

# Prologue

## Miranda

This place. This place, Miranda thought, as she looked across the bay, it was in her bones. From here, Ballycove had not changed, Miranda walked along this path for more years than she cared to remember. It grew only more breath-taking. Far out across the land, beyond the winding river, she could see the glitter of the sea and beyond, she could make out the shadow of Donegal's rugged coastline two counties winding away in the far north. Miranda imagined that beneath the scrubby banks, shingle pebbles glittered in the low evening sun and in the deep of the water, she fancied a lifetime of memories were stored. So many of her memories played out against this riverbank.

Today, the air murmured into a timely heartbeat of the water's current. It whispered a familiar chant. It always calmed her, walking along the river's edge. Sometimes, it was hard to believe that so many decades had passed since she'd spent her summers along this sunny path. Today, as always it was exhilarating in its freshness, a landscape forever shifting and still its fabric remained the same for all time. The grey-green hills beyond the village were surely smaller than in her childhood, as though the weight of time had obliged them to crouch just a little lower with each passing year. Still, they stood, stony and sturdy, their lines of time a testament to their ability to keep Ballycove safe from winter storms.

The water, glittering blues and greens that reached much further than the eye could see, was as timeless as it was unending. It fed families and took fathers, sometimes it seemed with equal generosity and ferociousness. Miranda thought it had never looked more beautiful than now, but then she smiled, because no matter when she walked along this path, she thought the same. She stopped for a moment on the little track, cleared by goats and the chases of foxes and rabbits when no-one else was looking. Miranda had been looking forward to this walk all morning. She had to set things right. It was time.

And now, thinking of her own family, she knew that there was only one thing for it. She would have to pull them all together and lay the foundations for a new beginning.

# 1

## The Past

Miranda Reilly clambered up the hill slowly. The heat made her cotton dress damp against her back, and the stitching cut into her narrow shoulders and arms. It was a size too small, but her mother insisted that another year could be knocked out of it. Her discomfort was heightened by the box of vegetables she carried in her arms, heavy and cumbersome and her excuse to escape the fraught atmosphere of home. It was worth being out of breath to make this short journey.

Most days, she ambled up to old Mrs Bridgestock's cottage on an errand of some sort. It was only a short distance really, but it was such a delightful place it might as well have been in the next county, so far removed was it from the bleak tone of her upended home. It seemed to Miranda that Mrs Bridgestock could be the oldest person in the world. She wore her dresses long and black. Her hair, white and held with pins, framed her soft and lined face in the same fashion as it had some fifty years earlier in the wedding photo that sat on the sideboard. Although Mrs Bridgestock wore the marks of age in her stooped shoulders and slow walk, the woman in the photograph, staring lovingly at the man next to her, would always be who she truly was. There was that same generous glint in the old lady's eye and no-one ever called but they weren't offered the little her cupboards held to bolster them for whatever might come next. Miranda sometimes marvelled at the treats the old lady had put aside for her visits.

She eagerly made her way forwards now, thinking of what they might share today and how they might sit and talk about how things were when Mrs Bridgestock was a girl. As much as Miranda dreamed of living in this cottage one day, she aspired to growing into an old lady like Mrs Bridgestock – although she'd never admit this to another living soul.

In the distance she could just about see the chimneys of Bridgestock Cottage peep above the wall of ash and rowan trees that shaded the farmhouse from winter winds and prying eyes. It was a lazy morning on the cusp of summer and Ballycove welcomed the sun as it did everything else that came its way, balancing a languid

acceptance with reluctant eagerness. In truth, it seemed to Miranda Reilly, that the only thing that this village had greeted with any great excitement had been the return of her father a few weeks earlier. The whole village turned out to welcome back Harry Reilly – after four years of war and six of convalescing. In a place that Miranda knew only as St Hugh's, some nameless doctor that her mother couldn't thank enough had set him on the journey home. The sun didn't shine that day, but flags blew vigorously on the breezy afternoon wind and the whole street lined out to greet the returned hero. Funny, how things can turn out so differently to how you expect.

Miranda wiped a tear from her eye now. She would not cry. Instead, she leaned forward and lifted the latch of the heavy gate that kept cattle away from what had once been a lovingly tended kitchen garden. She and her mother had spent the last ten years waiting for her father to return; honestly, Miranda had a feeling they'd both given up any hope. The village had learned after the Great War not to expect good news; her mother didn't say it, but they both knew, World War Two was no better. If anything it had turned out even worse.

While Miranda's father was away, her mother had considered herself lucky each time a telegram arrived in the village and it was not addressed to her. They spent years of hoping the postman would pass their door. And then it was as if they were washed through with shocked relief, gushing and exhilarating all at once when they learned he was convalescing; shell-shocked, but coming home.

Just then, she spotted the postman, coming along the path opposite, his black cap bobbing jauntily beyond the hedge. He would make it to the cottage first and that was unfortunate, because she knew that it meant Mrs Bridgestock would not have so much time for her today.

Miranda sighed as she made her way along the narrow track, worn down by her own feet on her daily visits here. She made it to the door just as Postie Kavanagh propped his bicycle against the grainy windowsill and smiled when he patted her head as though she was a friendly sheepdog. She dropped the box of vegetables in the darkness of the hallway and slumped down on the step at the front door of the cottage. She would sit for a while before making the journey back to the village. There was no rush, only more chores her mother had dreamed up to keep her out of mischief. It was summer holidays and it seemed as if the days stretched endlessly. Her walk back was meaningfully languid and slow – it was preferable to hanging lines of washing out or, worse, being made to scrub the front steps.

Out here, just a mile from town, the only building nearby was the old woollen mills. It loomed ever higher above her as she moved back towards Ballycove. It was as much a feature of this place as the mountains or the river, a grey monolith, reaching and sprawling, its chimneys forever churning out a reminder that its work was never done. Blair's woollen mills – there was something about it, Miranda thought. She slowed down to gaze at it through the thick hedges that sheltered the river from it and perhaps it from the river life that might seek out shelter where it would not be granted willingly.

One way or another, the Blairs kept her whole family. Her mother took in laundry for the Blair family, and Lady Blair paid far more than she should for the small amount they now had each week. Her father might work there too. No-one else would give him a chance because he had come back so strange. Lord Blair had been shell-shocked in the first war so Lady Blair had said she understood better than most what it must be like. Her mother said it was a good thing the Blairs were Presbyterians – their own lot might not be so full of social conscience.

She pushed thoughts of her father from her mind then; not today. It was too nice to spoil it with things she could not change. It was a bright and sanguine day, where the breeze played with her dark hair, a soft warm caress as she moved along the banks and towards the hump-backed bridge that would lead her across to the side of the river that backed on to the mills.

Although it was not the first day of the holidays, it seemed to Miranda that her summer began that day, when she met Richard Blair. He was sitting idly on the bridge, his legs hanging over it while he skimmed stones down river. A boy, perhaps a year older than herself, he was fair-skinned to her tan, blue-eyed to her green and his hair was somewhere between a very light brown and a dark blonde, whereas Miranda was so dark, she might have been a gypsy child roaming about the roads. He looked at her with a mixture of mischief and camaraderie.

'Hey,' he said as though he'd been waiting there for her to come along. It was early yet, full of promise; one of those long hot days that seem like a dream when they're over. Miranda had already spent what there was of it trying to put distance between her father and herself. Instead, she'd offered to bring vegetables to old Mrs Bridgestock who couldn't leave her house because she was a martyr to the gout.

'Hello,' she said spotting his icy blue eyes squinting against the sun while at the same time they picked out flashes on the water beneath him. Miranda had never seen

this boy around before and Ballycove was small enough to know everyone. Then she remembered she'd heard her mother say the Blairs had guests, back for summer holidays with a boy not much older than herself. 'On holidays, are you?' she asked hopping up on the bridge next to him.

'I am,' he said, flashing a shy smile and handing her a flat stone to skim across the water's surface.

'Good shot,' she said as she watched an elongated hopping string of splashes along the water's rim. She threw her own and it almost matched his, and she smiled with satisfaction when she saw a glint of admiration in his eyes for her skill. 'Are you staying with the Blairs?'

'Yes, they're my grandparents. I'm here for the whole summer long.' He nodded towards the trees and she presumed he meant the big house, Blair Hall.

'You're really good at that.' She nodded towards the river where another flat stone scudded efficiently across the water's surface.

'Thanks.' He laughed then. 'Richard Blair.' He held out a hand formally. 'Very pleased to meet you.'

'Miranda Reilly,' she said, swinging her legs across the bridge to get a better angle on her next skimming stone. 'Delighted, I'm sure,' she said to match his formality. Then she remembered the time. She needed to get back or her mother would surely have organised a search party. 'Aren't you a bit old to be skimming stones?' she said to make fun of him, throwing one last shot along the water.

'I probably am really. There's not a lot else to do here at the moment. I'm looking forward to getting my fishing rod out. My grandfather is letting me borrow his old punt, but I'll have to do a bit of tidying up on it first.' He jumped down from the bridge and began to walk with her.

'I'd love that... fishing on a boat in this weather. It sounds like heaven,' Miranda said. Trips on boats were few and far between, since most of the boats were fishing boats and they had no room for children who just wanted to sightsee. 'I could help, you know, get it ready, if you wanted,' she said, unsure of what that would entail, but if it meant getting a few boat trips it would be worth it.

'Ah, I'm not sure that's really the kind of thing a girl would be any good at...' He turned now, smiling at her. There was no animosity in his words. 'You know, painting, it's all very messy and it's damned tricky work.'

'Huh, I'll have you know, I've probably done a lot more painting than you have.'

‘I’m sure you have, but this is proper painting, not flowers in vases or fruit in bowls.’ He bent down, pulled a bunch of cardinal flowers and handed them to her. He laughed then but his eyes were kind.

‘That’s not proper painting...’ she began, because there was one thing that living without her father had taught her over the last few years and that was how to be practical. Each Christmas it was her job to run the paintbrush around the edges of doors and windows, skirting boards and tiles. She had, her mother always said, an eye for detail.

In the distance she heard a church bell ring out and felt a stab of panic. She’d been gone much too long. The short jaunt had turned into not only a long ramble, but stopping here, with Richard Blair, had also robbed her of time when she should be getting back if she didn’t want to be grounded for the rest of the summer. That notion made her heart sink. She couldn’t imagine being shut up in their little cottage with her father for days on end. ‘Where’s your boat anyway?’

‘Down along the river.’ He juttred his thumb forwards. ‘Of course, it’s locked away in the boathouse on the estate for now, but tomorrow...’

‘I know it.’ Miranda wouldn’t particularly want to admit that she knew most of the old outhouses along the riverbank. She had explored every place she could make her way into. The little boathouse, musty and empty, had given her shelter when she was caught out in an unexpected downpour once on her way back from a day spent tadpoling on the bank.

‘You do, do you? Well, I’ll be there first thing tomorrow, so if you’re at a loose end you’ll know where to come, won’t you!’

‘You’re making fun of me,’ she said as she hoisted herself up over the gate that blocked this lane from the main road.

‘Me? Never.’ He smiled and she was suddenly aware that they were standing there watching each other for a little too long.

‘Well, I should be getting back,’ which of course, was an understatement.

‘I suppose that we’ll be bumping into each other again,’ he said diffidently then he scudded his final flat stone along the top of the river. ‘See you soon, Miranda,’ he shouted as he made his way in the general direction of Blair Hall.

The following day, Miranda arrived at the boathouse just as Richard was pulling back the huge doors. With the morning light flooding the little shed, it seemed much brighter and less eerie than when she came here before. Now, she could see it was a very old building, home to two boats, one – Richard’s little punt – slept silently beneath a great blue cloak. He pulled back the cover and resolutely ignored the sorry-looking remains of a red and white sailboat in the corner.

‘Hi,’ she said shyly as she slipped around the door.

‘Fancy seeing you here.’ He was lining up a couple of rusting tins of paint, but there was no way of knowing what they contained without opening the lids. ‘Come to watch me work, have you?’ he said kindly.

‘I thought I’d help you,’ Miranda said with more confidence than she felt.

‘Oh, I can’t see you helping here. It’s all...’ His words stopped when he caught her eye, as though he was thinking that he might jolly her along. Then he turned back to the bench, taking up one of the paint cans again. Miranda spotted a big old screwdriver and she grabbed it, quickly levering open the first can before moving on to the next, aware of Richard at her back watching her silently.

‘Well done, maybe you’ll be able to assist me after all,’ he said, surprise tilting his voice.

‘We’re in luck,’ Miranda said on opening the final can. It was almost full of varnish, a slightly more vivid colour than the faded tone of the little boat that lay stretched out in the sunshine coming from the doorway. She set to stirring it up with the screwdriver so that soon the lumpy years of disuse were being broken into the liquid. ‘Have you found some brushes?’ she called to him.

‘Well, I have, two, but really...’ He held up a wide brush that would quickly cover the whole boat in a first coat and a second, narrow brush that would work well on the darkened rims and around the decorative patch that held the boat’s name. Miranda handed the heavy can of paint across to Richard.

‘Here, you start with this and I’ll have a look at the others.’ She nodded towards the three remaining cans. She picked out the most vibrant red and began to stir it up also. Richard was running long, milky strokes along the belly of the boat, which seemed to dry in before he had time to wet his brush for the next. ‘It’s going to take a couple of coats; the wood is really thirsty,’ Miranda said as she knelt down to begin painting around the rims.



‘Oh dear, you can’t... you mustn’t...’ Richard began, but he faltered as he watched her delicately apply the fuchsia-coloured paint evenly and precisely along a fine line, giving the body of the vessel immediate definition.

‘What’s that?’ She smiled at him, enjoying his surprise.

‘You’re actually...’ He was embarrassed now, looking across at his own messy work by comparison. ‘Well, you’re actually very good.’ They set to work then, each of them painting their own allotted space, working around each other and chatting happily as they went.

‘Some day, perhaps when I have more money, I’ll resurrect the old girl again,’ he said wistfully as they sat back against a rock later that day looking at the sailboat that would spend another year in darkness.

‘Doesn’t anyone use it any more?’ Miranda asked looking up at what was once a pretty sailboat.

‘It was my grandfather’s but he hasn’t sailed in years. Not likely to now, either.’

‘Oh,’ Miranda said and she wasn’t sure what else to say. She thought she knew everyone in the village of Ballycove, but she couldn’t ever remember seeing Richard’s grandfather. Surely, she would have remembered him, if she had. She knew his grandmother, a homely-looking woman, with silver flecks through hair that must have once been very close in colour to Richard’s.

‘He’s not well mostly,’ Richard said as he caught a few large drips of varnish hanging from the base of the boat. ‘The war,’ he said making a face, ‘the Great War? It did something to him and he’s never really been right after it.’

‘Same as my dad so.’ Miranda exhaled. It was the first time she’d actually admitted to anyone that her father was not right. ‘He came back a month ago and he hasn’t spoken two words to me since.’

‘They used to call it shell shock, from all the loud bangs, but I don’t know... my grandfather was an officer in the trenches, listening I suppose to others over his head dropping bombs around his ears.’

‘It had to be scary as hell, I suppose,’ Miranda supplied. ‘He must have been very brave.’ She knew the value of hearing something good about her own father.

‘Yes, I suppose he must have been. He hardly ever leaves the estate now, hasn’t for years, and can’t bear to go beyond it.’ Richard Blair shook his head as though he could hardly understand it.

‘I can’t imagine staying put all the time; of course, our house is a lot smaller than Blair Hall.’ She laughed now to cover over her nervousness – the last thing she wanted was to make him feel as others had done to her. ‘My dad can’t stay still at all. Sometimes, he goes off walking at odd hours, even in the middle of the night and when he’s home, well, he’s never really there, if you get my meaning.’ The sadness in her voice was as much for her mother and her father as it was for herself.

‘We’re a right pair so.’ Richard Blair smiled, a lopsided movement of his lips that didn’t quite reach his eyes, and Miranda could see in it something of her own experience of happiness always restrained by some unresolved emotion. Over the last month, this halter on her emotions had risen up in her. It was love mixed with fear and guilt and whatever other sentiment she was supposed to feel at any point. It was hard to feel unbridled joy when you were carrying such a sadness about your heart all the time. ‘Here.’ He searched in a satchel that had been cast carelessly along the bench and handed her a thick sandwich. ‘You can have half of mine.’ He opened a tall flask that smelled of something between sugar and coffee. ‘My grandmother makes the best hot chocolate,’ he said smiling at her before pouring them a cup each.

‘What about this?’ She pointed towards the name on the side of the boat, which was facing them now. ‘Funny Girl,’ she whispered softly. ‘Wouldn’t it look great in the red?’

‘Perhaps it’s what we could call you?’ Richard said as he angled a long and gentle gaze in her direction. ‘No?’ He smiled then, blushed a little, and went back to his sandwich. ‘See if you can’t paint around it and then we can decide later. There’s a nasty shade of yellow as a second option.’ He wrinkled his nose. It took almost the whole day to get the boat ready and it would take another day to dry it fully. ‘We’re lucky, the sun will dry it out quickly. We could be out catching our first fish tomorrow afternoon,’ he said.

‘I’ve never been properly fishing before...’ Miranda looked back at the huge, expensive looking rods that stood sentry inside the boathouse.

‘Well, perhaps I’ll show you how...’ Richard said with a lazy smile.

When they finished patching and painting, they took their rods along the bank and Richard set up Miranda, holding her steady and working with her hand over hand, his arms around her until at the same moment, they both seemed to realise the intimacy of the situation. Then, they dropped their lines just for fun. Richard had a jar of fresh

worms dug up the day before and stored in the cool darkness of the boathouse, saving them for his first trip out on the water.

The day was hot and hazy and the water shimmered, a musky blanket attracting flies just close enough so the salmon nosed towards the water's top. Too many silver salmon jumped up, tantalisingly close to them, but none of them lured by the measly bait on offer. Miranda lay back on the soft grass, enjoying the sounds of summer all around. The river was home to every water animal from frog to stoat and each rustle in the undergrowth suggested the proximity of something teasingly uncommon.

'Probably river rats.' Richard laughed when the grass swished with the bristling sound of something small and fast-moving.

'Don't say that, it could be anything – it could be a fox, or a squirrel, or a...'

'Badger?'

'Goodness, I hope not. Billy Bonner had his leg broken by one last year and you should see the scratches, all the way along his legs, urgh!' She shivered at the thought of it. She moved over a little, on the grass.

'No-one warned me when I came to Ireland, I was in danger of losing life and limb.' Richard was laughing at her now.

'It's okay, I don't think you need to worry; for one thing, I'm not sure they just attack random people and for another...' She looked out at the water for a moment, the line catching her attention, and then she looked back at him again.

'What, for another?'

'Well, Billy Bonner, who wouldn't want to teach him a lesson?' They both laughed at that and Miranda felt a creeping sense of freedom, the familiar tug of loneliness and worry fading from her as though it was releasing her lying there on the warm bank with Richard Blair – perhaps they would be best friends yet?

