

The Sign of the Rose

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Dear Reader

I hope you enjoy Chapter One of Book One of the Saga
'Love Should Never Be This Hard'.

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- John Morey

Chapter One

An all too familiar scene in a small Irish village, late 1800's...

"Run, Sean!," his father whispered. "Slip out the back door so they don't see you. Take this duffel bag with you, and the bedroll and tarp for shelter."

"Where should I run to, father?"

"Go out the back, over the sheep pen, and climb the hillside behind the back pasture. You remember where I showed you the circle of stones?"

"Halfway up the hill, overlooking the valley, on the other side of the Fergus River?"

"That's right, boy," continued Frankie, his father. The soldiers won't follow you there. Look for the overhanging rocks just above the stones. You can camp there. Lay low for two nights, use the tarp for shelter, but don't light a fire. Not until the second night, anyway."

"What shall I do then?" Sean sensed danger in the way his father was behaving but he was a big lad for his

sixteen years. He could hold his own in a fight with the other lads in the village, but the fear in his father's voice was totally new to him. He knew something was very wrong.

“Look out for a girl about the same age as you. She'll be coming from across the valley.” His father, Frankie's, voice was shaking as he knew the soldiers – and the local constabulary – were only minutes away.

“This girl. Who is she?”

“She's your...cousin I suppose. Well, she's not really. She's my brother's wife's girl. You remember I told you about Billy marrying a gypsy woman who lost her husband?”

“*Uncle* Billy? Who we see sometimes at the monthly market?” His Dad had shown him the spot where his brother had the farm they could see in the distance, on the other side of the Fergus. “He has a daughter?” asked Sean.

“Step-daughter,” corrected Frankie. “Anyway, there's no time to talk about it now. I promised him *on my life* that you would look after her. Now promise *me* you will protect her with *your* life. But do as I say. Run!”

“But what about Mam, and Declan, Bridie and Seamus?” Sean's younger brother was only twelve, and his sister and youngest brother only a year apart, at six and seven.

“Don't worry about us. Your Mam and me will look after them. Look after *yourself*, boy. And take Lurch with you, and this.” He handed Sean a silver necklace on a chain. It was in the shape of a rose. “Your mother says

you must wear this at all times and it will keep you safe. It was her grandmother's and carries a Romani blessing."

Sean slipped the chain over his neck, thinking little of it. He was more concerned about Lurch, their lurcher. *Sean's* lurcher. He had trained him from a pup, having bought him at the market two years ago. He had paid the princely sum of a flagon of poitin (pron. 'potcheen'). Since potatoes, the main ingredient, were still recovering from the blight of some years previously, this forty percent (plus!) spirit fetched a premium price.

But Lurch was worth it. Half whippet and half terrier, the little sight-hound weighed little more than the couple of sugar beet – the vegetables that might go into a poitin mash - but he was worth his weight in... I guess, poitin.

Lurch had become another bread-winner for the whole family. He was a master at catching the plentiful rabbits that populated the county ever since they were introduced by the Viking Norsemen, centuries earlier. He also provided a more varied addition to their diet.

Rabbits were exceptionally nourishing in times when good food was scarce. It also meant that, on a good day when he might catch a surplus of rabbits, Sean was able to trade them for other essentials such as clothing, medicines, other foods – including bread and cheese. Theirs was one of several small-holder's cottages in this area of Southern Ireland. It was a tight community where everyone looked after each other – at least when they could.

To look at Lurch you would think he was deprived and wanting in nourishment and love. Not a bit of it. His rag-

taggle look – with his rough grey coat that caught every burr and thistle he brushed against – gave him the appearance of an orphan. But despite that he was fitter than most other unwashed curs in the area and, as for love and kindness, he was given and returned more affection in a week than most other dogs, and people, could expect in a lifetime.

If you want to understand the behaviour of a pet animal, look at the master they often say. Lurch was a prime example.

The one thing Lurch lacked, of course, was a full *human* vocabulary. But he could sense what was happening was serious. He cleaved even closer to Sean now, with frequent glances to his master, searching his face for signs of anxiety, fear, danger – even hope. It was an unwritten, unspoken, secret language they shared. Sean and Lurch worked together without words. Instead they used instinct.

The occasional growl was the first clue that Lurch had spotted, or thought he had spotted, something that wasn't right. He didn't bark. He couldn't. It wasn't part of his breed characteristic. A high pitched yelp was all you were going to get if danger presented itself. *Read the signs* Sean's father would say.

On this occasion it was Lurch's 'Yelp' that startled Sean, forewarning him that the soldiers had entered the village, looting, burning, killing. Then he heard the unmistakable sound of a gunshot. It felt as if it had

passed right through him, it seemed so close.

Then there was a second.

He waited for the third.... Nothing.

Then a fourth..... Nothing.

A fifth?.... Still nothing.

He stopped, turned, looking to where he'd heard the gunshots. It was in his family's cottage. He pulled Lurch close. Closer. He feared the worst, knowing right away that his beloved Mammy – 'the beautiful Colleen' his father called her, because that was her maiden name, Annie Colleen McGowan when he first met her - was no more. Shot, just like his father, Francis John Baker Sercombe - Frankie.

Although English by birth they were classed as Irish and therefore 'non persons' in the eyes of the 19th century legal system. The English could kill - no, murder them - legally. Legally? What a joke. But what of his sister and brothers?

He was too far away to hear what he imagined would be the cries of disbelief followed by the sobbing of first the sister, then the boys, learning that the military had dispensed of their parents. Why? The answer was simple. They *were* dispensable. Of no value. Irish.

And why was that? Because Trevelyan, Assistant Secretary to Her Majesty's Treasury, said so. To keep

them alive let alone let them prosper, was not in his budget.

Sean pondered on what might happen to his brothers and sister. At twelve years old Declan might be considered 'useful' and probably sold off to become a cabin boy on one of the many 'coffin ships'. Loaded with unfortunates seeking a better life, these ships were leaving so frequently now from the Irish ports, including Kilrush, bound for Canada and America. But few survived the passage, dying either from disease or hunger.

After all, what was the point of feeding them well? the ship owners would say. Many of the evicted men, women, and children were already malnourished, suffering from cholera, dysentery, consumption – and typhus. *Why waste too much food on so many when only 60% - the lucky ones – would survive the perilous journey to New York or Newfoundland?*

The future was no more promising for his siblings. The English politician, Peel, had funded the building of new workhouses for the poor, which is where Bridie and Seamus would probably end up. If they were lucky.

It was the sudden flash as bright flames engulfed the roof of their cottage that struck dread into his heart. The mix of cane and peat turf used to keep out the rain caught light easily, fuelled by tar torches brandished by the constabulary. They were now so skilled at burning out their own kind. They made sure of that – for the money and spoils was good.

“So this really *is* the end,” said Sean, out loud, even though his canine companion could not understand his words. But Lurch understood the meaning and signs of sorrow. They were the smell of acrid smoke from a burning home. His *home*. Sean's and his, Lurch. His faithful friend nuzzled closer as if he was more in need of comfort than his master. Sean wiped the solitary tear from the lurcher's eye.

So dogs, and all animals, can feel grief and pain, he thought. That one tear told Sean that all the kindness his father and mother had also lavished on Lurch was felt, appreciated, and would remain with him long after their passing.

It was Lurch who first broke away from Sean's hold as if to say, *No turning back, now*. They set out ahead making their way down to the Fergus, looking for the section of low water, still but just deep enough, where they had a currach moored. Lurch led way. He had taken over. By the time Sean caught up Lurch was in the front of the small river craft, having already undone the loose knot of the tethered mooring rope!

Come on, now, Sean, he seemed to be saying – before going back to stare straight ahead, his body rigid as he stood with his nose pointed across the river to the opposite bank. It was where he, Sean and his father, had crossed on so many previous occasions – *but much happier times*, he reflected.

Obediently, Sean pulled the craft to the water's edge and boarded before taking the oar to push away from the bank to row across the gentle current of the River Fergus.

There was not a sound. Nothing stirred. The noise and chaos of soldiers ransacking his village was now a memory, but still raw.

Landing on the opposite bank he recognised the familiar and well-used dry slope leading up a gentle gradient to the standing stones – the stone circle. Sean tied the currach securely and away from the water's edge, just in case floods threatened. But he knew he was unlikely to return or need it again. Lurch started up the hill path ahead of Sean, looking round only now and again to check that he had chosen the route his master had intended.

Sean rarely looked too far ahead, merely keeping his head down and focussing on the rocky ascent to the place on the hillside where the standing stones had been undisturbed for centuries. Waiting. After another half an hour of steady climbing Sean reached their destination. Lurch was already there, patiently waiting. As soon as he saw his master come into sight he relaxed, lying down with his paws outstretched, resting his head on his legs. He yawned.

Sean ignored Lurch's bored expression, walking past him – deliberately right in front of Lurch – so close than he had to move his paws. He was heading for the overhanging rocks, and shelter. It was exactly as his father had described, with a clear view downhill and across the valley, just in case they might be followed. Sean was learning to be vigilant and learning fast. He also remembered to keep an eye out for the girl.

It was only then he realised how heavy the tarp and

duffel bag that his Dad had handed him – already prepared for him before the soldiers came – had become. He dropped it at his feet like a lead weight, immediately feeling the relief to his right shoulder. Lurch ignored Sean's protests.

He dozed.

Don't light a fire, his father had said, *at least not on the first night*. Sean could see why.

He could see everything for miles; but everything and everyone could also see *him*. He unrolled the tarp first, then found a branch – it had to be fairly straight and some eight foot long. He started to assemble his shelter. *Their* shelter. Already he was thinking about the girl and his pledge to his father that he would look after her, at all costs.

I hope she's not going to be a bother, he thought. But then a stark reminder of how alone he was struck him, even with Lurch for comfort. He needed someone, anyone – human contact, as long as it was friendly. *What would she be like?*

Dismissing those thoughts for a while, he set about more practical, and pressing, tasks – a camp. The principle for building a shelter was simple. You took an elevation or a wall, or an over-hanging rock, leaned the branch against it, and anchored it to the ground in front at the far end. Then he recalled how his father had taught him all this during their nights out with the flock during lambing season.

He had said, *You then drape the tarp over the branch, pinning it down on either side about four feet*

apart. The slope of the tarp, with the ridge pole sloping downwards, deflects any wind, rain, snow – the weather – over you. Sean could hear him now, as he followed his instructions. As soon as the shelter was finished Lurch joined him, settling back again to doze.

It was now time to see what was in the duffel bag – the rough canvas bag such as sailors would carry for *all* their belongings, secured by a drawstring at one end. He had not even noticed his Dad preparing this escape package, let alone realised he would soon be on such an escapade in the first place. But he *had* noticed *one* thing.

The cottage that he could just about see in the far distance but had never visited – the one belonging to Uncle Billy – was now gone. Its white walls were no longer visible, replaced by a plume of black smoke spiralling heavenwards in the still night air. He wondered if there *was* a heaven after all.

His attention turned back to the duffel. He laid its contents on the short-cropped turf grazed nearly bare by hillside sheep and goats. *Ah, there was the flint stone for the fire*, he muttered. Next he found a lodestone. It was his navigation if the sun and stars decided not to shine – another relic from the Viking age. Then there was something soft - food!

Neatly wrapped in paper was bacon. It would have been all the bacon they possessed. He found a few crusts of bread then the all-familiar, cut up, pieces of rabbit, skinned and boned. Cooked. One potato. (Also their last.) The eggs were hard-boiled, two of them, with a small bag

of salt.

Apart from a cooking pot the heaviest of the items were also the most surprising. Again, he fought to hold back the tears. His father's boots. His best pair. Another sign that, *I won't be needing these any more* (he could hear his father say). Guilt racked Sean as he realised he hadn't noticed his father wearing his old boots when they had said their last goodbyes. *How could he be so insensitive?*

Lurch sensed Sean's remorse, creeping forward on his belly as if he were a collie sheepdog, before resting his head on his master's knee. Finally he looked up to catch some sign of acknowledgement. Sean reached down to stroke Lurch's head, playing gently with the hound's ears until he, and Lurch, both drifted into a near slumber. It was now dusk but the alarm call of a nearby blackbird brought them both back to wakefulness, and an awareness of where they were. Back to the *shock* of where they were, and what they had gone through just a few short hours beforehand when life was oh, so different.

It was not perfect, now, but it was better. Safe.

It was soon dark. Looking across the river Sean could still make out the smouldering remains of their family home. Just. It lit up the sky every now and then when the dry roofing thatch ignited fragile timbers below, helped by the animal fat-impregnated material used to keep the weather from blowing through the crude openings used for windows.

To the right of that now, and way into the distance on

the same side of the river as he sat silently, he could just make out a similar scene marking the same fate that had struck his uncle's cottage. And, he presumed, the girl's family - the girl he was about to meet – and very soon.

The military-backed constabulary from the troubled town of Ennis would spare no-one. Recent food riots by local townsfolk had led to the introduction of even more British forces, involving more brutality. With recent riots quelled – at least for now – the cynical government authorities used Trevelyan's Law as an excuse.

It led to bands of Anglo-Irish task forces being deployed, to cause even more misery and resentment for all local cottage dwelling farmers, in scattered settlements along the banks of the Fergus and the Shannon, on towards Kilrush.

Sean turned his head away from the tragic scene to attend to immediate matters. With the temporary shelter assembled he topped up his water bottle from the nearby spring. Then he would try to get some sleep, hopefully until dawn. He was exhausted but the distress of the day kept his mind racing, searching for reasons and solutions.

Where would he go, and what would he do next? And who was this girl? How would she find him, and when? He took out the one, small cooking pot and filled that, too, with water.

A small blanket – child's size, the one once used in his younger brother, Seamus's, cot not so many years before – lined the bottom of his duffel bag.

It provided little warmth to take him through the

night, but at least there was Lurch to keep his feet warm, and his spirits from sinking even lower.

Chapter Two

Sean awakes to an unexpected intrusion...

His faithful hound served him well for warmth that night, as he always had. Skinny, sinewy and with a tatty covering of coarse grey hair, Lurch gave up as much body heat as he could to his master, hoping, of course, for more in return. Neither were disappointed. Thankfully, although rain threatened it remained dry with just a gentle spring breeze that night.

They both woke up early but refreshed, courtesy of the dawn alarm from a stray cockerel across the valley. It had been spared the brutality of a soldier's bayonet. Lurch instinctively sniffed the air. Something wasn't right. It was the scent of another human. Someone was nearby. He gave a low growl, the hairs on his neck bristling.

Sean tensed.

Lurch's instincts were returned by a low growl, followed by a sharp bark. Then silence again.

What the...? Sean thought. Then something stirred. Just the outline of a dark figure, a willowy female shape by the standing stones.

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