

Dublin, Ireland, February, 1795

He had us in a line in his parlour, the master. It were the room he used ta entertain his fancy friends. Must've killed him ta have the likes of us all in there at once. Was six of us. I been working in this house for a couple of years. I seen him make his way through the younger girls, feck'n them when he saw fit. Can't imagine how his wife don't know what he's up to.

He's looking for his gold watch an' a silver pair of buckles. Says he knows one of us lowlife Dublin misfits took 'em. Old Franny took 'em. I seen her do it. She's been working for him for more'n ten years in this house, and she's still poor. She sold 'em to buy medicine for her sick mammy. Franny's mammy must be ancient, cos we think Franny is old.

He strides along the line of us girls. I'm not scared of him. I hate him. I hate his kind; part of what they call the Protestant Ascendancy. Flaunting their wealth at us poor Irish Catholics. His kind don't think we are good enough. I didn't take his stuff, but I wish I had. He stops in front of me, standing so close to me face I can smell his rancid breath. Smells like the rotten meat that the cook sometimes uses to make the stew for him. I want to laugh in his face and tell him he smells like a corpse, but I don't want to get the cook in trouble. I stand straight and stare back at him. He doesn't like it.

'You stole them,' he roars. The spittle from his rotten mouth sprays onto me face. I lift me hand and wipe it off. This makes him real mad. He yanks hold of me arm and pulls me outta the line. I catch a glimpse of Old Franny. Her eyes are pleading with me not to say it's her that's guilty. Don't know what she expects me to do, take the blame meself?

'You took them, didn't you?' the master yells at me again. This time he's closer to me face. Wants to prove a point, I guess. I wipe me face with the other hand. He moves his arm behind himself, brings it forward quick as, and slaps me face so hard I fall on the floor. Old Franny screams. The other girls put their hands over their mouths and gasp. I stay on the floor on me hands and knees. Me head is spinning. He grabs me hair and drags me up to me feet. I don't make a sound. Not giving him the satisfaction.

'Lock her in the cellar,' he bellows at the bloke who's supposed to dress him and clean up after him. 'I'll send someone for the constable.'

'Elizabeth Bartlett,' the judge says to me. 'You are hereby found guilty of larceny at large, for the theft of a gold watch and a silver pair of buckles out of the house of James Dogherty. You will be transported for seven years.'¹

The cell is freezing. There's no heating, and it being February it's mighty cold. I didn't get a chance to take anything from my room when the constable dragged me from the cellar and along the streets into the gaol at Kilmainham. Now I'm back in the cells waiting to be transported to God only knows where. The other women in the cell are sitting close to each tother to keep warm. One

¹ *A Desperate Set of Villains: The Convicts of the Marquis Cornwallis. Ireland to Botany Bay 1796.* By Barbara Hall.

of them uses her finger to signal I should join them. Not much choice. I either sit near them, or freeze to death. Maybe I should freeze to death. Might be easier in the long run.

Old Franny sent her mam to the prison with me stuff. I'm surprised her mam didn't run off with it. Seems she got better with the medicine. Old Franny must be feeling bad right about now. Me taking the blame for her stealing the watch and the buckles. Old Franny's mam hands over me woollen overcoat. I've had it since I left home to work in big houses when I were twelve. The coat is too small, but I'll be able to put me arms in and cover meself with it. She gives me a pair of boots I haven't seen before. Says they are Franny's and she wants me to have them. She's hidden some bread and dried beef in me old cap. I'll have to hide it from the other women, or they'll fight me for it, and I'll get none.

I've been in this cell, in this gaol, for months. We can hear the birds singing outside, so I figure it must be getting nearer spring time. No one has been to see me since Old Franny's mam. Me own mam hasn't come, neither has Franny. They have their own troubles and don't want to be burdened with mine. A few of the women have died. One of them was left in the cell for three days before they took her body away. We took it in turns at night to keep the rats from eating her. She looked real young, younger than me. I think I'm about twenty. She looked about fourteen.

It's called the *Marquis Cornwallis*, the ship they are putting us on. They've made us take a bath in a barrel, they've cut our hair back to nothing and put us in clothes that don't fit. At least the clothes are clean, and I don't stink anymore. The whispers around the ship are that we're going to New South Wales. I never heard of it. They say it's going to take months to get there.

The guards feel us up while they're pushing us into our cells. The women who complain are cracked over the head with a cudgel. I don't complain. I'm used to it. All the houses I worked in in Dublin the masters of the house did the same to us girls who did the housekeeping. Same as slaves we are.

The cell on this ship is better than the prison cell in Kilmainham. At least we have a bunk each, so we are off the floor. Rats can climb, but it'll be easier to whack them off. We've been told we get three meals a day, but we have to work for it. We've got to keep the cells clean, we've got to keep ourselves clean, and we've got to do some learning while we are on our way across the seas. They tell us not to jump into bed with any sailors or guards or members of the New South Wales Corp. Looking around at them while they gawk at us, I don't see myself rushing into their arms.

We've been sailing for about four weeks and there's been a hell of a commotion with most of the men prisoners and a few of the women. They tried to mutiny, and Captain Hogan got wind of it. It was real nasty. Some were killed. I stayed in the cell with the other girls in my group. We didn't want to be flogged.

When the mutiny stuff settles, some of the girls start slinking away at night and sneaking back before the sun comes up. They have a better colour to their face and their clothes fit better. I grabbed Shirley by the arm one night while she tiptoed past me bunk. She didn't yell out but bit me hand. I didn't let go. 'What do ye want?' she snarled at me. 'Where you going?' I want to know.

She says she's not telling me. She says that where's she's going, they don't want no thieves. I twist me hand on her arm so that her skin burns. She is quite chatty after that. Seems she and some of the other girls are giving the privates of the New South Wales Corp their attention, and in return they're getting better quality food. I jump down off me bunk and tell her I'm going with her. My stomach has been grumbling for months. At least in that James Dogherty's house we got well fed. He was alright, the private. His name was William and he was kind to me. Said his mam was from Dublin and he missed her voice. Liked to listen to me talking. Liked the sound of my accent. I don't know why. I think my accent is quite normal, it's his and his kind that have a different accent. He isn't rough in the bed like the masters of the houses always were. And after he always takes me back to the cell, so I don't get bothered by one of the disgusting guards. He said he's made it clear to them that I belong to him. I'm not happy about belonging to him. But I belong to the King and he's sending me to the other side of the world, so I figure it don't matter much.

When I tell William I'm with child he shrugs his shoulders and says there's nothing he can do about it. He says he'll keep taking me to his bed, so I get proper food to eat while the baby grows inside me, but when we land in New South Wales, if I say he's the father, he'll deny it and I'll be flogged.

Another disaster in my life that I have to deal with alone.

They kept us on the ship for two days because there was some God awful storm when we arrived in New South Wales. I've never heard thunder like it. The lightning cracked so close to the ship you could see it through the sides. My belly is swelling and when we are finally herded off the *Marquis Cornwallis* at Sydney Cove I try me best to keep me dress in place to hide the growing infant. William catches me eye, looks for a moment, then turns away. I know I'm not the only one with child to a private. We all try to hide what desperation for a good feed has done to us.

It's so damned hot I can hardly breathe. I've never felt heat like it. It's like the sun has sucked all the air out of the world and filled it with its burning rage. The sweat runs down our faces, there's nothing that's going to stop it.

There were seventy Irish girls on the *Marquis Cornwallis*, and we stand before the commandant, or whatever high and mighty title he gives himself, cooking in the sun like a pot of soup on the fire. The corporal from the New South Wales Corp who was on the ship, wanders around looking us up and down. I'm one of the ones he tells to move to the side. My legs have trouble taking me where he says I have to go, they're expecting the ground to move like the sea.

Moving us away from the others, he tells us that we will be in Sydney Cove a couple of days and then we're being shipped off to another God forsaken place called Norfolk Island. That might as well be the moon as far as we know. Where the hell is Norfolk Island? We're being sent there cos we look like we'll know how to spin the flax into fabric to make sails. We turn and look at each other. I don't think any of us knows how to use a spinning wheel. I don't. But I'm not saying anything. I'm a slave, I have no rights, and I don't want to be flogged. Everyone stays quiet.

New Chapter

Norfolk Island 1796

I've never seen anything so beautiful in me life. My baby is going to be born in paradise. This Norfolk Island is magical. I expect to see leprechauns or elves or faeries jumping around under those magnificent trees. The marines here don't push us around, they let us take our time. Me and two other girls put our heads back and take in the sky. It's bluer than I've ever seen. Bluer than the sky over the ocean on our journey. There's no clouds. The air is sweet, clean, fresh, and tastes like the quince jam the cook used to let us have in the master's kitchen. I didn't ever think before that air could have a taste, but this air does.

We are put in cabins. Not cells. There's four of us to a cabin. It's hot, but not suffocating like Sydney. There's a breeze coming through the windows. We each have our own bed, and there's a fire and a table with four chairs. There's some food on the table, and we've been told to cook it and look after ourselves. We'll be told what's going on the next day. We share the cooking and sit down, the four of us, to eat like civilised women. At a table. We even have forks and spoons.

'They haven't given us knives,' I laugh. 'Wonder why they don't trust us with knives?' We have a chuckle about that and tell each other our names and the stories of how we ended up on Norfolk Island.

After the best night's sleep I've had in years, a banging on the door and a bellowing voice tells us to get up and report to the middle of the settlement. We take a bit longer than we should. We take time for a wash and to eat the rest of the bread, salted pork, and carrots. Carrots. Been a long time since I'd had a fresh carrot. The next banging on the door sees it open and a red-faced English marine straddles the opening and orders us to get to the meeting.

Turns out they only need six of us to weave the flax and the rest of us, me included in that lot, are to be assigned to settlers. This is the first time since I took the blame for Old Franny, that I've been scared. I'm with child. I've got no idea what it means to be assigned to a settler. Does it mean I'll be the property of some old man who'll have his way with me and treat me as bad as the masters of the houses in Dublin? I'll jump off one of them cliffs that runs along the edge of this Norfolk Island before I'll do that again.

Four of us are told to get up on the back of a cart with our stuff. None of us has much in the way of stuff, so it doesn't take long for us to settle. The cart is pulled by a horse who walks with its head down, staring at the ground its feet are treading on. Turning to the girl next to me, Mary, I say the horse looks broken and sad, a bit like the way I'm feeling. The driver hears me.

'The horses came from England,' he says. 'We don't know how old any of them are. It's just as long a journey for them as it is for us. This old girl barely had time to put her hooves on the ground in Sydney Cove before she was loaded up again to come to Norfolk Island. She's going to stay on the Cullen farm. Mr Cullen wants a horse for company for his younger ones, to settle 'em down. She is going to retire.'

I don't ask who Mr Cullen is. I don't want to know, but Mary asks the driver 'Who is Mr Cullen? Are we supposed to know who he is?'

'No lass, you're not supposed to know. He's a settler here on Norfolk. Was a convict, got sent here in 1790 with a lot of others to look after themselves. There were some convicts here

already, and there's been more since. Cullen is a constable too and has a big land grant. He's been free since a few months after he got to Norfolk Island. Even though you've got at least seven years, you can get out of it early if you behave yourselves.'

The driver turned to look at each of us. 'A couple of you look as if you'll be convicts for a long while.' Facing the front, he flicked the reins on the horse's back.

The baby kicked me with a force that took me breath away. 'I don't think the babe likes the idea of his mammy being a convict,' I said to Mary sitting next to me. 'I don't much like it either.'

Mary was the third one to get offloaded from the cart. The colour drained from her face as she crumpled her dress to climb down with some dignity. A man and woman came out of a house that had solid walls, a roof, two chimneys and a front verandah. The man waved, the cart driver waved back, then got down to greet the couple. I wanted to reach out and grab Mary and drag her back onto the cart, so we could huddle and be miserable together. Then the man spoke 'Greetin's ta ye Thomas,' he said to the driver. 'Ye've brought fer us a hard workin' lass 'ave ye?'

Mary moved her head to look at me. She smiled. The man had a Dublin accent. He introduced himself to Mary as Patrick Connell. She curtsied like a good servant and told him her name. 'Tis me wife, Elizabeth,' he said to Mary, 'she'll take ye and get ye sorted.'

Mary waved to me. Thomas flicked the reins on the horse's back. We trundled down the track to my place of servitude.

'It's your turn now, the driver Thomas said as he pulled the horse to a stop. 'You got lucky. You got Mr Cullen.'

I don't know how a person can think someone like me is lucky. I'm with child, I'm a slave on an island no one else in the world knows anything about, and I'm about to be handed over to a new master. For seven years.

A tall, strong looking older man marches out of a handsome house and makes his way to the cart. He shakes Thomas's hand and calls to someone who is working in the stable to unharness the old horse and look after her. Then as if an afterthought, he turns to me. Taking off his hat, he gives a little bow and says his name is James Bryan Cullen and I'm welcome on his farm in Queenborough Path. He has that English accent, but Cullen is an Irish name. I decide I'll ask him about it one day, if he were all right. I told him me name was Elizabeth Bartlett and I was pleased to meet him. I don't think he believed me. I didn't believe me either.

'Go on into the house, Elizabeth. Have a wash and change your clothes if you want. There are women's clothes in a cupboard in the bedroom at the end of the hall. That's your room. You should find something that fits.'

Me feet wouldn't move. Me brain was telling them to go, one in front of the other, but they weren't listening. This man was being nice, talking to me like I'm a person. There's got to be a catch.

'Is everything alright?' he asked. I nodded that it was, but me feet still wouldn't move. I started shaking. Couldn't stop. I thought any minute he was going to slap me across the back of me head.

'It's alright, Miss Bartlett,' he says to me. 'I'm not going to hurt you. You do a good day's

work, and we'll get along just fine. We'll talk about your duties when you're cleaned up, fed and had a good night's sleep. Off you go.' He followed his stable hand and Thomas to the stable and left me to make me feet work.

Taking a deep breath, one so deep the babe kicked me again, I got me feet to obey me brain and walk towards the house. The front door was open. I stepped inside and wrapped me arms around meself, I felt like the house was giving me a hug. It smelled like old leather and pine needles. For the first time since Old Franny begged me to take the blame for her stealing, the tears run down me face. I don't wipe them away.

The house has a kitchen and a parlour and a dining room and three bedrooms. It weren't as grand as the house I worked in in Dublin, but it's big, well made, and comfortable. I find the room Mr Cullen said would be mine. It has a sideboard with a wash bowl, a new piece of soap and a jug of fresh water. There's a towel folded real nice like and put over the side of the wash bowl. One wall has a cupboard. A window on the other wall looks out over the greenest grass that reminds me of the farms around Dublin. A big, soft looking bed is against the other wall. The bed has two pillows, and a quilt that looks like the sunrise and sunset have been trapped in its fabric. I use the new bar of soap to wash me face, hands and arms in the water and dry meself with a clean towel.

Sitting on the edge of the bed looking out the window, I'm thinking I might try out the pillows and the quilt.