The Black Silk Purse

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Chapter One

1903

Ella withdrew into the shadows, the workhouse uniform thin through years of laundering, offering little protection against the March wind. During the past six years she had become accustomed to cold and even hunger, but no amount of deprivation could take away her dreams. Hazy and only on the fringes of her mind it still lingered, that other world, one of colour and beauty, and these rare visits of Miss Fairchild with her glossy black hair, jewels and furs had become beacons in a life that contained only greyness. Ella glanced over to the waiting carriage with its patient chestnut horses, waiting to step forward to receive the reward of a smile. It might be swift, but with it would come the three words spoken in a refined voice, '*Goodbye, my dear*.' The endearment was like a balm bringing alive the vague remembrance of another voice, loving and gentle. Ella had been six years old when brought to the workhouse, and she had clung to that precious memory at first with despair and later with ferocity. It was her proof, her security. Because of it, she knew the truth: that, despite the taunts and name-calling, she was not a bastard nor was she a foundling.

After catching a glimpse of the well-dressed woman and asking endless questions, Ella had discovered via one of the senior inmates

not only the name she sought but also the regular timing of her visits. And since then she had, not without difficulty, contrived to be outside the workhouse in order to wait for her to leave.

Today, she was a bit later than usual, and then the door was opened and with a swish of her skirt she came out, her breath misting the chilly air. Ella moved forward to be seen, rewarded and warmed by the familiar swift smile and the words, 'Goodbye, my dear.'

Ella watched as the footman assisted her into the carriage and looked longingly at her lovely clothes; a dark-green coat trimmed with rich fur, a paler green hat with crimson feathers. Then, all too soon, the coachman was urging the horses and Ella hurried to a door at the side of the tall building and gingerly opened it.

All seemed safe, so she sidled inside. Talon-like fingers dug into her right shoulder. 'And where, girl, have you been sneaking off to? Aren't you supposed to be doing a stint in the laundry?'

Ella twisted round in horror. Miss Grint, one of the officers, had the habit of appearing from nowhere. 'Yes miss, sorry miss!'

'Sorry doesn't answer my question.'

She looked up with defiance into the harsh narrow face. 'I felt sick, needed a breath of fresh air.'

'What, in this freezing cold? Who gave you permission?'

Ella bit her lip.

'I see.' The blow knocked her sideways, the palm hard and stinging across her right ear. 'You idle brat, get back to your work.'

Directed by a violent push, Ella staggered along the corridor in the direction of the steaming noisy laundry. She hated Miss Grint so much it was like a fire in her belly. But she'd show her, just as soon as she was old enough she'd get out of this place, and when she did, she was going to become rich and she'd come back and she'd . . . The stone steps down to the laundry were

steep and awkward in her ill-fitting shoes; she picked up her skirt and concentrated.

'Oi! Where do you think you've bin? Get hold of some tongs and lift those sheets out of that boiler.' The woman shouting was in her fifties, her grey hair hanging in wisps around her perspiring forehead.

Ella hurried past her to haul the dripping white linen out of the boiling water and, dodging the splashes, lowered it into one of the long wooden rinsing troughs. All the girls had to learn household tasks to prepare them for work outside, but it was heavy labour for young thin arms. Glancing at the girl whose fainting act had caused the distraction that enabled Ella to slip away, she gave her a grateful grin. It would mean giving away her meagre supper tonight, but it had been worth it.

As the carriage drew away, Letitia Fairchild relaxed into its padded seat, relieved as always that her stultifying visit, decreed in her father's will, was once again over. Despite herself, she still resented how even from beyond the grave he managed to control aspects of her life. Although she had to accept that it wasn't his fault that some ancient relative had once fallen on hard times and spent a few years incarcerated in that gloomy place. He had never forgotten the unfortunates left behind and her father, having benefited by the man's later wealth, had bequeathed to his daughter the duty of visiting the workhouse four times a year. Letitia was generous but also had a keen head for figures and knew that her questions caused not a little consternation, but she was assured from photographs she had seen that this workhouse was little different to any other – after all, the number of poor and homeless in London was vast. And no matter how large the amount of charitable donations to swell the public coffers, more money was always needed to house, clothe and feed the inmates decently.

Enjoying the sound of the horses' hooves on the road, she gazed at the tall houses in the tree-lined roads leading into the city, feeling relieved as they neared her comfortable home in Hampstead. Not the smartest address in London but, as her father had proclaimed, one that spoke of solid respectability and yet might disguise a gentleman's true wealth.

She was entering the hall, her hand already raised to remove her hatpin, when the butler came forward. 'Miss Featherstone is waiting in the drawing room, madam. I told her that I expected you back shortly.'

'Thank you, Forbes. Please serve tea.' She unbuttoned her coat and, passing it over to a waiting maid, swept into the large handsome room. 'Grace, what a welcome surprise.'

The woman seated on the deep-cushioned sofa raised a hand to pat her hair into place. 'I didn't expect to find you out.'

'My duty visit to the workhouse. I've ordered tea but I can't possibly take it until I've washed my hands. You'll have to excuse me a moment.'

'Of course,' Grace frowned. 'You didn't touch any of the inmates, did you?'

Letitia turned at the door. 'No,' she said with an indulgent smile at the woman she regarded as her best friend, 'I didn't touch any of the inmates.'

A few minutes later, as they indulged in tea and scones, Grace was brimming with a snippet of gossip. 'Did you know that Lord and Lady Allaway have gone to Madeira for two months?'

Letitia shook her head.

'I did hear a whisper. Of course, one can never believe all one hears but, apparently, all is not as it should be in that household.'

'In what way exactly?'

'Shall we say that it involves a certain French governess?'

Letitia paused, her cup halfway to her mouth. 'You can't mean it, not Lord Allaway. He must be sixty if he is a day. The old goat!'

'Letitia!'

'Oh, come on Grace. We may be unmarried but we're old enough not to be ignorant of the world.' She glanced at her friend who, at twenty-six, was a year younger than her. She had both a fair prettiness and a good cleavage, and it was widely accepted that most men preferred an 'English rose'. Letitia put a hand up to her black hair, dressed in a chignon. Not only were her own breasts small, but 'handsome' was perhaps the best word that could be ascribed to herself. She had to admit that her assertion had been a trifle exaggerated as their knowledge of men had been confined to one suitor only each. And neither had led to matrimony.

Almost as if Grace had read her mind, she mused, 'Marriage is a subject we never discuss. Don't you think that a little strange among two close women friends?'

'We did discuss Victoria's marriage after she died, agreeing that her excessive mourning for Prince Albert had been the height of self-indulgence.'

'That was over two years ago.' Grace gave a sigh of resignation. 'I wasn't thinking of general conversation, Letitia, but never mind.' She dabbed at her mouth with her napkin. 'I really should get back to Mama. She's not at all well at the moment.'

It was after her friend had left that Letitia went to stand before the glowing coal fire surrounded by the solid-mahogany furniture so familiar to her. A feeling of sadness swept over her as she wondered whether her life would have been different if her own mama had lived. Would she herself have been different? Letitia had always believed that her father had blamed her for the loss of his wife in childbirth. Certainly, he had been a stern parent and there had been little warmth in this mausoleum of a house. There

was only one man from whom she had ever received affection and she would always wonder whether his invitation to dine that evening at Eversleigh had been timed to coincide with her expected absence. Certainly, when her social engagement was cancelled and she had joined the two men in the drawing room for cocktails, Cedric Fairchild had been unable to conceal his anger and dismay. She walked slowly across the room feeling a familiar ache in her heart as she thought of Miles Maitland, that idealistic young man with whom she had felt an instant bond. Sensing her father would disapprove, they had felt it advisable to be circumspect about their affection for each other, contriving during those summer months to attend the same social events even, at times, to stroll out into a garden where, in secluded corners, they could find some privacy. Letitia stared blindly ahead, remembering how Miles had hated the secrecy, insisting that he should explain their relationship to her father. But, long ago, she had learnt the futility of dwelling on that fateful night. With an effort she brought her mind back to the present, and as she drew out the chair to sit before her satinwood desk, she reminded herself that unmarried and childless she may be but, unlike countless other women in the same position, her father had at least left her financially secure.

Letitia picked up her silver fountain pen and, unscrewing the top, began to leaf through her diary to enter the date of her next visit to the workhouse. She paused, reflecting that it seemed a little odd that the same girl should be loitering outside again when she left. What was she – about eleven or twelve? All the inmates had their hair cropped to prevent lice but a few brown strands had escaped her cap; her pale face always looked pinched. Could the poor child possibly be half-witted, for why else would she stand out there in the freezing cold?

* * *

Later that evening at the workhouse, Ella trailed upstairs to the long cold dormitory, not only hungry but exhausted. However, she found it impossible to sleep. Not because of the sound of rats and mice rustling and scampering among the eaves – that was a familiar noise, as were the snores and muffled sobs in the room – it was her thoughts that were keeping her awake. Huddled on her straw mattress, she couldn't help thinking about the afternoon's visit. Miss Fairchild had spoken to her again, and Ella had long accepted that never again would she hear the warmth of her own mother's voice, but still her underlying loneliness never seemed to leave her.

And what of that other voice that haunted her, that of a servant woman? Ella couldn't remember her face or her name, but she had never forgotten those terrible words delivered in a hoarse whisper. *'Dearie, promise me you will never forget what you saw. Your ma was killed deliberate, them horses were driven straight at her, and someone oughter pay for it.'*

Chapter Two

It was three months later when, in a Camden tenement with dusty brown linoleum, scratched furniture and cheap fabric curtains, Rory Adare sat by the makeshift bed in the cramped sitting room. His father lay in silence, his once strong and handsome face gaunt and Rory leant over to pull the thin grey blanket higher around his shoulders. But he knew that Seamus, like himself, was waiting for the dreaded thud on the door. When it came, sixteen-year-old Rory went to face the burly man more than twice his age and, grim-faced, held out the coins.

'What do you call this?'

'It's all we've got.'

Grabbing the money, and with a scowl on his pockmarked face, the debt collector pushed past him into the shabby room and strode over to the mantelpiece.

Rory flung himself at him, but even though tall for his age, he was no match for the other man's bulk. Shouldered aside, he watched in horror as their last possession, a French ormolu clock that had belonged to Rory's mother, was tucked inside the thug's muffler and jacket. Seconds later, he was gone, with Rory slamming the door in fury behind him.

He turned to face his father. 'Da, we can't go on like this.'

'I know, son.' But Seamus's voice was weak, and despite his long struggle, it was obvious that he was weakening with every hour that passed.

With desperation Rory knew that there was now no alternative. '*You* could go in Da, you would at least be looked after.'

Seamus shook his head. 'The moneylenders never forget a debt, they'd only hound you, even rough you up. You'd be safer with me in the workhouse. Besides, your mother would have wanted us to stay together.' His voice became a hoarse whisper. 'True to God, I never thought it would come to this.'

Rory could only stare at him in despair. When two years after his wife's death Seamus had been diagnosed with cancer, its swift onset caused his once successful career as a Dublin journalist to falter. As his health continued to fail so did the quality of his writing, and eventually with little income they were forced to sell even their furniture. At first Seamus fought against taking Rory from his studies and their dream of his going to Trinity College, but as their situation became desperate and his mind befuddled by whisky to dull his pain, he disregarded his son's protests and began to insist they should go to London.

'There will be places where I can submit previously published articles. Sure, we'll be grand, you'll see.' But it was his last statement uttered with defiance that revealed the truth. 'Besides, I have no wish to become an object of pity.'

Despite Rory's plea, that same fierce pride had prevented him from accepting any offers of help, and with Rory's misgivings they had come 'over the water' to an unwelcoming London and continued rejections. As the months passed, Seamus's health worsened to such a worrying degree that Rory hardly dared to leave his side.

'Ye'll do no such thing,' he raged when, with their savings gone, a frightened Rory wanted to write to Dublin for help.

'Just for a loan to get you some medical help, Da.'

But even in his weakened state Seamus's temper flared. 'If we had family it'd be different, but no Adare goes begging from friends.' He struggled to raise himself from his pillow. 'I'd never forgive you, lad, never.'

And so there had been no alternative to making the dreaded application, and they were waiting for the visit of the Relieving Officer. There would be no problem with Seamus being admitted to the workhouse, but Rory feared that his own case might be dismissed with contempt. He glanced over at the bed, at his father's grey complexion, at the lines of pain now etched on his face. How could he not accompany him, be on hand to see him, to offer him a son's comfort and love? But would this man they were expecting have the humanity to understand that?

And then the tap came on the door, and on going to open it, Rory saw a small, portly man, red-faced behind his dark moustache and beard.

'Adare?' His voice was sharp.

'Yes, sir.' He stood aside.

The man entered the room with only a cursory glance at Rory. Instead he went over to the bed by the wall. 'Seamus Adare?'

He received a weak nod, and after staring down at him for a few minutes, he wrote in a small black notebook. Then he turned to Rory. 'And you are?'

'Rory Adare.'

'Your age is?'

'Sixteen, sir.'

'Occupation?'

Rory hesitated.

'Speak up boy!'

'He is a scholar.' The strength in Seamus's voice surprised them both.

The statement was written in the notebook.

The man, who hadn't offered his name, began to prowl around the two rooms, looking inside the cupboards and drawers. Apparently satisfied, he said, 'No source of income, then?'

Rory shook his head. 'I was employed as a pot boy, but . . .' His throat dried at the thought of revealing what had happened.

'I suppose it's the usual, sacked without a reference?' His tone was sarcastic.

Rory could only nod, avoiding the man's eyes, but there were no more questions, and later that night, his head on a grubby flock pillow, Rory lay staring into the darkness. To be forced to enter a workhouse was degrading for anyone, but for a man like his father, well-educated and who had mixed with the cream of Dublin literary society to spend the last days of his life in there . . . Rory could hardly bear to think of it. He had little thought for himself, he was young and strong, while nothing on earth would persuade him to remain in such a place, not after . . . he could only close his eyes in misery at the inevitable prospect.

After Ella's stint in the laundry ended, she began to learn needlework, an occupation she found far more to her liking. It was not that she had any special aptitude for the work, but the large room was quieter and the older women talked freely among themselves. Then, on one particular afternoon, knowing that it was time for another visit, she found it hard to concentrate. But she did try to listen to old Agnes, who was helping her with the intricacies of blind hemming. It seemed that her late husband had fought for his queen and country.

'Out in South Africa, he was, fighting them Zulus,' she said, 'and a spear got 'im in the shoulder at Rorke's Drift, so it was a pension after that.' She sucked on a length of cotton before threading a needle. 'But he didn't last long, and the army don't care about widows. Then our Janey went down with consumption and the doctor's bills took what bit we'd got saved.'

Ella dared to ask, 'What happened to her?'

'She couldn't fight it, love. And she wasn't 'aving no pauper's funeral; my Jim wouldn't 'ave wanted that. I got behind with the rent and the blasted landlord sent the bailiffs in. Next thing I know, I was carted off to this place.'

'That's awful.'

'I've 'eard of worse.'

'Agnes, how do some girls manage to get out of here?'

'If they're lucky they get taken on as apprentices, usually to dressmakers or milliners.'

'Not into service, then, you know in one of them posh houses?' The inmate who showed Ella how to sew buttons on, had once worked as a housemaid before falling on hard times.

Agnes shook her head. 'They wouldn't look twice at yer, not coming from this place. Mind you, some go out as servants – or should I say skivvies – in alehouses or to tradesmen's wives or suchlike, but most end up sent back.'

Ella stared at her. 'Why?'

'Thievin', lazy, or up the spout. This place doesn't spawn angels. 'Ow old are yer?'

'I think about twelve or thirteen. I'm not sure when my birthday is. I know I was six when I came in.'

'What, with yer ma?'

Ella shook her head. 'She was killed in an accident.'

'And yer dad?'

'She never told me. I think he must be dead.'

Agnes tightened her lips. 'Then 'ow come you didn't get sent to the orphanage?'

'I was supposed to go but they'd just had a big fire, so I ended up here.'

Agnes thought back. 'Six years ago, you say. Oh yes, I remember, arson was rumoured. Still, this place isn't that bad, it's big enough for the kids to be taught 'ere and not to 'ave to go to school outside. Those who do are looked down on as if they were freaks, poor little blighters.'

'That's not fair.'

'Life ain't fair, you'll learn that. Now, yer seem a decent girl, so work hard and keep yer nose clean. And mind yer don't get on the wrong side of that Miss Grint. If ever a woman was suckled on a sour lemon . . .'

But Ella was glancing up at the clock on the wall, which said ten minutes to four. 'Agnes, if I nip out for a few minutes, will you cover for me? Say I've got a bellyache or something.'

'Why, what you up to?'

'Nothing bad, I promise.' She put aside the skirt she was hemming, and as soon as the officer further along the line bent over another trainee, Ella eased herself out of the room. She met nobody as she hurried along the winding corridors, and on emerging into the blinding sunshine she turned the corner to find Miss Fairchild's carriage close by, drawn into the shade of the building. Feeling daring, Ella walked slowly towards it, drawn in fascination to the chestnut horses. The one nearest to her turned his head and, with a thump of her heart, she gazed into soft brown eyes. This horse would never trample anyone to death, she was sure of it.

'His name's Rusty – go on, stroke him, he won't hurt you.'

She glanced up to see the coachman grinning at her and, with a flutter of fear that was almost enjoyable, moved to place her hand on the horse's long neck. Its coat felt soft, velvety and very warm. She liked it. 'He's hot.'

'He's all right. It's a hot day. What's yer name?'

'Ella.' She glanced over her shoulder, fearful that someone might come out and see her talking.

'What are yer scared of?'

'I shouldn't be out here.'

'Playing truant, eh? I used to do that as a lad.'

'Me too!' The footman came round the carriage and winked at her. He was much younger than the coachman, with curly fair hair. 'Me dad used to take the strap to me, but it didn't make any difference.'

Although the church clock a little distance away struck four, there was still no sign of the visitor and Ella's palms began to grow clammy as she moved back to wait by the wall. She didn't dare to be out here for much longer. What if somebody noticed she was missing and reported it to Miss Grint? Her heart gave a leap of fear at even the prospect.