

Final Request

Written by
Carl D. Lord

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PROLOGUE

The crispness of the early morning chill surrounded me as I dropped my cane pole's fishing line into the calm, cypress-stained water from the end of my rough-hewn wooden boat dock. The red and white bobber floated as I sat and gazed across the foggy, moss-covered, tree-lined cove with the glowing daylight dancing atop my silvery hair, highlighting an ever-expanding collection of wrinkles cascading across my tan, weathered face. I loved these moments of solitude, whether the fish were biting or not. My weekend cabin retreat was nestled in the middle of Kentucky's horse country, where sleek chestnut colored thoroughbreds raced across rolling bluegrass fields, about an hour's drive from Louisville. Looo-a-vul, as we locals affectionately pronounced it, was where I chose to make my home after I finished my semi-illustrious baseball career as a major-league pitcher for the Cincinnati Reds. My fastball,

the roaring crowds, beating the Yankees, and making the playoffs were historic moments meant to continue well into my thirties. Instead, a career-ending injury at age twenty-nine, to my pitching arm, made me realize that life often throws more at you than you can throw back at it.

Today, by most accounts, I live a simple life for my age group, numerically matching my seventy-year-old Cape Cod Bungalow with manicured lawn, blooming perennials, and cobblestone driveway. My home sits on a quiet tree-lined cul-de-sac with neighbors, some of whom voted for Truman, middle-aged executives, and young couples with children in strollers who often wave as I unload groceries from my fully restored 1963 Jeep Wagoneer. No one in my neighborhood knew about my baseball past and heroics except a huge Reds fan, who disguises himself as my mailman. He swore an oath, not to reveal my true identity as long as I would occasionally autograph the paraphernalia of his choosing.

Some might say I'm a loner, anti-social, or even reclusive, but I never craved attention or fixated on being in the temporary allure of the spotlight. Still, my outward disguise of normalcy is a facade that guards a defining chapter of my life away from the baseball diamond that continues to shape my life forty years later. Was I lonely? Yes, but not alone. As a God-fearing man, I still enjoyed my company. Reading our local newspaper, most mornings on my front steps, cradling a cup of black coffee in my faded jeans and flip-flops, with readers balanced on the end of a once-broken nose from an opposing batter's line drive, brought comfort. I also enjoyed playing and singing at my baby grand piano

in the parlor, sometimes pretending I was the next big jazz or blues artist in front of a make-believe crowd who paid a cover charge and knew every song. Although surrounded by imaginary listeners, there was one face in that crowd I longed to see.

Suddenly, on cue, an emotional tug and splash interrupted my moment of solace. My pole didn't bend, nor was it from an unsuspecting bluegill swallowing my baited hook, disturbing the mirrored water. It was that recurring memory, a presence, and image that was haunting but at the same time warm and inviting, like one would feel when escaping the cold, disappearing under a fleece-covered throw in front of a wood-burning hearth. As a pitcher, I could always pitch my way out of trouble if I was behind in the count, but over the years, this flashback was much too powerful for me to overcome. It was her. The one whom I loved and at times hated the most. Once incredulous, truthfully, I now welcomed her attempts to torment and tease me. As Shakespeare said in his Sonnet 75: *"So are you to my thoughts as food to life, or as sweet-seasoned showers are to the ground."* Our love was filled with defining moments of beauty, romance, promise, and pain that were divinely interrupted but will forever be etched on the annals of my heart and mind. Now a widower, because of her, she allowed me to love again.

My story first began as a senior in college when I traveled to Ireland for graduation. I was young, athletic, and about to be drafted into the Majors; it was also a time of grieving over my first breakup with my college sweetheart. Although I believed in God, I was circumventing my faith and following a different path.

I was obsessed with baseball, my love of music, and the hope of finding "the one." Yes, I met her, but I didn't realize how much she and our love would redefine my life.

Looking back, I now see God's purpose for leading me to the Emerald Isle. The storylines and characters in this life-altering episodic drama continue to evolve. Every memory and enrapturing scene captures me with as much vivid detail as it occurred almost four decades ago. I invite you to relive this breathtaking story of love, tragedy, and ultimate triumph! Love truly does conquer all!

CHAPTER 1

My name is Ethan David, age twenty-one. It was mid-June 1979 as I stared at the moggy bogs, rolling fields, and endless rows of hand-stacked stone fences while our bus headed towards Killarney. A typical Irish forecast included overcast skies with patches of rain, but today, vibrant beams of yellow rays permeated the surrounding emerald green landscape. Kentucky was my home, but I chose Ireland as a graduation trip in hopes of reconnecting with my father, Connell David, who passed away along with my mother when I was a college freshman. Like my dad, who was a major league baseball pitcher, I was projected to be chosen in the early rounds of the upcoming draft. My future looked promising, but a recent breakup left me grieving, distraught; I needed help.

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As our bus parked near the town center of Killarney, a large eighteenth-century Gothic stone cathedral sat across the street. "Finally," I mumbled as I rose from my seat.

"Our stop today in Killarney will be brief. It's a day's walk to Shannon if you're late," the driver announced.

"Ethan, I think he's serious," replied Pete Carrillo, my philandering college roommate.

I nodded then exited with other passengers from our group.

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Entering 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. I rarely talk to you, but I 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 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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Pete asked, "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?"

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

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

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

Flipping a baseball towards the ceiling I reply, "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 Nelly's; 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 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 her, 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. Despite 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 girls' 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?"

"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."

"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 Nelly's," 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. 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 Pete scans the crowd, I remark, "I wonder if the local Fire Marshal is on duty tonight? Is this place busy or what?"

Pete 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 her! She's waving to you from that far table."

Dodging our way past the main bar, any trepidation regarding my future without Amanda had 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're 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? What are you talking about?"

"Bunratty Castle'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."

CHAPTER 2

As I approach the 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.

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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. My college roommate had a date tonight, so I came 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 her, but a word of caution. She's not 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 Gentlemen, 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 on 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 aura, 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 hesitated, then began my cappella selection.

Verse 1:

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.

Verse 2:

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 3:

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.

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

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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 a girl. After spotting Maura serving beverages to some of the

evening's earlier guests, I waited and 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 staying there for the next several days."

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At the front desk in 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 a quiet 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 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. 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 3

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 I to spend our upcoming summer vacationing on the Emerald Isle, posing as meandering tourists and figuring out why Maura was so intent on seeing me again.

After a career-ending injury to my throwing arm as a pitcher with the Cincinnati Reds, Christopher and I resided in Louisville,

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. Our home was far from the largest on the quiet, tree-lined block, but much younger than a couple 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, music 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 parents 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," I muttered 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-tinted 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 starting to envelop me.

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

"Almost. 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."

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 close proximity to Maura, its convenience to most of the area's tourist sites, and, more importantly, it had 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."

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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 greets 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 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 Irish 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 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?"