



# PROMISED LAND

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TRANSWORLD  
BOOKS

## About the Book

Inheritance changes everything, as Ella Kennedy soon discovers when her father dies and the hundred-acre farm she has grown up on and run for years in the Wexford countryside is no longer hers. Hurt and angry following a fight with her brother, Ella leaves her home and people she cares for and joins her wild cousin Kitty in Dublin.

Exiled in the city, Ella is forced to make a new life for herself like the other country girls. She tries to forget the farm, pushing all thoughts of Sean Flanagan, the neighbour she had loved, from her mind. In time she hopes to return to the home she left and find true happiness with a man who wants her for herself, and not what she will bring him.

# Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Acknowledgements

Wexford 1954

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Dublin 1954

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Dublin 1955

Chapter Sixteen  
Chapter Seventeen  
Chapter Eighteen

Dublin 1956

Chapter Nineteen  
Chapter Twenty

Dublin 1957

Chapter Twenty-One  
Chapter Twenty-Two

Bangor 1957

Chapter Twenty-Three  
Chapter Twenty-Four  
Chapter Twenty-Five  
Chapter Twenty-Six  
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Wexford 1957

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Dublin 1958

Chapter Twenty-Nine  
Chapter Thirty

Dublin 1959

Chapter Thirty-One  
Chapter Thirty-Two  
Chapter Thirty-Three

Wexford 1959

Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter Thirty-Six

About the Author

Also by Marita Conlon-McKenna

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# PROMISED LAND

Marita Conlon-McKenna

*In memory of my wonderful mother Mary and Aunt Eleanor  
Murphy - two very special West Cork women*

## *Acknowledgements*

I would like to thank the following:

My editor Francesca Liversidge

Sadie Mayne

Alice Wood

And all the great team at Transworld

Caroline Sheldon

Gill Hess

Simon Hess and Geoff Bryan and everyone in the Dublin office

The National Library of Ireland

My wonderful friends

My husband James and my children, Amanda, Laura, Fiona and James. Special thanks for filling my life with joy.



Wexford 1954

## *Chapter One*

THE LAND STRETCHED out all around her, acre after acre of the finest farm land in the county. Ella could never have enough of it, never fail to appreciate the rich landscape of patterned fields, green upon green, hemmed by a ragtag border of hedgerows and ditches, which formed their farm and its surroundings. A hundred fertile acres that straddled the Wexford-Waterford borderland, with the estuary in the far distance and the dipping bowl of Lough Garvan in the middle of it all. She watched as the great grey heron rose up from its murky blue fish-pool and flew languidly out across the lake, the water below shivering in the March breeze. She shivered herself, wrapping her heavy knitted jacket about her and stomping her boots across the muddy ground. The day was cold and it was high time she got back to the house and set to preparing the midday dinner, for the old man must be starving by now. He'd have the fire cleaned out and lit and would be sitting in the armchair waiting on her. She couldn't remember the day or the time she had begun to call or consider her father an old man, but of late Martin Kennedy had slowed down. His long spine had begun to bend and his joints stiffen and swell. Every day more work seemed to fall to her as he no longer had the power or the energy needed to run the place.

"'Tis all yours, Ella girl!" he'd console her, when she was soaked to the skin, or frozen cold, spattered with dung, her fingers raw with heavy work, her muscles aching with fatigue, the promise of the land keeping her going.

Returning to the whitewashed farmhouse that nestled snug in the curve of the hillside Ella noticed no comforting dash of smoke from the chimney. Inside, the embers of the previous night's fire still lay warm in the grate and the bread and soft butter sat on the table where she'd left them that morning, the butter melting, the bread hardening and the full teapot up beside the Rayburn untouched.

'Daddy!' she shouted, alarmed. 'Daddy, I'm back!'

Panicked she took the stairs two at a time, making for the master bedroom at the front of the house. Her father was sitting on the edge of the bed, bent over, the green sateen coverlet lying on the linoleum.

'Are you all right, Daddy?'

His heavy brogues and socks lay on the floor before him, and she could tell he'd been trying to put them on.

'What is it Daddy are you sick?' Rushing over, she sat down beside him, hugging him. He didn't answer, couldn't answer, the words wouldn't come out the way he wanted and she could read the fear in his eyes.

'Can you stand?'

There was no reply and she noticed the dribble of saliva that ran from the corner of his mouth and down his chin.

'Tis all right Daddy, I'm here now. You'll be all right, honest you will.'

His skin felt cold and she realized that he must have been sitting like this for hours, as she'd heard him dressing himself when she'd left the house that morning. His untied pyjama bottoms gaped loosely from his hips; embarrassed, she fastened them, touching his chicken-cold skin.

'Let's get you tucked up Daddy, you're freezing cold.'

Her father was a big man and it was as much as she could do to turn him round and lift up his feet and legs and lower him onto the pillows and bolster, pulling the sheet and blankets over him.

'You stay there Daddy and I'll go get help. I won't be long, I promise.'

She'd go up onto the main Wexford road, hoping that a car would come along or that one of the neighbours would appear on a tractor, anything, anyone that would get help. She cursed the Department of Posts and Telegraphs that had said it would be years before telephones would be installed down this way, for it was at least a three-mile walk to O'Connor's Bar where there was a public phone. Perhaps the Flanagans might help! She began to half walk and half run the mile or so towards their place, without seeing a sinner. Panting, she had to stop to get her breath when she noticed the work crew of men at the road's edge, picks and shovels in their hands, chipping at the grey stone face of a curve in the hillside, scooping out the earth and stone to create a hollow. They were working on the parish grotto to Our Lady and St Bernadette that was being built for the Marian year celebrations, and downed their tools when she approached them. Running towards them she begged the labourer seated in the van to drive to the pub and phone the local doctor, or call in to his surgery and tell him that he was needed urgently up at Martin Kennedy's. She thanked the workman and turned to race back along the gravel road, praying that her father was not in pain.

Her father lay staring up at the bedroom ceiling, his body awkward, his face contorted, as she prattled on trying to reassure both of them that all would be well. She fixed up the bed and patted his bolster, trying to make him reasonably comfortable. In readiness for the doctor's visit she tidied the bundle of clothes abandoned on the chair in the corner and stacked the pile of newspapers that had accumulated beside her father's wide bed, and using a corner of a sheet wiped the dust and tea and milk stains from the mahogany table.

'There you go Daddy, that's much better.' She sighed, catching a glance of the scared-looking woman that she was in the dressing-table mirror. He must be thirsty and

she offered him a sip of water, not knowing if that was the right thing or not, holding the china cup to his lip as if he were a baby, the water spilling down his neck as she tilted it between his lips. Then she sat waiting, stroking his arm till the doctor came.

‘It’s a stroke, Ella. We could try and get him down the stairs ourselves but it’s safer to let the ambulance boys do it. I’ll organize it.’

Martin Kennedy tried frantically to speak and make himself understood.

‘It’s all right, Martin, you have to go to the hospital, you’ve had a stroke. I’m going to organize a bed for you in St Joseph’s. Don’t worry, Ella and I’ll look after everything.’

Ella could see that her father was agitated. He hated St Joseph’s, and she hated the thought of his going to the old County Hospital.

‘Could he not say here?’ She gesticulated at the stuffy front bedroom, which her father loved.

‘No,’ said Paddy Walshe emphatically.

Ella saw the doctor out. He was about ten years younger than her father, but with his grey hair and tired green eyes could have passed for the same age; both of them drank in O’Connor’s pub of a Wednesday and a Friday night.

‘You’d best send for your brother, Ella. Get him home as soon as you can. Martin would like to see him.’

‘Is he that bad?’

Paddy shrugged. ‘You can never tell, but it’s best to be on the safe side.’ The local doctor, although an infrequent visitor to the house, had always been a good friend to the family, stitching cuts, easing pains, lancing boils. He had too a directness and honesty about him that garnered respect.

‘I’ll get him so,’ sighed Ella.

‘Try not to worry! Martin will get the best of care in St Joseph’s, and I’ll see the both of you tomorrow when I do my rounds. We’ll be better able to assess his condition by then.’

Back upstairs she could sense the dismay in her father’s face; avoiding his eyes, she busied herself about the room fetching pyjamas from the chest of drawers, and his razor and toothbrush and a fresh towel, relieved when she finally heard the trundling ambulance pull into the farmyard below.

It had taken an age to get her father from the bed and down the stairs on a stretcher, she trying to keep out of the way as the ambulance men manoeuvred the reluctant patient out to their van. She clambered in beside him, and rode the long stretches of potholed and bumpy country roads, her father, a scared, old man, holding her hand all the way.

\* \* \*

Inside the old red-bricked hospital building, calm red-faced girls took over the care of her father, making her sit down and have a cup of tea in the corridor. She watched as they bustled up and down, their crisp starched uniforms rustling as they passed, shiny hair pinned tightly under their nurse’s veils. They’d pulled the green curtains around the cubicle where her father lay and a young pimply-faced doctor was attending to him.

Ella hated St Joseph’s with its green half-tiled walls, cream-coloured paintwork and myriad of overhead pipes, its pinkish marbled floors and that strange hospital stench that filled your nose the minute you stepped into the place. Her mother had died in this hospital. The doctors and nurses had been unable to stop the spread of septicaemia from her burst appendix.

‘We’ll be admitting your father,’ the sister told her after more than an hour’s wait. She had followed them up in the clanking iron lift to the male ward of St Paul’s, which was a long narrow room that contained about eighteen beds. The patients ranged in age from the elderly wizened figures propped in worn armchairs to two young fellahs sitting on the edge of a bed, playing cards.

‘Visiting time is at seven o’clock,’ remarked the ward sister, dismissing her. ‘It’s best you leave it to us to admit your father and get him settled in. You may return later this evening.’

\* \* \*

She’d kissed her father and tried to placate him, sensing his disorientation. ‘The nurses will look after you, Daddy. I’ll be back after tea, once I’ve fed the animals and checked the place. Honest, I will!’

He tried to nod and she wondered if he understood at all what she was saying. She hugged him clumsily, feeling guilty at leaving him in that place that she knew he detested.

‘It’ll be fine, Daddy!’ she promised, trying in all honesty to reassure herself as much as him. Relieved, she left the place and went back home.

## *Chapter Two*

THE OLD FARMHOUSE was lonesome without him, and Ella wondered if she'd ever get used to not having her father about the place. The two of them had been constant companions for more than ten years, keeping house together, sharing the workload and minding each other, sitting up at night discussing the next day's work and planning for the weeks and months and years ahead.

Their black and white collie dog Monty had pestered her, following her around like a shadow as if she had somehow or other spirited the old man away. She knew that he just missed his master. She was behind in the work too, late doing everything. The hens were scratching outside looking for food clucking worriedly at the ground, waiting for their meal. The cowshed was in a state and she'd have to muck it out, as it smelled something awful. She'd meant to check the sheep and lambs up in the back fields, first thing in the morning, but hadn't got round to it yet. The pots and pans needed washing and she'd hardly a stitch of clean clothes to put on her. She'd wash a few bits and pieces first, and then set to, once she'd hung the washing on the line. Nowadays between the hospital visiting and the farm, she hadn't a spare minute. Doing the work of two wasn't easy.

There had been no improvement in her father's condition and if anything he appeared worse to her. He had lost his speech and seemed paralysed down one side of his body. She hated seeing him like that, one side of his strong



face pulled different from the other, one arm and hand useless, unable to walk or move around. She'd noticed, too, that once or twice he had seemed not to recognize her when she sat down in the chair beside his hospital bed.

'He's a sick man, and everyone on the staff is doing their best to keep him comfortable,' was all that Dr Walshe consoled her with, though she noticed he made no mention of recovery.

Ella had rifled through her father's bedside table drawer and found the bundle of her brother's letters. The old man had kept them all. The last one Liam had sent was from an address in Liverpool and that was a few years ago. There was very little information in the letter and she'd read it and reread it to try and discover more about her brother. She'd written to him, telling him all that had happened and what the doctor had told her; that was over a month ago and there still had been no reply. She was angry with him. How could he not come home and see his father when he knew how ill the old man really was? Liam had walked out of the house over ten years ago after a blazing row. She remembered her brother's white face and furious temper as he'd packed the old brown suitcase, flinging everything into it.

'Don't go, Liam! Don't leave us!' she'd pleaded, begging him to stay, grabbing hold of his jacket, crying, scared of the rows between himself and her daddy. She had just been a schoolgirl then with no say in anything, least of all the ways of men. Her brother had left for England the next morning, his cap pulled down over his curly hair, his eyes red-rimmed and sore-looking. The old man had shaken his hand and wished him well, neither of them prepared to say sorry or climb down. They were stubborn, the Kennedy men, pride parting the pair of them.

So it was that she had been left with her widowed father. The two of them lived alone in the old farmhouse at Fintra.

In time she had learned to cook and clean, her father showing her how to gut a fish and skin a hare and make light crusty pastry, the way her mother used to, but nothing she could say or do or make or clean could return the farmhouse to the way it used to be when her mother was alive.

Fair-haired Helena Kennedy would sing or hum as she worked, her bright eyes shining as she spotted another chore that needed doing. Folding clothes, washing the Delft, cooking the meals, tending the animals, sowing and planting and hunched over the heavy spade digging into the earth; even at night as she sat by the fire her hands never stilled, knitting a heavy woollen sweater for her husband, darning the socks, or mending the tears in their clothes. Yet Ella knew that her mother was totally contented, happy with her life. The house had always seemed warm and cosy then, filled with the smell of baking and the sweet freesia scent that her mother wore.

Ella's heavy winter coat now hung on the peg beside her father's at the back of the kitchen door and her boots nestled under the pine rack. The two of them worked side by side, tending the cattle, minding their sheep and planting with the seasons. She'd left school at fourteen. The land was her education; that's where she was needed, school could teach her no more. At times she wished that her brother was there to share the workload and help with the farm but knew that it was useless to voice such hopes. Tom Brennan, a local man, was hired at times by her father and besides there were plenty of casual farm labourers always looking for work. She herself worked as hard as any man, her hands hard and callused from using the spade and hoe, her skin wind-burned, her long light brown hair pinned up out of her way. She grew strong and tough and wiry. A good farmer's daughter.

'Martin, you're raising the child like a tomboy!' her Aunt Nance had complained. Her father would stop whatever he

was doing as if suddenly noticing her, paying heed to his older sister. 'Helena wouldn't like it!'

The very mention of her mother's name was enough to change the expression on her father's face from argumentative and annoyed to a reflective one as he considered whatever his sister had to say on a subject.

'She's the living spit of her,' was all her father would murmur and Ella would blush, knowing that excepting her light brown hair and taller frame she was a constant reminder of the woman he loved, with the same large blue eyes and full lips and skin that freckled in the sun. A visit to Aunt Nance and Uncle Jack's dairy farm at Rathmullen about five miles away would be organized and she would spend a few days with her five cousins, Teresa, Constance, Kitty, Marianne and Slaney, who like steps of stairs were around her own age, with Kitty only six months older than herself, and their older brother Brian. The influence of 'the ladies', as her Uncle Jack referred to his daughters, was bound to rub off on a gauche young girl who spent far too much time on her own. Their brother Brian would be kept deliberately busy on the farm and out of the way of their giggling and whispering and racing around playing silly games that Kitty and Connie invented.

There was always fun and laughter and plenty of female company up at the Kavanaghs'. She loved visiting them and being considered part of their family but, when the time came, was glad to get back to the peace and comfort of home, entertaining her father with stories of all their goings-on as he sat and smoked his pipe in front of the fire. Often they would both drive over to join Jack and Nance and their clan for Sunday lunch. Her kind aunt would fuss over the two of them and send them home with fresh-baked soda bread, and sweet cake and whatever else was left in her pantry.

Ella sighed and dragged on her boots tentatively. She'd found a field mouse in the left one once, and her father had checked them for her ever since. It had only been a tiny mouse but the memory of it still made her cringe. Pulling on her warm coat, she walked up the back fields, Monty racing along beside her. Her breath formed clouds of steam it was so frosty out, and she dug her hands in her pockets and was glad of the thick knit hat and scarf that she'd decided to don. The grass was greening up and bunches of wild daffodils spattered the ditches. The ground was heavy underfoot, rain-soaked and muddy as she turned her back on the lake and clambered over a turnstile and up towards the hill fields. She could see the white fleece of their ewes and lambs in the distance. It was only as she came closer to the flock that she could see the cluster of worried-looking ewes, huddled together, the lambs bleating plaintively.

Monty made a run at a mass of black crows pitched on the grass, scattering them with his barking. Dread coiled in her stomach as she spotted the bloody carcasses of two young lambs, their entrails stretched along the ground.

'Jesus!' she said aloud, closing her eyes as nausea washed over her. There were three more, she discovered as she surveyed the field, and two of the ewes were injured where they had obviously tried to fight off their attackers. Monty sat at her feet, unsure of what to do. Who could have done this? What should she do? What would her father do? She knelt down to examine a ewe. She had a deep gash on her leg, but the blood had caked and although she was limping slightly, it looked like it should heal up. The dried blood soaked into her fleece was probably that of one of her lambs. Ella patted her, trying to comfort her. The poor thing was still dazed with shock.

'Ella! Ella!'

She turned round to discover Sean Flanagan climbing over the ditch. His father's farm bordered on theirs and the

families often shared the cost of wire fencing and digging ditches and putting in drains.

‘So they got you too! How many lambs did you lose?’

‘Five,’ she replied angrily.

‘We lost nine.’

‘Who did it, Sean?’

‘Bloody dogs! O’Sullivan’s dog is half crazy, it would nearly take the arm off you if you step into their farmyard, and they always leave it out at night. You see it roaming around the place, and the tinkers have a few half-starved bitches that probably joined in. Jim and the da are gone down to the sergeant to complain.’

Silently Ella thanked the Lord that Monty slept stretched out in front of the fire every night, guarding the house, for the dogs involved would have to be put down.

‘How’s the da?’

‘Much the same, Sean.’ She stood up, brushing the dirt off her knees.

‘Do you want me to bury them for you?’

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. In situations like this she realized just how alone she was, and was grateful for the good neighbours.

‘I’ll wait till the sergeant has seen them, so don’t be worrying yourself, Ella.’ He reached for her hand clumsily and gave it a squeeze. She didn’t draw away.

When she was about fifteen she’d had the biggest crush ever on Sean, following him around and finding excuses to visit Flanagan’s farm whenever she could. Sean had pretended not to notice despite some fierce slagging by his two older brothers. Now the boot was on the other foot, and he somehow or other always seemed to be over at their place. He had a sturdy build, with broad shoulders, and long legs and body, making even her feel small when she stood beside him. His straight dark hair was in sore need of a good cut, his eyes were a hazel-brown colour, his face strong and almost handsome. She supposed he was good-

looking compared to most of the men she knew, with a quiet reserved manner that made him easy to talk to. Her father liked and respected him, and she knew he held her father in high regard too. She was still mad about him and was glad that it was now being returned, the two of them often attending the local dances and parish socials together. When Sean escorted her home in the moonlight, his kisses almost made her weak.

‘Is it all right if I call over later Ella, after tea?’

‘I’ll be going to the hospital.’

‘Then I’ll drive you! My da won’t mind me driving you to see Martin.’

She nodded, pleased. Sean had brought her to the hospital a few times. Twice on the way home he had pulled the old Ford Prefect into a quiet spot off the lake road and courted her. She had been glad of his kisses and his hands pulling her close to him. She had responded as eagerly as he had and returned home red-faced and swollen-mouthed, glad that her father was not there to witness her passion.

At the rate things were going one night she would end up bringing him inside, and up the stairs to her bedroom.

‘Sean Flanagan fancies you like mad,’ said her younger cousin Slaney.

‘Sean Flanagan wants a wife and a farm of his own,’ murmured Marianne, ‘and you’d be a great match.’

‘And you have him if that’s what suits you Ella love,’ added her aunt.

Ella blushed, glad that men couldn’t read women’s minds. She wasn’t stupid and knew that it was high time she made a match and settled down. She was twenty-one and with her father sick, the farm would need a man about the place. The Kennedys and their farm were no doubt already the talk of the place.

‘See you later then Ella, pet.’

She watched as he crossed back over the hedge. He’d called her pet. She wanted to run after him and fling her

arms around him but instead began to walk.

Honest to God she was like a bitch in heat with all the dogs after her, what with her father sick and the running of the farm to be sorted out. Every local bachelor was coming out of the woodwork considering her a good prospect. Men she didn't give a toss about like John Mannion, who'd insisted on giving her a lift home from the village last week and was a skinny galoot of a fellow, and Tim Murphy, who made her laugh with his jokes, and Kevin O'Leary, all seemed to have become obsessed with her father's welfare of late and were always enquiring about him. As far as she was concerned there was only one man in her mind and that was Sean Flanagan; none of the rest of them were even a patch on him.

Her head full of such considerations, she made her way back down to the outhouse. She'd fetch a bucket and some disinfectant back up to the hill field and wash the sheep's cuts and grazes. She didn't want the animal getting sick on her. What if the dogs came back tonight? Maybe she should sit up in the field keeping watch, or move the sheep to the small paddock at the back of the house. She should have asked Sean what to do. There was no point worrying her father about it as he had enough to contend with. He just had to get better. The farm needed him and truth to tell so did she.

## *Chapter Three*

ELLA HAD SCARCELY slept a wink, tossing and turning all night. Her bones were so stiff and sore she could have sworn that she was an old one, instead of a twenty-one-year-old woman in her prime.

Martin had been in a bad way the night before. He had never opened his eyes once to any of them and had developed a strange heavy breathing.

'He's just resting.' Her aunt had tried to reassure her but she could see the worry in Nance and Uncle Jack's faces. Sean had gone out to sit in the hospital waiting room.

'Do you think your father would like the priest?' the staff nurse had asked.

Ella had seen the look that passed between his sister and her husband. She had just nodded in agreement. She had sat by his bed for an hour, watching the rise and fall of his chest and the easiness that now filled his face. Her father was a religious man; he'd want the priest to attend him.

'If he doesn't get in tonight I'll leave word for Father Tom to come up to the ward in the morning,' the staff nurse added gently, squeezing her patient's hand.

'Come home and stay the night with us, Ella?' her aunt had offered.

'No! No thanks! I'd prefer to go home.'

She was adamant about going back to Fintra, not wanting to leave the farmhouse empty. Sean was waiting to



drive her. Understanding her need to be in her own place, Aunt Nance had wrapped her plump arms round her and held her close, while Ella forced herself not to break down and cry.

Sean was quiet on the drive home along the dark country roads, both of them enveloped in silence. She was in no mood for kissing and courting and was glad that he didn't attempt to pull off down towards the lake shore. Outside the house he turned off the engine; she was exhausted and in no humour for chatting.

'Thank you for driving me, Sean.'

'Are you all right, Ella?' he asked, concerned.

She shook her head, not trusting herself to speak as tears began to stream down her face. Sean pulled her towards him, cradling her against his chest. 'It's all right Ella, I'm here. You're not alone.'

Strange, but there in his arms she felt safe and secure and not at all embarrassed. She relaxed against him, sniffing as he stroked her hair and the side of her face.

'Ella, you are so beautiful.'

She sniffed, knowing that her eyes were red and scalded and her nose running and Sean was the only one who would still consider her beautiful.

'You and I have known each other a long time and you know I'll do anything for you. Should anything happen to your father, you can count on me. What I mean is that I'm here for you, Ella, I always have been.'

Ella studied his broad strong face in the darkness. He was as kind and as good a man as a girl could ever expect to meet. She'd known him all her life and knew in her heart he'd make a good match, a good husband, a good father and a good farmer. Was he offering to marry her? She didn't want to think that far ahead, not with her father lying so ill in his hospital bed.

'Thank you, Sean.' Her breath shuddered as she opened the car door. 'But Daddy's going to get better. He's as

strong as an ox. Daddy will be fine again, you just wait and see!’

She sat at the kitchen table waiting for the kettle to boil. She’d boiled an egg for herself and out of habit had put on two; she’d have the other hard-boiled later. Two slices of her aunt’s soda bread lay buttered on her plate. She had no appetite but knew she must eat. The warm April sunshine filled the room as the birds sang outside in the trees, oblivious to her distress. A car pulled up out in the yard and, fearful, she jumped to her feet and ran to the door. She didn’t recognize the black Ford Anglia. A man and woman were getting out of it, and looking up at the house. She was in no mood for visitors. Most likely they were trying to sell the latest vacuum cleaners, or other household appliances. She’d be polite but firm, and get rid of them. She opened the door as they came towards her. Something about the man was familiar.

‘Ella! Ella!’

Immediately she recognized him and flew across the yard to meet him. It was Liam, her brother Liam. He’d come back!

‘Liam! Liam! I can’t believe it!’ She found herself screeching with excitement like a little girl as her older brother scooped her up in his arms and hugged her.

‘You’re all grown up Ella, a real young lady! I just can’t believe my eyes. When I left home, why, you were just a skinny schoolgirl in pigtails and now you are as pretty as a picture.’

She punched him gently in the chest, and tried to get a good look at him. He’d filled out and there were fine lines round his eyes; his hair was now tightly cropped. He was still handsome, like she remembered, but had a look of someone who had experienced much in life with a repressed sense of anger and disappointment.