CONNEMARA RANCH

Cahal Dunne

PROLOGUE

My name is Liam O'Donaghue, horse trainer, musician, lover of the arts, businessman, and most importantly, a man getting a second chance to be a husband and father.

I had the misfortune to live during Ireland's greatest catastrophe — the Irish Famine. In 1847, there wasn't a scrap of food available there, at least not for Catholics. I was caught stealing food to save my family from slowly starving to death, and for that "crime", I was exiled for life to a horse farm in Fremantle, Australia, England's newest colony. Learning everything there was to know about horse breeding, I escaped, thanks to my Aboriginal friend Kumba.

After some time whale hunting, I worked digging the "Bathurst Goldfields," near Sydney. There I made what some people think was one of the greatest gold discoveries in Australian history.

From the moment I was exiled, I was obsessed with escaping and making my way back to Ireland to find my wife and son and bring them to America. After seven years, I made the long trip home, and, despite everything they and our families had endured, I found them still alive.

At our wonderful reunion, the landlord's son Edward tried to prevent our escape and came to an untimely demise. Chased by British Redcoats to a rain-slicked pier on Galway Bay, with the help of our local friends and neighbors, our families made a hasty escape on a hired cattle ship. "Borrowing" two of Edward's finest horses, and, finally free, we began our journey to a new life in America.

ONE

Liverpool, England
May 1854

"Is it going to be like this every night Liam?" asked Josie. "Yes Mam it is, but don't eat everything on the table, or you'll be twice the size you are now when ya get to America."

"Liam's right," said Máire, "I remember the Kitcheners' talking about lots of their friends dying from the rich foods they ate, not to mind all their drinkin'. Sure they could barely walk, some of 'em, so take it easy on those rich foods, or your stomach will start talkin' to ye."

When the waiter served Josie her first course, she was stunned — imagine someone calling her ma'am! Liam smiled. Big Tomás had never seen an upright piano before, and was fascinated by the skill of the pianist. Unfamiliar with the lovely music filling the room, he listened intently, intuitively grasping the depth of its beauty. Like father, like son.

"Harry is better than him," said young Tomás. "He's very good, but Harry plays it better. I miss him."

Máire gave him a loving hug. "So do I Tomásheen; so do I."

Young Tomás recognized the difficult classical pieces the pianist played, and remembered how Harry played them effortlessly in the Kitcheners' grand parlor. The Kitchener mansion had been his second home almost all his life, so he felt the most comfortable of them all as they dined at the well-appointed table. Fashionably attired in wardrobes Liam had bought them just hours before, on the greatest shopping trip of their lives, they looked like every other passenger seated in the ornate dining room. Even so, they still felt self conscious and very much out of place.

Órla took in this strangely beautiful sight. "'Tis like a dream," she whispered. "Are we really here?"

Just two weeks before, they'd barely escaped capture thanks to their brave neighbors. As the soldiers raced to the ship to prevent it from pulling away, they'd blocked the pier entrance with their donkey carts, giving them vital seconds to inch away from the pier. Liam had hired Captain Baynard for the journey from Galway to Liverpool. Having lost his only son to deportation, Baynard had his own grudge against the Crown and bravely refused orders to drop anchor. Liam forced Edward Kitchener, their hated English landlord, onto the ship and placed him at the rear of the boat, right in the sightline of

the soldiers. Liam knew they'd never fire at the very person they were in Ireland to protect. But the English captain had just arrived from England and didn't recognize Edward, whom he mistakenly assumed was an Irish rebel. He ordered his soldiers to fire, killing Edward, and by the time they had reloaded, the boat was out of firing range.

It had been an utterly grueling journey to Liverpool, sleeping on the damp deck of the cattle ship and shivering in the cold May weather. But it also gave everyone the chance to share the amazing stories of survival and sacrifice they had endured these past seven years. Everyone was equally astonished at Liam's rags-to-riches story, hearing of all his many adventures, and learning how crucial Kumba, his Aboriginal brother, had been to his very survival. None of them, however, had any idea of the extent of Liam's wealth.

Liam's extraordinary wrestling moves against Edward back at the church, had made him an instant hero of young Tomás and of Nora and Diarmuid Donnelly's two teenage sons.

"Will ya teach us how to do some of that fighting stuff?" young JohnJo asked one morning.

"Okay so, have ye the time now?" He'd seen how bored they were every day with nothing to do and nowhere to go.

"Yes," they replied excitedly.

Liam looked around and saw a part of the deck free of ropes and sails. "All right lads, follow me."

Looking into their eager faces, he explained, "It's called folk wrestling. The whole purpose of it is to get the other person down on the floor and keep him from getting up again. Packie, you go first. Okay, stand here an' I'll show ya a move."

Liam thought about which move would be the easiest to teach them first and decided on the 'single leg takedown.' Packie stood a few feet from him and, before he could utter a word, Liam had him on the floor. The boys were amazed.

"Okay so," said Liam smiling humbly, "now I'll show ya how you can do it to me." Packie meekly rose to his feet. "Okay, Packie, come at me as fast as ya can and grab behind this knee with both hands."

Packie did exactly as he was told and got his hands around Liam's right leg. "Good man, that's very good. Now grab it as hard as you can and push your head into my chest." Packie did it. "Now straighten up your body all the way from your shoulder down to your knee, like you're kneeling saying the rosary. That's good," encouraged Liam. "Keep yer leg as straight as ya can,

and don't have any space between me and your body. Come on, push in as far as you can. Now use your other leg to drag yerself up onto your feet and push me back as fast as ya can."

Packie pushed hard, and with just one leg free, Liam lost his balance and landed on the deck with a loud thump. The families gathered to enjoy the action, and each time the boys landed Liam on his back, they applauded and cheered. In a few hours, the boys had practiced dropping Liam so many times, that his back was killing him. They were thrilled.

"Okay," said Liam, "we'll do another bit tomorrow, and every day 'til we land," *if ye don't kill me first,* he thought!

Máire was delighted to watch Liam bond with his son again, and glad to see the boys kept busy for a few hours every day practicing their new skills. "Lads, at this rate, you'll be able to beat me by the end of the week," said Liam. They all laughed, knowing he was joking.

"All right, maybe not by the end of the week, but I promise ye, if ye continue to work hard at learning to read and write on the way to San Francisco, I'll give ye a lesson every day, and then you'll definitely be able to beat me."

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As they sailed up the Mersey River, cold, wet and hungry, they saw a forest of tall masts and extensive docks lined with huge warehouses in Liverpool's busy harbor. Liam noticed the strong contrast between the naval port of Southampton, and the import-export, industrial-driven port of Liverpool. Fortunately, as they had the tide with them and ship traffic was light, they didn't have a long wait to dock. Once alongside the quay, Captain Baynard secured his little sailing ship and lowered the gangway.

On an opposite dock, hundreds of emigrants were disembarking from a large ship. Intent on getting off, they were pushing and shoving in a chaotic free-for-all. Liam noticed customs officers inspecting people's belongings in the larger ships and was relieved that they ignored Captain Baynard's humble little boat. In his once-fine clothes, now ruined after sleeping in them for a week, Liam knew he would have had a hard time explaining what he was doing with such a huge treasure of gold coins, especially sailing on a ship from Ireland.

Observing the throngs of people, Liam spotted the usual tricksters running up and down the docks, preying on the vulnerable, and trying to relieve them

of whatever meager treasure they might have. He had seen it all in the Bathurst goldfields.

"Yea, they're called 'runners'," said Captain Baynard. "Stay a mile away from 'em. Use yer fists if ya have to. They'll rob ya blind, so they will."

Eager to get off the ship after a week's sailing, and having managed, mostly, to avoid seasickness from the constant rocking and swaying, the two families promptly discovered their sea legs. As they walked gingerly down the shaky, rotting gangway and onto welcome land, they felt a swaying sensation, as if they were still on the boat. A bit dazed, they stood in the rain and waited as Colm and Kumba walked the horses safely off the rickety gangway. They watched busy sailors and dock workers scattered everywhere, shouting orders and exchanging insults with their colleagues.

"The main booking office for ships to New York is in St. George's Building in the center of Liverpool." said Captain Baynard. "It's a carriage ride, I'm afraid. Go up to St. George's Hall. That's where all the agents are." As Liam paid him for the return trip to the docks, they smiled, shook hands and exchanged farewells. "Good luck, mate," said Captain Baynard.

Liam was disappointed to learn that Captain Baynard had been right. He'd said that he thought ships had to sail to New York first, and then on to San Francisco. He walked along the bustling agents' front windows, advertising their companies' ships and schedules, each line vying for transatlantic business. A sign over a rather dilapidated office caught his eye: SAIL TO NEW YORK IN 21 DAYS.

"It's sailing in eight hours!" said an excited man, flashing his ticket as he exited.

Liam walked on and saw an even more promising window sign: STEAM FROM NEW YORK TO SAN FRANCISCO IN 40 DAYS. *This would cut our sailing journey to less than half,* he thought. Entering, he saw travelers and families standing in several lines seeking information about routes, costs and schedules from harried agents. The walls were decked with detailed maps and large, colorful posters advertising luxury ships. An opulent office, its mahogany counters and marble floors reflected the company's obvious success. Liam took a place in the shortest queue, and when he reached the front of the line, the agent explained options. "Sir, you have two choices: sail to New York, then around Cape Horn to San Francisco, or take the much shorter route on a steamship from New York, crossing over the land mass known as the Isthmus of Panama. It separates the Atlantic and Pacific oceans in South America. There, you'll cross a fifty-five mile piece of land by rail,

barge, and mule. Then you'll board a different ship and steam to San Francisco."

Hearing that this route included mules, Liam thought of his parents. "Does this mean riding on mules, or does it mean riding in carts pulled by mules?"

"It means riding on them, sir."

"How many miles?"

"Right now, approximately ten, sir."

Liam figured they could probably manage that with lots of stops, but he could already hear his mother cursing the entire way: *"For God's sake, Liam, we didn't have much back home — a donkey, yes, but at least we didn't have to ride on him!"*

"When is the next ship taking that route?" asked Liam.

"In ten days, sir," said the agent.

"Do you have six saloon cabins available?" The man checked his papers.

"Sorry, sir, we only have one left."

"What about second cabins?"

He checked again. "I'm afraid we only have three available right now, but we have plenty of steerage tickets."

Liam's enthusiasm waned; he stood there considering everything he had just heard — a ten-day wait and likely having to put two adults and the young lads into steerage. He remembered the advice his mother always gave: "When in doubt, do nothing." There were many times when he hadn't taken her advice, and, in hindsight, he had to admit that she was nearly always right. This time, he decided to listen to her. He now knew that most ships leaving Liverpool sailed or steamed first to New York, then onto San Francisco, mostly due to the ongoing California gold rush. He hadn't much time to learn about and weigh the pros and cons of various routes and ships, and to make an informed choice about what ship to engage for the trip to San Francisco.

Liam knew that there was no way he could put anyone in steerage, so he returned to the office offering a clipper ship to San Francisco, set to sail in just eight hours. Entering the building, Liam saw that, compared to where he had just been, there was absolutely nothing aesthetically pleasing about it. The office was packed with people booking passage. Despite the morning's chill and dampness, the body odors from people cramped together was assaultive. Hopeful passengers stood in four lines to work their way up to the ticket desks, while several burly security men stood watch, ready and able to

handle any trouble. Liam got into one of the lines and made his way slowly to the ticket window. Since huge amounts of money were being handed over, each counter was heavily fortified with strong steel bars. These could be closed quickly if needed — an attempted robbery, for instance. Liam was served by a friendly ticketing clerk representing the ship built for the St. George Line — the Racer. Liam liked the name immediately.

"Do you have six saloon class cabins for fifteen people for San Francisco?"

"No sir, we only have two saloon-class cabins left, but we do have six second-class cabins available."

Liam was crestfallen, his big surprise ruined. Stroking his thick beard, trying to decide who'd get the saloon-class cabins, he cried out, "No no no… nooo!"

"May I ask, sir," said the clerk, "are you all men?"

"No, we're a couple of families."

"Well sir, they won't allow women and children in the saloon-class dining room without a man or men present. No exceptions. I'm afraid it's company policy, sir."

Liam was gobsmacked — the social hierarchy of Victorian society still ruled. "Can second-class cabin families eat together?"

"Definitely, sir."

"And can they walk freely like saloon-class passengers?"

"Yes sir."

"Are the cabins okay? I mean, compared to saloon-class? And how's the food — is it all right?"

"Sir, I can assure you that the rooms are adequate, some shared cabins and amenities of course; the food is excellent, and there's plenty of it."

"Shared cabins?" asked Liam.

"Yes sir, but I think that won't be an issue since there are fifteen of you."

"If I book all the way to San Francisco now, and decide not to continue on once we reach New York, will I get my money back for the rest of the journey to San Francisco?"

The agent smiled, shaking his head. "Sir, I've never been asked that question. The Racer doesn't sail to San Francisco, so we only book you as far as New York. You'll have to book another ship to California."

"How many days 'til we get to New York?"

"Approximately three weeks, sir, depending on the weather."

Liam had to decide quickly whether to wait ten days in Liverpool for the steamship, or to get to New York, and then book a steamship to San Francisco via the Isthmus crossing. Hearing the cost for everybody, he now had another problem. Even though they'd be traveling cabin-class, he hadn't anticipated that he'd be paying for fifteen people from Ireland to San Francisco! Even cabin-class was going to cost him almost everything he had with him. After paying for everybody, he knew he'd be running short of what he'd like to have left. He'd have to get to a bank first thing to get more money for the trip. He was never so glad that he had taken Big Jim's brother Ben's advice to bring a bank draft with him from his San Francisco bank. "You can present this to a correspondent bank anywhere in the world," he'd said, "and they will pay you the stated amount, in the event of any unforeseen circumstances. Bring more than you think you'll need; you never know." Liam laughed, imagining how he'd explain his 'unforeseen circumstances' being fifteen and not three people when he introduced them all in Sacramento!

"Well then, I'll take six cabin-class cabins." Liam insisted that Kumba have his own cabin, and not join JohnJo and Packie.

"You deserve your own cabin, Kumba," said Liam. "You wouldn't have any peace and quiet with those two!" Kumba smiled! He had lots of books he wanted to read.

Much to Liam's relief, since sailing would be later today, the families would avoid the shady lodging houses Captain Baynard had warned him about. "If you're lucky enough to get lodgings, you'd better sleep on your luggage, as they'll rob you blind without your seeing or hearing a thing. They're that good."

Liam returned to the docks, and arranged for the horses to be shipped to New York, then onto San Francisco on a cargo ship. Beaming, he walked everybody through the hectic scene towards the ship. It was quite a walk in this busy hive of harbor activity — avoiding cart-pushing peddlers, sailors running up and down the quay shouting and roaring while carrying all sorts of equipment, and trying to dodge travelers struggling with heavy luggage. For once, they felt fortunate not to have any themselves.

Finally, after passing countless similar-looking docks with sailing and steamships loading and unloading loudly, they saw the Racer — the ship that would take them to New York. They stared in amazement and wanted to pinch each other in disbelief. Before them was an elegant sailing ship with three, strong-looking, perfectly-crafted giant white masts and multiple decks. Liam admired its graceful design, noticing that it had the largest and sharpest

bow he had ever seen. “Look at that,” he said, pointing to the front of the ship with awe. “This will slice through the water.”

“Ah sure Horse, ’twill do I suppose,” joked Colm, grinning.

Liam delighted in hearing his nickname. It was the first time he’d heard it in seven years.

“Let’s go an’ see our cabins,” said Liam. Excited, they walked briskly to the embarkation area.

Seeing their cabin-class tickets, and overlooking everyone’s filthy clothes, the clerk gave Liam and his group the full treatment.

“Welcome aboard,” he said, smiling. “Please go to the poop deck at the stern; your cabins are two decks below.”

Liam, curious as ever, piped up, “Did you say poop deck?”

“Yes sir,” probably explaining the term for the thousandth time. “It comes from the French word ‘la poupe’ meaning stern.” They looked to the rear of the ship and saw a small deck elevated above the main one. Its safety railing offered an unobstructed view for the ship’s officers.

After another careful walk, this time on the main deck to avoid the frenzied activity of a ship about to set sail, they reached their cabins. Liam noticed straightaway that they weren’t as grand as the British packet ship Constance, the ship he and Kumba had sailed on from Australia to San Francisco, but they were reasonably spacious and had a washbasin, a sofa, and satinwood beds draped with damask curtains.

“Mother o’ God Liam,” said an astonished Josie staring from the door of her cabin, “is this all for just us?”

“Yes Mam, ’tis all for you,” smiled Liam.

They marveled at the luxury of their cabins. While cabin-class accommodations were by no means as grand as those in saloon-class, they were more than comfortable and away from the steerage passengers towards the front of the ship, one deck down. Most of them had never known such luxury. As they looked around, astonished at the sheer extravagance of it all, they regarded each other, still in their filthy clothes and felt out of place, inadequate — imposters! Coming from near slavery to this astonishing level of luxury, they stared ahead dazed, clearly lost in thought. Liam well knew that feeling, but much had happened during his seven years away. Now he had hard-won confidence, and he knew they desperately needed a lift.

“Listen, we have eight hours before we sail, so, who wants to go shopping?”

“Shopping?” asked Órla. *What in God’s name is he talkin’ about?* Not one of them had ever bought anything other than the odd potato, a chicken, or buttermilk to survive with the few pennies they had saved. Why would they need to go shopping now that they had everything they needed and more? Confused, they looked to Liam, and he knew exactly what they were thinking.

“Well ladies, I think it’s time to buy you some beautiful dresses. Don’t you want to get out of those clothes and look nice for dinner tonight?”

“A new dress?” gasped Nora, tears welling. She looked down at her filthy, rough cotton dress, and covered her mouth in excited anticipation.

“And lads,”said Liam, “I think it’s time to buy you all some brand new suits, shirts, ties and shoes. Whad’ya think?”

“C’mon Horse,” said Colm, “are ya sure ya have enough gold for all o’ that? Sure that’ll cost a fortune.”

“Yerra,” said Liam in a dead-pan voice, “I have enough all right. Let’s go shopping!”

They were delighted to be able to wash up in the cabin washbasins, asking the stewards frequently for more clean, hot water. Unfortunately, there was nothing they could do about their filthy, smelly clothes, but put them on again.

Soon, they were whisked away in several carriages to the top Liverpool fashion stores on Bold Street. When the carriage drivers dropped them off, Liam knew they wouldn’t be allowed within a mile of the store, once the proprietors saw their grimy attire, so he beckoned a sales assistant to the entrance and handed her what was probably more than a month’s wages. “Look after these ladies well, and there’ll be more when I come back, all right?” The lady was shocked at her unexpected good fortune and began to give the women and girls the royal treatment, bribing the other assistants to turn blind eyes to their appearance and get them out of their clothes as fast as they could.

Exiting the shop, Liam asked the driver of the men’s carriage to bring them to a good men’s clothing store and wait there while he and Colm quickly bought new suits, a few shirts, ties, and shoes. The driver was delighted to have fellow Irishmen in his carriage and assumed that they were rich, shopping on Bold Street. Most immigrants, just off the boat, were dirt poor. Colm barely had time to enjoy the feel of the crisp lightweight linen shirt on his body, a first-ever sensation. And the shoes? The most comfortable he had ever worn! Liam and Colm quickly returned to the carriage.

“Jaysus,” said the driver, shocked by all their new finery, “Where would ye be goin’?”

“To the city center Bank of Liverpool on Water Street.”

The street bustled with the vibrant activity of pedestrians and horse-drawn carriages. From their carriage they saw a pleasant mix of new and older buildings.

“We’re here lads,” said the carriage driver.

The bank was a relatively new, three-story Victorian stone masterpiece of mostly Greek neoclassical design. It was definitely THE building on the street. Again, Liam asked the driver to wait for them. Dapper in their new finery and looking like the privileged patrons there, they walked through the front of the hall housing the agents’ living quarters, and arrived at the banking hall in the building’s center. They saw several agents servicing clients, and stepped in line. At his turn, Liam opened his leather satchel, took out the bank draft issued by his San Francisco bank, and presented it to the agent. Liam assumed that this, being the biggest bank in Liverpool, would be affiliated with his bank, Wells Fargo, which had only recently been founded, primarily for the California gold rush.

Surprised by the amount, the agent asked if they wouldn’t mind waiting until he could consult his supervisor. In short order, an older man arrived, looked at the draft, saw two prosperous-looking young men at the counter, and stamped the draft. Soon, Liam’s satchel was full again. Colm had been absolutely awestruck when the clerk handed his brother such a huge amount of gold. “Mother o’ God Horse, are ya the richest man in the world or what boy?”

Liam laughed, “No no no, nowhere near that, but when we get to Sacramento, I’ll be sharing all of this with you. Remember, I promised ya we’re going to be equal partners in America.”

Colm felt inadequate to the promise, an accidental hanger on. “Sure what do I know? You’ve been learnin’ everthin’ about everthin’. I know nothin’. I have nothin’. How can I help you?”

Liam saw his brother’s look of defeat, and he knew that Colm needed reassurance. After what had happened back in Connemara, they were together again at last. Colm would be vital to Liam, as a trusted family member, possessed of uncanny common sense and the amazing ability to stay calm, literally, as he’d proven in the many storms that would suddenly blow up while he was out fishing for the Kitcheners’ dinner table. He knew that his brother had all the abilities to be an invaluable partner in what Liam hoped

would, with Colm's help, become the finest horse-breeding stud farm in America. "Colm, are ya not the best fisherman in Connemara wha? You kept the family alive when nearly every other family around you died. How d'ya manage that for God's sake? You didn't get evicted. It wasn't just fishing that kept ye all alive. No, it was you able to handle Lord Kitchener and Edward, that bastard of a son of his, no matter what shit they demanded. That's not nothin'," said Liam strongly. "I need you to use all o' that stuff when we get started in Sacramento. You have more common sense in your little finger than many of the successful people I've met these last few years. An' don't forget the big one. You pushed and pushed me to ask Máire out horse ridin' that night. Remember?"

"Yea, I remember all right." And, beginning to feel better about himself, in true Colm style, he cheekily added, "Sure if I hadn't broken me leg, God only knows where we'd be right now boy."

"Now there's the Colm I wanna hear." They laughed as Liam grabbed him roughly around the shoulders, and gave him a brotherly hug.

Exiting the bank, they returned to the waiting carriage where their driver, among his own, was not one bit shy. "PatJo's the name from Sligo lads," he said cheerily, "I'll have ye back to Bold Street in no time at all. Back to where ye dropped the ladies yea?"

As they headed for the ladies' shop, PatJo began a little history lesson. "Liverpool is the turty-turd county of Ireland lads. They say that about a turd of the people living here are Irish. They all came over during the famine, like meself. This place was just a field where they made ropes for the ships a long time ago. At that time, they had to build the street to measure the standard length needed for the ropes from the top o' the street to the bottom, not an inch more or less. Can ya imagine that? Ropewalk they called it," said PatJo brightly. While he spoke over the clatter of his and other carriages on the cobblestones, the brothers noticed impressive mansions with large shopfront windows, many with colorful, billowing skirts on display. "The mansions used to be owned by wealthy people, but they moved farther out of the city so that they could have large gardens. Jaysus they're obsessed about their feckin' gardens so they are," said PatJo dismissively. "Now, the mansions are shops for all the well-to-do like yerselves. And here we are, back where we left your womenfolk," he announced.

Liam and Colm stepped out of the carriage, looked into the shop window, and saw the ladies and girls waiting at the door. Just an hour before, they'd exited their carriages in rags and peered into the shop's windows in disbelief.

On display, were the most beautiful dresses, hats, and shoes they could ever have imagined. And today they had been able to choose anything they wanted. Feeling uniquely liberated, they were able to don dresses of silk and lace in colors of their choosing and, for the first time in their lives, they were privy to the latest fashions and selected from among them. They saw several dresses with low and wide bustlines but chose more ladylike dresses with high necklines, long sleeves and soft sloping shoulders.

After they'd chosen their dresses, the attendants handed each of them a set of drawers leaving the lot of them nonplussed, for they had no idea what they were. All except Máire. Having also served as Lady Kitchener's laundress, she held hers up, mimicked where and how they'd be worn, and then, grinning, sent them into a fit of giggles when she showed them its open crotch. They'd never worn drawers. They'd always worn simple dresses with no undergarments, for there'd simply been no need. Slipping into theirs, they noticed that the garments were long, loose, and hemmed to just below the knee.

Next, the attendant did her best to persuade them to undress so they could try on their new dresses. With lots of giggles from Máire, Órla, and the girls, along with absolute embarrassment and excited anticipation from Josie and Nora, they awkwardly and modestly undressed together for the first time ever. The attendant handed each of them a cotton chemise. "It'll protect your dresses from perspiration," she explained. She then handed corsets to Josie and Nora. Máire was the only one of them who had ever seen one, so she helped both ladies into theirs. They were exactly the same as Elizabeth Kitchener's corsets; cotton with whalebone inserts for stiffening. When she laced them up tightly from the back, Nora screamed, "Jesus Mary and Joseph Máire, you're strangling me. Me, yer own mother. Will ya loosen it or I'll suffocate!" Máire highly regarded Nora and her mother in law, Josie. These women had managed to keep their families fed throughout the worst years of the famine against all odds, always scavenging, often sacrificing their own health and wellbeing to nourish their families, literally getting blood out of turnips. They just wouldn't give up, bravely getting everyone through alive, despite everything that had been cruelly imposed on them. *These are two of the the strongest women I've ever known,* she thought. Her heart warmed to see them now, luxuriating in the completely unexpected experience of selecting fashionable dresses with matching hats and shoes!

"Put on your dresses now ladies," said the attendant. As they did so, Nora and Josie murmured several colorful swear words under their breath.

“C’mere you two,” said Máire, leading them to a full-length mirror. Stepping before it, they stared, shocked by the transformation. There they were with full, bell-shaped dresses whose large skirts gave the illusion of small waists, helped of course by their corsets.

“Will I loosen it so Ma?” asked Máire.

“Don’t you touch me. We’re grand now, aren’t we Nora?” And that was that! Máire laughed as she saw the two ladies bask in their femininity, feeling years younger and a little bit prettier.

Órla loved her rose-hued dress; it gave her milk-white skin a lovely glow. Bríd and Aoife chose ribbons to complement their dresses. They had never had more than a few rags to tie back their beautiful long hair. Máire selected two dresses, shoes, belts and a luxurious, full-length white silk nightgown trimmed with delicate lace, ribbons, and embroidery around the neckline and cuffs.

The surprise shopping trip was an exhilarating, emotion-filled experience for all of them. Despite the unexpected gift of money, there was absolutely nothing the sales assistant could do about the women’s old clothes. They would have to take them with them as they left, or she would be terminated for bringing possibly disease-ridden clothing into the shop.

Liam and Colm waved at them and pointed to the men’s store a few doors down. There, they saw Big and young Tomás, Diarmuid, JohnJo and Packie putting on their first ever brand new, perfectly-fitting suits, clean socks with no holes, and shiny leather shoes. Their feelings of inadequacy slowly gave way to heads held a little bit higher and posture noticeably straighter than just a few minutes before. Kumba was just as well outfitted, but he still wasn’t happy to wear shoes. He hated wearing shoes. Liam paid for everything, and they headed back to the dock.

Aboard ship, after supper that evening, Liam watched them all chatting happily around the large dinner table, the women occasionally smoothing their skirts, trembling with excitement. After that wonderful shopping trip, their anticipation and confidence grew and grew, as they realized that all of this was actually happening — it was real, not a fantastic dream — and they were all well and truly going to America. Liam looked around the table. Everyone who mattered most to him in the world was seated there. After a few moments taking it all in, he rose, smiling confidently. “Look at ye! All of ye! Mother o’ God, I never saw a better sight before me.” Liam faced Máire, taking in her comeliness, still as guileless as the first night he saw her. “Máire, from that first time I set eyes on you, I loved you and only you.” His

voice caught, and he paused for a moment before continuing. “There were so many times I thought I’d never see you again.” He took her hand and kissed it gently. “I know you must have felt the same despair, but you waited Máire. You waited for me all those long, awful years. Thank you.” Liam let out a heartfelt cry and kissed her gently. Tearful, Máire lowered her face and sniffed, shaking and clasping Tomás’ hand. She had prayed and prayed for this moment.

“And Tomás, my son, my precious little boy, everything your mother has told me about you is true. You’re a fine young boy. I’m sorry I missed all those years, but I’m here now Tomás, and I’ll try to be the best father I can be. There’s so much I want to show you in America.” Young Tomás beamed. At the church, he had seen Edward put a deadly chokehold on his father, and then with one swift, beautiful wrestling move, his father had turned the tables on the man he hated, the man who had been Harry’s bully for years. Da was his hero.

“And look at you Ma and Da, sailin’ off to America in all yer grand clothes. When ya get to Sacramento Ma, you can teach them all how to cook those fantastic meals I’ve missed so much.” He smiled at his father. “Da, there’s so much you can teach everyone about farming in California.

And Colm and Órla, I’m so glad it turned out like it did, all of us together. It’s so good to meet your beautiful daughter Cara. Together we’re going to build the best stud farm in America, starting with Kitchener’s two horses.”

Everybody cheered rebelliously. “Colm, there’s such a lot to do, and there’re some fine rivers for you to fish in as well. I think you’ll enjoy them. And we’re going to do it together Colm, just like before.”

Liam looked to his younger sisters. “Bríd and Aoife, I’ve missed you so much. Wait ’til you ride one of Kitchener’s horses with saddles made especially for you.” He nodded his head and smiled as they began thinking eagerly about it.

He regarded Máire’s parents and their sons: “Nora and Diarmuid, JohnJo and Packie, we’re family now, forever. No one will hurt us ever again.”

Then he looked to Kumba at the end of the table, almost as comfortable amidst all the grandeur as young Tomás. *He’s come a long way*, thought Liam. Kumba, now twenty-six years old, standing five feet five, had skin as black as night, blue eyes, and long, matted, slightly-curly blond hair. *I wonder what my family thought when they saw him wield his boomerang!* Liam threw his arms wide open and gave Kumba a heartfelt, respectful bow. “Kumba, you gave up your family to save me. I wouldn’t be here tonight if

you hadn't rescued me from being hanged by Dunsley. It would be absolutely impossible for my family to appreciate how much you sacrificed to rescue me — YOUR family! So welcome to your new family my brother."

When everybody looked to Kumba and cheered, he smiled, his mind drifting back to happier days with his family in Australia. He wondered how they were.

"Everybody back home in Connemara would want us to be happy. Right?"

"Right," they replied.

"So let's drink to our future together okay? Here's to a better life in America for all of us. Slainte," said Liam.

"Slainte mhaith," everybody responded heartily, and with overly-full bellies.

Leaving the dining room, Colm winked at Liam, "Hey Horse, we'll look after Tomás tonight all right?" Liam winked back. Although exhausted, he smiled and wrapped his arm around Máire's waist as they walked to their cabin. He opened the door slowly and stood back for her to enter. The clerk had only one second class cabin left with a porthole, and Liam took it for Máire, Tomás and himself, feeling a little bit selfish. Though the cabin was relatively small, that didn't matter. Not tonight. The intense physical longing they'd felt for each other was overwhelming now. It had been building for two long weeks, privacy lacking entirely.

Rescued by Liam from the ceaseless monotony of her existence in Ireland, and now facing a better life as a family, Máire couldn't believe she was here at last with the love of her life. Finally. Alone. Together. Liam closed the door softly and faced his one and only love, his everything. Tears welling, Máire walked towards him slowly. Cast in a soft moonlight glow, their separation of seven long years was over. They relished the warmth of their bodies as he held her in his strong embrace. "It's been so long." Later, Máire fell asleep in his arms, content that their future in Sacramento was secure.

During their long, cold journey to Liverpool, Liam had told the two families where in America they were going to live. Sacramento. "The Sacramento River," Liam had explained, "was named by a Spanish cavalry officer for the Santissimo Sacramento, the Most Holy Sacrament, the Eucharist."

"Big Jim told me that nothing really happened there until the gold rush in 1848. After that it just exploded."

As she lay just inches away, Liam looked at her beautiful, innocent face, not at all hardened by the toil and cruel indignities she'd endured. He wanted more than anything to stroke her hair, touch her soft skin and make love again. Holding her in his arms, the world was finally right. His love had burned brightly throughout all his years in exile; it was the only thing that had kept him sane. "I heard your voice across the oceans Máire," he whispered. "Those chains have all rusted and crumbled, and you're in my arms again." Eventually they drifted off to sleep.

TWO

“Good morning Mrs. O’Donaghue,” greeted Liam as she opened her eyes. “I brought you a cup o’ tea and some bread.” He kissed her gently as she pulled herself up with a huge yawn. They had loved freely and passionately the night before, finally lifting for each of them the endless darkness of their separation. As he set the tray on her lap, she touched his hand to reassure herself that he was really there.

“’Tis a long, long time since you served me breakfast in bed, Mr. O’Donaghue,” she smiled.

“Sure ’tis only tea and bread, we can join everybody for breakfast in a few minutes when you’re ready.”

She drank her tea and nibbled on the bread quietly for a little while. Then, placing the tray on the bedside table, she reached for Liam’s shirt, and sliding back down into bed, pulled him close, kissing him.

“Thanks for breakfast Mr. O’Donaghue.”

Everyone was there when they got to breakfast and, just as at dinner the night before, they were astounded by all the choices set before them: hot beef and lamb, boiled salted fish, soft boiled eggs, bacon, hot rolls, tea and coffee.

“It sure beats the ould boiled potatoes and buttermilk every morning Ma, wha?” said Colm smiling, as he dug into delicious mutton chops.

“Yea,” said Liam, “’tis all here, three times a day.”

“Mother o’ God,” said Josie shaking her head over such abundance before her, “THREE times a day? All this food?” She looked at her husband Tomás devouring a huge serving of beefsteak, “We’ll be as fat as fools when we get to America! I can’t eat anything today; me stomach’s screaming at me.”

“Well Ma, I told ya about that rich food, remember?” said Liam. “The trick is ya have to learn to say ‘no’ to a lot of it, okay?”

Seeing the bounty of food set before her, Órla asked, “No?” She was shocked at Liam’s absurd answer, as if he were mad. “Sure we can’t say ‘no’ to all this food; we have to eat it in case ’twill be gone tomorrow.”

Liam understood Órla’s concern. All their lives, the first thought every day was, *Will we have enough food to stay alive today? And, if we’re blessed to have it, we’ll eat it as fast as we can, because there’s no guarantee it’ll be there tomorrow*. “I want to tell ye all somethin’,” said Liam smiling confidently. “None of you will ever go hungry again. Never again,” he repeated strongly. “Those days are behind us now. There was plenty of food last night, and as ye can see, plenty today, and there’ll be plenty tonight,

tomorrow and the next day and the next. I know it's hard to believe that you'll never have to worry about being hungry ever again, but I promise you all, you won't. When I sailed to Australia, I couldn't believe it myself, the idea of having enough food to eat every day. We're free now. Nobody will ever stop us from growing our own crops and having our own horses and cows in Sacramento. Yesterday is gone forever. We're not going back to Ireland where we were poor and hungry all the time. We're going to America. The Americans fought the British for their freedom and they kicked them out seventy-five years ago." Everybody gave a hushed rebellious yell. "So, enjoy your breakfast, and leave enough room in your bellies for dinner. There's plenty more where that came from."

They began to believe more and more that they were finally free from their former daily existence, and that there actually was a promising future in store for them in America.

After breakfast they went for their first long walk on the main deck, enjoying the bracing sea air as the clipper, catching the wind in perfect sailing conditions, made strong headway with its full spread of three impressive sails unfurled.

"This is somethin' isn't it, Da?" asked Colm, impressed with the beauty of the sparkling new ship slicing through the water at speeds he'd never thought possible.

"Mother o' God," said Big Tomás, "I never saw anything like it." He took in the hive of activity before him — sailors everywhere handling the lines and sails. "Look at 'em all running up and down the masts. I never saw so much rope. 'Tis everywhere, and it's not just three big sails like I thought. There must be a hundred small square sails on each mast, all different sizes. Can you see 'em? And they're using the ropes to control it all."

"And look at the size of the masts," marveled Diarmuid. "Where on earth did they get trees that tall? Not Connemara."

"'Tis a wonder for sure," said Colm, nodding his head in admiration.

They began to walk towards the rear of the ship, but were stopped about half way by a young steward. "Folks, this is the steerage section," he said, surprised that, although they could see the people's ragged clothes, they would actually want to enter their area. His job was to keep steerage passengers from entering the first and second class areas, not the other way around. "For your own sake folks, I don't think you should go any farther. In Liverpool, they don't check carefully to see if any of them are sick," said the American steward.

Seeing their haunted, impoverished famine faces, the families began to feel guilty about being “on the other side”, as the “haves” and not the more familiar feeling of the “have nots.” They didn’t know what to do, except feel pity. They could clearly see the spectral hunger in their eyes, and they knew there were a lot more of them than there were travelers in the first and second class quarters.

“Are you going on to San Francisco?” asked the steward.

“Yes,” they answered.

“Well, steerage passengers have to go through a medical and legal inspection in New York before they board. They have regulations there to prevent the spread of diseases, so it’ll be much safer to walk the whole deck then.”

“Thank you,” said Liam, knowing only too well that the steward was absolutely right. “Listen,” he said, gathering everybody around him, “you heard what he said. We’ve gotten this far okay? I don’t want any of you getting sick now before we get to New York. We’ll all have to be very careful until then all right? And once we leave New York, sure we can bring some of our food to them, nicer stuff like those apple tarts and things, and I’m sure they wouldn’t say no to some whiskey either yea? And look, it’s not as bad as it was for the poor souls who left during the famine. They had nothing but the clothes on their backs aboard those coffin ships, no food, no blankets, and they weren’t allowed up on the decks every day like these people. And the captains? Those bastards didn’t give a damn about whether they lived or died. These people brought food with them at least, and it’s only three weeks to New York now, instead of three long months back then.” They began to feel better knowing they could help their countrymen with their newfound fortune.

Changing the mood quickly Liam said, “We can’t stay on the ship while it’s in New York. Everybody has to get off, so we’re going to see a little bit of the city.” Everybody brightened.

“Mother o’ God Josie,” said Big Tomás, “did ya ever think we’d get to New York, and at our age?”

“Maybe we can visit Paudie and Una Casey,” said Josie hopefully. “I think they’re somewhere in New York, an’ I’m sure Paudie and Siobhan would love to hear how they’re doing.”

Liam smiled at Josie’s innocence. “’Tis a very big place Ma,” he said gently, “and ’tis packed with people. I don’t think we’d be able to find them in just a few days, and sure they might have moved on even.”

Suddenly they heard shouting coming from the steerage section, and they were shocked to see JohnJo and Packie fighting with a couple of lads about their age. They saw their boys pinning two lads to the floor exactly as Liam had taught them, and then they saw several other boys rushing in to help pull "the invaders" off their friends, landing a few punches and kicks of their own.

Liam and Colm rushed over to intervene, but were stopped once again by the steward. Ordinarily, this wouldn't deter Liam, but he remembered the steward's advice about staying away from steerage due to the threat of disease. Everybody quickly formed a circle around the fighting boys and cheered for their own. They had seen two well-dressed boys stupid enough to enter their section and assumed that they were English — so, hit first and ask questions later — a sweet and very rare moment of unexpected retribution.

Thankfully a few other stewards appeared and broke up the fight before anyone was seriously hurt. JohnJo and Packie staggered unsteadily back to their parents, one with a bloody nose and the other holding his eye, grimacing in pain.

"Jesus Mary and Joseph," screamed Nora, "didn't ye hear the man telling ye not to go over there?"

"What man?" Packie shouted back in anger.

"I heard nobody," said JohnJo, almost crying.

"They must have slipped by the steward when he was talking to us," said Máire, staunching Packie's bloody nose with her handkerchief.

"Don't ye ever do that again or I swear to God I'll kill ye myself," growled Nora.

That night at dinner, they looked around at the other passengers, mostly eating in silence, joyless, barely touching their food, making the odd comment.

Colm saw pure boredom, "Look at 'em. Some of 'em are still miserable, even with all their money. Look at that ould one over there. She looks like she was dragged through a hedge backwards!"

Órla and Cara giggled to each other, burying their faces in their hands.

"Now now be nice," said Liam, and then he let out a huge uncontrollable belly laugh, causing the entire table to erupt into a fit of openhearted laughter. Liam was back amongst his own, and it felt good. The other diners, amused by this spirited laughter, were envious of their gaiety. Ironically, unable to discern a single word, they were unaware that the laughs were at their expense, as the families were speaking in Irish.

Bringing them back to the present, Liam announced with a serious tone, “Ye have a lot to learn in the next few months okay? I want ye all to read and write better and to learn more and more English. Even you, Josie and Nora.” Hearing this, the women looked at each other and burst out laughing nervously.

“Are ye gone mad Liam?” Josie exclaimed in utter disbelief. “Sure how could we do that at our age?”

Liam got serious. “The same way Kumba did it Ma, practice, practice, practice. I’ll find a teacher for ye. I want everyone to do yer best in America, and ye have to be able to read and write and speak English. Ye’ll be all the better for it, I promise ye.”

He turned to his father, “So Da, I’ll have to get ya another squeezebox. I’m sorry ya had to leave your one behind.”

“Yerra that’s all right Liam. I hope JohnJo Dineen will take it. I hope he knows I’d like him to have it. Sure his one was nearly dead. I s’pose I’ll be busy enough myself for a while anyway, learning to read and write. It’s time I s’pose. It was a beauty though,” he said with a wry smile.

“So, we’ll take it easy ’til we get to New York. Then we’ll start okay?” Liam recognized that familiar, disinterested shrug from everybody. It was exactly the same reluctance he’d seen when prisoners aboard the Australia-bound Mermaid were told that they had to attend school every day. He knew he had his work cut out for him.

A few nights later they were brutally awakened by a vicious storm. Luggage, furniture, anything not tied down, was tossed around as the sound of heavy waves pounding the ship, terrified them all. They could hear the cracking and groaning of the wooden hull under extreme stress. This was nothing like some of the extreme storms Liam had experienced on his voyage to Australia, but it was thrilling for many of the passengers who hurried up to the main deck to witness their first storm at sea. Holding onto the railing tightly, they watched the waves kicking up furiously as the ship cut through the water, throwing up huge amounts of spray and drenching everybody. They saw that all the top-most sails were furled, to prevent them from being torn apart. The huge masts creaked, as thunderous, heavy waves washed over the deck, making it wet, slippery and dangerous.

Eventually they made their way back to their cabins, grasping railings to keep their balance. Máire saw Liam’s worried look.

“Maybe I made a mistake booking this ship. If it’s going to be like this all the way, ’tis very rough going, even in good weather. I don’t know.”

Then, as always, she floored him with her unique and quick-thinking ability to disarm him: “Don’t you start gettin’ a big head now Mr. O’Donaghue, but if I had to crawl to Sacramento I would — as long as we crawl there together! It’s all right; it’ll calm down. Don’t worry, sure ’tis just a rough patch that’s all.”

Flushed and excited by the ocean’s raw, untamed power, she said, “Maybe Órla and Colm could watch Tomás for a little while.” She gave him that special look he had forgotten about during their long years apart. Liam smiled as they quickly walked back to their cabin, casting aside any doubts about his decision. Órla, Colm, and Cara, were right behind them when they reached their cabin. Turning, Máire gave Órla a smile, hesitated opening the cabin door and fiddled with the doorknob. Órla nodded.

“C’mon Tomás, your uncle wants to tell you a story, don’t ya Colm?” Soon they clung together as the unpredictable waves pushed them all around and off the bed, completely controlling their passionate lovemaking. It was wild, and loud, and free. Primeval.

Josie, Tomás, Nora and Diarmuid decided to stay in their cabins, shielding themselves from the outside elements. As the storm raged, they felt dramatically more “rolling” than when they were aboard Captain Baynard’s big-hulled, calm and steady cattle boat.

As the ship jerked rapidly from side to side, bouncing her and Tomás all around the cabin, Josie screamed, “Jesus Tomás, ’tis worse than the oul ass and cart comin’ home from Mass! It better calm down fast or it’s gonna’ be a very long three weeks!”

Hours later, the weather calmed, and for the next few days they sailed swiftly, and more importantly for everyone on board, relatively smoothly, as the ship’s captain took advantage of prevailing trade winds and currents.