

Chapter 1

"Finally," I muttered, gazing at the eighteenth-century gothic stone cathedral.

"Hey Ethan, our tour bus is about to leave!" shouted Pete Carrillo, my philandering college roommate. "I won't be long." As I entered the dimly lit sanctuary with its towering stained glass and a wooden cross, I chose an unoccupied pew and knelt.

God, I'm sorry for the interruption. It's seldom that I talk to you, but I really didn't know where else to turn. I guess you know that Amanda cheated on me. Although I still love her, I want to be with someone I can trust. If possible, and if you have the time, could you maybe bring someone into my life who wants to be loved as much as I do? I don't expect miracles, but maybe see what you can do. Amen.

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"Come on, the tour is gonna leave Killarney without us!"

"Thanks, roomy, for holding the bus."

"What were you doing in that cathedral? I didn't know they held Mass on Thursday."

"They don't. I just needed to get some things off my chest."

"The driver said we should arrive in Shannon by noon. I'm glad you talked me into this trip. I've had a blast! The touristy stuff has been fun, but the Irish scenery has been fascinating, and I'm not talking about the countryside either."

"Have you ever gone at least a day without looking at a girl?"

"Will I ever be on the *Dean's List*? No!"

"At least we'll be back on campus by Tuesday. I'm ready to finish out the semester, graduate, and get on with my life."

Ethan then stares into the distance.

"Is something wrong?"

Ethan shrugs. "I'll be in better spirits once we reach our hotel."

#

As Pete admires himself in the hotel room mirror, he asks, "Ethan, why aren't you getting ready? The banquet starts in an hour."

Lying on his bed, Ethan tosses a baseball towards the ceiling and says, "Maybe I'll just order a pizza. Stuffing my face at a medieval banquet doesn't sound all that appealing."

"At least go with me over to Durty Nellys; I'll show you what a real Irish Pub is like. A pint of Lager would do you good."

"I thought you were going to hook up with that waitress you met at lunch?"

"Catherine? Don't worry, I told her you might join us for drinks. Are you still depressed about Amanda? This trip was supposed to help take your mind off the breakup?"

"Maybe you're right. I guess I have been a little down. Sorry."

"Look, I know that dating someone for three years is a long time, but she cheated on you and then lied about it."

"Yeah, but it still hurts."

"Ethan David, although I liked Amanda, truthfully, she didn't deserve you. My friend, you're a college athlete, musically gifted, and, I might add, much more loyal to the opposite sex than I ever could be. In spite of your tremendous attributes, the one negative, as I see it, is your shyness. If I could sing like you, I would be in front of the girl's dorm serenading any cute co-ed that might listen."

"I know, but it's hard for me to approach women like you do. I was in awe this afternoon when you first spotted Catherine. I mean, she wasn't even our waitress. After a couple of minutes, you had a date already lined up. How can you do that?"

"Ethan, the difference between you and me is that I don't care about rejection. When it comes to girls, I figure there are plenty of others just waiting to say yes if one says no. Confidence and boldness are my weapons of choice when hunting the female species. Be a little more aggressive and think in terms of opportunity when someone catches your eye."

Ethan rises from his bed. "You're right; I need to be more forward and less introverted. You know I'm already starting to feel a lot better. I think coaching would be a better major for you than finance."

"Yeah, but I would always be broke. Chicks like guys with money."

"All right, maybe I will join you and Catherine."

"That's the attitude I'm looking for. Let's make a pact to look towards the future, not the past."

Like gridiron teammates in a pre-game huddle, a thunderous cry erupts from a lone hotel room at the Shannon Fitzpatrick.

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"Welcome to Durty Nellys," came a boisterous greeting from the shapely red-haired female hostess as she fought to be heard over *Brown Eyed Girl*, blaring from the overhead speakers. "First time at Nellys?" she asked.

With an over-dramatized southern drawl, Pete says, "Eit shore is."

"Now I can tell by your accent that you boys aren't from around here."

While intently observing Pete's verbal swordplay, he motions for the cute lass to move in a little closer and says, "Don't tell anybody, but I'm the odds-on favorite to become the next governor of Kentucky and looking for someone to become my First Lady. Are you interested?"

Laughing at Pete's impromptu creativity, she shakes her head and says, "You two will fit in here perfectly. Enjoy yourselves, and don't you lads drink too much."

"Pete, you're amazing!"

"Ethan, let me know if you see Catherine. I wasn't exactly sure where to meet her."

As Ethan scans the crowd he says, "I wonder if the local Fire Marshal is on duty tonight? Is this place busy or what?"

Pete checks out the Irish lasses, and responds, "He's probably in a corner tossing down with the Mayor and Chief

Constable. As much ale and whiskey as I see flowing, a fire could be pissed out by the patrons in a matter of seconds.”

“Pete, I’ve spotted Catherine. She’s waving to you from that far table.”

Dodging our way past the main bar, any trepidation regarding my future without Amanda now all but vanished. Maybe the festive atmosphere and Pete’s earlier pep talk were starting to sink in. For the first time since Pete and I left Kentucky, I felt optimistic. I looked forward to whatever new experiences might lie ahead.

“Nice to see I wasn’t stood up,” Catherine said.

Impressed by the brunette’s plunging knit top and hip-hugging slacks, Pete says, “My eyes aren’t Irish, but they surely are smiling!”

Over the next hour, Catherine and Pete’s attraction for one another was evident and, at times, embarrassing as I continued scanning the scenery for any lone female who might enjoy the company of an aspiring extrovert.

“If you two gentlemen would excuse me, I need to freshen up in the ladies room.”

After disappearing around the corner, I said, “Catherine seems nice.”

"Yeah, she and I seem to be hitting it off so well that we are going to pass on going over to the banquet. We'll probably hang out here a bit longer then maybe take a drive into Limerick City. What about you?"

"Since I haven't been able to capture anyone's attention, I might as well check out the banquet. Besides, I'm starting to get a little hungry. Tell Catherine I enjoyed meeting her."

"You bet. Remember, don't let the Earl's Butler throw you into jail."

"Jail? Pete, what are you talking about?"

"Bunratty's banquet has a tradition in which one person will be chosen by the rest of the attendees to be thrown into an arbitrary dungeon. Then, by decree of the Earl of Thomond's Butler, the humiliated detainee must sing his way out to gain their freedom. Usually, the person picked is the one whose name is shouted loudest by the other participants. Ethan, I know you can sing, but this could be quite embarrassing."

"Okay, I'll try to remain inconspicuous, but how do you know what happens?"

"I read the brochure earlier this afternoon."

#

As I approach Bunratty Castle's front iron gate, a

lone-kilted piper plays in the distance as a mist-like fog eerily surrounds this seemingly impenetrable, 15th-century fortress. While squinting up through the steady cool drizzle, the sheerness of the outer stonewall seemed to all but disappear into the black night sky. I, along with about a hundred others, are now instructed by one of the castle staff to climb a nearby, winding staircase that will lead us to the Upper Great Hall and then into the main banqueting hall for the evening's meal and production.

Five long wooden tables filled the dimly lit main floor as a large raised stage and massive stone fireplace anchored the room. On the upper wall, stage left, was a small balcony reminiscent of a scene from Romeo and Juliet, while period rugs and other relics adorned the vast chamber area. Making my way to an open bench area at the hall's middle table, I politely nod to my surrounding tablemates as a harp and mandolin play light madrigal music in the background.

With a melodramatic entrance, the banquet's Butler announces, "Welcome to Bunratty Castle. You are the chosen guests of my Lord, The Earl of Thomond. You will be expected to enjoy our drink, delectable food, and specially chosen entertainment. Our lovely ladies of the castle will not only serve you a bountiful and meaty fare but also serenade you with

traditional song and dance. If you have any compliments, beckon me. If you have any complaints, talk to the cook, he is the largest man in Ireland. You can't miss him."

The room erupts in dutiful laughter as the Butler theatrically exits the stage. With a growling stomach, I inquisitively look for my eating utensils, but none are to be found. Questioning a middle-aged couple seated next to me, I asked, "What do we eat with?"

"Better keep your napkin handy. Knives and forks are nonexistent at most medieval banquets."

Still maintaining my introverted demeanor, a jolly voice down from me asked, "What's your name?"

The question came from an ample lady, appearing to be in her late fifties, with dangling costume jewelry, a bright orange blouse, and a matching straw hat.

"I'm Myrna Fitzgerald the tour director for our travel club, most of whom are seated at this table."

"Nice to meet you, Miss Fitzgerald. My name is Ethan David, and I'm from Kentucky."

"Kentucky? I was there for the Derby two years ago. What a horse race! I won five hundred dollars and probably drank six hundred dollars worth of Mint Juleps!"

From the other end of the table, a silver-haired couple in matching aloha shirts asked, "Are you here by yourself?"

"Sort of. I'm in Ireland on Spring Break. My college roommate had a date tonight, so I went to the banquet alone."

Another said, "Our group is known as the Bay Area Travelers or B.A.T., from in and around San Francisco. We take at least two major trips each year. Ireland is our spring choice, and a Caribbean Cruise out of Miami is our next option in the fall."

Now laughing and enjoying the camaraderie as an honorary B.A.T. member, a captivating Irish accent behind me asks, "Sir, may I tempt you to indulge in either chicken or ribs?"

Just as those unsuspecting sailors in Greek mythology could not resist the Song of the Sirens, I, too, suddenly found myself in uncharted waters as I turned around, unable to resist this creature's melodic beauty. As appealing as her waist-length, coal-black tresses and nicely endowed figure were, her radiant emerald eyes locked onto me like radar. Just as the Italian master Raphael had captured the timeless beauty of his Madonna on canvas, that night a living, breathing masterpiece stood before me without a visible flaw.

Still studying her as she disappeared into the kitchen galley, I pulled aside one of her co-workers to ask, "Could you tell me the name of our server?"

Sensing my fancy, she said, "Oh, so you like Maura Dougall?" Then, with a hint of sarcasm, she said, "Most of the guys that come through here always seem to chase after Maura, but a word of caution. She's not real keen on American guys. Thinks they are out for one thing. So if I were you, I would not get my hopes too inflated."

Thanking her, I contemplated my options before deciding what my next course of action might be.

"Ladies and Gentleman, please welcome the spectacular Bunratty Singers!"

Finding out that each server did double duty as a vocalist, I intently scanned the stage for Maura. There, in the middle of approximately ten vocalists, was my enthralling temptress dressed in a purple and black gown fit for aristocratic nobility. As her voice soloed on an unfamiliar Irish tune, the pureness and fluidity of her tone were enrapturing. I was truly witnessing the most beautiful, and talented person I had ever seen. At that instant, a ludicrous thought occurred to me that sent me figuratively to my knees. "God, this is Ethan. If I'm chosen as the person thrown into the dungeon, I vow to sing a song to Maura Dougall as my key to freedom. Amen."

After Maura and the other singers left the stage, a loud and fully rehearsed announcement echoed throughout the banquet

chamber. "Here ye, here ye. Ordered by my Lord, The Earl of Thomond, shouted the Butler. A royal decree will now be read. There shall be one person among you who will be chosen to occupy the castle dungeon for a time yet to be determined. This prisoner will remain in solitary confinement and can only gain his or her freedom by singing a melody that is approved by you, the Earl's invited guests. As Butler and curator, I now ask you to shout aloud your choice."

A clamorous discussion immediately befell the room as various names began flying off tongues with the intensity of a national political convention. "Mary," "Robert," "Fiona," "Ethan." Ethan? Hey, that was my name! My fellow B.A.T. Members, with Myrna hollering the loudest, had surprisingly deemed me to be their candidate, as they spiritedly chanted, "Ethan, Ethan, Ethan!" Unable to refute my tablemates overzealous choice, the Butler summoned two castle guards to arrest me and take me away to my hypothetical cell located just off stage right. Once placed in my imaginary prison, the Butler asked, "Prisoner Ethan, please convey to the audience why I should consider releasing you."

With the dramatic ineptness of a first-time actor, I begged, "I am falsely accused of my crime, but am prepared to sing my way to freedom."

"Prisoner Ethan, what are you prepared to sing?"

As a novice songwriter who has sung and played the piano since the age of ten I said, "If it pleases the Earl's Butler and assembled guests, I would like to sing an original composition with one stipulation. This prisoner would like to sing to one of the Earl's servants, Maura Dougall."

Taken aback by my request, the Butler and a few of the Bunratty Singers who were on break, gasped with wonderment. "Prisoner Ethan, did I understand you correctly? You want to serenade one of the Bunratty vocalists?"

"Yes, that is correct. I would also like her to stand up in that balcony."

Impressed by my candor the Butler asked a couple of the singers to go and find Maura.

Wondering if the last several minutes qualified as an out-of-body experience, I knew that I, the epitome of shyness, had never been this bold and confident before. Hopeful, I was about to sing a love song to a young lady I had never met, attended by people I hardly knew, in a historic Irish castle while my fair maiden stood listening from a balcony. Pete would even be impressed.

While many of the banquet attendees were now quietly mingling, I nervously paced in the background, hopeful that

Maura would accept my musical offering and not run away, disappearing over the next glen.

Suddenly, one of the performance troupe excitedly bursts from the galley and says, "We found Maura; she's on her way out!" A spirited cheer arose as I prepared myself.

With a royal presence, Maura appeared, looking down over the edge of her balcony and casting an inquisitive eye in my direction as the Butler asked me to again announce my intentions.

Focusing only on Maura, I said, "My name is Ethan David, and I am a college senior from Kentucky. I will sing to this beautiful lady an original song I wrote. It's titled, "If She Only Knew." Silence filled the room as I began my cappella selection.

Verse:

If she only knew how much I needed her

If she read my mind

To know how I think of her

Would I be the one that she would choose

Then I could be the one if she only knew

If she took the time to ever look my way

Then she would see the passion on my face
Oh I need her so, but she doesn't even know
That I could be the one if she only knew

Chorus:

If she only knew these words I want to say
Then I could be the one to take her heart away
And I need her so, but she doesn't even know
I'm the one she needs if she only knew

Verse:

If she only knew how I lay awake each night
I reach for her, but she is nowhere in sight
Does she dream of me do wishes still come true
Cause I was meant for her if she only knew

With the last word sung, I confidently blew a kiss to an impressed-looking Maura as the rest of the crowd stood in an encore of applause. Several women cried, and couples hugged as I bowed with a newfound sense of confidence and freedom.

Expressionless, Maura met me on the way back to my seat and whispered, "Meet me in the reception area after the show." I couldn't tell whether she was angry, embarrassed, or playing me

as a potential winning hand in poker. I nodded in agreement, now waiting nervously for the evening's grand finale.

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"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen for visiting Bunratty Castle. On behalf of the Earl of Thomond, the castle singers, and myself, we wish you pleasant travels and peace. Goodnight."

I entered Bunratty's reception wing like a first-time father heading to the delivery room, wondering if I might be having a boy or girl. After spotting Maura serving beverages to some of the evening's earlier guests, I waited then approached, saying, "I'm sorry if I embarrassed you, but..."

"That was quite a performance coming from a total stranger. Your song was beautiful, and I think you have a lovely voice. I didn't think American guys were that romantic."

Maura then looked up at me as her subdued theatrics gave way to an outburst of laughter.

"Mr. David, now that you already know my name, what other tidbits of information have you gathered?"

"None that I care to mention."

"Since you had the cunning audacity to feature me as your own Juliet, I deserve to at least know more about you. Why don't we head next door to the Fitzpatrick Hotel? They have a nice lobby where we can talk."

"Yes, I know. I'm actually staying there for the next several days."

#

Entering the carpeted lobby, a travel-weary family of four was just checking in; a group of friends laughed by the hearth while another couple conversed next to the silent black baby grand. Maura chose an intimate corner as an immediate attraction quickly developed between us. Intriguing was the fact that Maura's off-stage persona was that of a simple country girl whose humble attitude towards her amazing musical talent and dazzling beauty would befuddle today's pretentious divas who possessed half of her ability, looks, and charm. That night, Maura and I managed to condense a lifetime of experiences, regrets, goals, and dreams into a magical two-hour exchange that concluded with hands being held and a deep, indulgent midnight kiss outside on the hotel's front steps. I had managed to fall in love that evening but cautiously wondered as I returned back to my room if Maura was prepared to release her heart to a smitten young man from Kentucky. My question was soon answered.

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Maura and I were like two lovers about to be separated by the duty of war during those remaining days I had left. We scripted our future atop the Cliffs of Moher and its dramatic

backdrop of the pounding Atlantic. A whirlwind of desire gusted between us as we swam and sailed upon the open waters of Bantry Bay. Finally, without guilt or reservation, we stripped away our innocence, making love for the first time in a secluded patch of wild Irish heather along the banks of the River Shannon.

Upon my return to Kentucky, Maura and I would talk on the phone every Sunday afternoon with midweek letters and cards written and received without fail. After making enough extra money that summer delivering pizza and mowing grass, I made a quick return to Ireland followed by several more visits over the next year and a half.

Immediately accepted by Maura's family, her mum often told me, "Ethan, my daughter is a wonderful girl, but she can be very independent and aloof. She needs a man who will be firm and definite. Otherwise, she won't respect you."

"Ethan, what is America like?" Maura would ask each time we walked through the rural countryside near her family's farm. I've always wanted to see a Broadway Show and go to Disney World. Have you ever been?"

"Maura, I will take you to all those places and even more after you become my wife."

"Ethan, that is very sweet of you, but we'll have plenty of time to discuss marriage. For now, let's enjoy the time we have together."

Although our physical passion for one another continued to be insatiable and unrelenting, Maura always sidestepped any reference to commitment or developing a greater intimacy within our relationship. "Maura, don't you love me?"

"Of course I do. I don't want to spoil what we have by getting serious too soon."

"Maura, it's been almost two years since we met. I don't think we're rushing into anything."

"Ethan, the distance is so hard. I'm just not sure."

I knew something had gradually changed between Maura and me as I flew out of Shannon that very last time. The impassioned newness we had seemingly experienced at the beginning was taking on a different rhythm and volume for Maura. Slowly, my phone calls were not as readily answered, I received letters not quite as long, and proposed trips needed to be canceled due to unforeseen family or work conflicts on Maura's end. I wasn't sure at this point if she was scared, had met someone else, or had just fallen out of love with me. Initially hopeful for reconciliation, I slowly began to accept the fact that Maura's life was setting a course in a different direction. It made

sense for me to move on and chalk our relationship up as a beautiful experience. Still, my instincts told me that Maura Dougall, in some aberrant way, would end up always being a part of my life.

Chapter 2

It has been ten years since I saw Maura Dougall, but our once torrid past remained undeniable and hauntingly irrepressible. Although I pretended that Maura was simply just another failed relationship, I knew as sure as basketball would be worshipped here each fall in Kentucky, that I loved and desired her above anyone else I had ever been with. Maura and I had still corresponded over the last decade through sporadic emails and occasional letters. Still, until her unexpected, urgent call last month, I had not even thought about returning back to Ireland or ever seeing her again. Unusually remorseful, Maura genuinely conveyed how much she regretted ever leaving me but hoped that we could possibly reunite or at least revive our once vibrant friendship that had lain dormant much too long. Mysteriously vague, she also mentioned some changes that had taken place but would only offer an explanation face to face.

Although I wondered if our relationship could ever be more than casual, I decided to take a chance and arranged for my eight-year-old son, Christopher, and me to spend our upcoming summer vacationing on the Emerald Isle, posing as meandering tourists and figuring out why Maura was so intent in seeing me again.

Residing in Louisville as a thirty-three-year-old former Major League pitcher, Christopher and I lived in a white three-bedroom Cape Cod with a winding stone sidewalk that led any first-time visitors around landscaped gardens and a weeping willow before ending up at the bottom of our front porch. Originally built in the 1940s, our home was far from the largest on the quiet tree-lined block but much younger than most of our elderly neighbors, some of whom still waved from their porches in weathered rockers. A converted carriage house in the back served as my home office, allowing me to work a flexible schedule necessary to meet the demands of single parenting, which included carting my son off to baseball practice, guitar lessons, and Cub Scouts each week. My favorite times with Christopher were often spent sitting on our porch swing imagining the passing cloud shapes, discussing his sometimes-mischievous behavior in Miss Finley's second-grade class, or why he can't burp or fart around girls.

"Do people speak English in Ireland?"

"Yes, son, most do."

I enjoyed working out, playing racquetball at the YMCA, and waterskiing or fishing with Christopher on weekends. Because of my son, I purposefully maintained a comfortable distance from potential matrimony ever since my brief failed marriage to Myra eight years prior. Some people say that marriage can be a wonderful union between two souls. My experience thus far would be summed up in two syllables, "Hell...ish!"

Myra Sinclair was a blue-eyed platinum blonde lingerie model and prized daughter of a corporate CEO whom I had met while attending a Kentucky Derby Party. Her physical attributes, combined with my lustful attraction, parlayed a chance meeting into a shotgun wedding, with our son being born right on cue seven months later. While I never measured up to her parent's lofty social expectations, Myra and I soon divorced, leaving Christopher, then age one, and myself behind for Los Angeles to pursue a model and acting career entirely funded by her father. Although I filed my ex-wife permanently under "lesson learned," my skin-kneed, rambunctious, freckle-faced blonde remnant gladly adds "parenting adventure" to my ever-expanding resume as a single dad. Sadly, Christopher's only correspondence or interaction with Myra is an obligatory birthday card or a brief

visit during a holiday break if she isn't busy filming or on a photo shoot.

An only child growing up in central Kentucky, my mother and father always cheered me on, whether it was playing sports, taking piano lessons, or building a rickety tree house in the giant maple behind our house. It was because of their confidence and spirited encouragement that pushed me towards accepting a baseball and music scholarship in college. Tragically, my parents both died in a car accident towards the end of my freshman year. Because of their legacy in my life, I also wanted Christopher to experience that same type of involvement and belief from me.

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"Just as I remembered," muttering to myself while maneuvering our blue rental car out of the Shannon International Airport and onto the N18 carriageway that would take Christopher and me into the nearby town of Ennis in County Clare. The predictable falling mist, green tint landscape, centuries-old houses, and distant castle ruins pass by quickly as I accelerate around slow-moving traffic and towards our destination. Since we departed Kentucky the previous day and spent a sleepless night flying across the Atlantic, my immediate goal was for us to reach the Old Ground Hotel in Ennis, call

Maura to let her know that we had arrived, and grab a nap. Gazing into my rearview mirror, I smile, noting that my first-time international flyer was tightly curled up in the rear seat, fast asleep.

Though ten years had passed since my last visit to Ireland, there was already a warm feeling of familiarity was already starting to envelop me, like a favorite pair of faded jeans.

"Dad, are we there yet?" Christopher asks.

"Almost Son. Why don't you rest? I'll wake you when we arrive."

Smiling, I quickly glance back over my shoulder at Christopher and remark to myself, "Hollywood can keep its damn actresses."

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Approaching the town center of Ennis, I carefully circled the congested roundabout, turned onto O'Connell Street, and then into the guest parking area of the historic Old Ground Hotel. I chose the Old Ground because of its fairly close proximity to Maura, its convenience to most of the area's tourist sites, and, more importantly, its free Internet access. Because most of my web design and consulting work was done online, I was able to set up my virtual office almost anywhere in the world.

"Okay, Son, it's time to wake up. We're here."

"Can I sleep just a little more, please?"

"As soon as we check into our room, you can rest as long as you want."

Passing underneath the ivy-clad entryway and into the main lobby, hardwood floors, hand-hewn ceiling beams, tapestry rugs, and a cozy sitting area with a sod-burning fireplace greet us with an elegant but inviting warmth. As I set our baggage down in front of the check-in desk, Christopher was already seated in front of the fireplace dozing off.

"Your name?" politely asks the female reservations clerk.

While trying to disguise my distinctive Kentucky accent, I said, "Ethan David."

"Oh yes, Mr. David, we have been expecting you and your son. We have reserved a lovely double en-suite room. It seems you might be staying with us for a while."

"Yes, that's correct, but I'm not sure of my exact departure date yet."

"That's quite all right, Mr. David. Just let us know when you wish to depart. Would you like for me to schedule a wake-up call?"

"Thank you, but that won't be necessary."

"Very well, have a pleasant rest and enjoy your stay. Afternoon tea is served promptly at four in the fireside area.

Mr. David, your room number is two-six-four, located down that hallway in our east wing. Please ring our front desk operator if you need further assistance, and welcome to Ireland."

Entering our traditionally furnished, pastel-colored room, Christopher immediately claims the bed closest to the door, discards his shoes and pants, and slips under the inviting fluffy goose-down comforter while forming a barely heard, "Goodnight, Dad."

Understanding, I said, "Goodnight, Son."

Finding a temporary spot for our luggage, I retrieve my laptop, look up Maura's phone number, and proceed to dial her flat in Limerick City.

After three quick ring tones, "Hello" greets me as Maura answers in her normal upbeat Eire accent.

"Maura, this is Ethan."

"How was your flight? I can't wait to see you."

"I'm a little tired but I should be fine in a couple of hours."

"Why don't you get some rest? I will meet you and Christopher at your hotel at about three p.m. Bye."

After hanging up the telephone, I briefly glance over at my soundly sleeping little offspring, remove my wrinkled pants and crumpled shirt, set my travel alarm for two, and gladly collapse

onto the queen-size featherbed mattress. Intuitively, I think,
"What have I gotten Christopher and myself into?"

Chapter 3

"Dad, wake up. Your alarm is going off."

"Sorry Son, I must have really been tired."

"When are we supposed to meet with Miss Maura?"

"In about an hour."

"Do I need to dress up?"

Peering out the window, I said, "Just a pair of shorts and a long sleeve should suffice. Meanwhile, can you help unpack while I get a shower?"

"Sure, Dad."

As I start to fumble through my suitcase for shampoo and razor, Christopher stares at a picture of Maura that I had earlier set on the dresser. Although he never came out and said anything, I knew deep down my Son wanted and deserved the presence of a mother in his life. Though I had done some modeling as a way to earn extra money, it was Maura who always

turned heads whenever we were seen out in public. Rivaling any high-aid model plastered across a Manhattan billboard, Maura was the equivalent of a sleek Italian sports car with her firm, curved body and perfectly detailed features that could be appreciated both coming or going. Always displaying her penchant for current styles, Maura's wardrobe usually consisted of the latest Paris or New York fashions, with blue jeans and sneakers worn secretly in front of family or friends. Her Irish brogue was quick and energetic compared to my drawn-out southern elocution. Despite her classic beauty and style, it was those unforgettable nights in Maura's Celtic lair where a continuous volcanic passion erupted between us that I was happy never to forget. Just as the intimate details of our once ardent romance remained vivid, the bitterness of why Maura had suddenly ended our two-year relationship sometimes irritated me as slow drivers occupying the left lane do.

Maura had grown up on the family farm in Caherconlish, a charming village just outside Ballyhobin, about twenty kilometers southwest of Limerick City. There, rosy-cheeked children waived, horses pulled hay wagons, and chimneys puffed smoky peat bog into the horizon on cool Irish nights. Upon graduating from secondary school, Maura moved from there to Limerick City and began working as a receptionist at the

downtown branch of Anglo Irish Bank while singing part-time in the evenings at Bunratty Castle.

Maura's mother, Mrs. Marie Dougall, was a slender, reserved woman, now in her late fifties. Her elegant but never-afraid-to-get-your-hands-dirty attitude reminded me of former Hollywood actress Barbara Stanwyck. Although I looked forward to seeing Maura, I missed Mrs. Dougall almost as much. Since both of my parents had died, Mrs. Dougall became something of a surrogate mother to me for the years Maura and I were together. Even when Maura was slowly distancing herself from me, Mrs. Dougall and I periodically phoned and corresponded by mail. I was greatly looking forward to our forthcoming reunion.

Maura's older sister Glenna, by two years, an accountant in Galway, was single with good looks, bleached blonde hair and a jollity personality that attracted almost any eligible chap that managed to cross her path. If Maura could be considered mischievous, then Glenna was a criminal. Very blithe and independent, Glenna wasn't necessarily looking for a long-term commitment, just short-term pleasures.

Padraig Dougall, Maura's younger brother, lived in Dublin and worked as a domestic auto mechanic. Tall in stature, Padraig was quiet and unemotional but always dependable, like a finely crafted Swiss watch.

I had never met Eamon Dougall, Maura's father. According to Mrs. Dougall and validated by the assorted medals and other military honors on display throughout their house, he had been a distinguished and well-decorated serviceman for his country. Dying from a heart attack when Maura was sixteen, he passed on his spirit of grit and determination to his family, but especially to Maura.

"Dad, are you about ready?"

"Almost Son. I'll be out in a minute."

Wiping clear the steamy glass I peer at my maturing but still somewhat youthful reflection in the mirror. "At least the subtle collection of parenting wrinkles is equally proportioned and kindly dispersed," I thought. Checking my teeth, I straighten my blue Oxford collar and finish combing through my straight, sandy blonde hair.

Rap! Rap! Rap! Quickly bounces off the front door as Christopher yells, "Dad, someone is at the door."

Looking at my watch, I smiled. "Maura was always on time." Briefly inspecting Christopher, we now stand military-ready as my eager offspring moves to open up another chapter in our lives.

Releasing a resounding high-pitched shriek, the Irish welcoming committee of one grabbed my unsuspecting Son with such

ferocity that I worried his present four-foot-six-inch frame might be stunted for life.

"Christopher David, you look brilliant! Ethan, he is so much bigger than in the last photos you emailed me."

Noticeably embarrassed by Maura's well-intended affection, Christopher sheepishly looks up at me, wondering how he can escape her smothering grasp.

"Christopher, you are a handsome miniature version of your father."

Coming to my Son's rescue, I said, "Since my son has been blessed with my favorable attributes, does that also entitle me to a hug?"

Slowly releasing Christopher, Maura says, "Ethan, one of the things I always loved about you was your timely sense of humor. Come here."

I relished the feel of Maura's hands now securely joined behind my neck as she pulled me close. The fragrance of her skin was sweet, as were the memories of our once unquenchable desire.

"Ethan, we must go! I have so much to tell you, plus I have a surprise for Christopher."

"A surprise for me? What is it, Miss Maura?"

"Son, it wouldn't be a surprise if she told you, would it?"

Hanging his head, "Okay, Dad, I guess you're right."

"I thought we could stop by my flat to pick up a couple of things before heading to Caherconlish to see Mum."

"What's a Copper Cornish?" Christopher asks.

"Caherconlish is a small village area where my family's farm is located."

"Miss Maura, do you have cows and chickens on your farm?"

"We have both, plus a few sheep and an old chestnut mare named Pedro."

"Dad, this is beginning to sound like fun!"

"Great, then let's load up in the car."

As Maura and Christopher merrily hold hands, I follow closely behind as we head back through the main lobby and outside to the parking area. Attractive as ever but visibly thin in her black slacks and matching turtleneck, Maura's usual fast gait was now impeded by a noticeable limp, probably due to a turned ankle or pulled muscle. Keeping any observations to myself, we secured ourselves inside Maura's red sedan and sped back down the N18 towards Limerick City.

#

As sounds of racing engines and cheering crowds resonate from Christopher's "Game Boy" in the back seat, I casually remark, "It's pretty amazing that I am back in Ireland after all this time."

"Ethan, I'm just so thankful you came over when you did."

"Why? Is there something wrong?"

"Before I go into any further detail, let's just say we have a lot of catching up to do."

"Maura, I know you're up to something."

"Ethan David, you were always the suspicious one. Besides, a girl has a right to keep a secret."

Now maneuvering past the commerce district of Limerick City, Maura drives across the Sarsfield Bridge as the midday sun bounces wildly off the River Shannon. Taking a quick right onto Henry Street and then a left onto Mallow Street, Maura announces, "Almost there."

"Son, how are you doing?"

"Dad, please don't talk to me; I'm about to reach level five on my Mario game."

Chuckling, I knew my little gaming prodigy was already acclimating to the five-hour time change.

"Here we are. I'll run upstairs and only be gone for a moment."

"Are you sure you don't need any help?"

"Not to bother Ethan. You and Christopher sit here and relax I'll be just fine."

As Maura disappears, I turn to Christopher and ask, "How do you like her?"

Briefly looking up from his game screen, he says, "She's okay, I guess."

Visibly winded Maura pauses and says, "See, I told you I wouldn't be long. I called Mum to let her know that we are on the way. Hot tea should be waiting, along with cookies and lots of hugs." Upon hearing about more hugs, Christopher looks up at me and helplessly rolls his eyes.

#

Entering the Dougall farm's entrance, Maura accelerates down the twisting gravel lane towards the large stone house looming in the open distance. Cattle and sheep grazed upon rolling green fields, divided by thick hedgerows and bordered by stacked fieldstones erected centuries before.

"Look, Dad! I see chickens over there. Is that Pedro?"

"It sure is."

"Miss Maura, can I ride him?"

"Of course you can. He's very gentle."

Turning into the horseshoe drive, colorful garden beds of heather, perennials, primrose, and lilacs line the entry walk as ivy twists and climbs up the story-and-a-half front wall towards the charcoal grey thatched roof. The same hundred-plus-year-old

Sycamore stands shadowing the left side of the house just above the kitchen and family room, while on the right, the parlor with its ceiling-high picture window overlooks the nearby clover-covered bog and white-washed stone barn. After parking, Christopher jumps out of the back seat, racing to get a closer look at Pedro. Just then, the front porch door swings open, and Mrs. Dougall stands waving from the top step. Mrs. Dougall appears ageless in her green floral print, trim build, and cropped black hairlike an unretouched photo from years past. Running to greet her, we hug as she whispers, "Ethan, I am so glad to see you again; it has been much too long."

"Mrs. Dougall, you haven't changed a bit."

"Charming and polite. I always liked that about you, Ethan."

Squinting into the daylight, she says, "Ethan, although I have recent pictures of Christopher, I still can't believe how much he looks like you."

"Son! Please stop chasing the chickens. I want you to meet someone."

Gasping with hands on his knees, Christopher says, "I'll be right there, Dad."

"Son, I want to introduce you to Mrs. Dougall."

"Hi Mrs. Dougall. Nice to meet you."

"And it is certainly my pleasure to make your acquaintance, Master Christopher. If I didn't know any better, I would say you look a little Irish with your light skin and freckled cheeks."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Come everyone, let's go inside and gather back in the kitchen."

As we entered the main hallway, I remembered the stained furnishings, antique pieces, and numerous photographs of the family, including Christopher's first-grade picture I had sent last year. I also recalled that simple conversation always took place in the kitchen around the large rectangular oak table with hot tea and finger foods. Formal entertaining or serious discussions were always done in the parlor.

"Ethan, why don't you and Christopher sit over there. Maura, could you grab some beakers out of the cabinet?" Once seated, Mrs. Dougall says, "Ethan, I am so proud of you raising Christopher all by yourself. Not many men would undertake that sort of responsibility. I can already tell you are doing a fabulous job."

"Yeah, my Dad is the best Dad in the whole world!"

Appreciating my Son's boldness, Mrs. Dougall says, "No doubt Ethan, that boy of yours has to have some Irish blood in

him. He has all the intangibles: good looks, confidence, strength and opinion."

"Dad, what does "opintated" mean?"

"Opinionated is when someone is not afraid to share his or her true thoughts with someone."

"Maura, just look at these two handsome gentlemen sitting at our table; how come you never let Ethan sweep you off your feet?"

Anticipating her mother's inquest, Maura immediately shoots back, "Because I was blind and mentally unstable."

Loving the well-meaning but spirited exchange between wise mother and stubborn daughter, I slowly took a sip of my Earl Grey while Christopher quickly devoured a second cookie.

Two car doors slam shut in consecutive fashion as Maura takes a deep, calculated breath. "It must be Glenna, I'll be right back."

"I wasn't expecting to see Glenna."

"She extended her weekend a couple of days, knowing that you and Christopher would be here."

After a brief moment, Maura, Glenna, and a little girl about five or six with waist-length curly black hair and a China doll complexion appear in the kitchen archway.

Enticingly trimmed with a belly button piercing, Glenna, with hair now dyed a dark copper, looked nightclub-ready in her skin-tight jeans, pumps, and flattering halter top. As we embrace, she says, "Ethan, it's so good to see you again. I swear you must have a fountain of anti-aging water hidden somewhere back in Kentucky. My sister should have snatched you up when she had the obvious chance."

"Glenna, you're the one who hasn't changed. You look great! How's everything at the accounting firm?"

"You know, as long as there are numbers to crunch and sheets to balance, I should still have a job."

Now approaching Christopher, Glenna says, "DNA testing won't be required to convince the authorities whose boy this is! Hello, I'm Glenna."

"Hello, I'm Christopher."

While the little girl continues to stand motionless over in the corner, I ask aloud, "Who is she?"

As Maura, Glenna, and Mrs. Dougall exchanged speechless glances, I had a discerning suspicion that one of Maura's well-kept secrets were about to be revealed.

"Christopher, do you remember that I had a surprise waiting for you?"

"Yes, Miss Maura, I remember."

"I arranged to have a playmate come over. Christopher, this is Abhora. Abhora, I would like for you to meet Christopher David. Abhora is six years old and likes horses. Would you two like to go for a ride with Glenna?"

In unrehearsed unison, Abhora and Christopher respond with a spirited "Yeah!" and head outside.

"Maura, I might be exaggerating, but Abhora looks like you."

"Ethan, it's time we talk. Let's go out back." As we walk beside a nearby hedgerow, Maura takes my hand and, in a slow, deliberate response, says, "Abhora is mine."

"What!"

"Ethan, please let me continue. About three years after I ended our relationship, I met Abhora's father and fell madly in love. We were to be married, but his supposed affection for me ended after he found out I was pregnant. Knowing that you were still trying to get over your breakup with Myra and unsure if you still loved me, I kept Abhora's birth from you. Because of our distance, I figured you would never have found out. I'm so sorry."

"So why are you telling me this now?"

"Ethan, I never trusted or loved anyone as much as you. From this point on I don't want there to be any secrets between us."

"Are there other confessions I should know about?"

"Yes, but for another time. Ethan, I'm so glad you're back here with me. I want to concentrate on us and enjoy the time we have together."

"So why do I feel that Abhora is just the tip of a much larger iceberg?"

"Because she is. Ethan, I know it doesn't make any sense right now, but I have purposefully kept certain feelings and selected information from you because I wasn't sure how I really felt towards you."

"I'm listening."

"Ethan, it's not the right time. I'll explain everything, I promise. You have to believe me. Come on, let's go see how our children are handling themselves in the saddle."

"Hey, Dad, look at me! I'm a cowboy!" Christopher shouts as Glenna leads him and Abhora around the house on Pedro.

After the children dismount, Glenna takes Pedro to the barn while Christopher holds Abhora's hand, and they skip up to greet Maura and me.

"Dad, I want you to meet my newest best friend, Abhora Dougall. She is fun to be with, and I like her a lot!"

"Nice to meet you, Abhora. My name is Ethan. You two can sure ride good."

"Did you and Christopher enjoy yourselves?"

As Abhora attaches herself to Maura's leg, she says, "Yes, Mommy, Christopher is neat!"

"Time for supper. Children, make sure you wash your hands," Mrs. Dougall shouts.

"Abhora rarely takes to someone as quickly as she has with Christopher," Maura says.

"Yeah, I was a little worried he might get bored, but having a playmate while we're in Ireland will be good for him."

#

Mrs. Dougall's dinners were always an event unto themselves. Several courses of enticing Irish fare to stretch one's belly, folklore spun of fact and fiction, and traditional gossip topped off by desserts aplenty. Although I was still inwardly stunned by Maura's revelation about Abhora, I was at least encouraged by how happy Christopher seemed to be since meeting his new friend. Even back in Kentucky, I had never seen Christopher warm up to someone the way he was so quickly drawn to her.

"All right, everyone, I am exhausted and still need to drop Ethan and Christopher back off at their hotel."

"Ethan, I expect to see you and Christopher back in Caherconlish within the week."

"Thank you, Mrs. Dougall. I'm sure you will."

"I'll get the kids buckled in," volunteers Glenna as Abhora and Christopher race out to Maura's car.

With a warm embrace, Mrs. Dougall says, "It's good to have you back, Ethan."

#

As I offered to drive, little was said that evening on the way back up to Ennis. Christopher was patient in showing Abhora how to play his electronic games in the back seat while Maura was reclined into a napping position during most of the trip. The scent of burning peat filled the brisk night air as it glistened beneath the visible starry constellations.

Approaching the Old Ground's front entrance, "Maura, wake up, we're here."

"Sorry, Ethan, I must have dozed off."

"Are you sure you'll be able to drive back down to Limerick City?"

Readjusting her seat back, Maura says, "I'll be just fine."

"Dad, can I see Abhora tomorrow?"

Sure, interjects Maura. Ethan, why don't you and Christopher meet us in the morning around ten? Then we can decide what to do."

"That would be swell, Miss Maura."

"Goodnight, all."

As we stand waving goodbye, Christopher says, "Dad, I would love to have a sister just like Abhora."

"I know, Son. Come on, we've had a long day. It's time you get to bed."