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Final Request

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Approx. 65,000 words

PROLOGUE

(IRELAND - Present Day)

Predictably, the Caherconlish drizzle fell as I stood gazing across the dark brown Celtic bogs and rolling emerald fields with bleating sheep dotting the hillsides. My thatched whitewashed home was my haven of contentment as the peat-fired chimney puffed rhythmic vapors of smoke into the early sunrise. Ready myself for my Sunday morning ritual, I descended the pinewood front porch steps, limping ahead slowly, among the clover and heather across the rain-soaked, uneven ground, while my shoulder-length tresses tangled and fought against the sweeping moor winds. The grayness of the overcast, chilly morning matched my hollow, emotional state as I stumbled towards the stark reality that my one chance at lasting love was now an artifact like those on display in a museum.

Tugging at my woolen shawl, its comfort and warmth reminded me of his touch, and I momentarily felt his arms and strength envelop me again. Although once vibrant and desirable, I was now medically diagnosed as terminal, frequently pausing with muscles that now weakened and ached while performing even simple chores for a thirty-two-year-old Irish lass. Still, my mind and his memory were 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 and matching the waterway's ebb and flowing current.

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Approaching our family's centuries-old graveyard, surrounded by a waist-high, hand-stacked stone wall, I must now, with gritted teeth, use both hands to pull open the frigid, iron-framed gate, which creaks and cries out like an out-of-tune bagpipe. Winded, I move to a nearby stone bench, scanning the collection of algae-covered headstones. Death seems so unfair, I think, and could he ever forgive me? My fingers, now curled, begin to quiver as I remove a timeless photo, but it drops to the gravel-covered peat. Wheezing, I slowly bend to retrieve it. I smile as an acutely 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. Wiping away a cascading tear against my pale porcelain cheek, I knew it was foolish of me to let him go. No other man ever loved me with such honesty, strength, and passion.

Struggling to rise, I begin to move through the dampness of the hovering fog. Headstones displaying the surnames of Dougall, Flaherty, and Dooley, dating as far back as the 1500s, symbolize

tales of misfortune and tragedy, not unlike my own. Stoically, I think that soon, the once-promising story of my own life, now in its final chapter, will be on display like theirs.

Leaves applaud as a windy gust rushes through a nearby large, hundred-year-old oak as I approach the grave of my father, Lieutenant Eamon Dougall. Born: November 7, 1940. Died: March 16, 1991. His epitaph read, "A warrior for his country. A hero to his family." I softly whispered, "Father, it won't be long." I've missed you. After making a sign of the cross, I move in front of the empty grave, next to his. Staring, I wonder if dying so young is punishment for my decision to run away from my greatest love. Or maybe it was my destiny? I needed answers and his forgiveness. Seconds pass when a beam of yellow sunlight breaks through a partial clearing of clouds as I reach out with my left hand. Feeling the coldness of my unmarked granite headstone, his diamond-clustered 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!