

Chapter 19

Liam stared out the window of the speeding train, hoping not to be noticed. The carriage was still only about half full, and earlier he had discreetly taken a window seat, facing forward. The morning sunshine was not strong enough yet to melt the heavy frost from the night before, and the countryside through which the train travelled westwards had a frozen, icy beauty about it. But despite admiring the ever-changing winter scene unfolding before his view, Liam couldn't relax. Any minute now a conductor must surely enter the carriage to check tickets, and that would be a tricky moment.

So far, everything had gone to plan. He had set off for school at his usual time, but as soon as he was out of sight of his house, had turned towards the station. With Broadstone depot practically on his doorstep, Liam was very familiar with its many tracks and marshalling yards. He had hidden his school-bag under a stack of ballast stones, then mounted the platform for the Sligo-bound train, coming from the direction of the goods yards and thus avoiding the ticket collector at

the main concourse of the station.

Before leaving home he had given Eileen, his eldest sister, a note for his ma. He had made Eileen promise not to hand it over until after she came home from school this afternoon. By then Liam hoped to have ridden the train to Mullingar and made his way the final eleven miles from there to Ballinacargy. In the letter he told his mother not to worry, and that he would get back to Dublin with the precious supplies as quickly as possible. Eileen tried to quiz him about what was going on, but he had insisted that she had to trust him, and that he was doing something that would mean food for the family.

Now, as the train clattered along the tracks, Liam tried not to show any nervousness. He sat in his window seat, the carriage warm and cosy in contrast to the frozen fields that whistled by outside the glass. He caught a movement from the corner of his eye, and glancing around, felt a sudden thumping in his chest. The ticket collector had entered their carriage. Liam had deliberately chosen the middle of the carriage so that he wouldn't be among the first to be asked for tickets. He rose, as casually as he could. He stepped into the passageway between the seats, making sure not to catch the eye of the heavy-set ticket collector, and made for the toilets.

Liam had picked a carriage that was near to the toilets, hoping to hide in there until the ticket collector had moved

on to the next carriage. He walked along the passageway now, forcing himself not to rush. He felt as though the ticket collector's eyes were burning into his back, but he knew that was probably just his imagination and he resisted the temptation to glance behind him.

He prayed that there wouldn't be someone already in the toilet as he made for the sliding door at the end of the carriage. He pulled it across, closed it after himself, then anxiously tried the handle of the adjacent toilet.

The handle swung down, and Liam felt a surge of relief. He stepped into the toilet and locked the door. It was colder here and bumpier too, and Liam had to brace himself to prevent being banged against the walls. *How long should I stay here to be sure the ticket collector has moved on? Better to stay a good while rather than risk running into him, he thought. Then again, if I stay too long I might draw attention if other passengers want to use the toilet.*

He didn't know how long he stood there, his mouth dry and his pulses racing. Suddenly he was startled by a loud knocking on the door.

'Ticket, please!'

Liam felt his heart pounding wildly but he tried not to panic.

'I'll ... I'll be out in a while.'

'How long are you going to be?'

'A few more minutes,' answered Liam, trying to keep his voice normal as he played for time.

‘I can’t be waiting that long,’ said the collector. ‘Slide your ticket under the door.’

Liam’s mind raced as he tried to find an answer. ‘Can I ... can I bring it up the carriage to you when I’m finished here?’ he suggested.

‘No. Open the door and show me your ticket, or slide it under the door. But I want to see a ticket – now!’



Nora’s mind was miles away, but she managed to give the impression of paying attention as she chanted out her poetry with the other girls in English class. They were reciting Thomas Grey’s *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*, a poem she really liked and, knowing the verses by heart, Nora was able to call them out with the other girls while her mind was elsewhere.

She had been upset the night before by the idea of Liam’s little sister crying because she was hungry. Upset, but frustrated too that Liam had declined her offer to go with him to Ballinacargy. Liam was only trying to protect her, of course, but she was tired of being protected.

Just now, her teacher, Sister Regina, had tried to protect her from the imagined evils of the suffragette movement. Not surprisingly, Sister Regina was far more conservative than Miss Dillon had been, and the middle-aged nun had just read out to the class some extracts from Sir Almroth Wright’s new book, *The Unexpurgated Case Against Woman Suffrage*. Nora