

Excerpt from Chapter 1, *Madam Muldoon's Garden*, by E. V. Sparrow

Orla removed her apron, wiped her hands, and stood beside her chair at the table. She grumbled. "Beauty's never been within the eye. I fear 'tis within the soul." *Me own may match me face.*

"What did your da tell you 'bout what true beauty is?"

Low-pitched voices and shouts of laughter approached the Muldoon's cottage, and Mam and Kathleen hurriedly removed their patched aprons after they laid all the food in the center of the bumpy table.

"What Da said?" Orla clasped her hands in front of her. *Me lovely da.* "He said a brilliant mind is more winsome than beauty." How would he know? He was a handsome man. His normal blue eyes did not frighten people. *No one spit at him or told him he was evil.* Her heart contracted with longing to have him back with the family, but was God not selfish enough to take him to heaven? She would not mention this thought for fear of a curse.

Kathleen unlatched the front door and tugged it inward. "Morning to you, our charming men. So glad you all work on the farm." She bobbed a curtsy to one of her older brothers, Mick, as he entered ahead of the other Muldoon brothers, Ed, and Rory.

"As if we have a choice, aye? Where else could we work? Feeling spritely today, are you, Lamb?" Mick kissed the top of Kathleen's head.

"'Tis a good day to be so, as there's a cloudless sky above us."

Orla snorted. "Quick, someone should paint a painting as proof of Ireland's rare clear sky."

Kathleen grinned. "We can ask Rory. How is your *macushla* faring, Mick? Has Fiona's fever abated?"

Mick took a wobbly seat simultaneously with his three brothers, and they scooted closer to the table. He rubbed his eyes. “Nah, Lamb. She’s still poorly. I’m fearing for her wellbeing. She was fast asleep when I left her, but Father Shanahan is to visit us later to perform the *Sacrament of the Sick* and anoint her. ’Tis why I’ve come for breakfast. Then I’ll away directly.” He addressed Mam with a raised brow.

“Oh, aye. As always, you may take what’s left of it home with you after you’ve had your fill.” Mam sat, and the girls followed. She nodded at Orla. “Our Orla has given me the egg money and earned us more by going to market with our Tarah, aye. They must pay higher wages in Limerick, for we’d enough coin to purchase sausages this time.”

“Am glad to do that for the family, Mam.” Orla studied her plate and fumbled with her fingers on her lap under the table.

“Kathleen, now your brothers are seated, and ’tis your turn to give thanks. Add a prayer for God’s mercy upon Mick’s bride.” Mam crossed herself and closed her eyes.

Everyone did the same but Orla. *Those sausages weren’t from God’s angels.* She had learned her destiny was to provide for each of the families, had she not? She studied each precious member as Kathleen blessed the repast.

“Bless us O Lord, for these Thy gifts, for which we are ’bout to receive from Your bounty through Jesus Christ our Lord. Christ, have mercy upon all the sick in our village, and especially Mick’s bride, Fiona. Amen.”

When had God ever answered her own prayers? Not when her da was ill. Not when Mick’s first wife and both little sons were ill. They had all passed away. *Why pray for Fiona?*

Mick took two pieces of meat from the plate Mam handed to him, and passed it over to Ed, who passed it to Rory. Then Rory passed it to Mam. Around the table in a circle those

expensive sausages went, with only Orla herself knowing the cost to herself to bring them home. Could she force herself to swallow a bite? She scrunched up her shoulders.

Kathleen leaned against her. “Orla, do you have a chill? Sally got ill with the typhus this time round, and then her brother and sister. ’Tis why we avoided Mick’s home. You must be careful not to get ill.”

“Who’s getting a chill? Who’s getting ill?” Mam’s shrill voice almost cost Mick his sausage as it jerked on the tongs of his fork.

Ed scoffed. “All this family needs are more ill people. When will it ever end? The Crown starves us. It weakens us.” He spat. “Ah, apologies Mam.”

“You know how I detest anyone spitting upon me clean floors, Edward Muldoon.” Mam’s auburn eyebrows formed into one long “V” shape. *Glad I’m not the brunt of her ire.*

Orla turned her eyes to survey the stone floors. *Clean enough, they were, with only a bit of dust.* Thanks to Kathleen’s chores, for certain.

Rory finished his last bite and dropped his fork onto his already cracked plate. *Rory.* Such a quiet man one can almost forget he exists. *Methinks, he prefers it that way. Whilst I’m forced into the shadows where I don’t wish to be.*

“Orla.” Kathleen tapped her sister’s arm with her teaspoon. “Mam’s been asking you a question.”

“What was it, Mam? Was thinking of Da, and lost track of what you asked me whilst heeding the interruptions. He always made us wait to speak until after we’d eaten, aye?”

“Not I. Me preference is to speak whilst everyone is in one room altogether.” *She means demand every detail of our lives.* She craved fodder for the village chinwag, Mrs. Gilhooley.

Wheels crunched on the path outside the cottage. Through the recessed rectangle window facing the front yard of the cottage, a cart pulled up near the front door. If only Kathleen had wiped the windowpanes during her other chores, they could identify the person approaching.

“Glory be. Now who would be arriving at this time of day, when all good Irish families are breaking their fast before work? If good fortune gave them a full cupboard, that is.” Mam craned her neck to peer through the window. “And Kathleen, why haven’t you wiped the glass?”
There ’tis. Poor Kathleen.

Mick stood and clutched their mother’s shoulder. “Let me see to it, Mam. Could be someone fetching me.”

A thud at the door, and Mick swung it inward. “Ah, morning Aidan. What’s the goings on to bring you here so early?”

“Aidan?” Kathleen perked up like a hen discovering bugs in the grass.

His own expression lit up when he spied Kathleen. “Morning, all. I’ve a question for Orla—”

Mam’s tabby cat rushed in between the men’s legs with something in her mouth and set it on the floor. It was a bird. Not yet dead.

“Holy heavens, she’s done it again.” Orla tipped her chair over as she stood, and the bird flew past her to the hearth.

Aidan crunched his tweed *Tam-o’-shanter* in his fists. “Me apologies, Mrs. Muldoon. I’d no intent—”

“Get the bird!” Mam shrieked. “No, get the cat.”

The tiny bird hopped and settled onto the iron rods cooling the pans beside the lit hearth.
Catching its terrified breath, no doubt.

Kathleen rushed toward the hearth with a bowl, and the sparrow fluttered to the ceiling's thatch and rafters. "Good heavens. 'Tis too high now."

"I'll do it." Orla dragged her chair over by Kathleen. "I'm taller. Give me the bowl."

"Make haste." Mam wrung her hands. "Pitiable thing, 'tis bleeding. Glad 'twasn't a lizard this time. Holy angels. Tabby's not full grown, yet she'd find a way to drag in an elephant by its toe if they lived in Ireland."

Ed huffed. "Just flap your hands at it, Orla, and 'twill fly out the open doorway."

A split second before Orla thumped the bowl over it, the sparrow regained its strength. It avoided the men near the door and glided above the table to land on Mrs. Muldoon's green hutch.

Tabby sprang into action and four feet off the ground. She landed on the tabletop in the middle of the sausage plate, tracking the movement of her hunting trophy. Tabby knocked over teacups and stepped on the leftover eggs and toast.

"Our breakfast! Grab her before she jumps onto me dishes and breaks them." Mam clutched her head between her hands. "'Tis why I don't allow cats inside of me home."

Orla scrambled off the chair. "Doesn't bode well, does it? Tabby's not giving up her prey." She hurried to protect her mam's valuables on the shelves from the hunter, but the tiny bird launched from the hutch toward the ceiling above the hearth. It clutched the *scraith* between the open rafters, hanging on tightly while eyeing its predator.

Tabby scurried after it, and skittered onto Mrs. Muldoon's favorite chair, impaling the bird with her murderous scrutiny.

"None of us can snatch Tabby, Mam." Kathleen rubbed her neck. "She bites and scratches. She shan't catch the bird now, aye? But how do we coax it outside?"

Mick stepped away from the open door and stared at their trodden breakfast. “Mam, will you allow me to stand upon your table? I shall wave me cap at it to startle it away.”

Mrs. Muldoon raised her hands. “Aye. What damage will boots do after Tabby? First, we must do something ’bout the mess.”

Everyone cleared a spot on the tabletop and set the dishes in the sink, while Mick removed his boots. His big toe peeked out of one gray woolen sock.

Orla chuckled. “You need some darning, brother.”

“When me *macushla* is well, she’ll get after it.” Mick scampered onto the highest piece of furniture, and Tabby did the same.

Tabby sat alongside his foot. He scooted her with his foot, but she bit it. “Ow. Someone, seize that wicked cat.” She defended her position with her teeth and claws, focused intently on the sparrow.

“See, as I warned, aye? Tabby won’t let us.” Kathleen reached for the cat. It scurried beneath the table, across the seats, and returned to crouch by Mick’s feet.

Orla snorted. “I learned the painful way. Never touching her again, the hell-born beastie.”

Ed ran his hands over his hair. “Mam, since our breakfast is ruined. Might as well be done here.” He headed to the back door. “Our donkey’s waiting for his, and Rory must do the milking.”

“Ah, ’bout that. Wait. Rory, Ed . . .” Aidan hurried after them, leaving the back door open.

Kathleen stared after Aidan and chewed her lip. “I wished to speak to him for a moment before he left.”

“And he’s left another door open. Mayhap it’ll tempt the bird, aye?” Mick waved his *tam* in the air. “Go on, fly away. Now’s your chance, little one.”

The sparrow took flight. The predator cat clambered after it, and the two dashed outside into the golden sunrise.

Mam banged the door shut. “And that’s as it should be. Such a hullabaloo to deal with first thing in the morning. What further unfortunate happenings lie before us this day?”

Muffled voices outside the cottage drifted in.

“Someone’s out front.” Kathleen rushed to the window. “’Tis our men with our *minseach*.”

Orla swung the door open and leaned out. “They’ve untied our goat from Aidan’s cart. Why was she tethered to it at all? We would’ve known she was missing if Rory would’ve milked her earlier.”

“Shoo, Orla. Don’t let the cat back inside.” Mam jostled her outside and she and Kathleen followed her, closing the door. They gazed at Rory together and rubbed the chill of early morning from their hands while the sun hovered low above the green hills and trees.

Rory clenched the rope that had fastened the goat to Aidan’s wagon. “Wondered who’d stolen her when I found the shed empty with the gate open. We all need our milk, but couldn’t figure out which one of our good neighbors would do such a terrible thing, aye?” He led the goat down the hill back to the pen.

“Your nanny was happily eating grass beside the road as I was on me way to Limerick.” Aidan pointed at his stack of crates. High pitched peeping emanated from them. “Me uncle wishes me to deliver his chicks in three days’ time. Since I’d to return your goat home, I thought

Orla might be needing a ride to the city? Mayhap she can help me with feeding the hatchlings and warming them on the journey, aye? What say you, Mrs. Muldoon?"

Orla turned to her mam with a smile and entwined her fingers behind her back. "I know I returned only last week from helping Aunt Clodagh, but she and Tarah are always in need of it."

Kathleen gasped. "Oh, Mam, may I go as well? She always goes, and I never have. We'll be of more help together, and we can return with haste. You know how good I am at doing chores and—"

"You may not. I can't spare both me girlies at the same time. It takes nearly six days to go back and forth, aye? Orla may stay to help. Don't pout Kathleen, you're nearing fourteen." Mrs. Muldoon glanced between Aidan and Orla. "Sure, and you'll be under your uncle's escort, and you'll also abide by society's rules of conduct for unmarried young people?"

They agreed.

"Then you may be away." A sudden shaft of sunlight beamed upon Adian's cart from behind the oak tree in the yard. Mam Muldoon shaded her eyes.

'Tis a grand sign I'm to go. Orla raised her hem and hurried into the cottage. Footfalls behind her in the soft mud alerted her that her younger sister was not willing to drop her request to accompany her on the journey. *What could be done 'bout it?* Mam happily ruled their lives with her decisions since their da went to heaven.

A soft sob from Kathleen, and Orla paused to embrace her. "I know, Lamb. I'd be sad to stay if I were you. Come with me whilst I pack up."

They entered together and headed for their room. Kathleen sat on their narrow bed and swiped at her cheek. "Why can I never leave, even for a few days? 'Tis all because you're the oldest daughter. Why did God make me the youngest? Mam depends upon me for everything—"

“Imagine how ’twould be to be Mam. Would you enjoy us both away?” Orla stuffed her other skirt and shirt into a tattered pillowcase.

Kathleen sniffed. “You know I wouldn’t.”

“Nor I.” Orla grabbed her hairbrush from their dresser and her unmentionables to add to the stuffed pillowcase. She knotted the top closed and smoothed out the wrinkles on the red rose quilt Kathleen had pieced together for their birthdays. She sat on it and pulled her sister beside her.

“God must love you dearly, Orla, to give you time away from our Mam.”

If she believed God cared for her welfare, would she not be convinced of God’s love as well? *Has He ever even seen me?* Orla kissed Kathleen’s cheek. “Being in Limerick gives me a way to earn some coin. Wishing to purchase a *bhainne* for Mick when I’ve enough coin saved. Will further add to the family coffers by selling her milk at market. ’Tis me plan anyway. And the mooing will add a musical sound to the barnyard, aye? One day, Lamb, I’ll surely take you with me when the time is right.” *How shall I ever explain our family’s dire situation to our innocent lamb?*

As Orla did not believe God noticed anything about her, it was likely only destiny was behind what happened to her. Her family’s welfare was her burden to bear, and she would do her utmost to carry it alone. She would accept any chance to feed them. Plus stash a portion in her hiding spot for her own secret plans.
