablaze. We brought buckets to try to put the fire out but they used their cudgels to force us back saying, it was too dangerous. A few of them loaded their pistols and fired a couple of warning shots over our heads. Later they put the story about that your faulty paraffin lamp had exploded but we think they had been told to burn your cottage to the ground.'

'Callum, I sold my paraffin lamp two years ago. I couldn't afford the oil.'

'It was all planned and of course, Charles Newton was here, watching from the hill, sitting on his big black gelding, observing but not directly involved.'

'Callum, I'll never give in to this sort of bullying and intimidation. I'll write to Sir Murray and set all this down on the record. And I'll have a strong word with the Constabulary at Brodick. From what you have said, this was arson. Blatant, barefaced arson with many witnesses. We must bring Newton to justice.'

'Ah, Don-Angi, that might be a problem. We hear Charles Newton has been sent to Ireland where Sir Murray has bought a new place, a sporting estate that needs building up. I pity the poor souls over there. The latest word from the big house at Shiskine is that Newland's younger brother Edward is soon to take over as the new factor. The word is that in his previous post, this Edward Newton was the factor at Sir Murray's estate at Glengennet ten miles outside of Girvan. During his three years in charge, he got rid of the families growing potatoes and kale to create a grouse moor. Most of those folks went either to Glasgow or to Canada. They are saying this *Edward* Newton is even more vicious than his brother Charles.'

'So be it. I'll face up to him as I faced up to Charles. I will ***not*** give in to bullying.'

'Listen, Don-Angi, take my advice and let this matter pass. When Charles Newton hears you are back, he'll make sure you don't get another tenancy. He is a bad man and far too powerful to have as an enemy.'

'Let me think this through. Can you put us up for a few days?'

'Yes, of course. I'll go and tell Margaret Jean.'

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Don-Angi walked back across to the pier and signalled to Fiona to sail into the harbour.

'Andra, get a few of your friends to help you to unload the smoked meat in those creels. Take them to your house. Tomorrow I'll need your help again to get the rest of the fish and meat to those who need it. Leave Fiona's kist and her other bits and pieces in place for the minute until we see how this all pans out. Now, Andra, make sure the *Margaret Mary* is fully secured. Thankfully, it looks as though we are in for a period of settled weather, at long last.'

'Aye, Uncle. Yer wuman hus a braw boat tae. Looks as if she's the twin sister o' yer ain boat. Is she a McIver, tae?'

'Almost certainly. I've checked her scantlings and she certainly is to the same pattern, just a good bit older but she has been well looked after.'

'Did ma faither tell ye aboot yer hoose getting burnt oot. The wind caught the flames an it jist explodett. It was a nice hoose, afore. Wan of the bailiffs punched me when I tried to throw waater on it.'

'Thanks for trying.'

'Uncle Don-Angi, see yer extra boat, wid ye teach me tae fish the long-lines wi it?'

'Ah, well, it's not my boat. It belongs to Fiona. But I'll keep ye in mind, put in a word for you, eh? Anyway, let's wait and see, shall we?'

'Thanks, Uncle Don-Angi. Ah'm right gled yer no' drooned. I wus sure ye wid make it hame tae us.'

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Donald walked over to join Fiona who was standing near to the road that looped past the harbour. In the distance she could barely make out sheep with lambs and cows with calves settling for the night. Staring into the gloom, she was filled with trepidation at this new, strange place with its widely scattered houses filled with strangers, their hens already cooped and their windows shuttered for the night as if deliberately shutting her out, refusing to come to greet and welcome her. Even the smell of the smoke from their fires was different until she realised that some were burning seaweed mixed with dung, a sign they were even poorer than she had been back at Sandy's Bay.

Will they accept me? Or will they resent me for stealing one of their own.

'Right Fiona, here we are. *Good girl, Molly. DOWN now!* Fiona, we need to talk to my in-laws. There's a lot that has happened here while I was away.'

'It's not illness then?'

'No, just badness. Come, we will have to face this head on and I need to hear what your views are.'

Conflict

When the children were tucked away to bed, Callum gave a full recap of what had happened when Charles Newton and his Bailiffs had visited.

Then it was Donald's turn to explain what had happened during his absence. Taking heed of what Maria-Angela had said, he gave a simpler, well-rehearsed version of the story as agreed with Fiona before their departure. In this account, there was no mention of Maria-Angela Palumbo or Dom O'Shea and no mention of Sandy's Bay by name, just a vague description of her cottage on the coastline near Rathlin Island where she had lived with her parents until Don-Angi had been driven ashore, storm bound and near to death.

Throughout Fiona sat in silence, her eyes closed, one hand stroking Molly's head, the other on Donald's knee.

As was her nature, Margaret Jean asked many questions, seeking details from Fiona about her life and family. In return she received only vague, bland answers, her new future sister-in-law giving her name as Fiona 'Sinclair' (omitting McKeen). In accordance with their agreement, Donald was equally vague when his sister and brother-in-law tried to elicit finer detail from him. After a long period without progress, it seemed to Margaret Jean and Callum Mchendry that the pair were well suited, both reserved, turned in on themselves as Don-Angi had been over the years since losing his Chrissie.

Eventually, talked out, the four adults sat in silence. Then, with a fresh pot of tea dispensed, it was Margaret Jean who spoke first:

'Don-Angi, I fear that when Charles's brother Edward arrives and discovers you are here, your life will be in danger. I think you two should go to Glasgow. Father will help you find a job and a place to live.'

Callum added:

'They say Edward Newton is arriving soon. He might even be at the big house at Shiskine. You know how hard it is to keep secrets here on Arran. No doubt he has been told all about you by his brother. I don't want him coming at you while you are biding with us. Margaret Jean is right, you would be far safer in Glasgow.'

'But I am I not a free man under the law? So, what about that big lazy lump McCallum up at Brodick?'

'Constable George McCallum has quit. He's taken his wife and family to the mainland, to a new post in Kilmarnock, working as a clerk in the bank there. Anyway, as you know, George never once stood up to Charles Newton, did he? His position has been advertised but Ah hae ma doots we will attract the right man. None of the locals are interested. Be realistic Don-Angi, man, and get away to Glasgow and safety before you cause us a barrowload of trouble.'

'Well, Fiona, what do you say to that notion?'

'Donald, I agree that we must go from here and quickly too. But would it be fair to uproot Peggy? Perhaps we should leave her with Margaret Jean until we are settled.'

Before Donald could reply, Margaret Jean snarled:

'Don-Angi, be warned, Ah'll no' give up Peggy to ye, not now ye're startin' oot afresh wi' Fiona. It's no' fair on eethir o' them. Ah've had Peggy here wi' us since she was an infant. It would break ma hert to lose my wee lamb. She is like my very ain child. Look, Fiona, though she knows Don-Angi is her real faither, it's eyways to Callum and me she runs if she's in trouble. Fiona, ye must understand, the way ma brother has been over these last years, Peggy has hardly seen him wi' a smile on his face. If the truth be told, she hardly knows him, and he hardly knows her. The bond, if there is one, is very weak. It is that no' true whit I say, is it Don-Angi?'

'No, no, Margaret Jean, you are being very hard on me. I know I've been struggling but my Peggy always comes to see me on a Sunday afternoon and we read and sing songs together and she was learning the harmonium too.'

'Two hours a week and no' every week, more like once a month.'

'Aye, well, I was busy.'

'Busy? Oot walkin' the shoreline lookin' fur crabs and diggin' bait fur fishing aff the rocks, and on Sundays too! And when was the last time you set foot in the Church. Ye used to be a leader amongst us but since Chrissie died, you've changed. Let me say it outright Don-Angi, ye've lost the right to claim Peggy back from me.'

Callum half rose and holding the flat of his hand towards his wife:

'Wheesht now, Margaret Jean! That's enough of that kind o' talk. We're here to help Don-Angi and Fiona, not to drive them away from our door. And keep your voice down, we don't want the weans tae hear what we're saying.'

The adults remained silent while Margaret Jean made a fresh pot of tea and served it with bread and tart raspberry jam.

Fiona broke the silence:

'Donald, it's a nice night out there. Can we two go for a walk? I've something private to tell you.'

Margaret Jean replied:

'Fine then, you two can hae the kitchen bed and we'll snuggle-in beside the weans. But remember, if you cause trouble for us Don-Angi, Ah could lose my job with the milkers and running the creamery. If he's as bad as they say, this man Edward Newton might even take the Laird's horses elsewhere for shoeing. That surely would sink us. We must hae a decision frae ye in the morning.'

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Just before dawn, when Margaret Jean tiptoed into the kitchen to light the fire, she was surprised to see the curtain at the kitchen bed was drawn back. The bed had not been slept in.

On the kitchen table, there was a note and a stack of twenty gold guineas.

Callum and Margaret Jean,

Thank you for all you have done for me over the years and for adopting Peggy. Please use this money to help her make her way in life,
We have decided to take your advice. When you read this, we will be sailing for the mainland where we will sell the Margaret Mary and then make our way to Glasgow then onwards from there to Canada where Fiona has relatives.
When we are settled, I will write with our news.

God Bless you all,

Don-Angi.

Broomielaw, Glasgow

The Purser stood at the foot of the boarding station, looked up , checked his watch, then said:

'Mr and Mrs. Donald Angus Campbell?'

The couple stepped forward and Donald signed twice; once for their cabin key and then to acknowledge the receipt for their hold baggage - Fiona's family kist, strengthened, re-varnished and fitted with a new padlock.

The Purser smile:

'Thank you for being prompt. We sail at 3:00 pm and expect to dock at Quebec on Friday 22nd July, a passage of twenty-three days. I see from your onward itinerary your intended destination is Halifax, a fine thriving city. Trust me, I should know, Halifax is where I'm from myself. Should you need any advice on how to expedite your onward journey or where to stay when you get there, just come to see me at your convenience. The weather is set fair and we do not expect any delays.'

At the top of the boarding ramp, they were met by an officer:

'Welcome aboard *The City of Glasgow*. Your personal attendant here is David who will show you to your cabin and answer any questions you may have.'

A smiling ,fresh-faced young man in a dark blue uniform and wearing white gloves stepped forward and shook their hands. The Officer continued:

'David will respond to a call pull in your room, should you need anything. You are scheduled to dine at the first sitting which is at 6:00 pm in the *Nova Scotia* dining room where David will be your waiter. After dinner, usually around 7:30 pm, he is off duty until 7:00 am tomorrow. On his behalf, and to avoid misunderstanding, David should be rewarded for his service with an appropriate gratuity, this payable in cash when we reach Quebec. This is the American way.'

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In their cabin, naked under the fresh crisp linen sheets, they lay side-by-side on their backs listening to the bustle of footsteps and babble of voices in the corridor as the other second-class passengers made their way to their cabins.

'Well, Fiona Sinclair Campbell did you ever imagine this might happen to us?'

'You mean that we would be married with a baby on the way? Well, yes Donald Angus Campbell, I did. The very first time I saw you naked, I said to Molly: "Yes, he'll do very nicely".'

Donald turned to his wife and pulled her close:

'Well, what I meant was immigrating? Did you ever think that would happen?'

'That first year in Sandy's Bay, when I was left to cope alone, I knew I would never make it living on my own. As I've already told you many times over, if it hadn't been for Maria-Angela, I would have sold up and gone to Canada long before you came into my life. At first, when you asked me to marry you and move with you to Blackwaterfoot, I was looking forward to living on Arran. But from the very minute we arrived, I felt it was not really a good move, not for me and not for you. What do you think yourself, do you agree?'

'Fiona, you are right and Maria-Angela was right to warn us to be brave and move forwards and face new challenges together. And Margaret Jean was right about my Peggy. It's true, I hardly knew her. I think I shunned her, shut her out because she reminded me so much of my Chrissie. . ..'

'Shush, now *my* Donald. That girl is no more. Now you have me, *your Fiona*, a girl who loves you with all her heart. You must let them go, let them fade away, all three of them. Peggy and Molly will be well-looked after by the McHendrys and over the months to come we too will fade from their lives. But that, my dear Donald, is the way of the world, is it not?'

'Yes, it's true what you say. And Callum will have repaired the *Lorna Ann* by now and Andra will have the chance to make a living as a fisherman just as he always want to be, right from a wee boy, just like me. Fishing is in my blood. I hope your mother's cousin might help me make a start, will he?'

'Yes, my Donald, I'm sure he will.'

'What about you, Fiona?'

'I just hope that Maria-Angela made it safely to Lisbon with Jean Wishart.'

'Ah, our fairy godmother. I could not believe it when we sold off those trinkets and watches at the auction in Edinburgh for £126 nett. I still can't believe it. Should we send some of to her in Portugal?'

'No Donald, I think she knew exactly what she was doing when she gave me that dowry gift. I think Maria-Angela is very much richer than any of us could imagine. Remember, she was quite definite telling me to use our money for ourselves and for our new family.'

'Should we name our baby after her, if she is a girl?'

'No, my Donald, no! Our baby will be a boy and we will call him William McKeen Campbell, after my father.'

'Yes, that has a good ring to it.'

'Donald, thank you for coming into my life and rescuing me from loneliness.'

'Fiona, thank you for saving my life. And bringing me back from the edge. If I had gone back to Blackwaterfoot alone, I might have. …'

She placed her finger on his lips:

'Shush now, my Donald. Check that door is locked and close the curtains on the porthole.'

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At three o'clock the ship's horn sounded, rousing them to enjoy another round of lovemaking.