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Approx. 65,000 words
Contemporary Romance

FINAL REQUEST

by

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PROLOGUE
(IRELAND - Present Day)

Predictably, the Caherconlish drizzle falls as I stand gazing across the dark brown Celtic bogs and rolling emerald fields where sheep dot the hillsides. My thatched home is my haven, its peat-fired chimney puffing smoke into the early sunrise. Ready myself for my Sunday morning ritual, I descend the porch steps, limping slowly through the clover and heather across the rain-soaked, uneven ground, while the wind tangles my hair. The grayness of the overcast morning matches my hollow state as I face the reality that my one chance at lasting love is now an artifact.

Tugging at my woolen shawl, its warmth reminds me of his touch, and I momentarily feel his arms envelop me again. Although once vibrant, I am now terminally ill, frequently pausing as my muscles weaken and ache during chores that should be simple for a thirty-two-year-old Irish lass. Still, my memory remains intact, vividly recalling his romantic exploits at Bunratty Castle, and making love for the first time on the banks of the River Shannon, moving as one with the waterway's ebb and flow.

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Approaching our family's centuries-old graveyard, surrounded by a hand-stacked stone wall, I grit my teeth, using both hands to pull open the iron gate, which creaks like out-of-tune

bagpipes. Winded, I move to a nearby stone bench, scanning the algae-covered headstones.

Death seems so unfair, I think. *Could he ever forgive me?* My fingers quiver as I pull out a photo, but it drops to the gravel. Wheezing, I bend to retrieve it. I smile as a handsome man in his early twenties, and a younger version of me, stares back, posing atop the Cliffs of Moher. I was beautiful, and so in love then. Wiping away a tear against my pale porcelain cheek, I know it was foolish to let him go. No other man ever loved me with such honesty, strength, and passion.

Struggling to rise, I move through the hovering fog. Headstones displaying the surnames of Dougall, Flaherty, and Dooley, dating back to the 1500s, symbolize tales of misfortune and tragedy not unlike my own. Stoic, I soon realize the final chapter of my own life will be on display like theirs.

Leaves rustle in a nearby oak as I approach the grave of my father, Lieutenant Eamon Dougall. Born: November 7, 1940. Died: March 16, 1991. His epitaph reads: *A warrior for his country. A hero to his family.* I softly whisper, "Father, it won't be long. Your Maura misses you."

After making a sign of the cross, I step in front of the empty plot, next to his. Staring, I wonder if dying so young is punishment for running away from my greatest love. Or maybe it was my destiny? A beam of sunlight breaks through the clouds as I reach out, my hand brushing the cold surface of my unmarked granite headstone. His diamond engagement ring glistens in the daylight. Knowing it would take an act of God, I look heavenward and shout, "PLEASE! I need to see Ethan David!"

CHAPTER 1
(Twelve years earlier)

The crispness of the early morning chill surrounds me as I drop my fishing line into the calm, cypress-stained water from the end of the wooden boat dock. The red-and-white bobber floats as I sit and gaze across the foggy, tree-lined cove with the glowing daylight dancing atop my blonde, wavy hair. I love these moments of solitude, whether the fish were biting or not. My parents' cabin sits in the middle of Kentucky's horse country, where sleek chestnut colored thoroughbreds race across rolling bluegrass fields, between Louisville and Lexington. Some might say I'm a loner or even reclusive, but I never crave attention or fixate on being in the spotlight. As a novice musician and songwriter, I also have dreams of playing baseball professionally and finding love based on loyalty, not convenience.

On cue, I tighten my grip as an emotional tug and memory interrupt my moment of solace. It is her image that haunts me. Her voice still seduces me, whom I thought was "the one." Truth, though sometimes disguised as forgiveness, revealed that in her mind, our relationship was merely a convenience.

Metaphorically speaking, love is like baseball. Once you reach first base, navigating the rest is unpredictable. One must take risks to steal second, and rounding third base in hopes of

scoring takes fearless determination and oftentimes prayer. But as a pitcher, I know baseball is a game of control, and love is a wild pitch that can shatter your life.

My name is Ethan David, a college senior and a “can’t-miss” professional baseball pitching prospect according to major league scouts because of my tall stature, deep arsenal of pitches, and a 100 mph-plus fastball. Like my father, who was a major-league baseball pitcher, I too have the same dream of throwing in the Majors. As a projected first-round pick in the upcoming baseball draft, my life to most seems idyllic, but I continue to battle that emotional challenge related to love, where I am behind in the count and can’t pitch my way out of it.

As a member of the Commonwealth University baseball team, I am constantly scouted by the female student body, which can be predatory and, truthfully, embarrassing. Unlike many of my teammates, my stats, when it comes to chasing women, are nonexistent. I’m not naive and understand the male-to-female attraction begins with one’s appealing outward appearance, which I’m told I have, but a woman’s inward beauty, her loyalty, combined with a touch of self-reliance, are traits that excite me even more.

Sadly, Amber Jacobs, my college sweetheart and fiancée, was chronically unfaithful, which ended our engagement. A rookie when it comes to betrayal, I wasn’t prepared for the curveball of her deceitfulness; thus, I completely struck out. Now guarded and discouraged from loving again, the scars of distrust and resentment are deep and creviced. I need healing and a way to recover from the emotional impact she inflicted upon my life.

Now standing to leave with my cane pole in hand, the stillness is broken by an acrobatic small-mouth bass jumping out of the water, chasing its next meal. Pausing, I wonder as I, too, break the surface, lunging towards earning my degree and entering the draft, will that bring

contentment and fulfillment, or will the next chapter of my life bring further disappointment, brokenness, and unrealized love? Continuing to walk towards the cabin, I made up my mind that no matter what waited ahead, I was going out swinging.

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Sun-bathing college coeds watch as our baseball team takes the field beneath a sun-swept Kentucky sky. They laugh, take selfies, drink Starbucks, and snap photos of every decent-looking guy in uniform, but their attention shifts the moment I walk onto the field and start stretching.

Unconcerned, I continue my pre-workout routine, using a massage gun to loosen muscles still sore from that morning's weightlifting session. In the bleachers, two girls lower their sunglasses for a better look at me.

"My God," one of them says. "What I would like to do with him."

"Don't bother," another replies. "Amber Jacobs has him locked down with no chance of escape."

"Don't believe everything you hear, ladies," a boisterous male voice says.

Not having to look up, the familiar Italian accent and the opportunistic intentions belong to fellow college senior, Pete Carrillo. Pete's educational goal has never centered on academics or earning a degree. He's far more focused on charming the female population.

"How would you know?" one of the girls asks.

"Because I'm his roommate and best friend," Pete replies smoothly.

An eye-catching blonde leans forward. "Can you introduce me?"

Pete lowers his sunglasses slightly. "Maybe. But I'll have to set up an interview first.

Ethan's selective about who he goes out with."

Clueless to Pete's real intentions, the blonde nods eagerly. "Sure. Just let me know when."

"Anytime this evening after eleven works for me," Pete says.

"Great. Here's my number," the blonde replies.

Pete flashes a nefarious grin, slides his sunglasses back on, and heads toward the batting cage where I'm pitching to Brock Powell, our third baseman.

"Hey, roomie," Pete calls. "There's a hot coed in the bleachers who wants to meet you."

"Not interested," I reply as I wind up and fire a fastball at Brock. He swings late again.

Brock shakes his head. "Ethan, can you slow it down so I can hit the ball?"

"Sorry," I yell back.

After a few more pitches, I pull off my glove and grab a sports drink.

Pete groans. "I hate midterms. It gets in the way of my social life. At least our trip to Ireland will be fun!"

Noticing the female groupies waving from the stands, I turn away and reply, "The travel arrangements are all made. It will be nice to get away."

Winking, Pete says, "And I'll be anxious to experience the Irish female cuisine."

For Pete, Ireland means pubs, girls, and poor decisions. For me, it was a chance to reconnect with the Irish roots of my father, Connell David, who, along with my mother, tragically lost their lives in a car accident my freshman year in college. An equally important

reason was to distance myself from my recent breakup with Amber and avoid going to Ft Lauderdale, our spring break destination each year before.

After taking another drink, I say to Pete. "With baseball and my kinesiology exam to focus on, I haven't thought much about our trip."

Pete laughs. "You take classes I can't even pronounce. Besides, I've got a date tonight with Stacy."

"On the basketball team?" I ask.

"Oh, yeah!"

"Isn't she about three inches taller than you?"

Pete grins. "Not when we're lying down."

"What about your accounting midterm?"

Pete glances back toward the blonde. "I'll cram later. Can't keep the ladies waiting."

Brock crosses his arms. "Come on, Ethan. I need the practice."

As Pete heads back toward the bleachers, I slide my glove back on and envy his confidence with women. When it came to romance, I am not even in his league.

#

Impressed by our driver's ability to maneuver our tour bus down the narrow road to Killarney, Ireland, mountains, lakes, and grazing Kerry cattle create a scenic postcard view. A typical Irish forecast included overcast skies with patches of rain, but today, my sunglasses reflect a sun-drenched emerald-green landscape. Unsurprised by my philandering college

roommate as the outside scenery whizzed past, Pete's focus was on two college-age girls seated in the back of our bus.

Interrupting my moment of comfort, Pete poked me and said, "Ethan, look! Those girls want us! Let's go talk to them."

Humored, I respond, "You're on your own; besides, we're close to Killarney."

Pete replies, "They keep staring. I'm willing to share."

Returning my attention to the outside view, I think *there is no way I'm going to get involved with another female after my fallout with Amber. At least not on this trip.*

#

Our bus parks near Killarney's town center, across the street from a large eighteenth-century Gothic stone cathedral. "Finally," I mumble as I rise from my seat.

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

"Ethan, I think he's serious," Pete replies.

Grabbing my backpack, I exit with the other passengers from our group.

#

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 Amber 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.

#

Nearing our bus, Pete intercepts me and asks, "What were you doing in that cathedral? I didn't know they held Mass on Thursday."

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

Pete says, "The driver said we should arrive in Shannon by noon. Ethan, 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?" I ask.

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

Still struggling emotionally, I remark, "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."

#

At the Shannon Fitzpatrick Hotel, Pete admires himself in the mirror and asks, "Ethan, why aren't you getting ready? The banquet and show start in an hour."

Flipping a baseball towards the ceiling, I reply, "Maybe I'll order a pizza. Stuffing my face at a medieval banquet doesn't sound 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."

"Weren't you going to hook up with the waitress you met at lunch?" I asked.

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

Pacing, I say, "Why is it so hard to do that? I deleted all of her photos, blocked her calls, and even prayed about it. Nothing seems to work."

Pete sits on the bed. "Look, I know that dating someone for four years is a long time, but she cheated on you and lied about it."

"Yeah, but it still hurts," I reply.

"Ethan, maybe it isn't supposed to be easy. I guess I've never been in love." Now standing, Pete continues, "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 who might listen."

"But it's hard for me to approach women as you do," I reply. "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 David, 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 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."

Exchanging fist-bumps, I say, "Pete, you're right! I need to be more outgoing 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."

Changing shirts, I say, "All right, I will join you and Catherine."

“Roomie, that's the attitude I'm looking for. Let's make a pact to look towards the future, not the past.”

#

"Welcome to Durty Nelly's," comes a spirited greeting from the shapely red-haired female hostess as she fights to be heard over “Brown Eyed Girl,” blaring from the overhead speakers. "First time at Nelly's?" she asks.

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

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

While intently observing Pete's verbal swordplay, I watch him motion for the cute hostess to move in a little closer. "Don't tell anybody, but I'm the odds-on favorite to become the next governor of Kentucky, and I'm looking for someone to become my First Lady. Interested?"

Laughing at Pete's impromptu creativity, the hostess 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 Amber 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 feel optimistic and look forward to whatever new experiences might lie ahead.

"Nice to see I wasn't stood up," Catherine says.

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 she disappears around the corner, I say, "Catherine seems nice."

"Yeah, she and I seem to be hitting it off so well, we're going to pass on going over to the banquet. We'll probably hang out here a bit longer, and 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?" I ask.

Pete explains. "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."