

LIZBIAN

JOURNEY

TO THE OTHER SIDE



THE FIRST IN THE 'JOURNEY' SERIES

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Lizian

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*Abs, you've taught me what love is.
"I'm everything I am because you love me."*

CHAPTER 1

I jump as something scabbles loud in the dark, heart thumping fast as I hold my breath in the cool summer night, my back pressed against the wall as I try to stay hidden. Long moments later a rat scuttles past searching for its supper, its sharp claws loud on the uneven cobbles. I breathe again. Another noise, this time from my belly, reminds me I've eaten nothing since I left home early this morning.

The rain finally stops but my tattered woollen dress is wet and heavy against my body, and I can't feel my hands and feet as they're so cold. I'm sure it's normally warmer in summer, but then I've always had a roof over my head and a fire to keep me warm and dry. Harsh voices call out across the market square through the fog as I shrink down, my back pressed against the rough stone wall. I breathe through my mouth as the stink of animals and people is so strong, waiting for the long hours to pass and thinking I don't much like what I've seen of Mitchelstown so far.

The wind passes through me and my breath mists in the night air. I can't stop shivering and wrap my arms round my legs,

teeth chattering as I tuck numb hands under my arms trying to warm them. My bare feet are covered in mud and I try to move my toes, worried they will freeze off before morning. I try to open the calico bag Mrs Hickey gave me this morning, hoping to eat some of the food she gave me, but a sob of frustration escapes when my fingers are too frozen to open the tie, belly timber having to wait for the warmth daylight brings.

I jerk awake as heavy footsteps thump past, taking a moment to remember where I am before reaching out and realising my bag of food has been taken. I jump to my feet to chase the thief but he's faded into the night, knowing the streets much better than me. A thick blanket of sadness covers me as I huddle with my knees pulled to my chest as there's no way sleep will come back tonight. All I'm left with are my thoughts and they keep coming back to the last talk I had with Da.

"I'll be back from England before the 'arvest." Da's face is in shadow, his bushy red whiskers almost hiding his mouth. Da is a tall man but he's looked older these past months, not the strong farmer he's always been.

"I know." I kick the dirt, finding it hard to say goodbye to da so soon, especially as I'm left behind to look after the children.

"I was talkin' to Daniel O'Sullivan the other day 'bout you and young Daniel." My heart beats loud at his gruff words and I want to cover my ears with my hands so I don't have to listen no more. "You're fifteen now and we need ta think of gittin' you married and startin' a family like me and your mam did." His dark brown eyes are serious, his bushy eyebrows creased into a frown. Ma and da's families were all farmers and too poor to go to hedge school same as me. Sometimes I wish things could be different and that I could learn to read and write but I'm needed on the farm now more than ever and anyway there's no coin spare for lessons.

"I don't want ta git married, Da, and I don't love Daniel."

"You could git married when I'm 'ome from England. Young Daniel's gittin' some land as inheritance as soon as 'e's married. I was thinkin' you could build a cottage over yonder." Da points with his chin,

his deep voice low and I can't remember him ever talking so much.

"Da, I can't do that. Who'd look after the family?" I've known Daniel since we was young but the thought of having to marry him or any other man scares me more than the bogeyman living in the bogs who kidnaps young children.

"I'm sure we'll be all right and you can come round and 'elp with the chores 'til you 'ave children of your own."

"But I don't love 'im!" I raise my voice to da for the first time in my life. The children all stop what they're doing and stare at us with open mouths as da's eyes narrow in anger. I lower my voice and cough. "Da, I can't marry someone I don't love. Please don't make me." He sighs deeply as I beg, long skinny arms wrapped around my waist trying to push down the lump in my belly.

"Well I s'pose it's not somethin' you need ta decide 'til I git back, but think 'bout it while I'm away." His eyes soften as I nod, glad I've time to find a way out of marrying Daniel O'Sullivan. Da steps away but turns back as if he's remembered something.

"Mary, I'm proud of you and know your mam would've been as well." His voice is rough as he pulls me into his arms, my cheek pressed against the scratchy wool of his shirt smelling of sweat and dirt. "I love you." He's never said them words to me before and my breath catches in my throat as I feel his ribs through his shirt, noticing how much his duds now hang off him.

"I love you, too, Da, please come 'ome soon," I mumble against his chest. Too soon he lets go and says goodbye to the children, joining the other men travelling to England to look for work, not turning back once to wave goodbye.

Tears flow down my face as I remember that April day three months since, resting my head on bent knees, waiting for sunrise and the markets I hope will bring a change in my luck.

Morning brings more rain so I use a puddle to wash the dirt from my arms and legs. My dress is still wet, making my skin itch, and I smell like a wet dog. I walk to the water pump along the edge of the square past the houses with front doors open,

people inside going about their morning chores. Our cottage has only one room and no windows, the straw floor keeping it warm and dry. Our whole family lived and slept in that room and until a year back we shared it with the pig and chickens until we had to sell them to pay for food. The room is always stinking and we often end up shouting to be heard over the din, but it's my home and I wish I was back there.

When I get back to the square the dark shadows have gone and barrow men are arriving, carts piled high with potatoes, corn and butter. Other farmers bring pigs and sheep to sell at the weekly market, most of the animals as dirty and underfed as me. Noise fills every corner of the square as men shout to be heard and the smell of animals hides the stink of the sewers. I've never seen so many people in one place so I stay on the edge of the square, wishing da was here keeping me safe.

My belly reminds me it's still empty, but I have nothing left to eat and no coin to buy food. The beggars I talked to yesterday have gone, probably because the constables have come dressed in smart green jackets and breeches, eyes hidden below hard black hats. Rows of polished buttons down the front of their jackets shine, matching the swords at their sides. I've heard the men on the farms talk of constables as evil men, bringing trouble to us Catholic farmers during the tithe wars, so I make sure to stay far away from them.

Today is the only day I have to find work to save our home. When that eejit agent called round a few days back to speak to Da, he told me we had a week to pay the rent and tax or he'd come back with the bailiff to evict us and tumble our cottage. I don't know if leaving the children with Mrs Hickey was right, but I have to do something as I ain't heard from da since he left.

The rain stops as I stand between puddles of water in the middle of the square, staring at the grand market house. It's made of grey stone, and ahead of me wide steps lead to a black wooden door. I'm distracted by shouts on the other side of the

square and see a crowd of people standing together in one corner, most of the men clasping battered spades and shovels. I head over, eyes fixed on the ground, avoiding the questioning eyes of the men and women, hoping I've found others looking for work. I skirt the edge of the crowd to the back, sneezing as the smell of the streets mixes with the strong smell of unwashed bodies tickling my nose.

“Labourer wanted; wage eight pence a week including food. Must be single, no children.” The well-dressed gentleman stands at the front, his smooth, deep voice carrying easily to the back. A handful of men step forward, shovels clutched nervously in hands as the landowner examines them as he would a prize pig, nodding to one of the men. “Come with me.” The man grins and follows his new boss, the others stepping back into the crowd trying to hide their disappointment, waiting for their next chance.

“Wanted, stable hand. Experience required....” My attention's drawn by people near me pushing against the person in front of them, ready to jump forward if a job comes up they can do. The smell of stale sweat gets stronger, my nose at armpit height as I wrap my arms around my body trying to protect my ribs from elbow jabs as people make space for themselves. I have been pushed forward and am now squashed in the middle of the crowd, panicking when the toe I stubbed yesterday gets stamped on and bleeds again. I can't move or take air into my lungs and I turn blindly, elbowing my way to the edge of the crowd to find a bit of space to breathe and clear my head.

Gentlemen come and go, each finding a worker so desperate for food and a roof over his head he'll work almost for free. When the last gentleman steps up wanting another farmhand, I shove my fist into my mouth, trying to hold back a deep cry as I know my only chance for finding work has gone and that my family will soon be homeless.

I'm weak and tired as it's been so long since I've eaten and I know I need food before walking three miles home. I'm going to have to beg for food as I've no coin, so I head towards the food carts in the square thinking I may be able to cadge a scrap from one of the barrow men.

"*Stop, thief!*" a man's voice shouts out just before a young boy tears round the cart in front of me trying to escape a constable chasing from the other side of the square. The boy knocks some of the potatoes off the cart and they bounce off the cobbles, rolling in different directions. As I bend to pick up the dropped vegetables for the barrow man, a hand clamps down roughly on my shoulder, jerking me upright.

"Got you!"

CHAPTER 2

“I was jest...”

“I know *exactly* what you was doin’.” The constable’s mug is red and he breathes heavy in my ear as he wraps a chain round my wrists and pulls me away from the cart toward the market house.

“You’ve the wrong person. I ain’t done nothin’ – I was pickin’ up ’em paters for the barrow man.” I wince as his fingers dig in, pinching and bruising my pale skin.

“I don’t want ta know.” He drags me through the square, people pointing and muttering under their breath as we go. Sweat rolls down his plump face into his thick black moustache, dark eyes nearly hidden by his round hat. I breathe through my mouth not wanting to smell him, his grand belly wobbling with every step.

“Where you takin’ me?” We’ve left the square and the constable drags me through the streets, breathing heavy in my ear.

“Ta the bridewell.”

“What’s a bridewell?”

“If you don’t know, you will soon enough, ta be sure.” He laughs unkindly, “I’m sure you’ll know it very well before long.” I suppose the bridewell must be a gaol, and my heart is heavy as

I know I've just lost any hope of going home today.

We stop at another grand building made of grey brick, a porch stretching the whole way along the front.

"There's bars on 'em windows." I lift my head for the first time, shivering as I wonder what's on the other side of the thick black bars.

"Keeps your sort inside where you belong." Not having use of my arms, I catch my toe on the stairs and stumble, the sweating constable dragging me through the door and into a dim room. The air smells damp and is pierced by loud screams and wailing from somewhere further inside and I'm worried if I go in I'll never come back out.

The constable knocks on a wooden door, waiting for a moment before opening it and pushing me in front of him into a warm room where a man sits behind a dark wooden table. Light shines through a window behind the desk and off the smooth wooden floor under my feet, the faint smell of tobacco nice after the smell of the market. A young lad dressed all in black stands tall at the side of the table, a row of silver buttons down the front of his jacket and a bunch of keys at his waist. Both men look up as we walk in, and the constable pokes me in the back until I stop in front of the table, my eyes staring at the piles of paper nearly covering it.

"Yes constable?" The man sitting behind the desk has a smooth voice and his eyes rest on me as I fidget under his stare. I'm too scared to look at him so keep my head bowed, glancing up from under my eyelashes. Most of his face is hidden by spectacles and short brown whiskers, his long wig the same dark brown and tied behind his neck.

"Afternoon, Sir, I picked up this thief in the market square. Gave me a good chase." The guard jabs me in the ribs and lets go of my arm as I rub the spot his rough hands have bruised, the chains on my wrist clinking in the quiet room.

“I didn’t steal nothin’. I already said you’ve the wrong person!”

The constable raises his arm to slap me. “Quiet!” the man behind the desk raises his voice, stopping the constable from hitting me. He looks at me sternly. “You will remain quiet unless spoken to. You have a chance to state your case to the Magistrate, but until then you will stay here at the bridewell. I need to process you and take down your particulars for registration.” I try to guess what them words mean but give up, knowing it won’t make no difference anyway. “Constable, please check the prisoner for belongings and weapons.”

“Lift your arms and spread your legs.” The man’s face is so close I can smell his rotten breath as I struggle to lift my arms with the heavy chains round my wrists. I squeeze my eyes closed as his hands move over my body, shuddering and trying not to vomit as his hands roam. When he’s finished, the guard nods. “No weapons and no possessions, Gov’nor.”

“Very well. Name and address, please.” The governor picks up his quill and dips it in a wee ink bottle, turning to a new page on the book in front of him. I watch close as he holds the quill over the page, a drop of ink sitting on the end of the quill as he waits for my answer.

I clear my throat before speaking. “Mary O’Connor.” He writes carefully in the book and lifts his head slow, brown eyes meeting mine through his spectacles.

“Address?” I don’t know what to say as I already know we’re going to lose our home. “Do you have somewhere to live? Where do you sleep at night?” His voice rises with each question as I stand silent in front of him moving my weight from one foot to the other.

“Umm, I..I.. I live on a farm outside town. Or um... I used ta.” I stumble over the words as he puts the quill down in the inkpot and rests his chin on his hands, watching me. I lower my head under his gaze, staring at my dirty feet, the toe I stubbed yesterday covered in blood and mud.

“So you have no fixed abode.” I lift my eyes to see him

shaking his head and clucking, picking up the quill to make another mark against me on the paper.

“Well, I do ’ave a ’ome, I jest need ta find money ta pay the rent.” I lift my head to see the man staring at me, his mouth stretched tight in a thin line. “Please, you must believe me, Sir. I ain’t done nothin’ wrong and I didn’t steal ’em paters.”

“Humph. Don’t believe a word, Sir. We see the likes of ’er all the time. She’s a ragamuffin – look at what she’s wearin’ and ’ow dirty she is. She don’t even ’ave no shoes – there’s no way she ’as a ’ome ta go ta.” I scowl at the constable and he snarls, showing tobacco-stained teeth.

“Please, what’ll ’appen ta me?” I turn back to the governor who puts the quill back in the inkpot and folds his hands together, resting them on the desk and leaning forward in his chair. “As I said before you’ll be locked up here until you see the Magistrate. He will decide whether you have a case to answer and if so you will go to court charged with theft and possibly vagrancy, since you have no home to speak of. Both crimes carry a punishment of transportation to Australia for at least seven years.” There is a roaring in my ears and my legs give out, the constable grabbing my arm just before I fall over.

“’stralia?” He nods. I’ve heard of people being sent there as punishment for their crimes and once you leave you don’t ever come back to Ireland.

“But me family don’t know what’s ’appened. They’re waitin’ for me ta come ’ome.”

“Well you should’ve thought of that before you stole ’em paters!”

“*I DIDN’T STEAL NOTHIN’!*” I shout and the constable slaps my cheek hard, my head snapping back as I bite my tongue.

“*THAT’S ENOUGH!*” the governor roars, banging his fist on the desk and jumping to his feet as I sway, my ears ringing and cheek stinging. “Guard, go and find the matron and send her to me immediately. Constable, unchain the prisoner and then you’re dismissed.”

“Aye, Sir.” The constable frowns and takes off my chains,

leaving with the guard, the door slamming behind him.

The governor sits back down. “Mary, we need to measure you and get the rest of your details. Come over here, please.” I follow him to the corner where he pulls out a piece of string to measure my height. “Five foot six.” He makes his way back across the room to write the answer in the book as I follow behind. “When and where were you born?”

“February fourteen. I’m fifteen.”

“1819.” The man looks up at me and I shrug, not sure of the year I was born. “Are you married?” The quill hovers over the page, a drop of ink about to drop onto the page. “Are you married?” I start at the repeated question and take my eyes off the quill.

“No.”

“Where were you born and what is your trade or occupation?”

“I was born and work on our farm.” The governor writes my answers in the book but stops when my belly makes a loud sound in the quiet room.

“When did you last eat?” His voice is quiet in the grand room as I think about his question, realising my dress is now almost dry and I’m now warm.

“Umm, yesterday mornin’.”

“Everyone’s eaten but I will ask matron if there is any left over.”

“Thank you, Sir.” I stare at a spot on the table, trying to hold back the tears, swallowing the lump in my throat at the kindness.

The man clears his throat and gets back to his questions. “Can you read and write?” I shake my head.

“Are you able to sign your name?” I shake my head again. “If you aren’t able to sign I still need you to make a mark.” He turns the book around, pushing it across the table to me, handing the quill over after dipping it in ink. I stare in fear at the long feather, taking it clumsily in my fist, having never held one. The page in front of me is covered in black marks, the governor’s finger pointing to where to put my mark. I wrap my fingers near

the end of the quill, trying not to get ink on my hands, and place the tip of the pen to the paper, making a thick blob on the page before handing the quill back.

There is a knock at the door and a plump older woman limps in. Her hair is hidden by a scarf, thick ankles showing below her long black skirt and apron, heavy shoes on her feet.

“Matron, this is Mary O’Connor. She will be seeing the Magistrate in the next couple of days and possibly going to court next Wednesday.” The matron stops beside me, the smell of sweat reaching my nose a moment later. “Mary, you will be kept in a cell with the other female prisoners until you go on trial. Tonight you will have a bath, your hair will be cut and you will be given clothing. You must do exactly as you are told as any misbehaviour will be reported to the Magistrate. Do you understand?”

“Aye, Sir.” I say quietly, trying to breathe through my mouth because of the smell of the matron.

“Matron, I am sensible dinner has already been served. Is there any left for Mary?”

“There’ll be some scraps left.” The matron glances at me a moment before turning back to the governor. I know I should be thankful I have food and somewhere to sleep tonight but all I can think of is my family and what they’re doing.

“ere’s your duds.” Bumps cover my skin as I dry myself after my first ever bath. The breeze on my neck reminds me the matron hacked off most of my hair with blunt scissors which was almost enough to make me cry. The water was cold and filthy dirty, mud from my body mixing with dirt left by others before me. Once my wet clothes are off the matron hands me gaol clothes and a blanket, and I flinch as a rank smell reaches my nose. Holding my breath I close my eyes and step into the petticoat and skirt that stick to my wet skin, trying not to think

of what happened to the last lass who wore them.

“Don’t worry, child, you’ll git your own clothin’ back soon enough.” The matron is gruff but speaks kindly, having seen the look on my face, grunting as she picks up my tatty dirty old dress, the last thing left from home.

“‘ere you go.” I finish tying the scarf on my head as she comes back from the door holding a bowl of food and a piece of bread hard as rock. “You need ta eat in ‘ere as meals is served in the cells and the lags’ve already supped tonight.” She hands me the bowl and a dented metal spoon, chunks of vegetable floating in the clear broth. My belly rumbles as I take a spoonful of the plain soup, the first food I’ve had in almost two days and the first bread for years. I swallow the food down quick as I can, thankful to have something in my belly other than potatoes.

As we walk back down the hall, gas lights on the wall flicker uneven in the dark and I jump as a voice screams from behind a door, my heart loud in my ears. I feel safe between the turnkey and matron now I’m used to her smell, her grand shape making a queer shadow on the rough stone wall. We stop at a door half-way up the passage and the turnkey takes off my chains before unlocking the door using a key at his waist. “Go on.” The turnkey pushes me into the dark room and the door closes behind me with a bang.

CHAPTER 3

I can't see much as the only light in the room's from a wee barred window high on the far wall. The smell of unwashed bodies and chamber pots is so strong I gag as I wait for my eyes to get used to the dimness, grand shapes spread through the room I guess to be other lasses. Something scratches the floor near me and shadows move across the room as I feel eyes staring at me.

"I've been waitin' fer this!" The low voice is close behind me and I spin round to see a short lass scowl at me, black eyes flashing in the dim light topped by stringy, black hair cut uneven to her shoulders. Her eyes are hard and she pokes me in the chest making me stumble back and nearly trip over. "By gad." She stalks toward me again but I've nowhere to go as there's people sitting on the ground behind me. She stands so close I can't escape her rotten breath and before I can move out of the way she lunges, knocking everything I'm holding to the floor. As I bend to pick up my things she throws herself on me, pushing me to the ground as she bashes me over and over. She's stronger than she looks and I curl up to protect my head as she keeps hitting my back and legs.

"Deirdre." Someone calls from far away, their voice faint as

she keeps hitting me. “*Deirdre, stop!*” The voice is panicked but the punches slow and finally stop. I open my eyes to see a lass dragging my attacker away. “What you doin’? You’ll git into a scrape if you ’urt ’er.” She speaks angrily, the lass who hit me standing in front of my rescuer with her hands on her knees breathing heavy. I struggle to sit up, gasping at the sharp pain in my chest and legs, hoping my ribs aren’t broke.

None of the women come to help me so I stay sitting with my arms wrapped round me, waiting for the pain to ease. After a while I lay my blanket on the stone floor and crawl onto it, thankful that at least I’ve a roof over my head tonight.

A loud, hacking cough distracts me and through the dark I see the shape of a lass lying on one of the straw beds. She coughs again and tosses and turns on her bed. A coughing fit takes hold of her and she curls up moaning, gasping for air as memories of my mam come flooding back.

I barely notice the freezing February air or the screaming babby in my arms. I can’t stop watching mama lying on a bed of straw at the other end of our mud cabin, thrashing and moaning in the grip of a fever. I felt her brow a short time since and it seemed her frail body might burst into flame at any moment. The flickering candlelight glows across da. He’s normally a tall, strong man but now stoops over ma with a dazed expression.

Da drags himself away from mam’s side. “Mary, I’m goin’ ta fetch the ’ealer ta see your mam. She’s gittin’ worse.” Even though he speaks to me, da’s eyes are fixed on mama. “Can you look after everyone while I’m gone?”

“Aye, Da.”

“Thank you,” he says, brushing my shoulder and rushing out the door. Mama’s been sick for a week since she gave birth to my brother. The day after the babby was born mam got a fever, sore throat and vomiting which has been getting worse, the smell of illness all through the cottage.

“Mawy.” Four-year-old twins Patrick and Catherine try to get my attention over the babby’s screams by tugging on my grey woollen skirt, nearly pulling it off my narrow hips. The babby’s wail ain’t stopped since it was born and I’ve had to care for it as mama has been too sick, feeding it with a cloth dipped in water as we’ve no milk.

“MAWY!” The twins scream louder, jumping up and down trying to get me to answer them.

“Food. I want food. I ’ungwy!” Patrick has a strong grip on my skirt and won’t let go, each tug pulling it further down.

“Patrick, let go.” I grab my skirt with my free hand to stop it falling to the floor. “I’ll start supper soon as I change the babby and git it ta stop crying.” He stops shouting and lets go after glaring at the child in my arms.

“Ahhhhh.” Mama’s moans interrupt us as she tosses and turns feverishly on the bed, throwing the thin blankets off her body. Bouncing the unsettled babby on my hip, I take a clean cloth and dip it in water, heading over to mama and wetting her forehead hoping this eases her fever.

“Eileen, could you take the babby while I git supper on?” My ten-year-old sister stops talking to Thomas, nodding and coming over to let me hand the babby over, leaving both hands free for the first time all day.

We’ve long finished dinner when da bursts through the door followed by the healer, both of them rushing to mama’s side.

“Nooooo Catherine!” Dada’s cry is wrenched from his chest as he sees mama is worse than when he left to hurry the few miles to fetch the healer. She’s no longer sensible of her surroundings and don’t hear him call her name. The healer moves up to da’s shoulder and they bend their heads close together as the tall, dark-haired man checks mama over.

The children are slow to settle for the night and it’s much later when I’m able to check on Ma. I don’t remember the healer leaving and da hasn’t moved, still kneeling beside her bed, his whiskered face bowed and hands clasped in his lap, too scared to touch her frail body should he bruise her.

“Da,” I whisper but get no response. I touch his shoulder gently

and look at him closely in the dim light, shocked to see tears running down his face. I've never seen da cry but he crumples before me now, a broken man.

"What's wrong with Mama?" I ask softly, not sure I want to know.

"Childbed fever. It's spread through 'er body and there's nothin' ta be done." His whispered voice barely carries to me and my breath catches as his words hit me like a blow to the chest. Ma's going to die. A sob escapes as I sink to my knees on the wet, dirty straw beside Da. We wrap our arms round each other as we cry for the woman whose spirit has left the husk of a body lying before us. I blindly reach out to clutch mama's hand and pray silently for a miracle.

The furze in the stove has burned down to embers, leaving the room dark as I try to keep my eyes open so as not to miss a moment with mama. The frozen floor and bitter air chills me and my bones ache. I hold ma's wee, calloused hand in both of mine. Her hands tell the story of her life: hard work on the land and spinning wool to make extra money and clothes for her family. At nearly fifteen I'm already taller than her, my knotted brown hair the only thing we have the same.

The chill wakes me. My eyes fly to ma lying still on the bed. I shake her shoulder gently and watch her chest to see she's still breathing. She's not. I nudge da who stirs beside me and opens his eyes, confusion clearing as he lifts his head to meet my gaze. His eyes drift to the bed and he lets out a whimper, pulling mama to his chest, rocking her lifeless body backwards and forwards, murmuring to her over and over again, 'Me sweet Catherine.'

I swallow the tears, the pain in my heart worse than the pain in my ribs, remembering how broken da was after mama passed.

"What you lookin' at?" Deirdre catches me staring at the sick lass and I turn away, not wanting to anger her more.

Darkness has fallen outside and most of the women have settled on their beds for the night, laughing and telling stories. The pain in my ribs makes me hiss quietly every time I move my

arms and legs. As I'm lying on my blanket I've nothing to cover me and by the time the morning comes I know I'll be freezing and exceeding sore. I have no more tears, pain the only thing left, and even this fades as I drift off into the dark.

A ringing bell wakes me in the early morning, light shining through the window and the smell of full chamber pots mixing with the smell of unwashed bodies.

"Quick, call matron!" a lag calls out in a worried voice as she shakes the lass who'd been coughing during the night. People sit up to watch but no one goes to help. "Someone git the dubsman, quick!" The same lag shouts again and the chum nearest the door climbs up, ringing the bell on the wall. Footsteps hurry down the passage toward us, a key scraping in the lock and a sliver of light creeping into the room with the man.

"What's wrong?" It's the same turnkey as I had yesterday and he breathes heavy as he locks the door behind him.

"Tis Eileen, I can't rouse 'er." The turnkey steps over beds to the still lass lying on her side. "I'll fetch matron and we'll take her ta the infirmary, then." He slips out as quick as he came, fading footsteps tapping fast against the stone floors of the hall.

"Roisin, what you in the lumber fer?" The other lags in the cell sit together in a corner as I stay on my blanket, too scared to go closer. Deirdre stays apart from the group watching me out of the corner of her eye. The sun shining through the window chases the morning chill away, dust dancing in the light. The lass called Roisin is the one who called for help this morning. She reminds me of a mouse with wee dark eyes and a nose and mouth always twitching.

"I was workin' as a 'ousemaid and me mistress 'ampered me claimin' some plate when I thought she was out. She slapped me and turned me in. Scratch an itch! After all I'd done fer 'er." The women all shake their heads at Roisin's bad luck as I try to guess what she's talking about, not having heard most of

the words before. “ow bout you, Niamh?” Roisin asks the lass who’d asked her.

“The same as most, ta be sure, in fer a vamp. I filed the cly of a flash-cove but ’e was awake ta it and boned me.” Niamh shrugs her shoulders – it’s like they’re talking another language and I have trouble understanding what they’re saying. “You want ta ask Deirdre what she’s in fer. She’s got a story, ta be sure.” Niamh nods toward Deirdre as I listen close, not sure if I want to know why she’s in the bridewell.

“Come on Deirdre, what they get you fer? Blow the gaff.” Deirdre ignores Roisin and turns to face the wall, folding her arms across her chest. Roisin turns back to Niamh, “Tell us then, we all want ta know.” Niamh gazes uncertainly over to Deirdre and lifts an eyebrow in question getting a nod in answer.

“Well,” she begins talking, leaning forward and lowering her voice so I can just hear her without moving closer. Everyone else is silent, watching Niamh and waiting for her to speak. “She put someone’s lights out ta hear it told – you’ve never seen the likes of it.” Most of the women gasp, their eyes wide in surprise at the news.

“Jasus – you fecken killed someone?” I feel dizzy at the words and a chill passes through me knowing my life depends on me being able to stay as far away from the lag as I can.

Everyone is resting on their beds when the bell rings again and a key rattles in the lock. The matron brings breakfast and I wait for the others to get their food before shuffling to the door where I’m served a lumpy spoon of porridge. I carefully lower myself to my blanket and try to swallow the tasteless oats, my ribs hurting with each movement.

“Not good enough fer you?” Deirdre stands in front of me holding her bowl, sneering. I worry she’s going to kick the bowl out of my hands, holding it tight to my chest and ignoring the sharp pain in my ribs.

“’tis.” I look down wishing she would go away.

“Deirdre, leave Mary alone.” Deirdre’s eyes widen as matron calls out and Niamh appears, waiting to pull the bully back if needed. Deirdre glares once more at my food and then back to the matron who is still watching her, stepping slowly away with Niamh close behind. I let out the breath I’d been holding and eat the rest of my porridge, sensible of Deirdre’s eyes on me from across the room.