

1 Evanton Estate, Wicklow Hills

County Wicklow, 1792

Just after daybreak, sitting in the cart behind two men and a woman and wedged between portmanteaux and boxes, Elizabeth gazed intently at her street, which was all she knew of the world. She waved at her parents, grandmother, sisters, cousins and neighbours. It was hard to believe she would not see them for years.

The cart clattered into the wider street that she hardly knew and then along to the high street, past the green and the big cathedral. Soon they were driving out along the road to the country. Dublin Town took so little time to ride through and leave behind. Here, there were fields and scarcely a house or shed for miles. Cows she saw, but not people. She must get used to the countryside. In her new life as a housemaid, she would have country fields and hills all around. She unwrapped her small portion of bread and took a bite. It was cold in the wind; even in her shawl and bonnet she shivered. She must not eat too much at first or she would be hungry and too cold as night drew near. After a time, her head drooped, and she dozed. The wobbling of the cart had a rhythm that soothed her.

When she woke, the cart was stopped in a crowded village street. The driver told her to walk about.

Granny had told her this, too. "If a body stays on the cart the whole journey, the bones and all will be stiff for days."

"But don't go wandering out of sight," Da had warned. "Don't trust anyone in the villages, especially young men lounging about."

She pressed her nose to the window of the shop next to the inn and looked over the bonnets and ribbons. There was a statue of some nobleman in the middle of the street with steps around it. She sat on one of the steps for a few moments and looked to see if there was water anywhere. Her mother had worried about her not getting anything to drink. Granny had suggested asking for a cup of water at the inn, but Elizabeth feared she would be sent packing, like in Dublin Town.

She stood up and walked back and forth, trying and failing to ignore the jostling boys rushing past. Then she saw them grabbing something off a tree near the corner and running away. No one came after them to scold or whip them. She followed their path and saw a big pear tree overhanging the street. It grew behind a high stone wall. On the ground near her were two pears, one half smashed and one whole. She looked about her, stooped quickly, scooped them up into her shawl and scurried back to the coach. Though she could not eat them till she was safely away, they felt so soft and plump in her hand under her shawl that it was all she could do not to grin in triumph.

The pears made up for the cold wind. As the cart trundled off, she ate the soft smashed one – so sweet and running with juice – a taste she had not known, for it was only old apples that they ate at home. She pulled her shawl close about her and pressed her back against the wooden rails as the cart rocked back and forth. No one else was travelling on with her so she sang softly to herself and imagined her future life in the Big House. Granny had described the outside of the house, but not the grand rooms or the ladies' clothes, for she had lived in the outer region of the estate on her small farm and did not know the ways of the household.

They drove past so many streams that Elizabeth lost count. Twice she spied a castle and once they drove close to its gates. Who would believe such great high buildings, half-ruined but still so grand. Way off were such hills – no, mountains – they took her breath away, they were so beautiful. To think that she would have never seen them if she had stayed in Dublin Town.

She saw men and boys bringing in the cows. There were farms a way off from the road and when she saw the smoke wafting from their chimneys, she shed quiet tears at the thought of the little fireplace at home. How she wished Granny could have come with her, or Ma.

They stopped two more times. It was tiring to climb down but she had to find a spot behind the bushes to lift her skirts. When she climbed back the second time, the driver threw her a rug to snuggle under. When the gloaming came on, she loved her view of the sky and the rising moon and then the flicker of stars behind wisps of cloud.

She did not know she had fallen asleep until she heard the driver's voice. "Wake up, girl, the estate starts on this hill."

She saw gates and long meadows and then, hazy in the dim light, gardens that went on and on. In the distance, tiny farmhouses – one

that was once Granny's.

Then the Big House. A lantern lit up the main entrance. The walls and roof were etched against the violet sky. Their lines were so straight and grand. The dark windows gleamed in the moonlight.

The cart rattled around to the back. She was shaking in anticipation and could hardly take in the courtyard and the smaller buildings. The driver helped her down, led her to a door and knocked.

An old, dried-up looking man nodded at the driver and then looked her up and down. He ushered them both along a corridor into a large room with a fire. She wanted to rush to it but did not dare. The driver sank down on a long bench by the fire. The old man handed him a jar and uncorked it. Then the old man handed Elizabeth a cup of something warm. She gulped it. He waved towards the table, and she saw a plate of bread and a little cheese. He nodded towards a chair, so she sat and ate. The driver stretched out on the bench. When she had eaten, the old man beckoned her and led her out to a passage at the end of which was a narrow staircase.

"Be quiet, child, as we go up to the room. The other maids are asleep. Your place is on the bed near the door. Do you require the water closet?"

She stared.

"Do you need to make water, child, to relieve yourself? There is a place here for the maids."

She nodded. He took her bundle, then led her to a small door and opened it. She walked inside and shut the door. She looked at the wooden bench and the hole. So well-scrubbed, a bowl inside to empty, and hardly a smell at all.

He led her up to her room and pointed to a bed, the closest of the three. The other girl on it was facing towards them but did not wake. Elizabeth took off her boots and her shawl and slowly slid under the quilt on the other side of the bed. She feared she might wake the other occupant with tossing and turning, but she slept at once.

A few hours later, the sun streamed in the windows and the girls were talking.

Maire, the tallest girl, had a wide smile, kind eyes, a broad face, and a noticeable bosom. Her hair was bundled up under her cap.

When Elizabeth sat up, Maire said, "Show us your boots – no, the soles," and the girls all laughed. "Brush them off." She handed Elizabeth a hard brush. "Over there in the corner where we won't

walk in your dirt. You can't go bringing outside mud or dirt inside the house, see? Downstairs there is a boot-scraper and a brush for when you come in from the laundry or the garden. You will get your clothes from Mrs Ryan once we have the fires going and the breakfast ready."

Aine was smaller, not much bigger than Elizabeth, and her eyes were mischievous but a little sad too. "Come down with me," she said, and they ran down the stairs so fast that Elizabeth was laughing and panting to keep up.

She watched Aine and the others lighting fires, opening curtains, dusting and carrying in platters of fruit and bread that smelled better than anything Elizabeth had tasted before.

In the kitchen, she met Mary Hogan, the cook, who was calling out orders and who sat Elizabeth down on the end of a bench. The other girls rushed into an adjoining small room and brought back bowls of steaming gruel. One was banged down in front of her. She was so hungry she would have eaten it were it sour or bitter, but it was pleasing – and filling. Oats and other grains it was, with milk and hot water. Maire brought in a tray covered with slices of bread; was it the wonderful kind that she had smelt? Perhaps not, more like yesterday's bread, but thankfully not too hard or dry.

Maire said to her, "Don't expect butter or jam, except on Christmas Day."

Aine said softly, "Sometimes there are leftovers at lunch time."

When Mrs Ryan appeared, she was dressed like a fine lady, with no apron.

"You are neat enough, I am pleased to see," she said. "Keep that straight back, girl. Good posture is what we like at Evanton. Maire, fetch her uniform. Now, Elizabeth, go to the scullery, take off your things and wash your face, neck and hands. Wash the soap off thoroughly or you may get a rash."

In the scullery, she found a basin of cold water and a bar of soap on the bench under the window. She took off her upper garments but kept on her petticoat – surely that was what Mrs Ryan meant. She swished her hands around in the basin and splashed her face and neck. Mrs Ryan came into the room holding out a cloth.

"Dry yourself, now. And leave those clothes in the basket at the door."

She had scarcely put her clothes in the basket when Mrs Ryan was behind her again. The housekeeper lifted Elizabeth's arms and hair to

examine her for lice, but her family hardly ever had those. Inspection completed, Mrs Ryan swept a cloak over Elizabeth's shoulders and pulled her out into the kitchen. Elizabeth's garments were on the long seat. She found the dress fastenings were beyond her.

Mrs Ryan called Maire, who was stacking bowls into a dresser, to come to Elizabeth's aid.

"Tomorrow, you will fasten your clothes yourself," said Mrs Ryan. "You will need to change your clothes if they become soiled, but we try to keep the one dress for the week, so remember to use the apron at all times. Your payment will be kept for you till the end of the trial period and then all your payments will be kept by me to avoid you losing them. You may apply to me if you need ready cash. Most of our girls do not, not till the summer fair. You may attend Mass with the other girls on Sunday when I can spare you, and you are lucky that your master allows it."

Elizabeth nodded. "Thank you, Mrs Ryan."

"You will work with Maire today and all this week." Mrs Ryan dismissed her with a quick nod and walked swiftly from the room.

Maire was watching in the large silver-framed mirror she was cleaning. She winked at Elizabeth. "All of us are so tired by the time we get to Sunday, but we must trudge out to the field for the Mass and listen to the priest talking his foreign lingo, or who knows what might happen to us. The devil is always watching, isn't he? It is a comfort when the priest gives us the blessing to keep us safe from curses and the devil's tricks. Come here. I'll show you how to dust this cabinet."

"How do I know what my work will be next week if I'm not with you?" Elizabeth asked Maire.

The girl laughed. "Old Ryan will make sure you know, don't you worry."

Elizabeth wondered when she would meet Milady.

"Did you start here when you were my age?"

"What age are you? Twelve? Yes, that's the age that my lady wants her maids to be." Her voice changed to an old, slow, English one. "I need them young enough to be moulded and old enough not to miss their mothers."

Without warning, Elizabeth burst into tears. She hid her face in her apron and wished she could be anywhere else. How scornful big Maire must be.