



Half and Half Rose

Judith Kammeraad

She had been searching for so long, the task now seemed impossible. How could she go on?

Something woolly pressed against her arm. “Marble.” Rose desperately wanted to get something right, though part of her knew better. Then a substance, both stringy and wet, a hunk of grass in a wad of wool and spittle, along with two sincere-looking eyes fixed on her face.

“No! No! That’s not what I expected. Get away! Get away!”

The sad-faced little sheep eased off.

She wasn’t crazy. She knew the creature was a sheep. But just when you had a cuddly sheep in your arms, it turned into something hideous. No sense in it, but there it was.

The mental dam that held her back from desperation leaked, little by little, until she couldn’t hold back. Oceans of tears crashed against her hold on reality. She had always counted on winning Michael back, but now she knew better. There was no order left in her life. She tore at her hair. She ripped her nails against the stone wall. The love of her life had come face to face with her and had stalked away.

She had to do something, but what? It was dark now. No moon. She worked her way along the wall until she returned to the beginning. She sucked at the blood on the tips of her fingers. What if she could suck it out and stop living?

She whimpered.

She cast out the once-beloved name, like a bat in her hair. “Michael! Michael,” she shouted across the castle’s demesne. She bellowed the name. She sobbed the name. A shrill scream like that of a wounded horse rent the clouds.

She covered her face with her hands and cried. “Puppy. Oh, Puppy...” She lifted her face to the sky, collecting scattered raindrops in her mouth and on her cheeks to join her tears

At last she stumbled across the courtyard where she had eaten the sandwiches. “Four walls. Warmer.” She was unable to concentrate any more. Weariness got the better of her, and she hunkered down inside a ruined passageway. She made a small package out of her body as best she could and...just...disappeared into her only comfort—unconsciousness.

HALF AND HALF ROSE is an edgy story about a quirky heroine and a sweet, hunky hero, married to each other and insatiably in lust, only to be torn apart by a tragedy neither one seems able to overcome.

After binge drinking, Michael rolls the car on a forest road, killing their unborn child. Neither he nor Rose can get past the tragedy. Unable to cope with Michael's alcoholism and the guilt both feel, Rose flees to Ireland in order to save herself. Michael keeps his mysterious issues close to the vest and shadows the love of his life from across the ocean. When they change their minds, and Michael disappears, the stakes increase, and it's up to Rose to reclaim him. If she can only find him...

Another Citrus County novel, set partially in Ireland.

KUDOS for *Half and Half Rose*

In *Half and Half Rose* by Judith Kammeraad, Rose Flanagan is about to have a baby when Michael O'Leary, her husband and the love of her life, wrecks the car while driving drunk. Rose loses the baby, and the grief and guilt that both she and Michael feel cause them to separate. Rose flees to Ireland and tells Michael she doesn't want to see him ever again. But when Michael disappears, Rose realizes that she still loves him. But how can she tell him when she can't find him? The story is engaging and intriguing, heartwarming and heartbreaking, and will have you laughing, crying, and sighing all the way through. And the sex scenes are hot! A wonderful read. ~ Taylor Jones, *The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

Half and Half Rose by Judith Kammeraad is the story of a man and woman in love, in lust, and married to each other. But when tragedy strikes, they suddenly discover that the bond they have isn't strong enough to overcome the guilt and grief. Michael O'Leary, the husband, has a drinking problem. He crashes the car while drunk and causes his wife, Rose Flanagan, to lose the child she's carrying. Michael blames himself, and so does Rose, but she also blames herself for letting Michael drive in the condition he was in. Neither can forgive him/herself, and they can't seem to talk about it so they can't work through the grief together. Eventually, they separate, and Rose goes to Ireland, tracing her roots and looking for her grandfather, who seems to have disappeared. As Rose travels the country, Michael tries to win her back by sending flowers and notes to the locations where she is staying in Ireland. But Rose isn't ready to forgive and she tells Michael to stop stalking her. Michael responds with a firm "goodbye forever" message and then promptly disappears. Only after Rose discovers that he has vanished does she realize that she was wrong and that she still needs and loves Michael. But he is gone, and she doesn't know where to find him. Unless she can pull off a miracle, Michael may be lost to her forever. *Half and Half Rose* is a touching, poignant, and compassionate story of grief, courage, and the

struggle to forgive. Filled with enchanting characters, intriguing mysteries, spicy sex scenes, and vivid descriptions, it is a book that will warm your heart and break it at the same time. All in all, a very compelling tale. ~ *Regan Murphy, The Review Team of Taylor Jones & Regan Murphy*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sincere gratitude to my keen-eyed critique partner Carol Megge and to beta reader Jennifer Taylor.

Thank you, Clifden, Ireland, for your encouragement and for giving me Rosemary.

Other Books by Judith Kammeraad:

Teach me Too

Ani's Lover

Little Peanut's Wild Ride: Little Peanut Makes a Baby

Little Peanut's Wild Ride: When Puffy Died

Half and Half Rose

Judith Kammeraad

A Black Opal Books Publication



GENRE: CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE/ROMANCE SUSPENSE

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HALF AND HALF ROSE

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eBOOK ISBN: 978-1-626947-02-3

First Publication: JULY 8, 2017

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DEDICATION

*To Peter S. Kammeraad, my beloved husband,
who takes me around the world.
Love is a journey, you my safe harbor.*

Part I
Flight from Paradise

Citrus County, Florida

Chapter 1

June:

Rose Flanagan's world hung upside down. Blood rushed to her head, and as far as she could tell she was blind. And tied up.

"Michael—" She squirmed against her bonds and groped with her left hand—the only one that would function. She caught hold of his bare wrist. It hung limp, his pulse undercover. Her heart pounded into her throat. "Oh, God, oh no! What—what's wrong?"

She shook his inert arm. "Michael, what's that horrible smell?"

Acrid. Something like smoke but more powdery. It forced her to hood her eyes. Fire? Her lungs reached for oxygen, but a piercing pain tore through her belly, ripping out a tortured shriek.

"Michael! Help me, Michael!"

The substance in the air made her retch. Why was she so woozy? Awareness and dread rolled through her guts, hunching her over as far as she could reach. She curled a protective arm over her abdomen—an instinctive gesture ever since the child took shape inside her.

A viscous wetness soaked her from crotch to navel, and she knew its name. She knew, but would not acknowledge. Her lungs grabbed for air, and let it all out in a piercing shriek, which spiraled down to a sob.

“Baby girl. Ohohoh, Rosebud. Oh, God. No!”

She rode just under the crest of panic. Struggling against her restraints, she gasped for a full breath before another wave claimed her.

“Michael!” In agony, she screamed his name.

Finally he groaned.

“Michael, thank God! What happened?”

He grasped her arm. “Rosie—I’m so sorry. Are you all right, baby?”

Before she could respond, a stronger pain rumbled through her, squeezing her low in her belly and confusingly jumbled. She heard herself scream, buffeted with horror and unwilling realization. She couldn’t bring the primal outbreak under control.

She didn’t see her husband in the darkness that wrapped around the oaks in the Withlacoochee Forest, but she heard his fear. God, she smelled it in his sweat.

“Rose, is it the baby? Try to loosen the seatbelt, honey.”

The fingers on her right hand refused to function. More liquid gushed out of her vagina. The intense muscular tensing and relaxing confirmed that this was all wrong. She touched the goey liquid with her good left hand and brought it to her face. Her nose wrinkled as she recoiled. It smelled like a kettle of copper pennies.

The truth turned its death’s head on her.

The lump in her voice brought her down to a low moan. “Michael, there’s blood.” She sobbed and gritted her teeth against another spasm. “No, God, don’t let it be true.” She struggled to catch her breath and ride the next squeezing pain.

This was too bizarre, her common sense told her. Part of her Irish imagination? You couldn’t give birth upside down, could you? She laughed and shivered until the next pain, all the while struggling to turn herself upright.

Michael uttered an inarticulate murmur.

“Michael, help me—please—It’s too early. She can’t come now—here. You’ve got to stop it, Michael. Get help, please!”

He groaned when his restraints snapped free. Metal creaked as he kicked his door open.

“Oh, damn! My arm is broken. Coming around to your side, Rosie.”

At last her door swung free, and he fumbled with her seatbelt, cushioning her with his body as she slid down to the sedan’s headliner.

“Get out, Rosie, come on. Lean on me.”

But the waves had taken control. She fought to keep from going under with her precious cargo. She panted and puffed and rubbed her belly in circles with her good hand.

“No, Rosie, no. She’s shy of seven months. It’s not happening. Not so far from the hospital. Not on a dirt road, for Christ’s sake!”

“Get your cell phone, Michael. Please, get help.”

“I can’t, Rosie. I can’t. Can’t find the phone. Please hang on.”

She could only stare at the florescent sticker affixed to the dash, a photograph of an orange and pink shrub rose he’d planted to celebrate their pregnancy. “Look at that rose, Rosie. That’s you. And its little rosebud is just like our baby attached to you. Our little rosebud.” His voice had resonated with joy.

Now his voice quavered. “Focus, Rosie. Look at the rose. Look at the rosebud.”

She wasn’t listening anymore, not to him. He rested a palm on her belly. She shoved it away.

Instead, she spoke to the child inside her. “I’m sorry, baby. I know I can’t save you. Oh, God!” Her gut wrenched until she managed to grab control of her breathing again.

Rose recognized what had to happen.

She couldn’t stop the expulsion from her womb. Using the little self-control she possessed, she had to do something else for her daughter. She must let Rosebud experience a good death. The baby’s sense of the world came through her, the mother, didn’t it? Her heartbeat, her breathing, her emotions, her fear. Her grief. Her child would never live a single minute in the world outside. Rose knew that. So if this time together, right now, was to make up Rosebud’s total experience, part of that was up to Rose.

“Don’t let her die afraid, please, God. Don’t let her feel what I feel now.” Tears snaked down her cheeks. She struggled to stifle her wild gulps for air. “Let me give her one great, wonderful deception. God, forgive me for my lie.”

Then Rose let tranquility in. She breathed in and out, riding the waves, cresting the peaks and bobbing in the calm intervals. “Baby girl, listen to Mommy now. You don’t need to feel afraid. You will never know about loss, and you will never cry.” She swallowed the sound of her sobs and continued the effleurance on her belly. “Just know I love you, and stay peaceful, my love. Mommy will help you get to the end, and then you will be with God.”

She sang all the lullabies that came to mind. She thought of the quilt with colorful ponies on it. “Maybe you will see it from Heaven. I wanted to wrap you in it and walk you up and down to show you our pretty home and grandpa’s horses. Your little toes would peek out, and Puppy Joe would lick them, and your laugh would tinkle like his dog tags and make your daddy laugh too.” She chortled as if enjoying herself. It didn’t sound right, but she had to make do.

In the moments before dawn, distant sirens screamed toward them. Within minutes, headlights focused on them. Voices shouted. At first, Rose instinctively closed her eyes against the brightness, but soon she saw everything—the old Maverick upside down, the blood on Michael’s face, his arm hanging limp. She wished she were back in the dark with her child. Just the two of them in unwitting bliss.

Two emergency technicians approached the car and addressed Michael. One of them knelt next to her. “We’re going to put you on a stretcher, Ma’am.”

She kept rubbing and murmuring. “Mommy’s not afraid, baby. Stay calm. Think of Puppy Joe and the pony quilt.”

Michael’s voice was low and urgent, and then the EMT leaned in over her. “Ma’am, we’re going to remove your slacks.”

“Hush, little baby, don’t be afraid...” she crooned, part singing, part crying, part laughing.

“Get behind her, Sam, and let her lean against you.”

She moaned. “Don’t touch me, don’t move me.”

The EMT mumbled close to her personals. “I can see the head. Can you push the baby out, ma’am?”

She knew her baby’s first struggle for breath would mean its death.

“No—no—Michael, don’t let them take her. Tell them I want to keep her here with me.” She shuddered. “Oh, baby, I love you so much.”

“Push, ma’am!”

No, she would not push her child out. Not when birth led to death.

“I’ve got her. It’s a girl, a tiny little girl with all her fingers and toes, ma’am.”

Her throat was swollen with agony. “Is she—is she—”

The tech turned to Michael. “Are you believers, sir? Hand me that bottle, Sam.” Then he swiped water over the little bald head in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He handed the tiny form swaddled in Michael’s shirt over to Rose’s good arm, and Michael leaned in over the body, close to Rose’s face.

She smelled the sour odors of Irish whiskey and sweat.



Later, Rose recalled signing forms, though the details eluded her. What had happened to Rosebud’s little body? In her imagination a burly, masked man shoveled the baby girl into an incinerator. “No, no. I didn’t want that.”

She sobbed until the nurse hung a different bag on the IV pole above her and relieved her of the ability to think.

Dilatation and Curettage surgery removed the placenta and miscellaneous products of conception, as the nurses called them. “But that belonged to my baby,” she protested. An anesthesia haze kept her ribs and fingers from hurting.

A resident hovered above the gurney. “Wake up, Rose. Can you tell me what happened to you?”

She curled her arms around her abdomen as well as she could with one useless arm and tubes in the other. "My baby." Her voice had shrunk to a hoarse whimper.

"That's right, Rose. I'm sorry for your loss."

"I was always afraid of this. I'm barren, you know." Did this make sense?

"No, Rose, you did fine. It was the trauma that forced your body to expel the fetus. She was a perfect baby girl, and you would have carried her to term if not for the crash."

Rose was surprised she had any tears left to give.

The resident patted her shoulder. "You came through the D and C great. Now you rest. You've got hand surgery ahead."

Rose floated. "My baby?"

Rosebud danced into the room wearing a yellow hair ribbon and panties with lace across her bottom. "Bye, Mommy."

Rose reached out. "Wait, sweetie. Let me give you a kiss."

Rosebud's skin was the softest thing ever. Rose kissed each cheek and the fat little belly. The tot giggled and gave Rose a sweet, sloppy kiss from her rosebud mouth.

A nurse jolted Rose out of her dream, bringing on a spate of new tears.

"Don't cry, honey. It's just morphine and antibiotics. You've got quite a rampant infection. Your fever is high as the town drunk. Can't you tell?"

"What happened? Why do I have a fever? What about my hand?"

"Infection happens sometimes." The nurse shrugged. "You have to get that under control before the surgery. The doctor is concerned about protecting your future fertility more than your hand right now. You can give birth without a hand, but not without your female giblets." She gave Rose a pat on the shoulder and turned up the drip.

"Where's Michael? I want Michael."

She remembered she was mad at him, but she wasn't sure why. She just wanted him to hold her. She wanted to press her face against his heartbeat and take in his smell of rose petals and pure soap and testosterone.

“You’re in isolation, honey. Nobody can come in here but medical staff. Your parents were asking for you.”

“Please, can you find out about Michael? Is he all right?”

“Oh, yes, I have a note here on that.”

Surgeons had placed a titanium rod into Michael’s left arm to realign the disarticulated parts of his humerus. The note was in a stranger’s handwriting. A curving symbol at the bottom started her weeping again.

“He’s left-handed. He signed that with his right hand. It’s— it’s his—his Irish triple heart. He always signs his notes that way, ever since we decided to have a child. He never gave up on me when I couldn’t conceive.” His triple heart showed her he still hadn’t given up, even now.

“I should—be with him—take—care—take care of him.”

She’d always done her best to look out for Michael, though she let him think he was the dominant partner. Her white knight.

Halfway to oblivion, Rose rambled about the first time they’d played knight and damsel. That night Michael had thrown off whatever had numbed him in recent years. “Claiming me, ravishing me. It freed him somehow. It made it all right to roar in victory.”

She recounted how, later, the game-playing had become more real, more elaborate. “I sewed him a knight costume and he bought a metal helmet and sword.” Her lips curved up in a grin. “He used it on some of the trees out back. Then he besieged me.” She licked her lips. “He set me on fire.”

The unyielding infection kept her in the isolation room for a week after Michael went home. Before he left, he looked in through the glass panel in her door. He raised his right hand to the window, and she placed the fingers of her left hand against it. He bore a stoic expression, but the lines around his eyes were new.



Rose’s bruises and broken hand and ribs started to heal, but, with her forced isolation, she and Michael had no chance to

mourn their loss together. When they skyped, she noticed Michael's expression was flat, his eyes guarded, though, otherwise, his face had always appeared so animated, so full of adoration.

"Got to go. See you soon." He raised his good hand to the screen, and it went dark.

Rose spoke to the mindless laptop. "Maybe you don't want me to see how you feel. Please don't treat me that way."



At last Rose returned home, and she and Michael faced each other across the table, bereaved rather than hopeful, as they had been once.

He studied the table. "Rosie, you look pale—and thin."

What had happened to the wonderful blue eyes that had held her spellbound? "You look...different." Distant. She didn't touch the steaming cup of tea he placed in front of her. Instead, she broke down in sobs each time she looked at the face she loved—and hated—for killing their child, though she would never admit the negative tinge of her feelings.

Michael's jaw hardened. Had they lost their once effortless connection?

"Please, Michael, I need to talk about this with you."

He waved the idea away, his voice rough. "Rose, I've been mourning for a week."

She gulped down a sob. "But not with me. Please, we need to talk."

He lifted dead eyes. "What can I say? It's over. I can't think about it anymore. I have to get past it, and so do you."

Rose lay on their bed sobbing, while Puppy Joe cuddled against her empty belly. He wore his ears folded backward and poked her with his nose, showing how much he wanted to comfort her.

"Why isn't Michael here, Joe? I can't do this without him."

From the bed, her glance caromed off the vanity mirror to a scene in the dim hallway where Michael brooded, his right arm hugging the cast on his left. So close to the bedroom, he made

no attempt to approach her, as if this were the limit of his trust. His downcast eyes, slack posture, and lowered head told her all the shame and sorrow he could not put into words. But she needed him to say those things to her.

His hands covered his face, and he sank ever deeper against the wall. In the dark, she reached out to him with her misery. “Come to me, Michael.” Just a few steps closer. Just a few words of shared comfort.

He did not reach out. Instead, he left her with tattered hope—hope that the threads of feeling between them were still strong enough to bind them together.

Michael uttered an animal moan and wrenched himself away from the hallway. The door of the old refrigerator creaked open and shut with a rubbery slam. Bottles clanked in Michael’s hand. He stomped out of the house, slamming the screened door behind him. Once in a while she heard the bottles clank together or smash against a tree. Four Budweisers—all a one-handed man could clutch against his chest. His boots pounded down the steps and scrunched on the gravel path. The door to the shed creaked open.

Presently he stumbled back to the front yard. “Yabba Dabba Doo!” Blows smashed onto splintering wood. Puppy Joe cowered into her side with a whimper, joining her ragged sighs. Grunts of clumsy exertion joined the groans and cries floating through the night into her shriveled heart, wrung dry.



For weeks, Rose’s mother had looked in on her every day, and Puppy Joe had become like another appendage.

“Oh, Mommy, he actually chopped Rosebud’s bush into slivers. What can I do with a man like that—all suppressed passion and booze? I feel like I’m in a private hell.”

Maria smoothed her daughter’s hair. “Losing the baby was terrible, and you feel you can’t get past it, don’t you? I don’t know how to advise you, honey, but I do know you have to go on.”

Rose was glad her mother was a sensible mutt, with none of the Irish stubborn streak her father's father claimed with pride. This made Rose a half breed, Grand-dad Sean had judged, and she had yet to decide which half was dominant.

Rose's father Aidan came down from the main house every day too and forced her out for walks on his south Inverness spread. Getting you out of the house is like maneuvering a breached foal out of the mare.

She hugged him. "Oh, Daddy, you always make me smile." The corners of her mouth turned down, and she buried her face in his chest.

She reached a hand into the corral to rub the equine faces extending quizzically back at her, while Aidan's deep voice spoke soothing words to them. To her too. He handed her a wrapped peppermint, which always meant he didn't know how else to make things better. Always before, her work on the ranch had lifted her mood. So had Aidan's homespun advice. Even his voice.

But this time her whole spirit had suffered a compound break. Her brimming eyes sought his face. "Dad."

Aiden took her hand. "Appreciate every moment when you feel a little bit okay, honey."

She grinned, knowing what was coming.

"You know what I mean? Sometimes okay is good enough. There's plenty of time to reclaim your joy. I'm telling you what I know from experience."

It was more than okay to stroll under the live oaks in the company of the man who had made the most of his own sad situation.

Rose snuggled against his arm. "Daddy. I know you still love your mother." Seeing the encouragement in his face, she posed the question that hurt. "Do you ever hate her as well for what she did to you—for the way she left you?"

He stopped amid a stand of longleaf pines, pulling her into a side hug, and his quasi-firm voice presaged his answer. "Have you—have you started to hate Michael, girl? Because hatred is always a step away when love is strong."

She rested her head on his chest.

He made her look at him with a finger under her chin. "Could be Michael hates you too for what he did, and for what he cannot give you. You had so much together all these years, and now you've lost so much. You might say you both lost paradise."

Chapter 2

July:

Rose suspected what Maria was up to, coaxing her to spend daylight hours at the White House, as Michael had dubbed the family home. Mother and daughter savored the calm in the north-facing studio.

“You always were a natural landscape painter, Rose. I’m so glad you ended up getting your degree in fine arts.” Maria hugged her daughter. “I love how you’ve adapted traditional art into your own style.”

Rose emitted a desolate sigh, though a rush of warmth followed her mother’s efforts to cheer her.

Maria moved mismatched squares and triangles of printed cotton around. “I’ve always liked bits and pieces, collage and quilts. Maybe it’s because my heritage is such a mixture, while at least you’re half Irish. Your dad used to call me his patchwork girl, though I know your grandfather wished his son had married full Irish.” She snorted.

Rose put down her pencil and met her mother’s eye. “I’m glad you made me an artist, Mommy. It’s keeping me sane. If it weren’t for you and Dad and Puppy Joe, I don’t know...”

There were no more words. Maria’s face told her there didn’t need to be.



Lately, Rose dragged her wretchedness with her like a sack of manure. Now and then, some escaped, and everyone knew how it stank.

Maria set down her teacup and peered over her working glasses. “My poor child, you’re not getting over it, are you? Will you at least talk to someone?”

Rose’s smile sagged. Even her paintbrush drooped.

“Did you have someone in mind, Mama?”

“Mmm...remember that nice woman we met at your last pre-natal visit?” Maria stopped short, reddening, before hurrying further. “Lyla something, I think. From the winery. She got on the topic of her psychologist, a life-saver, she told me. Her father-in-law goes to him too. She gave me a coupon for a tour of their farm. An alpaca on it. Cute. I’m sure I could find it.”



August:

Two weeks later, Dr. Meadows sat back in his leather chair and inspected Rose through his thick glasses. He sported a walrus moustache and thick eyebrows without a single hair on his perfectly shaved head. Her voice always dropped a half tone when she saw him.

His index finger groomed his moustache. “So...let me get this straight. You think it’s your fault you lost the baby. That’s over my head. Explain how you came to that far-fetched conclusion.”

Rose couldn’t stop twisting a strand of her hair, yet she felt foolish for doing it. She blinked at the intense Florida light that slitted through the plantation blinds. She hated it when people pressed her, but she soldiered on without protest, setting her lips in a line.

“Yes, it is my fault, because I should have been mindful of Michael’s alcohol consumption at the party, and I shouldn’t have let him drive.”

He steepled his fingers. “Oh, you’re saying you should’ve watched him all the time?”

“Yes. No.” She brushed her answer away like a fly. “During recent years Michael always drank at parties. He always drank at home for that matter. I knew it, but I guess I was sick of the

fact that alcohol dominated our lives. I wasn't exactly in denial...I just wanted our life to be normal once in a while. Like it used to be. Awareness got away from me that night." She crossed and uncrossed her legs.

Dr. Meadows laced his fingers behind his head and leaned farther back. "And what was it like when your life used to be normal?"

Her arms rested by her sides, while she let her mind wander back to the good times. "It was delicious. Michael came home from work, dumped his tie and jacket on the sofa, and undid the top buttons of his shirt. I loved the way he looked at me—as if to say, *later*. Then he took a sweating glass of iced tea in one hand and a small pruner in the other and walked with me through the rose garden he'd planted through the years. Some of the bushes were five feet tall, all gorgeous and Florida friendly.

"He always used the same words. 'Rose, I'm in Paradise right now. The work of my own hands in front of me and the love of my life by my side.' He always kissed me after that. For a long time. It was a tasting more than a guzzling."

Jotting down notes as she spoke, Dr. Meadows looked up when she paused. "Go on," he prodded, with a little half grin. Shoot! She must have that sappy, love-soaked look on her face.

"Then we had dinner together and talked about our day. I told him about the people who had come for their riding lessons. Maybe about my drawing. He related anecdotes about his day in the law office in Inverness. Even if his day had been the same old same old, he made it sound interesting, and he always made me laugh. After that, he cleaned away the dishes while I tidied the kitchen and living room. Then he—" She pulled up short, feeling the redness suffuse her face.

"Don't worry, Rose. I think I'm familiar with what comes next. Go right ahead."

She felt a bashful grin curving her lips. "Then he stretched out his hand to take me to the shower—the first touch was electric." A smile played on her mouth. She was almost to the good part and done twisting her hair, so she hugged herself.

"And?"

“We soaped each other up.” Her eyes slid away. “Lather, thick and slippery. Mmm...Drawing with our fingers on each other’s sudsy bodies. We soaped and resoaped, just for the pleasure of it.” She snapped back to the moment. “We went through a lot of soap.”

“Mmmm?”

“Michael led me through to our bedroom. A lot of times we oiled each other up with rose-scented lotion. We traded backrubs. He liked to massage my feet—” She shuddered. “Sometimes we talked.” She fell quiet. “We did a lot of role play, especially since his emotions started locking up a few years ago—you know, not letting me see how he felt, not crying any more. Gosh, he used to cry a lot in the old days.”

“Go on.”

“Well, he liked role playing—knight and damsel most of all. He was pretty good at pretending to rescue me. Or he was an ogre who carried me off and turned into a prince at one taste of my lips. Sometimes I was an unwitting virgin, and he was my teacher.”

A hot flush captured her up to her ears, as a swampy feeling took over everything south of her Mason Dixon line.

Dr. Meadows gave her a sharp look. “So Michael was your savior. He always took care of you, inept as you were. Was that it?”

She shifted in her seat as the idea squirmed in her head. “Mmmm...I guess that’s true.”

“Don’t you think you set yourself up?”

“Maybe I should have assumed the role of the knight?”

“What do you think?”

“Now that I recall, I think Michael needed me to save him sometimes. Maybe he needed me to ravish him and carry him to a safe place away from his demons.” She bowed her head with regret. “Over time I realized he did have demons, though he wouldn’t let me know what they were. Now it’s too late.”

“Is it?”

She recalled Michael’s recent entreaty after a bout of guzzling beer. “Come on, Rozhie. Just. Stop. Nagging me, damn it! I can stop drinking any time I try. It’s never too late.”

She tossed her head from side to side. Her voice sounded strident, even to herself. “What about me, though? I need to save myself. His Guinness and his Jamieson are going to drown both of us if he keeps on this way. He hasn’t stopped drinking, and his emotions are still blocked, though he has no trouble shouting at me. Meanwhile, I can’t stop crying.”



September:

The cottage bedroom fell silent with a thick sense of loss. Rose and her mother packed up the baby clothes that had remained in the hope chest Michael had given her years ago when hope had been a pulsating, living thing. She lingered over the quilt with the vibrant appliquéd horses.

Maria laid an arm around her shoulder. “Don’t you want to keep that for a while? You’ll still use it, you know.”

Her eyes were wet. Rose hated the fact that her pathetic self-pity saddened her mother.

Rose blew her nose on a well-used tissue and stuffed it back in her pocket. “I spent so much of my life trying to conceive. We used to tell each other we were on a quest for our holy grail.” Rose made air quotation marks around the word *quest*. Should she even reveal such things to her mother? No choice. She was an emotional pimple straining toward rupture.

She groaned. “That was why we...we were so...diligent in the bedroom. ‘Here I am,’ he would say. ‘Ready to reconnoiter, troops. Where is my staff sergeant? Ready my pistol, adjutant.’ We used to laugh ourselves silly.”

Maria smiled. “Good, honey. It’s a treat to hear you laugh.”

Rose shook her head. “You know, when I lost the baby I lost my past and maybe a lot of my future too. I’m afraid I’ll never have a child, Mother. I’m afraid without Michael I won’t want to make one again. Not with some other man. And maybe not with him either, if he—Michael was one of a kind—once.”

“It hurts more when you give in to that kind of thinking, Rose.” Maria sniffled and turned away. She lowered her voice.

“I lost my grandchild, you know. I can’t accept that this is the end of my dreams.” She fumbled for a fresh tissue.

It was Rose’s turn to comfort Maria now. “I know you loved her, Mommy. I appreciate that. You would have been the best grandmother ever. I think about that. I do. I play them over and over in my mind—scenes of you playing with her, teaching her to sew, showing her your world.”

Maria nodded.

“You do understand, though, don’t you, Mama? It kills me to be with the man I adored—without having sole possession of him, that is. He and I aren’t alone together anymore. He has another lover now, and her name is Booze.”

“Oh, Rose, I have always loved that boy. It feels like I’m losing a son in a war he can’t return from.”

“I know, Mama. That’s just how I feel. I’ll never stop wanting him...but I’m turning to dust in his hands. That’s why I have to move out. It’s killing me to see him all the time, when he’s not really mine anymore.” She stumbled over the stone in her throat. “You do understand that, don’t you?”

Maria placed a hand on each of Rose’s cheeks. “I know why you need to spend time apart. Just don’t kill something that could still live.”

Rose blew her nose and dried her eyes. “It’s kind of like weeding, isn’t it? Sometimes you pull out the wrong plant.”

Maria walked over to a chest of drawers and emptied out the newborn-sized onesies and receiving blankets. She cleared her throat. “In the meantime you need your work on the ranch. You’re a gifted riding teacher, even if you don’t ride, and you’re good with the horses. I don’t know if it’s enough for you, though. Maybe you need something else to occupy you the way your drawing used to.” She fingered a white lace baby dress. “I wonder if you could feel that way about quilting. Maybe it could get you back to your representational art. You know, creating a scene from applique and patchwork?”

The stone on Rose’s heart lightened, and she smiled.

“Let’s see what we can do, shall we, sweetie?” They embraced for a long time before they lugged the boxes out of the cottage.



Rose returned to the comfortable leather chair opposite the desk.

“So, you moved out. Left the house you shared together piece by piece. Is that it? Why did you draw the process out so long?”

“It was easier to get used to that way.” She opened and closed her fingers. “Although, not easy enough. I have to pass my house—my former house—to get to the main road. I must admit, that hurts.”

“It’s all right to hurt, Rose. Emotions are sometimes the only thing a person owns, so it’s good to know which ones you’ve got in the bank.”

Rose raised her eyebrows.

“In other words, you need to own your hurt no matter what you decide to do about the marriage.” Dr. Meadows studied her face as if assessing it for later. “It’s not the house that hurts you, Rose. Passing it by does that, just like failing to deal with your husband. You don’t have to stop looking at it, remembering it, even visiting it. The same goes for Michael. He can still be in your life somehow if you want him there. You don’t have to cut off an arm to treat a hangnail.”

Recalling Michael’s role in her life made her squirm more than ever. She forced herself to stop twisting her hair. Michael in or Michael out, the pain would stay with her. Could she salvage anything good from her marriage?

“How are you really doing, Rose? What have you been up to since you left him?”

“I took a lesson from Michael’s plant husbandry—I’m working with my hands. I’m growing a quilt. It keeps me absorbed.”

He gave her a quizzical look and steepled his hands.

“I started quilting before I met Michael, but somehow I never had time after that. He kept me so busy.” She thought about some of Michael’s ideas of *busy*. She hoped Dr. Meadows didn’t notice the blush she felt flooding her features.

“Tell me about how you two met, Rose. Tell me about the early days. Those may be the emotions you want to take from the marriage.”

She pondered what she should leave out. Those days were so full of carnality that she feared she might give the wrong impression. Or maybe she feared the right impression. “We...er...met during our last year of college—at an outdoor concert. We sat on blankets on adjoining squares of grass. I saw him staring at me. He was not subtle, but not rude either. Just engrossed. ‘Not interested in the concert?’ I asked.”

“‘I’m distracted,’ he admitted. ‘I prefer this view, but I could see better closer.’ That line made me laugh. I felt feisty.”

“You look feisty right now. What did you do then?”

Rose fondled her armrest. “I patted my blanket, and he moved over. I don’t know why I did that. It wasn’t my way, but I didn’t even think about it. Before long my hand was in his. He traced messages into my palm, and we laughed like gagging seals.”

“You were uninhibited, and you had fun.”

“We sure did. I think about that evening a lot these days.”

“What happened after the gagging?”

“When the concert ended, everybody went home. Everybody but us. Michael dragged his blanket over us...” In her mind, Rose was back in the day, rolled up with this stranger who felt so familiar and so dead-on right for her. They had narrowly avoided the lawnmower in the morning.

“That was it. After that, we were together every day and every night. My parents embraced Michael right away, and we married on our graduation day. Grandfather approved, because Michael was full Irish like him and Dad. This meant Michael must have the *Irish values* in his blood.” Her mouth sagged with reservation.

“What exactly does that mean?”

“He never could explain. Maybe he made those values up. I’d like to find out some day.”

“So you two connected right away. Did you ever think it was too soon?”

“Well, it didn’t hit me that way, because I’d heard so much about my grandparents’ torrid romance back in the sixties. She was from Ireland. They saw each other at meetings of the Irish-American club in college, but if it weren’t for JFK, who knows how things would’ve played out?”

Doctor Meadows stopped fondling his moustache and sat up straighter. “Oh?”

“You see, when they heard about the assassination, they ran out into the quad with other students, all crying. The two of them ran straight into each other’s arms. Quick as a snake can wiggle, Grandmother was pregnant with Dad. That’s how Grandfather put it.”

“Now that’s a romantic story. I can see why you would think your love affair might be the same.”

“Well, I guess theirs wasn’t romantic enough. In a few years, Grandmother left him. I don’t know why. She was on a visit to her family, and she never came back. Thank goodness she left her son here with his dad. That was my father, and here I am—without her, without Granddad, and without Michael.” She looked at her lap. “You knew Granddad retired to Ireland, right?”

Dr. Meadows offered a subtle bob of head and shoulders. “How do you feel about your grandmother abandoning her husband and son, Rose?”

She picked at her skirt. “I’m confused. I’ve missed her all my life. Yet she can’t have loved them...us very much. In my book she has a lot to answer for.”

He chewed on the earpiece of his glasses. “And yet you’ve left Michael.”

Hands moving in agitated jerks, she avoided his eyes. “That’s different. If I keep living with Michael, his drinking will kill me.”

“So you’ve left him to save yourself.” He studied her. “How do you know what your grandmother had to live with in her marriage?”

Rose had no answer to that. She tugged at the top of her blouse. “I know...um...I know that a child would be better off without an alcoholic, pent up father.”

Or would Rosebud have made Michael better somehow?
Could love put Humpty Dumpty together again?



November:

“I love quilting with you, Mom.”

Maria cocked her head. “But?”

Rose lifted her palms and weighed them left and right. “I’m partly like you in my life, Mommy, willing to stick to my plan, determined. On the other hand, my artistic temperament is more free-flowing. I get antsy but can’t act on my impulse. I don’t know how to integrate both sides of me into a quilt, much less into my life. You’re so balanced.”

Maria lowered her eyes. “It’s true. You don’t seem to take after me that way—at least not right now.”

Rose gave her mother a hug. “Anyway, I’m so glad your family name is part of mine.”

“Clever, wasn’t it?” Maria lifted an eyebrow. “*Rose*, shortened from *Belrose*, with all my mixed up non-Irish heritage.”

They laughed like co-conspirators.

“I always thought your grandfather made you conflicted, though, Rose, always spouting off about being full Irish.”

“Yes, he did force the Irish pride on me. Poor Granddad. I love him, but he pressed me into emotional bondage. I wonder if he set me up to be the wuss I am today.”

Her mother wrinkled her brow. “How do you mean, Rose?”

She waved her hands with impatience. “I put up with Michael’s alcoholism far too long. His charisma eddied down into anger and outrage. I accepted that, though it gave a sour taste to my beautiful memories.”

They remained quiet for a few minutes, pursuing their own thoughts.

Rose shrugged off the weight pressing on her. “I do miss Grandfather. I hope he’s all right by himself, so far away in Ireland. I’m sort of sorry he inherited the family cottage.” She shrugged. “I feel mean saying that, though. He was so happy.”

“Well, right now let’s take care of your artistic quandary.” Maria reached for Rose’s hand. “Come look at the album I made of my youthful experiments. I think you’ll be surprised.



January:

“Cheer. Cheer. Cheer. Trrrr!” A cardinal chirped through the open window while Rose related her memories to Doctor Meadows—a process by now as smooth as rotary cutting calico, in spite of his alarming eyebrows.

“I like to imagine myself back in those lovely days of our early marriage. I don’t have to give up all the good memories if I can’t keep the marriage, do I?”

“Is that what you want?”

“Are you kidding? I even lick the last ice cream out of my dish. I always hold out hope that something’s left.” They shared a laugh.

She gave him a contented smile. “Our work together is better-oiled lately, isn’t it? You know how to turn on the switch, and the insights just pour out of me. It reminds me of when Daddy backwashes the pool. Dirty water just spurts out of that thick blue hose.”

He smiled at the turn of speech. “You’re doing very well, Rose.”

“By the way—I’m happier with my quilt design. Very free form and thought-provoking. That’s what I’ve been doing day and night since last week. Scenes from life, with rivers and mountains and children and dogs. Primitive Americana. A lot of movement, arrested in the moment if you know what I mean.”

“I do. And you changed the subject.”

Taut puzzlement lifted Rose’s eyebrows.

Dr. Meadows leaned forward. “I don’t think your troubles started with Michael’s drinking. That’s his attempt to avoid dealing with unpleasant thoughts and feelings. Focusing on his symptoms is your way of avoiding your own emotions.”

She shifted in her chair. “But—”

“Think about it. When did things first go wrong with your great passion? That’s your homework for next week. Now tell me about the quilt.”



On her way back to her parents’ home, she passed the house where she and Michael had created a marriage and a child. Michael approached the car, a hopeful smile on his handsome face. The sight made her heart leap into her throat.

“Hello, Rosie.” When did his eyes grow so sad?

“Hello.” She couldn’t think of anything else to say. Or rather, she thought of too much.

He drew a line in the dirt with his boot. “This is awkward. What’s up?”

“I, uh, I miss the roses.”

“I miss the Rose. When are you coming home?”

She could barely breathe in his presence. She looked away and shook her head.

He handed her a late season pink rose. “Here. Take this one with you.” He leaned close to her open window. “I can still give you roses, can’t I?”

Maybe they could still be friends. Maybe, when she stopped wanting him so much. It should become easier any time now.

She reached the main house in time to snag a cup of tea with Maria.

“I’m so glad you invited me to live here with you, Mommy. It lets us spend time like this together.”

“I like it too,” Maria replied. “As long as you’re sure it’s what you want. It’s hard to work on your marriage if you don’t live with your husband.”

A torrent of sadness spilled over her. “I know you disapprove of the separation, Mommy. It hurts me, too. But I can’t be with Michael now that he drinks so heavily. It’s too crazy-making for me. I didn’t marry a man who spews nonsense and stumbles around cursing at night. I need to get away to save my

sanity, though God knows it tortures me to the point of madness.”

On her mother’s massive project table, Rose unrolled her king-sized plan for a quilted panorama and laid the finished part atop it. “I’ve made a lot of progress. What do you think?”

Maria clapped her hands together and slung an arm around her daughter. “Oh, Rose, this is quite wonderful, and you do have a lot done. I like how you’ve combined quilting with appliqué and embroidery.”

Rose pointed. “Yes, see here—down at the bottom—the big pieces form the pond and the grass of the park, as well as the big tree. Those I fastened in place on the backing first, except for parts like the top half of the tree that will cover scenery in the distance. Then I added the batting and basted the layers together as I went along. To be machine quilted. Of course I crafted the smaller pieces first and attached them separately with appliqué and a lot of embroidery. Look, leaves and all the bushes, ducks in the pond and dogs playing with children.”

“Yes, and I didn’t miss the couple with their legs sticking out from behind the tree.”

“Oh, you caught that. Yes, and, of course the most work is the grandparents on the park bench with their grandbabies.”

“I suppose that’s your father and me, front and center.”

Rose nodded. “I always hoped so.”

“And so it will be, some day.”



February:

Every week Rose told Dr. Meadows more about her landscape quilt and the significance of all the scenes she’d depicted.

“This has been quite an undertaking, Rose. Does it represent your life?”

“Maybe the life that could have been, but I don’t know where my future goes yet, so the quilt gets more fanciful as I go higher. See? There are Dorothy and Toto with their friends in that field.”

“True, you’re acknowledging the unknown. Wait and see, eh? Don’t forget, though, who’s designing your life.” He supported his chin in his left hand, as if ready for a long story. “Have you thought further about the place where things went wrong in your marriage?”

“Well...” She chewed on her lower lip, thinking how to start. “I suppose the trouble began with a series of disappointments. For one thing, after being honeymooners for years we started trying for a baby. After a while, our bedroom turned into a factory with a work stoppage. I’m not saying sex wasn’t still first-rate.”

She wound her legs around each other. “But sex wasn’t just for pleasure anymore. Whether the act took or not was the main issue. We were in denial for years, but finally we realized we weren’t digging in fertile soil. I felt ashamed of myself, and I know Michael felt less of a man. We seldom approached each other for the joy of it, though passion was still a factor. The fact is, now that our project was a dud, we found reasons not to...indulge. Not to fail.”

“So you had intercourse after that?”

“Oh, yes, we still wanted each other. And sometimes desperation took over. As a lover, Michael delivers quite a jolt.”

“Anything else go wrong?”

More homework.

On the way home, Rose passed the garden where Michael bent over his roses. Knowing he didn’t see her gave her license to feel imprudent sensations.

The sight of his backside drove electricity up inside her, but she forced herself to drive on. Life-giving. That’s what the sight of him was. Still. Six months and six days after Rosebud’s death. She still burned with desire for him.

At least her feelings weren’t dead, even if she couldn’t have him. She pounded the steering wheel and drove on. Tears fell on her words. “Oh, Michael, Michael. Why did you have to ruin things for us?”

The next day, Michael waited in the road, in order to waylay the car. His face twisted in a grin. I knew you would come by. I think I spend more time watching for you than I do at work.”

He shuffled his feet. "Writing out contracts doesn't do much for me anymore."

"We could switch. I could spend a day straightening up your office, and you could come and muck out the stables."

"Ha! Not much difference, now that you put it like that."

By God, he still had fire. She couldn't help buying into his smile—and his beautiful, searching blue eyes. They were like catnip to a tabby. She reveled in them, and they never failed to shoot a pain of lust into her.

"Rosie, it kills me to see you pass by. You should be living here. Joe is worn out running from house to house."

He was holding her hand through the open window, rubbing the sensitive place on her palm, which he knew so well. Their eyes locked, and she was lost in the passion she knew would never let her go. Not as long as he could look at her this way.

His voice was husky when he released her hand. "Come look at my new rosebush. It's already got a blossom."

She hesitated, but when he opened her door, she followed him into the garden. Dozens, maybe more than a hundred bushes dotted the well-tended beds he had designed during their marriage. Each one stood as witness to his love for her, as he'd often maintained.

He led her to the new bush, with a porcelain white blossom.

"A hybrid tea?"

"Yes, but almost no thorns. It reminded me of us and the way we can be." He showed her the name on the tag. *Home and Family*.

In the next moment she was in his arms. He brushed her lips with his in that tentative way that made her loins beg for him. Their searching mouths became one organ, probing ever deeper, rejoicing in the taste and fragrance and velvet touch that was *them*. His incorrigible hardness pressed against her, and he gripped her buttocks tighter to his groin. The aching and throbbing inside her drove her to desperation.

She broke away and hurried to the car, past the beer bottles that poked out of the trash.



Rose sat in the chair across from the doctor's desk, crossing and uncrossing her legs. The sun filtered through the slats into her face. She was going to have to say something about that one of these days. She moved the chair a little. God, she felt testy.

She caught Dr. Meadows hiding a smirk. What was that about?

His moustache spilled over his hand as he rubbed his mouth. "Well, Rose, what about the quilt?"

She leaned toward him and spread out her arms. "I found out my mother also quilted landscapes when she was young. Mine is going to be huge with many hills and valleys, like a real life. The landscape extends into the far distance. Near the top all the rivers empty into a large one along with waterfalls off the mountains. Above it all, you'll see a hot air balloon rising into the atmosphere. Symbolic, don't you think?"

"Very. Uplifting."

They indulged in a joint laugh.

She thought of her last visit to the cottage. "Michael loves symbolism."

"Is that where you get it from?"

"I'm more images. He's a word man."

"Don't sell yourself short. You have quite a way with words yourself."

She told him about the new rose and how its name had fanned them into a burst of romantic feelings.

He raised his eyebrows. "So? A new start?"

She shook her head. "Doctor Meadows, I feel angry at Michael, not just hurt."

"Do you now?" He raised his eyebrows and looked at her over his glasses. "Hmmm. We'll have to talk about that." He changed the subject. "Tell me about your homework."

She understood he wouldn't forget the topic she had broached. She was proud he trusted her not to take the easy way out of their conversation. She was ready to peel back all the layers of her life to him, even the distasteful ones.

"You asked what else went wrong in our marriage. Your instinct was right—there were other things that happened to sink

our happiness. The worst was when Michael's father died. He worshiped his father, a good man, though sometimes a hard father in his last years. My grandfather called him staunch Irish, and they became close pals. My dad was not such a fan of Michael O'Leary, Senior, though. A hot-shot Ocala lawyer he called him. Maybe Daddy was envious of his education."

Dr. Meadows's eyebrows rose closer to his hairline. "Oh?"

"Yes, you know my grandfather moved to Citrus County to establish his horse ranch? My father worked hard in the business all his life, while Granddad made it a going concern by hob-nobbing with important people in the horse culture." She crossed her arms across her chest. "Cinderella, my dad called himself. He's funny but serious, my dad."

"Dad loves Michael, but he wasn't so sure about Senior, especially the intense drinking. Then, of course he was sorry to see how ripped up Michael was when his dad...died."

Doctor Meadows gave her time to empty her thoughts out under his lens.

He steepled his fingers. "Tell me."

"It wasn't so much that he died. He killed himself."

"But the papers reported he fell."

Rose's ears moved back in surprise. "You knew?"

"Some things I do know. You think I'm wrong?"

"Yes." She looked into her lap, her shoulders rising to her ears. "He killed himself. He walked right off a cliff. That's when Michael started to fill in the cracks in his heart with drink like his dad did."

Doctor Meadows nodded. "Hmmm...How do you know he did it on purpose?"

"Michael was there."



March:

Rose labored on the landscape quilt in the big, sunlit studio. "Get down, Puppy! Look what he's done, Mommy. He bit off part of the pattern. What's gotten into him these days?" Joe spun around and around chasing his tail.

“Maybe he’s not getting the attention he needs?”

Rose opened the door. “Michael should be home from work. Find Michael, Puppy.”

He sped down the road toward the cottage.

“The poor thing.” Maria strained after the dog. “A product of a broken home. It kills me. He’s losing weight rushing back and forth.”

“I know, Mommy, but neither of us wants to give him up. I do know I’m going to put him into every landscape quilt I ever make.”

Maria nodded. “You’re taking to this genre.”

“Look, I’ve put in the road where it goes past the park and the little town across the road. It’s going to be tricky to wind the road around the hills all the way to the mountains in the background.”

“I see, and you’ve got to make the details of diminishing size to maintain perspective.”

“I’m learning so much. Not just about art. About the really important parts of life. See the wedding party at the church across from the park?” She hugged herself. “I can’t wait to show it to Michael.”

Maria looked at her out of the sides of her eyes.

Rose felt sizzly all over. “Oh, God, I can’t believe I said that.”



The next day, Rose stood at the office window. “I see you’ve got some new plants in here. They need more light, but not just now and in my face.” She adjusted the blinds.

“Very good.” Doctor Meadows nodded. “I wondered when you would stick up for yourself. I hoped I wouldn’t have to take up smoking to push you along.”

Rose turned away from the window. “It took a while, didn’t it? Well, enough is enough. I guess that’s part of what happened to Michael and me. Too many drunken snits, too much silence, too much unhappiness—and I accepted it. It didn’t

mean we stopped loving each other. We just stopped being good for each other, and that's why I left."

"The drive for survival."

She plopped into the chair. "I'm still in danger of falling for him every time I see him, and then we'll be right back where we were."

"I see."

They were silent for a while.

"Doctor? Do you think it's all right to show Michael the quilt?"

"Does it feel all right?"

"Well for some reason I just want him to see it, but I'm afraid too. I'm afraid I won't have any willpower once I'm in the house with him."

"Willpower is useless if you don't want it."

"But..." She wriggled in her seat.

Strands of gray had grown into Doctor Meadows's moustache in recent months, too many with her name on them, she figured. They sighed at the same time.

"I think you're getting sick of me rambling on about Michael. You probably think I focus on him too much and not enough on moving on." She pinned him with her stare.

"Do you think that?"

She pounded a fist into her palm. "Yes, yes. I'm sick of myself. I'm totally stuck on him, and I can't progress when I'm always around him."

Dr. Meadows cleared his throat. "Let's change the subject. Does Michael know that his drinking is the deal breaker between you?"

His abrupt gambit took her aback. She helped herself to a few deep breaths. "Yes, we went to AA together once but he scoffed that he could handle it himself if he only had a chance...meaning if I gave him a chance. Umm. That sounds like I'm responsible for him drinking or not drinking, doesn't it? That is not fair."

"You're very perceptive, Rose. Just a little late."

Chapter 3

April:

Rose's hands shook when she climbed the porch steps of the house where she used to live and rang the bell with her elbow. She was glad the rolled up pattern and the nearly finished quilt filled her arms. She was glad she had something to talk about besides the same old problems.

Michael appeared in the door in a sleeveless t-shirt and bare feet. She'd forgotten how the sight of his feet made her all sweaty. She felt that way now. Oh, dear!

She concentrated so well on gobbling him up with her eyes that she barely heard him speak.

"Hello, Rose." He dried his hands on a dishtowel. She always hated it when he did that. Linen was for glass.

He hid the towel behind his back. The act made his chest jut out, drawing her attention to his pectorals and making her remember what it felt like to rub her hands over them.

"It's nice to see you here. It's been a long time." His voice sounded a little throaty, and, head down, he looked at her over his eyebrows "I was just finishing my meal. There's a lot of custard left. Want some?" He opened the screen door wide.

Oh, man, first bare feet and now his homemade custard.

She looked at the floor. "I...uh...I just wanted to show you something."

She remembered the door always squeaked when opened too wide. Now the sound brought back memories of times when

Michael was the one with his arms full—an arm full of field daisies, bags of fruit, and a pretty twelve week old sheltie displaced in a divorce settlement he'd handled. The pup, already named Joe, had licked them both as Michael had pressed him into her arms.

“Come on, then.” He and his grin helped her crowd in through the screened door. Now a handsome teenager, Puppy Joe followed her in from the porch.

“We really should find a way to keep track of his whereabouts, Rose. I'm afraid we'll lose him on his sorties.”

“Well, when he's not with you he's on the White House porch with his ears up and his nose in the air.”

“Yes, he knows when it's time for somebody to come home.”

Come home. The words resonated with her, tingling in her chest. She licked her lips. “I was afraid to come here.”

“Afraid of me? Rose, you don't need to be afraid of me.”

“I'm afraid of myself and how I'll react to being with you.”

“It doesn't have to be like that.”

He was telling her everything she wanted to hear, but she couldn't say what she wanted him to know. Her voice felt dry as oil-poor corn bread. She thrust her bundle at him. “I...uh...I just came to show you this. Where can I put it?”

Papers he'd brought from the office overflowed the dining table. His eyes twinkled. “It looks intriguing so far.” He examined her with a look that always made her heart turn over. “Come in here. Let's lay it out on the bed.”

The part of her that was hurt beyond healing wanted to pull back, but she followed him, anyway, into the room they used to call *Paradise*. She uttered a small sob. He opened his arms to her but stepped back and turned his gaze to her bundle.

“It's a quilt, isn't it? A huge one, I see.” He gestured with his arms wide. “And intricate, if I know you.”

If he knew her? The memory of his intimate knowledge of all her curves and crannies itched at her.

“Let me get us some iced tea, and you can guide me through it.” Without waiting for an answer, he quitted the room.

She heard him rummaging in the kitchen while she fidgeted beside his bed. His pillow showed the dent where his head had lain. She knelt beside it and touched it with her fingertips. With a groan, she let her face sink into it. She took in the familiar scent of his shampoo and soap, wishing she had time to take in the scents lower in the bed, where the most personal parts of his body had reposed.

“Iced tea for my lady,” sang the artificially jovial voice. “Unsweet, just the way you like it.”

She jerked her head up off the pillow, presenting him, she knew, a very red face.

Showing him her project was comfortable, though, and suggestive of old times. She pointed out minutiae of the scenes, and he professed interest in every detail. Michael was always like that, drawing out time together as if it were precious. Finally he helped her roll up the quilt and pattern in a tidy bundle. Slowly, suggesting he didn’t want to finish the task.

Side by side, they made their way to the door, where he handed her the bundle. “I miss doing this with you, Rose. You should be living here with me.”

“But you know why we have to be apart, don’t you?”

He shrugged. “I know what you think, but I’m going to get on top of things. Someday you’ll be back in this house with me, Rose. I know it.”

She extended a flexed hand as if to say *stop*. “I do still have feelings for you, Michael, but I need to try to get over them. I can’t let your drinking kill me. That’s why I have to go away.”

He staggered forward, as if he’d lost his balance.

“Michael, Daddy is sending me to Ireland for a while.” Now he would get mad at her, or at Aidan.

His voice was thick as bean soup. “The quilt is amazing, Rose.” He turned away. “At least I didn’t kill your creativity. You deserve to salvage that much from our marriage.”



Afterward, Rose gave Doctor Meadows a rueful smile. “At least I didn’t say ‘I can’t let your drinking kill me *like it killed*’

our baby.’ I wouldn’t have been able to look at him after saying something so cruel.”

Doctor Meadows wiped his glasses and let the silence pile up. “But that is part of what you’re angry about. That and his failure to be forthcoming with his feelings. And the drinking, of course.”

Rose balled her fists. “To tell you the truth, I wanted to tell him to step up and lob his big ball of anger and sadness into my court, so I could deal with it. But he just watched me get into the car and drive away.”

She stood up and twisted the slats open. “And that was the last I saw of him. And this is the last I’ll see of you until I get back. A month at most. I hope I can handle it.” She gave him her hand.

“You can handle it, Rose. Good luck. I hope you find what you want over there...and here.”



Packing prodded the next few days to race by. At last it was time to go. She told her inner sceptic she was off to do the homework that would bring her back in better shape. Rose made herself sound crisp and decisive when she bade farewell to Maria. She couldn’t handle any wavering.

“Watch over Puppy Joe, will you, Mom? Hopefully he’ll accept staying with Michael all the time, but he may come around looking for me.”

“Maybe he’ll come around looking for me. Aiden and I know how to take care of him too, you know.” Her expression softened. “Your absence will be hard on that dear doggie.”

“You do understand why I have to go, don’t you Mommy?”

Maria made a *mmm* sound down in her throat and then turned away. “Just keep telling yourself what your motives are. When none of them is left, come home. Just come home.

Rose took in one more look around the ranch from the porch of the White House. The big oaks, the pines, the double fences where the thoroughbreds and saddle horses exercised, and—most of all—the little house that backed up to the woods. Mi-

chael's house. It could be a long time before his tempting proximity presented no danger to her peace of mind.

She squared her chin, murmuring a farewell down the road. "I'm moving on now, Michael. I won't come back the same."

"That's so true." Maria held Rose's face between her palms. "Remember, darling. You may forget the places you visit in the next month, but the people you meet and the lessons you learn can change you forever.

"I hope so, Mommy. I hope some things will change. I know I'll miss you most of all."

"No you won't, child."



May:

Rose hoisted her twenty-six inches up to the scale. "Shannon, Ireland. I'll keep my backpack."

"Are you one way, then?"

Rose shrugged and gave the attendant her passport. "I'll stay until I find what I'm looking for."

She turned away from the counter and perused the crowd for a face she didn't want to see there, yet longed to gaze upon. A few men possessed the tall, slim physique and tumbling dark hair she scanned for, two or three of them with the right kind of eyes. No, Michael wasn't here, just the thought of him. That was everywhere. The knot in her belly relaxed, as it usually did when she knew they wouldn't come face to face.

Her father was here, though, the very last of the pure Irish in her family, thanks to Maria, who'd brought the line to an end. Grandfather disliked Maria's wantonly mixed blood, and did his best to restore Rose to a Celtic sensibility. But not her dad. Aidan always insisted his daughter was perfect as God made her. His little half and half counted as cream, after all.

Aidan motioned her over to the spot in front of the window where he minded her backpack. One of the dark-haired Irish, just like his father, Aidan stood out from a distance. Handsome

men and passionate they were, and she had kept their surname when she'd married Michael O'Leary.

"Well, then, Rose, all set?" Aidan's voice caught a little. "I can't believe my girl is going on a grand adventure in the homeland at last." He waved her protest away. "Sure, I know you're nearly thirty years old, but you'll always be my little girl, and your mother's too."

"Yes, I know that, Dad." She hugged him to keep away the tears that burned her eyes. "Thanks for arranging the guided tour. I don't know when I'd get another chance to see the land our family once called home."

Her father held her at arm's length, searching her face. "Well, you deserve it, darling. You need it after all you've been through. Maybe it'll do you good, and you'll find out who you really are in the process. And who you want to be."

"I hope so, Dad. I think I've known myself merely as Michael's half-breed wife for too long, thanks to Grandfather going on about the Irish thing. Thanks for helping me get away."

He patted her on the back. "Thank you too, for promising to look up your grandfather after the tour. Stay as long as you like with him. It's great he retired at the ancestral cottage, but he needs to stay in touch. Give him a verbal thrashing for me, will you? Make him promise we'll hear from him."

Her mouth quirked in commiseration. "I'm sure he's all right, Dad."

Aidan shrugged. "Maybe he's carousing around, spending all his money, and that's all right." He sniffed and wiped his eyes. "I worry about the old fellow. After all, he is my da and the only parent I've got."

"I know how you feel, Daddy. You're my da."

He gave her a squeeze. "Wait 'til they see you over there, Rose dear. Next time I see you, you'll be bringing a big hulk of an Irishman home." He pinched her cheek. "Don't be afraid to look around."

Rose turned and waved to him as she proceeded into the security hall. She dashed away a tear and adjusted her backpack. It had ground her down to say goodbye to her father, so much her ideal that she'd married a man with his dark hair and blue

eyes, his honeyed voice and gentle manner. She sighed. And now she had to leave them both behind. She squeezed her eyes shut. “God, take care of Michael.”

She thought she felt eyes on her backpack, so she turned around, and there he was. Her heart contracted forcefully. All she could do was stare, as her legs turned to noodles. Yes, it was Michael all right—puppy dog eyes, curly hair, and that look that shook her up inside. Even now he made her feel the way he always did, all mush and jelly. But she was still angry enough at him to blow an artery.

He closed the remaining feet between them. “Rosie, I’m so glad you didn’t go through security yet. I’d have to buy a ticket to see you then.” He wrapped his arms around her, backpack and all. “Darling, I couldn’t let you go without saying good-bye.”

She felt squashed in more ways than one. “We talked about this, Michael. We’re not together anymore.” A pinch in her groin belied her words, but she refused to heed such sensations any more. “Why did you come? You know how I feel.”

Michael’s eyes were wet, forcing her to look away. She was always a sucker for those eyes. He’d been a man who used to cry freely before he got dammed up. She’d loved him for that then, and—damn it—she loved him for his more infrequent tears now.

“Please, Rosie. I know I’m to blame for everything. The baby, the drinking... But I can turn things around. I promise I will.” He tipped her face to make her look at him. “I know you still love me the way I love you.”

Her heart turned in her chest, but she wouldn’t give in. “I just can’t go through it anymore, Michael, the drinking and how you act when you aren’t yourself. Your refusal to share your feelings with me. I know you belong to your demons now, not to me, and I deserve better. You’re not the man who used to be joined with me at the hip.”

“Please, Rosie, you’re everything to me. I stopped drinking, and I’m getting help. I can’t lose you, sweetheart.”

Rose moved past the security agent, and the queue sucked her in. He’d already lost her. That’s what she told herself.



Rose blinked when she saw the interior of the Air Lingus jet. Thank goodness, some seat room. She could still feel the buttery flesh of her seatmate on the Atlanta leg of her journey. Thank goodness, that wouldn't happen again.

On that first flight, a jiggly warm arm covering part of her body, with the hot sun from the window, had put her into a fitful dream about Michael. He'd smiled into her eyes, again the soul mate she'd married eight years ago. Gloriously naked, he half reclined on a sheet of velvety rose petals, and she melted into his muscled, yet yielding flesh. When she'd awakened, she'd found her generously fleshy neighbor patting her knee.

There was plenty of room on this second flight, to Shannon. Rose stood on her seat to bustle her carry-on into the overhead bin. Her weight-lifter grunts mortified her. She strewed furtive glances around, hoping she had attracted no attention.

A light voice spoke at her shoulder. "Don't hurt yourself. Let me help," Bright turquoise eyes looked at her. "Really."

"Thank you. It must be the boulders I packed."

"You'll need those where you're going. Wait until you see the Irish rocks. You're not Irish, I take it, except for your hair. It's the color of rosewood."

"I'm partly Irish. Just call me Half and Half."

"How do you do, Mizz Half and Half. My name is William. And this here is Claris." He pointed to the woman beside the window.

He was easy to talk to. Nice. But surely he wouldn't have commented on the rosewood if he knew how she hated her dark red hair. Grandfather loved it, because it was the part of her that looked most Irish, he'd thought. It reminded him of his wife.

Rose apologized for not speaking to Claris until now. "How do you do. I'm Rose." Claris listed toward the wall, looking miserable. She stared straight ahead, her eyebrows forced together. At short intervals she sniffed. "I'b sick. I thig I bight throw up. Eben better, baybee I'b dyig."

Will raised an eyebrow and cocked his head at Claris. "Allergies."

Claris gave him a pained look. “Dabbit, Will, why dote you help be?”

Will fished some antihistamine tablets out of his pocket.

Claris popped two into her mouth and gave him the evil eye. “God forbid they’d give us water od this tid cad.”

Rose gave her a bottle she’d filled near the gate. Claris turned her face to the rivets holding the wing together. Will and Rose chattered until dinner time. Hmm! This guy was good at getting information from her.

She indicated the Gators emblem on her baseball cap. “I’m from central Florida. My family runs a horse farm in Citrus County. You’ve probably heard of the big corporate farms in Ocala, near us. Well, ours is a small concern. Saddle horses. My great-grandfather always wanted to run one of the horse farms in Ireland, but he couldn’t afford it. That’s how the Flanagans came to the States. My grandfather built his father’s dream, and now my dad runs the ranch.” Rose took a deep breath. She couldn’t believe she’d talked so much. “We’ve been in Florida since the late sixties.”

“Ogay. Dow I’b dyig.” Claris whined

Will ignored her.

“You do look Irish with that glorious hair.”

“That’s one of the things my grandfather always used to say. He told me to remember I’m Irish above all and hang on to my Irish qualities, er, values. I don’t know just what that means. Maybe I’ll ask him when I find him.”

“Is he lost then?”

“Sort of. See, he inherited his family’s home in Ireland and hasn’t contacted us for a while. We’re not too worried, but who knows what he’s up to? I’m playing family detective. After my three week tour, that is.”

“Ogay, id’s workig now. I’m goig to sleeb, you two, and the berson who wakes me ub is going to be sorry.”

Will patted Claris’s hand but otherwise ignored her.

The man was charming, but shouldn’t he pay more attention to his wife? He was an interesting companion, but Rose could see something was not as it should be between them.

“Why are the two of you going to Ireland? I can tell you’re not Irish.”

Will chuckled. “Is it the gray-blond hair and Boston intonation?”

She nodded. “And your laid-back manner. I can’t imagine you hoisting a Guinness with one hand while bashing a fellow’s head in with the other.”

“Well, I am more of a talker than a fighter. I work at a prep school. I’m on sabbatical. So, I’ll do some lecturing and some research, but first I’m going to travel.”

Talk of the places he planned to investigate got them through their rubber chicken and soft-cooked peas.

“Do you know this is an actual Irish dish—mushy peas?”

Will shuddered. “God, who would kill perfectly good vegetables for this? I like to eat them raw, right out of the pod.”

“So do I, and my puppy likes to eat them out of my hand.”

After dinner the captain warned of turbulence ahead. The plane pitched forward.

“No kidding,” Will exclaimed, his fingers gripping the arm rests.

Rose felt the blood leave her face. “I’m not partial to this. I don’t even like the nerve shredders at amusement parks. I don’t enjoy pitching and rolling and ups and downs. I prefer to be on an even keel.”

Will gave her his arm. “Well, if we go down, I’ll let you fall on me. It will be my pleasure.”

What a funny man. So nice. What about his wife? Rose wouldn’t have liked her husband making over a female companion like this. But who knew what Michael would get up to now? She compressed her lips.

Presently, Will braced both arms over his chest and joined Claris in a nap.



Rose rummaged in her backpack for a sweater, since the cabin walls gave off a chill. Loneliness made her cold too, especially now that her conversation partner was dead to the

world. She'd rarely traveled alone since Michael and she had married. Except for his drinking, she had loved being married, and she missed it now. When would she ever get over this? A marriage lost was a life-long sentence of bereavement.

Her heart pitched forward when she found an envelope jammed inside her backpack's outer pocket. Michael and she had done this when one of them had been away from home, even for a single night. She'd assumed the custom would stop now, but her name wiggled across the envelope in the scrawl she would recognize anywhere. "To Rose, my heart's desire."

She moaned softly. "Oh, no...oh, Michael." He would never let her go. A band formed around her heart, scary but comforting too. Truth be told, she had missed finding his sweet little notes in the house. Despite her resolve to make a clean break, it felt delicious to settle in to read this one.

My darling Rose,

You can't forgive me for the past, and I understand that. You have good reason. I know I have ruined everything, so things can never be the same between us. I just hope we can preserve our feelings for each other in some form, like a wasp in amber. I just hope you understand I have to maintain hope to stay alive. At least for a while. Let me have that, Rose. Please.

I'm going to try everything I can to win you again. I won't say "win you back," because I know the best I can hope for is to possess you in some new way. If it's a different connection, a different relationship, I can accept that. Just, please, don't sever our bond beyond mending.

I'll never stop thinking of the closeness and passion we had. I know, though, that you deserve the life you want, with the man you want, and that might not be me.

Enjoy your trip in the homeland, Rose. I truly hope it gives you what you need.

All my love, Michael

P.S. No, I'm not going to stalk you forever, darling. I just want you to know you will always be my Rose. You'll hear from me once in a while, until I am able to stay away.

On the card's back side she found a drawing of three shamrocks with their long stems forming the shape of a heart.

How could she have fooled herself? She would always love Michael and want him in that old way, but she deserved better than what their life had become—grief and regret, with a soupçon of recrimination and a lot of anger. She had to move on.

She tried to swallow past the lump in her throat, pressed the missive to her lips, and closed her eyes. Now and then a tear or two squeezed through her lashes.

In her dream, a giant bottle of the dark, liquid temptation that was his new love whirled around in Michael's embrace. Next to them, a tiny girl jetéed and twirled by herself. Her organza skirt ballooned and bore her through the windows into the garden, beseeching Michael with outstretched arms. "Daddy, please. I'm too light."

He did not seem to notice her absence. Rose reached out to him, crying. "You killed what we had together."

Why must he love his Guinness more than he loved her? More than he loved Rosebud? Why had she loved him too much?

PART II
Trying to Forget

Ireland

Chapter 4

Rose intended to say goodbye to her companions, but by the time she grappled with her hand luggage and endured two Swedish wrestlers bearing in on her person, she felt deflated. William struggled to make Claris stand up—husbandly attentions that won Rose’s approval. Meanwhile, the throng stampeded her forward and out to the concourse.

Fresh off the bus to the Strand hotel in Limerick, she milled about the lobby waiting for a room assignment, and, even more important, decisive news of the group’s missing luggage, now on its way to Dublin on the eastern side of the island. Apparently she and her clothing were slated for separate vacations.

Many were in the same boat. Everyone wanted a shower and a change of clothes after a long day and night of travel. She wandered from group to group exchanging personal information that no one would remember. She wouldn’t, anyway, given the fried state of her brain. She felt like an Easter egg with the insides sucked out, and she said so, making the others laugh. Maybe they would remember her for her egg brain later on. Goofy was better than pathetic.

People started going off in pairs and groups of four as they scored room keys. The process reminded her that she had always been half of a couple. She couldn’t see herself as a solo act. Yet there she stood, alone on the sculptured carpet. Loneliness flooded her despite the throng.

She remembered other hotels and riding upstairs hand in hand. Unfamiliar rooms became home as soon as Michael

swiped the key card. He always carried her across the threshold laughing. Always, he uttered the same phrase. “Now this is our marriage bed, should you choose to accept it,” and he hummed the theme song to *Mission Impossible* until they collapsed with hilarity.

Rose grabbed a turn at the guest computer in the lobby. Her parents responded to her email at once, though dawn barely filtered through the pin oaks on the farm. They must have been up all night waiting to hear from her.

She typed fast. *Is there anything new on the ranch?*

Aidan replied. *Not much, though we heard an awful howling on the property last night. I went out with my rifle, checking for coyotes. It was Puppy Joe. I've never heard him like that.*

Maria added a postscript. *Yes, the poor little guy. But Aiden didn't tell you the worst part. Michael was there on the porch, crying his heart out too. The two of them together. I'm going to have him drop Joe off at our house when he goes to work and pick him up on the way back. That way I'll get to check on both of them. Don't worry now, honey. Have the time of your life.*

How could she, when she couldn't get Michael out of her mind? She returned to the lobby and gazed from the window at the city Limerick, but she imagined Michael standing on his porch instead, his thick, dark hair disheveled, his forelock tumbling over his forehead. His blue eyes grew larger than ever, their rims red. He wailed her name over and over before he fell to his knees. “You've torn my heart out, Rosie. Look.” Just as he opened his bloody white shirt, she gasped and forced her gaze onto the street scene before her instead. She knew the desperate turns her fantasies often took. There was no way she wanted to be in on this one's dénouement.

“Are you alone, then?” conjectured a cracked voice at the level of her chest. “I know this is grim, but you look like it's too late. We'll get our rooms all right. It's never too late to sleep or to fall in love. That's my slogan.”

Rose turned her head from side to side and rubbed her face. “Just so tired.”

A cackle issued from the diminutive woman. She wore spectacles that made her eyes enormous. “Didn’t you ask for a roommate?”

“Hah, uh...” That would be a mean trick, to pair someone up with a sad sack who was liable to cry all night. “No, I—”

“Well I didn’t either. I snore, and I can’t put anyone through that, unless he can’t hear.” She snickered. “Besides, my kids are paying for this trip.” Her laugh tinkled like a bell on a cat. “In case you’re wondering, it’s a present for my eighty-fifth birthday, and my name is Mildred.”

At that point, two porters bearing keys appeared to whisk them to the glass elevators. In a moment they found themselves looking down at the foyer from six floors above.

Mildred plastered her face to the glass. “Whoo-ee! What a thrill. I wonder if anyone can see up my skirt.” Mildred’s magnified eyes twinkled at Rose. “There’s always hope.”



Limerick:

By walking straight on the Ennis Road, Rose could cross the Shannon River on the Sarsfield Bridge into the heart of Limerick. “Wow,” she mumbled into her guidebook. “Michael would want to climb underneath this old swinging bridge.” An MBA and attorney, he always wanted to see how things functioned. It was beyond her, why he’d never studied engineering.

“That’s right, darling,” he whispered in her head. “It’s vital to investigate the guts of things—or people. That’s how you come to understand them.” His earnest eyes pierced her soul as he spoke. Rose wrapped herself in her sweater, shivering despite the sun.

Lorries and automobiles whizzed by on the left side of the street. She leaned on the stone balustrade to catch her breath and enjoy her first view of the river. Across the bridge, the Georgian city center showed off its abundant smear of red brick. To the right, the river chugged along downstream. She consulted the map showing its estuary and the Atlantic Ocean,

where emigrants sailed for New York, clinging to hopes for a better life. She imagined the moment the vessel broke free of land, passengers waving and shouting and embracing each other.

Today, people and prams bustled along the concrete embankment of a park near the hotel. There was plenty of white water here, and it looked like a cold place to swim any time of the year.

Rose bounded across the road for a view from the upstream side. To the north, the thirteenth century Thomand Bridge led to Saint John's Castle. She and Maria had read reams of information in preparation for the tour—her parents' gift to her.

"Come with me, Mommy."

Her mother had chuckled. "No, Rose, you'd have too much fun with me there. You need to be alone in your head and in the homeland just now."

"Is that what Ireland is? I've never felt that way, though maybe I should."

Maria had clasped her daughter in a snug embrace. "I'm a product of random breeding. If you ask me, home is where you want to be." Rose could use a good hug like that now.

She couldn't believe she stood on a spot where Aidan's ancestors had come to imagine a new life."

She crossed over the Shannon to the four story brick buildings and their storefronts. Autos, parked or in transit, crammed the first cross street in several unmarked lanes. Mounded red and yellow bouquets took up the center of the roadway, and fluttering blue and white pennants hung across the street at intervals, far into the curving distance.

She decided to seek a closer view of the castle, somewhere to her left, so she wound along whichever streets she judged nearest the water. At last, the warren of buildings opened out into a park with shade trees and a view of the river.

Her Canon captured the castle and, in the foreground, a squirrel on the park railing. She deposited her weary backside onto a bench and sketched her version of the scene.

A tiny girl in a full-skirted dress stared in her direction before following a group downstream. Would-be artists occupied

benches all around, many with pads and coffee containers. Mmm... What she wouldn't give for a good old-fashioned coffee.

"I'll share if you let me have part of your bench." She looked up at a smiling young man with unruly red curls and a short Irish nose.

"It's as much your bench as mine, but no thanks on the drink."

He tipped his billed cap and possessed himself of the end of her seat. "Well, thank you for that, and I can see how you might think I would try to slip an aphrodisiac into the coffee, you being so lovely. You're wise to decline." His eyes mocked her, and he lifted the lid on his steaming coffee, close enough so she could take in the aroma.

Mmmm... That smelled heavenly. It was just what she wanted. Instinct leaned her toward his cup. "Oooh..."

"Well, don't fall over. Change your mind? I'll let you drink first if you show me what you've done there."

Fresh life flowed into her with the caffeine and unaccustomed boldness.

"Well, are you going to stop?"

Wincing, she handed over the cup. "Sorry, I didn't mean to do that." She watched him help himself to a deep draught.

His shoulders relaxed. "Ahhh... I needed that. All right, then, hand it over." He pointed to the sketch pad on her left. "You show me yours and I'll show you mine." He beamed at her facsimiles of the river and the castle ahead of them. "This is lovely. I imagine it's what everyone's after at this spot, but you've got something unique. Something to do with the light. And the squirrel's a nice touch." He nodded. "I'm bad with buildings myself. Are you a professional, then?"

Pleasure sent a warm flush over her face. "No, I wanted to be, but it didn't work out." Unpainted, her planned portrait of Rosebud with Puppy Joe stuck in her mind forever. She didn't tell him that. He stared at her enough as it was.

"What's the matter?"

He leaned forward. "I don't like to tell people, but I have a feeling you'll never hold it against me."

An uncanny feeling licked at her. "What is it?"

He handed her the coffee cup. "Now there, nothing bad. My grandmother was a seer, and unfortunately the curse came down to me. I see things in people's eyes, that's all." He shook his head. "Unfortunately, women don't find that attractive in a man. Sometimes, I see something they don't like. My curse...compulsion...is the reason I drew this." He tore out a page from his pad and handed it to her.

A sweet sadness washed over her when she recognized her image. In her eyes shone the reflection of a toddler's face, a reminder of her unfinished past. Or things to come? Rose stared at the drawing for a long time.

By the time she finished, the young man and his second sight were gone.



Rose kept winding her way toward the castle. Near noon she stopped in a side street. At Locke Pub's patio, an iron railing, hung with overflowing pots of geraniums, enclosed wrought iron tables. She backed herself into a round-backed chair at a small table near the bar, where unreadable script identified all the specials. She opted for local fish and salad with strong Irish tea. With her face to the door, she could keep an eye on anyone coming in for a plate or a pint or a quiet hour with the newspaper. As she ate, Rose indulged her love of drawing people.

An elderly couple sat down on the window seat, took out their novel and magazine and proceeded to ignore each other, except for the woman's occasional touch on his arm.

A small girl settled into a corner table with her mother. "Now, Libby, eat yer chips, luv. Dawn't gawp at the lady."

"But, Mummy, I want red curls like that, please."

Rose smiled expansively at the pair while the mother blushed. "They think of the daftest things, dawn't they? Still, there's nothing like a wee babby."

Half a dozen seventy-something men claimed a table near her. Their laughter and half-heard jokes occupied her attention while she finished her meal.

She approached their table. “Pardon me. I’m American, and I’m not in the know about Irish pubs. May I ask you...Is that your regular table? Do you come here every day?”

The skinny one with the quirky eye answered. “Oh, grrreat. She thinks we’re pub rats.” They chortled and elbowed one another, and Rose warmed with embarrassment.

“Sorry—I—I just wondered about the customs.”

The man with enough white hair to cover two heads soothed her. “Don’t worry, dear. He’s just teasin’ because he doesn’t see many pretty ladies these days.”

The one-handed fellow stuttered. “No, I mean, we come here once a w-week, and we always sit here, but the table doesn’t exactly be-belong to us, ya know.” A few of them got red in the face.

“Well, it just looks like you have a lot of fun together. I was wondering what got you together in the first place.”

“Look, it’s like this.” That was a man with a low, sexy voice, who peered deeply at her V-neck. “We’re all retired.”

Rose felt a flush rising up her neck as she returned Sexy Voice’s glance.

Two of them, from their looks twins, spoke at once. “Yes, and guess where we used to work.”

The one-handed fellow wiggled his fingers. “We used to be expert bead stringers.”

Rose startled, looking where his other hand was meant to be while all of them laughed.

“Pay them no mind,” said Sexy Voice, giving her a deep grin. “We all worked for the post office. Can you believe it?”

“Yes.” Quirky Eye looked—she figured—at One Hand. “When he was on his route, a poodle bit off his hand.” To them, this was hilarious.

“Well, my grandfather used to tell me the Irish like to have fun. He was of pure Irish descent, Celtic through and through, and he warned me to remember I’m full of the Irish myself.”

They murmured to each other. Sexy Voice chuckled. “No Irishman is pure.”

She shrugged. “I’m here to find out how his judgment applies to me and what he meant by it.”

They embarked on an argument about what it meant to be Irish.

“It’s the small nose,” offered the twins together. “Uptilted.”

“Nauw, it’s the full hair,” added the bald one. “Curly.”

“We love talking. Some of us talk all the time.” The skinny one elbowed the one with the hand, who colored up ominously.

“How dare you say that?”

“It’s true, you argumentative sot.”

“Are you implying I imbibe?”

One of them turned to Rose with a shrug. “We’re a wee bit impulsive, now and then.”

“Hard to comb, it is.”

“Get off it. We already talked about the hair.”

“Did not.”

“You stubborn arse.”

“Well,” Rose decided, “I’d say you six are a friendly, personable sample.”

“And we love having fun. And arguing.”

“Not me.”

Where would her mail go, Rose inquired, now that she was on the road—assuming someone would want to write her a letter? She pictured the man who might want to find her. She’d loved to watch Michael walk the letters to the mailbox—how his buttocks and hips swung his long legs. How it made her want to take hold of his backside right now and press him against her.

“...that depends,” One Hand was saying. “The writer would have to know the itinerary, the hotels, the coach company. Like that.”

Sexy voice stood up and leaned in to her. “If someone wants to find you, there’s always a way. You never give up. That’s Irish.”

Rose smiled to herself. So much testosterone in the air, but all her life she’d only had pheromone receptors for one man. The man who knew enough to find her.



Five yards from the pub, a small boy rode his scooter from one corner to the next and back again. He reminded her of herself as a child, unable to detour from her inner map. Even now. Couldn't she be impulsive like Michael? If so, she'd be in bed with him right now, her plane ticket crumpled in her pocket.

She'd veered away from the river, so she corrected her course left into a small street, where a betting office surprised her. "Well, a bookie." She'd like to go into Saint Margaret's Cathedral and the betting office too, but she kept on walking anyway. The castle of King John, brother of Richard the Lionheart had pride of place on today's program. First things first. Once she had seen the castle videos, animations, and spectral holograms about thirteenth century life, she retraced her steps. What if her priority had taken up so much time that she never got to number two on her bucket list?

As Rose neared the corner, the bookie closed in her face. The church door had locked as well, but the iron gate of the cemetery stood open. Under the oak trees lay row after row of gravel-covered graves outlined with bricks. Granite monuments identified those once beloved and unloved alike—all were as touching to Rose as a good novel. Around the corner, in a shaded spot, she spied a tiny stone with a statue of a lamb. "Our baby," it read. Rose knelt on the gravel and laid her hand on the stone.

Where was her baby...their baby now? Just as she thought it had curled up and moved on, her grief awakened. She balled her fists and cried out. "Our baby should have a grave...and a real name. Oh, Michael, where were you when I needed you? When she needed you?" She wiped her face on her already sweat-drenched shirt.

Back at the hotel, she idled under a hot shower and rubbed the complimentary shampoo into her hair. She swirled her gamy t-shirt and underwear around on her sudsy head and finished up with the miniature bar of soap. Then she set her alarm clock and tumbled onto the bed naked. She dreamed of the baby girl who, in the drawing, lived inside her—and of the man who'd put her there.

After her rest and a joyful meeting with the spare shirt and undies from her backpack, she revisited the guest computer. “Dear Michael,” she typed. “Arrived safe and sound. Don’t worry. Having a raucous good time. Hope you will too. Take care of Puppy Joe.” She blew her nose on a sheet of scrap paper. “Don’t think about me.”



“How-ya!” The next morning, Gary the driver helped Rose haul her stiff body up the steep bus steps. “It’s a little close today, isn’t it, but there’ll be grand craic—fun, as you say, and the sunshine is a gift. Mind yer head on the coach.” Rose nodded to Mildred in the seat behind the driver and flopped down on the left behind the tour guide’s station, where she could best see the countryside looming up at her. She lumped her raincoat and her backpack on the seat beside her and turned away from the aisle toward the window.

“Well, I see you took the best seat on the bus.” This came from Sue, who, in the airport, had recounted her life’s story. At least Rose hoped she had already heard that entire load of misery.

“I saw you put your suitcase in the luggage compartment. It must have come during the night, like mine did.”

Rose forced her face into the imitation of an interested smile. “Oh, good.” She hoped that wouldn’t egg Sue on too much.

“Think so, huh? My new luggage got torn apart, I’ll have you know. Things couldn’t get much worse, but they will.” Sue grabbed her sour-looking husband by the jacket. “Come on, Lou. Don’t stand there talking, or we’ll get a terrible seat.” Rose was relieved when they moved on.

A very large, hairy man came next, “I hope you checked that your valuables are secure.” He questioned each traveler, “Your jewelry all right?”

“Keep your mind off our jewels, pervert,” Lou snarked from his newly claimed seat.

“Sue and Lou. I can’t believe their names rhyme. And their surname is Pugh, as in stinky,” stated a crinkly voice behind her. It accompanied a shock of white hair, bushy white eyebrows and bright blue eyes.

Rose turned around on her knees to get a good look at the man. “Yes. And they look exactly alike. They both work in a sewage processing plant.” She wrinkled her nose.

The gentleman behind her dampened his voice to a confidential register. “They look like their noses are turned up permanently...like the whole world smells bad. Pee-you.”

Both of them laughed harder than Rose thought discreet. She offered her hand. “Alistair, isn’t it? I heard the guide call your name at breakfast. I’m Rose. I’m from the U.S.A. You’re Australian, right? So’s Mildred here.”

The tour guide, Ally, called for attention. “Did you all enjoy the welcome dinner on the grounds of Bunratty castle last night? It dates from 1425, with a Viking and Norman structure before that.”

Mildred reached over the aisle. “Isn’t Ally cute? She’s got the wild, floaty hair and the Irish nose.”

“Oh, I’ve got that too. My father used to tap me on the tip of my nose a lot. He liked to say he could always depend on me to *turn up*. It was a joke.”

“You’re pale like her too.”

”Michael claimed he could find me in the dark.”

“Brilliant.” Ally started her wind-up “Well, I hope you enjoyed your walk in Limerick yesterday. How many visited St. John’s Castle? St. Mary’s Cathedral? How about all that Norman and Georgian architecture?”

After the enthusiastic mumbles, Ally explained the counter clockwise rotation system on the bus. “If you don’t want to move, you may sit in the rear seat. That’s the way of it, and I’m dead stubborn.”

Rose nodded. “Mmm, Granddad used to use that expression.”

Mildred whispered behind her hand. “That’s strange. Last night Ally seemed so friendly and kind.”

“Damn. This means tomorrow I’ll be behind myself. Tomorrow you’ll be in front of me, and I’ll be able to keep an eye on you for days until we cross into the other side of the bus. We’ll never get back to the seats we have now.”

Mildred smiled at her. “Well, at least we won’t get into a rut.”

Rose admitted ruts were one of her weaknesses. She moved closer to the aisle, so they could talk head to head about the welcome festivities and the pretty streets and cottages at Bunratty Castle last night.

“What did you like best, dear?”

“The welcome dinner, Irish music and dancing. And spending the evening in a thatched barn!”

Since he was eavesdropping anyway, Mildred included Alistair, who was eyeing her while she scooped over the aisle. “Didn’t you think the pretty streets around the castle were wonderful?”

Rose clasped her hands in elation. “Yes, the thatched cottages are charming. Isn’t it strange having the pavement come right up to the house? What’s up with that?”

“Wouldn’t that have something to do with keeping the rain water from making the ground too soggy around the house?” For this suggestion, Mildred judged Alistair a genius. She joined him in his seat, and Rose could hear him rumble on in an explanation of engineering, punctuated with her high-pitched giggles.

Mildred spoke to her through the crack between seats. “I really liked that t-shirt you had on last night. You must have gotten your luggage before the rest of us.”

Rose explained that she’d brought the fancy t-shirt rolled up in her backpack in case she needed it. “That was a picture of my puppy Joe on the shirt.”

“Oh, what a sweet puppy. Do you still have him? Don’t you miss him? Who took the picture? It looks like a professional did it.”

“Yes, I miss him very much.”

Mildred giggled. “The dog or the man with the camera?”

Rose laughed. “My ex took the photo and gave me the shirt before I came on the trip.”

“What a considerate man. Too bad he’s ex.” Mildred’s forefinger made a slashing motion across her throat.

Her remarks brought to mind the events of last night, when they’d all gathered before dinner. William had stood next to the bus. At first, she’d failed to recognize him without Claris. And standing up. As soon as their eyes had met, he’d hurried over to her. “Hey, pretty lady. Remember me? You look as though you don’t.”

“I—I—William—I must have been out of it earlier. I didn’t even realize you were coming on this tour. I thought you had to head off to a university assignment.”

“And I missed the same bits about you. I only remembered your plans to find your grandfather. It seemed we told each other our life’s story on the plane, except for the *what next* part.”

She noticed the faint laugh crinkles around his eyes.

Later in the evening, Rose had seen him on stage dancing with the folk performers. Long limbed and limber, he possessed the loose, unselfconscious mannerisms of the Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*, her favorite movie once. Claris had been wrapped in a black cape and a scowl and hunched over a table in a corner. What was wrong with that couple? Maybe Claris didn’t approve of William’s unabashed shenanigans? Rose admired his ability to give in to impulse.

This morning William and Claris sat two rows behind to her right. William twinkled his eyes at her from time to time when she looked in his direction. Had he toured Limerick earlier, as she had? Or had he and Claris remained in the hotel room? They were a couple, after all.

Everything about this bus culture reminded Rose of what she had lost with Michael. She sank back in her seat and thought back to many an amorous afternoon when she and Michael had ignited the sheets in hotel rooms. They’d always traveled with a cooler of food in case they didn’t get out to dinner. “Everything I want I have right here,” his lust-husky voice stated, while he unbuttoned her blouse, “and I’m a starving man.”

She would always remember how heat smoldered in her when his voice turned low and dark. And his eyes. Those eyes that pierced into hers, all the way down to her melting south pole.

Chapter 5

Cliffs of Moher:

Ally's microphone squealed. "First view of the ocean!" Grandfather had always wanted to ride at the Cliffs of Moher. She wondered if he'd been here lately, fulfilling that dream. All those years breeding saddle horses in Citrus County made him a capable horseman, but still... She winced.

Grandfather and Michael had scrutinized photographs of the cliffs, with their drop-offs to the sea. Posted signs were intended to keep tourists from the fragile edge. However, judging from photos of daredevils walking on since-eroded surfaces, the cliffs offered a short countdown to tragedy. The two men had laughed at her squeamishness.

In every way, Grandfather had taken pleasure in Michael. It had been his idea for the newlyweds to build a house on the ranch, so they could all live near each other. Yet he'd been the one to retire to the land of his forebears. Rose shook her head at the irony.

With Mildred in tow, Rose made their way to a viewing plateau. "You would never catch me so close to that edge. See those kids clowning around? One wrong step, and...I know I couldn't save them." What a nightmare.

The precipice recalled her father-in-law's death. Michael hadn't wanted to talk about that afterwards, though he'd once been open and expansive about his emotions. She recalled him

slumped on the couch hour after hour, eyes cast down, hands covering his head. He'd started drinking soon after his father's demise, and nothing had ever been the same again.

"Yes, I can see some of the rock broke off." Mildred bent closer to the danger zone. "What's the matter, dear?"

Her kind eyes prompted Rose to confide. "I don't know if you've heard of the Pictured Rocks on the Lake Superior shore? My father-in-law fell off those cliffs when we were there on vacation."

"Oh, you poor dear!" Mildred made a clucking noise as she slipped an arm through Rose's.

"We were tortured about the secrets he may have taken to his death. My mother-in-law kept thinking of him going to hell for the sin of self-murder."

"Suicide. But why would she think that way?"

"Isn't that the church's idea—that he couldn't live to ask forgiveness?"

"It's a big assumption, my dear." Mildred clucked again. "My Bernie was a minister for over forty years. He always said you never know what's in a person's mind at the end."

After ascending a further incline, they stopped to catch their breath.

Mildred pointed "Look, there's a peregrine falcon." As they watched, it took off at top speed, and snatched a little crow with orange feet out of the air.

Rose grasped her hair. "Awk!"

Mildred patted her arm. "You're a sensitive soul, dear."

On their left, they took in the view of the shoreline to the south. The surf charged in and out of large sea caves at the foot of the cliffs. Maybe it had been like this on the cliff where Michael's father had taken his plunge. Rose pictured him as he'd stood on the headland, bereft and in need of deliverance from whatever hell he was in at that moment. Maybe his mind called out to his higher power as he fell to his doom? Mildred's voice startled her away from his imagined scream.

"My Bernie and I once made love in a cave like that. We were in a small boat, and it kept rocking back and forth." Her

eyes turned up in their sockets. “We did things that day that were illegal in several states.”

Rose tittered. “Mildred, you are some woman.”

After Mildred turned back toward the touring coach, Rose reviewed her own passion in a rowboat. It had been uncomfortable, but unforgettable. Michael’s hands rough and urgent on her body. The sweaty taste of his skin. His slippery ownership of her mouth and nipples and personal places. His roar of laughter when they’d capsized the boat. All the sensations jangled her synapses, even in memory.

That was all over now. The boat, the glorious sex, the man. She wasn’t disappointed that she’d failed to forget such moments. After all, she was unlikely to experience anything like them in her lonely future. Why not indulge herself with a steamy memory now and then? They were better than dwelling on her loss.

She pushed on to O’Brien’s Tower, a small eighteenth century monolith, where she looked straight out to the Aran Islands.

A thick voice behind her startled her. “A descendant of old King Boru built this to promote tourism. Turns out it worked.” The voice belonged to the hairy passenger from Rose’s bus. Justus, wasn’t it? The guy set her teeth ajar. Justus peered at her through his cola bottle lenses. “Here, darlin,’ let me put my arm around you and squeeze under this arch with me, so Harry there can take our picture.” She took a helping of tolerance from her mental toolkit. After all, they were destined to form a tight community for a few weeks.

On the other hand, Justus’s greasy lack of personal hygiene turned her stomach. She was amazed at the kind of man she attracted, now that she didn’t have a husband. Justus lifted her hand. “Are you married, young lady? I see you’re wearing a nice wedding set—yellow gold, nice solitaire, a few small rubies and diamond chips.” He inclined his lips to her hand. “You should’ve left that home in your jewelry box.”

Once rid of her admirer, Rose scuttled along to the end of the path, from where she looked north to a different section of cliffs with their grassy plateaus. Alone with that horizon, her

mind took in the sounds and the briny odors of the sea, the cliffs, and the grassy terrace. Puffins with their comical orange beaks preened on the ledges below and groaned and growled to their peeping pufflings in their burrows. Once under the sod with their young, the adult birds sounded like lowing cows.

A kestrel emitted its chittering call over the cliff tops. Rose wrapped her sweater tight around herself.

A woman's voice screeched. "Colin! Colin! You get back here."

Rose forced her attention to a reedy voice. "Go see puffins. Fly, Mummy."

Arms and legs pumping, a toddler headed for the precipice near Rose. She opened her arms and took a step forward, just as he veered toward the cliff's edge, wings poised for flight. "I fly, Mummy. Watch me!"

The woman's cracked voice barely managed a scream. "No, Colin, no!"

Rose felt her hands and feet go numb. All her senses focused on the frantic pounding in her chest. She tackled the tot in mid-air. One foot closer to the precipice and they might have tumbled onto the rocks together. She focused on the fragrance of baby powder mingled with the smell of her own fear.

The child flailed in her arms, but she did not loosen her grasp on him, though he pounded her shoulders. "Let me fly! Let me fly!" Wailing, the child buried his face in Rose's bosom. His mother fell on him and on Rose.

"Oh, God," bawled the mother. "You saved my baby."



Rose was the last person back on the bus. She trembled slightly, and Ally raised her eyebrows at her. While the bus continued northbound, Rose clutched a scrap of paper and a photograph. She thought about little Colin's baby-powdered body. And about Rosebud, who'd smelled of blood and amniotic fluid. She blinked rapidly and then stared at the coastline as they headed north.

Mildred stretched over to see what Rose held.

“It’s someone I met after you left. This is her little boy.” She zipped the paper and the photo into her backpack and turned back to the window. “She wants me to write her.” Rose lost herself in the vista of sea and sky.



Tall hedgerows planted atop and around them, stone walls bordered the two-lane road. “Whoa.” Rose addressed Mildred. “It’s disastrous to veer into the bushes here.”

“Yes, especially on a bicycle. The bushes would tenderize your body like a fork and the wall beneath them would finish the job.”

Rose chuckled at Mildred’s imagery. She remembered her own tendency as a child to ditch her bike on the side of the path, usually onto the sparse Bahia grass and magenta phlox that formed the verge in Citrus County. Roads were different here. Tight curves. Were it not for their seats high up in the motor coach, the passengers would have little view of the countryside. The driver’s tunnel vision would leave him no plan B if and when he came head to head with another vehicle.

She chalked up a score in the air. One for the land of her birth, zero for Grandfather’s Irish paradise.

Sights and sounds of the road set Rose reflecting on her responsibility to keep her eye on the straight and narrow whenever Michael drove too fast. Now she could relax and trust the driver.

Today the rotation placed her three seats back in the bus. She couldn’t see much to the front at this distance, but the screeching of brakes and a surge of adrenaline resulted from a near crash with a minivan on an ess-curve. Behind Gary, their driver, Sue let out a head-splitting screech. Others, especially the tall-bodied ones who could see past the seat backs, contributed equally to the din.

In the second seat, Mildred unclenched her fingers from her arm rest to peer at Rose through the seat crack. She spoke loud enough for Sue to hear. “Thank you for not screaming in my hearing aid, Rose.”

Rose smirked.

The van had no choice but to back slowly around the curves behind it, while the bus inched forward. What if the van collided with traffic to its rear? Relief swept over Rose when it sped up and backed into a lay-by to let them pass. Her nails had dug into her sweating palms.

“Don’t worry, Rosie,” Michael crooned in her head. “I got it under control.” The image of his cocky eyes made her sweat more.

The opened-up view of rocky hills to their right and the sea coast rising to headlands on their left announced the approach to the Burren, a sparse landscape where boulders and slabs of limestone capped the ground. Ally was into her spiel. “They say there is not enough water here to drown someone, not enough wood to hang someone, not enough soil to bury someone.”

Mildred looked coy. “Hee-hee. I’d better not die here then.”

Alistair took the bait. “Don’t worry. With your trim little figure, you’d fit in a crack. Besides, I’m sure Ally is exaggerating.”

Ally eyed them. “No, it’s true. They also used to steal soil from each other back in the day.”

“The sheep look fat enough, despite the scarce grass.” Rose narrowed her eyes. “I’d hate to graze my horses here, though.”

Ally agreed. “Yes, but this grass is especially nourishing. The lambs get rich milk.”

All Rose could think about was a little lamb running toward her across the grass, where she’d snatched him up from the edge of the cliff. Little Colin. Maybe she wasn’t the weakling she’d assumed she was. She eased back on the seat and pulled in a deep breath, a knowing, satisfied smile on her lips.



The Burren:

It was too bad Rose had given up riding as a child. She’d always missed it, and she loved petting the animals and brushing them. She frowned, thinking of the childhood incident

which had quashed her equestrian pursuits and set her up for some of the apprehension she'd felt, even today.

It had been her first solo ride on the big chestnut stallion Thunder. Her sheltie Charlie had trotted along behind them, nipping at Thunder's heels and then pulling even with Rose to bark his excitement. Charlie's silver fur flashed in the sunlight. Every time she glanced at him, his well-brushed coat caused her to smile. His eyes flirted with her, his lips spread in a big doggie smile, and his tongue lolled. She was crazy about him.

"Go, Charlie! Show this horse how you can run."

The dog had hesitated as if checking the intention in her eyes. He'd glanced ahead, then stared at her again. She'd pointed to the open meadow ahead. "Go!"

He'd taken the ground in great leaps of his forepaws, flicking the ground with his hindquarters. He owned the meadow.

"Go, Thunder. Run after Charlie!" The horse had broken into a gallop, fence posts and live oaks passing them by. Thunder had closed on the speeding dog.

She'd pulled the reins. "Charlie, watch out!" What had happened next still composed her nightmares. After the horse had limped home alone, her father had found her, curled around the broken silver body.

She'd never sat astride horseflesh again.

Ally announced a stop at the karst formation beside them. "The terrain consists of deep fissures and cracks. Please keep well away from the cliffs, and take care not to break a leg in a crack, right? Brilliant." Claris bulleted out of the bus, apparently eager for the fresh air. William rolled his eyes at Rose as he passed her seat. Claris rushed to a nearby boulder with her romance novel. Rose couldn't understand those who spent their outdoor time with their faces attached to a book or electronic device.

Scraping the ground with his shoe, Will lingered outside the bus. When Rose started her descent down the steep steps, his eyes lit up, and he held out a hand. What a nice man. Like Michael had been when he'd loved her more than drink. Will warned Rose about the wicked footing at the Burren.

She nodded. “This reminds me of the beach. When I was a child, I’d carry around a pail full of watered down sand. Then I would dribble it onto the beach and watch it harden into a terrain much like this, only smaller. I’d maneuver a little action figure—Super Woman—around the knobs and holes.”

“Whoa!” Will grabbed her around the waist. “Look what you almost did.” Rose lifted her foot out of a crevice “Your leg could’ve ended up dangling between earth and sea, and you might’ve broken it. Come on. You can put it down on firm ground now.”

She shivered. “Thank you William. I guess I had a close call.”

“Come on.” He held out a hand. They found their way stone by stone over the cracks and holes until they stood near the rim peering down to the waves that broke on the rocks below. “Hold on to my belt, Rose. I promise I’m very sure-footed.”

Rose had her eye on a teenager who stood a few inches from the edge. All at once he screamed and wheeled his arms. “Aaaah, save me!”

A teenaged girl approached the boy. “Stop it. You’re scaring me.”

The boy took her in his arms, laughing. The girl’s fists pounded what she could reach on his arms and back.

“Oh, Will, that’s mean. Look. She’s crying. You wouldn’t do that, would you—scare someone on purpose for a joke?”

“Well, I doubt it’s a mere laugh the boy’s after. And, yes, I may have done some play scaring in my day. I wasn’t always perfect.”

Rose fisted him on the arm two or three times. He chuckled. She sneaked a glance at Claris. Still not of this world. “Oops! I shouldn’t have done that. Claris wouldn’t like it.”

“Ahh...don’t worry about her. She’s hit me plenty of times herself.”

What a strange relationship those two had. If the wife didn’t mind her husband play fighting with another woman, what else could he get away with?



Rathbaun Farm:

Ally strolled down the aisle with her microphone. “For you Floridians—” She looked at Rose. “—this dissolution of the limestone bedrock is the same thing that forms sinkholes.”

Rose shivered inside her wool-lined raincoat.

Ally looked them over. “You look a little the worse for wear. Well, how about a cup of hot tea? We’ll be at the farm in two shakes of a lamb’s tail. Pun intended.”

Meanwhile, Lou and Sue informed the group of some grim facts about Irish sewage treatment. “Did you know it’s possible for septic tanks to leak into karst rock like the ones at the Burren?”

“Sue’s right. You know, under the latest laws, the Irish government requires inspection of wastewater plants and tanks.”

Will engaged Lou. “Maybe because the EU sued Ireland over the lack of mandatory inspections.”

Gary got into the game. “Yes, we aim for disposal without endangering human health or the environment. The liquid goes into the water, but we hold on to our sludge.”

Will’s eyebrows met each other in an expression of distaste. “And pathogens and toxins.”

Perhaps because others looked as queasy as Rose felt, Ally won out against Lou’s rhetoric. “Well then. Everyone on this bus has some personal tie to Ireland, but no passenger possesses Irish citizenship.”

It tickled Rose to hear she was not the only half and half.

“My groups usually have a lot of folks who always wanted to visit Ireland for its beauty, or because they read about it.”

Rose raised her hand. “Or family—umbilical ties.”

Ally giggled. “Brilliant. I’ll call you the Belly Buttons.”

“That would be great for George here.” Alistair, pointed to the thin, red-haired fellow in the seat across from him. “He’s a cop. He could be a Belly Button Fuzz.”

Everybody groaned.

“How about the International Shamrocks?” William suggested in a quiet tone.

“Yay for the Shamrocks!”

Ally tapped her microphone. “And here we are at Rathbaun Farm for the best cup of Irish tea you’ll find.”

Moments later, teasing, bubbly Frances Connelly welcomed her guests at the door to her plastered and painted stone cottage, which, like most, stood in a paved yard with potted flowers set out on the pavement. A few foundation plantings in the front grew up the wall to the overhanging thatched roof, which made the building resemble a furry mushroom.

Their hostess waved them into the salon, where a turf fire burned high, and to her lunch room beyond. Along with her scones and tea, she treated them to a brief recounting of the farm’s two hundred year history.

“It’s about time we stopped.” Sue stretched. “I was going to stiffen up permanently, wasn’t I, Lou? He’s not listening to me. He lost his new camera somewhere.”

Rose wrapped her hands around her steaming teacup. “I agree, it’s not a moment too soon. Mmm. These scones are delicious with the fresh butter. And the strawberry jam.”

“I can’t eat those. I’m carb free. That’s how I stay so thin. You might watch it yourself.” Sue wandered to another table and chided Lou for helping himself to the scones.

“Oo!” Maryann sat near Rose with her sister Jocelyn. “Sounds like somebody’s jealous of your boobage, dear. And your other ass—ets.” Jocelyn cackled.

Heat flashed up Rose’s neck. Did anybody hear that? At the next table, Will rolled his eyes and grinned.

Alliances formed when people heard she’d almost fallen through the limestone at the Burren. She didn’t know whether to call attention to William’s role as her savior. At a table in the corner, Claris was busy with her book again. Was Will in trouble? He seemed to enjoy the conversation at his table anyway.

“You shouldn’t go off by yourself.” Sister Ann eyed her. “Next time, join our group.”

Frances’s husband Fintan popped into the tea room to invite them to tour his sheep barns. Rose hugged the middle of the group as they trudged herd-like down the drive between the farm buildings. In the barn, Fintan demonstrated his shearing techniques with yearling lambs.

Sue hissed. “Look how he’s got the poor thing on its back. Oh, now he’s flopped it on its side.

The young border collie Buff sniffed at the lamb and vied for attention from Fintan. He petted Buff, and the dog stood down. “These sheepdogs, they’re constantly tagging in with their masters. Totally devoted they are. They never give up.”

“Our eighty acres are largely in pasture now,” he told them, “so it’s mostly the lambs that keep us going.”

Alistair raised a tentative hand. “So there’s good money in Irish wool?”

“Not at all. That goes off to third world countries. It’s the meat that makes our living. Lamb.”

Sue let out a strangled squeak. Others fell silent. Fintan released the lamb, which stumbled off into a corner, naked.

Buff made a dramatic pass, herding several lambs past the barn and into an outside pen. After a round of photos in front of the pen, some of the humans returned to the warm house. Rose sat down near the fire to work on a sketch of Buff.

Will spoke from the companion chair. “Very good, you could make a living doing that.”

She gave him a full smile, pleased that he’d noticed. “I don’t know. I kind of like giving my drawings away—which reminds me—excuse me, will you?” He looked so alone when she left him sitting there, despite his apparent ability to fit in anywhere.

Outside the sheep barn, she met Fintan with Buff. “I always wondered how someone holds on to a sheep while shearing it. That was so interesting how it just let you lay it on its back and turn it every which way like a bale of hay.”

“That’s right. They’re pretty meek when you get the upper hand, and, though you’re gentle with them, you can’t think of them as personalities, you know.” Buff laid his forepaws on his master’s thigh and drummed for attention.

“I especially enjoyed the demonstration of Buff’s herding abilities. He was brilliant.”

“Oh, yes. You noticed that then?”

“Yes, my family has always kept a border collie on our horse farm. The one my dad has now reminds me of this little

guy.” She scratched behind Buff’s ears. “My own dog is a sheltie, and he’s talented with squirrels.”

“What’s his name then?”

“Puppy Joe. I mostly call him Puppy.”

The farmer laughed. “What? That’s not a name for a dog. A real dog would be Joe.”

Rose laughed too. She handed him the page from her sketch book. “I drew Buff’s picture. You can have it if you want. It’s important to have pictures around of the ones who love you, as your dog obviously does.”

He scratched his head. “Well, I don’t know, but these dogs have a strong urge to please, like some people. You may say they’re always courting their special person, and they don’t let anything put them off you either. You can call that love if you want. Some might appreciate that attitude in humans, as a matter of fact.”

“And some of us try to discourage such devotion.”

He wrinkled his forehead. He walked away rubbing the back of his neck.

Their hostess ran up to Rose as the group piled onto the bus. “You’re Rose?”

Rose nodded, a question forming in her mind.

“This must be for you then.”

“Wh—what?” Confusion and suspicion flooded her, as Frances pressed a perfect pink rose into her hand.

“Don’t ask, and I won’t tell, and I’m not supposed to tell.” She nodded with a conspiratorial glance at a folded piece of paper in her hand. “You probably know who sent it to you, anyway and what he’s trying to tell you.”

Rose opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Her mind had turned to gelatin.

Frances spoke with emphasis. “I guess I don’t need this paper anymore.” She placed it on the tarmac, in front of Rose’s shoe. “Have a lovely trip, and try not to make any daft decisions, love.”

Back on the bus, Mildred gestured with her head at the paper in Rose’s hand. “Well?”

Rose held the paper for a long time, while she pressed the rose to her lips. She recalled the first time Michael had given her a rose.

He'd drawn her close. "When we get married, I'm going to plant a rose garden, just so I can hand you a blossom every day. When we need to be apart, I want you always to have one nearby and hold it against your succulent lips to remind you of my kisses." Then he'd brushed her lips with his and segued into a deep and lingering kiss that made her feel warm inside, even now. "I want to give you a rose every day of our lives. Remember, no matter what, you'll always be my Rose."

She smiled as she recalled how he'd kept his promise. When they'd completed their cottage, he'd proclaimed the event worthy of a rose bush or two. Then he'd planted the front yard full—tea roses and grandifloras and old garden roses in all the colors of an overjoyed rainbow. Everything known to thrive in the south. True pink *Belinda's Dream* and *Apricot Candy* and blood red *Chrysler Imperial* basked in full sun, White *Blanc Double de Coubert* and pink *Butterfly* sheltered in the shade of a grand old oak. Michael had made the sandy soil fertile and babied his roses leaf by leaf.

After several years of practicing, they'd conceived, and Michael had celebrated with a single young rose bush near the front door. It announced their fecundity with bursts of yellow and deep pink. Michael presented Rose the tag from the bush.

"This name will always remind me how I feel today, my love." The tag read *Yabba-Dabba-Doo*.

Rose forced herself back to the present moment, though her eyes swam with tears. She unfolded the paper she wasn't supposed to see.

*Dear Mrs. Connelly of Rathbaun Farm,
My wife Rose Flanagan will arrive at your farm on a scheduled stop with Ireland Tours. Will you please do me a favor and present her a rose from your garden? Please don't explain where it came from. I believe she will know what it means.*

You see, by the time you meet my Rose, she may have made a decision I can't bear to hear but must accept. The rose is just

a tacit reminder of what she means and will always mean to me.

Rose couldn't read any more. She pressed her lips to the signature at the bottom of the page. She closed her eyes and turned her head to the window as tears rolled down her cheeks. What was it Fintan had said about faithful sheepdogs? "They keep courting the ones they love? They never stop."

Chapter 6

Galway:

That night, Rose ruttled in her bed until she could articulate what she wanted to say. Alone in the hotel computer room, she typed her message “Dear Michael, got the rose. You knew I would like it. Thank you, but it’s not necessary. Hope you find new things to keep you busy.”

She rubbed at the ache in her chest. She had to admit there were some new things she didn’t want him to get into, though that was no longer her business. So far there had been no e-mails from him.

There was one message in her inbox. “Rose, honey, as you know, I’ve kept tabs on Michael. So far, he always goes out after supper. Not to a bar I hope. Time for bed. Dad.”

“Immediately, a message from Maria popped up.

Hi, Rose, sweetie. Aidan’s message was a little negative. Still, I take the news as encouraging, and you will too when you hear what happened the other day. I was on my way to Inverness when I passed Michael on his porch. He wore a dirty T-shirt and hadn’t shaved in days. I asked him why he wasn’t dressed for work.

He gave me a look out of hell. “I can’t work, Mom. I can’t sleep. I can’t eat. I can’t think. But don’t worry, I’m going to the doctor this morning.”

I saw he had your pony quilt in his arms, dear. He nearly broke my heart.

Rose stared at her empty hands. She drew her arms up, over the ache in her throat and bosom. She barely had the energy to stand up. She spoke to the image permanently entrenched in her mind. "I'm so sorry, Michael. I didn't mean it to hurt so much."

With a heavy tread, she retraced her steps to her room, where she stood under the shower for a thousand years.

That morning, while the Shamrocks toured the Connemarra marble exhibit outside of Galway, Rose wandered away into the grounds, where Mildred found her crying.

"I can't concentrate on a collection of rocks, and I suppose my face is too swollen for decency. I'd probably ruin the trade in there."

Mildred held her without making her explain.

Slated to stop in Galway center for a late lunch, most of her companions were excited about a bap with ham and a cup of tea. Rose, though, felt growly through her glued on smile.

"Forget lunch. My stomach is like a rock. I want to see the city. After all, I'm looking for my heritage in this county. That means on the ground, not in a bus. I've got under an hour."

"I applaud the change of mood, but heritage is not defined so easily." Mildred had won her attention. "I suspected my Bernie had Aborigine blood in him. I traced him, but his tendency to make a walkabout whenever I gave him a chore list was nothing but laziness." Rose laughed at the odd story, and Mildred patted her arm. "Watch your step while you're searching, dear. I read the paving stones aren't the best."

"Try St. Nicholas's Church," suggested Meredith, a nurse. "Do you know Christopher Columbus prayed there? Look, you can see the steeple from here. Ahead and to the left. Early fourteenth century I think."

Rose set off down a twisting thoroughfare teeming with activity. Carved wooden business signs hung over the street. No sidewalk. Every second storefront contained a cafe, with tables and chairs and potted plants claiming space on the roadway.

She had to pick her way along the paving stones, with potholes competing for her attention now and then.

The next thing she knew, one eye peered directly into one of those holes. The other examined the pavers. Several voices shouted at her. “Get up! Get up!” Their tone was strangely compelling. Why would she want to get up? Everything was fine down here. She couldn’t fall any lower. For the moment nothing hurt—as long as she didn’t move.

“You must get up!”

“Come on, you can do it.”

“Can you move? See if you can.”

Goodness, people were upset. She felt like a sheep, dozing under a tree, with dozens of sheepdogs nattering at it. This was a great view of stones, holes where stones should be, and feet. Sandals and hiking boots, mostly. Funny-looking toes. Now a pair of knees. Strong thighs. A crotch. A man’s crotch. Right in her face.

Somehow familiar, a deep voice spoke her name. “Rose, I’m going to stay with you. Only I doubt I can get down any lower. What do you think about sitting up? No rush. Just a suggestion.”

The voice made her want to comply, so she pushed up with her palms. Her right arm rebelled. “Ow, that hurts!” she appealed to turquoise eyes.

“Good job. The arm hurts, does it?” He palpated it.

She pulled away. “That’s what I said.” She had to tug on her mental reins to keep from snapping. “Why are you following me, Will? Why are you repeating what I say?”

“See if you can move it, will you?”

“Where’s Claris? Ow! That hurts like crazy.”

“Mmm, grouchy. Good. Now brace yourself on my arm. Use your other arm. There you go. Up...up...good.”

She was on her feet. Nothing hurt down there, though one shoe bore evidence of a brief scuffle with another pothole. Ugh! Lousy construction workers. No better than in the USA. Worse.

Will made her raise her injured arm straight ahead, up, and to the side. Then he compared it to her good arm.

“What are you doing, Will? Why are you ogling my chest?”

He blushed. "I'm not, woman, just your collar bone. Nothing's broken, and your arm moves fine, but it's going to hurt worse before this is over."

She felt grumpy. "Well, I can't do anything about it. Too late. I'm a cripple, ogled by a stalker, even in my condition."

He chuckled. "Still have your personality, I see. Now look across the street. There's the provider of all necessities to American tourists. Aim for that."

She felt wobbly, as well as wounded in body and in self-confidence. They tacked their way through the sea of college students and tourists to the fast food store front, a shy and narrow afterthought among the businesses, remarkable only for its red and blue paint. She took the one remaining seat in the establishment, while William fetched her a bag of ice.

"Ice cubes. I haven't seen that since we got here."

"Yeah, this was their entire stash."

She opened the bag and took out a cube, which she popped into her mouth. "Mmm, good."

"Uh, wrong move. Get your jacket off and place this on the hurt muscle. We want to keep the inflammation and stiffness down."

William was right about the ice. By the time he finished answering her questions, her arm had stiffened but did not bruise. Not yet.

He insisted he hadn't followed her—not much. He'd been on this street to look for the university, where he planned to spend part of his sabbatical. In fact, he explained, he meant to travel here and there about Ireland, and he would have a chance to look up his daughter Bridget, who'd married an Irishman.

"And what about Claris? Why isn't she with you?"

"No way." He shuddered. "She's begun her search for the finest Irish wool, as she's a textile artist. She's convinced she'll find the Holy Grail of textiles here. I just hope she ships it all home. I'm getting too old to carry her stash."

The image of Will as a camel swayed across her imagination.



Connemara:

If Claris had found what she sought, her expression didn't show it later in the day when she and Will stuffed themselves into a corner bench at O'Donnell's bar in Clifden. The permanent crease between her eyes had deepened.

Some of the others draped themselves on the bar or in barrel-backed chairs at tables. Rose was not into bars. She snorted. This looked like one of those boondoggles foisted on tourists in lieu of more eco-cultural spots, but she had to be a good sport. Wouldn't it be odd if a watering hole gave her a sense of Grandfather-like Irish belonging? This was the hometown of his ancestors, she realized with a jolt, and she'd return here after the tour. She studied the bar patrons. What were the odds of him showing up right now?

"Rose, Rose, come sit with us." Six or eight Shamrocks crowded into a semicircular embrasure. "Tell us about your adventure. How's your arm?"

Mildred was there, next to Alistair, patting a bit of cushion on her near side. Paddy, who believed himself the reincarnation of Oscar Wilde, sported a flowing orange scarf purchased in the city. Several other Shamrocks bent over their glasses of Guinness. It seemed Rose's fall had endowed her with notoriety. Probably she could score a half dozen painkillers right there.

"It's stiff, and it hurts, and I can only get it to half staff now, but I'm relieved my right hand works." She flashed back to the night she'd broken that limb,

Meredith handed her a bottle of ibuprofen, still warm from her fanny pack. "Keep icing the arm."

Her companions around the table demanded she show them her sketch pad, which had made her an instant celebrity earlier. Their handsome waiter plied her with Irish cream whiskey, the house-recommended pain reliever. Alistair nudged her. "Drink up. Two rounds are included with the outing."

Everyone sat shoulder to shoulder listening to a local musician play six different guitars, Irish pipes, a flute, and a small drum. Rose grew ever warmer.

William flashed her a helpless glance across the room as Claris became more animated, maintaining an iron grip on his arm. Why didn't he pay attention to his wife? Rose didn't like this about him. Otherwise, he was so nice. Thoughtful, like Michael. Her thoughts went to his roses. All the roses. All the time.

William took the microphone. Rose clutched her throat as his tenor voice soared with the familiar strains of "An Irish Lullaby." The crowd sang the chorus with him.

"Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ral, Too-ra-loo-ra-li,
Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ral, hush now, don't you cry!
Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ral, Too-ra-loo-ra-li,
Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ral, that's an Irish lullaby."

Tears flowed at the memory of Michael singing this song to the child once inside her. "And now, for my little Rosebud," he used to say. "This is to show you Daddy will always protect you."

Instead, he'd killed her.



Knock, Sligo, and the Donegal Coast:

It had been a troubling morning. Sue had found her missing purse in the trash minus a wad of cash and a list of her passwords, and Meredith's jeweled rosary had vanished into thin air.

Justus acted as if these incidents were personal. "God damn it! "Didn't I warn you people?"

His wife Marge's sparse white neck whiskers trembled. "Oh, dear, now you've all set him off." What secrets lay in that marriage?

After a night fraught with nightmares, everything reminded Rose of her marriage and her past.

She strolled through the massive gardens and furnished rooms of Kylemore Abbey, a castle before Benedictine nuns

took it over. She imagined herself such a building, and at first it was more fun than pretending as a living creature. She cast a fond eye at opulent furnishings and a rose garden the owner had planted for her, his beloved. She stuck out her front porch, feeling grand with her thirty-three bedrooms. Later, laughter bounced off her walls as little girls came for the nuns to instruct them. In the present, people spoke in hushed voices within her walls. So much for Rose's imagination, which always returned her to reality, thank goodness.

Rose stood on the shore of the lake, celibate and barren, like the nuns.

She lowered herself onto a bench and rummaged in her bag for a leftover scone from breakfast. She came across Michael's two roses, pressed into her paperback novel. Should she throw them away to help her forget? She raised the faded blooms to her lips. Their fragrance lingered, one she would forever associate with him and the garden he'd cultivated for her.

She could no more throw the roses away than discard the recalled scent or the handsome face always present in her mind's eye. "I can't shake you off, Michael, though I'm doing my best to move on."

At the village of Knock, the Shamrocks scrambled over the grounds of the shrine. Meredith tagged along with Rose. "What a terrible time to lose my rosary. I planned to go in for some heavy praying. Not that I can't do it without the beads...but you get in the habit."

Rose's lips perked up in appreciation of the pun. "Here, take mine. I'm half Protestant anyway."

They ended up at the wall of the parish church, where fifteen people had claimed to see Mary, Joseph, and Saint John with angels and a lamb. Rose imagined an apparition of her own—Michael with open arms. "Please, Rosie. Please love me again." His fierce eyes sent her stumbling into the church.

There, too, Michael's voice pleaded in her head. "I can't forget you, darling. Please forgive me."

Her throat constricted with tears. "I can't." She covered her face. "I can't." People stared.

She exited the church with Mildred. “You told me your husband was a pastor. What did he say about forgiveness?”

Mildred frowned and scratched her head. “He used to say ‘Get used to it, because we all need it every day.’ And he said to get used to asking for it and extending it. Sometimes I used to nurse a snit about something he had done. ‘I forgive you for pouting, Millie,’ he would say, ‘and I feel so much better.’”

Rose mulled this over.

“You know what else? Sometimes Bernie used to make up things to be sorry for, like spilling the salt, so I could have the pleasure of forgiving him. Oh...I did enjoy making up with him. The more I forgave, the more...uh...apprecia—tion I got.” Her eyes went to a bygone place.

Rose was relieved to curl up on the bus and escape all the chatter and her troubling thoughts.



Later, Mildred peered between the seats. “Do you like Yeats’s poetry? We’re coming up on the famous churchyard. Grab your camera. This is Drumcliff, and that’s Sligo Bay. There’s a table mountain that reminds Gary of a pile of cow pats.”

Rose yawned and stretched. “Did I miss a lot—besides that?”

“Ally reading aloud from a book of poems.”

“How was it?”

Mildred mimicked Ally’s exaggerated smile. “Brilliant.”

They both giggled.

“Unfortunately, I was the one who lent her the book. Some of the poems I liked until now. I’ll show you some later, but—don’t worry—I’ll spare you the declamation.”

Rose smirked. Bless Mildred. What an irreverent, refreshing person.

She followed the crowd to the poet’s grave, where a guide read more poetry and told anecdotes She enjoyed that, especially the spicy bits. She elbowed Mildred. “What do you think Yeats meant by that—‘the tragedy of sexual intercourse is the

perpetual virginity of the soul.” Mildred raised a finger to her lips.

Wandering among the monuments by herself, Rose came upon an undersized stone near a tree. She knelt to read the inscription, which stung her eyes at once. “Our little Posey. Born too soon for our arms. Borne up to God’s.”

She knelt there, her mind blank as polished granite.

“God, what am I going to do? Give me a sign.” A shadow covered the grave.

“Excuse me ma’am. I knew you were coming. I know you by your hair. It really does look like a burgundy rose. He told me I’d find you among the graves, especially those for the children.”

Rose turned around to see a frail gentleman. “Who are you?”

“I’m the man who gets the letters. People write to me from all over the world. Or they write to the church. Sometimes they write to Jesus.” He shrugged. “They want to place flowers or tuck notes under the pebbles near a stone, so I do that. You’d be surprised.”

“What? Who?” She trembled, anticipating the answer she already knew.

“I don’t have the man’s name, but he went to a lot of trouble and expense. He sent this rose along with the bit of poetry. It’s by the local bard. ‘Consolation’ if you want to look it up.”

She clutched the rose to her lips. Tears made it hard to read the words.

... *Where the crime’s committed*
The crime can be forgot.



The lines echoed in Rose’s mind. *The crime can be forgot.*
The crime can be forgot.

A river of tears flowed through the landscape of her soul. “Oh, Michael, I’m trying to forgive you, but I can’t forget. Can’t you get out of my head?”

At first she failed to see Mildred nearby. "If it hurts so much, maybe it's up to you to do something about it."

Rose handed her the poem.

"Oh, yes. I know this one. I agree it's a heart-breaker. Do you know what it means for you?"

Rose nodded. "It's practically written for me." They leaned against a tree, while she shared her unsuccessful attempts to deal with her loss and with Michael's ongoing tryst with alcohol.

Mildred tapped her front teeth. "That's a tough one to forgive."

Rose nodded, shuddering out a last sob.

Mildred handed the poem back. "Rose, are you happy the way things are now?"

Rose shook her head.

"Do you want him to leave you alone?"

"No!" Rose's spirit leaped. What? Was that true? Eddying confusion soured her belly.

Mildred urged her to the path. "The bus is leaving. Life goes on, you know, with us or without us."



After a day viewing the deeply serrated Donegal coastline, the tension skittering through the bus gave Rose a headache. Behind her, Alistair carried on a long-winded dialogue about the Second World War with William. Darn it! The men's boring discourse set her teeth on edge. And so did the fact that Will had left Claris staring out of the window and blowing her nose.

It was a relief to clamber out of the cramped bus at last. Ally herded them into the Belleek pottery company like car-sick cows. Rose's antipathy to over-decorated trinkets had increased with the throbbing of her temples. Was this tour doing her any good at all?

To her surprise, the demonstrations piqued her interest in the production of the fine Parian china. A greenware specialist told them about trimming excess clay with a fine knife. "One slip, and the whole piece goes into the waste bin. And don't think I

can get away with anything. Somebody in the next department evaluates my work.”

Wide-eyed, Rose turned to Mildred. “This man must’ve performed the same picayune motions for thirty years. My goodness, I couldn’t work like that for ten minutes.”

“I hope his private life is more exciting than this.”

The painters’ brushes produced exquisite miniatures. One wrong hairline stroke, and their project was done for. Rose supposed the smashing specialist, who worked over the rejects, left for home without a tense muscle in his body—or else with an overwhelming sense of waste.

Sue screeched. “What? No seconds? I was counting on that.”

Rose pressed close to the bin where thousands of Euros worth of fine pottery met their doom every day. “For once I agree with you, Sue. I don’t require anything to be perfect. As an artist, I like quirky things and people.”

Mildred whispered close behind her. “Now you’re getting it.”

“Anybody want to smash something?” The tour guide placed an exquisite cream-colored ewer into the receptacle. A hush moved over the Shamrocks. Everybody stepped back except Rose, who peered hypnotically inside. “Here, madam. Have at it.” The worker handed her the hoe-like smashing tool.

“What?”

A couple of the Shamrocks snickered behind her.

“Me?” For a moment she thought she saw the smashed skull of her beloved dog Charlie under Thunder’s hooves. She shuddered. “Not me. I could never smash anything.”

Hands on hips, the craftsman in the work smock stared into her eyes. “Don’t want your chums to know the truth about you?” He looked her up and down. “I’ll bet you could really go to it.” His sarcasm struck at her anger bone.

“Hm-hm,” she croaked. “I’d feel way too guilty to ruin something so nice.” She looked around at the Shamrocks, who leaned forward, eager to see her id at work.

Some of them wetted their lips. “Do it, do it, do it. Go, Rose, hit it, smash it!” The smasher found its way into her hands.

Justus pounded his fists on the bin. “Smash his head to pieces. Grind him to bits. Get even!”

Rose administered a tentative tap. She tapped a little harder. God, what a wuss she was. She felt the ewer crack without a sound.

“Okay, we’ll leave it at that. Anybody else want a try?”

Rose glared at the people crowding in on her. They shrank back, while she planted her feet far apart. “Grrr—Hah-yak!” The ewer split in two. She hauled off on the enemy. “Yak! Yak! Ah!” She bore down with all her weight. Over and over, her pulse pounding in her throat.

William pulled her away. An embarrassed silence shrouded the Shamrocks. Then they all started to cheer. “Brava, Rose! Way to go, Rose.”

Justus fluttered his moustache at her. “Got him right in the balls! It was better than seeing you naked.” His wife Marge looked ready to smack him.

“Holy Red Sox. I’d like to rent your services sometime.” Claris seemed breathless.

Rose’s legs shook. Craving a glass of water, she headed from the department while her admirers hung two by two on her arms.

Sue giggled. “You actually snarled.”

“Did I? I’m sorry.”

Mildred took her hand. “Oh, you did. It was wonderful.”

“Any souvenirs? Gifts? An elegant-looking woman with porcelain roses at her ears approached. Some of her companions slipped into the gift shop.

Rose fondled her earlobe. “No thanks. I got what I came for.”

The official consulted a photograph in her notebook. “All right, Madam...Rose. This is for you. You’re a lucky woman.” She placed a small box in Rose’s hands.

One by one the women slid into the coach seat next to Rose. Ally first. “You know you’ll have to show everyone what you’ve got. Those are brilliant.”

Sue was next. “Very, very pretty. If I were you I’d scrub them down good with a toothbrush every time you wear them.

You'd be surprised what kind of filth, skin, mites get stuck in jewelry."

Rose made a gagging sound.

Jocelyn donned her spectacles. "Be careful you don't damage a sweater with any sharp bits."

"May I look at those closely?" Marge brought the earrings close to her tiny eyes. "I like to check for flaws. Most people can't see them. I, of course, am very aware of things others can't see and don't want to see."

Rose wondered how, with whiskers under her own chin, Marge could detect flaws elsewhere.

Mildred slipped to Rose's seat. "May I see? Is this from...him?"

Rose nodded. She could sense the tears building in her sinuses, much the way seawater did when she swam in the Gulf. "I feel as though I'm in over my head, Mildred. What should I do?"

"Don't cry over it, dear." Why not just accept it the way it's meant...a tribute to a pretty lady." Mildred examined the ear baubles, squinting her eyes into focus. "Heavens, this is the best kind of gift. Something you can keep close whenever you want."

Rose peered at Mildred. No earrings, no necklace, no bracelet. Probably no body jewelry. She snickered. Mildred gave her a puzzled look.

"I'm sorry, Mildred. I was picturing you with nipple rings."

"Not for me, nor for you, I imagine. You don't make impulsive decisions, do you, dear?"

Rose pursed her lips, "No, but I wish some new piercings could fix my life." She touched Mildred's left hand. "That's a lovely ring."

"Yes, it's the only jewelry I wear...the only jewelry I care about. As long as I can look at it all the time, my Bernie is always with me. I'll never take it off. It's getting a little loose, though."

Marge gushed. "Oo! Look at that ring, Justus."

Justus heaved himself into the aisle, looking more unsavory than ever, with an unrecognizable substance dribbled on his

flyaway beard. “That’s a beautiful ring, and it’s an antique. Don’t drop it down the drain, little lady.”

Lou threw up his hands. “God knows, it’s amazing what goes down the sewer.”

Rose was positive he was about to tell them. As he nattered on, she composed a message to thank Michael for the gift and rebuff him at the same time. It might work in cyberspace, but in her head it didn’t ring true.



Derry:

As the bus neared Derry, Ally asked for a volunteer who knew the melody *Londonderry Air*. Several of them recognized the tune.

“That’s the same as ‘Danny Boy.’”

“A hymn...”

Mildred raised her hand. “‘Apples and Roses.’ We had to memorize it at school. Something about kissing and blushing and sighing and breasts. We considered it naughty back in the day.”

“London Derriere. It’s a British bum.”

Ally gave Paddy a dirty look. “Rright. The tune is everywhere, even in movies and in a computer game.”

When William got up and sang *Danny Boy*, there wasn’t a dry eye in the bus.

Alistair trumpeted into his handkerchief. “Damn. I always hated war.”

A few minutes later, they pulled up in Derry’s Guildhall Square. A natty bald-headed guide mounted the bus steps and addressed them in posh English.

Lou poked his wife. “A Chinese guy, and he talks better than any of us.”

The guide bowed slightly. “Yes, and I’m married to a French woman. We adopted two kids—an African and an Indian. At least no one is American.” Then his rich bass rolled out the story of *The Troubles* in Ireland.

Sue looked flummoxed. “Shoot! I thought it was all about religion.”

Paddy coiled his scarf around his neck with a grand gesture. “That’s an American for you.”

Their guide prodded them down the street toward the neo-gothic Guildhall, his umbrella leading the way, while some of the females prattled.

“My, it’s imposing.”

“And red.”

“No, silly. It’s black. The British all have that.”

Mildred smirked. “Are you talking about the building or about his bumbershoot?”

“What did you call it? Is that a dirty word?”

The guide touted the stained glass and the large pipe organ inside the main hall. He broke up their tittering to remind them they had an hour to view the building, eat lunch, and meet the bus. He used his umbrella to point.

Paddy looked ready to pass out. “I’ll always remember that umbrella.”

Laughter rippled, with Sister Ann the loudest. Even Rose did her part.

The Shamrocks had little time to peruse the interpretive panels about the Irish plantation system and *The Troubles*. Mildred let Rose grumble for a while about fixed programs on tours.

Then she pressed her lips together and crossed her arms. “Well, dear, were you in a mood to organize your own solo trip? You’ve got that guide book in your pocket, but I don’t see you rushing about Ireland on your own. How often have you sailed your own ship?”

“That’s one thing I hate about myself. No initiative.”

A little later, Ally announced time to walk on the only complete city wall in Ireland, four hundred years old and never breached despite several sieges.

A deep laugh rolled out of Justus. “That’s why it was called The Maiden City.”

Rose thought back to Michael’s fondness for laying siege on her. She let her mind go back to that game, hot blood settling in her loins. He emerged from the shower, his warrior shoulders

wide and powerful, his hips trim and primed for engagement. He hadn't taken the time to shave his face, and a dark forelock forewarned of tortures ahead.

"Well, maiden, I've scaled the wall and taken the fortress. Now you're mine. What say you? Shall I rub your holy grail into insanity, or do you give in to my mounting your hill at once?"

She'd sat on the edge of the bed, pretending to tremble. Well, really trembling at the sight of his weapon.

"Grrrr!" He'd seized her by the laces on her medieval underwear and tugged her chemise and breast binder over her head. "Now give me those braies." She kicked off her panties. His dagger swung in front of her face, swelling as it advanced.

"Oh, Lord Michael. Mount me then, if you're man enough."

She was far away from the scenes of Derry passing by.

The bus maneuvered in front of one of the four original city gates. Ally was adamant on the timetable. "One hour. If you don't make it to the third gate in half an hour, you won't make it around, so come back the way you went."

Mildred peered at Rose hard. "You're sweating. Are you all right? What were you thinking just then?"

"Coming, little lady?" Justus hurried Mildred along with a hand under her elbow and an impressive belch. "Remember, don't give up that ring if the British attack."

Mildred brightened and held up her hand for him to examine. "Bernie gave me this."

Justus became more attentive. "It's an old European cut, solid platinum and diamond, over half a carat in the center stone, I'd say. Hmm...The ribbed design is unique. It could be a retro engagement ring, or it's original, and you've taken care with it."

"Hey, what about me?" Marge called to him.

"Exactly." Rose muttered. "There's way too much familial neglect going on." She had to admit, Michael had always been super attentive. Except when he drank.

Will disappeared into the post office, laden down with bags of yarn. He dropped some of them, and Claris lit into him.

Rose turned to Mildred. “The poor guy’s trying his best. Somebody ought to say something to that woman.” Michael’s parents came to mind, a couple who’d alternately ignored and picked at each other in their final years. Until he’d killed himself.

Rose marched up to where Claris leaned against the wall. “Claris, I’m going to say something to you, and I hope it helps your relationship.”

Claris looked blank.

“You don’t treat Will with respect, as far as I can see, and, though he’s not very attentive to you, he doesn’t deserve that.”

Claris squinted and made a *get away* gesture with her palms. “Okay, thank you, but I’m guessing you’re no better. She’d hit a nerve. Rose opened her mouth, but Claris wasn’t finished. “What’s the matter with you today? You’re awfully cross.”

“You’re right. In fact I’m irked...about a lot of things, including how you treat Will. You always act like you’re mad at him and he can’t do anything right. I would never act that way.”

Claris took a deep breath. “Sure you would. Don’t forget, I’ve seen your temper when you smashed the pottery. Didn’t you have a sibling or friend to take things out on?”

“Yes, but I never treated my husband that way. Though he yelled a lot when he was drinking.”

“Well, Rose, everyone has someone he loves enough to yell at. Let me know when you want to talk about what’s going on with you. And if you think you can do better with William, you can take him on.” Claris took refuge in the post office, leaving Rose with her mouth open.

Rose mounted the stone steps and strode along atop the fortification. Maybe Claris had the right idea. What made Rose think she knew how to treat a husband better than others? She looked back to the Michael of her past, the bereaved son, who’d sat at the table for hours, his head in his hands.

She’d yanked his hand. “Come on, Michael. Let’s go for a walk.”

“No, Rose. I don’t feel good.”

“Well, you won’t feel any better just sitting there. Come on. You need to get out.”

“I can’t Rose. I need to think. I’ve got to figure out how to get over this.”

“Why? All you do is think. I want to get some exercise. It will be good for you too. Please.”

“If you want to do what’s good for me, why don’t you leave me alone?”

Leave him alone? Hurt and angry, she’d slipped out of the house and taken the car to Inverness without saying goodbye. An hour later, laden with a bag of sketch paper and pencils, she’d found him bereft, pacing on the front porch. When he’d caught sight of her, he’d sprinted down the walk and caught her by both elbows.

His voice had trembled. “Where have you been? I was so worried. I can’t stand it if I lose you too.”

“Is that your business? You didn’t want to do anything with me. You just sit there sulking, and I’m supposed to watch? Well, I can entertain myself. Don’t worry about it.”

She’d stamped into the house, slamming the door behind her. She’d been in bed before he got inside. That night, he’d slept on the couch.

From then on, he no longer sat at the table feeling sorry for himself. The next day—and most days thereafter—he’d brought a six pack home after work.

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About the Author



Judith Kammeraad grew up a good girl under the triple onus of preacher-teacher-author's kid. A fecund imagination counted as a survival tool, and making up stories proved almost involuntary. Books were her best friends, and Dad showed her that words were the best fun ever. Mom voted for ladylike behavior and cookies. Fate led her to marry her high school sweetheart, who brought out her naughty side at last. The Kammeraad's settled down in Michigan and raised two daughters as creative as their mom, who encouraged them to embrace their inner quirkiness. Kammeraad devoted herself to a teaching career and created her stories and poems on the side.

These days the Kammeraad's and their talented sheltie live in Florida near their six grandchildren, who inspire her to write stories about children and spicy novels that break hearts and warm the spirit. And keep her laughing and crying all day. Meet Judith on Face Book, on Amazon Central, and on judithkammeraad.com where you can join her newsletter.