

BAD LUCK
CLEMENTINE

A Novel

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and MARK BORNZ

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PART ONE

Life Always Brings You Full Circle

As I waited for my food to arrive, the music changed from a four-piece band to a solo guitarist. My table was furthest from the stage, and the dim lights hid the musician's identity. Without warning, the wonderful notes seeped deep into my bones, and my attention focused solely on the music. I don't know if you've ever heard a Spanish guitar before, but it is an extraordinary sound in the hands of a virtuoso. Woody, warm, rich, refined, and mellow, but also hot and spicy, even shimmering.

The song started out slow and tender, gradually picking up speed until the notes raced in a rhythmic timbre loud and passionate. A racehorse sprinting along the shoreline. Closing my eyes, I pictured the nylon strings vibrating excitedly at the musician's behest, the music tingling my skin as if fingertips all over me. The intensity of the notes elevated faster; faster still, enrapturing me in euphonic bliss, caressing my soul. How could someone play like this and not catch fire!

"Isn't he talented?" the waitress beamed, appearing out of nowhere. I opened my eyes as she placed my food on the table. "I could listen to him all night."

"Who is he?" I asked, curious to know more about this gifted musician.

"Joshua David Sheehan. He's a fisherman who grew up here," the waitress said, staring at him with dreamy eyes.

Speechless! That was Joshua David Sheehan? How could that be! How could the young man I knew long ago—a poor Irish fisherman's son—play the Spanish guitar like that? As kids we were inseparable, becoming teenage sweethearts as we grew older, and nothing was secret between us; yet never once had he mentioned his interest in music, much less his natural talent to play it.

"Do you know him?" asked the waitress, noticing the disbelief on my face.

How should I answer, I thought, knowing we were once romantically involved? "I used to, but that was a long time ago," I said. "And I didn't know he was musically inclined."

The waitress laughed. "Funny how people can surprise us, aye?"

I nodded and smiled. "Yes, he's certainly changed a lot from when I knew him." At that moment, I realized I never knew him at all . . .

CHAPTER 1

An American in Ireland

Let me introduce myself and start from the beginning . . . My name is Clementine McKenna, and I am an American chef who specializes in Irish cuisine. Well known in the culinary world for putting a new spin on authentic Irish dishes, I've developed quite a following. Not to brag, but I'm pretty talented in the kitchen.

I invent new creations, too. In fact, I often make a game of it. Whenever I feel a powerful emotion, my brain conjures a new recipe, naming it after the experience. I can feel one coming on now . . . *Tell My Story Chocolate Silk Pie*. Dark chocolate for my anxiety, bright red raspberries for my excitement, Irish cream for my sorrow, and blueberries for my late husband who passed away in a tragic accident. He loved blueberries. Blueberry muffins, blueberry pancakes, blueberry ice cream, blueberry pie—he fancied them all. I think of him every day, especially when I first wake up in the morning and subconsciously reach over, only to find he is not beside me. My wonderful, late husband—a Southern gentleman; a kind soul; a disciplined professional; a loving, devoted partner; and I am sure, had he lived, a fantastic father.

On the weekends, sometimes he would get up early and surprise me with a creative dish of his own, even though he hated to cook. “Good morning, darling,” he would say with his deep, Southern drawl, his hair messy and a lazy smile on his flour-sprinkled, handsome face. “I made this just for you.” The morning of the accident, he placed the food tray on the bed, and with a twinkle in his eye he said, “See here? You’re this side of the pie, and I’m the other side.” Crawling up beside me, planting a tender, soft kiss on my cheek, he added, “I will always be the other side of your blueberry pie for the rest of your life.”

That evening the police showed up at my door, sadistically ripping my idyllic, utopian bliss in two, reminding me of the bad luck that had plagued me my whole life. In the cruelest, most tragic way, my world changed in a flash as they told me my husband’s private jet had gone down in a storm. No survivors. I remember sobbing into my mother’s chest while she held me tight, as if comforting her ten-year-old daughter who had just lost her kitten. But I wasn’t that little girl anymore, nor had I lost my kitten. No, this time I lost the most wonderful, loving, amazing man.

My better half.

My soulmate.

The other side of my blueberry pie.

A year later, unable to move on with my life, I found myself sinking deeper into despair. I had stopped playing the violin, lost interest in cooking, and hardly ever left my home. My mother and sister visited often, trying desperately to help me through my sorrow, but I had no strength, drive, or volition to overcome. I simply wallowed in my grief.

No one knows what it's really like when you lose your spouse . . . until you do. How it makes you feel. How they seem to be everywhere you look, even though they're gone. The smell of their clothes in the closet, their presence in every room, their voice in every sound. I even kept his cell phone active just to hear his sweet voicemail in his Southern drawl: "Looks like I'm busy, ya'll, so leave a message," the cheery recording said. "And if this is my beautiful wife, I'll be headin' home soon, honey. Love ya to the moon!"

Finally my Irish grandmother had enough and went straight into action, refusing to watch her granddaughter pity herself into oblivion. She opened the blinds to let in the light, fed me an omelet that would choke a horse, and told me she had made plans for my recovery. Grabbing me by the hands, she stood me up, looked me square in the face, and told me she knew how to heal my broken heart and fix my bad luck. She was sending me to Ireland! I was to complete my bereavement and reclaim my life in her childhood home.

Now just a summer vacation house, Rosewood Gardens was a thirty-two-acre estate near the ocean in the small village of Glengarriff, situated in the Beara Peninsula of County Cork. The town population, aside from the transient tourists, was a mere 140 souls, and everyone knew everyone. Nana felt it was the best possible place for me to be, given the woeful circumstances.

A demure and sophisticated lady, Grandma Kara Quinn McKenna was also energetic and spunky, even well into her eighties. Still beautiful with her sparkling sapphire eyes and rosy cheeks, she had a sharp wit that could slice a diamond. Pure Irish and proud of it, she sported a bright green shamrock tattoo, indelibly inked on her right ankle. I loved my grandmother dearly, and the recipe I had created in her honor was called, *I Love My Nana Banana Cream Cookies*. Ripe bananas, spelt flour, cane sugar, salted butter, eggs, Irish cream (her favorite liqueur), big chunks of white chocolate chips for her endearing demeanor, hearty pecans for her inner strength, and of course, green food coloring for her Irish heritage. Yum!

My sweet grandmother thought my sour luck was because I made a promise to a local Irish boy while visiting her as a child every summer in that small village of Glengarriff, Ireland, and then broke that promise once I grew older. Could that really be so? Regardless, that's why she urged me to travel 3,800 miles from small-town Tennessee to small-town County Cork, back to her homeland, back to Rosewood Gardens named after the surrounding woodland and the wild roses that grew throughout the estate, where I could heal from my heartache and in the process shed my bad luck.

"So here I go, Nana; this is for you," I whispered to myself, sitting on the plane as the turbine engines roared, ready for takeoff. "I am on my way!"

CHAPTER 2

Break an Irish Boy's Heart, Bad Luck for a Lifetime!

By the time I had landed in Dublin, seventeen hours had passed. Long lines at airport check-in and security, delays with initial and connecting flights, restless sleep on the plane—it all left me exhausted, and yet a five-hour train ride was next. I didn't mind, though, because it was now morning in Ireland, and the magnificent scenery of the Irish countryside was always a treat.

Rolling green hills went on for miles, scattered with countless sheep like white puffy grains of rice. Wild horses raced alongside the train, veering off toward watercolor purple-hued mountains in the distance. Neo-Gothic castles and cathedrals with tall spires and stained-glass windows occupied every passing town. And tranquil loughs, winding rivers, or lush forests took turns shouting out their glory to God.

As I gazed endlessly out the train car window at the stunning views, I imagined starting a new life here in this emerald isle encircled by the ocean like a sapphire jewel on the finger of a prince. A new beginning, as my grandmother had put it. Yes, I could be happy here. Far away from America, from the city and its noise, and most importantly, from the life I had once lived with my late husband Brett.

What was my life like before he died, you wonder? In a word, sublime. So why would I want to escape its joyful memories? Let me explain . . .

Prior to becoming a chef, I fell in love with the violin. I took lessons from a young age, and eventually became good enough to perform in local theater productions. That led to a burgeoning side career as a violinist for hire, and that's how I met Brett. He was in the audience one evening, staring at me while the orchestra performed Beethoven's *Three Trios for Pianoforte, Opus 1*, and I could feel his presence. After the concert, he sent me a dozen flowers every day for a week, then showed up at my door in a limousine. Six months later we were married, moved into our dream home in Memphis, Tennessee, and life was grand.

A typical day for me would involve the three things I loved the most: music, cooking, and my husband Brett. First I'd practice on my violin in preparation for my next orchestral performance. Then I'd plan and prepare a new Irish recipe for my fans on Instagram and the restaurants that supported my culinary creativity. And lastly, but most affectionately, I'd spend the evenings and weekends with Brett.

He was a successful defense attorney at one of the largest law firms in the State of Tennessee. Trusted, respected, and admired by all who met him, he was a man's man, yet not afraid of his feminine side, either. We weren't just husband and wife but also best friends and partners in everything we did. And he adored me as much as I did him.

After breakfast on that tragic day that altered my life, he asked, "You sure you don't want to come with me to New Orleans, love? We can paint the town red after I'm done with my meetings."

I walked up to him and finished doing his tie. “No thanks. Your last business trip I spent the entire time by myself, waiting for you in the hotel room.”

“Sorry, girl. Sometimes these meetings don’t always go as planned.”

“Hence why I’ll stay home this time,” I replied, smiling into his honey brown eyes.

He tenderly kissed me goodbye and was gone. Little did I know that hours later, everything would drastically change, collapsing my universe into a black hole and taking my happiness with it. And that’s why I wanted to escape these haunting memories from my past, knowing I’ll likely never experience that same level of love and joy I had with Brett again.



The train was on schedule, and I would be in Glengarriff in an hour. How do I feel about this, I pondered? Excited. Anxious. A little scared, even. And definitely sad that Brett was not with me. Once again, my mind subconsciously diverted itself, transmogrifying my emotions into another culinary creation: *Ireland Without My Husband Cheesecake*. This one was very similar to *Tell My Story Chocolate Silk Pie*, and why wouldn’t it be? After all, both were conjured from the same emotional ingredients—excitement, anxiety, and sadness. I would add more Irish cream to the cheese, though, considering I was in Ireland, along with dark chocolate ganache—extra thick. And of course, the garnish would be wild blueberries in memory of Brett. Yum!

Let’s talk more about this bad luck of mine, and when it all started. I wasn’t always unlucky, you know. In fact, there was a time when I had great luck. That is until Joshua David Sheehan came into my life. When I was ten years old, I went on a family vacation to Ireland, spending the entire summer at my grandmother’s childhood home, Rosewood Gardens. I met Joshua there—a local fisherman’s son—and we bonded immediately. He was two years older than me and worked on his father’s fishing boat called *The Jacquelyn*, and he’d often take me with them. Joshua was a romantic, even at a young age, and told me it was love at first sight for him. To be honest, I was completely smitten too. We’d sail all morning on his father’s boat and eat smoked fish and capers for lunch, drinking sweet apple cider pretending it was champagne. Back on shore, we’d ride our bikes through the village, hike through the woods, and explore the castle ruins in the area, pretending to be kings and queens of an ancient realm. We swam in the ocean every day, joked and laughed without a care in the world, and hated to say goodnight. When summer finally ended and I had to go back to the States, we held each other and cried.

“We’re going to write each other every chance we get,” Joshua had said as we hugged each other goodbye, tears streaming down like rain. “You’re my lass, and I’m your lad.” And so we did, eagerly awaiting the next summer to be together again. And the next. And the next after that.

As time went on, we grew from children into teenagers, and innocent conversations became more serious in nature. More mature, with concrete plans being made. “When you turn eighteen, I’m going to marry you,” Joshua had said. “We’ll live in our own home by the sea, and I’ll work for my father to support us.”

Young, naïve, and ridiculously in puppy love, I agreed, not realizing I wasn’t old enough to make such a promise, and that we lived in two different worlds. Me, from a wealthy Southern family; and he, a poor Irish fisherman’s son.

Then came that summer when I did turn eighteen, but I didn’t go to Ireland like before. I had just won a scholarship to study music at the prestigious Juilliard School in New York, and I couldn’t wait to move there. Things had changed, I had matured, and I had new goals in life besides becoming

someone's wife. Joshua continued to write, of course, professing his love for me and how he wanted us to marry, but in truth, I just wasn't ready. I didn't know how to tell him, though, so I simply put an end to it all. I did not return to Ireland, I did not write back, and I would not accept his phone calls.

It was soon after that that my luck suddenly changed. My scholarship to the Juilliard School was revoked because of a technicality they had overlooked when reviewing my application. My violin strings would break during a live performance. Our family dog ran away while I was walking him, never to be found again. And everything I owned or touched would continually break—my car, my watches, my stereo, my TV, my appliances—you name it.

I was in one fender bender after another, had one job after another, and dated one man after another, each one worse than the previous. Even my family was affected, cursed by my bad luck. Active in the equestrian riding community and horse racing world, they forbid me to attend their events and competitions as the horses they would finance or bet on would always lose or be disqualified when I was there. And that's how I earned the moniker, *Bad Luck Clementine*.

Desperate to turn my fortunes around, I had a shamrock tattooed on my ankle, just like my nana had done in her youth. I was convinced it had worked, too, because soon after that I met Brett. My luck had finally changed for the better, or so I thought, until his plane went down after a year of marriage. I wished I had never met him. I wished he had met and married someone else instead, and perhaps he would still be alive. That is what I told myself.



As the train progressed through the endless countryside, I wondered about this magnificent isle and its salt-of-the-earth people. If only this emerald land could talk, oh the stories it would tell! The passions and pains, tears and joys, wins and losses, all held for millenniums, hidden in the ground like an arcane language, a secret message, an inscrutable code only God can decipher. In a strange way, it gave me comfort, knowing that my story was just one in a countless number of flawed human chronicles from creation onward, and that Almighty God was aware of them all.

A sheep farmer tending his herd waved at me as the train passed by, reminding me of my sister waving goodbye at the airport. It stole my comfort and fed me melancholy, recalling our last conversation . . .

“When was the last time you played your violin?” Natalie asked, noticing the music case by my feet.

“The day before the accident,” I replied. “Haven’t picked it up since.”

“Oh, Clementine,” she said, pulling me into her embrace.

“I thought I’d bring it because . . . you know . . . maybe I’ll find the desire to play it again.”

Natalie released me and took a step back, still holding my arms while giving me a look of sisterly affection. “Of course you will. You’ll get through this pain, and life will go back to normal; you’ll see. You just need some time to heal.”

An uncomfortable silence followed, and in that lapse of sound were all the things we both knew but couldn’t say. My husband was never coming back, and I’d likely never find that kind of love again. How could I? Brett was the love of my life. My rock. My strength. My everything . . . The other side of my blueberry pie.

“I keep thinking if he just hadn’t met me, he would still be alive,” I finally said, tears welling in my eyes.

“Stop that, Clementine. How in the heavens could you have anything to do with that accident?”

“I’m bad luck.”

“No, don’t you dare blame yourself. You may be accident prone, and some unlucky things have happened to you in the past, but you are not responsible for what happened to Brett.”

“It’s like a gray cloud follows me everywhere,” I persisted. “When I first met Brett, I honestly thought things had changed for me. But now I think I cursed him as well.”

“That’s ridiculous, and I’m not listening to it. You can’t make a plane go down just because of some unfortunate circumstances from your past. Besides, you weren’t even on that plane.”

Deep down I knew she was right, that I had nothing to do with what had happened. And yet still, in the pit of my stomach, I felt such guilt.

Natalie changed the subject: “You know, I really think this trip will be good for you. Glengarriff is a lovely town, and Rosewood Gardens is a beautiful estate.”

I agreed. If there were any place on earth conducive to recuperating from my tragedy, Rosewood Gardens would be at the top of that list.

“Wish I was going on this adventure with you,” Natalie said. “But with three young kids and a needy husband, it’s impossible.”

Adventure, I internally scoffed? An adventure is something you excitedly embark upon, returning home after it’s over. But I didn’t want to ever come back now that I was on my way. What would I come back to? There was nothing here for me anymore. No, I’d rather hide in the land of Éire forever, learn how to speak Gaelic, knit green wool sweaters, wear Irish kilts, learn to play the bagpipes, and live off colcannon and Irish champ. I’d rather become someone else and forget who I was, and one day in the far-off future when I’m a little old lady, tell tales of America to the village children while drowning my sorrows in Baileys Irish Cream.

“You know what you should do?” asked Natalie. “You should look up Joshua David Sheehan while you’re there.”

Memories of my first love came flooding back: His young, angelic face. Those searing, lazuline eyes, fringed with thick lashes. The faintest of freckles dusted across his strong nose. A crown of coal black hair, soft curls flowing in the breeze. The last time we had said goodbye, we were standing by the ocean, the moonlight reflecting off his handsome face, feeding my infatuation. But it was more than that—there was something inside him, like a pearl in its shell, shining from within. I did love Joshua once, as a teenage boy. But I later realized I didn’t want the life of a fisherman’s wife. Thinking back now, that decision seemed rather vacuous, and that I could have loved him just as much as I had Brett. How different things would have been if I had kept my promise to Joshua David Sheehan.

“Clementine, are you listening to me?” Natalie asked, interrupting my daydream.

“I’m not ready to date anyone,” I said, “much less rekindle a relationship I ended years ago. Besides, I doubt he would want to see me, anyway.”

“That’s right—you broke his heart.”

I didn’t disagree.

“He wrote you for years; didn’t he. The poor guy thought you were going to marry him.”

“I made that promise when I was fourteen; how could he possibly hold me to it.”

“True . . . What happened between you two, anyway? What made you change your mind?”

“I grew up and realized . . .”

Natalie finished my thought: “That a humble fisherman from a small village didn’t seem so attractive anymore?”

“Something like that,” I said, recalling the past. Joshua’s letters had always been sweet and endearing, but you can’t kiss a letter, and you can’t be held by words. I felt bad for admitting it, but

my sister was right . . . I was a girl from a wealthy, prominent Southern family, and he was just a poor Irish fisherman's son. How could that possibly work? The older I got, the more I began to realize that, especially when my mother explained to me in detail how his life would become mine if we were to get married. She must have known how we felt about each other back then, and no doubt read his letters without my consent to see what we were up to. Being the spoiled teenager I was, indulged by my parents and grandparents my whole life, given every creature comfort there was to give, I slowly pulled away from Joshua, wanting to maintain the lifestyle I had. I convinced myself that I was too cultured for him, and that I couldn't clean fish, shear sheep, and struggle to make ends meet as a fisherman's wife. And yet, despite all that, a part of me didn't care and still wanted to marry him.

"I remember you two walking along the beach holding hands," Natalie said, smiling as if reminiscing about her own first love. "So sweet and innocent."

"Stop romanticizing, Natalie. It's not helping me."

"Sorry . . . Do you ever wonder what became of him, though?"

"Nana knew his grandmother, and she said he married a local girl." I imagined them having a small, intimate ceremony on a beautiful spot by the sea, just like Joshua and I had always dreamed of having. "I'm sure he still works on his father's boat and has a bunch of kids by now."

"What if he's divorced, though? You never know, right?"

I shook my head and rolled my eyes.

"Oh c'mon, Clementine—you're seriously telling me you're not going to look him up while you're there?"

"Nope." I lied.

"Well it's a small town, so you might not have a choice. I bet you run into him."

"If I do, I'll ask about his wife and children."

"He was pretty cute, from what I remember. I wonder if he maintained those good looks or if he's now the quintessential fisherman with red skin, chapped lips, and slits for eyes from squinting at the sun too long."

I wondered that too, thinking about the fishermen that sailed the Irish seas. They were happy blokes, working hard from sunup to sundown, grateful for what the ocean gave them. My grandmother often said that fishermen come from different stock, having the purest of hearts because the soul of the sea lives inside them. And when they die, God gives them a choice to roam the watery deep or enter through the Golden Gates. She was always telling stories like that, and I loved her all the more for it. She was also keenly superstitious and firmly believed that breaking Joshua's heart is what brought on my bad luck—involuntary penance for breaking my promise. What my sister didn't know is that I had made another promise—this one to Nana—and I intended to keep it . . . If given the opportunity to make things right with Joshua, I would.



The train came to a screeching halt, a loud whistle announcing our arrival. As I stood to collect my things from the compartment above my seat, a sudden flicker of excitement ignited in me, hoping that I would indeed see Joshua David Sheehan again. Despite what had happened between us, and the years that had passed, perhaps we could rekindle a platonic friendship after all. It would be nice to talk and laugh as we once did, especially since I could use a good friend these days. With my emotive thoughts lingering, once again my mind transmuted them into an apposite recipe. This one I named, *Thinking of My First Love Toffee Shortbread*, because Joshua always teased me about my height,

affectionately calling me his shortbread. Gobs of toffee, roasted almonds, wheat flour, maple syrup, caster sugar, unsalted butter, and as always, a generous amount of Irish cream. Yum!

With luggage in hand, a floppy velvet green beret on my head, and a deep breath of come what may, I left the dimness of the locomotive to be welcomed by a bright, sunny day in Glengarriff, County Cork. The crystal blue sky, the wonderfully fresh sea air, the people bustling around—some locals, some tourists—and the village vibe all fortified my decision to come here.

Across from the station were stores, pubs, and eateries, lining the street side by side as if gingerbread houses on display, competing for the same patrons. Men in Irish caps and tweed jackets walked in and out of the pubs; women wearing vibrant scarves and lush scarlet lip stain came and went through their favorite stores; and couples leisurely strolling down the sidewalks pushing baby carriages enjoyed the day.

After window-shopping for a spell, I chose one of the eateries and went inside. I found a booth tucked away in the back where I could observe my new surroundings and ordered a late lunch—a cheese and ham toastie with chips and pickle on the side, and an ice-cold beer. It was delicious. Well, I'm here, I thought, looking around at the red-and-white checkered tables and the people sitting at them as I ate my food. Now what?

Finishing my lunch, I went to the bar to enquire about getting a cab, and suddenly every person within earshot came alive . . .

"Might be hard getting a cabbie today, love," said the bartender, wiping down the counter.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Only three drivers in town, and one's sick, one's visiting his parents in Belfast, and the other's car is in the garage for repairs."

"Oh, shucks!" I replied, remembering how scarce public transportation was in this small village.

"Where you be goin', lass?" slurred one gentleman sitting at the bar. "I have a car and I'll take you where you need to go."

I smiled and politely declined as he swayed back and forth on his stool, struggling to focus his double vision on me.

"Me bloke is coming to pick me up after work," said a plump waitress. "If you can wait a couple of hours, we'll give you a ride."

Before I could answer, a gentle hand touched my shoulder, and I turned to see a petite older man with a funny grin smoking a pipe.

"Is it a ride you be needin', lass?" he asked, a puff of smoke bellowing from the side of his mouth.

"Yes. I need to get to Rosewood Gardens on Yellow Bonnet Road."

"*Abhb, Gairdíní Rosewood,*" he said in Gaelic. "*Áilleacht áite, agus ní bréag é sin.*" ("*Abhb, Rosewood Gardens. A beauty of a place, and that's no lie.*")

I didn't understand the ancient Goidelic language, so I just smiled at him.

His expression changed, and he now seemed curious. "You related to the McKennas?"

"I am. I'm Kara Quinn McKenna's granddaughter."

His eyes grew wide before his wrinkled mug scrunched up into a big, toothless smile. "You don't say! Ha! We went to school together, she and I!"

"Really?"

"Yes! I remember her well, too," he continued. "Lovely lass, she was. A smolderin' Irish beauty!" He removed his pipe and examined me more closely. "I can definitely see her in you."

"Thank you," I replied, blushing. "People have said we resemble each other."

“That you do!” He thought for a moment, thinking about the past. “I recall she married a Yank and left to the States many years ago. She’d come back and visit in the summers, though.”

“That’s right. I used to visit every summer too, during my childhood and teenage years.”

Pointing his pipe at me, he changed the direction of the conversation: “C’mon, lass, it’s a bit of a drive, so you best be lettin’ me take you to *Gairdíní Rosewood* now.” Without asking, he picked up my luggage and started walking toward the door. I followed.

Once outside, there were no vehicles around, so I asked, “Where’s your car?”

“Car? Ha! Loud useless things, they are. I have a horse and buggy, and me wife is waitin’ in it right now. We take tourists from the train station to their destination, givin’ ’em a tour of the town along the way. Takes longer, but they always enjoy it. Would you like a tour of the village sights?”

“No, thank you. Just Rosewood Gardens, please.”

He seemed disappointed, so I added, “But when I have more time on another day, that would be lovely.”

His face scrunched up into another toothless grin. “Where’s me manners! I hadn’t properly introduced meself yet.” Putting down my suitcase, he extended his hand and said, “Me name’s Danny O’Kelly, and me wife’s name is Mary.”

I shook his small hand. “I’m Clementine McKenna.”

“And so you are! Good to meet you, Clementine. *Áilleacht ainm le baghaidh áilleacht bean*,” he said in Gaelic.

“What does that mean?”

“A beauty of a name for a beauty of a woman.”

I smiled.

“Now look at you,” he said, his voice becoming squeaky. “When you smile, you look just as I remember Kara in her youth.”

At the horse and buggy, Danny O’Kelly introduced me to his wife. A pleasant lady and even tinier than he was, she smiled and offered me Irish soda bread with goat cheese topping. Though I had already eaten, I didn’t want to offend her, so I accepted her hospitality, nibbling on the snack as we trotted along while listening to her husband tell stories about my grandmother. At one point I had to correct him, though, when he erroneously referred to someone as my nana’s sister: “My grandmother didn’t have a sister,” I said. “Only two brothers.”

Danny looked confused. “No, she definitely had a sister. Her name was Ava. Irish twins, they were.”

“That’s impossible,” I politely insisted. “I would have known if she did.”

About to speak of this mysterious twin again, the older man abruptly stopped when his wife said something to him in Gaelic, scolding in tone. Turning to me, she smiled again and asked, “Are you married, dear?”

I frowned, immediately thinking of Brett. “No, I’m a recent widow.”

“Sorry to hear; bloody shame.”

“Perhaps you’ll find a good Irish bloke in County Cork, aye?” proffered Danny, seeking to cheer me up.

Mary scolded her husband in Gaelic again.

He ignored her and winked at me. “Well you’ve come to the right place to heal, lass. The rest will come later.” Putting away his corncob pipe, he pulled out a harmonica from his jacket pocket and began to play a sweet, Irish ballad. His wife simultaneously hummed along to the tune.

The sun was getting low by the time we got to Yellow Bonnet Road. When Rosewood Gardens came into view across the rolling hills in the distance, my breath caught in my lungs and my eyes began to water. Memories flooded back about this magical place where my siblings and I would spend our summers. We'd play hide-and-seek in the large mansion, slide down the spiral banisters, rummage around in the junk-filled attic, and help Nana bake cookies in the kitchen. Outside we'd explore the manicured grounds; on hot days we'd swim in the streams flanking the property; and on Sundays we'd spend the day by the ocean as a family. To us it was the center of the world, so beautiful and enchanting that God himself would come there and linger.

The stately home remained unchanged over decades of McKenna ownership, spanning multiple generations. My grandmother had been raised there, her father before her, and his father before him. Nana, being the spirited woman she was, had an itch to see the world and was the first to leave, answering an ad from a wealthy American banker looking for a wife. The ad had read, "*Adventurous man looking for adventurous woman with red hair and a twinkle in her eye!*" It intrigued her, and when they met it was the proverbial cliché—love at first sight. He promised her a wonderful life in America, which he made good on, but Nana could never escape her roots. She missed Ireland so much that eventually they started coming back to Rosewood Gardens every summer to appease her homesickness. Then once her brothers had passed and she inherited the entire estate, it became their beloved summer home. Once my grandparents became too old to travel, however, they rented the property to the mayor of County Cork. Until two summers ago that is, when the poor chap died.

"You look a wee bit cold," said Mary O'Kelly, pulling out a handmade, emerald green shawl. "I knit these meself—a mixture of wool and cashmere."

"Thank you," I said, draping the garment across my shoulders. It was soft and cozy, like a warm hug.

"Been makin' these shawls me whole life. Me mam taught me, and me mam's mam taught her. You won't find a better one in all of Éire, and that's no lie. In fact, me shawls have even been known to bring folks luck."

If only that were true, I thought.

Mary must have read my mind. "You just have to believe, dear." She touched my nose as if I were a little girl, and in that moment, I felt like one, too.

Before we knew it, the mammoth wrought iron gates of Rosewood Gardens stood right in front of us like Roman gods guarding the entrance to Mount Olympus. We all stared in awe.

"What a beauty," Danny said, admiring the elaborate Celtic designs in the imposing structure.

"Too right," agreed Mary.

As I stepped off the carriage, a gust of crisp wind caressed me, like a greeting from an old friend.

"Would you like me to take you to the front entrance?" asked Danny.

"No, it's ok," I replied. "I'll walk from here, thanks." I paid the fare, took my luggage, and handed the shawl back to Mary.

"Keep it, dear," she said, "you'll be needin' it for luck," winking at me as if fully aware of my unfortunate past.

I hugged the charming older couple goodbye, and within minutes they were out of sight down Yellow Bonnet Road, leaving me standing alone in front of the prodigious gates. Fumbling through my suitcase, I found the skeleton key that not only opened the gates but also the front door to the house. It too was impressive to look at—the most fascinating vintage key you have ever seen. Large, pencil thin, made of heavy brass with an intricate lace-like design, and a unique head in the form of a Celtic knot heart. I imagined the stories it held, wishing it could speak to share those tales.

The day before my flight, Nana had taken my hand and placed that key firmly in my palm. “This opens the door to a magical world where you can heal, my sweet Clementine,” she had said, her gaze motherly yet mysterious. “Where you can find your happiness again.” As she looked intently into my eyes, I realized she was seeing herself in me. A vicarious thrill of once again returning to her childhood home. And yet there was more. Something she couldn’t say but wanted to. An unsolved mystery hidden behind her cerulean eyes. What secret was she wanting me to find, or not find?

Along with the key, Nana had also handed me a note. I once again read it as I stood there . . .

My Dearest Clementine,

My sweet, precious granddaughter. My heart aches for you in this sad and tragic time. I wish I could stop your heartache and bring your beloved husband back. I wish I could fix everything. But I can't. The one thing I can do, however, is give you a gift. The gift of staying at Rosewood Gardens for as long as you need. It is a cherished place dear to my heart. Like you, my wee lass. And I know it will help you heal.

So go, Clementine. Go find your smile again, and maybe even change your luck!

Much love,

Nana

The skeleton key fit perfectly in the keyhole, and the giant wrought iron gates creaked open. I had been just a teenager the last time I stepped across that threshold to the other side. Now I walked the path as a widow in her late twenties.

It was so quiet except for the wind, and in the back of my mind I could hear my siblings as children, playing in the trees or hiding behind one of the carved stone sculptures lining the long entranceway. They had aged, cracked, and faded from the elements, but that only added to their appeal.

As I made my way up the gravel drive, luggage in tow, it dawned on me how much Brett would have loved it here. We had talked about coming to Rosewood Gardens for our honeymoon, and almost did, but Paris seemed more romantic, and I had never been. That change of plans turned out to be a blessing in disguise now, because it would be impossible to heal here if it were filled with memories of Brett.

The warmth of the day absconded with the setting sun, and a chill filled the air. I hugged my new shawl and stared up at the perennial mansion, green ivy crawling up its colossal stone walls. It was just as I had remembered, but for some reason seemed spookier now.

Gorgeous red roses, after which the estate had been named, grew everywhere, making the snaking ivy seem less creepy. They scented the air with a sweet, delicate fragrance, reminding me of my beloved grandmother. Wasting no time, I took the stone porch steps by twos and quickly inserted the skeleton key. Again, it fit perfectly in the keyhole, and the large wooden doors swung open.

With one flick of a switch, a massive crystal chandelier flooded the entrance with light, revealing the splendor inside. From where I stood, the enormous foyer split into two winding staircases spiraling up toward a cathedral ceiling. A huge opening between them led to the main living area where floor-to-ceiling windows revealed a full view of the ocean. Marble and hardwood floors, intricate box-beam ceilings, white enamel and cherrywood cabinets—the mansion boasted it all.

Each room was decorated elegantly with seventeenth century Baroque furniture and ornate tapestry wallpaper. Some rooms had stained-glass windows depicting colorful peacocks, swans, and unicorns; others had wall murals and antique Tiffany lamps. Oil paintings hung everywhere, a

succession of them in the dining room displaying the McKenna ancestors who've lived in the home, including my grandmother and grandfather.

The special details of the estate were endless, too. Victorian architecture; a large, stocked wine cellar; manicured gardens; private ponds and streams; stone walls and statues—they all added to the distinct features of the property. Truly, my grandmother's estate was something to behold, and I was grateful for her gift.

I made a simple dinner that night and ate alone. Afterward, with a bottle of 1928 D'Oliveiras Sercial Madeira from the wine cellar to keep me company, I opened the French doors to the balcony and listened to the sound of the ocean. Surprisingly, despite the intense emotions coursing through my veins, they did not metamorphose into another recipe. Perhaps they were too potent and not transferable. "Wish you were here, love," I whispered to my late husband Brett. "Wish you were here."

CHAPTER 3

Joshua David Sheehan

I woke the next morning and subconsciously reached over for Brett, only to find once again he was not there. People who've never lost a loved one can never know the sorrow that that evokes, as if caught in a perpetual time warp, forced to relive your pain. While you sleep, you forget your sadness, as if given a reprieve from a lifelong sentence. But when you awake, it comes back with a vengeance, hitting you with a fresh wave of bitter bane.

As I lingered in the middle of the king-sized, four-poster bed with silk satin sheets, looking about the room, I exhaled the grief and felt my spirits rise. This was my grandmother's bedroom, which made it particularly special. As with the rest of the house, the furniture was luxuriant, Louis XV style, employing marquetry, inlays of exotic woods of different colors, as well as ivory and mother of pearl. Across from the bed was a stunning chaise lounge I used to recline in as a child, witnessing my grandmother get ready for some special dinner or event. I loved watching her brush her silver-streaked, auburn hair in front of her gold vanity, applying crimson red lipstick, ending with a touch of powder on her face. With bated breath, I always waited for the grand finale when she would stand and look at me, a queen of unmatched beauty, and ask, "How do I look, my sweet Clementine?" Staring in awe, I would answer, "Breathtaking, Nana," giggling with delight. She would smile and wink at me. Oh, how I loved those memories!

Yawning and stretching, I jumped out of bed to greet the morn, glad to be back at Rosewood Gardens as if a tourist on the first day of her dream vacation. Slipping into one of my grandmother's cream satin housecoats, I immediately opened the French doors to the balcony so I could hear the ocean and smell the wonderfully salty air. It invigorated me.

Out on the terrace, I again scanned my magnificent surroundings—the endless indigo sea, the turquoise sky above, the emerald pastures below. Birds of every kind searched for food, sheep in the neighboring fields grazed the land, and a single humpback whale breached the watery deep with a mighty splash. What a glorious place to be!

Standing there looking out at the vast ocean, I noticed a fishing boat near the shoreline. Two men were on deck, and one of them waved; I waved back. As the vessel turned, I saw the name on the stern and instantly froze. In bold letters it read, *The Jacquelyn*. That was Joshua David Sheehan and his father! Though it had been years since I last saw Joshua, I still recognized him. Did he recognize me too, or think I was just a new renter? He must have known because he kept staring, unable to move like me.

After the boat had chugged around the peninsula and out of sight, I continued to stare at nothing, shocked that I had seen him. I knew, of course, that it was likely to happen sooner or later, given that Glengarriff was a small town, but I wasn't expecting it to be on my first day! No longer a teenage boy,

he now had the persona of a full-grown man. A man I had once promised to marry, and whom I exchanged letters with for years. We were so happy then, he and I, madly in love with each other. His sense of humor, his charm, those dazzling azure blue eyes—it all came rushing back as if I lived it only yesterday.

“He has a wife and kids now, Clementine,” I said under my breath, inhaling a deep dose of reality. And I was happy for him, glad to see he looked healthy, handsome, and full of life. Yet still, I could not deny the sensation that pricked at my inner self. A peculiar sensation. What is this, I wondered? What new feeling has gripped my soul? Then it dawned on me . . . jealousy. Jealous of the woman he had married and who was waiting for him to come home to her. Jealous of the unbreakable bond they no doubt shared through the miracle of children. Jealous of the life they had built together.

Envy is an ugly thing, but powerful. To mollify the sensation, I summoned a new recipe . . . *Seeing Your Old Childhood Sweetheart Sandwich*. More ingredients than normal were required to mask the distasteful odor of covetousness, so I chose fried sourdough bread, smoked pork, a generous amount of limburger cheese, sautéed onions, shredded cabbage, and sour pickles, all served with a side of salt and vinegar chips. Yum!



“Who was that lass you waved to at Rosewood Gardens?” asked Cillian Sheehan—Joshua’s father.

“I think it was Clementine McKenna,” said Joshua, still numb over the discovery.

“You sure it wasn’t just a new renter?”

“It was her,” Joshua affirmed, taking off his cap, running his fingers through his hair before putting it back on.

Cillian, too, took off his hat, scratched his head and put it right back on. “After all these years, she decides to return?” he asked, perplexed over why.

“Guess so.”

“Hm . . . Well she certainly grew up nice,” said Cillian, returning to the helm.

Joshua didn’t agree or disagree. All he could think of was that day he realized his first love no longer wanted him. No longer loved him. What a cruel, heartbreaking moment that was—the worst in his life. He knew, of course, that something was wrong when the pretty American girl stopped writing back and wouldn’t take his phone calls, but there had to be a logical explanation. After all, they had promised they would marry each other. It took a long time to heal from that, and now the wounds have been reopened.



As I lay in bed the next morning, a childhood memory filled my thoughts. I was a little girl living in Memphis, Tennessee, and my mother had just given me a beautiful Irish Barbie doll. It came wrapped in a green box covered in tiny shamrocks, and a medieval castle decorated the lid. Oh, how I loved that gift!

The Barbie had long, flaming red hair, green eyes, porcelain skin, and tiny freckles across her nose. Dressed in traditional Irish attire, she wore an emerald green satin dress rimmed with ivory lace on the bottom, a white linen top with gold ribbon and puffy sleeves, white stockings, and tiny black lace-

up boots. Across her shoulders was a red, olive, and white tweed shawl, and on her head a gold crown with rubies and emeralds. She held a sheepdog puppy in one arm and a violin in the other.

My father, knowing how much I loved that doll, created an Irish castle to go with it. Using Rosewood Gardens as a model, he made every room, floor, ceiling, hallway, stairway—you name it—an exact replica of the real mansion. Even the furniture, appliances, and rugs were the same, and everything was to scale. The detail was remarkable; it must have taken him weeks to complete.

After school, I couldn't wait to get home to play with my beloved Barbie in her amazing castle. Hours went by unnoticed in my room, lost in my imagination, lost to the world around me. Then one day I gasped in glee at what my mother gave me next—a matching Irish Ken doll, dressed in a wool pleated kilt, a Ghillie shirt, plaid waistcoat, and kilt socks with black shoes. He rode a white horse and carriage and carried Irish bagpipes. It was such a happy day for me! Weeks later I found a tiny baby added to the nursery—this time from my dear nana—and the Celtic family was complete.

As I grew into a woman, I often thought of that Irish doll family—the happy personification of what I wanted for my own life. Who would have known that decades later, I would be living in that very home used to create my Barbie's castle, except without my Ken and a baby?



Later that day, I ventured around the enormous house, refamiliarizing myself with each room. And there were many. Ten bedrooms and bathrooms; the living room, dining room, and kitchen; the library; the attic and cellar; and multiple other rooms and common areas that served various purposes. It had been two years since the mansion was last occupied, and some of the furniture in those rooms was still covered in cotton sheets to protect it from dust and light. As I pulled each sheet off to expose the décor, different memories came back to me. One in particular was in the formal dining area . . .

In my mind's eye, I saw a younger version of my grandmother wearing a beautiful chiffon dress that swayed as she walked about the room. Hair done up in a high bun, rosy cheeks and cherry red lips, a warm smile on her face, she carried herself with elegance, sophistication, and regality. Nana was always mild and lenient with us kids when we horsed around the house, short of swinging from the chandeliers, but dinners were much different—we knew to behave ourselves. Cavorting all over Rosewood Gardens like wild animals during the day was fine, but at night sitting around the dinner table, we were expected to be gracious and mannerly. I recall one time my brother came late to the table after playing out in the woods all day, skin and clothes still soiled, and Nana simply pointed upstairs. Without a word he went to clean up while we all silently waited for him.

Grandma loved dinnertime at Rosewood Gardens with her children and grandchildren sitting around her, and it was such a fun experience for us all. Delicious Irish home cooking; lingering at the table as she and Grandpa told interesting stories; snuggling with them by the fireplace until we dozed off—memories to cherish for a lifetime. I believe that is where my love of Irish food began, leading to my career as a chef.

When I entered the library, something extraordinary happened. In the corner of the room stood a bookcase that somehow looked out of place. I'm not sure why since it was a library after all; perhaps its isolation is what raised my curiosity. I studied the books on the top shelf, and when I pulled one out, lo and behold, the entire bookcase shifted over! Shocked, frightened, saucer-eyed with my jaw on the floor, I gasped at a hole in the wall with a staircase leading down into darkness. What on earth was this!

For a moment I just stood there, not knowing what to do. All those years playing in this house during my childhood, inspecting every inch of every room, and never once had this secret been discovered. Lighting a candle, I mustered my courage and ventured down the stairs, finding a rustic wooden door at the bottom with an iron grill handle of a lion and dragon facing each other. Striking in appearance, I grabbed the handle, but the door was locked. I tried the vintage skeleton key that opened the massive gates to the estate and main door to the house, but it didn't work. Then I tried again, but with the key inserted upside down. This time it did work! Gently I pushed the door; it slowly creaked open.

I can't tell you how excited I now was to venture into that secret place. Inside were three rooms—a small office, a living area with furniture, and a bedroom with a single mattress, nightstand, and toilet. What was the purpose of them, I wondered? Why would the McKennas have made this clandestine hidey-hole, and did my grandmother know about it?

Needless to say, I carefully examined everything in each room. Looking through the books and papers in the small office, I found an old Irish cookbook, which seemed rather odd to me as there was nowhere to cook anything. On flipping through the pages, however, I realized it was no cookbook at all. No, it was a diary camouflaged as one! But whose diary was it?

By now it was evening, so I took the diary with me upstairs. I skipped dinner and began reading in a daze, feeling tingly and dreamy all over. As if a detective searching for the missing link to solving a major crime, I kept at it for hours. Then I came to a specific entry that gave me serious pause . . .

Dear Diary,

I saw Jack today and nearly fainted when he smiled at me. I was walking through the field on my way to school when I saw him fishing in the creek before class. I thought about him all day afterward, and I made a plan to drop my books in front of him so he would stop to help and hopefully talk to me.

As I raced to the spot where I knew we'd cross paths after school, he was already talking to Ava. How could she do this to me! She knows I have loved Jack from the moment I saw him. I saw the way he was looking at her, too, with stars in his eyes. Oh, Dear Diary, if only I were a little older, then maybe he would look at me that way too!

Tonight I am going to wrap my hair in curlers, and tomorrow I will wear mam's red lip stain and my favorite lavender dress. He will notice me then, and I'll hint that I have no date to the upcoming sweetheart dance. Wish me luck!

I desperately wanted to know who the diary belonged to, but nothing I had read thus far identified its owner. It was clear, though, that whoever wrote it had a crush on a boy named Jack, who fancied another girl named Ava. That's when I remembered the tiny older Irishman and his wife, Danny and Mary O'Kelly, who gave me a ride to Rosewood Gardens in their horse and buggy. Danny had mentioned a woman named Ava, referring to her as Nana's sister, and I told him he was mistaken. But maybe he wasn't. Perhaps the diary belonged to Nana, and maybe she really did have a sister.

The very notion of it all left me tired, confused, and upset. If it turned out to be true, if Nana really did have an older sister, why would it have been kept a secret all these years? Why had I never heard of this woman, let alone met her? And what happened to her? Was she still alive? Where was she now?

So many unanswered questions . . .



The following day I felt like going for a swim, just as I had countless times before when I visited Ireland as a child. A huge heated pool waited in the back courtyard next to the garden, but I always preferred swimming in the ocean. Dawning my bathing suit, I walked to the shoreline and dipped my toes in the salty water. Yelp! It was freezing!

That never stopped me in the past, though, so I took a deep breath of courage and dove into the rolling waves. The second I surfaced, I let out a piercing shriek and ran out of the icy water as fast as I could. Little did I know that *The Jacquelyn* had just come around the peninsula as I made it to the beach, jumping up and down trying to warm myself. Joshua and his brother were on the boat, howling in laughter over my antics.

I wrapped my towel around my body and yelled out, “Go ahead, laugh! Ha ha!” storming back to the house.

“This time of year isn’t the best for swimming, lass!” one of them yelled at my backside. “Hyperthermia could set in!” Again, they both laughed.

I was furious. Embarrassed. But by the time I got back to the house and shut the door, I too was laughing at my own lapse of judgment. How silly I must have looked trying to swim in that freezing cold water, pretending I was so tough, only to scream in discomfort as I skedaddled back to the beach, jumping up and down like a fool. Oh, well.



That afternoon I drove the estate vehicle—a 1960 Mercedes-Benz 220SE Cabriolet—into town to pick up groceries. Glengarriff was bustling as usual, being the popular tourist destination it was, and it always struck me how enchanting the village and its people were, as if something out of a fairy tale. I didn’t linger, though, because I wanted to get back home to cook, eat, and continue reading the diary I had found.

Irish stew pie containing lamb shoulder roast and every local vegetable sold in town, baked in a delectable flaky crust, was on the menu for dinner. Though I had improvised, it turned out absolutely scrumptious, and I made a mental note to write down the recipe later. That had to wait, though, because first I wanted to get back to the mystery diary. Opening to the page where I had left off, I continued reading . . .

Dear Diary,

I told Ava today that I’m in love with Jack, and if she steals him from me, I won’t ever talk to her again. Out of all the blokes in the world, she has to set her sights on someone I have dreamed about for years. I want a life with Jack, and she knows this. How cruel of her to play with his heart and mine, digging her evil claws into him. She was once my best friend, and now I loathe her!

I couldn’t take the suspense anymore, so I decided to call my grandmother to ask her about the secret hideout I had found, along with the vintage diary. If it was hers, I’d learn the identity of Ava. If it wasn’t, at least she could help me determine to whom it belonged.

Just before I dialed Nana’s number, the sonorous chime of the doorbell rang through the foyer. Who could that be, I wondered? When I opened door, my heart fell to the ground.

“Hello, Clementine,” said Joshua David Sheehan, releasing a pleasant grin. “It’s been a while.” Standing much taller than I had remembered, his hair was freshly washed and sleeked back, reflecting

a blue-black sheen under the chandelier lights. A full beard covered his lower face, and he wore a navy blue wool turtleneck with jeans.

“Josh . . . Joshua,” I stuttered, not expecting this. “I’m . . . I’m surprised to see you.” I mustered a smile back.

He studied me a moment, and I instantly became self-conscious, wishing I looked better. “What’s it been, ten years?” he asked, his teeth a flash of white beneath his dark beard.

“Something like that,” I answered. Lordy, why was my voice so breathy?

“When I saw you on the balcony a couple of days ago, I figured I was imagining things. I mean, I recognized you immediately, but I couldn’t believe it was you.”

“I was just out there staring at the sea,” I said, cringing inside over stating the obvious, having no clue why I was explaining myself.

“I also came by to apologize for us blokes laughing at you this morning.”

I smirked. “Don’t worry about it. When I got back into the house, I laughed too.”

“You seemed pretty upset at the time.” He chuckled. “I have to admit, though, seeing you jump up and down like that, as if you were on fire, was one of the funniest things I’ve seen in a while.”

I felt my cheeks flush with embarrassment, and I fought the urge to slam the door in his face, run upstairs and jump into bed, pulling the covers over my head. “Well, we’re good now, so don’t worry about it,” I repeated. Having no idea what else to say or do, I tried to shut the door.

He caught it. “After all this time, you want to brush me off so quickly?”

I just stared at him, an awkward silence filling the space between us. Finally I said, “It’s not a good time, Joshua. And it’s late.”

“I see you’ve been drinking,” he replied. “I could use a drink myself—want some company?”

I had forgotten I had a glass of wine in my hand. “Um . . .,” I hesitated.

“Oh, c’mon. It’s a beauty of a night, and I would love to visit with my childhood friend.”

I acquiesced and opened the door wide to invite him in, timorous beyond description. We both walked into the living room where the fire was dying down, and without asking, he put another log in the fireplace. I poured him a drink, and for several painstaking moments, we again said nothing.

Joshua picked up one of my books from the coffee table and read the author’s name aloud. “Jane Austen,” he said. “Boring.”

“Well, you never were one for cultured things,” I quipped back.

He smiled. “That’s right, I’m just a poor Irish fisherman’s son, aye? What would I know?”

I took a nervous sip of my drink. “I never thought of you like that, and you know it.” Actually, I had, because we did in fact come from two different worlds.

“Sure, sure, you didn’t,” he mocked. “If I had been a rich lad, things would have worked out much differently between us.”

And just like that, what I had feared the most was happening. I had a scorned Irishman in my living room, and I had no idea how to ask him to leave. But maybe I didn’t want him to, either. From the way I looked at him, I think he knew that.

“I have a good idea,” he said. “Let’s go for a walk.”

“Right now?”

“Yes, right now.”

We both stepped out onto the balcony, taking the stairs down to ground level, following the path to the shoreline. The night was warm, and the breeze friendly, like a silk scarf wrapping around my skin. A full moon reflected its light off the surface of the ocean, giving the illusion of liquid silver. We walked for a while, then sat on a rock and stared up at the diamonds in the sky.

“Remember when we were teenagers, and you were about to go back home to the States?” Joshua reminisced. “We always came down here on our last night together, and I’d ask you which star you wanted.”

“Yes, I remember,” I said, fond memories flooding back.

“You’d pick one, and I’d tell you I would move heaven and earth to get it for you.”

I smiled.

“We would talk about where we’d live once we got married,” Joshua continued, “how many kids we’d have, and all the things we wanted to do.”

“We were so young, then,” I interrupted. “Full of youthful dreams.”

Joshua turned and looked intently into my eyes, his expression making my stomach tighten. “I believed in all of it, you know. It wasn’t just a dream for me; it was real. I never forgot you, and I never got over you, either.”

The sound of the ocean waves crashing on the shoreline suddenly seemed louder. “I’m not sure how to respond to that.”

“How about starting with an explanation on how we could say such things and write each other for years, only for you to suddenly ghost me as if I never existed.”

“Joshua, we were teenagers infatuated with each other. The time we spent together was wonderful, and I’ll cherish those memories forever, but we were just kids who didn’t know anything.”

“You made a promise to marry me.”

“I was fourteen years old, and you were sixteen. How could you honestly hold me to such a promise?” I thought of my grandmother and the promise I made to her, too, that given the chance, I would make things right with Joshua. I just wasn’t expecting to have to do it so soon. Nor did I know how.

“I made that same promise, but I intended to keep it. It meant something to me.”

“Look at me, Joshua. Do I look like the kind of girl who’d be happy cleaning fish all day, or shearing sheep? I come from money and privilege, and as I grew older, I couldn’t see myself giving that up.” I cringed, hearing myself talk that way. “When I said those things to you about love and marriage, I wasn’t taking all the variables into consideration.”

He made a joke of it, grabbing my hands and turning them over. “You look perfectly capable of hard work to me.”

I pulled them back. “We lived two different lifestyles, Joshua. It wouldn’t have worked.”

“Maybe you’re right,” he conceded, becoming serious again. “You still could have told me, though. That was cowardly and cold the way you ended it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too. It took me years to let you go. I really did think we’d marry. I loved you.”

Another awkward silence settled in, until Joshua stood up. “Let’s keep walking,” he said.

Moments later, I marshalled my nerve to ask about his life: “I heard you married a local girl.”

“I did.”

Funny how it still stung to hear that, even though I was the one who broke up with him.

“It didn’t work out, though,” he admitted, throwing me a quick glance. “Mutual decision—no harm no fowl.”

Though undeserving, an unexpected spark of possibility filled my thoughts. Confused and bewildered by it, I wasn’t sure how I should feel. “Any kids?” I asked with bated breath.

“No kids. And she took the dog.”

Again, though I had no right, I felt what could only be described as happy relief. This time, however, a heavy dose of guilt followed right behind it. How could I even be thinking this way when I came here to recover from my grief over Brett? Though conflicted, I still wanted to know more. “Why did it end between you two?”

“Honestly?”

“Yes.”

He stopped walking, his cobalt eyes piercing right through me. “I had never gotten over my first love—an American woman who stole my heart. My wife Tracy knew it, too. She even looked like you, in fact. I think that’s why I picked her to begin with.”

Once again, my stomach involuntarily tightened, speechless over what to say next.

Joshua flipped the script on me, asking questions of his own: “What about you? What became of Clementine McKenna, and why is she back in Glengarriff, Ireland?”

“I’m a chef now, and a professional violinist.”

“Interesting combination.”

“Originally I was supposed to concentrate on my music,” I explained, thinking back how my scholarship to the esteemed Juilliard School in New York was revoked after I broke things off with Joshua. “But it didn’t work out as planned, so I went to school to become a chef. I still play my violin for an orchestra in Memphis, though.”

“And why isn’t your husband here, or is he coming later?”

I stopped in my tracks, as if suddenly doused in ice cold water. With tears burning through the back of my eyes, I said, “My husband Brett passed away a year ago.”

Joshua’s face softened. “Oh, I’m sorry.” He took a step closer to me. “What happened?”

“His private jet crashed in a storm.” Tears were now falling down my cheeks; I wiped them off as I spoke. “One day I had everything I dreamed of; the next I was awake in a nightmare. That’s why I came back to Rosewood Gardens—to get away from it all and heal.”

“What was he like?” Joshua asked, displaying genuine empathy—a quality I always loved about him.

“Just wonderful. Brett was the love of my life. Kind, sweet, and gentle. Intelligent and funny. He was the perfect man.” I saw the hurt in Joshua’s face as I said that. Pulling the shawl Mary O’Kelly gave me tighter around my shoulders, I added, “You would have liked him, Josh. He was a good man like you.”

Joshua faintly smiled. “Any children?”

“No . . .” Then came the ugly cry. You know the one: face scrunched up, shoulders hunched, body quivering, shaky breath. And you know what? To my own surprise, I stepped into him and sobbed on his chest!

He held me tight; it felt good. We said nothing, unsure of how much time had passed. After a good long while, I composed myself and stared up at him.

“You’ve been holding back those tears for a long time,” said Joshua.

He was right. I had cried, of course. Many times. But not like I had just done in his embrace. I wasn’t even sure why. With his arms wrapped around me, the scent of his Old Spice cologne lingering in the air, I felt as if I had just come home. My *real* home. Perching on my tiptoes, I lifted my chin up and kissed him.

I kissed him!

As gentle as a soft breeze coming in from the open sea, the buss was a mere flicker before he pulled away. “You’re a widow who’s hurting, with a wee bit too much wine in her,” he said, brushing a lock of hair out of my eyes. “I think it’s time for me to go.”

Mortified that I had kissed him, I shrunk away with a bruised ego, turning to go back to the house.

He grabbed my arm. “Don’t be upset, lass. I just don’t want you in my arms for the wrong reasons, that’s all. And right now, what you need is a good night’s sleep.” He kissed me on the forehead and left, leaving me alone by the ocean with my shame and heartache.

I was so mad at myself for kissing him that I kicked the sand! More bad luck! Right on cue, a new recipe manifested in my mind . . . *Bad Luck Clementine Sour Irish Chicken*. The crucial part was the sauce—apple cider vinegar, red wine, mayonnaise, thyme, plenty of garlic, and tons of shredded parmesan with parsley on top—served over blackened chicken on a bed of cooked cabbage. Yum!



Back in the house, sober thoughts hit hard . . . What just happened! Was that really Joshua or was I dreaming! Oh God, I even kissed him!

If ever I needed my sister, it was now. I didn’t care that 10 p.m. in Glengarriff, Ireland meant 4 a.m. in Memphis, Tennessee—I just dialed her number.

“Hello?” a groggy voice answered.

“Natalie, it’s me.”

“Clementine, what’s wrong!”

“Nothing; I’m all right.”

She mumbled something to her husband and returned to the phone. “It’s 4 a.m.”

“I know, sorry. But I have to talk to you.”

“Ok, hang on.” Natalie got out of bed and took the phone to the kitchen. “You realize I have three small children, right? My body is exhausted, and I need my sleep.”

“I need to talk to you,” I repeated more urgently.

“Ok, ok, I’m awake and in the kitchen.”

Standing by the fireplace, staring into the flames, I still couldn’t believe what had transpired. “I kissed Joshua,” I blurted out.

“What!”

“He stopped by this evening, and I kissed him.”

“You’re kidding me.”

“Would I call you at this time if I were?”

“Oh my God, how did it happen? What did he say? What did he do? Why was he even . . .”

“Natalie, stop! Let me get a word in, here.”

“Oh, sorry, go ahead.”

“He came by the house unexpectedly, and we went for a walk down to the shoreline.”

“Goodness, after all this time, you two met again.” My niece had woken, and I heard my sister tell her daughter to go back to bed. “Why did he come to Rosewood Gardens? How did he even know you were there?”

“I was standing on the balcony when his father’s boat came around the peninsula. He waved at me; I waved back, and then we just stared.”

My sister went silent.

“What is it?” I asked.

“That’s so romantic,” she sighed.

“Oh, Natalie, don’t be ridiculous. Anyway, he’s still hurt about what I did to him. I tried to explain that we were just kids and it was unfair to hold me to something so serious, but he stood his ground

and told me how I broke his heart. He even said his wife looked like me, and that that's probably why he married her."

Again, silence, followed by a faint snore.

"Natalie!"

"Sorry, sorry. Like I said, I'm exhausted."

"I said Joshua told me he picked his wife because she looked like me."

"Oh, shucks, he's married. That's too bad."

"No, he's divorced now."

"Perfect, then. Any kids?"

"No."

"Even better. How did he look?"

"Good."

"Good like how?"

"C'mon, Natalie."

"C'mon, nothing. If you're going to wake me up at 4 a.m., I want details."

I hesitated. "He's very handsome and manly." Blood rushed to my face, turning it beet red; my body temperature surged. "He still has those magnetic eyes, too, and he now wears a sexy beard." I smiled. "He also smells nice."

Natalie giggled. "How tall did he end up?"

"I'd say about six foot one." The doorbell rang. "Hang on, Natalie, someone's here."

"Don't just open the door, Clementine. Look through the peephole first."

"I will." Seconds later, I was at the door, peering through the spyhole to see who it was . . . Joshua again!

"Who is it?" asked Natalie.

"It's him!" I whispered into the phone.

"Who?"

"Who do you think!"

"He's back?"

"Yes! What should I do? Natalie, tell me what to do!"

"Leave me on the phone and answer the door. I want to hear the conversation."

"Goodbye, Natalie!"

"Call me right after!"

The melodious chime rang again as I hung up the phone. Taking a deep breath, I calmly opened the door. "You're back."

"I forgot my hat on the couch," Joshua said, appearing a bit nervous. "Would you mind getting it for me? It's my favorite."

I walked down the long hallway to the living room, retrieved his cherished hat, then returned and handed it to him. For a moment we just stared at each other, unable to look away, his haunting blue eyes searing through me. When I thought he was about to say goodbye, to my utter surprise he grabbed and kissed me instead. Passionately. This time it lasted . . . and lasted. I didn't resist, and when it was over, my arms were draped around his neck. Looking down into my soul, he said, "After ten years, our first kiss should at least be memorable, don't you think?" Releasing his grip on me, he placed his hat firmly on his head, and once more he was gone.

That night before bed, I sat at my grandmother's gold vanity and ran her brush through my auburn hair, staring at myself in the mirror. Countless emotions surging through my body left me faint and dizzy. What are you doing, Clementine, I asked myself? You're a married woman; you can't be kissing him like that. Swiftly that internal dialogue changed to . . . No, you're not married. You're a widow, and the kiss is allowed. And yet, that wonderful, passionate encounter made me feel so terrible. So sad. So lonely. "Oh, Brett, I'm sorry!" I cried. "I miss you now more than ever!"



My sister woke me early the next morning and kept me on the phone for an hour. There were only so many times I could recount the evening to her—and the kiss—but she wanted every detail. "How was it?" she must have asked a dozen times. "Is he a good kisser?"

"Yes, he is. But it felt wrong. I'm just not ready."

"I figured you would say that."

"Well it's true, Natalie; I'm not." A sadness washed over me again. "I'm still in love with Brett."

"But he's . . ."

"No, don't say it," I pleaded. It was still hard to hear those words.

"I'm sorry, Clementine. But there's nothing wrong with you having a friend, that's all."

I shook my head. "I'm not going to pursue anything with Josh. He was a childhood crush, and we don't even know each other now. Maybe he just needed closure. Besides, I came here to recover. To heal. To find myself again. And that's all I'm gonna do."



After that long conversation with my sister, I went back to bed to get some more sleep. Not that I got any, though, because no sooner had I closed my eyes than the booming sound of the doorbell ricocheted off the walls once more. Had Joshua returned?

Quickly I got out of bed and threw on my grandmother's cream satin housecoat, ran a brush through my hair and slapped on some lip color, thinking about what I was going to say to him . . . "You need to stop dropping by like this, Josh," I silently rehearsed. "I'm not ready to be romantic with anyone because I'm still in love with my late husband Brett. Besides, it didn't work out between us before, and for the same reasons, it wouldn't now." Then I would kiss him goodbye. Yes, just one more kiss—I'll give him that.

Opening the door, I said, "Listen, Josh . . ."

"Hi, I'm Bunny!" chirped a little redheaded girl standing in my doorway, holding a basket of food. "Were you expectin' Joshua David Sheehan? Me sister says he's dreamy and all the girls in County Cork are in love with him."

Surprised by my little visitor, I smiled. "Hi there, I'm Clementine."

"I know who you are, silly goose," she replied, handing me the basket. "Me mam made you these. She would have brought them herself, but she's not feelin' well right now."

"Oh, thank you, Bunny," I said, still smiling at how cute she was. Taking the welcome-basket containing freshly baked potato bread, sliced pork, and Cashel Blue cheese, I recalled my grandmother saying how the groundskeepers had five children. Bunny must have been the youngest.

"Joshua has a mot, you know," said the little girl.

My smile dissipated. A girlfriend? Why had he kissed me like that, then? Even though only minutes ago I was prepared to tell him I'm not interested in starting up a relationship again, it still pricked me.

"Her name is Sarah Flanagan, and she's a waitress at the Lilly Pub in town," Bunny continued. "They recently broke up, though, because she wants to get married, and he doesn't."

So, he *is* single, I thought, taking a deep breath of relief. "Bunny . . . How come you know so much about Joshua?"

"Me older sister tells me everythin'. She's in love with him too."

"I see." I knelt down on one knee to her level. "You know, sweetheart, you really shouldn't be sharing information about other people's private life."

"Why not?"

"It's not kind."

"But that's how you learn about people, and it would be boring if we kept everythin' to ourselves."

I couldn't argue with the reasoning of an eight-year-old, especially one covered in freckles and wearing pigtails.

"Guess what?" asked Bunny, a sparkle in her eye.

"What?"

"Kassie had puppies, and they're so cute! I just love 'em all!"

I laughed. "That's lovely. Where are the puppies now?"

"In the barn."

"Can you show me?"

Bunny flashed an ear-to-ear smile with an adorable gap between her teeth. "Sure, follow me!"

Pulling on my green rubber boots, I threw a tweed sweater over my housecoat and followed the little girl to the estate barn. On a bed of hay in the corner, twelve squirming puppies huddled close to their mother, feeding as she lay on her side. The exhausted female sheepdog stared at us, trying to discern if we were friend or foe.

"Would you like to have one as a pet?" Bunny asked, gently petting the mother.

"Maybe," I replied, kneeling down to join her. "But they have to stay with their mother first for at least a couple of months before you can take them away."

"Why?"

"Because they need each other. Just like you need your mummy, and she needs you."

After petting the puppies, we left the barn, only to be greeted by a little lamb, mother nowhere in sight. The baby sheep was just as cute as the puppies, and it ran right up to us, looking for our attention.

"This is Daisy," said Bunny, giggling as she played with the animal. "Daisy's mam doesn't want her."

"Awww, that's terrible. Why?"

Bunny shrugged her shoulders. "Da says sometimes it happens. He feeds her with a bottle."

I picked up the fuzzy lamb, nuzzling into its soft wool. As a young girl visiting Rosewood Gardens, I always loved playing with these beautiful, gentle creatures. And now as a grown woman, that tender affection for them remained.

"She likes you," said Bunny.

I put the lamb back down. "Go on, now, Daisy," I said. "Shoo!" But she wasn't having it. Instead, she followed us everywhere we went. We started walking faster, and even tried to run away, but Daisy easily kept up.

"You could keep her as a pet, you know," Bunny suggested. "She's young enough to be domesticated. Me aunt has one, and it acts just like a puppy dog."

I laughed—I can't keep a baby sheep as a pet, especially in the mansion. But when I looked down into Daisy's yearning eyes, I knew it wouldn't take much to convince me otherwise. "Oh, dear," I said. "Bunny, run off home now so Daisy will follow you."

The little girl ran across the field, giggling in delight as Daisy jumped around and frolicked along with her.



I didn't see or hear from Joshua for a whole week, rendering my plans to tell him to leave me alone unnecessary. Curiously, I found myself out on the balcony more often than usual, looking for his father's boat. One time I did spot them and waved, but they were too far away to see me—that's what I told myself.

By the second week, I reasoned he had reunited with his girlfriend and told myself it was for the best. Then I concocted a new recipe . . . *I Don't Miss Joshua David Sheehan Turkey Shepherd's Pie*. Potatoes, ground turkey, onions, carrots, parsnips, peas, sour cream, garlic, pepper, butter, thyme, sage, white wine, chicken broth—all baked in a light and flakey crust. Yum!



When Friday night rolled around, I decided to venture into Glengarriff. I had been living like a hermit on this large estate since I arrived, and a change of scenery would do me good. Fresh makeup, French-braided hair, a cute yellow dress, the green shawl from Mary O'Kelly—I was ready to hit the town.

With several pubs to choose from, I checked out each one. Too dark, too empty, too loud, or too many men and no women sent me heading right back out the door. Finally I found one with the right combination of everything—the Lilly Pub that Bunny had mentioned.

As I waited for my food to arrive, the music changed from a four-piece band to a solo guitarist. My table was furthest from the stage, and the dim lights hid the musician's identity. Without warning, the wonderful notes seeped deep into my bones, and my attention focused solely on the music. I don't know if you've ever heard a Spanish guitar before, but it is an extraordinary sound in the hands of a virtuoso. Woody, warm, rich, refined, and mellow, but also hot and spicy, even shimmering.

The song started out slow and tender, gradually picking up speed until the notes raced in a rhythmic timbre loud and passionate. A racehorse sprinting along the shoreline. Closing my eyes, I pictured the nylon strings vibrating excitedly at the musician's behest, the music tingling my skin as if fingertips all over me. The intensity of the notes elevated faster; faster still, enrapturing me in euphonic bliss, caressing my soul. How could someone play like this and not catch fire!

"Isn't he talented?" the waitress beamed, appearing out of nowhere. I opened my eyes as she placed my food on the table. "I could listen to him all night."

"Who is he?" I asked, curious to know more about this gifted musician.

"Joshua David Sheehan. He's a fisherman who grew up here," the waitress proudly stated, staring at him with dreamy eyes.

Speechless! That was Joshua? How could that be! How could the young man I knew long ago—a poor Irish fisherman's son—play the Spanish guitar like that? As kids we were inseparable, becoming teenage sweethearts as we grew older, and nothing was secret between us; yet never once had he mentioned his interest in music, much less his natural talent to play it.

“Do you know him?” asked the waitress, noticing the disbelief on my face.

How should I answer, I thought, knowing we were once romantically involved? “I used to, but that was a long time ago,” I said. “And I didn’t know he was musically inclined.”

The waitress laughed. “Funny how people can surprise us, aye?”

I nodded and smiled. “Yes, he’s certainly changed a lot from when I knew him.” At that moment, I realized I never knew him at all.

I stayed and listened to Joshua play all night, in absolute wonder of this man who had become someone new. The quotidian teenage boy from a decade ago had miraculously transformed into somebody cultured, refined, erudite. No longer was he just a poor Irish fisherman’s son but a gifted musician, an accomplished artist, with people paying to hear him perform. Well, well, how about that, I internally exclaimed! In a daze I walked back to my car, all the while humming the last song he had played on his Spanish guitar.

“Clementine, wait!” I heard from across the street. “You left your shawl!”

Joshua ran over to me as goose bumps sprung over my bare skin from the chill in the air. “Oh, yeah . . . thank you,” I said, still bemused over my discovery.

“Why don’t you come back in so we can have a drink together?”

I took my shawl and wrapped it around my shoulders. “It’s not a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Many reasons.”

“Give me one.”

“I heard you have a mot,” I said, even though Bunny also mentioned they recently broke up.

“How do you know that?”

“Someone told me.”

Joshua shook his head and chuckled. “Bunny—the youngest gossip in town. And the most dangerous.”

I didn’t laugh.

“I’m no longer seeing her,” he said.

“How recent was the breakup?”

“Several weeks ago.” He stepped closer to me. “And ‘mot’ is for the younger generation. If you’re gonna speak Irish, ‘acushla’ is the word. It means ‘darling.’” He picked up my wrist and felt my pulse. “In Gaelic, the literal meaning is ‘pulse’ or ‘vein.’”

I stared at him as if he were a stranger, yet more familiar than ever.

“What is it?”

“You’re so different than I remember.”

“I was a boy back then. Now I’m a man.”

“And I was only a girl. That’s why you shouldn’t hold a grudge over what happened between us.”

He lifted my wrist to his lips, kissing my pulse. “Clementine . . . acushla . . . I don’t hold a grudge against you. In fact, I would like us to start over.”

Studying his face under the moonlight, I said, “That’s not possible,” breaking away from him.

He grabbed my lower waist and pulled me into him, his eyes holding me hostage. “Why? Because I’m not cultured enough for you? That’s why you wouldn’t marry me back then; wasn’t it. I was never going to amount to anything other than a poor Irish fisherman who couldn’t provide you a comfortable way of life, right?”

“No, that’s not it,” I protested. And yet it was. Back then, anyway. But now it was something different. Clearly Joshua was as cultured as I could ever want, and yet still something stood in our way. “I loved my husband,” I said, “and I’m here to heal from my loss. That’s all I can handle right now.”

“I think it’s more than that,” said Joshua, bewildered by the mixed signals I’ve been giving him since I arrived in Ireland. “What is it you’re afraid of?” His gaze intensified, so close that I saw the splinters of silver in his glass blue eyes.

Just then, Danny O’Kelly came by in his horse and carriage. “Danny!” I called out, flagging him down. I needed to get out of there fast, and I was in no emotional condition to drive.

“Hello, lass!” the tiny, older Irishman said, his face scrunched up in his funny toothless grin. “You be needin’ a ride?”

“Yes, I need to get back to Rosewood Gardens. I’ll come for my car tomorrow.”

“Sure, love, get in.”

As the horse trotted away, I turned to Joshua and said, “I’m bad luck, Josh,” my eyes tearing up. “Trust me—you don’t want me in your life again.”

And with those foreboding words, I left him standing in the street, his face full of confusion and blight. I had hurt him all over again, but this time it was for his own good . . .