

The Wild Colonials – Draft 1

Chapter 1

September 1861

Agnes had been silent for a long time. She stood rigid, standing among the stores and packages on the side of the road. They had halted mid-way along the main street of Braidwood, a small village with a few buildings clustered close together, as if hugging each other for comfort and security. But then there were other buildings further out, drifting in a straggle along the road trying to decide whether or not to become part of the town.

‘We’re finally here, Aggie m’ love,’ Sean ventured, with forced levity.

‘So I see.’

‘Is this where we’re to live? It was his elder daughter Maggie who spoke, drawing close to her mother.

‘No, we’ve a way to go yet, but we will stay the night here,’ said Sean. ‘I’ve told you all, many times, we will be living at your grandfather’s property, and it’s still some distance from Braidwood.’

‘I thought Braidwood would be bigger than this,’ said Eamon, ‘it’s a powerful long way to come, for sure, but no doubt we’ll get used to it, and if not we can always go to Sydney.’

Sean eyed his eldest son warily. It was a gamble, taking a grown family half way across the world, and now knowing they were not too impressed with what they saw at their destination.

Agnes looked at her children, the older ones now adults, making an attempt to hide their disappointment, the younger ones tired and already complaining of hunger. She shook herself, knowing she must support her husband in his decision, no matter the effect on any or all of them. She dusted down her brown serge travelling dress, worn and shabby thing that it was; she would be rid of it when they made enough money to replace it.

‘When will we meet Grandfather?’ asked Kate.

‘He is too old to travel much to town, so we will meet him at his home, and hopefully that will be tomorrow.’ Sean was pensive. His family might be meeting their grandfather for the first time, but it would also be a first meeting for him with his father. They would be moving in with a stranger, and a very old one at that. Still, there was nothing else for it. The situation in Ireland

was dire, and people came here for a better life. He could not contemplate that it might be worse than the one they'd left.

That night, they gathered around the large dining table at the Commercial Hotel, nervously trying to ignore the curious glances of other patrons. People they had spoken with were invariably friendly, but all commented on their fresh Irish accents.

'What is a 'fresh' Irish accent, I'd like to know,' asked Seamus, the youngest.

'I'd be sayin' it's different to the Irish who've been here for a while longer,' replied Finbar. 'They'd be havin' the inflection of the locals with their nasal twang, that's soundin' just like someone from England.'

'Shh, Finn, people can hear you and it's not polite to be speaking that way,' his mother admonished him.

'I'm not meanin' to be rude, mam, it's just an observation.'

'You keep your opinions to yourself.'

'So you'd be the newly arrived Dillon family!' Their conversation was interrupted by a large-bellied bewhiskered man, who reeked of beer, surprising them with his sudden arrival, and leaning a little too close to Maggie.

'Yes, that would be right,' said Sean rising to his feet and extending a hand to the stranger. The man was forced to stand upright, and move away from his daughter.

'I'm the owner of the saddlery at the corner. I hope to acquaint you of the good name of my business. Now you'd be old Paddy Dillon's long lost son.'

'My name is Sean Dillon, and you would be -?'

'Archibald Ewing, at your service.' He gave a mocking imitation of a courtly bow. 'You'll no doubt be needing good horses. I know exactly where to find the right ones, especially for the young ladies.' He leaned back towards Maggie.

Agnes rose to her feet. Sean was about to introduce her, but she silenced him with her frown.

'Will you excuse us, we are all very tired after a long journey. Good night.' The family rose as one, with the exception of Eamon, who joined his father.

'I'm thinkin' I might have a pint, Da.' With that he walked towards the saloon doors. Sean felt compelled to follow him, as did the redoubtable Archibald Ewing.

Eamon's severe lack of funds and Sean's refusal to buy more than one round of drinks truncated the evening, but not before Archibald, or Archie as he was known to the locals, had regaled them about the dangers of living in the Jingera district.

'They're a wild lot of colonial lads up there, and you'll be wanting to make sure you have plenty of guns and ammunition at the ready.'

'My father is eighty two years old, and he has survived all these years, so I'll be takin' my chances,' replied Sean.

'Ah he's one of those that keeps his counsel.' Archie nodded sagely, accompanying the gesture with an extravagant wink.

Now what did that mean, thought Sean, but he was growing increasingly uneasy. His father had written to him of the acreage, the good return for wool and meat, and of the sunshine that aided the rearing of healthy children.

This, following the loss of his job in Cork, and the death of their Seamus' twin, Sean junior, from Consumption, forced his hand. Agnes was resigned to her loss, he knew that. Few people got through life without burying one or two of their offspring, after all, but her grief was not yet worked out. It was two years this week that young Sean had gone, and Agnes was well aware of the approaching anniversary. She'd have them all on their knees saying the whole fifteen decades of the rosary on the day, no matter where they were or how tired anyone might be. She was reluctant to leave her son's grave, and was only persuaded when her sister, Orla, promised to tend it regularly.

'... and that Pat Connell, there isn't a horse in the whole colony he can't master. It's like they're one, and do they fly through the bush ...' Sean suddenly realized that Archie had been speaking and he hadn't taken in a word. Eamon, though, had been attentive.

'Ah that's what I'd like to do, but I've not had the chance to ride. There are few horses for the likes of us in Ireland.'

'Well, my lad, you'll have to ride here, or you'll be stuck in the bush forever. But don't think you'll ever be as good at the art of riding as Pat, or the Clarke boys. Now Tommy, he's almost as good as Pat, and they're both daring lads. The things they get up to ... ah ... never mind ... I've said enough on that score.'

Eamon turned to him, curious. It sounded as if there was more excitement here than he'd thought. 'What is it they do?' he asked, but Archie had just seen an old friend and abruptly left to greet him.

'Drink up Eamon, and we'll be away for the night. It's an early start we have tomorrow.' Sean was relieved to be rid of their company.

Eamon, grimacing, drained his glass.

Chapter 2

The track was long and dusty, the sun setting in a haze below the distant mountains when they arrived at Patrick Dillon's modest home. The O'Malleys, neighbours of Patrick's, had volunteered to bring them from Braidwood, and had assembled all the spare horse power and drays they and Patrick owned to convey the family.

Kate had slept part of the way, her head on her mother's lap. The boys had taken turns at driving the horses under close supervision from Mick O'Malley.

'It's just over the rise. It's a nice outlook,' said Mick, enthusiastically. And so it seemed. A winding track of red-brown earth with fruit trees in blossom, led to a small, low rise stone house with a wide verandah. It apparently had a wooden room recently added. The house seemed well built, testament to the skills learned by Patrick during his days as a convict.

The barking dogs alerted the owner to the arrival. A tall, lean, grey haired man emerged from the garden at the side. Seamus jumped down. 'Is that grandfather?' He started toward the man.

'No Seamus, wait. Let your father meet him first,' ordered Agnes, as she gratefully climbed down beside him.

Sean walked towards his father, struggling to hide his emotions.

The older man met him in silence, grasping both of his hands, several tears escaping from his faded blue eyes, and disappearing into his long beard.

'It's a nice place you have here, Father,' said Sean, huskily, breaking the uneasy silence, 'and it's good of you to share it with us.'

'My boy, my boy, at long last you have come. Look at you, there's no doubt I'm your dad, but you have your mother's eyes, God rest her. It's so long ago. How old would you be now?'

'I'm all of sixty two. I was late becoming a father.' Sean turned and gestured towards the drays. And here is the family.

'Agnes, I'm pleased to meet you,' Patrick gave a slight bow, unsure of whether to shake her hand or kiss her cheek. 'You've all come so far. It's not a journey for the faint hearted.'

One by one the family were introduced, and the absence of young Sean sadly noted by his grandfather. 'Please come inside.'

The room they were ushered into was warm and light, but with roughly plastered walls. A large fire place was the central feature, freshly white-washed and with a large kettle of water hanging from a hook over the fire, along with another blackened pot that contained a stew. They were surprised to see a young girl cutting up a cake on the scrubbed wooden table.

'This is Charlotte Hart, she's the daughter of a very good neighbor of mine, and she has brought us sustenance.'

Patrick went through the introductions. 'You'll be staying a while, Charlotte.'

The girl smiled, brushing a curl back from her forehead with the back of her hand.

'Oh Mr Dillon, I'm sorry but I can't, I need to get back before dark, and my horse is so slow pulling the cart. Dad says she'll be off to the knackery soon.' She laughed.

'I can't see your father doing that, soft thing that he is,' Patrick grinned. 'Thank you so much for your help, and thank your good mother for this feast.'

'I left the mutton stew on the fire, and there's a rabbit stew I put in the meat safe down the well. I'll be off now.'

Agnes walked to the door with her. 'We'll be very happy to meet you again, Charlotte, and your family, too. Kate, go with Charlotte. Eamon, help her with the horse.'

'You are from Ireland. It's such a long way. Did you see exciting places on the way?' Charlotte enquired. The conversation didn't have time to range widely as Charlotte soon became aware of the deficiencies of her help, and she rapidly hitched the horse to the cart. 'Haven't you hitched up a horse before?' she asked, surprised.

'It's somethin' I'll be learnin' quick,' replied Eamon, blushing. But we lived in a town, so we walked everywhere.'

Charlotte smiled again. She seemed a friendly girl, asking Kate if the fashions were different in Ireland, and admiring the small cross and chain she wore. She chatted with them for a while, and discovered a lot more about them than they did about her. 'I'll be back in the next few days to collect the dishes. If not me then one of my kin.' She waved and slapped the reins on the horse's rump, easing it into a trot.

Kate woke early the next morning. They had all slept well, the girls in a room on one side of the house, while the boys were accommodated in the new wooden room. Patrick had vacated his room for Sean and Agnes, and was set up in a small sleep out at the back of the house.

'That would be the best sleep I've ever had,' said Kate, yawning widely.

'It's more comfortable than I thought it would be,' added Maggie.

'Your grandfather's late wife must have had a hand in the furnishings.' Agnes examined the cushions on a settee. 'I think she had a little money, but then, they had no children, and he has a sizeable parcel of land, from what your father says.'

'How much land?'

'I'm not sure, but it's over three hundred acres altogether.'

'Great heavens, it's a powerful amount. I'm wondering why he isn't as rich as Croesus.'

'It's the quality perhaps that's wanting, and he runs sheep but not any crops, apart from the kitchen garden. He's not rich, because it's hard for the Irish here, as the place is run by the English protestants, and they have the real money. It's just not as terrible in oppression as at home.'

Patrick had roused the young men and they were all out having their first riding lessons. 'Now this is my old mare Bessie. She's gentle, but not used to seeing so many at once, so we'll take it easy, like.' Finn wasn't too sure, but of the three, the horse seemed happiest with him on board. Patrick's other two horses weren't considered suitable for novices.

'What about you, Da? When are you goin' to learn to ride?' asked Eamon.

'I have news for you, my son. I was quite adept a rider at your age.'

'No, you never were...!'

'I spent some time as a stable hand, and in those days I was slight in build and about Finn's age, so I would be used as a trainin' jockey. I spent several years doing that until I took work with a builder. It's been a long while, but I'm thinkin' it's a skill that will return with a little practise.'

'I'm going to check the sheep on that far hillock,' said Patrick, 'there could be some losses in the lambs. Would you come with me, Sean?'

Sean found the mare to his liking and rode off, appreciating the admiring expressions of his sons.

Patrick was grateful for the company, and the chance to speak with his son about his life in Ireland and to share a little of his experience of life, as well as of sheep husbandry. They dismounted and inspected several ewes, and noticed two lambs that were struggling.

‘We’ll bring them and their mothers up close to the house and put them in the fenced paddock. The creek runs down there. It’s good clean water, and hasn’t run dry even in the worst of the drought.’ They walked towards some rocks where they sat. ‘It’s a lot for you to learn, at your time of life, but your boys will be quicker.’

‘No doubt I’ll manage. It will all take a while to become accustomed. It’s so different, the light, it’s bright, and the great blue sky – not a cloud to be seen, and the smell of those trees. It’s good and fresh, but not green at all.

‘Nothing is as green as Ireland, and believe me, this is as green as it gets here. We have the new spring growth in the pasture right now. Wait till summer when it is so dry the air almost crackles. It will also be hotter than anything you are used to.’

‘It was hot coming through the tropics on the ship.’

‘A humid heat that saps the energy. It’s much drier here. It’s fires we have to most guard against.’

‘It is quiet and peaceful –’

As if to contradict him the sound of horses’ hooves thundered through the bush, accompanied by whoops and shouts. Both men turned towards the noise.

‘It’s young James Clark, and his brother, John. Hmmm ...’

The two riders were quickly upon them.

‘G’day Mr Dillon. A great day for ridin’, eh?’

‘Hello, boys, mind where you go, I’ve two sick lambs in that gully.’

‘We’ll keep clear of ‘em. Come this way, Johnny.’ It was James who spoke, and Johnny grinned and wheeled his horse to follow his brother. In less than a minute they had disappeared.

‘Are they the lads we’ve heard of in Braidwood?’

‘No doubt. They’re good boys, but high spirited, like the horses they’re riding. I daresay they are not the Clarke brand.’

‘They don’t own the horses? Isn’t that illegal?’

Patrick chortled. 'Illegal? And who's to stop them? Not me. I was a convict, and so were many of the fathers and grandfathers of the lads in this district. They flout the law because they can. They have no respect for those who make money with the sweat and blood of the poor and downtrodden. This colony has been bred in blood, misery and injustice. But here, up in this part of the bush, the traps are few and the temptations are great. The children can't read or write, but they can all ride, and that's their preferred entertainment. And they can enjoy the freedom that's been denied all of us who came before.' He sounded bitter.

'But you have done well. You have land, stock and a good, solid home.'

'And I've lived a long life, even though I've suffered for it. There are no convicts coming here anymore, thank God for that, but there's plenty still serving time, and still bear the scars and resentment. I've made good, but not as good as some that turn a blind eye, and live the high life. It's not just the poor that do that. Everyone is looking for the big chance, and few worry about how it's done. Then there's the others who came with the gold rush, all wanting to get rich quick. The gold is running out now, so there's plenty looking for other ways of making a pile of money, not all legal.

'Is it mainly the horses they steal?'

'And the cattle. Everyone has been known to take calves from all about and brand them. It's a mark of success to be faster branding at your neighbour's cattle than he is.'

'And what about you, Father? Are you the only virtuous one here?' Sean grinned.

'What about me, son? I know nothing about it at all.' He looked serious, but the corners of his mouth twitched.

Chapter 3

'So what are they like?' Charlotte's friend, Emily, met her at the door.

'Give me a minute to get my bonnet off, and I'll tell you.' She sighed, and threw her bonnet onto the table. Put the kettle on, Emily, I'm all in.'

'Yes, but what are they like?' persisted Emily.

'Well they have heads and bodies and arms and legs...'

'Don't be silly.'

'They're people with good manners, so that's an improvement for the district. And there are the two older parents and five younger ones.'

'How young?'

'There's two grown up, early twenties I'd say, and there's a boy of about seventeen and a girl, Kate, who told me she's fourteen, and then there's young Seamus who's eleven. He was a twin but the other one died.'

'What are the boys like? I mean the older ones.'

'Eamon, he's the eldest –

'Eamon?'

'Yes Eamon – he's very good looking, and quite tall, he has dark wavy hair, and brown eyes, or they might be blue. I didn't get a really close look, and I suppose I wasn't all that interested. He can't ride a horse –'

'A grown man, and can't ride a horse!' Emily was horrified.

'It's not his fault. They lived in a town and didn't need horses, and couldn't afford them I suppose. You know how you'd have to pay for stables if you have a poky house in the town.'

'He'll have to learn here, or be a laughing stock.'

I'm sure he'll learn, and so will the other boys. The girls didn't seem too interested. Anyway, the middle boy is Finbar. Isn't that a name! They call him Finn, though, so that isn't too bad. He looked really tired, and asked his grandfather where he kept his books.

'Oh Lord, imagine old Paddy Dillon with books!'

'He can read and write. I've seen him reading a newspaper, and he probably does have a book or two. The late Mrs Dillon had some, but the house is looking sad now. I suppose the younger Mrs Dillon will soon have it in order. She didn't say too much, but looked a bit shocked by it all.'

I suppose it would be a shock coming here. I remember how my grandmother used to talk about the green in Ireland and the rain, and how cold it was.'

'Yes, they'll be in for a bigger shock when it gets hot. And Maggie, she's the eldest of them all, she said seeing fruit trees blossom in September takes some getting used to.'

'Oh that's right, the seasons are all the wrong way around over there. Now this Maggie, is she beautiful? Perhaps she's someone who would sweep Tommy Clarke off his feet?'

'I don't think so. She's not his type at all!' Charlotte answered quickly. 'She's not all that good looking. The younger girl, Kate, is good looking – She's got really nice skin and big eyes, and masses of long dark hair. And she looks like she'll have a nice figure when she's older.'

'More competition for all of us girls here. Just think about all those Clarke girls. Soon the boys will have two girls apiece.'

'I think there'll be enough boys to go around,' remarked Charlotte, drily, 'as long as no one challenges me for the one I want.'

'And who would that be?' teased Emily.

'No one in particular,' retorted Charlotte, laughing, and rapidly changed the subject.

'Now, Father, where can we attend Mass?' Agnes asked Patrick.

Patrick was taken aback, but quickly recovered. 'It's not a regular thing. There's only one priest in Braidwood, and he has his work cut out going between Braidwood and Araluen. They are the centres of population.'

'So unless we go to those places we don't get to Mass?'

'There's the temporary church, and every once in a while Father O'Brien comes out to these parts. And the congregation are about raisin' money for a sturdier structure.'

'And when would that be likely to happen?'

'It will be a while, as we've been payin' for St Bedes in Braidwood.'

'But it's such a way to travel.'

'Too far by half, but as I said it's the lack of a priest, more than the will of the people to accommodate a congregation. And it's not as if any of the young lads around here are anxious to be involved in Holy Orders.'

'It's no wonder they are growing up wild and immoral, then. It's not been a concern for you, personally, the lack of a priest and the Sacraments?'

'Agnes my dear, I'm long a strayed sheep. It is very hard not to become disillusioned with religion after what I've been through.'

'Is that because there were no priests at all in this colony for so long?'

'No, quite the contrary. As convicts, all the Catholics, and we were mostly Irish, had to attend the religious service provided, and that was the Church of England. The other protestants had no choice, either, but we were the biggest group affected. We rebelled but that just meant more punishments. So I've suffered for my religion. Eventually they gave in and allowed some priests in – but they're mostly English ones, who would go along with the government. Of course there were some priests transported and would manage to say Mass in secret, but that was always hard to do.'

'We are in the way of saying the rosary at night. You will not object?'

'No, of course not, but I might not always join you.'

'Then we will pray for your immortal soul.'

'That's very kind of you. Now I think I will go out and check on those sick lambs.' Patrick knew there would be changes with a new woman in the house, but he wasn't really prepared for the heavy kneeling variety.

Chapter 4

It was a week later when they were invited to attend a gathering that was to be held at the hamlet of Krawarree. It was to be a picnic held in their honour to welcome them to the district and would be held two weeks hence. If the weather was inclement they would assemble in a large barn. The girls were particularly excited to be meeting new people, as they were already tired of their own company. Apart from a return visit from Charlotte and one from the Griffin men, they had not met another soul. It was a contrast to the crowded quarters on the ship, and the life in Ireland with more people in and out of their home than they wanted. Kate especially craved company.

The boys were spending much time learning horsemanship, and while on foot, had managed to find several stray sheep, to their grandfather's delight. He was concerned at how far they had travelled in pursuit of the animals.

'I wouldn't venture too far into the bush just yet. It's easy to become lost, one tree looks much like another, and it's not as if there's a village over the hill. I can show you the tracks to take,

and if you do get lost and you are on a horse, just give the horse its head, and it will find its way home.'

Patrick was pleased with the boys' progress, particularly that of Finn.

'You look at home in the saddle, and the horses all like you. It's a gift, to take to riding as naturally as you do,' he enthused. Finn was flattered, but although he liked the horses and riding, this was not something he aspired to at all. ' And Eamon, you've shown great improvement, too.'

Eamon did not return his grandfather's enthusiastic grin. I'll always not measure up, he thought angrily. There is Finn, not caring a fig about horses and sheep, but he's the favourite, no doubt – all because he sits well in a saddle. I'll show him and them all. They won't just be talkin' of the deeds of the Clarkes and the O'Connells when I master this!

He took Bessie out and was soon confident trotting around the flat area near the house, but in an attempt to canter he pulled the reins suddenly and the mare shied. Eamon's foot slipped from the stirrup, and he slid sideways, the mare skewing away from him in an effort to be rid of the burden. In another second he was on the ground, his head striking the earth, hard.

He woke to see his mother leaning over him gently bathing his face with a damp cloth. His head hurt badly.

'What ...?'

'Hush, now. Don't try to speak, son, it's a bad fall you've had.' Agnes spoke soothingly, with a calm she didn't feel.

'Oh praise be to Jesus, Mary and Joseph,' exclaimed Maggie, 'you have survived!'

It took some time for Eamon to realise that he had been unconscious and he had completely forgotten falling from the horse. It took even longer for him to recover completely, and while he was nervous around the animals, especially Bessie, he knew he had to face his fears and try to ride again.

Several days later a pale and thinner Eamon approached the stables. Patrick had gone with him to steady the horse, and to supervise his ride.

'Hold the reins firmly, but don't pull on them. Pat her on the side of her head. That's right. Horses can sense if you're unsure. You have to let them know that you are the boss. Good, now nudge her with your knees. If you use your heels she'll break into a trot.'

'I'd like to be able to at least trot,' said Eamon. 'I was able to do all that before, it's only when she went a bit fast ...'

'You need to be in rhythm with the horse, you don't just bounce up and down –'

More horses were heard approaching. Both men turned to greet their visitors.

'It's Tommy Clarke and his uncle, Pat.'

'His uncle? He looks more like a brother.'

'It's a case of a big family, and Pat being one of the younger ones, while Tommy is the eldest son of Pat's sister.'

'Mornin' Mr Dillon, we're just passin' through.' It was Pat who spoke.

'Good day to you. I see you have *found* some of those missing horses.'

Tommy and Pat were both leading an extra horse.

'Yeah,' said Pat, 'We're just takin' them back to Mount Elrington now.'

'They'd be the two that have a reward offered?'

'I'd say so,' chimed in Tommy. They were down near the Jerra Creek. Took us a while to pick 'em up, but it's all in a day's work.'

'Yeah, I'm sure,' replied Patrick, acerbically. 'This is my grandson, Eamon, not long from the old country, and he's learning to ride. Eamon, meet Tom Clarke and Pat Connell.'

Greetings were exchanged and Tom eyed the young man awkwardly perched on the grey mare.

'When you've got the way of it, you'll have to come out with us. We could show you the finer points,' he remarked with not a little amusement.

'That might be a while, but I'd be grateful for your advice,' replied Eamon, his cheeks burning.

The two waved and trotted off.

'That's rather sedate for them,' said Patrick. 'But those two horses they're leading are very expensive animals, and it's uncanny how those two always seem to know where to find the missing ones.'

'Do you think they take them, and then *find* them again?'

'I don't think that, my boy, I know it!'

'I think it's disgraceful,' remarked Agnes as she kneaded bread dough.

Sean knocked out his pipe against the fire grate. 'It is that, for sure, but it is the manner of this place.'

'Haven't they ever been told that stealing is a sin?'

'I think there's a lot they haven't been told, but I suppose the way they see it is that the big landholders just came out here and took up great swathes of land, and didn't pay a penny for it, now people have to pay for smaller lots that aren't as productive, and they can barely scratch a livin'. So they see it as evenin' up the score. It's no different to the resentment of the English back at home.'

'I think it is different – they didn't have their land taken from them as we did.'

'Yet the Aborigines did. They are the ones who are disinherited, just as we were in Ireland.'

'But they didn't farm the land.'

'No, but they hunt and gather, and generally live off the land. And they were here first.'

'That's true, and they seem to be dying in great numbers. It's terrible to see.'

'That it is.'

'There's some that are very clever finding their way through the bush, Father was telling me. The police employ them to track people who get lost or who are in hiding.'

'Well those Clarke boys will want to be on their guard. They seem to be more daring every day.'

'I haven't seen too much evidence of police around these parts. And from what Father says, they are known to be friendly with most, and seem to turn a blind eye to misdemeanors.' Agnes placed the bread on the hearth. 'There, that should rise nicely overnight,' she said, admiring her handiwork.

'I have never been to a picnic,' wailed Kate, 'what should I wear?' She had been up since dawn.

'I daresay you will wear what you have for best. It's not as if there's a great wardrobe of gowns to choose from,' replied Maggie, but she had made a special effort that morning, and was brimming with excitement. The idea of meeting new people, especially of the male variety, appealed.

Eventually they were assembled, all washed, hair combed or coifed and bonneted, and clad in their Sunday best clothes. Patrick had decided that Sean and Finn would ride the horses, while he would drive the dray taking the rest of the family. Patrick was trialling a new horse with a view to buying, and it was hitched to the dray beside Bessie. He did not think it wise to let it be driven by his inexperienced grandsons. Eamon secretly seethed at his younger brother being given a horse to ride, but knew better than to complain.

An hour later they became aware of voices, and the sounds of a number of people greeting each other, not far beyond the Dempsey house. A fairly large group had watched their approach, and the family became conscious of being appraised from afar.

James Dempsey moved forward to greet them, and to assist the ladies from the dray.

'Welcome to our gathering,' he said genially. 'I'll make some introductions, but no one will be offended if you have to ask their name a second or third time.'

The families of Bradleys, Berrys, Harts and Dempseys and the rest of the O'Malleys, were duly introduced, along with several of the Clarke girls and a number of Connells. Another two men stood to one side, and were the last introduced.

'These two good gentlemen are our local policemen, Constables O'Neill and Dalton. Neither of the men was wearing uniform, and considered the visit to be strictly social.

It took little time for the conversation to turn to Ireland, and those who had hailed from that country to indulge in nostalgia. The recovery from the great famine was a topic regularly revisited.

'I must say,' said Mary Anne Dempsey to Agnes, 'although we don't have a great deal here, we are never hungry. There's plenty of vegetables and meat, and we can always get flour, sugar and tea from town.'

'It's a healthy climate, to be sure,' replied Agnes, 'and look at all your fine, strong children. They grow taller in all the sunshine it would seem.'

'Yes, the climate is cold in winter, and hot in summer, but it's not so bad as we often get the wind from the east that cools it down. It's a good, bracing climate, but not nearly so cold or wet as Ireland. In fact the lack of rain is usually the biggest problem.'

Charlotte Hart took Maggie and Kate under her wing and with a number of other girls was discussing the latest fashions. Both of the newcomers felt shabby compared to these girls, who were decked out in a variety of colourful spring dresses.

'We make our own,' said a girl named Caroline Hurley, 'although some are better with a needle and thread than others.' She looked knowingly at her sister, Lucy.

'I do like nice dresses,' Lucy said, 'but I'd rather be riding a horse than sewing, any day. And if there's a better way to get a dress than sewing it, I'm all for it.'

'You can ride a horse?' asked Kate, awe-struck.

'Of course, Can't you?'

'No, I never thought to try. My brothers are all learnin'.'

'And why not you?'

'There are not enough horses for us all.'

Lucy giggled. 'Then you find one and take it. It's the only way to get around sometimes. There are so many rich people around here with horses to spare. And when you've finished your ride smack it on the rump and let it go. It'll generally find its way home.'

Kate gaped at Lucy's temerity.

Charlotte interrupted. 'I hope you aren't leading Kate astray, Lucy,'

'Not at all, she has to learn to have some fun or she'll die of boredom out here. Now, Charlotte, have you seen anything Tommy Clarke lately. I met his uncle Mick O'Connell not long ago. Now there's a man who knows a trick or two. He's talkin' of visitin' Tom ... who's away just now.'

Lucy looked wistful.

'Tom Connell you mean? I don't think he's seeing too many people at the moment ... I think all the Clarke boys were at the last race meeting in Braidwood, but I'm not sure. Some of the Connells might have been there, too. Now Annie Clarke had a really lovely dress that day, it was a lemon muslin with wide hoops. She had to go through the door sideways! I would love something like that this summer.'

'Annie really does dress well when she can.' Lucy laughed, and Charlotte shook her head.

The men and women slowly separated, as was the norm at these events. A favourite haunt for the males was around the beer keg, brought specially from Braidwood for the event. Inevitably the discussion turned to the price of wool and the breeding of horses.

'Did you know that a horse owned and bred by the Hassalls and the Royds is going to race at a big meeting in Melbourne? Denis Dempsey handed a mug of beer to Sean.

'Which one?' asked Patrick.

'Archer,' supplied Mick O'Malley. 'He was leased to Etienne De Mestre, and he's training him down at the coast, at Terara, I believe.'

'He's done well at Randwick, but there'll be a lot of competition in Melbourne. I've heard there's a handsome purse for the winner,' said Cornelius Dempsey.

'How much would that be?' asked Sean.

'Seven hundred and ten gold sovereigns and a hand beaten gold watch.'

'Don't tell the Clarkes and the O'Connells about that, or they'll find a fast boat to Melbourne,' laughed Mick.

'There's a horse they didn't get a free ride on!' said Patrick. 'But the odds would have to be against Archer, especially if they have to walk him all the way to Melbourne.'

Denis and Mick nodded in agreement, and took a swig of their beers.

'Now tell me Mrs Dempsey, 'are there any schools hereabouts? Agnes enquired.

'Why no, but there's the parish school in Braidwood.'

'But that's too far. They'd have to find board in the town.'

'Mrs Higgins has a boarding and day school, but it's very expensive, and doesn't offer the right religious instruction. I've heard that all of your children can read and write, do they even need more schooling?'

'I think Seamus certainly does. I was a governess before I married, and I have made sure all my children have basic literacy. But our Finbar is one who especially enjoys reading. I'm hoping, too, that he may be visited with a vocation for the religious life, and I am concerned about access to Mass and the sacraments for them all.'

'Of course, as we all are. Though we're planning to build a permanent church in Reidsdale, and then Father O'Brien will come on a regular basis, but the main effort has gone into the construction of St Bede's in Braidwood. You would have seen the church at the end of Wallace Street.'

'Indeed I did and a fine church it is. It is such a shame it is so far to go, but we will have to make the effort on occasion.'

'Perhaps you would need to go the night before and stay. But that would be very expensive for your entire family. We are all concerned about the religious welfare of our families, and we have a committee set up to raise money for our church. Would you like to be involved?'

'Most certainly. We will all happily contribute in whatever way possible.' Agnes was delighted with the news. 'Perhaps we should ask the archbishop to send another priest, to support poor Father O'Brien.'

'He's already been asked, but the colony is growing apace, and we usually have to wait for priests to come from England and Ireland. 'Still, as you have the skills to write a persuasive letter, then please do it for all of our sakes.'

Maggie had moved to replenish her cup of fruit punch when she was surprised by a male voice.

'Please allow me to get that for you.'

She turned and found herself facing Constable Gerard Dalton. He was tall, and of sinewy build, with thick russet coloured hair and beard. His nose was crooked and his ears protruded somewhat under his black wide-brimmed hat. He couldn't be called handsome, but not ugly, either. His eyes suggested a sense of liveliness and humour.

'Oh thank you, Mr er ...'

'Gerard Dalton, at your service,' He bowed slightly and took the cup from her hand. He was adept at making small talk, and she, though uncertain, managed a little conversation. They were eventually joined by Emily West who asked her to return to the group of young women seated under a large pine tree.

'Maggie,' she whispered, 'be careful what you say around the police. Constable Dalton is new to these parts, too, but they all want to find out as much as they can about everybody in this district.'

'I'm not sure I understand. I don't know anything about anyone.'

'Yes but it's surprising what you might unknowingly tell them. We are very loyal to our neighbours. '

'I'm sure I agree that we should be loyal, but really we only talked about the weather and Ireland. '

'Of course, but it's just for future reference. If you hear anything about the Clarkes or the O'Connells for instance, don't pass it on to the police.'

'What is all of this talk of the Clarkes and the O'Connells? I've heard that they either break the law or stretch it every day.'

'It's hard to make a living with such a big family to support. 'And if rich people leave valuable possessions lying about or unsecured, it's tempting for young men, and some young women, to ...mmm ... acquire them.'

'It shouldn't be if they have a sense of right and wrong!'

'Not everyone has the same sense of right and wrong. Your grandfather, for example, did he ever tell you why he was transported to the colony?'

'I've heard a little. I don't think he wants to talk about it. I know he suffered terribly, but that is long ago and he has prospered since.'

'He has prospered a little, but not nearly as much as the big landholders. And, though some are kind enough, most don't care at all about the likes of us. I used to work at Foxlow, as a maid, and the differences in the way they live are enormous. There are balls and lavish parties, and the clothes and jewels that the women have would make your eyes water.'

'Why did you give up your work? '

'They asked me to leave, because one night Pat and Thomas O'Connell called in, and were hungry. I only gave them some of the left over food from a dinner, but they called it abetting them.'

'That's very callous , especially if the food was going to waste.'

They were joined by Mary George, Charlotte's older sister. 'You should also add, Emily, that the O'Connells helped themselves to some horses and saddles on the way out, and that is why you lost your job.'

Emily flushed. 'I didn't know they were going to do that. I was just doing what we all do when our friends are hungry. We feed them!'

'Of course,' said Mary kindly. She turned towards the Irish girl. 'It can sometimes be very tricky, Maggie, to decide what is right and what is wrong. Things aren't always as simple as they might seem.'

Chapter 5

The Dillon's social life was improving. The picnic was followed by a dance. It was held in the hotel at Major's Creek, with all of the tables and chairs removed to make space for the dance floor. Marty Hanrahan played the fiddle with Bella Mulvaney on the piano. To the delight of the Dillons, the music was distinctively Irish and lively in nature with many reels and jigs that kept the dancers huffing and puffing, especially those who weren't as young as they thought.

Maggie was surprised to see Constable Dalton approach and ask her to dance. Rather than risk being a wall flower – she noted that even Kate was dancing - she accepted. It was too noisy for conversation, so she decided to simply enjoy the dance. As it was a dance that required partners to change, she rapidly progressed along the line until she found herself facing the notorious Tommy Clarke.

He grinned and introduced himself and swept her along with energy and enthusiasm. Once again there was little conversation, but Maggie was aware of the sheer power of his presence. He radiated a masculinity unrivalled by the other men in the room. As she passed to her next partner, she found her hands shaking. Later she reflected on this strange reaction. Was it just that she, who prided herself on her virtue, was in the arms of a wild and dangerous man. And for all that they referred to him as one of the 'boys', there was no doubting Tommy Clarke was very much a man. The most disturbing thing was how she was instantly attracted to him, and try as she would, she could not eliminate the feeling.

Kate had been asked to dance by a handsome young man, someone about Finn's age. He appeared nervous, and stammered a greeting.

'Hello ...I'm... John, like to ... dance?'

She nodded her assent, and would later learn from Charlotte that she was dancing with John Clarke. After the dance finished he gestured towards the fruit punch on the bar, and without waiting for her agreement poured them both a cup. It appeared that his stammer wasn't from nerves, as in other ways he was self- possessed. Kate had seen other children with the problem in Ireland, and witnessed their frustration when others tried to finish their strangled sentences. She smiled warmly and waited for him.

'Yes, we are from Ireland, and it is a big change in the way of life,' she replied to his halting question.

'Do ... you like ... it here?'

'It takes some gettin' used to, but everyone is so friendly and helpful, that I'm sure we won't take long to settle in.'

Their conversation was interrupted not long after by another man, shorter than John and with sandy hair and beard, and piercing blue eyes. 'Scuse me miss - Johnny we best get goin',' and the man nodded towards Constable Dalton who was making his way through the crowd towards them. John patted Kate on the hand, and stammered a farewell.

Maggie, who had been standing near the door made way as they rapidly moved past and within minutes the silhouettes of two riders were illuminated against the setting moon, and the pounding of their horses' hooves could be heard rapidly fading into the night. Maggie was reluctantly turning back towards the crowded room when Charlotte Hart appeared by her side.

'Don't be setting your sights on the likes of Tommy Clarke, 'she said firmly, 'I hear he's spoken for.'

'Oh my goodness, Charlotte, the thought never occurred to me!' And until that moment, it really hadn't.

The following day most were late rising, apart from Patrick who had made his excuses because of his age, and not attended the dance.

'So how did you find it? '

'It was most enjoyable, Grandfather,' said Maggie.

'It was most tedious,' said Finn, emphatically. 'For the life of me, jumpin' around to music and getting' all hot under the collar is a great waste of energy.'

'Weren't there any young ladies to your likin'?' asked Patrick.

'None that I could conduct a decent conversation with,' replied Finn.

'That's just sour grapes,' said Eamon. 'I had no trouble havin' a decent conversation with at least five of them. And they dance well, too.'

'Perhaps they didn't like the look of you, is closer to the truth,' suggested Kate. 'Well I saw Maggie dancin' with the new policeman, and she also took a turn with the infamous Tommy Clarke!'

'Kate, you know I danced only briefly in the reel with Tommy Clarke, and you would have too had the music not stopped. Now, I couldn't help but notice you were dancing for much longer with his younger brother.'

‘What if I was. I don’t think he’s yet been arrested for all the cattle and horse stealing, unlike his brothers.’

‘That’s enough, girls,’ said Agnes, severely. ‘I’m very pleased you enjoyed the dancing, but there are plenty of respectable young men to dance with. Maggie, I must say that Constable Dalton is a real gentleman.’

‘Who? Oh yes, he is ... quite the gentleman.’ But her thoughts had already strayed to someone who could not be described in such terms.