

Sweet Dreams by Claire

A Novel

Nanette Littlestone



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Dreams
by Claire*

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SWEET DREAMS BY CLAIRE

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To my sweet mother, Doris,
who supported and encouraged
my love of good food and good books.

Chapter 1

CLAREMORE, COUNTY GALWAY, IRELAND

MONDAY, JUNE 18

Food is more than just nutrition. Food is a gateway to adventure. Which is why my ancestors agreed there are two necessities in life: bread and dreams. The first, to nourish your body and keep it going. The second, to nourish your mind.

Twenty-two years the bakery sign for Bread and Dreams has watched over me, ever since I started helping at the age of five. The five-foot oval on the back wall commands your attention when you first walk in. The sky-blue middle reminds me of a cloudless summer morning and the powdery white trim a dusting of confectioners' sugar.

When I was little there was more adventure with the baking. Mam used to put hidden ingredients in the soda bread—pieces of candied fruit or chocolate—or make a different scone flavor every day. But things changed when my dad had to slow down for health reasons and decided to retire. The oomph fizzled out.

Dad was all for selling the bakery, but Mam couldn't give it up. The shop has been in her family for generations, going back to my great-great-

grandparents. I keep offering to take over more of the baking and introduce some new items, but she won't hear of it. And now we're competing with the new castle resort. The only way to stay afloat is to branch out, bring in a younger crowd of customers.

If only Mam weren't so set in the past. Having to take charge of the finances, the ordering, managing the suppliers—all that can sap your creativity. If I had the money to buy her out now and let her retire, I would. Then I could create and dream to my heart's content. Because dreaming is what makes baking so much fun. I want to experiment with exotic spices and flavors. Learn new techniques. Incorporate all of that into our food.

With that I look at the sign again, place my hand over my heart, and swear that someday I, Claire Francis, will have my own Bread and Dreams. A shop full of baking adventures. Not just the classic Irish staples like Barmbrack or soda bread—my mother's favorites. But magical concoctions with lemongrass or chilies or saffron. The ideas make my mouth water, and I long to go practice in the kitchen. Mam would curb my enthusiasm with practicality and satisfying our customers' needs. Barmbrack and soda bread are perfectly fine for the people we see (and they are tasty). But how can you know what you want if you never venture beyond the ordinary?

It's not that I don't love my family. It's a joy helping Mam with the baking and sales. But it's up to me to shape my future.

I look over the small shop with its worn wooden counter and eight display shelves. The cracks in the floor that Dad refinished ten years ago. The plates with chips along the edges that hold the free sugar cookies. This is fine for my mother, but I want more.

In the back the heavy aroma of yeast and butter and sugar take me on a baker's fantasy every time I work. Out here in front the smell is more subtle, a gentle tease that tickles my nose and invites me to explore.

The quiet lets my imagination soar. The counter in my dream shop would be longer than this one—at least an extra six feet—with separate showcases for bread, savory goods, cakes and tarts, and fancy desserts. The British baking show fills my head with visions of profiteroles, roulades, tea cakes, and dacquoises. To the left of the entrance would be a cluster of small tables and chairs for having tea or coffee with a pastry. And a few tables and chairs outside under umbrellas, like a French café. My mother doesn't want the shop crowded with people sitting, but I quite like the idea. It sounds cozy and neighborly. A way for people to relax and appreciate the food. On the opposite side of the entrance, along the side wall, would be shelves filled with baked goods

to go. Cellophane-wrapped mini loaves of quick breads or slices of cake. Plus a variety of tea and coffee in bright canisters.

I tighten my ponytail and push the straight brownish hair behind my shoulder, then tug on my polo shirt, the same blue as our logo with Bread and Dreams in white on the top left side.

Mam comes out from the back and places a tray of cupcakes on the counter. Soft brown curls frame an oval face that seems a little wearier than before. “Six vanilla and six chocolate,” she says. “For the taste testing at the castle.”

“Rodarc Resort? Who’s doing a tasting?” I reach to swipe at the frosting and she bats away my hand.

“A nice woman named Brigid. She’s getting married on Saturday.”

There was a Brigid Fallon here in town, but she married and moved to County Kerry. And Brigid Jordan, much too young for marriage, who went to London for university. Last year there was the big to-do with Brigid Cleary and that author Andrew Connally at Eva’s bookshop. People didn’t stop talking about that for months. But they went back home, across the pond. I clear my thoughts and focus on the task. “Won’t she want something special?” Everyone wants something special. Like spice cupcakes with a

candied ginger frosting. Or a chocolate and raspberry swirl with a raspberry sauce. “Let me make some—”

“Claire, these are—”

“It won’t take me a minute. You know how fast—”

“Claire, these are ready to go.”

“But they’re so plain.”

The half-smile on her face is the one she gives me when politeness wars with frustration. And I know I’ve overstepped. “All this giving out to me about the cupcakes. They’re fine,” she says, her voice crisp and direct, signaling an end to our discussion.

“But if she wants the ones we make, why doesn’t she come here for the tasting? Why do we have to take them to her?”

“So many questions, Claire. It’s a wonder your brain has any room for other things. Now get a move on. Brigid is expecting you.”

I pack the cupcakes in a box, careful to keep the frosting intact. Then I quietly sing a little ditty that came to mind the other day.

I gave the Taoiseach cupcakes

He put them to the test

And with a winning smile he said,

“These are just the best.”

Mam sighs. “You know there’s more to life than someone liking your cupcakes.”

I turn to her with a smile of certainty. “But the prime minister’s an important person, so that’s the grand prize. The ultimate success.”

She leans against the counter. “Is it now?”

I nod. “It is. If the head of our country likes them, then it proves I’m the best.”

“Ah, sweet girl,” she says. “You don’t have to prove that to anyone but yourself.”

The bell rings over the front door, interrupting our conversation. I don’t get to tell her, once again, that she’s wrong. What other people think matters. A lot.

She heads to the back and I grab a towel to wipe my hands as footsteps approach the counter. My least favorite customer.

I paste on a fake smile. “Mr. Foley. Welcome to Bread and Dreams.” My whole body tightens in resistance and I want to run. Instead, I grip the counter and force the automatic response. “What can I get you today?”

“Six of your almond scones and a dozen flaky dinner rolls,” he barks. A cloud of sweaty gym socks washes over me. “The really flaky ones,” he adds.

I nod and hold my breath until at least eight feet separate us, then I bend down and drag in clean air. A second or two to relax before I have to face him again. If he could just brush his teeth in the morning. Maybe use a little mouthwash. And in my head, I see Mam shake her head and say, “Now, Claire. Be kind to the man. He’s doing his best.” My mother the saint.

Chewing my lip, I gather his order and place the goods on the counter. “Will there be anything else?” I ask, hoping he’ll say no. I have an errand to run. But he dithers, and ers and ums, and walks the whole length of the counter—twice. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” I say under my breath.

He glares. “Excuse me?”

“Nothing, Mr. Foley.” My voice drips with honey. “Did you see anything else you wanted?”

He shakes his head no. Then he holds out payment and we play tug of war with the cash, his way of having a conversation. Too many seconds pass until he lets go, I put the cash in the till, and he grabs the bag and shuffles out of the shop.



The sun is bright this June morning, the sky as blue as a blueberry swirl. The walk to the castle will be fine. Good for my left leg. Even though it starts to

drag and my thigh twinges. I stop to rub it, gently, trying to knead out the pain. A cramp at thirty yards is not a good sign when there are still a couple miles to go.

Now is when I wish, once again, that I owned a car. A vehicle would make short work of the distance and save me all that time that I could be spending on new inventions. I can see myself driving down the road, the window open to let in the breeze, the smell of cut grass and fresh air and golden sunshine as sweet on my tongue as a piece of melting chocolate. I know cars are expensive, but just think of all the places I could visit, the tastes I could taste.

I've never even left Ireland.

With a sigh, I start up again, the box tucked against my side. Vanilla and chocolate cupcakes. How pedestrian. Already my brain is inventing something magical. Mysterious. Double dark chocolate with a cherry whipped cream frosting. Banana cake with a banana pudding center and macadamia nuts on top. Cranberry orange with an orange liqueur and candied pecan frosting. Whoever this Brigid is will be nodding and smiling and sighing ecstatically with each new taste and praising the fabulous concoctions.

I can't help the grin as all those flavors whirl in my head and take my mind off the effort of walking. Then I round the bend in the road and come face-to-face

with a dark-haired man on a bicycle. Barreling down at me, his mouth open in surprise.

I yelp.

He motions frantically.

I leap.

Landing on the side of the road jars my bad hip but thank God for the cushiony grass. I don't think anything's broken but there will be bruises. Large technicolor ones.

Brakes screech. He drops the bike on the pavement with a metal clang. Then he clomps over to me, his hands braced on his hips, his face an angry red. "What the hell were you doing in the middle of the road?"

Rude and unhelpful. Not to mention that he was in my way. "Well, excuse me for taking liberties on my walk. And I wasn't in the middle." It was more to the side. I try to get up and give a gasp as my hip burns.

His hands drop to his sides and his face gentles. "You're hurt."

"It's nothing." A persistent throb tells me otherwise. I also notice that he doesn't have an Irish accent.

"Here," he says and extends his hand.

Warm fingers clasp mine and pull me up. He's quite a bit taller than I am, with eyes like blue forget-me-

nots and thick waves of dark hair.

He steps back and I remember to stop staring, then I take stock of myself. My white runners (freshly washed) have new scuff marks, there are grass stains on my jeans and the hem of my shirt, and the throb turns to a constant pulsing. I shift my weight to my other leg. Otherwise, I'm okay.

But the cupcakes. The box I took such care with is flattened, and the road is an abstract smear of white and brown.

He walks over to the goopy mess and gingerly picks up the box. "What was it?" he asks, half serious, half laughing.

"It's not funny," I tell him. "Those were cupcakes. For a woman getting married. She's waiting on me now at the castle." I shake my head. "Mam will kill me."

"Maybe she'll be a little more lenient when I tell her it was my fault."

Nice of him to admit his blame. I almost smile at that. Perhaps he's not so bad after all. And definitely not Irish. American, maybe?

"I just happen to have an 'in' at the castle," he continues. "Let me give you a ride."

A ride? On what?

"Can you handle a bike?" he asks.

I shake my head, doing my best not to show my embarrassment. If I hadn't hurt my leg when I was little ... But what happened in the past is in the past.

He smiles then, a beautiful smile that draws me in. "All you have to do is sit on the seat. I'll take care of the rest."

"But I don't—"

Before I can finish saying I have nothing to bring, he rights the bicycle, guides me onto the seat with my feet dangling, then he straddles the bar, grabs the handles, and says, "Hold on." And we're off.

The sudden lunge forward has me clutching his waist. Which puts my focus on the rocking of his hips and the pull of his jeans as his legs propel us forward.

I have to admit his legs and backside are nice.

Quite nice.

Chapter 2

W e speed down the road, much faster than I could have gone even with a good leg. I close my eyes and revel in the breeze through my hair, past my face, ruffling my shirt, and the pleasure of the sun on my neck and shoulders. Even the pain in my hip has softened.

Gran is right to tell me I don't get out enough. I can't remember how many times she's invited me to go see her sister on Inis Mór, the largest of the Aran islands. But islands and I don't get along, and it's so much easier to travel the short distance to her house just down the road, where she waits for me with her healing balm, hot tea, and strong fingers. She spoils me and I'm grateful.

Someday I'll visit the island.

At the dip in the road I open my eyes and Rodarc Resort looms before me.

He brings us around to a side entrance and helps me off the bike. With a brisk, "Follow me," we go inside. Down a wide hallway with off-white walls and blue tiled floor and wall sconces that give off a warm light. We pass men carrying crates of fruits and vegetables, bags of flour, an assortment of stainless bowls and utensils. Someone on a ladder tinkers with

an overhead fixture. Then we walk into a cozy space with a table for four, where a chef talks to a woman with dark curls that are soft and springy, so different from my bland, straight hair. Steam rises from an elaborate white teapot and teacups wait to be filled.

The man who brought me here calls out, “Brigid, Chef,” as he pulls me over to the table. He kisses the woman on her cheek and shakes the man’s hand.

So this must be the Brigid Mam asked me to see. She’s slim and pretty in jeans and a soft green buttoned top.

“Finn, what are you doing here?” Brigid asks. “I didn’t expect to see you till later.”

Finn. A good Irish name for an American. I wonder how he knows Brigid and the chef.

“Didn’t Dad tell you? He’s got me overseeing some repairs to the Great Hall and the East Wing. The last bits before the guests come.”

“You? Overseeing?”

He shrugs. “I tried to tell him no but he wouldn’t listen. He did hook me up with some sailing in return.”

The mention of sailing makes me cringe. I ignore the tightness in my body and focus on the conversation.

“Well, good for you about the sailing,” Brigid says. “But I hope the repairs are done soon. We only have a

few days before the big event.” Her forehead creases and her energy seems to weaken. Then she smiles and peers over his shoulder at me. “And who is this lovely woman you brought with you?”

“She came with samples. Well,”—he says sheepishly—“there was a little accident, and I actually ran over the samples, but I’m sure we can fix the problem. Right?” He looks at me with a hopeful smile.

Brigid stands and her warm gaze takes me in. “You must be from the bakery. Thank you for coming. I’m Brigid Cleary.”

Facts suddenly slot into place. Brigid Cleary, the storyteller that everyone’s been talking about. Brigid Cleary, daughter of Patrick Cleary, who used to own the castle. Brigid Cleary, who’s getting married in a few days and having her wedding here at said castle.

“Claire Francis,” I reply. “From Bread and Dreams.” We shake hands and I admire her firm grip. “It’s an honor to meet you.”

“I think the honor’s mine,” she says. “My aunt raves about your pastries. I can’t wait to taste them. But I’m guessing cupcakes weren’t the only thing he ran over.” Her gaze takes in my stained clothes. “Are you alright?” She turns to Finn. “I hope you apologized to her. You did apologize?”

Finn straddles a chair and crosses his arms on the top. “Of course, I did,” he says with a wink.

A wink that might charm another woman, but not this one. I bite my lip at that and Brigid laughs. “My brother,” she says. “He thinks flirting with a woman makes up for bad manners. He doesn’t mean any harm. I do hope you’re okay.”

Her brother. So that’s what he meant by having an in. “I’m fine.” Except I have nothing to offer. “I’m so sorry the samples got destroyed.” I give Finn a glare, then turn back to Brigid. “But if you don’t mind the wait, I’d love to make you something.” Something way more adventurous than what my mother sent. Something that would give me the glorious opportunity of baking in a resort kitchen.

“I don’t mind at all,” Brigid says. “But I’m not in charge here.” She turns to Chef Alexandre. “Is that alright with you?”

I stand very still while the chef captures me in his gaze. It’s more than bold to invade another chef’s domain. He has every right to refuse.

He turns back to Brigid. “It’s up to you.”

“Thank you,” she tells him with a big smile. Then to me, “I’m excited to see what you’ll whip up.”

I give a half-grin, thinking the same thing. Chef Alexandre calls through a doorway, and a young man promptly appears, longish brown hair and a little gangly. “Allen, please show our guest the pantry and where to work,” the chef says. Then he addresses

Brigid. “If you’ll excuse me, I must get back to my kitchen.” He exits through the same door.

“I think that’s my cue to leave,” Finn says, then he turns to me. “A pleasure meeting you. Anytime I can give you a ride, just holler. My bicycle is at your command.”

How cheeky is that?

“I’ll see you later?” Brigid asks.

“For dinner.” He leaves the room whistling and there’s a look of longing on Brigid’s face as he walks out. The energy in the room has lost its sparkle and I sigh without even knowing why.

“This way,” Allen says to me.

“I won’t be long,” I say to Brigid. “I’ll come join you while they’re baking.”

“Oh, I’ll be fine. I don’t have to be anywhere for another hour.”

We smile at each other and my stomach clenches. An hour is a long time for someone waiting, but barely enough time to create something extraordinary, especially in a strange place. I cross my fingers as I follow my guide.

When I step into the space, I gasp.

I’ve seen state-of-the-art kitchens on TV, but I’ve never been in one. Until now.

It's enormous. Stainless steel as far as the eye can see—six-burner stoves, convection ovens, long tables, humongous mixers. Towering piles of identical pots and pans. Large sinks with high faucets where men and women in white aprons wash produce. And light everywhere, beaming from above and coming in through floor-to-ceiling windows. At one end a pastry chef rolls out dough while another chef cuts apart a chicken and assistants chop and slice and dice on thick cutting boards.

If I could have a dream kitchen, this would be it. Of course, it's far too much for a little bakery like Bread and Dreams. But I could see a much smaller version of this for my own shop.

Allen points out a mixer for me to use with counter space right next to it. Then I follow him to the pantry.

“There's a lot here,” he says. “But everything should be labeled.”

Shelves stretch from floor to ceiling, all filled with bins and tubs and perfectly organized inventory. Flours, sugar, honey, and syrup, rows of herbs and spices (I want to try them all!), cupcake papers, parchment paper, spoons, spatulas, pastry scrapers, bowls of all sizes, and measuring cups. And chocolate: Callebaut, Valrhona, Chuao, and Vosges in dark, milk, white, and ruby.

I'm dizzy trying to take it all in.

“I was pretty overwhelmed my first time too,” Allen says. “But you get used to it.” He pauses. “The door at the back leads into the refrigerated area for eggs and milk and anything else you might need. If you can’t find something, let me know.”

I nod, not quite able to speak. He starts to leave and I find my voice. “Wait.”

He stands there awkwardly with his weight on one leg, his arms dangling.

“I’m Claire. Thank you. For showing me around.”

“Sure.” He stares at me. “Can I ask you a question? How did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Get past Chef Alexandre. He doesn’t allow just anyone in his kitchen. You must be pretty special.”

My cheeks turn scarlet. “It can’t have anything to do with me. It must be Brigid.”

Allen gives a noncommittal shrug, then says, “Happy baking,” and leaves me alone.

I stare at the abundance of food and supplies for at least a full minute, then my brain clicks into gear. If I had all the time in the world, what experiments I would do. But Brigid is waiting, and Chef Alexandre certainly wants me out of here, so there’s no time to waste. The chocolate calls me, and I tap my fingers on the bin, thinking, thinking. Dark, rich, fudgy, maybe

with a little cinnamon or ginger, some cherries for a sweet contrast, the ruby chocolate for color on top. I grab supplies, pile them in a basket, and carry them out to the station Allen reserved for me.

Minutes later I'm preparing the batter for the cupcakes, slowly adding in the chocolate, fresh ginger, and cherries. I fill the pan with papers and spoon in the batter, then pop the cupcakes in the oven. While they're baking, I heat heavy cream and the ruby chocolate for the ganache, adding some chopped cherries at the end for color and flavor.

All around me the kitchen hums with the music of cooking. I thought I might visit Brigid while the cupcakes were baking, but I've been too preoccupied with my task. I set the ganache aside and look up to see a woman standing next to me. She points to the ganache. "May I?" My heart speeds as she dips in a spoon and tastes the concoction, her lips pursed in study. "Nice," she says. "I'd add a little cherry extract to enhance the flavor." Then she walks back to her pastry station.

I lean against the counter, waiting for my heart to calm while her *nice* spins in my brain. Then I race to the pantry, grab the bottle of cherry extract, and add a small amount. She was right. It does enhance the flavor.

The swirls of soft pink ganache look sweet and summery against the dark chocolate cake, and I hope I have a winner. I proudly carry them out to Brigid and set them on the table with a flourish. She closes her phone and looks at me with a bright smile.

“Chocolate cherry cupcakes,” I announce, “with a hint of ginger and a chocolate cherry ganache on top.”

“I just got a fresh pot of tea,” Brigid says. “Would you like a cup?” I nod and she pours for both of us. Then she peels back the paper on a cupcake and takes a bite of frosting and cake. Her mouth turns up at the corners and I hear a deep breath followed by a sigh. “Oh my God, Claire. These are wonderful!”

“Really?” I should have tried one but I didn’t have time.

Brigid laughs. “Really. Here.” She hands me a cupcake and I take a bite. The cake is moist and fudgy with a tang of spice and a hint of cherry, and the frosting has a perfect blend of chocolate and cherry. Not bad, if I do say so. I lean back in the padded chair and relax with my tea. This is going so much better than expected.

“These will be perfect for my party on Thursday,” Brigid says. “A little get-together my aunt is organizing. The last hurrah before I get married, so she said.”

“A hen party?” I ask. I haven’t been to one of those in years.

Brigid laughs. “I think she used that word. What does it mean?”

“Like your bachelorette parties. Some of them get a bit wild.”

“Well, I’m more of a quiet person,” Brigid says, “so I imagine this will be pretty tame. I think there are twelve people coming. Lady friends of hers that she assures me are very kind.”

My mind whirs with calculations as my heart flutters with excitement. Baking for a party will be such fun. Do I stick to the chocolate cherry flavor or add something else? Brigid hasn’t tried other flavors, so maybe the one is enough.

I wonder what kind of people she’ll have. Since she’s quiet, will everyone else be like her? Or the complete opposite?

She looks at me with a hopeful gaze. “I’m guessing most of the people will be my aunt’s age, or older. It would be so nice to have some younger people. Will you come? I’d really like you to be there.”

Nothing like a quiet life to leave my calendar wide open. “Are you sure? I mean, I’d love to. Thank you.”

“Thank you,” she says. “Aunt Maureen was right about you.”

Aunt Maureen. “Maureen Loughlin?” Even as I ask I know that’s who she means. My family has known Maureen for years.

“She adores you,” Brigid says. “Thinks you’re lovely and clever.”

Lovely and clever. My heart swells. “That’s very kind.”

Brigid reaches over and clasps my hand. “I’m so glad I got to meet you. I hope we’ll be good friends.”

Other women in the past have tried to be friends quickly but being with them felt forced. Off. With Brigid I’m instantly comfortable, like the warmth of Gran without the pressure of a relative. Just acceptance. I like her, this American. “I hope so too,” I respond with a squeeze. “Well, I better get back to the bakery and do some planning for your party.”

Brigid beams. “Thank you again.”

I leave the cupcakes with her, thank Allen and the kitchen staff, and exit the resort. Baking in that amazing kitchen was definitely the highlight of my day. Maybe my year.

As I make my way back to Bread and Dreams, I’m already envisioning the party and those spectacular cupcakes. I can feel the excitement of people trying out my baking. People who haven’t tasted my food

before. People who will place orders and spread the word and help make my dreams come true.

Chapter 3

Late afternoon, after the bakery closes, I visit my grandmother, Oona Francis. I love my mother, but I've always been closer to Gran. Her support of my baking endeavors, her cuddles, the way she includes me in her knitting group—even though I'm terrible with yarn—make me feel so appreciated.

She's out in the garden today, pulling weeds and stroking the heads of her herbs. Her white hair coils in a bun at the back like a cloud of meringue, the sleeves of her denim shirt rolled up. I hold the cake I've brought with one arm and lean over to give her soft cheek a kiss.

“Claire, me darlin'. It's so good to see you. Here,” she holds out her hand, “help an auld woman to her feet.”

I grasp her hand and give my grandmother a gentle tug, a woman who is not at all feeble, even though she pretends to be. Then we hug, and I rest in her warmth and comfort for several moments.

When she pulls away, she looks into my eyes. “Have you met him yet?” she asks.

“Who?”

She takes my arm and leads me to her home. “Sure, the man you’re going to marry. Tall, dark, and handsome.” Her wry smile holds a hint of mirth. “My knitting showed me.”

“Didn’t it show you someone last month and a few months before that? You know there isn’t anyone.” For me, I say under my breath.

We enter through the cheery front door—red, to ward off evil spirits and ghosts. Every time I walk inside Gran’s house there’s a feeling of welcome, an invisible hug from the rose-papered walls and chenille couches piled with cozy hand-knitted afghans. I pause for a moment, basking in Gran’s essence, then I follow her into the dining room to get ready for the weekly knitting group.

I stack her favorite Belleek cups and plates on the dining table alongside the lemon thyme pound cake with lemon glaze and crystallized roses and violets on top. “Gran, you’ll never believe where I was this morning,” I tell her with a wide grin.

“At the castle.”

Those three little words take away my big surprise. “Who told you?”

“You know how news travels,” she says. “Your mother told Maureen and Maureen told me. But all I know is that you were there. I’ve been waiting all day to hear the details from you.”

“Oh, Gran. The resort kitchen is so ... tremendous! Bigger and better than anything I could have imagined. Just as wonderful as the kitchens on the cooking shows on TV.”

I regale her with descriptions of the equipment and the pantry, going on and on about the immense space. She smiles as she listens, folding napkins and laying out silverware for the guests. Food before knitting, Gran has taught me. Satisfy the senses, then the mind can concentrate on its task.

By the time we finish, people start arriving. The ladies near my grandmother's age come first. Eileen, with her close-cropped dark hair that she's been dyeing for more than twenty years. Orla, tall and straight with tortoiseshell glasses that constantly slide down her ski slope nose. And Nora, the quiet one who always wears pink. They greet Gran with *Dia dhuit* and a hug, then they smile at me and give me air kisses on both cheeks, which always makes me laugh (silently, so I don't offend them). Maureen, with her long blond hair, comes last in an ivory dress that shows off her beautiful figure. I hope to look so young when I'm in my fifties.

With everyone here, Gran pours the tea and I slice the cake and blush with pleasure as they clap in delight. We all take our food into the living room and settle in, Nora to my right and Gran to my left. Gran leads us in a blessing to keep us well and protect us

from harm. Then silence falls while we eat and my shoulders tense. I try not to stare at the ladies, to watch them surreptitiously, because whenever I serve food I need to know what people think. Yes, I hope they like what they're eating. But I want more. Is the sweetness level right? Is the cake moist enough? Can they taste the thyme?

Eileen closes her eyes and nods, her lips in a sweet smile. Orla keeps a constant rhythm of fork to mouth. And Nora shyly glances at me while she chews and holds up her thumb and first finger in a circle. But Maureen is the first to voice an opinion. "Claire, sweetheart, this is delicious. So moist and packed with lemon flavor. And something subtle, like a hint of herb beneath that. You'll have to give me the recipe, if you're kind enough to share."

My tension flies away and my body relaxes. "I'm happy to share," I tell her with a grin. "And it's thyme. The herb you tasted."

"Thyme," Maureen says. "So clever. I knew you were the right one for Brigid."

"The right one?"

Maureen sets down her plate. "She said the cupcakes were, and I quote"—she raises her fingers in the air—"divine and she can't wait for everyone else to try them."

“Oh.” She called them *divine*? The word sinks softly into my skin like a lavender-scented bath. A feeling I’d like to stay with for a long time.

Sounds of silverware on porcelain fill the background as I sit in a warm daze. Eventually, the eating and drinking end, and everyone pulls out their knitting. Gran and her sister and the three older ladies used to be the Knitters from Inis Mór, when they all lived on the island. But soon after Gran moved to Claremore, the other three followed. Only Gran’s sister, Deirdre, stayed behind.

I watch them now, how they seem so comfortable with their projects. Nora works a cable stitch on her pink vest in the thinnest yarn, wielding three needles with ease. Gran is making an Aran design on circular needles with multiple colors and swirly patterns. I can barely follow how she twines the colors. Eileen creates an intricate lace pattern with twists and holes that boggle my mind. And then there’s me. I wrestle the gray scarf I’m working on from the carrying bag and dump it on my lap. Garter stitch, Gran gave me to start. Just rows and rows of knit. The easiest pattern there is. If I wanted, I could add a row of purl stitches every so often to give it some flavor. But somehow I keep messing up and either lose stitches or add more. The needles feel too long and too clunky, and the yarn fights me every stitch. With Gran and Nora there’s the soft clack of their needles as the yarn winds around

and in and over and behind in a marvelous dance, and I wonder how long it took them to learn or if they have a magic ability I'll never have.

With a sigh I pick up my knitting and clumsily poke the needles together.

“Claire, I can't stop thinking about that delicious cake we just had,” Maureen says. Unlike everyone else who can knit and talk at the same time, I stop to look at Maureen. She continues. “Brigid is so lucky to have you baking for her. What a treat.” Her eyes are bright and lively and full of care. “She also mentioned you had quite the momentous encounter with her brother.”

“Whose brother?” Nora asks.

“Brigid's brother,” Maureen answers. “Finn. A handsome young man.”

The memory of riding behind him on the bike—those firm hips and thighs—makes me squirm in my chair. I shouldn't be thinking of him like that.

Gran turns to me with a falsely innocent gaze. “I don't suppose he happens to be tall with dark hair.”

“He most certainly is,” Maureen says.

“Sure, that's what I told you,” Gran crows and pokes her finger at me.

“Is that Claire's boyfriend?” Orla asks.

“Absolutely not,” I say. A mortifying blush climbs up my face.

“Not yet, dear,” Gran says with a twinkle in her eye. “But give it time.”

I scowl at Gran. Everyone knows as well as I do that he’s not for me. “As if he’d ever go out with me.”

“Claire, *leannán*,” Maureen chides, “why do you say things like that?”

“You know.” I self-consciously point to my leg.

Even from across the room, Maureen’s warmth reaches out to me and gives a tight hug. “You had an accident when you were little,” she says. “That was all. The scars you carry are only as deep as you make them.” Her gaze is deep, her words encouraging. But kind words don’t change the facts. Men want a woman who’s pretty on the outside.

Maureen turns to Gran. “What time should we start setting up on Thursday for Brigid’s party?”

Gran doesn’t stop knitting to answer. “It’s for 6:30, so 5:45 should give us enough time. Claire can come early too and help out, won’t you?”

She looks at me and I say, “Of course.” Then I remember to ask, “How many people are coming?”

“Twelve, I think,” Maureen says. “But let’s check again. The six of us and your mother,”—she counts on her fingers—“plus Eva Sheridan, Janet Grealy, Brigid,

her friend Annemarie, and her sister Maebh. Yes, twelve. A number of harmony and abundance. The perfect complement to launch Brigid on her new journey of togetherness with Andrew.”

When she puts it that way, it does sound perfect. And in keeping with the theme of twelve, I decide to make thirty-six cupcakes. Two each would probably be enough, but more is always better.

“Don’t forget to wear pink,” Maureen adds. “We’re doing everything in pink and white.”

I nod and make a note on my phone.

“I’ll put out my china and silver,” Gran says. “Good thing I still have twelve of everything. And I’ll have the finger sandwiches ready. Do we want cloth napkins or paper napkins?”

“Oh, paper napkins,” Maureen says. “I found the cutest ones at a shop in Galway. They’re pink and white with the words Love and Kisses.”

Nora beams. “My favorite colors.”

Maureen looks to me. “Claire, you’re bringing the cupcakes.”

I nod.

“What flavor?” Eileen asks, leaning forward as she seems to eye the cake across the room. She has such a sweet tooth.

“Chocolate cherry cupcakes with ginger and a cherry ganache frosting.”

Eileen clasps her hands and her smile broadens. “Oh my.”

I bite my cheek to keep from laughing. “I hope you’ll like them.”

She nods with vigor several times. “Sure, I will.”

I return to my knitting and manage a few stitches without any mishap. Then Gran says, “Loosen up, Claire. You’re holding everything too tight.”

She might as well give me an engraved plaque with those words. She says the same thing every time I’m here.

“Like this,” she says and demonstrates. She holds the needles comfortably in her hands with the yarn threaded through her fingers. She slips the right-hand needle into the loop on the left-hand needle, flicks the yarn around the needle, and slips the stitch onto the right-hand needle. Piece of cake. For her. It would be so much easier to *make* a cake than to copy that little step. When I try, the needles sag, I can’t get the tip into the loop, and after I wrap the yarn around the needle, I can’t sort out how to get the loop off without dropping it. And if I drop it, which I usually do, forget the whole thing. Knitting may be relaxing and therapeutic for the rest of them, but it’s torture for me.

Gran reaches out and runs her fingers over the rows I've managed to do. Where her rows are as even and meticulous as a machine-knitted sweater, mine are bumpy and misshapen. She nods to herself, several times, then pats my hand. "You'll get this, Claire. I know you will. It just takes practice. Right now, your stitches are too tight. No wonder you feel like you're fighting. The yarn is telling you to ease up. Stop trying to do everything perfectly and just have some fun. Live a little."

The others stop for a moment and gaze at me with soft looks and kind smiles. Then Orla asks Gran about Deirdre, and the chatter resumes.

I look at the mess in my hands and chew on my lip. I have fun, and I'm trying to live a little. But I'm not sure I can let go of perfection. Baking requires precision. It's all about the chemical reactions. The right amounts of ingredients produce amazing confections that delight the taster. The wrong amounts create disaster. You can't just add a spoonful of this and a cup of that without knowing what you're doing. If your measurements aren't perfect, things don't work.

I know she's trying to be helpful, but sometimes you just have to be the way you are.

Chapter 4

TUESDAY, JUNE 19

Last night my dreams were filled with visions of the kitchen at Rodarc Resort. Miles of counters and twelve-burner stoves and an endless supply of men and women in white jackets bowing to me and whipping up magnificent creations. Right before I woke up, I had just served important guests their dessert, waiting for them to dig in and tell me what they thought.

Today my ponytail swings as I survey our showcase at Bread and Dreams. Front and center are the almond scones, Barmbrack, and soda bread—Mam’s constants. But next to the scones are six peach tarts, fresh out of the oven, the caramelized fruit glistening. Just waiting for some deserving person to take them home. Mam can’t fault me for using up the extra peaches.

When the bell jingles, I cross my fingers. A man walks in and comes up to the counter.

A man I recognize.

Finn.

Looking carefree in jeans and a cotton candy pink polo that Nora would love. Not many men can carry

off pink, but he does it well. Very well. He nods at me, his hands in his pockets. “Claire.”

“Finn.” My shoulders tense. What in the world is he doing here?

“I came to apologize,” he says.

“For what?”

“For running you over. Sending you into a ditch. Causing pain and dismemberment.” He smiles a little. “Well, maybe not dismemberment.”

The tension eases. “No, I’m still in one piece.”

“Thank God for that.” He places his hands on the counter and leans closer and my heart thumps hard.

“So, about that apology,” I prompt.

“Right.” He takes my hand and warmth leaps up my arm. Then his eyes gaze into mine. Deep blue eyes that make it hard to concentrate. “I’m sorry, Claire. I acted badly. Will you let me make it up to you?”

I try to pull my hand away, but he doesn’t loosen his grip. “You don’t need to do anything. I’m fine.” My hip chooses that moment to start throbbing.

“You’re not,” he says. “I saw that grimace. Look, if you need medical attention, I’ll pay for it. Whatever you want. If not, let me take you out for dinner. I just happen to know a very talented French chef.”

Is he talking about Chef Alexandre? I haven't tasted his food but all the promotion for the castle resort plays up the Michelin-star cuisine. Who wouldn't want to try that?

Of course he's only asking because he feels obligated. Because of his sister. "Did Brigid put you up to this?" I remember how insistent she was about an apology.

"She was right about apologizing."

"Well, I accept your apology. Now is there anything I can get you before you leave? We have some beautiful peach tarts."

"I love peaches," he says, still gazing at me.

I take a tart out of the display case and hand it to him on a napkin. "In exchange for your apology."

He takes a bite and his eyes light up. "This is good." He takes another bite and chews slowly. "Really good."

A little shiver of excitement runs up the back of my neck. "I'm glad."

"But I won't feel complete until I take you to dinner."

The tart was supposed to work. "You know I can't stay out late. Baker's hours." A handy excuse that deters most people.

"Got it. I'll have you back early."

He's very determined. "Okay," I say. "But only because there's food involved."

"Great." He grins and my body feels happy. "I'll pick you up at six."

Then I panic. Fancy cuisine means fancy attire and I don't own anything glam. "Do I need to dress up?"

"No, casual is fine. Just be comfortable." He takes another bite of tart, squeezes my hand, rewards me with a big smile, then he's out the door.

"See you at six," I say to an empty shop.

Dinner with Finn. Oh my.



Our usual morning customers fill in after Finn's departure. Hannah wants two loaves of soda bread for her family's afternoon picnic in the park just past the pub. Mrs. Kelly buys a dozen scones for her bridge club tea. Connor takes a poppy seed cake and two-dozen chocolate cupcakes (the simple kind) for the football team.

My hands are full with orders and casual conversation, keeping me from thinking about Finn and dinner.

A few minutes later Brigid walks in. Pale with jittery hands that tap the counter in an off rhythm.

Even her periwinkle shirt that compliments her hair and skin doesn't lessen her paleness. Foregoing the pleasantries, I jump right in. "What's the matter?" Mam often tells me I'm too blunt, but directness saves so much time.

Her finger tapping increases and I want to hold her hands to calm them.

"I know this is ... well, I shouldn't even ask ... you know, never mind." She shakes her head. "I shouldn't have come." But she looks at me with panic in her eyes. And she hasn't turned to leave.

I wait, tamping down my impatience.

Finally, she says, "I don't have a dress."

"For the party?" I doubt anyone would care what she wears. We're not a fashion center here in Claremore.

"No. The wedding. On Saturday." Her voice is little more than a whisper, strained and almost cracking.

"I see." Though I don't see at all. Is she trying to find a dress in our little town that has only one dress shop? Please tell me she isn't one of those brides who has to have utter perfection and won't settle on anything less than a high-priced designer dress. I've seen those shows where the brides go on storming rampages and throw horrible fits. But Brigid doesn't seem like that kind of person.

She takes a deep breath and then her words rush out. "I know we've just met, and you don't know me at all, and I barely know you, but Aunt Maureen is organizing all the wedding details and doesn't have time and I don't really have anyone else and something horrible has happened and if you would just come with me and give me your opinion that would be so nice."

I reach over and pat her hand, trying to give her comfort. "I'd be happy to go with you."

Her hands and body relax. "Oh, Claire. Thank you."

I simply nod because I have no clue what we're talking about. "It'll all work out," I say. "Where are we going?"

"To the dress shop in town."

"Just so you know, I don't have much experience with wedding dresses."

"That's okay." She twists the ring on her right hand, a beautiful green stone. "I have a slight advantage."

"What advantage?"

"Is it alright if I tell you on the way to the shop?"

"Sure, you can." With the exception of Brigid, the bakery is empty. Mam is in the back finishing a plain chocolate cake for my father. There are no immediate deliveries or orders to fill. "Let me just tell my mother." I push open the door to the back. "Mam,

would you mind watching the shop for a bit? Brigid wants me to go with her to the dress shop.”

Mam sets down the bowl of frosting and comes out front. “Brigid, love. It’s so nice to see you.” They exchange a warm hug. “I’m looking forward to the party, dear. I hope you liked the cupcakes.”

Brigid smiles sweetly. “They were wonderful, Mrs. Francis.”

“Oh, please, call me Rose. And have a good time at the dress shop.”

“Thank you,” she says.

I give Mam a quick kiss and my thanks. Then Brigid and I are out the door and walking in the soft Irish sunshine.

She hurries down the road, much too fast for me to keep up. After lagging for several yards, I ask if she can slow down.

She stops. “I’m so sorry. I wasn’t thinking. You’re still recovering from your fall yesterday.”

I don’t bother to correct her or to mention that her brother asked me to dinner. I wouldn’t mind knowing a little more about him. But that would mean opening myself to all those embarrassing questions about dating. And assumptions. Two things I’d rather avoid.

We proceed at a slower pace that lets me enjoy the morning air, the green of the summer grass, the

honeyed smell of red clover and the sharp hint of wild thyme in bloom along the road. “I hope I get to meet your husband. I mean Andrew. I’ve heard wonderful things about him.” I read *Queen of the Irish Seas* some months after it came out. There was so much talk about it in the village that I had to get a copy. Even though I’ve never been a fan of mysteries, it was an amazing book. All the sailing was hard to stomach, but the love story between Raven and Carrick almost made me believe in love.

“You’ll meet him at the rehearsal dinner. You’re coming to that, aren’t you? And the wedding? I need all the support I can get.”

I look at her in surprise. A hen party is one thing, but a rehearsal dinner and wedding? “I didn’t know I was invited. That’s so nice of you. But I’m sure you have all the people you need.”

She shakes her head. “It’s completely selfish. I don’t have any friends here, really. No one my age anyway. And I like you.” That pure smile is like a lighthouse beacon, drawing me in. She and Finn share that magnetism.

A tingle runs through me in agreement and cements my feelings from yesterday. “I like you too.”

She links arms with me. “That’s settled then. And you’ll love Annemarie.”

“Annemarie?”

“My best friend in New York. She’ll be here in a couple days.”

“Right.” The friendship tingle fades. But what was I thinking? I can’t expect BFF status when we’ve just met.

We walk in silence for a bit, and I try to let go of expectations. “You were going to tell me about the dress. What happened?”

Brigid’s grip on my arm tightens. “Do you know about my ring?”

I’ve only had a cursory glance at her engagement ring. “It’s a beautiful diamond. Did Andrew choose it?”

“Not my engagement ring. The emerald.” She loosens her grip on my arm and points to the ring on her right hand. A dark square cut stone that seems to lighten as I watch. “It’s magical.”

Magical. A word that conjures sorcerers and wizards. Everyone believes in the magic of Ireland, from the tales of the Tuatha De Danaan to the stories of faeries and selkies. Maureen has a strong intuitive sense of the people and things around her. And Gran has a knack for feeling the energy of people in their knitting. I’m open to magic, though I’ve never personally experienced it.

But right now, Brigid needs support. “Magical?” I ask.

She nods. “When I was here last summer it showed me a vision of my childhood friend, Rory Sheridan. The boy who died in a terrible accident.” She presses close to me for a moment, and I sense her distress. “Then before Andrew and I were engaged, I saw us getting married by the castle.” She relaxes then, her expression wistful and dreamy.

“You saw these things?” I ask.

“As if I’d closed my eyes and imagined them. But I didn’t imagine. The pictures came to me, like a dream unfolding.”

“So you knew you were coming back here?”

“I did. The ring even showed me my dress. Not all the buttons or the beading but a flowing white gown that made me feel I was in a fairy tale with my handsome prince.” She blushes and laughs. “Look how I go on.”

Remembering your childhood, well, that’s something we all do. But seeing into the future ... that’s quite a gift. “I think it’s wonderful how much you and Andrew love each other. That’s how it should be.”

“Do you have someone? I haven’t even thought to ask if you’re married or have kids.”

“No. To all of it.”

“Well, you will. In time.”

I don't even shake my head. That's just a pipe dream for someone like me. And we need to get back to the dress. We're close to Mrs. Grealy's shop. "What happened after those visions?"

"I told my sister, Maebh, what I'd seen, and she showed me several vintage dresses in her shop. There was one from the 1940s in white satin with a little lace at the neck, a fitted waist, and a long train that you could swirl around in front. It fit beautifully, just some tiny alterations needed. Maebh took care of handling everything and sent it to the shop here to be ready for my wedding." She stops abruptly and swallows hard. "But it's gone. Never delivered. I tried to ask Maebh to follow up but she doesn't have time. What Mrs. Grealy showed me is off the shoulder and modern and not at all what I want." Her eyes well and she blinks and turns away.

Of all the things to go wrong with your wedding, this is definitely bollixed up. "Have you talked to your aunt? Can't she help you?"

"Aunt Maureen has so much on her plate right now. I don't want to bother her. She doesn't need unnecessary worry."

This is the farthest thing from unnecessary, but it's not my place to argue. "What about your sister? Can she bring another dress?"

"It won't be the same. That was one of a kind."

Yes, but. Isn't something better than nothing? "Let's take a look around the shop and see what Mrs. Grealy can do for you. Something will work out." I squeeze Brigid's arm. But her pale face wrinkles with worry.

A short while later Mrs. Grealy brings out the dress. Her shop is miniscule compared to the luxury shops on TV. But even in her tiny space the white satin gleams and sparkles and I draw in a breath of admiration. It may not be what Brigid wanted, but anyone wearing this dress is sure to look wonderful. "Did you try it on?" I hope my smile shows warmth and certainty.

"Not yet," she says. "It didn't feel right."

"But it's a lovely dress, dear," Mrs. Grealy puts in. "Please do try it on. We need to see how it looks on you. And we can take care of any last-minute alterations."

Brigid sighs and my heart goes out to her. "Just give it a go," I say softly. "Maybe it'll be better than you think."

She follows Mrs. Grealy to the dressing room while I wait out front and stroll around the shop. Several of my cousins have married over the years and I've watched them page through bridal magazines, mulling over satin or silk, lace or beading, veil or no veil, or maybe a tiara. But the bridesmaid dresses—such god-

awful designs. I pray I never get asked to be a bridesmaid.

A few minutes later, Brigid walks out to the front. The satin dress is beautiful. Sleek and rich and sensuous and so wrong for her. It's trying to be sexy when she needs to be soft and feminine.

"You look gorgeous," Mrs. Grealy says, straightening here, fluffing there, pulling at the waist in the back. "Simply gorgeous. I'm sure your man will be all agog when you walk down the aisle." She stands back and gazes, her hand on her heart. "You know, I still remember when your mother got married. What a beautiful dress that was. Fit for a queen. She looked like a movie star with her long red hair."

Brigid's hands clutch the sides of her dress. I keep my mouth shut while this goes on. My opinion doesn't matter.

Then Brigid turns to me. "Claire? What do you think?"

So much for keeping quiet. My throat is tight, probably because I don't want to deliver bad news. I give a tiny shake of my head and her mouth starts to tremble.

"That's what I thought," she says. "Thank you, Mrs. Grealy, but I can't wear this."

"Are you certain, dear? It looks lovely on you."

Brigid doesn't answer. She gathers up the folds of the dress and shuffles back to the dressing room.

"There are plenty of other dresses to choose from," Mrs. Grealy says in a helpful voice. "I'm sure you can find something."

When Brigid exits the dressing room, we thank Mrs. Grealy and go outside, away from the dress disaster, and take a seat on a nearby bench.

Brigid's hands clench and her mouth twists and her cheeks quiver with her effort not to cry. "I don't know what to do. I had all these hopes and expectations. I wanted everything to be perfect."

I give a little laugh at that, recalling the words Gran said to me at the knitting circle. *Stop trying to do everything perfectly and have a little fun.*

Brigid wipes her eyes. "Please tell me you're not laughing at me."

"No." I stroke her arm gently. "I would never do that. I was just remembering what my gran told me last night at her knitting circle. I'm terrible at knitting, by the way. Everyone else is a pro, making all these beautiful scarves and sweaters, and I can't seem to work the yarn around my fingers and the needles. I feel so clumsy."

"I would too. Maybe I can join you next time and you won't feel so bad." Her mouth holds a glimmer of a

smile.

“I’d like that.” I give her arm a squeeze. “Anyway, Gran said I’m trying too hard to be perfect. That I need to let go and have a little fun.”

“She said that about you?” Brigid gazes at me with her deep green eyes. “You seem so relaxed. Like everything’s a breeze.”

“I sure have you fooled.” I sit back and watch the sky, the shifting colors, the slant of the sun, the leaves of the nearby oak tree whispering in the breeze. If there’s a message for us, I hope it finds us. We could use a little magic now. Then I slip my hand through Brigid’s arm. “I’m sorry about your dress. But there’s an answer somewhere. We just have to find it.”

“I’m glad I have you for a friend, Claire. So very glad.” We exchange mobile numbers because that’s what friends do, even temporary ones. Then she leans her head on my shoulder and I sit in silence, praying hard that a dress will somehow mysteriously present itself.

Any time now would be good.

Chapter 5

Part of me wanted to confide in Brigid about Finn and dinner, to see if she had any advice for me. **P**Woman to woman, from the perspective and advantage of being his sister. But I'm better off not mentioning it. It's just dinner. I'll be home before you know it and that will be that.

Mam leaves at four o'clock to pick up some groceries. "Have fun tonight," she says on her way out the door.

I roll my eyes. "He's just doing it to apologize."

She stops and turns. "It's a night out with a handsome young man. Enjoy yourself. You can tell me all about it when you get home."

"Not going to happen," I mutter to myself.

Mam winks and blows a kiss.

I welcome the quiet, the time to dream about my future. I don't get much farther than Brigid's wedding when wedding cakes come to mind. Rectangular layers coated in a chocolate glaze with white or pink rose petals trailing from top to bottom. Traditional rounds in white frosted in a lacy pattern with a frosting satin bow. In no time at all I'm sketching rounds and rectangles, outlines of flowers, pretend ribbons and intricate beading. Colored pencils create

soft shades, checkered patterns, a mirror glaze of vivid blue.

Time passes while I'm lost in a world of design, pouring out my creativity on ideas that no one will see.

Then Finn walks in.

He wasn't supposed to be here until six. I glance at the clock and he's right on schedule. Where did the time go?

Nervous, I push the papers to the side. Finn is still wearing the pink polo shirt and jeans he wore this morning. Still looking unreasonably good in casual wear. I hope my light blue shirt and tan trousers are alright.

He leans on the counter and smiles. "Are you ready?"

Now or never. "Sure."

I lock up the bakery and follow him to a white BMW. We get in and I sink into the plush red leather seat. Finn takes off and we cruise down the road, our windows open, while he shifts and negotiates the turns with ease. "You don't mind the left-hand driving?" I ask. Most foreigners detest it, especially the turns and traffic circles.

"I've done a lot of traveling around the world for sailing. You'd be surprised at all the places where

people drive on the left. Africa, Asia, Australia, the Caribbean. If there's something I can learn, I want to learn it. I discovered some beautiful scenery and amazing locations that I wouldn't have been able to access without a car."

I stare at him in wonder. All that travel, all those places he's been. Places I'll never go.

"You're staring," he says.

"I envy you."

"You could travel. Why don't you?"

"My mother needs me at the bakery." I leave it at that.

He turns onto the highway, and we leave Claremore. "You haven't told me where we're going."

"It's a surprise." He reaches behind him to pat a large picnic basket. "But I've kept my promise. There will be good food."

I'm already salivating, and I have no idea what's in the basket. Once I start thinking about food, I'm a one-way street. "Food is my favorite topic. There are so many things I want to try. Like those custard tarts from Portugal—pastes de nata."

"Pah-stay-ees," Finn corrects.

"Pah-stay-is," I say, not correctly but better, and I marvel at his facility for language. "And those round,

syrupy sweets from India.”

“Gulab jamun,” he says and glances at me. “Those are so good. Really sweet, but they melt in your mouth and the syrup has that hint of rose and cardamom.”

My mouth gapes at his description. “How do you know so much about food?”

“I’m an explorer. Food should be appreciated, so why not enjoy life by eating well?”

An explorer. The very thing I am with my baking. I ask Finn about his travels, and he tells me stories about the Maori meals where they cook the food underground, the steamed pork buns in Singapore, the boerewors sausages in Cape Town. They sound incredible and I love our combined passion for food and the willingness to try new things. “I keep a list of exotic foods and spices I want to taste. Every time I watch a baking show, I have this urge to experiment. I love it when bakers try out strange combinations like passion fruit with chili peppers or strawberry and basil. When I have my own shop, I’ll create all the things I’ve learned about.”

“Tell me about it. Your dream shop.”

The fantasy spins in my mind with all its details. “It’ll be a little bigger than the one my parents own now, with lots of showcase room for breads and sweets and some fancy creations. A few tables and chairs inside, plus several outside with umbrellas for

shade. And I want to sell tea and coffee for people to take home.”

“What are you waiting for?” Finn asks.

“I don’t have the money. My dad retired several years ago for health reasons, and Mam is wearing herself out with the business end of things. Dad thought she should quit but she wanted to keep going. I want to buy her out so she can retire and live the good life with my dad.”

“Won’t the shop be yours when your mother retires?”

“Someday, I guess. But I don’t want to wait that long.”

The wind plays with the ends of my ponytail as I watch the scenery pass by. We’ve reached the outskirts of Tuam where the plots of land in their many greens remind me of the patchwork quilt Gran made me when I was seven. Kelly green, emerald green, spring green, grass green, plus the lighter shades of burnished growth and worn edges.

We drive in a quiet silence, my brain filled with color, then the color morphs to food again. I remember the question I used to ask in school when I met someone new. “What’s your favorite food?”

“After all the talk of traveling, this might sound silly. But when I was growing up in New York, Brigid

and Maebh and I used to stop by this Irish bakery on our way home from school. Mrs. McGrady would serve us tea and cookies, these big oatmeal cookies fresh out of the oven and just firming up. I couldn't get enough of them. They were so good and Mrs. McGrady never made us pay."

"Irish oat cookies." I sigh with amazement that Finn would like something so simple and homey. "They're one of my favorites. You can't beat all that Irish butter. Whenever I need a touch of comfort, I always make those. They're perfect on a cold day with a big cup of tea and a warm blanket."

His lips curl into a smile and I settle back in my seat to watch him, his right hand lightly cradling the steering wheel, his left on the gear lever. The waves of his dark hair lift and feather in the breeze, and the muscles in his arms bunch and relax with each movement. He's so at ease, as if he's just posing for a photo. Little sparks of attraction dance along my skin, but I can't help wondering if he should be somewhere else, with someone else.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask.

"Doing what?"

"Why are you taking me to dinner? I accepted your apology. You didn't need to do anything else, especially take me for a drive to ... to wherever we're going. Where *are* we going?"

“It’s a surprise. If I tell you, I’ll spoil it.”

It’s a good thing I like surprises. “Can you tell me the general location? We’re obviously heading south.”

“Perceptive,” he grins. “I like a woman with a sense of direction.”

“Well, I’ve been to Galway a few times, and this is how we went.”

“What’s in Galway?”

“The most wonderful baking shop. It’s called Stuff 4 Cakes and it has everything a baker could need. All of the basics, like papers and bakeware, plus colors and pastes and edible dusts and chocolate decorations and so many flavors.”

He’s watching me and I blurt out, “Keep your eyes on the road.”

“We’re fine,” he says and gives my hand a squeeze. There’s a burst of unexpected warmth that lingers when he moves away. “Your face lights up when you talk about baking. You really love what you do.”

The acknowledgment makes me blush, with pride and a little joy. It’s nice of him to notice. “I do. I want to be the best baker there is. Mam says that’s ridiculous, that I don’t need to prove myself to others. But it’s not. I want to be the best.”

“Maybe you already are,” he says. “That peach tart was terrific. But she’s right about trying to prove

yourself. That's a hard road. One that seems never-ending sometimes." He puts one hand on the steering wheel, his other arm in the open window frame. "My dad's in construction. You probably know he used to own Rodarc Castle until he sold it to developers. Now he's in partnership with them and he sent me here to oversee the repairs."

I hear frustration in his voice. "Isn't that a good thing?"

Finn growls. "No. I hate construction. Well, architecture is cool, and what they've done with the castle is great. They've managed to maintain the historical aspects of the castle and modernize the interior. The rooms and equipment have been brought up to par, along with all the technology that you'd expect today. I appreciate what they've done, what they're doing, and all the people who've made it what it is, but I'm not interested in that kind of work. I'm an outdoors guy."

"What about outdoor construction?"

"Still not interested."

"Have you told your father?"

"Yeah." His mouth thins and I feel his tension.

"Parents," I say, and we share an exasperated laugh.

We ride in silence, with the wind washing over us and the faint warmth of the sun shining down. It's a

beautiful drive, one I haven't made in a few months. With all these new ideas popping through my head, I should make the time to visit the baking shop and check out their inventory. Who knows what new flavors or decorations they might have that would inspire a new creation.

It's almost seven o'clock when we turn off the highway onto Tuam Road and head into downtown Galway. My curiosity fires and I twist and turn in my seat. Where is he taking me with a picnic basket? To a park, an outdoor concert, a summer theater performance? We continue to drive, further and further south, until we finally park at the dock.

Water fills the horizon, tremendous amounts of it, and boats line up like anxious students waiting to be let out of class.

Finn exits the car and spreads his arms with a grand, "Ta da! We're going sailing."

The seat sticks to me like super glue and I wish I had a blanket to throw over myself.

"Come on," he says. He grabs the picnic basket and holds out his hand. "Our vessel awaits."

I manage to shake my head. At least I think I do. My body is completely frozen. All I can see is water. Terrible, terrible water.

Finn comes around to my side and sets the basket down. "You don't have to be nervous. I'm a sailor. I know what I'm doing."

"I can't," I whisper.

"Sure, you can," he says. "Everyone's a little scared the first time out, but it'll be great. I promise."

I gnaw on my lip and wish I were anywhere but here. I shake my head hard. "I can't."

"Why not?"

Sweat pours down my back, between my breasts, under my arms. My body shudders. Finn brushes a wayward strand of hair behind my ear with a soft touch, but I can't look at him. I feel like I'm going to throw up.

"Claire, what's going on?"

"I'm sorry," I manage. "I didn't know you were coming here. I just ... I can't."

The heaviness between us makes me cringe. I hate that I'm reacting this way, but I have no control. "Okay," he finally says. "Do you want to sit somewhere and eat our dinner? There's some delicious salmon and tuna sushi that shouldn't go to waste."

Fish. Ohmigod. The worst thing in the world. My stomach spasms and I hunch over to stop the pain. "Can we just leave?" My eyes well with tears.

Finn stows the basket in the back, just as before, and gets behind the wheel. “Where to?” he asks, his voice tight and his body stiff.

“Home, please,” I say, my own voice strained and miserable.

“You got it.” He puts the car in gear, and we roar away from the dock.



A miserable silence fills the car on the ride home. Finn drums his fingers on the steering wheel and taps his free foot in a forceful rhythm. He finally turns on the radio to light jazz, which slightly softens the mood.

When he drops me off at the bakery, he doesn't leave the car, merely grunts at me and drives off. Walking home, I think of Gran and her *tall, dark, and handsome* hunch. Finn is certainly all that, but there's more to a relationship than looks.

If ever there was a mismatch, it would be with a woman who's terrified of water and a man who lives for the ocean.

Chapter 6

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 20

Something pokes me in the arm and I lift my weary head from the bakery counter. Sleep evaded me last night, my dreams filled with images of boats and water and eerie sea creatures. All because of the horrible incident with Finn. A man I will never see again.

“How was your date?” Mam asks, all grins and cheery voice.

“It wasn’t a date.” I rest my head on my arm.

“A handsome young man took you out to dinner. That sounds like a date. How did it go?”

Any reference to “handsome” from my mother would normally be embarrassing. But I’m too wrecked to care. “Can we not talk about it, please?”

“Hmph.” Several seconds pass, then she pokes my arm again. “Look alive, Claire.” Mam pushes a white bakery box toward me. “Brigid called and invited you for lunch at the castle and asked if you could bring dessert. She said she tried your phone, but you didn’t answer. I told her you’d be delighted to join her. Here you go.”

I groan, then look in the box and the five remaining peach tarts wink back at me. *Thanks, Mam.* The back

of my head pounds and there's a metallic taste in my mouth that takes me back to my childhood when the doctor gave me iron pills so large Mam had to cut them in two. I'm sorry I missed Brigid's call but it's for the best. "Why don't you go and I'll stay here?" I tell her. Sleep is calling me.

Her eyes narrow. "I have accounts to take care of. And Brigid asked for you."

"Sorry, Mam. I can't today." I push the box toward her.

She pushes it back. "You can. I give you permission. Now run along." She wiggles her fingers at me, waving me out of the room.

I glare at her. "I said no! I'm not your lackey."

Mam's face turns as white as vanilla icing. "Claire Elizabeth Francis, you forget yourself."

As if my head didn't hurt enough, now my heart curls in pain. We never yell at each other. "I'm sorry, Mam," I say quietly. "I'll take them straight away." My head pounds something fierce but I slide off the stool and grab the box.

By the time I reach the castle the headache is a dull throb behind my eyes, something I can tolerate for a short time. I'll just deliver the tarts and return to the bakery.

The front desk directs me to a peaceful room next to the Great Hall with a deep blue couch, two blue-and-white striped armchairs, and several tables, only one of which is occupied. A large bay window overlooks a rose garden in bloom with luscious flowers in pink and white. Brigid sits at a table in jeans and a print T-shirt, flipping through a bridal magazine. A beautiful blonde across from her sips tea, her linen jacket and tank top over tight leggings making me wish my bakery outfit had more style.

I knock on the door and say, “Your dessert has arrived.” Then I walk into the room and place it on the table.

“Claire!” Brigid says with a bright smile. “How lovely. I’m so glad you could come. This is Annemarie, my best friend from New York.”

Annemarie stands and pulls me into a hug. “It’s nice to meet you. Brigid has been telling me all about you.”

I wish the same were true in reverse, I think unkindly, cursing my headache for my nasty thoughts. “It’s nice to meet you too.”

Brigid points to an empty chair. “Have a seat. Lunch should be here in just a moment.”

I look at the two women with their easy smiles and relaxed energy. I feel out of sorts and out of place. Brigid needs time alone with her friend, not with me.

A pain across my forehead confirms my decision.
“Thanks, but I have to go.”

Brigid touches my arm. “Please stay. I ordered tons of food. Plus, I need your opinion.”

A waiter arrives with a tray full of sandwiches and spicy chips and a pitcher of strawberry lemonade. Before I know it, a chip has made it to my mouth and the flavor of potato, salt, and chili wakes me up and lessens the ache. Maybe it’s the fact that I haven’t had any breakfast. Or maybe it’s simply the smell of real food, not something from the sea. But I’m feeling better.

Brigid divvies up the food, pours us all drinks, and I bite into a ham and cheese sandwich. “It’s good to see a little color in your face,” she says. “You looked a bit pale when you walked in.”

“I didn’t get much sleep last night.” I leave it at that. The last thing I want to do is discuss her brother or my actions.

Eating consumes us for a few minutes while I try not to hog the chips. Brigid asks both of us for opinions about dresses, but the answers don’t seem to matter. She keeps turning pages.

“Brigid,” Annemarie says, “you know Andrew won’t care what you wear.”

“I know.”

Her tone is not convincing.

I shouldn't interrupt but I do. "Why are you looking for a dress in a magazine? I thought you needed something now."

"Thank you," Annemarie says. "I've been trying to tell her that all morning." She flattens her hand on the current page, putting a stop to any more searching. "Brigid, you know we're running out of time. Even if you see something in a magazine, that doesn't mean the shops will have it. Let's go to Galway and find a dress."

I like Annemarie's directness, her determination. That no-nonsense attitude is just what we need.

Brigid sets down her sandwich and fiddles with her napkin. "But what if I don't like anything?"

"Sweetie, you won't know until you try. Right, Claire?"

"Absolutely." Positivity first, even when you haven't a clue.

"You'll come with us?" Brigid asks me with a woeful gaze, her mouth already turning down in disappointment.

Mam isn't expecting me back for a while. A trip wasn't in the plans, but a dress outing feels much more comfortable than what happened yesterday. And

it will give me a chance to get to know Brigid and Annemarie a little better.



The last thing I expected after the debacle of last night was to be back in Galway, thanks to Brigid's driver, Tommy. It would be novel to someday to have a car and driver at my beck and call. He also let us out in a part of town away from the water, which I greatly appreciated. I don't need a repeat of yesterday.

Now we're in a bridal shop, combing the racks of satin and silk, lace and tulle, searching for the dress that will make Brigid say Yes. We've been to six shops, including a vintage bridal shop, which I thought would surely have something perfect. But nothing has caught her eye. I'm afraid nothing will.

I wait with Annemarie in the mirrored dressing area while Brigid tries on the last gown the stylist chose. There are only a handful of sample gowns she can buy today. Most of them are the wrong size or just wrong for her.

"Is she being too picky?" Annemarie asks. Her sleek blond hair cascades over one shoulder, smooth and glossy. Then she nods her head. "She's being too picky. I know some of the dresses look horrible on her, but there've been a few that weren't too bad. I

liked that one in the last shop, the rows of scalloped lace with the three-quarter length sleeves. It had a nice vintage look.”

“That was pretty,” I say. “I think she’s having a hard time letting go of the one she had in New York. She was so upset when we went to Mrs. Grealy’s shop. The dress she tried on there was way too sexy.”

“You know,” Annemarie says, “I was at Maebh’s shop with Brigid when she picked out that perfect dress. But it’s gone and we have to move on.” She fingers the ends of her silky hair. “Thanks for being here with us. You’re such a calming influence.”

Calming? Really? “Um, you’re welcome.” Then I remember what Annemarie said during lunch. “Is it true that Andrew won’t care what Brigid wears?”

She turns to me with a quizzical stare, her mouth a little pursed. “You haven’t met him yet, have you?”

I shake my head.

She smooths the chintz fabric on the arm of the chair. “I’ve had my share of boyfriends, and I thought my last one, Brad, was the one. He had these little looks that gave me chills in the best way. But the way Andrew looks at Brigid? He adores her. It doesn’t matter in the slightest what she wears. It could be a pair of overalls for all he cares. He just wants to be with her.”

I've seen that in the movies, two people so clearly in love it makes your heart ache for what you're missing. But the chances of finding someone like that are next to zero. Besides, that feels like too much obligation. Too much to live up to.

Brigid comes out of the dressing room and stands on the elevated stage before us. The white gown—from the Theia collection, the stylist announces—has a hint of lace at the top with the barest of sleeves, a fitted bodice, and a drape of satin to the floor with lace on the sides and hem. It may not be what Brigid wants, but it's fresh and bright and pretty. If only she didn't stand as if she were about to fall over.

Annemarie claps her hands. "Oooh, I like it. Claire, what do you think?" She turns to me for my opinion.

"It is pretty, Brigid. Do you like it?"

Brigid sighs and her mouth droops. "I don't know. It's fine, I guess."

Annemarie walks up to her and takes her hand. "I know how hard this is. You had your heart set on that dress back home. And it was gorgeous. But you're getting married in three days. You have to wear something. And this dress suits you the best out of all the ones we've seen."

Brigid's eyes glisten with a film of tears. "I know. I know. Okay. This is it."

Annemarie kisses Brigid's cheek, mouths a silent Yes! to me, then gently pushes Brigid towards the dressing room. "Go get changed and we'll talk to the stylist."

While Brigid changes, Annemarie asks the stylist the looming question. "How much is the dress?"

"You do know this is a Theia original, designed by Don O'Neill. His gowns are worn by celebrities around the world."

Celebrities. For the love of God. Brigid doesn't care about that.

"I love that we're in the company of celebrities," Annemarie says with a smile that tells me she's done this before. "That must mean we have good taste."

"Excellent taste. Theia gowns are highly respected everywhere."

I roll my eyes. We already know that. Annemarie is much more patient than I would be. Just get to the price.

"And every bride wants to be respected and admired," Annemarie says. "No wonder your shop is doing so well."

The stylist beams and preens and I feel like I'm watching a tennis match. Point Annemarie. I wish I could negotiate like this with my mother. Convince

her that it's time for the bakery to branch out with new offerings. Stop being so stuffy.

"I'm afraid we're on a budget," Annemarie continues. "And we need the gown immediately. Is there any magic you can work for us on the price? I'd hate to leave emptyhanded."

"Well,"—the stylist clears her throat—"I don't normally do this, but because it's a sample, I can let you have it for 1,800 euros."

I squeak and clap my hands over my mouth. Annemarie doesn't flinch, not even a blink. "That's a great starting point," she says. "But it's not enough. What's your final price?"

The stylist stares back, her cherry red nails tapping the side of her expensive white trousers. She finally says, "Fifteen hundred. That's as low as I can go."

"Could we—"

"Annemarie, we need to go."

Brigid is standing on the elevated platform in her jeans and blouse, her hands clutching her purse in front of her like a shield. "Thank you for your time," Brigid tells the stylist, "but we won't be getting the dress." Then she walks out quickly. Annemarie rushes after her. I say a hasty thank-you to the stylist and follow.

Outside the shop, Brigid leans against the glass. “I couldn’t do it. Fifteen hundred euros is way too much.”

Annemarie huffs. “Brigid, Andrew can certainly afford a few thousand dollars for a wedding dress. You’re only getting married once and you should look beautiful.”

“You did look really pretty in that dress,” I say, hoping to change her mind.

“I’m sorry. I can’t. It’s not the right one.” She takes a deep breath and her eyes get misty.

“Oh, sweetie.” Annemarie puts her arm around Brigid’s shoulder. “Okay. There is nothing we can’t resolve. Claire and I will put on our thinking caps and figure this out. Won’t we?”

“Right.” I fake a smile. “We will. Absolutely.” There’s that positivity again.

Brigid links arms with both of us and leans her head on Annemarie’s shoulder, then on mine. “You two are the best. I know you must think I’m crazy, Claire, with all this drama about a dress. But it’s my one chance to feel like the most beautiful woman ever. It has to be perfect.”

“I understand,” I say. Everyone gets a little barmy at times, and I get the need for everything to be just so. But if it were up to me, I wouldn’t let a dress dictate how my wedding will be. Spending that kind of money

on a fancy dress you only wear once is ridiculous. I'd rather spend my money on something that matters—the cake. A good wedding cake is as much a work of art as a dress. And you can eat it for weeks. Months, if you freeze it. Now that's something I can sympathize about.

Annemarie calls Tommy, who brings the car around, and we head back to Claremore, a little sadder, a little more frustrated.

Brigid and Annemarie are counting on me to help solve this. I don't have any more resources than they do, or money. But when people are hurting, I want to fix it.

Two days ago, I hadn't even met Brigid. Now I'm hoping to solve a major dilemma for her. If this were a baking issue there wouldn't be a problem. But can I succeed where everything else has failed?

Obviously, the little prayer I said outside Mrs. Grealey's shop was not enough. I need a solid plan.

Chapter 7

It's late afternoon when I return from Galway. Mam rings up two customers, then sits at her desk to tally up invoices, tsk-tsking the rising cost of ingredients. The front of the shop basks in peaceful quiet, a perfect place to implement my plan to track down Brigid's dress. I don't care if it ended up in Turkey. We're getting it back.

I call New York and hope that Maebh is there. Seven rings, ten rings, twelve rings. I'm about to hang up when a breathy voice answers, "Sorry, but I'm heading out the door."

"Wait, please. This is Brigid's friend Claire in Ireland. Are you Maebh?"

A quick inhale, then the voice softens, calms. "I am."

"Well, hello. It's nice to meet you. Long-distance, that is."

"Same to you. Listen, I'm afraid I don't have much time."

Get it together, Claire. "I'm calling about Brigid's dress. The one you shipped over here for the wedding. Do you have a tracking number?"

There's a pause where I expect her to ask what I'm doing, why the bother. Instead, I hear papers rustle. "I

doubt there's anything to do," she says. "Brigid says the dress is gone. But here's the number." She reads it to me. "Now I really have to go. Good luck."

She hangs up and I think about how different the two sisters are. Brigid is so full of love and goodwill, the kind of person who hates to worry others. Maebh barely had time to say hello. Is she always in a rush? Or will I see someone different when I meet her in person?

With the tracking number in hand, I pull up the claim form on the shipping website. I've been calling suppliers for Mam and they've all been friendly and so helpful. Wonderful people. I'm sure working with the shipping company will be the same.

I describe the item, quantity, estimate the cost at several thousand euros, then scroll through a list that best describes the shipment—from antiques to drugs to money. Everything but a wedding dress. Farther down the form asks for photos and other documentation, none of which I have. Upon completion, the screen informs me I'll be contacted in five business days to verify the information.

Are ya coddling me?

I pound my head on the counter (gently) and call customer service. "I have a special situation," I tell Susan, "and I'm hoping you can help me." I explain the wedding is Saturday; the missing vintage, one-of-a-

kind dress; the worrying bride; how nothing else will do but to have that dress, no matter the cost. A cost I'm hoping will be under a hundred euros.

“Oh, I'm so sorry about your predicament,” Susan says, her voice sweet and patient. “They always tell us to direct complaints to our online form, which I understand didn't work for you. Let me put you through to my supervisor. I'm sure she can help you. One moment, please.”

I hold, classical music playing in my ear, rehearsing my lines for the supervisor. More minutes pass, then I hear a distinct click and the line goes dead.

Five customer service reps and three supervisors later—all of whom tell me the same story—I give up.

Not helpful!

I almost wish I'd never tried.

The summer I was eleven, Dad and I had a booth at the Claremore Food Festival. He was showing off his lemon cake dipped in chocolate, explaining the ins and outs of his favorite sweet. Kids and parents stood before him, eyes wide with wonder while he melted and tempered chocolate, then dipped in squares of lemon cake and sold them for cheap. On the last day he prodded me to take over, since I knew the process as well as he. A good crowd gathered, and the demonstration was going well, until it started to rain. Then the chocolate seized and turned dull and grainy.

Every time the Great British Bake Off holds the chocolate segment, someone has a disaster. But I was so careful. I didn't think it would happen to me.

I tried reheating, cooling, nothing worked. I wanted to throw out the chocolate, but that would be wasting money. Dad apologized to the crowd and gave them treats for free. Then he put his arm around my shoulders. "There will always be disappointments in life. Sometimes things are out of your control. But a strong person sets them aside and moves on."

Disappointments. Things out of your control. That's exactly what dealing with the shipping company feels like. And I hate it because I wanted to fix the problem.

The door chimes and in walks Finn, looking crisp and jaunty in a white polo and denim shorts, his hair in beautiful waves that my fingers want to touch, his eyes asparkle. Seeing him brings back all the misery of our last encounter. If I hadn't caused such a scene at the dock yesterday, I might welcome him. But I'm frustrated over Brigid's dress, and I owe him an apology, one I'm not yet ready to make. Instead, what comes out of my mouth is, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph."

"Claire!" Mam says, standing in the doorway to the back room. I roll my eyes.

Finn strolls up to the counter and grins. "Actually, my name is Finn." He nods to my mother. She smiles

back.

Why is she standing there? Doesn't she have scones to bake? A cake to frost? I snap at him. "I know who you are."

"Someone got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning."

His cheery sarcasm grates on me. My lips curl into a snarl and I slap my hands on the counter. "Someone is being put upon by your family."

"Claire Elizabeth Francis," Mam says for the second time today.

I bite my lip, come around the counter, and motion Finn outside away from my mother. Then I march to the door, hold it open, and wait for him to exit.

We stand in front of the shop window, side by side, and I cross my arms and lean against the glass, the warmth seeping into my back. Finn's BMW sits not ten feet away, calling to me to take a chance on another adventure. But right now, I'm adventured out. "Sorry," I say. "I was in a better mood earlier, but Brigid ..." I stop before my mouth gets me into more trouble.

"What about Brigid?" he asks.

"Never mind. What do you want, Finn?" I'm being rude, but I can't seem to help myself.

"Tell me what's going on first."

What's going on is I need some alone time, but I can't help Brigid by being mean to her brother. I scuff my shoe on the pavement, waiting for this temper to fade. Finn stays silent while he waits, his eyes straight ahead. Giving me space. Why hasn't he walked away? Men don't usually take crap from women they barely know.

"Okay. What's going on is that the dress that was shipped here for Brigid's wedding got lost. So Annemarie and I went shopping with her today for a new dress, but she didn't like anything. She's upset about the whole situation. Extremely upset. And I have to fix it."

"Why do you have to fix it?"

The million-dollar question. The answer is because it's nice feeling part of a group. Because for once I felt like I had value. Because I want to be the hero and come to Brigid's rescue. "They're depending on me."

Finn grazes my cheek with his fingers, a touch so whisper light I might have imagined it. "You care about people," he says. "Not everybody does."

First a touch, then a compliment. Who is this guy and what is he trying to do?

He gazes at me for a few moments, then asks, "Do you need my help?"

I shake my head. “Men don’t know much about wedding dresses.”

“I’m sure that’s true. But I run into a lot of problems at sea and I’m pretty good at finding solutions.”

He leans against the glass, so casual, his hands in his pockets. Not boastful, but naturally confident. I just wish he would stop with the mentions of the ocean. Then I stare at him for a few seconds, his face open and full of curiosity. But can he really help? “I tried talking to the shipping company. Told them the whole sob story. Gave them the tracking number. It didn’t matter. They’re happy to look into it but it will take at least five business days.”

“Not until after the wedding.”

“Thank you for stating the obvious.” But this time I almost smile.

“I feel for you, Claire. It’s hard when you want to help and there’s nothing you can do. I think if you tell Brigid she’ll understand.”

Maybe, maybe not. And that’s where the conversation seems to end.

We stand there in silence, the warmth of the glass slowly softening my mood. Finn doesn’t seem to be in any hurry to leave, but he has to have a reason for coming. “So why are you here?” I finally ask.

He combs the hair back from his forehead with his fingers, a gesture that makes me want to touch his hair even more. “I wanted to make up for yesterday.” He moves closer and I can see the darker glints in his deep blue eyes. “I like you, Claire. I like your company. I thought we could try again tonight. Something simple at the castle. No long trips this time.”

My body is humming to *I like you, Claire*. Words that make me want more. Make me want to say yes. But the fewer complications I have in my life, especially with Brigid’s disasters, the easier it will be. “I’m sorry. I can’t.” He doesn’t need to know that the Great British Bake Off is on tonight—the infamous chocolate week—and I’m not missing that. To be a little more gracious, I add, “But thanks for the invitation.”

“Are you seeing someone else?” he asks.

As if, I wish and shake my head.

Finn takes my hand and my body freezes while my brain goes on alert. I haven’t held hands with a boy since college, on a dare, and his hand was cold and clammy. But Finn is not a teenage boy and his hand around mine feels solid and strong. “Why not?” he asks. “What’s so pressing that you can’t spend some time with me? I’m not asking for a permanent commitment. Just a few hours.”

I watch the circling of his thumb, mesmerized by the warmth and pressure, and I want everything to be as simple as that motion. “I have cupcakes to make for Brigid’s party tomorrow.”

“Oh, is that all?” Finn grins.

The grin seriously annoys me, and I yank my hand away. “Yes, that’s all.”

“Hey.” He takes my hand again. “I was kidding. Really.” I think he’s waiting for me to relent, to relax, but tension claims me again. “Claire,” he says softly. “Even I know it doesn’t take all night to bake cupcakes.”

I look at his fingers, tan against my white. “And how would you know that?”

“I watch baking shows.”

“Sure, you do.”

“I do, on occasion.”

He has to be joking, so I test his sincerity. “The Great British Bake Off is on tonight. I was planning to watch.”

“Then we’ll do it together.”

A nice answer, but I’m having a hard time believing him. “Don’t you have somewhere else to be or someone else you want to be with?”

“I want to be with you, Claire. What we do doesn’t really matter.” Then he taps his wristwatch. “Time to get baking, young lady. I’ll meet you at six-thirty at the reception desk at the castle. Don’t be late.”

He hops into his car and drives away before I can answer and I stand there in amazement. Finn watches baking shows.

And he just set up a date, with me.

Could the world get any stranger?



The castle lobby is filled with people talking and laughing and low-key piped music. I cross a large expanse of polished wood floor, then the signature carpeting of navy diamonds with two intertwined Rs in the middle for Rodarc Resort offset by thick cream lines. Table arrangements of blue hydrangeas and white roses add a touch of elegance.

Finn leans against the reception counter, ever-so-casual, in a crisp white shirt with rolled up sleeves, jeans, and black runners. I run a quick glance over my blue polo shirt and trousers and wipe away some crumbs on my right leg. Thank God I don’t have frosting smears. When Finn sees me, his face lights up in a grin and he pushes away from the counter.

“Claire,” he says, his voice warm and comforting, and I feel as if I’m welcomed by an old friend. My silly heart flutters in response.

“Hi.” I hand him a chocolate cherry cupcake in a white baker’s box. “I made an extra one.”

He leans over and kisses my cheek, an unexpected gesture that leaves my skin with a tingle. “For me?” he asks.

“For you.”

He opens the lid and inhales the cupcake aroma. “Oh man, that smells good.” He lifts out the cupcake and starts to peel back the paper.

“Not now,” I say. “It’s for after dinner.”

“Then I’ll save it for later.” He puts the cupcake back in the box and closes the lid. “Are you ready?”

I’m not sure what he has in mind. But I say, “Yes,” and he takes my hand.

Somehow, I’m comfortable holding hands as we walk through the lobby, past the restaurant and the Great Hall, down a long corridor filled with seascapes and abstract watercolors until we stop at double doors that open into a roomy space filled with couches and armchairs and wall upon wall of books. The library. There are several people here and there lounging and reading, but Finn keeps walking towards the back of the room where an alcove has been set up

with a long couch, a large screen TV, and a table for two with white linens, china, and crystal.

I'm impressed and surprised. "How did you manage this?"

Finn sets the cupcake box on the table. "Oh, it's nothing." The corners of his mouth fight a losing battle against turning up. "Though it probably helps that I'm a Cleary."

I laugh. "It probably does." I sink down on the couch, which is so comfortable I want to move it to my bedroom. I've often preferred couches to beds. There's something so relaxing about falling asleep on them in front of the TV. Then my stomach gurgles. "Is the food coming soon?"

At that moment a server appears with a rolling cart. There are bottles of sparkling water, an electric kettle that he plugs into the wall along with cups and teabags, two plates covered with silver domes just like in the movies, and a platter full of cookies. The server arranges the food on the table, then looks at Finn. "Will there be anything else, sir? The kitchen closes at eight, just in case."

"No, that should do it. Thank you."

The server and cart disappear.

I'm so curious now. "What's under the domes?"

“I promise it’s not fish,” Finn says. Then he plays the gentleman and pulls out a chair for me. I take a seat and Finn pours each of us a glass of water, then ceremoniously removes the domes. Each plate holds a crisp side salad with cherry tomatoes and cucumber next to a perfectly golden brown, flaky pot pie, garnished with a sprig of rosemary. The aroma is heady and buttery.

“Dig in,” he says, but I wait until he’s seated, then I break through the crust to the secrets inside. Thick, tender chunks of beef melt in my mouth, the vegetables are a perfect al dente, the gravy rich and hearty and delicious. I wish I had a spoon or some bread to sop up the juices. Each bite makes my mouth sing, my body sigh. This is just as good as one of my desserts.

I wonder if the chef would give out the recipe. I’ve seen articles in cooking magazines where they share favorite recipes from fancy restaurants and hotels. An accomplished local baker would have some pull, wouldn’t she? I take another bite and ponder.

When I look up Finn is laughing at me. “Why are you laughing?” I ask.

“You’re making little growling noises.”

Oh, God. “No, I’m not.”

“You are,” he insists. “They’re cute.”

How embarrassing. “Well, it’s really good.” I’m almost done with mine and Finn is only halfway through.

“Do you want another one?” Finn asks. “I can call the kitchen and have them bring more.”

“No. Please don’t. One is plenty.”

“If you change your mind, just say so.”

I take my time now with the remaining bits of salad and pot pie, concentrating on the scents, the flavors, tasting rosemary, a hint of thyme, and something else a little unusual with a bit of heat. Stretching out the moments. Appreciating every mouthful with a mental nod to Chef Alexandre. Whoever made this knows what they’re doing.

“Thank you, Finn. This is nice.” And I’m pleased to see his plate is empty too.

He wipes his mouth. “I’m glad you like it. A bit better than fish?”

I grimace. “I’m sorry about that. Really.” There’s so much more I could say but I don’t want to open up old wounds. Or dwell on the leg that sends out a painful throb at that moment.

He leans forward and takes my hand. “Is it just boats? Or the water?”

How can you separate one from the other? “Both.”

“Well, I’m not trying to pry or make you relive something painful. But if you ever want to talk about —”

I shake my head before he can finish and change the subject. “There’s a plate full of cookies calling to me.” I grab one and take a bite and my mouth floods with heavenly sugar and butter. “Irish oat cookies,” I say in wonder.

“After our discussion yesterday, they seemed like the perfect complement.”

“These are fantastic. All that Irish butter ...” I don’t bother with the description; I take another bite, and another, and remember picnics at the beach with Mam and Dad and these cookies, before my accident when I wasn’t afraid of the water.

“Are you okay?” Finn asks. “You got very quiet.”

I clear my throat to take away the sting of the memory. “I’m fine. Just reminiscing.” I reach for the kettle and pour a cup of tea. “Would you like some?” Finn nods, so I hand that one to him and pour another for myself. The mix of ginger and lemon is a little bit spicy, a little bit soothing.

“Thanks for accepting my dinner invitation,” Finn says.

“Thanks for an excellent dinner.” Not only was the food wonderful—I’m taking all those cookies home

with me—I'm enjoying his company. He's easy to be with, relaxed, no pressure. I like that. And once again I wonder why he's spending his free time with me. "Why aren't you with some pretty girl?"

"I am."

"Hah.

His forehead creases as his eyebrows lift. "Who told you you're not pretty?"

"I'm okay. But you compare me with a model and you're always going to choose the model."

"Yeah, if you like someone who's fake and putting on airs. That's the difference between lilies and daisies. Lilies are all showy and pretend. Daisies are natural. Simple. They don't have to pretend to be special. You're like a daisy. Naturally pretty. And I'd rather have that any day."

My heart is doing a flutter kick while my brain keeps replaying the words *naturally pretty*. How can he mean that? "So you don't have a woman in every port?" I tease, but the curiosity is genuine.

"You mean like those stories you hear of men who sail around the world?"

"Exactly." Like him.

He shakes his head. "They're just stories."

“A good-looking guy like you is unattached?”
Something I never got around to asking yesterday.

He grins. “You think I’m good-looking?”

I ignore his question and shrug.

Finn sighs, a deep breath that lifts his chest and shoulders with an equally deep exhale. “I travel a lot and relationships are hard. They start well, I think, but a couple days in, the flash and excitement of being with someone in sports fizzles out. Most women don’t get that I’m dedicated to sailing, being there for the team, whatever’s needed. Plus, they start fantasizing about marriage and kids. I guess I haven’t been ready to settle down.” He stares at me for a moment, his eyes steady and intense, then he looks away.

It’s difficult to believe someone hasn’t snatched him up. He’s not just good-looking, he’s kind and engaging. But I get it. I’ve known girls like that in school. One kiss from a boy and they’re madly in love and planning out their lives for the next twenty-five years. Something I’ve never bothered with because I have no plans to settle down either.

Finn picks up the remote and points to the couch. “Go ahead and get comfortable. I’ll start the program.”

“Is it time?” I set the plate of cookies on the side table next to the couch. “Have we missed any of it?”

He fiddles with the device and up pops the Great British Bake Off. “I set it to record so we didn’t have to worry about the time.” He sits down next to me with the cupcake box in his hands.

“Smart man,” I say and give him a soft shoulder bump.

“Smart woman who appreciates the talents of others. Don’t mind me while I scarf this down.” He takes the cupcake out of the box and holds it up to his nose.

I think he’s joking, but three bites and it’s gone. How can he appreciate all the work I put into that in three bites? Good food needs time, understanding, sensory dedication.

“God, that was good. Are there any more?” Finn asks as the show begins.

“No. Now hush. It’s starting.”

“I want more, Claire. It’s not wise to deny a hungry man.”

“Quiet.” I laugh, but he needs to stop talking. The show demands my full attention.

It’s difficult to split my awareness between the contestants on the screen and the man at my side. I’ve seen several fellows who claim they were watching television while simultaneously playing games on their phones. How they could do that is anyone’s

guess. If I'm watching a show, I want to see everything—the expressions, the pauses, the concentration, the sighs. Every moment is a part of the whole, not to be glossed over or missed because of some distraction. But Finn isn't playing solitaire. His phone isn't even visible. And his eyes seem to be glued to the screen. Is he truly absorbed, or just pretending?

Finn slaps his leg. "Oh, come on. You can't do that." He turns to me. "Did you see that? Michael just put frozen raspberries in his soufflé."

I didn't see it. I was watching Finn. But now I want to know more. "What's wrong with that?"

Finn presses Pause on the remote. "You know what's wrong. The fruit will end up soggy. He'll have a disaster on his hands."

Exactly. But I try to look as if I hadn't thought of that. "Oh, right. Poor Michael."

Finn shakes his head and resumes the show. Sure enough, when the judges cut into Michael's soufflé, the raspberries are a wet mess. He pauses the show. "You were testing me, weren't you? How come?"

"I was wondering how much you knew. If you really watch baking shows or if you were just playing along."

He holds me with his soft gaze. "Did I pass?"

There's no reason for me to be nervous now. I'm in my element. But my heart speeds up. "You did. You

seem to know a bit ... well, probably more than a bit ...
I mean, you—”

Finn gives me a slow, warm kiss on my cheek. Then he laces his fingers through mine and there’s a rush of heat like a toasty embrace. And the program continues.

His eyes are straight ahead, but I can’t stop staring at him. I thought this would be a simple evening. We’d have some food, watch a baking show, I’d go home, and that would be that.

But it doesn’t seem to be that at all.

Chapter 8

The credits roll and the contestants congratulate Sarah on her second win. Then Finn asks me what part I liked best.

I drain the last sips of tea, my mouth mellow but my thoughts working to calm, to quiet. I can still feel my cheek tingle. “The technical impresses me. Half the time I haven’t heard of what they’re making and trying to create an unknown without an exact recipe is mind boggling.” Talking settles me, gives me a point of concentration. “But the showstoppers are my favorite. So much imagination. The cake that Jason made with the panda face was so cute, and Sarah’s castle was amazing. All those towers with the little flags flying. I don’t think I’d have the patience for so many separate pieces. But I loved the filled chocolates Mark put along the edges of his cake.”

“What’s so special about his chocolates?”

“I’m a huge salted caramel fan. I want to make those someday.”

“Why don’t you make them now?”

“We don’t sell chocolates, and Mam’s perfectly happy with what we already have.”

Finn lets go of my hand and turns to me in surprise, his body facing mine. “But you’re so creative. She has to see that.”

“I think she does, and that’s what she doesn’t want. Mam is pretty set in her ways.”

“Did she taste your cupcakes? The ones you made for Brigid?”

“No, and I haven’t told her about them.” Something else that weighs on me.

“But you will, right? Isn’t that what you brought me tonight?”

“It was.”

“Well, if you can do that with a cupcake, who knows what you can do with candy.” He gazes at me, then he stands and holds out his hand. “Let’s go.”

“What?”

“Salted caramels. You said you’ve always wanted to try them. Let’s do it.”

“Now?” Has he lost his mind? It’s late. Time to get home. Mam will expect me to be up early. I can’t fool around in a kitchen. The castle kitchen.

“C’mon. What better time to play?”

Working with chocolate isn’t playing. You need finesse. Exactness. Chocolate is finicky. Any number

of things can go wrong along the way. “I don’t think so.”

“Claire. Your eyes are dancing with how much you want to. Take a chance.” He continues to hold out his hand.

My butt stays firmly planted on the couch.

“I dare you.”

“I can’t just waltz into the kitchen without the chef’s permission. That would be sacrilege. And illegal. Besides, it’s late. I have to go.”

“There’s way too much worry wrapped up inside you. Let go and live a little.”

I shake my head and start to say *but ...* then I remember Gran’s advice. *Loosen up, Claire. You’re holding on too tight.* And I feel the tightness in my shoulders, the stiffness in my neck. I take a deep breath and blow it out, then I look at Finn. “Okay, let’s do this.” We’ll be fast. In and out.

His smile is the zing of sugar-coated ginger and he pulls me up off the couch. We hurry through the library, down several halls, past the Employees Only sign, to the staff entrance for the kitchen. He swipes a card key and we’re inside. Darkness gives way to light when he flips the switches and spotless stainless steel gleams and shines.

Finn spins in a slow circle, taking in the counter tops, the ovens, the shelves of pots and pans. “Where’s all the food?”

“This way.” I lead him to the sacred room, back to the place where I could easily live in a little corner.

He mutters a soft “Wow!” and we both stare at the abundance. “This is like the pantry on Master Chef.”

All I can do is nod. I’m still staring. It doesn’t matter that I’ve been here before. The second time is as impressive as the first.

“Okay,” Finn says, “how do you make salted caramel?”

The thrill of creating snaps on like an electric current. For a moment I stand there, basking in that aliveness.

I find round candy molds and add those to a basket, then I answer his question. “Butter, sugar, heavy cream, and sea salt.” I direct him to Irish butter, tangerine sugar for a burst of citrus, heavy cream, and Celtic sea salt. Then I choose a bag of Callebaut Belgian Dark bittersweet wafers.

In the prep area we pile ingredients on the counter and I show Finn how to clean the molds. Then I chop the chocolate and divide it into thirds, setting two-thirds in a double boiler over simmering water, a digital thermometer nearby. “You want to raise the

temperature to 55°C for dark chocolate to fully melt it,” I explain to Finn. “Then you take it off the heat, add in the rest of the unmelted chocolate, and cool it to 27°C. The trick is to seed the mixture with already tempered chocolate. Encourage it to form the correct bonds. The last step is to reheat it to 31°C, and that heating and cooling and reheating tempers the chocolate and creates that glossy sheen.”

While the tempering proceeds, Finn sets the clean molds on the counter, his manner calm, his eyes alight with curiosity. When the chocolate’s ready, I fill the molds with a river of rich dark brown that makes my mouth water.

I love being in the kitchen, this zone of wonder and exploration. Someday I’ll sort out how to bottle this feeling so I can have it with me all the time.

While the shells set, Finn dutifully measures the sugar, butter, heavy cream, and salt for the caramel. But will everything work with the chocolate? I won’t know for sure until the end.

I let him whisk the sugar while it melts, then we watch it bubble and turn a rich reddish brown. I add the butter, he gently whisks, and once it’s smooth, he takes the pan off the heat. The cream is added and whisked, then the salt, and we’re done. I let it sit to cool so it won’t melt the molded chocolate, and Finn

swipes a taste, and smiles. I'm content to wait. Then I pour the caramel into a piping bag.

Filling the shells is one of my favorite parts, a dance of exactness and harmony. Enough filling to almost reach the top, but not too much to prevent the top piece from sealing. I retemper the leftover chocolate and carefully pipe that over the top of the molds. Then I refrigerate the candy to harden and set the timer.

As we wait, Finn pelts me with questions. "I thought you hadn't made chocolates before. How do you know all the steps? Did you memorize a recipe? Where did you hear about tangerine sugar? How do you know what flavors go together? How do—"

"Stop." I laugh at his eagerness, which reminds me of *me* with the baking show. I want to know everything, right now. "My dad used to make candy for Easter and Christmas when I was little, and I remember watching him chop big chunks of chocolate into slivers to melt. He was the one who taught me about tempering, and how it gives chocolate that wonderful shiny look. He had this beautiful mold for Easter that would produce a whole rabbit with amazing detail. I used to love that. And I've made chocolates a couple times when my mother was away from the bakery."

"Why don't you use the mold now?"

I haven't thought of those gorgeous Easter rabbits for more than ten years. The one Dad had was metal and wonderfully detailed, the rabbit standing tall on his hind legs with a woven basket on his back. I could always imagine eggs and candies in that basket. "Dad stopped making candy a long time ago, before he retired. And Mam's not a big chocolate fan. I don't even know where the mold is. She may have thrown it out."

"That seems like a shame," Finn says. "Especially since you love chocolate."

"Well, maybe someday I'll get another mold like the one we had. In the meantime, we should start cleaning up. The candy will be ready soon."

Finn helps me bring the dirty bowls, cups, spoons, scrapers, and more to the sink, which we fill with hot, soapy water. I do the washing and he rinses and dries.

"Have you talked to your mother about how you feel?" he asks, pausing with the dishtowel over his shoulder, looking just like the male lead in a kitchen scene in a romantic movie.

I wish his question was as casual as his stance. "I've tried. But she doesn't want to hear about my dreams. Kind of like your dad with you and construction. Maybe I can talk to your dad and you can talk to my mother."

We both laugh at the absurdity of that.

“Seriously, Claire, you’re talented. You need to find a way to let your creativity shine. Maybe someone else who’ll support your efforts. Or ... what about a job here?”

“At the resort?”

“In this kitchen. They do have some amazing supplies.”

“They do. But working here would be like working at the bakery. Someone else would be telling me what to do and how to do it. I want my own shop.”

Finn nods and I know he understands. Then he walks away and comes back with one last bowl from the double boiler. The wet bottom and my wet hands make the bowl start to slide out of my grasp. I reach for it, fumble, skid on a patch of slick floor, and feel as if I’m falling backwards in slow motion. Finn springs towards me and catches me in a low dip, one arm behind my head, the other behind my back. A move ridiculously out of place in a gourmet kitchen, but one that brings up a memory of my dad twirling my mother around our kitchen, their voices ringing with laughter, their cheeks flushed with happiness. As I look up at Finn gazing back at me, I remember wondering if a man would ever do that with me.

“I’ve got you,” Finn says, and I feel solidly secure in his arms. Heat pools in my face, then he pulls me upright.

With one hand on the bowl, I push against his chest for space, but the moment he lets me go I sway and start to fall again. As we round the corner of a heavy metal cart, I clutch at his shirt and pull him with me right into the cart, which slams into the wall with a loud bang.

We steady ourselves and gape at the ragged gash several inches wide that's dripping plaster crumbles on the floor. Not a pretty sight. And I can only imagine what the chef will think.

All because of a stupid bowl, which I quickly park on the cart.

My nerves rocket into outer space, my breathing hard and fast. "We're in so much trouble."

Finn shakes his head, not at all disturbed. "Nah. It looks bad, but it's an easy fix. A little spackling, a little paint, and it'll be good as new." Then he runs his hand over the hole, and I watch the ends of his fingers disappear.

I cross my arms over my chest. "That looks deeper than you thought."

A furrow creases Finn's forehead as he gently inspects the gash. "Yeah, and ...". Now his fingers wiggle inside up to the first joint.

"Holy cow, Finn. That's really deep." If I wasn't worried before, I am now.

“It’ll be fine. I’ll get maintenance in here to patch the hole. You’ll never know there was a problem.” He moves the cart several inches to hide the gash, and he’s right, you can’t tell.

The timer dings, saving us from further discussion.

After cleaning and drying the bowl, I spread a sheet of parchment paper on the countertop and unmold the chocolates, the globes a rich glossy brown of perfection. I wish I knew how to give them that fancy mirror glaze look I see with expensive candy. But that’s for another time.

Now I’m eager to see how these taste, and a little scared. I hate failure.

“May I?” Finn asks, his hand hovering above the candies. “I’ve been holding myself back since you started. I can’t wait any longer.”

I nod, my heart doing triple time.

He pops a chocolate in his mouth and I watch his face, almost afraid to look. There’s a moment when his eyes glaze, the irises darkening to indigo. He chews slowly, then he groans, and I can imagine his tongue sweeping the corners of his mouth to capture all that thick, rich decadence. Then he looks at me in disbelief, as if he’s never seen me before. “God, Claire, these are insanely good.” He picks me up and swings me in a circle, his eyes sparkling, his whole being bright. Then he sets me down gently and steps back.

“This candy is just as good, if not better, than anything I’ve had. There’s something special here, Claire. I don’t know what you did, but people will love these.”

“You’re teasing me now.”

“I’m serious. If you were selling them, I’d buy you out.”

“Oh,” I say in a small voice. Then I have to know for myself. I lift one of the candies to my nose and inhale that dark scent of cacao, the aroma that puts all my senses on alert. Then I bite down delicately, through the crisp snap of the outer shell, into the caramel that bathes my tongue with buttery sweet, a pop of citrus, a hint of salt. Oh, this is good. This is unreal. I put the rest in my mouth and stare at Finn and nod with satisfaction. And finally, regretful that it’s gone, I swallow.

“What did I say?” he tells me. Then he moves closer. “You know, Claire, you’re amazing in the kitchen. Confident, bold, and really pretty.” He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear and his fingers linger there, right at the edge of my jaw. “I wish I didn’t have to go back to the States so soon.”

My body shivers and my jaw tingles where his fingers are and I ever-so-slightly lean into his touch. A more experienced woman might be coy or sexy or even witty, but all I can do is be honest. And take a

little risk. “I wish you didn’t have to go back so soon, either.”

His eyes deepen, darken, and he steps closer until we’re separated by only a few inches. My heartrate speeds and my breathing quickens, and I wonder if he’s going to kiss me.

Hope he’s going to kiss me.

He stares into my eyes and his fingers trail down my neck, as maddeningly soft as a dusting of flour. Then he steps back and I see his chest rise and fall. “Well, I should take you home.”

I let out a breath of disappointment and box up the chocolates, then we depart.

When he drops me off at the bakery, we pause at the door. “Thanks for tonight,” he says. “Especially the chocolates. I think you should forget your bakery idea and go into the candy business.”

He delivers that last line with a grin so I can’t tell if he’s serious or not. But the compliment feels sweet and delicious. “I’m not ready to give up baking, but thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” He flashes his beautiful smile and touches my cheek. “See you later.”

I watch him walk away, into the night, until I can’t make him out any longer. I know I told myself I didn’t want anything from him, but I was wrong. Because

after tonight, I'm going to be thinking about him for a long while.

Chapter 9

THURSDAY, JUNE 21

Every time I stand in front of Maureen's cottage, I feel like I'm about to step inside a fairy tale. The morning light here has a golden glow. Oak branches drape across the thatched roof, their leaves providing a mantle of shade and protection. Pink and cream climbing roses by the door send out their sweet apple-scented perfume. "Come inside," they whisper, their happy faces trying to melt away my concerns.

If only they could. Brigid's dress problem won't solve itself. After the failure of my plan, it's time to talk to Maureen.

I knock on the door and a memory of last night unspools.

Chocolates with Finn. What good fun it was. Playful. Like the froth of whipped cream atop an ice cream sundae. And the more serious moments when he caught me from falling, when his hand lingered on my cheek, when I told him I wished he didn't have to leave. But ... and there's a big but. Liking Finn makes my friendship with Brigid all kinds of awkward. A friend is someone I would spill my thoughts and feelings to, ask for advice, reminisce about magical

moments. I don't feel comfortable doing that with Finn's sister.

This is where I miss Lily. We were best friends from primary school through fifth year. Even though she had a boyfriend, she always made me feel included. I was never the odd girl in the group. Then her family moved to Northern Ireland. We tried phone calls and emails and texts, but it wasn't the same as in-person. She quickly made other friends and our connection faded.

I could use a bestie now. One who's not related to the man I'm starting to have feelings for.

Then I shake my head. Enough. And I don't have all day. Mam was willing to give me a break to help Brigid, but she expects me back soon.

When the door opens, it's Brigid. Not the person I wanted or expected. I've heard how close she and Maureen are, how much love they share. And Maureen is the one managing Brigid's wedding. She *should* be the one Brigid would go to with problems. Still, wanting to talk about Brigid makes having her here awkward.

I give Brigid a hug, and she throws her arms around me as if she hasn't seen me in years. When she finally pulls away, her eyes are damp, leaving me with tons of questions.

“Come in, come in,” she says. “Aunt Maureen, you have company.”

Maureen steps into the main room holding a dishtowel and a wet cup. Her long hair waves like Finn’s, though slightly looser, and her light blue cotton dress hugs her shapely figure.

“Claire.” She kisses my cheek. “How lovely to see you. Brigid and I were just about to have some tea. Please join us.”

“I’d like that.” Maureen’s baking rivals mine, in my opinion, though she’s so nonchalant about her skill. And she sticks to three or four dependable recipes. What will it be today?

“I made a pear tart,” she says, and my taste buds tingle.

“I remember that from last year,” Brigid says. “The best pear tart I’ve ever had. Andrew still talks about it.”

“How is the dear man?” Maureen asks. “I’m so looking forward to seeing him.”

“Up to his neck in research, his favorite part,” Brigid says. “And having a wonderful time in the Scottish Highlands, talking to people and getting a feel for their customs. I think he’s still torn with historical vs. current time, but his characters are already coming to life. He’s told me a little about them and I can’t wait for him to start writing.”

“Well, good for him,” Maureen says. “He’s a talented fellow, and his last book was simply brilliant.”

“It *was* brilliant,” I echo. “I’m not a mystery fan but I loved the chase between Raven and Carrick.” And the fact that their love made me almost believe love was possible.

“That’s so kind,” Brigid says. “Andrew will enjoy hearing that.”

Maureen gestures to the couch and armchair. “You two make yourselves at home while I get everything ready.”

Brigid sits on the couch, and I take the chair.

“I’m sorry to barge in,” I tell her. “I didn’t mean to interrupt. But I have some news.”

“Good news?” she asks.

“I wish it were.” And I wish I could soften the blow, but sometimes it’s easier to tell it quickly. “I talked to the shipping company Maebh used to ship your dress. I tried everything I could think of to locate it, but their stupid system was incredibly unhelpful. They might be able to tell you something next week. But definitely not by Saturday.”

Brigid’s face goes from sad to resigned to utter defeat. She wipes her eyes and tries to smile. “You’ve been so wonderful these past few days. So generous

with your time, your friendship, those amazing cupcakes. I couldn't have asked for anything more."

She fiddles with the fringe on a rose-colored afghan, stroking it again and again. There's something else. "Brigid, what happened?"

She finally raises her eyes. "I've already told Maureen. Maebh isn't coming. First, the dress. Now my sister. I really am cursed."

"What do you mean Maebh isn't coming?"

Maureen comes in with the tea and tart, places them on the coffee table, and sits on the couch. I so want to dive into that tart, but the crisis comes first. Brigid takes a cup of tea and holds it in her hands for the longest time, staring into the brown brew as if it has answers. She takes a few swallows, then she digs out her phone and hands it to me. I look at the screen in shocked silence.

Mackenzie was in a car accident and I have to be there for her. Sorry for the delay. I promise I'll make your wedding.
XOXO Maebh

"I made sure Mackenzie's out of danger," Brigid says. "There aren't any life-threatening injuries; she'll just need some time to recover." Then Brigid's lip trembles. "But Maebh was supposed to be here by now. She'll never make it in time."

"She'll make it," I counter. "There must be flights every day. And if Tommy is waiting for her when she

lands, that will speed things up.” Brigid can’t object to using her driver for an emergency.

Brigid slumps, her eyes glazed and dim. “That’s a nice idea, Claire. But I know Maebh. Once she gets distracted, that’s it. She’ll be so focused on her friend she’ll forget about the wedding.” She twists her napkin into a tight wad. “It’s more than wanting my family here. Maebh was my other bridesmaid. I can’t have just one.”

I want to ask why not, but Maureen suddenly smiles as if everything’s grand. “I don’t know why I didn’t think of this earlier,” she says. “Such a simple solution. Claire can stand in.” She looks at me with utter certainty.

The edges of my world suddenly bubble and overflow. I don’t know the first thing about being a bridesmaid. And I have no desire to stand in front of an assembly of people I don’t know. Brigid should have someone she knows and trusts. Not a woman she just met.

I open my mouth to say No, I *can’t*. Then Brigid looks at me with such hope, such want, that I turn to watery custard and mumble a pitiful, “Of course I can.”

“Oh, Claire,” Brigid breathes and squeezes my hand. “You don’t know how much this means to me.” The hangdog look eases and her eyes begin to shine.

I try to project a sweet smile. “I’m happy to help,” I say with a feeling of doom. “Will I need to wear a special bridesmaid dress? You probably have something picked out already.” I cross my fingers behind my back, praying *No putrid colors, please.*

“You’re in luck,” she says, and my mind imagines some grotesque gown in hot pink with miles of ruffles and balloon sleeves. “A green dress is all I ask. The style is completely up to you.”

“There’s nothing to worry about, Claire,” Maureen says. “You’ll be a beautiful bridesmaid.”

Sure, that’s not the case. But now that I’ve committed, I have to follow through. “It looks like I’ll be paying Mrs. Grealy another visit. But just until Maebh shows up.” I add that last part to give my sanity something to hold on to. Because, of course, her sister will come.

Maureen gives me an all-knowing smile. “Come with me. I think I have something that will work.”

I follow her into the bedroom, a spacious room with light pouring in on vanilla walls of large cabbage roses, a four-poster bed with a hand-stitched quilt in soft colored squares, and a slanted ceiling with windows that look at the sky. I immediately want to lie on the bed and stare at the clouds. At the foot of the bed sits a heavy carved mahogany chest opposite a beautiful matching wardrobe. Maureen opens the

wardrobe to a collection of casual dresses dipped in muted colors. She moves aside the lemon chiffon, the coral and dusty pink, the lavender and lilac, and reaches for a dress of watercolor greens. A floor length gown of something gauzy. She takes it off the rack and holds it up to me. It's strapless, with tight diagonal folds across the bodice, and I can't imagine myself in it at all.

"Will you try it on?" she asks.

I agree, but it will look terrible.

"I'll wait outside," she says.

"Before you go," I say, and she pauses. "Brigid doesn't want to bother you because you have so much else going on with the wedding. But the dress that Maebh sent is definitely lost. I thought the shipping company could work a miracle for us, but they can't. And the dress that Mrs. Grealy has, well, it's beautiful, but it's not Brigid at all. It probably won't make a difference, in the long run. I mean, Andrew won't care what she wears. But Brigid had her heart set on this other dress."

Throughout my speech Maureen has been standing quietly, with that almost smile that tells you she knows more than she lets on. When I finish, she cups my cheek softly. "Darling Claire. What a kind heart you have. There isn't anything to be done about a dress that's vanished. But you know I'll help where I

can. Trust me, I won't breathe a word to Brigid. Now I'll just wait outside while you try on your gown." She gives me a soft kiss and leaves me alone.

I take off my shirt and trousers and step into this billow of fabric that zips up the back. Surprisingly, the bodice fits well, though the dress is several inches too long and my bra straps show above the top. But when I step over to the mirror, I feel like I'm looking at someone else.

The light green brings out a peachy glow in my skin, and gold threads on the bodice swirl and gleam. From the waist down, the fabric falls in a soft whipped dream that swishes as I move and feels delicious against my legs.

Maureen knocks. "Claire, may I see?"

I clear my throat. "Come in."

Maureen crosses the room and stands before me with a wide smile. "Oh, *leannán*. You look wonderful. Just as I hoped."

I can't stop staring at the gown. "It's so ... so ..." I can't seem to find the words to describe it.

"You've always been beautiful, Claire. Now you can see it for yourself."

I only half believe Maureen's pretty words. But I do believe in the beauty of the dress. "May I borrow this for Brigid's wedding?"

“You may. We’ll need to find you the right shoes. And I think I have something for your hair.” She rubs her cheek with a pensive look, then marches over to the chest and lifts the lid.

“Aunt Maureen,” Brigid calls. Footsteps come down the hall until she’s in the room with a gasp. “Oh, Claire.”

I turn to her with a look of wonder. “It’s for your wedding.”

“You look amazing,” she says. “You might even outshine the bride.”

I shake my head. “That’s not possible.”

“I found it,” Maureen calls, and we turn to her. There are shawls and scarves and piles of folded cloth scattered around the chest. In her hand is a beaded comb—a starburst of green gems and seed pearls and twisted golden wire. “I wore this with that same dress many years ago. A wonderful night with a special gentleman.”

She holds it out to me and I cradle the design. “It looks like leaves and flowers.”

“A perfect accent for your gown.”

She puts the dress in a garment bag and wraps the comb in tissue. Then she sorts through her shoes and hands me a pair of strappy green sandals that fit

amazingly well. “These should work. And now you’re all set.”

Brigid laughs. “What fun it’ll be getting ready. You have to come to the castle, Claire. Annemarie and I are having our hair and makeup done. I’d love for you to be part of that.”

Hair and makeup? I’ve wondered what that would be like. But I don’t want to take attention away from Brigid and her friend. “That’s alright. Mam can help me at home.”

Maureen gently squeezes my arm. “Take the gift, Claire.”

“Are you sure?” I ask Brigid.

“I’m sure.”

I thank both of them and gather up my things. A couple hours of girl time could be fun. It’s a lovely gift, something I’ll have to look back on after the whole bridesmaid experience is over.

Chapter 10

rigid's hen do at Gran's is about to start, as soon as the honoree arrives. The dining room table is stacked with plates and cups and silverware, and Eileen and Orla are working on decorations. I've heard about parties with strippers and risqué cake toppers and favors. This is much more sedate, given the age range of the attendees.

A white banner stretches high across the living room that proclaims "Best Wishes to the Bride" in gold letters with pink hearts. There are pink heart-shaped "Bride to Be" balloons and round white balloons tied in bunches in every corner. The table is set with Gran's Belleek china, the silverware polished to a high shine, with pink party napkins printed with Love and Kisses. Gaily wrapped gifts in pink and white and gold stand against a cabinet next to the table.

Everyone is wearing something pink—Nora, Orla, Gran, and Eileen in light cotton cardigans; Mrs. Grealy with a pink scarf; Mam in a buttoned pink blouse; Maureen in a pink linen dress; Eva in pink trousers. I don't usually wear pink, but my new short-sleeved tee in light pink looks good.

Even the chocolate cherry cupcakes—baked after Mam went home—contribute to the theme with their soft pink cherry frosting. And Mam baked a two-tier

lemon cake with a white lemon drizzle, studded with pink candy hearts. There will be tea aplenty, plus champagne to go around, thanks to Maureen.

Eva, married to Hugh Morley last winter (what a cute couple), and Mrs. Greally arrange a large cluster of pink and white roses for the middle of the table. Maureen chats with Gran about the wedding bouquets and music, the string quartet that will play as Brigid walks down the aisle with her dad and again when she and Andrew take that same walk as husband and wife. I can't wait to see the decorations for the castle grounds. There's a lovely green lawn with a special canopy just for weddings. We're all saying daily prayers for fine weather.

There's no word from Maureen about Brigid's dress. It's only been half a day, but couldn't something have happened by now? Patience is not one of my virtues as everyone in the knitting group knows.

The only other thing marring the event is the absence of Maebh. I keep hoping I'll hear that she's on her way.

At the scheduled time the door opens, and Brigid and Annemarie call out, "We're here!"

Brigid introduces Annemarie to the others and Maureen and Gran gently herd the group to the table for food, a slice of lemon cake and a cupcake on each plate.

Mam squeezes my shoulder hard, her face a mass of storm clouds. “Where are the vanilla and chocolate cupcakes, Claire?” she hisses in a low voice. “That’s what we agreed on. Not this ... this spectacle.”

“Sorry, Mam,” I whisper and edge away from her steely grip. Though I’m not sorry at all. And I doubt anyone else will mind the switch.

Annemarie pulls me aside. “Welcome to the bridesmaid’s club. It’ll be so much fun, don’t you think? I can’t wait to see your dress. Brigid said you look wonderful in it.”

We all find seats in the living room and Gran pours tea while people dig into the sweets. My plate sits on my lap untouched while I wait for a verdict on the cupcakes. Pass or fail.

“Lovely cake, Rose,” Mrs. Greally says. “Like a taste of spring.”

Mrs. Greally, ever the diplomat.

“Thank you, Janet.” Mam pointedly avoids me even though I’m near Mrs. Greally.

Annemarie bites into a cupcake and sighs. On the second bite her face opens like a flower drinking in the sun. With a look of utter delight, she turns to Eileen. “Have you tried the cupcake?”

Eileen sets down her tea and picks up her cupcake, nibbles at the frosting, smiles, then pulls off a piece of

cake and puts it in her mouth. “Oh,” she says. “Oh my.” Then she takes a bite of cake and frosting and sits there chewing with a Cheshire Cat smile. That starts an avalanche of tasting and lip smacking and a chorus of mmms.

“Rose, dear, try the cupcake,” Mrs. Grealy says. “It really is divine.”

“I’m quite full now,” Mam says. “Perhaps later.” She smiles sweetly, but I know her look is a bitter dose of “we’re not done yet.”

Eva chimes in. “They’re really wonderful, Rose. The perfect thing to have for the next author book signing.” She takes another bite and looks keenly at my mother. “You should carry these at the bakery.”

Oh, Eva. *Thank you!* Despite my mother’s adamance, my heart sings with baking possibilities I hadn’t expected.

The conversation moves on. Plates are scraped clean, teacups drained, and Brigid answers questions about Andrew and his Scottish adventure. “He’s starting to speak with an accent now. A bit of a burr. It’s really cute.” She laughs and her eyes twinkle and I’m envious of their love. The way Finn looked at me last night flashes in my head, and for a moment I wonder what if.

Maureen stands and claps her hands. “Alright, ladies, time for a little game. We’re going to start off

with He Said, She Said. Claire, will you hand these out?” She gives me a stack of pens and forms printed on white cardstock with He Said, She Said at the top, then twenty statements, each followed by a pink ring and a black bow tie. I circle the room, giving each person a form and a pen.

“You have two minutes to sort out your answers,” Maureen announces. “Circle the ring if you think the statement fits Brigid. The bow tie if you think it’s Andrew. The one who gets closest to Brigid’s answers wins a prize.” She looks around the room. “Everyone ready?”

“Ready,” we call out.

“Then go.” Maureen starts the timer on her phone and the room quiets, but not for long. There are giggles, then loud laughter from several ladies. I look over the statements—*I fell in love first, I’m the serious one, I read the most books*—and have no clue about any of them. But I play along and mark my card, chuckling as I go. When Maureen yells, “Time is up,” I still have several statements unanswered.

Brigid reads out her answers, and we all get a laugh over who’s the better cook—neither one—and which one reads the most—Brigid, because Andrew is usually writing. Annemarie (no surprise there) wins a lunch at Murphy’s pub, courtesy of the owner.

Then we turn to a short game of Truth or Dare. Just one question for each person, based on a deck of cards that Maureen bought. “Who will go first?” she asks.

Gran raises her hand, opts for Truth, and pulls a card. “What’s the most embarrassing thing that’s happened to you?” she reads. She smiles to herself, then hands the card to Maureen. “When I was just nineteen,” Gran says, “before I married my Conor, I fell down a flight of stairs at a friend’s house and snapped my wrist. A horrible break. Her parents took me to hospital and the doctor, a handsome bloke, declared I needed surgery, so they put me under and operated. The doctor was finishing the sutures when I woke up. There wasn’t any pain but I was fully aware of the voices in the room and the table I was lying on. ‘Don’t open your eyes,’ the doctor warned me, so I kept them shut. But I had to go to the bathroom something fierce and finally confessed. ‘Can you hold it?’ a nurse asked, and I said, ‘If you could free me other hand, I’ll see if I can manage.’”

The whole room roars with laughter and Gran turns a pretty shade of pink, almost as dark as her cardigan. Then Gran calls on Eileen and passes the cards. Truth this time is a secret talent, and we hear about Eileen’s fondness for making medicinal teas. Eva takes a chance on a Dare and performs a silly dance. Then Brigid pulls a Truth card and confesses that if

she were a man, she would date Annemarie because her best friend is beautiful, loyal, and caring. Brigid blushes tomato red and passes the cards to me. I have visions of parading in my underwear if I choose Dare, so I go with Truth and pull, “Who was your best kiss?”

Of all the questions to get, it had to be this one. An innocent question. A question most girls could answer without thinking. But I’ve never been properly kissed. Not the way I’ve seen in the movies.

I go quiet, thinking of the men from my past—boys, actually, because there hasn’t been anyone since my school days. None of them were particularly swoon-worthy and they certainly didn’t deliver on that delicious-never-to-be-forgotten moment. Or the lack of kissing in the case of Rupert Blaney’s thirty-second fumble with my virginity in the back of his truck. If he were someone like Finn, I could have focused on dreamy blue eyes instead of dodgy sweet talk and sour breath.

I know it’s just a game, but my heart whirs like an eggbeater and I’m feeling overly warm. Kissing someone is what you talk about with your girlfriends, not your mother or grandmother or their friends and acquaintances.

“Come on, Claire,” Brigid prompts. “There’s no judgment here.” She smiles with a sweet laugh.

I shake my head as scarlet climbs my neck. “I’ve never really had a good kiss.” Then I pass the cards to Annemarie.

She stares at me. “Not even once?”

Sure, there are questions. “Well, there was Billy Duncan in the fifth grade. And a few pecks in secondary school. But nothing memorable.” Rupert doesn’t deserve a mention.

“We need to do something about this,” Annemarie says with a grin. “I bet Finn would oblige. Brigid, talk to that brother of yours.”

“He had his chance,” I blurt, then everyone stares and my face feels uncomfortably hot while my hands go cold. Where is my cloak of invisibility when I need it? Even Brigid’s cheeks go rosy, but Mam turns away as if I don’t exist.

“And he didn’t take it?” Annemarie shakes her head in disbelief. “What’s wrong with him?”

Brigid laughs. “Someone needs a good talking to.”

I try to laugh with them and wish I had a fan to cool my cheeks. I thought Finn might kiss me the other night. Hoped he would kiss me. Will there be another chance?

The party continues and I wonder how I’ve let myself—my life—become so sheltered. Wondering

when, or if, I'll ever be properly kissed. I may be the youngest one here at twenty-seven, but that's no excuse.

I need to be more adventurous, more daring. How can I be the best I can be if I still have my childhood fears? An intense shiver ripples down my back and the scar on my leg tightens and pulses. The ever-vigilant reminder of my boundaries.

The nightmare of my childhood starts to surface. The boat. The waves. I push it away and struggle to be here. Now. At Brigid's party. A time of celebration.

I look around the room and Brigid has started opening gifts. There are cheers and clapping as she reveals bright red sexy lingerie from Annemarie; a string of cultured pearls from Maureen; a muted green sweater and scarf from Mam and Mrs. Grealy; a photobook from Gran, Nora, Orla, and Eileen with childhood pictures of Brigid's family (with a lot of help from Maureen); and last, but not least, a set of cookbooks for newlyweds from Eva and me, along with ten of my favorite dessert recipes handprinted on decorated cards.

When the party ends, Gran and Maureen take charge of clean-up. Brigid says her goodbyes and another round of heartfelt thank-yous to everyone, and the house begins to clear. Mam goes home on her own, still avoiding me. Annemarie waits by the door as

Brigid comes over to me. She gives me a sweet kiss on the cheek. “Thank you, Claire, for everything. The cupcakes were wonderful. Everyone thought so.”

Everyone but Mam.

“It was a perfect party,” Brigid continues, “because you were part of it. I hope you didn’t mind the teasing earlier. That’s all it was. I promise I’m not talking to Finn. I wouldn’t interfere that way, unless you wanted me too.” She looks at me with a hint of a smile.

Is she hoping I’ll say yes? “No, please don’t.”

“Of course. But I think he likes you. I’ve never seen him light up the way he did when he was talking about the two of you making chocolates.” Her smile and eyes are the happy anticipation of the first bite of just-out-of-the-oven cake. You know it has to cool but it smells so good you want to taste it now. Her look takes me back to the giddy pleasure of creating, of Finn’s enthusiasm.

Then she gives me a hug, and she and Annemarie are out the door with goodbye waves and calls of, “See you tomorrow.”

Sounds of light conversation drift from the kitchen where Gran and Maureen are cleaning up. I should go join them. Instead, I take a moment to survey the remnants of wrapping paper and ribbon on the floor, pillows in disarray, half-empty cups and glasses and a bit of leftover cake. Signs of a great party.

The embarrassment about my kissing history smarts like a paper cut. I'll get over it. The cupcakes, though—I shouldn't have tried to hide them from Mam. That's a bigger issue to confront.

I square my shoulders and head for the kitchen. Every baker has mistakes and failures. You simply try again until you get it right. I'm already checking off today—a cupcake success. Tomorrow I'll apologize to Mam and all will be well. Then the rehearsal dinner—I *am* looking forward to meeting Andrew—and at last the wedding.

Piece of cake.

Chapter 11

FRIDAY, JUNE 22

The silence between Mam and me last night was as thick as fondant and just as unappealing. I tried my best smiles and a litany of *I'm sorry*, feeling sorrier each time I apologized. But nothing cracked the wall. Mam refused to look at me or respond or give any signal that she heard my pleas. Dad wisely stayed out of it. I went to bed worn and frustrated and more than a little defensive. It was just a batch of cupcakes.

This morning I arrive at the bakery, hoping Mam's mood has softened overnight. I hang my yellow cotton dress for the rehearsal dinner in the back room and approach her desk. But the wall between us remains high and strong. Deep fissures line Mam's mouth, her normally styled hair flat and dull.

I stand before her desk. "Can we talk?"

"I have nothing to say." She pulls a bill off the bill pile and scribbles a date at the bottom. "Shouldn't you be out front?" she says without looking at me.

If she won't talk, then I'll start baking. "I have work to do here."

"Already done," she says crisply.

"You've made the Barmbrack?"

“I have.”

“Well, then, I’ll work on the scones.”

“Done.”

“What about the soda bread and the dinner rolls?”

“Done and done.”

Each time she says *done* my level of surprise increases. Not in a good way. I look at her in shocked silence as she keeps on with the bills and it dawns on me, she’s not even reading them. She’s using the repetitive action to stay busy. To avoid me.

A tight fist squeezes my heart so hard I want to cry out. We’ve always worked together. I can’t imagine us being separated like this. I pull a chair over to her desk and sit down. “Mam, I’m sorry,” I say for the thousandth time. “I should have told you about the cupcakes. The ones you sent with me got ruined and I was there in the castle kitchen and had to make something up on the spot. I wanted to impress Brigid.”

“You should have made what I sent. People love our chocolate and vanilla cupcakes.” She raises her head and the dark circles under her eyes are like bruised plums, a sure sign she hasn’t slept well.

My heart kicks in sympathy. I never meant to hurt her. But how do I make her see I need the freedom to be creative?

Maybe if I appease her now, that will help. “You’re right, Mam. I should have made more of the same.”

Her eyebrows rise. She’s listening. I want to keep agreeing so she’ll forgive me and everything will be alright. Then I envision the castle pantry—the chocolate, the spices, the exotic foods—and I know I’ll never be happy with plain anything. I let out a sigh that could collapse a soufflé, scorch a cake, chase away all our customers. All the frustrations in my life rolled into one.

“You’re the one who loves the basics, Mam. Vanilla and chocolate are pure and simple. But I’m not like that.” As I explain our differences, what makes me “me,” tingles of excitement prickle my chest and hands. I can feel the stir of creativity I get when a big idea surfaces, and I start to smile. “I love strange flavors and different combinations. I love experimenting and trying out new things. I couldn’t help myself in that kitchen pantry. All those possibilities calling out to me. I needed to try something wild.”

“You know better than that, Claire. Wild will always get you into trouble.” Then she shakes her head. In disappointment? Disgust? Something far from happiness.

I move the chair away from her desk and stand there, waiting for a word, a glance, something that

will resolve this misunderstanding. But all I get is a heavy silence, which hurts far worse than yelling. I finally leave and take my position at the front counter. No armistice for now. In fact, the battle lines appear to be even deeper.



The rest of the day I tend to the customers out front; she stays in the back. Our hurt stands tall and firm. Several times I think about trying to talk to her, but I don't know what more I can say.

In the afternoon, she pleads a headache and goes home early. When the shop closes, I change into my yellow dress (glad of the cheery color) and escape to Murphy's pub for Brigid's rehearsal dinner. I'm looking forward to some fun and laughter. And Finn. He's never seen me in a dress.

A small knot of people crowds the door to the pub, glasses of ale in hand, the women in light dresses, the men in jeans. "Hi, Claire," a bakery customer calls as I smile and shoulder past into the busy room. Clusters of people line the bar and dot the floor, relatives of Brigid's that I'll see at tomorrow's reception. Tables meet end-to-end to form two long rectangles of seating, with bunches of blue hydrangeas every four chairs. A nice addition to the casual décor.

I wave to Maureen and wonder if there's any news on Brigid's dress. I think Brigid's worry is rubbing off. I want to ask Maureen but I don't want to know that nothing's been done. Then I hear my name.

"Claire," Brigid yells over the noise of conversation, and I head towards the back of the room where she stands with Annemarie and a man I've never met. I look for Finn but I don't see him.

Brigid and Annemarie and I exchange hugs.

"That color is fabulous on you," Annemarie says to me.

How nice of her to notice. "Thank you."

Brigid adds, "You look so pretty in a dress. Doesn't she?" She turns to the man for confirmation.

"As lovely as an Irish summer with the sunlight on the trees and a sweet wind whispering through the fields."

What gorgeous words. This must be Andrew, the writer. A river of delight has me swaying in place and thinking I should wear dresses more often. I might if I had someone to show them off to. I quickly scan the room again. Where is Finn?

"Such a poet," Annemarie says with a laugh. Brigid follows with, "Claire, this is Andrew. Andrew, my new friend Claire."

“The baker,” he says with a warm smile and firm handshake. “I’ve heard a lot about your chocolate cupcakes. I look forward to trying one.”

“Of course,” I say, though I have no plans to make more soon. “It’s lovely to meet you.”

“And my new bridesmaid,” Brigid announces. “Standing in for Maebh.”

“Ah,” he says. “That’s kind of you to step in at the last minute.”

The words “my pleasure” register in my brain but can’t quite make it out of my mouth. So I nod and smile and hope that’s enough.

Handsome, he is, Brigid’s Andrew. I’ve seen his photo on the back of his book, but he’s softer in person. Less academic and more approachable. He’s only a few inches taller than Brigid—not male model tall like Finn—and seems quite relaxed surrounded by three women. I expect he doesn’t mind talking about himself. “Are you still researching Scotland for your new book?”

“I am. Fascinating place, the Highlands, with the different terrain and dialects. I still have trouble with the Gaelic spellings. Way too many vowels, as far as I’m concerned. And I had no idea there was a difference between Scottish and Irish Gaelic. I was telling Brigid I got a compliment on my accent, thanks to her. She helped me with my pronunciation when I

was working on the Irish book.” He beams with the satisfaction of a job well done and gives Brigid an adoring glance.

That sweet look sends a swell of longing through me for something of my own. Someone of my own. Being so in love used to seem burdensome, oppressive. But Brigid and Andrew look the opposite of weighed down. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad having someone love me like that. Someone like Finn.

Andrew waits for my response. “Pronouncing Irish correctly isn't an easy thing. So you must be doing well,” I tell him. “And I really enjoyed your last book. I'm looking forward to the new one.”

“So am I,” Brigid says. “I'm tired of sharing my almost-husband with his research.”

We all laugh at that, then Andrew plays the gentleman and goes to fetch me a drink.

Brigid softly rests her hand on my arm. “Claire, thank you again for everything you're doing. I don't know how I would have made it so far without you.”

“Hey, what about me?” Annemarie puts in and we all laugh.

Brigid gives Annemarie a quick hug. “You have special status as best friend. No one can take that away from you.”

There's that moment again, that trusted connection that I want with someone.

"Andrew is lovely," I tell Brigid. "You two are perfect together."

Brigid's eyes soften with a dreamy look. "I'm so glad we're past all of our earlier misunderstandings."

Does she mean the big falling-out at Eva's bookshop last year? I heard bits and pieces but never the whole story. She doesn't elaborate and the topic feels inappropriate now, so I move on. "Are you nervous about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" Her voice squeaks. "You mean the actual day when I get all dressed up and stand in front of a bunch of people I don't really know and pledge my life to the man I love for the rest of time? That tomorrow?"

Is she joking? Serious? Annemarie bursts out laughing.

"She's a little nervous," Annemarie says. "We've been going through the timeline for tomorrow and overwhelm tops the list. But there's nothing we can't handle. Even that silly dress, right?"

"Right," Brigid concurs. But the nervous swallow and wide eyes say otherwise. "I know Maureen has everything handled," Brigid tells me, "but I always

worry. I'm so glad Andrew's back. If I was still waiting for him to return from Scotland, I'd be a wreck."

"I'm sure it'll all be fine," I say. "Maureen is a master planner."

"Well, I'm glad you'll be with us, Claire," Brigid says. "I feel much more confident with two of you." She looks at me and Annemarie with a wobbly smile, and we each squeeze an arm to give her support. Then I think about my role as bridesmaid, everyone's eyes on me as I walk down the aisle. Thank goodness it's a short walk.

Donal, the pub owner, moves through the crowd, telling people the food will be out in a few minutes. We take our seats, Brigid, Andrew, Maureen (I give her a hand squeeze across the table), and a man about Maureen's age in the center, which must be Brigid's father, Patrick Cleary. His dark hair is graying now, but his eyes hold a lively twinkle, his laugh deep and merry. He may live in America, but he has lots of Irish charm.

On either side of me are men my mother's age. Second or third cousins of Brigid, they say as we introduce ourselves. I lean across the table towards Brigid. "Where is Finn? I thought he'd be here." I want him to be here.

"He had a last-minute emergency with a friend's sailboat," Brigid says, "and had to rush down to

Galway. He apologized profusely and promised to make it up to me. He'll be here tomorrow."

I try to nod in understanding, but he should be here now, for his sister. Poor Brigid, without either of her siblings. And me, all dressed up for a man who won't see me.

Then the food is served and dinner calls my attention—tomato, basil, and mozzarella salad—each ingredient fresh and bright—followed by crispy fish or juicy burgers (because fish is appalling) and chips with malt vinegar and tartar sauce. Simple, wholesome food to satisfy any appetite.

Partway through dinner Mr. Cleary stands and taps his knife on his glass of ale. Heads turn in his direction and the conversation quiets. "Most of you know me, but for any who don't, I'm Patrick Cleary, father of the bride." He winks at Brigid, who returns a weak smile. I wonder about the history between them. "Thank you all for coming tonight, and a special thanks to Maureen for taking care of this grand event." She bows her head in recognition. "I'd like to start by welcoming Andrew Connally, husband-to-be, to Claremore. Tomorrow you'll be part of the family. And a braver man I've never known. Did you know he had the courage to ask the father of the woman he loves for his blessing?" He grins at Andrew who responds with a rosy blush. A wave of laughter rolls through the pub. "You're a good man, Mr. Connally, and a kind one,

and I can see my daughter adores you as much as you do her. You have my blessing now and for all the years to come.” Patrick raises his glass and we chorus, “Here, here.”

Then he turns to Brigid, his eyes shining with a fatherly love that tightens my throat and makes me long for my dad. “To my darling daughter Brigid. I know our road hasn’t been an easy one, with our differences and you losing your mother when you were so young. But I pray that our love will continue to grow and you’ll come to know how much I treasure you. My wish has always been for you to feel loved and cherished, and you’ve found a wonderful man in Andrew. Someone who will love and cherish you. And for that I’m grateful.”

Brigid wipes her eyes and Andrew kisses her cheek with the kind of warmth every man should bestow on his woman. My eyes are a little wet, my heart a little raw as I think of the fight I had with Mam. I’m missing her comfort, the ease we usually share. And I wish Finn were here to talk to. I remember him telling me about his relationship with his dad. He’d understand that delicate balance.

Patrick raises his glass again. “My thanks to all who have kept my daughter safe and loved. Here’s to Brigid and Andrew. May you love each other as much as I loved my Kate. *Sláinte mhaith.*” He beams his goodwill to his daughter, who mouths a teary *Thank you.*

Gerry, Patrick's brother, and two other uncles make short speeches while we all finish our food. Donal keeps the ale freshly topped and conversation resumes. Andrew talks casually with some of Brigid's relatives, completely at ease, charming them with stories of Scotland. Brigid fidgets with the silverware, still carrying that anxious energy from earlier. I wish there was something I could do to ease her stress.

Dinner ends, the gathering starts to break up, and Andrew pulls me aside. "I have a favor to ask." His voice is low and calm, but there's an undercurrent of concern.

"Of course. How can I help?"

"Brigid keeps going on about her wedding dress. How it's not the one she wanted and it looks all wrong on her. I've told her so many times that it doesn't matter. She could wear a bathrobe for all I care." I swallow a chuckle as I picture Brigid walking down the aisle in a bathrobe. "But she isn't hearing me," he says. "She's so worried that wearing the wrong dress will ruin the day. You know how she wants everything to be perfect." He pauses and searches the room for her, his gaze marshmallow soft when he finds her.

"Can you talk to her?" he asks. "Tell her not to worry? It hurts my heart to see her so upset."

What a kind and selfless thing to ask. If only it would work. "Annemarie and I have told her the same

thing,” I say. “But I’ll try again.”

“That means a lot, Claire. Thank you.” He kisses my cheek and gives me a warm smile. “Now I should find my bride-to-be. She’ll think I’ve run off on her again.”

As he walks away, I battle a feeling of failure.

Brigid’s dress problem still lingers, despite asking Maureen for help.

I’ve had an awful row with Mam.

And I don’t know how to make either of those right.

Chapter 12

SATURDAY, JUNE 23

I've never known my mother to hide from a problem, but she's hiding from me. She isn't at the breakfast table, and when I ask Dad about her, he says she's staying in bed.

"Is she sick?" I demand. "Should I go see her?"

Dad folds the sports page and gives me his best fatherly look with his head tilted, his eyes kind. "Give her a break, sweetheart. Whatever's going on between you two needs a rest."

"But I hate us not talking."

"I know. She hates it too."

"So ..." I don't know what to say after that grand start. How do I fix the trouble I've caused?

"She's proud, your mother. She'll reach out when she's ready."

He snaps his paper open, the signal that he's done talking. But the way he talks about her, the love and respect beneath his words. "Dad, how did you know Mam was the one?"

He peers at me over his paper. "One what?"

"You know, the one for you?"

“Oh, that one.” His eyes crinkle and the dimple on his right cheek flashes. He lowers the paper a smidge. “I didn’t have to try so hard with her. With other girls I felt I had to sound really witty or be good at sports. Two things that weren’t natural or easy for me. With your mother everything just clicked, as if we weren’t trying at all. I loved that she loved me for who I am. That’s how I knew.”

He winks at me then goes back to his paper.

He’s right about their relationship. It does look easy. I always thought it was because my dad tries so hard, but maybe those little touches—the flowers, the kisses, the compliments—maybe they’re easy because she makes it easy.

Like being with Finn. I don’t have to pretend with him, I’m just myself.

I leave Dad with a kiss and say I’ll see him and Mam later at the wedding.



The bakery is quiet today. With most of the town attending Brigid’s reception, there’s not much need for bread or dessert. The castle will be providing a sit-down dinner sure to outdo anything we can offer.

Andrew's *favor* nags at me, weaving threads of trepidation as I wonder how to approach Brigid. Outside, grey clouds lace the sky, and I cross my fingers against potential rain. An ominous portent for the afternoon, but maybe also for me. Will our bakery survive with the resort as competition? Our customers will continue to need their weekly loaves of bread and scones, won't they? The resort is more for people on holiday, not everyday living. Still, I think Bread and Dreams needs a facelift, an uplift, a dusting off of the tried and true. A venture into new and exciting.

If only Mam would agree.

Mrs. Hennessey stops in for two loaves of soda bread. Mr. Foley brings his foul breath back (shoot me now) for another round of dinner rolls. Jenny, the daughter of Mam's friend Carol, purchases a chocolate cake for the family Sunday lunch. Someday I'm going to convince Mam to allow something different, like my chocolate cherry cupcakes. Then she'll see how fast they sell.

When noon arrives, I close up shop and leave Mam a note about the sales. I grab some of the salted caramel chocolates that Finn and I made from the fridge and pack them in a small bakery box. Treats for Brigid and Annemarie—a thank-you for inviting me to the pre-wedding ritual. Then I gather my dress and comb and shoes and head for the castle, rehearsing

my speech to Brigid (the one I don't want to give) about how her dress will be fine. Just fine.

Reception directs me upstairs to a suite set aside for the bride and bridesmaids. I still shake my head whenever I hear that word, expecting it to be for someone else.

On the way, I poke my head into the Great Hall where the reception will be. Right now, it's a hive of activity with waiters smoothing crisp white tablecloths and polishing wineglasses and silverware. Others place flower arrangements in green and white in the middle of the tables and small cards by each plate. Curious, I look at a card on the nearest table—a packet of wildflower seeds stamped with a four-leaf clover design and the words “Let Love Grow, Brigid & Andrew” followed by today's date. Sweet and lasting.

Then I hear “Claire,” and see Finn across the room, casual as ever in a short-sleeve shirt and jeans.

Without so much as a hello, I blurt, “Where were you last night?” Apparently, I'm still miffed about his absence.

He moves toward me and my body tenses, my heart beating faster. “I drove to Galway to handle some last-minute arrangements.”

“You couldn't handle them during the day?” I don't know why I'm being so unpleasant. He doesn't owe me anything.

He stops a couple feet away, hands in his pockets, as if he knows better than to risk coming closer. “I was setting up a sailing venture for Brigid and Andrew for their honeymoon. The boat leaves Galway and stops at each of the Aran islands.”

“Their honeymoon?” He didn’t have a crisis like Brigid said?

“Yeah. I took Brigid and Andrew sailing in the spring and they loved it, so I thought this would make a nice gift.”

A gift. All of that steam fizzes out and I feel like an idiot. “Brigid said you had a boat emergency.”

“It was. The owner was out of town all week and the only time we could meet was last night.”

“Oh.” Insert foot in mouth and give several hard twists. “That’s ... that’s nice. I’m ... I’m sorry for being —”

He closes the gap between us and touches my cheek, a soft caress that makes my heart thud. “You care about Brigid, don’t you?”

It hits me then that I do. I really do. I have feelings for her.

She matters to me.

“You’re a good person, Claire. I’m sorry I wasn’t there last night. I wish I could have been with you.”

My brain starts on a slow whir and all I can think is *me too*.

We stare at each other for the longest time until I remember why I'm here. "I have to go. Brigid's expecting me."

Finn smiles. "Girl stuff?"

I nod. "I'll see you later?"

"You can count on it."

On the way upstairs I practice *Brigid, about your dress ...* The door to the suite is slightly ajar. I knock before I enter, then I stand there a minute and absorb the décor. White couches and peach armchairs with pillows in peach and white. A white carpet with embossed double Rs that I want to sink my toes into. Soft jazz floating in through overhead speakers. Maybe I could move in here for a long stay.

Brigid and Annemarie wear bathrobes of white plush terrycloth with a double R embroidered on a breast pocket, while two women set their hair and smooth on foundation. When Annemarie sees me, she calls out a hearty, "Claire, come in. We've been waiting for you."

I wave to her and Brigid and keep my distance. No messing up the facial art. I take a seat on the couch and push aside the speech. Gifts first. "I brought

treats,” I say and pull out the box of candy. “Salted caramel chocolates, if anyone wants one.”

“I do, I do,” they both chorus, and work pauses so they can taste.

Brigid sits in a happy dream state with a sweet melting smile. Annemarie pierces me with her gaze while she chews, her eyebrows arched so high they almost touch her hairline, until she ends with a “Holy Mother of God, where did you get these?”

A beam of joy lights me up inside, spreading through my body until it shoots out my fingertips. “I made them.” I give a nod to the two assistants and grin as they taste and smile and say sweet thank-yous.

Annemarie wipes chocolate off the corner of her mouth and licks her finger. “You made them?”

“Don’t act so surprised,” Brigid says. “I told you she was talented.”

“I know, I know. Those cupcakes were amazing. But candy and cupcakes are different.”

“They are,” I agree, so pleased with the impact I’m making.

“Are they for sale?” Annemarie asks. “Because I want to buy a bunch and take them home.”

Oh. The beam of joy brightens. I hadn’t thought about selling them. They were just an experiment, something I’d wanted to do for a long time. *Playing*

with chocolate. Then I remember Finn said that people would want them. “I’ll give you some to take home.”

“That’s great. But you should sell these.”

“I wouldn’t know what to do. That’s just a pipe dream.”

“Not a pipe dream,” Annemarie says. “A sweet dream.” Her face stills as if she’s thinking hard and she pulls out her phone and snaps a photo of a chocolate. “Leave it to me.”

I have no idea what she means, but I nod and gear up for my speech to Brigid. I’m just about to say her name when Maureen enters the room in an elegant blue gown with a garment bag draped over her arm.

“Aunt Maureen,” Brigid says from her chair with a little finger wave. The assistant pauses with makeup brush in hand.

Maureen blows kisses to Brigid and Annemarie and gives me a hug. A soft fragrance surrounds her that reminds me of roses.

“What did you bring?” Brigid asks.

“I have something to show you. Can you take a break now or should I wait?”

The assistant nods to Brigid, and Maureen hangs the bag on the rack next to the other dresses and removes a gown straight out of a fairy tale. A long-sleeved white lace bodice with appliques of leaves and

flowers dips in a low V in the front that still retains its modesty, with trails of applique leaves flowing over a waterfall of pleated tulle. The back dips to a V at the waist with more leaves winding downward. It's slim and ethereal and so, so Brigid.

Thank my lucky stars for Maureen and her excellent timing. I'm so glad I didn't say anything.

Brigid puts her hands over her mouth, her eyes wet and shiny. "This is like the dress in my vision, the one my ring showed me. Where did you get it?"

"It was your mother's. So many years have passed I'd forgotten about it. Finn called the other day to say that the resort had some boxes in storage that belong to the Clearys. Boxes that needed to be moved out. I offered to take them for now. I was looking through one to see what kind of items they contained, and I came across this dress."

Brigid dabs at her eyes, careful not to ruin her makeup. "May I ... do you think it's alright if I wear it?"

Maureen gently cups Brigid's face. "I think your mother would want you to." She quickly swipes at her eyes. "Now go, finish."

"Thank you, Maureen," I tell her softly.

She gives me a knowing smile as she zips up the garment bag, then she digs in her purse and pulls out

a small gray bag, soft and velvety. “And these are for you, Claire.”

I take the bag from her, release the drawstring ribbon, and pull out a pair of earrings. Each one has a small pearl at the top, followed by a gold moon, and below that an inch-long teardrop of dark green in an outer ring of gold that glistens in the light. They feel warm and old, from another time. “Are these emeralds?”

“They may be,” Maureen says. “You’d have to ask a jeweler. They were in the box with the dress, wrapped in several scarves. I almost didn’t see them. But I thought they’d go nicely with your gown.”

“They will. They’re beautiful. Thank you.” And certainly in keeping with the theme of green and white.

“I have to run now,” Maureen says. “Little details to attend to. Have fun, ladies, and I’ll see you shortly.”

We say our goodbyes and thank-yous and Maureen leaves. In another hour or so we’re all coiffed and beautified. It’s amazing what hair and makeup will do. I look at myself in the mirror and the woman looking back is pretty, sophisticated. Far from my normal appearance. My hair is parted on the side, swooped and waved and gently falling to my shoulders in soft curls. The comb that Maureen loaned me gives me a bit of fairy-like appeal. My eyes are lined, my lashes

thick and curled, the lids with a touch of shimmery brown. And there's a hint of pink on my mouth.

Then it's time to change for the wedding. Annemarie and I help Brigid with her dress, making sure to keep the material away from her face. Makeup stains can be ghastly. I've thought Brigid pretty since the moment I met her, with that curly hair and bright green eyes. But with her hair softly pulled back and the gloss of makeup and flowing lines of that dress, she transforms into a mythical goddess.

We all told her the dress didn't matter, but now I know how much it does. The right dress can perform miracles.

Oh, Andrew. If you only knew what awaits.

Then Annemarie takes her dress off the rack and starts to remove her bathrobe. I stand there frozen. I can't do this. I haven't undressed in front of anyone for years, not even my mother.

"Come on, Claire. Stop stalling," Annemarie says. "I want to see that dress on you." She tosses me a grin and drops the bathrobe to reveal a nicely toned figure in matching black bra and panties.

I am so out of my league with these women. But it isn't just envy.

Brigid walks over to me and puts her hand on my arm. "Is something wrong? You can tell me."

I try to chase away my fears. I know Brigid and Annemarie are trying to be nice, and it's not their problem. It's mine. But my body doesn't want to cooperate. My limbs refuse to move and my stomach has thirty knots, pulling tighter every moment.

Brigid leads me to the couch so we're both sitting. "Whatever it is, it's okay." She holds my hand in hers and I feel her warmth, her sincerity, her kindness. This is *her* wedding day and she's comforting *me*.

"This is stupid," I say.

"No, it's not." She squeezes my hand again.

Annemarie takes a seat on my other side, her dress revealing one shapely shoulder with a sleek floor-length fall of forest green. Simple yet stately and so right for her. She leans her head against my shoulder in solidarity. "You can tell us. Whatever it is, we're here to help."

Oh God, that just makes it worse. I swallow, clear my throat, and finally speak my truth. "I have a scar on my leg." Which chooses to pulse in recognition. I place my hand over it for comfort.

"A scar," Brigid says and nods. "Go on."

"A really bad scar." An image of the accident fills my mind and a streak of nausea races through me.

"I'm so sorry, Claire," Brigid says, her voice soft and full of sympathy. "From when you were younger?"

“I was eight.” My body shudders from the memory of the crash. The roar. The impact. The screams. My scar throbs now, hot and searing and I do my best to relax. To let go of the pain.

“You poor thing. Finn mentioned you don’t like the water. Is that why?”

I should be mad at Finn for divulging my secrets, but there are other things more important now. Like getting dressed for the wedding. “Yes,” I manage to croak.

“Well, there’s a simple solution,” Brigid says. She stands and pulls me up. “We don’t need to watch. You can change in the bathroom. There’s plenty of room in there, and lots of light. And if you need any help, just call. We’ll wait out here.”

I grab my dress and shoes and earrings and hurry in to change, thankful my leg has calmed. She was right about the bathroom. You could fit my whole bedroom in the space. Counters for miles, an enormous wall of mirror, lights so bright you can see every pore, and drawers and cabinets filled with expensive toiletries. I’m definitely moving into this suite.

I get dressed quickly, folding my clothes and shoes and zipping them into the garment bag. And Maureen was right. The earrings do go well, and I like the feel

of them dangling from my ears. Then I exit the bathroom.

Brigid and Annemarie are standing with their backs to me, gazing out the picture window that overlooks the garden where Brigid will be married.

I softly clear my throat and they turn.

Their smiles feel like the pop from a camera flashbulb.

“You look gorgeous,” they say at the same time.

And I start to believe it’s true.

Brigid links arms with me and Annemarie. “I’m the luckiest woman in the world to have you two with me today.” She gives each of us an air kiss. “Now I think I’m ready to get married.”

Chapter 13

SATURDAY, JUNE 24

The weather gods have blessed today with a mellow sun and a light breeze. That perfect temperature of just enough heat to stay warm but not wilt. A good thing for Brigid with her sheer lace, Annemarie's one bare shoulder, and my completely bare ones.

We gather together in a small room off the resort's back garden, waiting for the signal for the wedding to start. Maureen stands at the door, eyes on the audience and the musicians. Brigid has a tight hold on her father's arm, her dad whispering, "You're fine, love, you're fine." Even though I can't see her legs beneath all that tulle, I can imagine them shaking.

Then Maureen turns to Annemarie with, "It's time." Annemarie walks through the door with confidence in her step and a Mona Lisa smile, right at ease on the white aisle runner. When she's halfway down the path, Maureen nods to me. "Your turn," she says. I grasp the bouquet and try to ease my own stiff legs. Then I walk outdoors.

The string quartet plays The Flower Duet and heads swivel to watch me. I focus on the canopy covered with hundreds of white roses and baby's breath intertwined with lemon leaf and tiny clusters

of shamrocks. As I near the end I look at the priest, our sweet Father Thomas who smiles kindly, and at Andrew, who looks a little dazed, and at Grant, a fellow I haven't met who's Andrew's best man. And at... Finn. That's when I stumble, a wicked wobble that thankfully ends in a lean, not a fall. But I swear I hear the golden harp of Aengus, the god of love, even though there's no harp in sight.

How could I not know that Finn is one of the groomsmen? Of course he is. He's Brigid's brother. I take my place next to Annemarie and dare to look at him. Only to see him looking back at me, so handsome in his tux, his blue eyes as warm as the sky. I've had a thing for men in tuxes since Cary Grant in *To Catch a Thief*. But this is more than handsome, this is Ryan Reynolds meets Chris Evans gorgeous, and I have to look away.

I search for Maebh, for that striking red hair I've heard about, but no one matches that description. I trust she's just late.

When Brigid comes through the door with her father, everyone stands to watch the procession. She is the embodiment of a bride, a little nervous, a little shy, her natural beauty shining with her slow, graceful movements, her gown floating over the runner with soft swishing noises as she glides towards her groom. Andrew sucks in a deep breath and shakes out his

hands, maybe more nervous than she. Then her father kisses her cheek and hands her over to her beloved.

Father Thomas begins with familiar words about marriage that I've heard at the various weddings I've attended. The importance of God, his steadfast love, the honor and delight of entering into matrimony. But this is a small town without a fancy church and Father Thomas knew Brigid when she was a little girl. So he speaks of the tenderness of love, the faithfulness of the heart, the importance of communicating the truth to each other. The magic that springs from being honest and caring. Qualities that I would want in a potential partner.

I sneak a peek at Finn and wonder if he's potential partner material. He's got the good-looking part down pat, but there's so much more to being a couple. Things I've never paid attention to because I never thought I was partner material.

For the handfasting, Father Thomas takes braided green and white ribbon and winds it around Brigid's and Andrew's wrists. The symbol of binding together their separate lives—two into one. And Brigid and Andrew speak their commitment to one another.

With the ribbon released, Andrew says his vows. Words shaped with a master's pen, they capture the beauty and elegance of the moment. And when he says, "To the legend that brought us together, and the

ring that sealed our hearts. You have mine forever,” almost everyone nods in recognition of the dedication from his last book written to Brigid, his true love.

I have my hand over my heart at those words, even as Brigid starts to recite her vows. I glance at Finn when I lower my hand, but he’s focused on his sister. Will there ever be someone who has my heart forever? The dream never dies, though every year it seems less and less likely.

Then Andrew and Brigid exchange rings, thin bands engraved with a Celtic knot design, and Father Thomas delivers an old Irish blessing: “May love and laughter light your days and warm your heart and home. May good and faithful friends be yours, wherever you may roam. May peace and plenty bless your world with joy that long endures. May all life’s passing seasons bring the best to you and yours.” The couple receives the pronouncement of holy matrimony and they kiss. It’s sweet and a little chaste, entirely fitting for them.

The newlyweds exit to Vivaldi’s Spring, joyous music for a joyous event. Annemarie follows with Grant and Finn holds out his arm for me. When I touch his jacket, I feel the firmness of his muscles and, strangely, an ocean breeze. I haven’t been to the ocean since I was little, but I can taste the sun and salt, feel the wind in my hair. The thrill of being on the water and riding the waves. I half expect a sailboat to

come around the bend and see the tide flowing in and ebbing out. What's even more surprising, there's none of the usual stomach-churning nausea.

How is this happening? I'm not anywhere near the ocean. I'm in Claremore with Finn by my side, and we're about to enter the resort.

Inside, Maureen directs Brigid and Andrew to relax on a nearby couch with glasses of champagne. I hear a phone ring as the rest of us make our way to the Great Hall for the reception.

Finn pulls me back to let Grant and Annemarie take the lead. The warmth of his hand soothes and gentles, and the chaos falls away.

"Claire," he says, his voice hushed as if he's in a sacred space. His fingers lace with mine and his glance takes me in. "Your dress, the colors. You look like a Monet painting."

A thousand other names would have meant nothing. But he chose Monet—a man who captured simple landscapes and turned them into brilliant visions. The same thing I want to do—hope to do—with baking. "Thank you. He's one of my favorite artists."

"Well, you're as beautiful as his paintings."

I bask in a honeyed swirl of contentment. The rest of the evening doesn't matter. This is enough.

I wait for Finn to say something else, but he just stands there gazing at me. Annemarie and Grant have disappeared. “We should probably go to the reception,” I say.

”Sure,” he says while he continues to stand and gaze as if there’s nothing of more importance than me. What a heady feeling. Until at last he nods and steps forward and we walk together down the hall.



The reception passes in a blur, most of the time spent circling the room to greet people. Their smiles and compliments on my dress give me glimmers of joy and happiness—some taste like candy sprinkles, some like milk chocolate. Others are bursts of raspberry. But nothing as pronounced as the taste of the ocean with Finn.

Brigid’s relatives seem never-ending—aunts and uncles and cousins three times removed, some who traveled here for the day along with a few who live in Claremore. When they ask me what I do and I tell them about Bread and Dreams, many of them know my mother and promise to stop by soon. They will, you can be sure, for a Claremore promise is a thing well kept.

I look for Maebh again, walking through the room, wanting to meet her. Then Annemarie tells me Maebh won't be here. That Brigid and her sister talked, and all is as well as it can be. My heart goes out to Brigid, and I'm truly glad I filled in. As Annemarie starts to walk off, I stop her. "Have you noticed anything different?" I ask. "Everyone seems so happy and there are all these tastes ..." My words trail off because it sounds absurd when I ask, but for some reason the room seems to sparkle.

Annemarie looks me over. "I hadn't noticed anything. Sounds like you're wearing a pair of rose-colored glasses. Or maybe you're falling in love."

"Don't be ridiculous."

She leans in and bumps my shoulder. "I saw the way you were looking at Finn."

I shake my head in protest but she's already walked away. And I'm saved from overthinking because Finn is nowhere to be seen. Which is fine, as long as I get at least one dance.

I finally have a chance to sit down and eat my dinner when the speeches begin. First, Brigid's father with stories of their time living at the castle, then Grant, Andrew's publisher, with his stories of Andrew's start as an author. Several of Brigid's relatives toast the happy couple and I lean back in my

chair, slip off my shoes, and slowly sip champagne, wondering how many more hours until the end.

The music begins and the newlyweds dance their first dance together, then the floor fills with adults and children, everyone seemingly happy and relaxed.

Annemarie slides into the chair next to me. “I think this may be my favorite wedding of all time.”

“Because of Brigid?” Watching a best friend get married must make it special.

“Partly. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her happier. But I think I’m falling in love with Claremore.”

“Well, if you’re thinking about moving here, we’d be happy to have you.”

“Oh, I don’t think I’m ready to move.” She laughs. “At least not right now. I love my job in New York. And you don’t have many hotels here.”

“Not in Claremore. But Galway and some of the other big cities do.”

She shakes her head. “Speaking of Galway, I wanted to talk to you about next week. Brigid’s taking part in the storytelling contest there, and Andrew and I are going to support her. We’re leaving Wednesday and coming back Friday. She asked me to ask if you’d come too.”

So many thoughts race through my head. I do care about Brigid and Andrew and Annemarie. And Finn,

who stirs up unexpected feelings. But I've already had one crazy week. I don't need another.

"Thanks for the invitation. But I think I'll stay here and work on some recipes." Like how to fix my relationship with my mother. She and Dad are dancing across the room, his hand on her back, her head on his shoulder. Two people content with life and each other. She hasn't talked to me at all tonight, and I miss our closeness. I want that ease we used to have.

Annemarie pats my arm and I taste her pinch of disappointment. "I get it. I'm visiting a college friend in London for a few days while Brigid and Andrew are on their honeymoon." She probably means university, not our college here in Ireland. "But I'm looking forward to more time in Galway. If you change your mind, we'll be at the Parlee Abbey Hotel. It's supposed to be really nice. You can room with me."

She leaves and heads toward the buffet at the other end of the room. I reach down to slip on my shoes and when I look up Finn is standing there with his hand out.

"Dance with me?" he asks.

A quiver runs from my heart to my stomach. I was hoping he would ask, and I haven't danced with anyone since my fifth-year school dance, when

Tommy Walsh kept stepping on my toes. But I'm not sixteen anymore. I nod and give Finn my hand.

Brigid and Andrew chat with people at their tables. Mam and Dad have left the floor. But a small crowd of dancers lingers, including Hugh Morley with Eva Sheridan and Maureen with a man in a blue suit. Is that Chef Alexandre?

Then Finn leads me into the middle, pulling me close as the band plays a love song. We're swaying to the music, his movements sure and easy to follow, one hand on my back warm and solid, the other clasping my hand to his chest. Time passes while I stare at his bow tie, the collar of his shirt, afraid to raise my eyes.

"I know we haven't known each other very long," he says. "But I feel something special with you." He pauses, his fingers wrapping around my hand on his chest. "You don't have to say anything. I just wanted you to know."

My arms and legs tingle and I dare to look up.

The music is soft and slow, hypnotizing, lulling me into a heightened awareness of blue eyes gazing into mine, deep and thoughtful and tender. As if he's asking, without words, "May I? May I kiss you now?" His mouth moves closer, closer, until his lips are just a breath away, then they press gently down on mine and our mouths merge in communion. A supping. A drinking of each other unlike anything I've ever

tasted. There's a lemon tang of surprise and a spicy heat, mixed with a cinnamon wind and a salty breeze that says, "You're here; I found you." Time seems to linger, unhurried, and I savor a wistfulness, slightly sharp but honest, as if the newness of the kiss is gone and can never be repeated. But beyond that is a kindling, a fire building that's warm and deep, a wanting as rich and delicious as the finest chocolate. I don't feel Finn's body, or even mine. I only feel an indescribable fullness, a completeness of being that I never want to end.

We stay in each other's arms for minutes, maybe an hour. I hear a soft "Finn," and Finn pulls away. Maureen is standing there, her face tight. "Excuse me, I need to talk to you," she says and walks away with him. I feel bereft, missing his warmth, the rightness of being with him. What in the world is going on?

They stand out of earshot and talk, Finn with wild hand gestures, Maureen restrained. When they finish Finn gives me an unexplained look, then he shakes his head hard. They both walk back to me, Maureen with a fierce gaze that sends an unwanted shiver down my spine. And before she begins, I taste her displeasure, hot and sour on my tongue.

"Claire, *leannán*, you know I think the world of you. But I'm terribly disappointed. Chef Alexandre informed me about the accident you and Finn had in his kitchen. The fact that you were there without

permission. He wanted to speak to you”—her cheeks draw in on the word *speak* and I feel the weight of that anger—“but I asked to deliver the news. Suffice it to say he is not pleased.”

My own anger and guilt surface at the same time. My fists clench.

“It’s not her fault,” Finn says, his hands deep in his pockets, shoulders tight. “Blame me. I’m the one that talked her into it.”

Maureen sighs. “I’ve told Finn the same thing. Michel wanted to ban you from the resort, but I got him to calm down and he’ll allow you the freedom to be here. Needless to say, the kitchen is off limits to you both.” She pauses, studying me, searching for something. “I didn’t expect this from you. You’re so sensible.”

The displeasure turns to sadness. No matter how much I swallow, I can’t make it go away.

“I’m sorry, Claire,” Finn says, his hand on my arm. “The wall has been fixed. I saw it for myself.”

“I’m sure that’s the case,” Maureen says. “But it doesn’t excuse you being there.”

She leaves me with sadness in her eyes and the deep damage of her words. There were so many reasons we couldn’t tell the chef. Reasons that all point back to Finn.

Blame is an awful thing to wield, but I can't seem to stop myself. If it weren't for Finn, none of this would have happened. I'm a practical person, one who follows the rules and likes everything in its place. Invading someone's private property is going too far. I knew better. If I had just listened to my conscience we wouldn't be in this mess. It's a good thing Finn's leaving Ireland soon. Staying away from him should make everyone's life easier.

My cloak of dignity is barely around my shoulders when I turn to see my mother, horror etched in her open mouth and too-wide eyes.

"I came to say goodnight," she says. "To tell my daughter how beautiful she looks." Her words clash with the prickly distrust.

"Mam, I—"

"Is what Maureen said true?" she asks.

A huge sigh of shame moves through me. "Yes."

Her lips thin, as if it hurts her to speak. "First you go behind my back with the cupcakes for Brigid's party. Then you trespass on private property and cause an accident. I don't know who you are anymore. What kind of daughter have I raised?"

Her anger cuts as sharp as any knife. "If you'd let me ex—"

She holds up a hand, a simple gesture that leaves me weak in the knees. “I’m sorry, Claire. I can’t believe anything you say.”

The weary exhalation, the tight fists, the salty glimmer of her eyes are heavy blows to my self-esteem. Here I am hoping to rescue my relationship with my mother and I’ve only added to our troubles.

“Mrs. Francis,” Finn says, “please don’t blame Claire.”

She ignores Finn and her body sags as she gazes at me. “I think you should take some time off from the bakery. Sort out who you are and what you want. I’ll ask Jenny to fill in while you’re gone.” Then she leaves in a quiet rustle of silk, the sound of endings.

Final chapters.

Doom.

All because I wanted to be creative.



Finn insists on walking me home, even though I have nothing to say to him.

Halfway to my house he takes my hand, but his warm touch doesn’t soothe me. I’ve let down the people I love and care about. I don’t deserve soothing.

His fingers squeeze mine, and I think back to before the incident with Maureen, to that kiss. That amazing kiss. The feel of his lips, the weight of his hands on my back, the thrill of the energy running through me, and all those amazing tastes. If I had known how it would be, I wouldn't have waited so long.

Then I wonder if it's always like that. If the second kiss will be as good.

But will there even be a second kiss? Because after Mam and Maureen, I don't know where my place is.

We reach my house and Finn stops at the front door. "Claire, I'm so sorry. Not for making chocolates with you in the kitchen. I haven't had such fun in a long time. And if we didn't make those chocolates, I wouldn't know how crazy talented you are. But I'm sorry for the accident, for the way Maureen and your mother spoke to you. My dad called right after Maureen left and chewed me out too." He cups my cheek, gazing at me, and I want to see him the way I did before the commotion. But I'm too upset.

"Look," he continues, "your mother loves you. She'll get over this and you two will patch it up."

I want to believe what he says, but how can I?

"In the meantime, let me help." His fingers touch an earring, then trace a path down my neck to my shoulder, igniting little thrills along the way. Thrills

that I shouldn't be feeling now. "I'll call you after breakfast. Maybe we can take a drive somewhere. I want to spend my last few days with you."

"Last few days?"

"I have to get back to the States next week. I was planning to sail until I leave, but I'd rather spend my time with you."

My thoughts leap then plummet with a jagged twist. Part of me is excited at the thought of time with Finn. But the reasonable part—the one that just got stomped on—says absolutely not. I can't afford more trouble now.

I step away from him, from his touch. "I have to go, Finn. Thanks for walking me home."

"Anytime." But he doesn't turn away. He steps closer, then he cups my face and leans in for a kiss. A kiss that lingers and swells and tastes like Irish oat cookies dipped in dark chocolate. My arms seem to have a mind of their own and twine themselves around his neck, and I give in to the heady delight. This is definitely good. Fierce.

Before I'm ready, he ends the kiss. "Until tomorrow," he says.

Torn with indecision, I watch him walk away. I can't see him tomorrow. I want to see him. But without his presence, the obvious answer comes to light.

I shouldn't see him.

Chapter 14

SATURDAY, JUNE 24, EVENING

Twenty-seven feels much too old to be running away from home. But I can't stay where I'm not wanted. An alternate perspective would acknowledge that the separation gives Mam and me much needed space. A rather mature outlook, I think.

Mam and Dad have gone to bed, and a deathly quiet seeps through the house as I pack a few things for my getaway.

Then a surge of frustration pours through me that I'm so expendable. I want to throw something against the wall to release some of the anger. But I've already had one incident with a wall and that didn't turn out well.

Which brings up thoughts of Finn. His eyes, his warmth, his touch. The fact that he seems to like me. It was kind of him to offer to spend time with me. And the kisses. If I weren't in trouble with Mam or Maureen, I might see where this could go.

I gather up my overnight bag and the garment bag with Maureen's dress and comb and shoes, leave Mam an "I'm so sorry" note on the kitchen table, and depart.

Anger fuels me through the dark, past wide oaks and tall beeches with their leaves gently whispering in the night, all the way to Gran's, until I stand at her door and wonder what I'm doing. It's late. There's a chance she'll be asleep and waking her up won't do either of us any good.

But I have nowhere else to go.

I take a chance and knock softly. And wait. And wait. Then I gather my courage and knock harder—three swift raps—and steel myself for whatever happens.

The door opens and Gran peers out, her bathrobe pulled tight in her fingers, her pajamas peeking out below the hem. Seeing her brings a fresh wave of emotion, hot and turbulent. “Can I stay with you?”

The door opens wider. “Claire, darlin’. Whatever are you doing here this time of night?”

With that I start to cry. Fat tears that slide down my cheeks and into my mouth.

“Sweetheart, shhh,” Gran says and gently moves me inside, into the living room where the TV plays a movie, the volume on low. Gran lays my bags on a chair and sits me down on the couch. She pushes my hair back from my face and runs her fingers softly over my forehead, my cheeks, around the edges of my mouth. “Poor child,” she says, “you’ve had quite the

time of it. You know you're always welcome here. But what's wrong with your own house?"

She's always been able to see and feel things in me that I might not be aware of. But tonight I'm keenly aware. I think my need to share is what brought me here. "I've made a mess of things, Gran. With Mam. With Maureen."

"Give me your feet," Gran tells me, and I swing my legs up and place my feet in her lap.

Strong fingers massage my toes and arches and the balls of my feet. Enough pressure to relax but not hurt. Within minutes my feet are in heaven and the tears have stopped. I'm feeling much more calm.

"I'll have to let your mum know you're here," she says. I'm not happy at that prospect. I wanted to disappear for a bit. But I nod. "Now start at the beginning and tell me everything," Gran says as she continues to rub.

I start with Maureen and the edict from the chef. My face heats when I think about the accident from the chef's perspective. Two strangers in his kitchen, using his materials, damaging his property. I know Chef Alexandre doesn't own the kitchen, but it's his responsibility. I would be furious if someone came into the bakery and caused damage. What were Finn and I thinking?

Then I talk about my mother, the biggest of my problems. The one that affects not only my job but my personal life. Family is everything, as Gran well knows, and my mother is my partner, my lifeline. She raised me and cared for me and I owe her my livelihood. We've had disagreements in the past, especially about my ideas. But this is the first time she's said she doesn't want to see me. That she doesn't trust me. What do I do with that?

As I spill my troubles, Gran comments with an occasional "hmm" or "I see," enough to let me know she hears me and doesn't want to interfere.

When I finish my sob stories, Gran squeezes my feet and pats my leg. "Do you feel better now for talking it all out?"

I nod, though solutions still seem far, far away. "What do I do, Gran? Of course I'll apologize to Maureen and Chef Alexandre." With the mention of his name, an image flashes of Maureen dancing with a man in a blue suit. He was holding her quite close, her hand on the back of his neck. Something a woman wouldn't normally do with a simple acquaintance. The man also looked familiar. "Was that the chef?"

"Who are you talking about?"

Gran and Maureen have known each other for years and become good friends. Shared news and gossip and other more personal details. My

grandmother, the sly one. I bet she knows. “Is Maureen dating Chef Alexandre?” I ask.

Gran looks at me with her head cocked and a twinkle in her eye. “I don’t know if she’d call it dating.”

“So they *are* together.” I pull my feet off Gran’s lap and sit up. My mind starts sifting through images and events, all going back to the time when Finn brought me to the castle and I met Brigid and the chef. If Maureen and Michel are together, that could account for the reason he let me use the kitchen. “That’s why he was so nice to me when we first met. Why he let me use his kitchen to make cupcakes.”

“I imagine so,” Gran agrees. “But that didn’t give you permission to go in there after hours.”

I hang my head. “No, it didn’t.” And their relationship would also be the reason Maureen was so upset about my behavior. “I promise I’ll apologize.”

“I think that would be wise.”

Solving the small problem feels good, but the large problem looms like a towering castle. Solid and impenetrable. “I don’t know what to do about Mam.”

Gran gets up from the couch. “Let’s make some tea. We can talk in the kitchen.”

She pulls two mugs and lemon ginger teabags from the cupboard, then turns on the electric kettle. As the

water heats, she turns to me. “You two will find your way back. Give her time.”

A nice sentiment but I’m unconvinced. “That’s what Dad said.”

“I know that’s not what you want to hear, but he’s right. Your mother is a practical woman, not a dreamer like you. She had her own kind of creativity when she was younger, but since your dad retired, she’s had to worry about the business.”

I cross my arms and lean against the counter. “I just want to draw in more people. Maybe a younger crowd. They like unusual flavors and crazy decorating. Not the same old thing we’ve been serving our customers for the last twenty years.”

“You’re a lot like your mother, you know,” Gran says. “Both of you have this fierce resistance. Like two trains hurtling down the same track in opposite directions. Will you collide? Will one of you make way for the other? Will you both find new paths?” She smiles and pats my cheek, then she pours the water into the mugs and hands me one. “Try to see it from your mother’s point of view. Crazy decorating and strange flavors cost money. Money she can’t afford to spend if the experiments don’t sell. She’s been in the bakery business a long time. Don’t forget she deserves your respect.”

Gran's right, of course. I know experimenting costs money. "But what if they do sell? That could be the way to bigger and better profits, and I could eventually buy Mam out."

"Is that what this is about?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"All your experimenting is about earning more money?"

I blow on my tea and watch the water swirl. I hate how knackered Mam looks lately. If I don't do something, who will? "I thought if I could help out, Mam could retire early. She's been talking about playing golf with Dad for a long time. I figured it was up to me to make that happen."

"My sweet, thoughtful girl," Gran says and envelops me in a hug, careful not to spill my tea. She steps back and cups my cheek. "When your mother's ready to quit, the bakery will be yours, so there's no need for you to be tied up with retirement schemes."

All my wishes hang over me like a gossamer cloud, too fragile to pin down. "I just want her to be proud of me."

"She is proud of you, Claire. She's always been proud of you. We all are." She grabs her mug and slips her arm through mine. "Now let's go finish *The Quiet*

Man. I want to see what's up with Maureen O'Hara and John Wayne."

We settle on the couch to watch the movie. But I can't let go of thoughts about my mother and the bakery. I only told Gran part of the story—the part about wanting to contribute to the bakery in a way that will make it easier for Mam to retire, now or whenever she wants to. But the experimenting isn't just to make more money. It's who I am. It's the difference between a plain vanilla ice cream cone and a waffle cone with chocolate and hazelnut gelato. I'm not a one-flavor girl. I need a multi-flavored taste sensation.



Finn calls several times on Sunday and I let it go to voice mail. It would be great to go exploring with him, to seek out new locations and new cuisines, or whatever we choose to do. But I can't shake the feeling of irresponsibility. Mam's counting on me to do better. I don't want to repeat the same mistake twice.

Still, sometimes the memory of his kisses takes me by surprise and for a few moments I float on a cloud of whipped cream bliss.

Monday rolls along with no word from Mam. Regret sits on my shoulders, heavy and bitter. I want

to reach out to her, to try once again to make amends, but she told me to stay away. To sort out who I am. I've been thinking about that all weekend and who I am hasn't changed.

Mostly, I'm lost. Without baking, I have no direction, like an untethered balloon drifting through the sky. And I miss all the hullabaloo of the wedding. There was a lot of drama and I wasn't used to that. But in between all the hysteria I made new friends. I wouldn't mind sharing some time with them now. Except Brigid's on her honeymoon and Annemarie's with a university friend in London.

That evening Gran welcomes the knitting group and strongly encourages me to attend. She even suggests that I bake something, and I want to but I can't. I'm not in the mood. Maureen is coming and my unspoken apology sticks in my throat. I hate being the cause of something so upsetting.

We gather in the living room and Gran serves tea and butter cookies. No one comments on the lack of fanfare; they carry on as usual with their knitting and their animated talk of Brigid's wedding. Maureen gives me warm looks of concern, but I can barely meet her gaze. The grey scarf sits on my lap untouched. I'm still ashamed of what happened. She's in the middle of regaling everyone with a recap of the reception when I remember the leftover chocolates from the wedding.

I tossed the box in the garment bag with Maureen's dress.

I excuse myself to get them, then wait quietly for a lull in the conversation. "I'm sorry about the baking. I haven't felt like myself lately. But I have some chocolates if anyone would like one. They're salted caramels."

Eileen immediately says "Yes, please," and everyone takes one. Everyone but Maureen.

"Claire, may I talk to you?" she asks.

Anxiety needles every part of my body. I nod and follow her to the kitchen.

She leans against the counter and looks at me, her eyes gentle. "Are you worrying about what I said at the wedding?"

"I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to cause any trouble."

"Oh, sweetheart." She takes my hand and rubs the back, her touch warming my mood. "Everyone makes mistakes. Hopefully, you learn from it and move on."

"I will. But it's not just me. I got you into trouble."

She smiles. "Michel was not very happy. He's a bit temperamental and likes to voice his feelings. But he'll be fine."

Michel. She used his first name at the wedding and now she's using it again. Hmm. "Will you tell him I apologize? For the damage. And for using the kitchen without permission."

Maureen nods and her eyes shimmer with understanding. "May I ask what you and Finn were doing in there?"

"Making chocolates. The salted caramel ones I just offered you."

"Why did you use the resort kitchen?"

My shoulders collapse with the weight of wrongdoing. "That was Finn's idea. I didn't want to, but he kept telling me to loosen up. And I remembered what Gran said about always trying to be perfect. I wanted to prove to myself that I could have fun too."

"And did you?"

The memory of our joy licks at the corners of my mouth and I give a little smile. "I did. The kitchen is so wonderful. But I promise I'll stay far away." I look at her and there's no recrimination in her gaze.

"Thank you, Claire," Maureen says. "For the apology and the promise. I'll let Michel know." She kisses my cheek. "Now let's go join the others. I want to taste those chocolates."

That's the third time she's said his name. "Wait. Are you and Michel, I mean Chef Alexandre, together?"

A lovely hint of pink colors her cheeks. "We've been seeing each other for a few months."

"And you like him?" It's a nice twist to be the one asking the questions.

Maureen laces her fingers together and takes a deep breath. "I do."

"Well, I'm happy for you."

"Thank you, *leannán*." She walks me back to the living room and we take our seats.

"I love those chocolates," Eileen says. "So wonderfully yummy. I hope you have more."

Maureen has just taken the last one. I stare at the empty box then I look at Gran. "There are more at the bakery." If only I had access to them.

I settle back to watch Maureen, who bites down delicately, one hand poised beneath the chocolate to catch any drips. Then her eyes close for a brief moment, the corners of her mouth turn up, and I hear a heavenly sigh. "Oh, Claire. These are as good as anything Michel has given me. Maybe even better."

I smile such a broad smile my mouth hurts. At the same time, the ladies pepper Maureen with, "Who's Michel? How long have you known him? Is that a man or a woman?"

In the middle of all the questions comes an email from Annemarie.

Hi, Claire,

I got your contact info from Brigid, who sends her love. Hope you're having a good rest after the big wedding. Please change your mind about coming to Galway for the contest. It would be great fun to spend a few days with you. Let me know what you think. A.

I'd forgotten about the trip, but now I wonder if I should go. Since I'm banned from the bakery, I have nothing to keep me here. And I don't want to keep intruding on Gran's privacy. She may be my grandmother, but she has her own life and she's perfectly capable on her own.

I think about Galway, the photos that I've seen of the Parlee Abbey Hotel. A *jewel by the ocean*, the brochure said. As long as I stay away from the water, I'll be fine. I have a little money saved up and I haven't been on holiday for years. A few days with Brigid and Andrew and Annemarie could be grand. I can even stop by Stuff 4 Cakes and browse the aisles. Pretend I'm in a fairy land of baking wonder. Splurge on baking supplies so I'm prepared when Mam gives me the go-ahead to come back.

I text Annemarie. *It's a YES.*

A little getaway, a little time with new friends to rest and recuperate and reclaim my energy. That's just what this girl needs.



After everyone has left and the dishes are washed and dried and put away, Gran turns to me. "I'm off to Inis Mór on Wednesday to see Deirdre. Why don't you come along?"

Every time she goes she invites me, as if my fear of water will suddenly disappear. "Thanks, Gran, but not this time." I have an excuse now. A real one. "I'm going to Galway. With Brigid and Andrew and Annemarie. Brigid's participating in the storytelling contest, and Annemarie invited me to join them."

Gran smiles. "That sounds like great fun. Will that handsome Finn be there?"

"Gran!"

"So he is handsome." Her eyes twinkle and her eyebrow raises with her teasing.

"Yes, he's good-looking. But he has to go back to the States."

Gran frowns. "That's such a shame. You two look grand together."

“How would you know that?” She wasn’t at the reception. She said her goodbyes right after the ceremony. Wanted to get back to her knitting and some time alone.

“Maureen showed me a picture she took of you at the wedding. Quite the kiss, if you ask me.” She pinches my cheek.

My face flames hotter than an oven on high. “You did not see us kiss,” I protest.

“Ah. So you did. Good for you!” Gran laughs. “Love is in the air, sweet girl. Love is in the air.” She gives my face a quick pat. “I’m proud of you for taking a chance. Speaking of chances, Maureen and I will stop by the bakery tomorrow and rescue some of your chocolates. I’ll put them in the fridge.” Then she pauses and her eyes get a faraway look, the way they do when she reads people’s knitting. “They really are delicious, Claire. You might think about taking some to Galway.”

What is she getting at? Brigid and Annemarie have already tasted them. “For Andrew?”

“I don’t know, dear. Maybe you’ll find out when you get there.”

“I’ll think about it,” I say, though I can’t imagine why.

She pulls me into a warm hug. “I love having your company. Thank you for being here.”

“Oh, Gran.” I sigh with pleasure. “Thanks a million!”

When she pulls away, she says, “If you change your mind about the island, we’ll be there waiting for you.”

I shake my head. This girl is staying far away from the water. “Have a good time, Gran. Give my love to Aunt Deirdre.”

“I will. And you’ll talk to your mother when you get back.”

A statement, not a question. But she’s right. I can’t put off the inevitable forever.

I nod. After a few days in Galway, I’m sure the battlefield will have calmed.

Mam and I will reconcile when I get back.

Chapter 15

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 28, GALWAY

There's a richness in the air in Galway, a statement of pride that beckons and says *Look what we have to offer*. Warm sun tickles the tops of the buildings, lighting them with a buttery glow. The streets are full of shoppers and tourists. Everywhere I go I hear chatter and laughter, sounds of relaxation and fun.

This is so much better than moping around Claremore, wondering when and if Mam will forgive me. Even more so because I'm in regular clothes today—a comfy white tee and khaki knee shorts. We've left our luggage at the hotel until we can check in. But the chocolates—that Gran and Maureen rescued and Annemarie insisted I bring—are safe in my purse.

Andrew and Brigid decide on window shopping, anything to avoid the storytelling contest at the hotel. She's been talking to Hugh, one of the contest judges, who's told her she's more than ready. But I think she's more nervous about delivering her story than she was about getting married. The wedding angst with the wrong dress and her sister not coming had nothing to do with Brigid herself. But this is all about her, as she explained earlier—her pacing, her choice of words, the movements and tone of her voice, how much she

can involve the audience in her story. If she chews on another finger, Andrew may have to put her hands in gloves.

Annemarie's looking for clothes. Something unique and different that one can only find in Ireland. She's quite well-dressed already, but I wish her luck.

I'm on my own for a delicious hour before we all meet for lunch. A wonderful hour to spend at Stuff 4 Cakes. But how can a person comb every aisle with thoroughness and dedication in such a short time?

With a basket on my arm, I begin to explore. There are stencils with leaves, stars, flowers, and animals. Pink sugar roses and green sugar shamrocks. Sprinkles and pearls and edible glitter. And let's not forget the gold and silver leaf. I hold each item in my hands, taking time to imagine them on a cupcake, a cake, a scone, a tart. How will it work? How easy are they to use? How many of each would I need?

I pass the bakeware and packaging, the cake stands and paper baking cups in every color. Cake toppers for weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, and babies. Even children's book cupcake toppers that might work for a book signing in Eva's shop.

When I reach the flavors by Beau my heart does a happy dance, tinged with a wisp of frustration. Almost forty different ones to choose from and my mother only uses the standard vanilla and almond. I wish I

knew why. These concentrated essences are so gorgeous, so flavorful. My mouth waters as I read the labels—passion fruit, pineapple, strawberry, the morello cherry I used in the resort kitchen. The peach makes me think of a spiced peach cupcake with a streusel topping. The pumpkin spice reminds me of the hearty autumn aromas of clove and cinnamon. I grab bottles of strawberry, cherry, pumpkin spice, and peach. Then I look at my watch and my time is up.

The four of us gather for lunch at Santé, the tables spread with red and white checked tablecloths, the walls hung with photos from around the world. This is one of my favorite restaurants in Galway, known for their French food, especially their dessert crepes. We keep the meal simple with house salads and *croque monsieurs*—butter, ham, and Gruyère cheese, inside the bread and on top. Goopy, chewy, and deliciously good. Plus a banana and strawberry crepe with chocolate sauce to share for dessert. We may be too full after the sandwiches, but I'm willing to try.

When the food arrives, we dig in with gusto and choruses of "Mmm, this is good." Talk centers on the contest and registration and Brigid's nerves. She picks at her salad, barely eating. "Sweetheart," Andrew says as he caresses her hand, "you should eat. You need your energy."

"I'm fine," she counters. "I'm not up till tomorrow."

Andrew kisses her cheek and leaves her alone. Annemarie picks up the conversation with her shopping foray and pulls out a catalog from a knit shop that shows a cream Aran cardigan with vertical rows of cable stitches, front pockets, and brown leather buttons. Just like the ladies in Gran's knitting group would make. "Isn't this gorgeous?" she says. "Perfect for the cold winters at home."

"Why didn't you buy it?" I ask.

"They didn't have my size. I wish they did, though. The ones in the shop felt so cozy."

"You know, my grandmother could make you one."

Annemarie's mouth opens with a little breath. "She knows how to knit like this?"

"All the ladies in the knitting group do. Eileen likes to make scarves and Nora does everything in pink, but everyone's talented. They used to live on Inis Mór, the largest of the Aran islands. They formed the group there, then Gran moved to Claremore to be closer to me and my mom, and Eileen and Nora followed her."

"A sweater from your grandmother would be amazing. Do you think she'd make one? Please tell her I'm happy to pay her."

"I'll ask." I make a note on my phone to talk to Gran when I get home.

Home. The place where I have to make amends with Mam. The place where I don't fit in right now. I say a quick prayer for peace. A desperate prayer. Then I push away the heavy feelings. I'm on holiday with my friends.

"One more thing." Annemarie grins and hands me a small rectangular box. "Open it."

I lift the lid and pull out a business card on light blue card stock. At the top a swirly font announces *Sweet Dreams by Claire*. The words ripple through me with sugary delight. It's everything that I want to show the world, like an extension of Bread and Dreams but with a twist. A perfect name for my new shop. When I have one.

Below the title is a drawing of a cupcake with a chocolate on either side, then Artisan Sweets and an email address.

I look at the card in wonder, then at her. "I don't understand."

"So people can order your chocolates or cupcakes or whatever you want to sell. This is just a placeholder until you figure out a design."

"But I'm not selling anything."

"Not yet. But if you start handing out your chocolates, I guarantee people will want to buy."

I look at the card again. Sweet Dreams by Claire. It has such a nice ring to it.

Annemarie taps my arm. “Did you bring some with you like I suggested?”

I forgot that I had them in my purse. I nod and pull out a box.

She takes it from me and stands. “Let’s try it.” She pulls me with her to the front of the restaurant and asks for the manager. Soon a man in a gray suit appears and introduces himself as Henri.

“Annemarie,” she says and shakes his hand. “And this is Claire.” I remember to smile. “We wanted to thank you,” Annemarie continues, “for an excellent meal and give you a couple of handmade chocolates. Salted caramels.” She holds out the box. “Please try one.”

“I’m very pleased you enjoyed the food. Thank you for saying so.” But he doesn’t move.

Annemarie smiles warmly and I can feel her charm melt his resistance. “Just a bite, please. I know you have excellent taste, and we’d really like your feedback.”

He sighs. “*Bien sûr.*” He selects a chocolate and takes a bite. I can see the deep breath, the flare of his nostrils. “*Mon dieu,*” he says. “Who made these?”

“Claire. They really are something, aren’t they?”

He finishes the chocolate and gives me the once-over with his eyes, lingering for a moment as if he's found something interesting. "Oui. Yes." He digs in his pocket and hands Annemarie a card. "Call me." Then he fishes another chocolate out of the box and walks away, muttering in French.

Annemarie turns to me and gives me his card. "See."

I nod in a cloud of disbelief. "Is it always that easy?"

She laughs. "Maybe not. But I can teach you what to say. Your chocolates will do the rest."

We walk back to the table and take our seats. Annemarie hands me the box of candy. "Just a warning. Don't offer these to people if you don't want the business."

"I won't." I'm still in a daze as I stash the candy in my purse and my fingers brush against something cold. Metallic. The earrings from the wedding. I thought they were in the garment bag with the dress. I'm sure Maureen won't mind me having them for a few more days.

The emeralds gleam in my hand and I decide to put them on. As I thread them into my ears, Brigid notices. "Those are pretty."

Annemarie leans closer. "Aren't they the earrings Maureen gave you for the wedding?"

“They are.”

“The color is perfect for your skin. You should wear them more often.”

The waiter clears our plates and brings the crepe, which is over a foot long, delicately folded in thirds, with the top slathered in chocolate and artistically piled fruit. On one side is a dollop of whipped cream. On the other, small scoops of strawberry and vanilla ice cream.

I take a photo to preserve this in my memory. Then we attack and it's delicious. Even Brigid has several bites.

After lunch we head to the hotel. While Brigid, Andrew, and Annemarie check in and inquire about the contest, I cross the lobby to the huge outside balcony overlooking the harbor, just past the doors and into the warmth. I can't see the water from here, just the sky. I lose myself in the heat baking my shoulders, a light breeze ruffling my hair. There's a freshness, a tang of salt, and the urge to move closer. Before I know it, I'm at the edge of the balcony with my hands on the railing. Sun sparkles on the water with shimmering glints and the boats line up at the dock, their masts like popsicle sticks. I should be afraid to be out here, short of breath, cringing from fear. Instead, I look out at the water and remember my dad teaching me how to steer a sailing dinghy.

What great times we had with the wind at our backs and the spray from the waves.

Below me, people walk along the dock, waving and chatting to the boat owners as they pass by. A fellow with dark, wavy hair in a black polo and denim shorts steps off a yacht and turns toward the hotel with his arm raised, as if he's calling someone. It looks so much like Finn, but that's silly. He's already in America. Then the man turns a bit farther toward me and my heart leaps in recognition.

"Finn!" I shout. The familiarity of him tugs at me, hard, like a long lost loved one finally come home.

He starts to turn away.

"Finn!" I yell as loud as I can and wave with my arms overhead. "Up here."

His body angles straight at me, one hand shading his eyes. Then he smiles and my whole being lights up. "I'm coming down," I cry, then I race through the hotel lobby.

What's gotten into me? And with a man I barely know.

I have no idea how to get to the dock or how far it is from the front of the hotel. But I don't care. This notion of putting Finn out of sight, out of mind is ridiculous.

I want to be with him.

Two minutes of running and my body tells me to stop. I'm not used to speed, as my bad hip well knows. I race walk with a wobble, weaving in and out of people on the sidewalk, in the parking lot, then I cross a small grassy flat and merge onto the long stretch of walkway that winds along the dock. At this point I'm scanning every person I pass. Finn? Are you Finn? Where is Finn?

And then I see him. Fifty feet ahead, he stands in front of the gleaming white yacht with a navy blue hull. The sun crowns him with a halo of gold, and his smile—that beautiful smile—beckons me like the sirens of old. Forget my aching hip. Forget the polite, practical Claire that I usually present. I run and throw myself into his arms.

“Claire.” Finn gathers me to him and twirls me around. Then he sets me down and kisses me soundly. There's such a taste of joy and happiness, a blend of fizzy cider with a side of gelato.

“I've missed you,” I say, not quite believing the words that come out.

“I've missed you too.” His fingers stroke my hair, again and again, tangling with the jewels in my ears. “Your earrings ... aren't these the ones you wore at the wedding?”

I nod.

“They look good on you.” He cups my face, his fingers lingering on my skin. “What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here? I thought you went back to America.”

He shrugs. “When I didn’t hear from you, I went sailing with a guy I met on one of my races a few years back. He was in the UK for a week. Just left earlier today.”

The breeze blows his hair around his face, and I run my fingers through the waves, feeling the soft, crisp texture.

“Claire,” Finn says, his hands on my cheeks. “How can you stand here near the water? I thought you were ... I thought this was really hard for you.”

A seagull swerves overhead with a raucous cry. Then the wind picks up for a moment, gusting against our shirts. I look around me in wonder, as surprised as Finn. “I don’t know,” I say. “I don’t understand it.”

“So does this mean you’ll go sailing with me?” He holds out a hand in invitation and tugs me toward the boat. There’s no time to think. I move forward with ease until I have to cross the narrow gulf between the dock and the deck.

I freeze.

No amount of tugging moves me. My feet lock into place. Whatever magic brought me down here and allowed me to experience the sun and the water seems to have vanished.

The downturn of Finn's mouth, the pinch at the corners of his eyes, all shout disappointment. A dry, bitter taste that spirals through my body and makes me cough.

"I'm so sorry, Finn." More sorry than he knows.

He doesn't offer empty words of sympathy. He simply wraps his arms around me and just holds me.

We walk back to the hotel and Finn asks again why I'm here. "I came with Brigid and Andrew and Annemarie for the storytelling contest. You do remember your sister entered the contest." I poke at his chest and he captures my hand and squeezes. I love how easy we are with each other. I've been avoiding relationships for so long that I thought interacting with someone would be difficult. A learning process with lots of stops and starts. But Finn and I are like old friends.

"I remembered the contest. Kind of," he says with a sheepish grin that reminds me of the first day we met. "But I wasn't planning to be here for it. I thought I'd be on a boat somewhere or back in the States."

"Right, the life of a sailor."

“The best kind of life there is,” he says as we reach the reception desk.

I disagree with that statement, but there’s no need to argue. I get my room key, then we go in search of the contest registration and meet up with the rest of the group.

Brigid sees us before I can say hello and rushes to her brother with a big smile and hug. “You’re the last person I expected to see. I thought you were on your way home.”

“Looks like fate had other plans for me.” He shakes hands with Andrew and gives Annemarie a quick hug.

Brigid turns to me and I see the questions in her shining eyes. And Annemarie’s. I know they’ll want answers later, but for now they stay quiet and Finn takes over. “How was your honeymoon?” he asks. “Was that boat amazing or what?”

Brigid puts a hand on his arm and shakes her head. “We’ll tell you later. I don’t want to upset Claire.”

Finn laughs at that and I smile and lean into him.

“What?” Brigid asks. “What’s going on?”

Finn gives me a sweet, knowing look. “Do you want to tell them what happened?”

“Something happened?” Brigid says.

“Almost like a miracle,” I say.

We find an empty table nearby and take our seats. Then I relate the story of the balcony and meeting Finn on the dock. The women's mouths drop open, then their faces glow with sunbeams and laughter. Telling them about my scar last week showed them exactly how I felt. Their happiness for me now is like a double rainbow.

But Andrew has no idea.

"I'm sorry, Claire. What am I missing?"

"I used to be terrified of the water. Just seeing it would make me shiver and have this horrible feeling like I'd want to throw up. Finn tried to take me for a picnic dinner right near here and I couldn't handle it. I made him drive me back home. But for some reason, today I'm alright. I wasn't scared at all. Except—"

"Except what?" Andrew asks.

Finn squeezes my hand and I think about the ocean, the entity that has had me in its power for so many years. Some of that power has faded; at least now I can look at the water and appreciate its beauty. But I still want to conquer my fear of stepping onto a boat. I've lived without the water since I was a child, believing that was okay. That I didn't miss it. That I was better off without it.

Today proved to me how wrong I was.

I want it all. I want what was lost.

I look at Finn, at Annemarie, at Brigid and Andrew.
It's time to tell everyone the truth.

Chapter 16

Telling my story will be like ripping open a wound over and over again. Those buried feelings will bubble slowly to the surface then burst, spewing all that pain as fresh as it was the day it happened.

Everyone in Claremore knows about my accident. Small towns share news, and this was a big event. For a few weeks. Then life went back to the everyday routine of an author who just got published, a family wedding, the football team scoring a win against County Clare. Almost twenty years have passed since the event, and there hasn't been a reason to reopen the wounds.

Until now.

A huge part of me wants to retreat. To say there's nothing. What will dredging up the incident prove?

But as I look at the faces around the table, I see kindness. A sympathy as soft as rose petals. These are friends, I remind myself. People who care. People who understand. At least, I hope they will.

Finn's hand is warm on my shoulder. Solid. An anchor against the turbulence to come. How ironic that I'm thinking in ocean metaphors, but how apropos for him. For us, if there ever is an us.

The only way to tell this is to plunge in.

“We were on a sailboat in Galway Bay, not far from here. It was a hot day in August, the week after my eighth birthday. We’d been sailing for a while and Dad and I decided to cool off, so we stripped down to our bathing suits and jumped in the water. Mam stayed on the boat.”

The scene comes back to me as vivid as the day it happened. “The sea was fairly calm, low waves slapping against the hull, the sun high overhead, the sky clear and picture-perfect blue. The cool water felt good on my skin, and I loved the salty taste as it brushed against my lips. I remember leaning my head back and floating on the lull of the water. Dad splashed me a couple times in fun and I splashed back, then we just closed our eyes and drifted.

“It was beautiful out there. So peaceful.”

I loved that feeling of being one with the ocean. The support. The way it cradled me.

“It seemed like only a few moments had passed when Mam said, ‘You two should come in before you turn into lobsters.’

“‘In a minute, Rose,’ my dad said.”

Nerves fire in anticipation of what’s to come. Flickers that turn to flames that paralyze my limbs. My heart races and my breathing quickens. The

familiar dread starts to take hold with an iron grip, bearing down with incredible pressure. But this time there's something else. An aura of warmth that surrounds me. A softening to shield me from the pain. I let myself sink into that.

Brigid takes my hands. "You don't have to say anymore, Claire."

I avoid her eyes and lick my lips. If I look at her, I won't be able to go on. "I felt a pat on my arm, the little touch my dad would give me to signal it's time to come in. I nodded to myself, but I didn't open my eyes. I was so ... relaxed. So ..."

The memory crowds in. The swell of the water crashing over my face. The panicked sputtering as I waved my arms to stay afloat. Every time I've thought about this moment in the past, a terrible fist has me in its grasp, tightening with every heartbeat. I realize I'm holding my breath in anticipation of the pain, but it's so much less than before.

"I was still in the water when my dad started to climb into our boat. Then this bloody jet ski cut right in front of a nearby cruiser. The cruiser swerved to avoid it and smashed into us."

I pause for the overwhelm, for the gasping, the feeling that I can't go on, but the earlier warmth is still there, tempering the pain.

“Dad was thrown onto the deck, and the sheared off part of our boat swung around and slammed into my leg.”

I don't describe the blood or the screams or my mother's frantic cries for help. “I woke up in hospital with a pin in my leg and a nasty scar and the doctor telling my mother he wasn't sure how well I'd be able to walk.”

The silence is so profound I can hear each beat of my heart.

“And your dad?” Annemarie asks after a lengthy pause.

“He was fine. He had some heavy scrapes and bruises but they healed pretty quickly. I heard that a nearby boat rescued us and called in the accident.”

I drag in a deep breath. My heart still races but there's a lifting of the usual anxiety, a settling of my nerves. The dread is a fleeting memory. Even my leg is quiet.

I wish I knew what was different now. Why it's different. Maybe because of sharing with people I care about.

Brigid's eyes swim with tears, her hand over her mouth, and my own eyes fill, along with the bite of cranberries on my tongue. After several moments she

says, “I wish we had known. We could have stayed somewhere else, somewhere away from ...”

The last thing I wanted was to make the people around me afraid to talk about the things they love. “It’s okay. You can say water.”

I used to get such a negative charge out of anything related to the ocean. But after telling my story, I feel calmer. Am I truly not afraid of water anymore? A short while ago I was down by the dock with Finn and feeling fine. Until I tried to board a boat. Has that part changed? Or is this some momentary reprieve?

Finn kisses my cheek. Annemarie and Brigid wipe their eyes. Andrew thanks me for my bravery and for sharing. Then Annemarie turns to Finn. “Well,” she says, “did you know that Claire made her first chocolate sale today?”

Finn clears his throat. “I knew you could do it,” he says, his voice a little raspy. “What happened?”

Annemarie smiles and gives me an encouraging nod.

I silently thank her for not dwelling on my hurt and smooth my hands over my shorts, a temporary wiping away of the past. “We were at this French restaurant for lunch and Annemarie asked for the manager, then she charmed him into tasting one of the chocolates. He took a bite and said—”

“*Mon Dieu.*” Annemarie laughs. “The shock on that poor man’s face, expecting something mediocre when we clearly have an expert here.”

It feels good to shift the mood. “He gave us his card and said to contact him.”

Finn’s usual color returns. “How many does he want?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t called.”

“Call him,” both Finn and Annemarie say. Finn nudges my shoulder. “Now. Don’t give him a chance to second-guess himself.”

I excuse myself from the table and walk across the floor, out of sight of my friends, into a patch of sunlight coming from a nearby window. A flutter of nerves snakes down my back as I pull out my phone and the card from Santé. But these are excitement nerves. Ones I’m not afraid of.

The call rings through and I ask for the manager. “This is Henri,” he answers.

“Claire Francis here. I was just at your restaurant for lunch and Annemarie and I offered you one of my chocolates. The salted caramels.”

“Yes, yes. *Très bon. Très, très bon.* I’m sorry, but I don’t have time for chitchat. How much are they?”

A perfectly good question. One I should have an answer for. I should have gone over this with

Annemarie first. But now is not the time for calculations and planning. He needs an answer. I think of chocolates I've bought in retail shops and cut the price in half for wholesale. "Eight euros for a box of eight." My heart trips over itself and I hold my breath, wondering what he'll say.

The wait is so loud, so long, and probably only lasts a few seconds.

"I'll take six boxes of four at four euros a box. I need them next week. Can you do that?"

I don't think, I just answer. "Yes."

"Thank you, Mademoiselle Francis." He hangs up.

I let out a whoop, then return to the group and take a seat.

"Well?" Annemarie asks.

I look at her in a daze. "He wants six boxes of four candies for next week."

They laugh and shout and Finn claps me on the back and Annemarie's smile stretches from here to Dublin. "Well done," she says.

The euphoria from the call overshadows the heaviness of my earlier story. And I'm grateful to have changed topics, to think about something pleasant. Something I love. Chocolates.

There's just one problem. I don't have anywhere to make them.



Brigid, Andrew, and Annemarie decide to check out downtown Galway and leave Finn and me alone.

“Let's take a walk,” Finn says, and we venture outside. The sun hides behind clouds but the air holds its warmth.

“Shouldn't we be helping Brigid with her story?”

“Andrew wants to take her mind off the contest, so no.”

That makes sense. “Are we going anywhere specific?”

“Just walking.”

We head north from the hotel along the Long Walk, the man at my side someone I'm becoming increasingly fond of. He's leaving soon, so even if I wanted to, I shouldn't get involved. Involved means inviting in emotions—feelings—that get messy. Overblown. Twisted and tangled until you don't know what's what.

The thing is I've spent so many years avoiding relationships that I'm a pro at not feeling. But last week with Finn was different. Last week showed me a

new path, one that had involvement and feelings written all over it. And I liked it.

I'm a rational, mature woman. I can handle this. It'll be like a baking experiment. Success or failure doesn't matter. It's about learning how things work. And then I'll know for the next time.

As we walk I play tour guide for Finn. "This area of the city from the dock up to Bridge Street and then east a few blocks is called the Latin Quarter. It used to be 'The City of the Tribes,' the old medieval City of Galway. There's the Spanish Arch ahead, part of the old town wall. There are tons of shops, mostly for tourists. Like the Galway Woollen Market for knits. Annemarie could have bought yarn there for her cardigan."

"Claire ..."

We turn on Merchants Road, then onto Spanish Parade with restaurants on either side. Even though I've had plenty to eat, the aromas stir a longing to sample. After a lengthy wait, I prompt Finn. "What?"

"Your story. I've seen a lot of accidents in my years of sailing. Had a few of them myself. People get careless. Storms come up out of nowhere that you're not prepared for. Being on the water can be dangerous and the ocean is a difficult mistress. But for some idiot to inflict that kind of damage on a kid."

He stops and looks into my eyes. “That’s so wrong. He took away something you loved.”

It is wrong. Wrong enough that I’ve held onto the hurt and blame for almost twenty years. But the fact that Finn has said it allows me a glimpse into another point of view. The fellow who ran the boat into me. Who apologized a million times right after the crash—apologies I blocked out because of the trauma. He probably didn’t have any malicious intent. He was just a guy on a boat on a summer day who made a mistake. A life-changing mistake.

My eyes sting and my heart wrenches in acknowledgement. A little bit sweet, a little bit salty.

“Claire.” Finn dabs at my eyes with his thumb, a tender touch. “God, I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“I’m okay. And I appreciate what you said.”

We start walking again, past the restaurants and onto Quay Street with a cluster of shops. “What got you interested in sailing?” I ask.

“I used to ride my bike all over town when I was little, especially in the summer. It was only five miles or so to Lake Erie, and I would park on the dock and watch the boats on the water. They looked like great big birds to me with their different colored hulls and sails. I couldn’t wait to get on one. So I begged and begged my dad to take me on a boat. And one day he

arranged a short ride with a guy who owned a Catalina keelboat. Just me and Mr. Hansen.”

I can hear the catch in his voice, that wobble of excitement.

“We motored out on the lake,” Finn says, “then he showed me how to set the sails and lean into the wind, and we were off. It really was like being on an enormous bird. We were flying, with the sun on our backs and the spray rising up to meet us. One of the best moments of my life. I’ve never looked back.”

His memory matches the thrill I used to feel when I was on the water—before the accident. Will I ever feel that again? Can you have more than one joy in life?

“What about you and baking?” Finn asks.

“It was more like indentured service.” I laugh. “I started working in the bakery when I was five. But I loved it. Mam would have me crack the eggs for a cake or butter the loaf pans for bread. Something that a five-year-old could do. Over time, she added more things until I could do easy recipes on my own. And I grew, literally and figuratively, from there.”

“Do you think you’ll always be a baker?”

There’s no hesitation about the answer. “Always. It’s in my blood, just like sailing’s in yours.”

“Do you think you’ll ever give sailing another try?”

I've asked myself that question more times than I can count. "I've tried." Memories of long ago crowd my head. "I never got very far before. If you had a terrible accident like mine, would you go back to sailing?"

"Yes."

"Wait." I pull on his hand to stop him. "You didn't take any time at all to think about it."

"I didn't have to. Sailing is who I am. I can't imagine my life without it. Can you imagine your life without baking?"

I see his point. "No."

"So what do you think will happen now?"

I wonder the same thing myself. Finn and I have two different paths in terms of career. But once upon a time I used to love the water. "I guess I keep trying to improve. Spend some time by the water and see what happens."

He tugs me to his side with a gentle kiss. "I am at your service. However. Whenever." His eyes laugh but I sense his sincerity. "I know that's completely selfish, and part of it is because I want to share something I love with you. But I also want to help."

Maybe this is the first step. Sharing with him. "I don't think I'm up for a long ride along the coast just yet. But there's a pretty town on a river not far away called Clarinbridge. We could start with that."

Chapter 17

The drive to Clarinbridge skirts the coast, through Ballybane and Roscam, past Curragreen to Thornpark, the sun glinting on the water of Galway Bay. It's only twenty-five minutes to our destination, so we ride with the top down, our hair blowing, my earrings knocking against my neck. Cars zip past with loud whooshes and the taste of freedom is fresh and bright. I'm relaxed for the moment. Enjoying the car, the scenery, the company.

We pass the towns of Moneymore Road, Caheradrine, and then we arrive. My family came here, when I was a child, for the famous oyster festival in September. Even then I couldn't stomach oysters—gray/brown and slimy—but my dad adored them, tilting his head back and sliding them into his mouth and down his throat. I watched in awe and amazement and total disgust.

Finn parks the car. “Okay so far?”

That warm concern makes me feel so valued. And I'm fine. “It was a lovely drive. Thank you.” Then before we make any tourist decisions, I take a stand. “We are not having oysters here.”

“We're not?”

“No.”

Finn laughs. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. If you want oysters you can go by yourself." I don't add that he should drink plenty of ale to disguise his breath.

"Well, I just might ..." He winks at me, that flirting he did when we first met, and takes my hand. "No oysters, Claire. I promise."

"Good." I like a man who can make up his mind. Even when he's forced.

"Where do we start?" he asks.

"There's an ancient ringfort near the Ballynahanagh Bridge and a local church with a carving of the Virgin Mary. Those are popular. Also the Kilcolgan Castle has horses, if you're into that. That's about five minutes by car. Or we could walk along the river. It's pretty this time of year."

"You choose. We're here for you."

We start with the ringfort, its circular walls still standing after hundreds of years. Finn and I run our hands along the stones, feeling their warmth, breathing in their history. Then we visit the church and stand before the carving of the Virgin Mary, her hands clasped against a background of stars.

"I prayed to her so much when I was little," I tell him.

"After your accident?"

“Before and after. I liked that she was a mother; it made me feel closer to her than Jesus.”

“What did you pray for?”

“Understanding. It wasn’t about my parents. I knew they loved me. It was more about forgiveness. Recognizing that people aren’t perfect and allowing for their mistakes. There was a lot of bullying at school, and I could never understand why people did that. The ones who bullied others weren’t any better, and the ones who got picked on weren’t any worse. It didn’t make sense to me, but our priest talked a lot about forgiveness, so I prayed to Mary for understanding.”

“Did she help you?”

“I don’t think so back then, not that I could tell.”

“I’m no expert,” he says with a wry smile. “But look at everything you did for my sister.” He tucks my hand into the crook of his arm and covers it with his own. “You’re one of the kindest women I know.”

I snort. “You must not have met many women.”

“I’ve met enough. Most of them are extremely self-centered. They see a guy who’s into sports and enjoys being with people, and they latch on, wanting to be part of the attention. They don’t care who I am or what my interests are. It’s all about travel and money and being seen with someone who might be a star.”

“Are you a star?” I tease. “Oh my gosh. Should I be posing for photos?”

“God no.”

I shake my head, thinking about all the fake females. “I could never be like those women.”

“I know. That’s why I like you.”

A tingle starts in the middle of my chest and radiates outward, soft but exciting. He likes me. That’s the second time he’s said so.

Before we leave I stroke Mary’s arm and bid her farewell, thanking her for her love and devotion.

“Ready for a walk along the river?” Finn asks.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

We head west from the town center and follow the banks of the River Clarin. The blue-gray water runs fast today, rippling and churning as it moves towards the bay. Finn holds me tight against his side, overprotective, and walks closest to the riverbank. But I don’t fault him; I rather enjoy being the damsel in distress. And the nervousness has vanished. I could be on a walk in the woods or going to Gran’s house with the ease I feel.

After about ten minutes I ask Finn to stop and we face the water, standing on a grassy bank. He lets go of my arm and moves several feet away, taking in the scenery. Sun sparkles on the rushing current in

several places where the light peeks out from behind the clouds. Across from us a lush stand of oak trees flutters in the breeze.

I haven't dipped my toes in water—not counting a bath or shower—since my accident. I expect the river is cold, but suddenly I want to try. Only a second or so. Just to say I've done it.

I take off my shoes and start down the incline. Closer, closer. I'm almost at the edge.

“Claire!” Finn shouts.

I wave at him and continue. Then I reach the edge and step in. The water is shockingly cold and the soil squishes beneath my feet. Shivers crawl up my legs, but not because of fear. It's like an ice bath and I shouldn't stay, but the longer I stand there, the longer I want to remain. I may not have been able to board the boat earlier today, but now I'm standing in a river. Yes, only about six inches, but the victory feels enormous.

“Claire,” Finn says softly behind me. I turn to him and he's smiling that beautiful smile. The one that makes me feel so important. “I'm proud of you.”

I beam. “I am too.”

“But your feet must be freezing.”

“They are. I'll be right out.”

I turn back to the river for one last look to mark the spot of my great achievement. I start to move and there's a cool slide against my neck. An earring drops into the water. "Oh." My hand reaches to my ear, to prove that didn't happen. But my earlobe is empty. And near my feet I see the emerald gleaming below the surface. The current knocks against my legs and the earring moves a few inches. Then a few inches more.

I bend down to grab it and my right foot sticks in the mud, which throws me off balance. My arms windmill, I flail, then I fall with an ungainly splat. My rear end is fully soaked, as are most of my legs. The earring sits innocently next to my right hand.

Finn bursts out laughing, and I do too. So much for wetting my toes. Instead, I'm sitting in a river. My parents will never believe this. Being on the dock, driving near the coast, walking along a river. None of it. There's so much to tell them.

My mind whispers about my discord with Mam. But I refuse to dwell on it.

Finn scrambles down the bank and helps me up. By the time we get to dry land, his shoes are wet and dirty and I'm a mess.

"Jesus, Claire," he says. "I only took my eyes off you for a second. What happened?"

I open my right hand and present the earring, a bit muddied. “It fell off and landed in the water.”

“And so did you.”

“Two points for stating the obvious.” But I say it with humor. I grab my shoes. “At least my shoes are dry.”

He kisses my forehead. “Thank goodness for small favors.”

We walk back to the car, my wet shorts sticking to my legs. Finn takes a blanket from the boot and spreads it on the front seat. I’m on a high because of the wonders of the day, but I want to change my clothes as soon as possible.

On the way back to Galway, Finn asks, “Have you talked to your mother?”

That little question kills my mood. “I’m giving her a few days to cool off.”

Finn nods. “Also known as time to figure out how to win her over.”

“Yeah. Something like that.”

“Do you know what you’re going to say?”

I shake my head. I’ve been pushing the problem aside, hoping it will rectify itself. But nothing’s happened. Mam hasn’t called me and I haven’t called

her. “What if we never sort it out?” The thought squeezes my chest. Hard.

“You’ll find a way,” Finn says.

“Will I? Did you find a way with your father?”

“Not yet. Men don’t do emotional problems.”

“Sure, they don’t.”

“Well, I haven’t tried very hard. I tend to ignore it when I’m sailing.”

The weight of my troubles presses down. I turn toward him, wanting to curl up next to him while he strokes away my fears. “I don’t have that luxury. If Mam won’t let me use the bakery, I don’t have a job. I don’t have a place to bake. To create. And I can’t fill that order I just got for the chocolates.”

There’s a pause while Finn stares straight ahead, his hands clenched on the wheel. When he speaks his voice is low and heavy. “Then it’s time for you to call her.”

Chapter 18

inn drops me off at the hotel with a promise to meet for dinner at seven with the rest of our group. I thought I would retreat to the safety of my room to call my mother, but the room doesn't feel safe. The space is too small, the walls closing in on me, and Annemarie's luggage and clothes and bathroom toiletries restrict my freedom. I have a craving for the open, a wide field or large meadow with the sun on my back and the blue sky above to capture my cares.

I go down to the lobby, where light pours in from floor-to-ceiling windows, and settle into a roomy chair. Then I call home. "Dad, it's Claire."

"Hi, honey. How's Galway?" His voice pours over me like rich maple syrup.

Enthusiasm bubbles up for a moment. Ever since his retirement, Dad sounds so relaxed. I sink into that peace. "It's terrific. Andrew and Brigid and Annemarie are so nice and easy to be with." I leave out Finn. That's a larger conversation. Now for the hard part. "Is Mam there?"

"She is. Let me get her." I hear him call Rose, it's Claire. "She'll be right with you. Good to hear your voice, honey."

“You too. Oh, Dad, I even sold some—”

“Claire.” Mam’s voice chills the peaceful feeling into a heavy block of ice. Do I apply gentle heat to thaw her or attack with an ice pick?

I’ve always tried to obey and do my duty. But lately there’s another side of me trying to break free, and I don’t know how to make that fit. To start, though, I go with the truth. “I’ve missed you, Mam.”

She sighs. “I’ve missed you too.”

I wait for further revelations. A sign of leniency. Forgiveness.

Finally, she says, “Are you ready to come back to work?”

Is that it? No apology? No meeting halfway? Can I go back to the way we’ve always done things—Mam’s way? “I’ll be in Galway for a few more days for Brigid’s contest.”

“Well, give her our love. We’re all rooting for her.”

I swallow. What about me? Are you rooting for me? The path of my future with Bread and Dreams used to be a road paved with joy and happiness. Now it stretches into a distant mist where nothing is clear.

But I can’t give up yet. I have to break through to her.

“Mam, can we agree to have our differences?”

“What differences, Claire? This is the family bakery. It’s been run a certain way for generations and that’s the way I intend it to be as long as I’m in charge. Do you have a problem with that?”

Yes! I want to shout. *I do. Why can’t you see that?*

Gran was right about us being stubborn.

I get up from the chair and pace, my hand clenching the phone so hard my fingers will have dents.

I need the bakery. I need the environment, the food, the aromas. Without that I’m only half alive. Somewhere there’s a compromise.

“You’re right, Mam. You *are* the one in charge.” For now. “And I want to come back. I really do. On one condition.” Please, God. Please let her allow this.

“What’s that?”

Her voice is a reluctant monotone without hope. But I forge ahead. “I promise to do everything the way you want—no special cupcakes or cakes for the customers. Just our standard fare. But ...”

“But what?”

“You allow me to use the bakery after hours for my own creations.”

“Claire, we talked about this.”

I rush in before she has more objections. “I got an order for my salted caramel chocolates, Mam. They’re really good. Just ask Gran or Maureen. And a restaurant in Galway wants them. But I need a place to make them.”

“No.”

“I promise I’ll do it after hours. No one else has to know. Regular bakery by day. Chocolate emporium by night.” I let loose a little giggle at my imagination.

“No.”

“I’ll even give you all the profits. We could be rich by the end of the year.”

“Absolutely not. This conversation is over.” She hangs up.

I listen to the dial tone in disbelief. The thrill I just had talking about the chocolates, working at the bakery after hours. The delight of creating and helping my family with something I invented. The flood of chocolate joy rushing through my body felt so good, so delicious.

For my mother to squelch that, to smash that beautiful, sparkling dream to jagged shards, is inexcusable.

She might as well disown me.



I change for dinner, hoping to improve my mood, and join the group at the hotel restaurant, where I paste on a fake smile and try to look happy. The roast chicken on my plate is moist and juicy, the skin crispy and herbed, but my appetite has melted along with my hope. Even the yellow dress that I wore to the rehearsal dinner doesn't make a difference.

Annemarie and Andrew talk about their drive with Brigid to the majestic Cliffs of Moher, the breathtaking scenery and salty smell of the ocean. Brigid says almost nothing, just an occasional hmm. Finn reports about our drive to Clarinbridge, the carving of the Virgin Mary, and the wonder of our walk along the river. But even his excitement about my accomplishment doesn't elevate my mood. Time passes and the food gets cold. I give up trying to eat and push my plate away.

“Okay, you two downers,” Annemarie says. “What’s going on?”

Brigid pokes at her meal. “I think I should bow out of the contest.”

Annemarie throws up her hands. “For God’s sake, Brigid, when will you stop worrying and start enjoying yourself?”

A stunned silence falls over the table. Then Finn snorts. “Wow, tell her how you really feel.”

I almost smile but catch myself. Brigid looks utterly miserable.

“I’m sorry,” Annemarie says. “You know I wasn’t trying to be mean. I would never do that to you. I just wish you could get out of your head for a minute and believe how amazing you are.”

“She’s right,” Andrew agrees.

Brigid gives a choked laugh. “You have to say that. You’re my husband.”

Husband. Four days ago they were still engaged. Now they’re husband and wife. How quickly relationships change.

“Your adoring husband,” Andrew says, “who would do anything for you, including telling you the truth.” He kisses Brigid’s forehead. “She’s right. You *are* amazing. The trick is convincing yourself that you are.”

Brigid sighs, looking so not convinced. Her disbelief feels like a film of sand in my mouth.

Andrew taps the emerald on Brigid’s finger. “What about your ring? Did it show you anything about the contest?”

“It’s been quiet lately. I’m starting to wonder if it’s lost its magic.” She folds her napkin and sets it by her

plate. “I’m sorry to be so moody. Claire”—she turns to me—“is it true about the river? You actually waded in?”

I nod. “Just a few inches.”

“But that’s a big deal, right?”

“It is,” Finn says. “We should celebrate.”

Brigid studies me for a moment and I pretend to cough and turn my head. “Something else happened,” she says, and I wonder if her ring decided to start working. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I shake my head at the same time that Finn says, “Your mother?”

Annemarie leans forward. “What about your mother?”

I was going to mention it to Finn later. But maybe talking about it now will help me find a way to connect with Mam. My fingers scrunch the napkin in my lap into a tight wad. “My mother and I aren’t talking.”

Voices clash and climb over each other. “What do you mean you’re not talking?” “When did this happen?” “What did she do?”

A part of me thrills to the fact that no one assumes I’m to blame. But if it weren’t for my differences with my mother I wouldn’t be in this mess.

I wait for the table to settle, then I start at the beginning with the cupcakes at Brigid's hen party, ending with the dreadful argument that took place before dinner.

Brigid's eyes shine with tears. Andrew looks pensive. Annemarie has that piercing look I've seen when people get furious and want to inflict bodily harm. Finn seems to shift uncomfortably in his chair, looking from his phone to me and back again. "I'm sorry, Claire, I need to take this." Then he walks away from us, speaking to someone as he goes.

A piece of me seems to separate from my body and go with him. I didn't realize how much he anchors me.

Annemarie gives me a warm nod of encouragement. "I can't fix the argument with your mother. But we *can* do something about the order."

I love that she said *we*.

She ticks things off on her fingers. "You'll need boxes and labels and whatever else goes in the candy box. All the ingredients for the chocolates. You can start with a small batch this time, but you'll want a business license and wholesale number so you can scale up to lower your costs. That's the only way you'll get ahead."

My brain whirls with obscure terminology. I understand boxes and candy and ingredients. The rest flies over my head and up into the stratosphere.

Annemarie laughs and I come back to earth. “Sorry, Claire. I’m so excited it’s easy to get carried away. I wish I lived here and could help you with all of this. But you’ll do fine.” She taps her fingers on the table. “We should get started on this.”

“Wait,” I say. “What about Brigid’s contest? I came here to support her.”

Brigid smiles with a warmth and certainty that’s been lacking all day. “That’s okay. Your chocolates are important.”

How sweet and kind she is. And totally wrong. “Absolutely not, as my mother said. Your contest is every bit as important as the candy. You’ve been working on that story for a long time. You’re not getting rid of me so quickly.” As I say those words I feel the strength of our friendship, the fact that I don’t want to let her down.

“When do you need the chocolates?” Annemarie asks.

“Next week. Henri didn’t give me a specific date.”

“And how long will it take you to make them?”

I think back to the night in the resort kitchen where Finn and I experimented. There was no rush, just the joy of working in a professional location with amazing ingredients and equipment. Wherever I make them now won’t have the ingredients, the equipment,

the ease and fluidity of space and design. I can find the chocolate and cream and butter, but the tangerine sugar? Can I even do what I've promised?

"You're frowning," Annemarie says. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure I can find all the ingredients. And I'll have to make them in somebody's kitchen ..."

"We have a car and phones, Claire," she says with a gleam in her eyes. "And I love adventure. Never say no."

"Okay. Gathering all the resources will be the hardest part. Making the actual candy only takes a few hours."

"Then we'll start after the contest." She looks at Brigid and Andrew. "Are you two helping?"

"Absolutely," they chime.

"I just want to warn you, Claire," Andrew says. "Anything I'm involved in is open territory for a story."

I imagine Andrew describing the process of making chocolates, the words that flow and weave and cast a spell. I wouldn't mind that at all. For the first time that evening, a real smile forms. "You're on."

My lungs fill with a sweet camaraderie for these people I'd met only a week ago. People willing to pitch in and help out an almost-stranger and save her from entrepreneurial disaster.

What a treasure they are.

But the bigger question still looms, the one they've skirted. The one that doesn't seem to have an answer. How do I patch my relationship with my mother?

Finn returns to the table and takes a seat, his eyes bright but his mouth glum. "What did I miss?"

"We're going to help Claire with her chocolates," Annemarie says, "after Brigid finishes her contest. You'll help too, right?"

The expected yes doesn't come. Instead, he turns to me and takes my hand. "That was one of my sailing buddies from the States. I've agreed to be at a race the day after tomorrow."

My heart does a meltdown while I try to look happy. "That's great." My enthusiasm fires at a low five out of ten.

"Yeah."

"So you're leaving tomorrow?"

He nods. "Why don't you come with me?"

The laugh that escapes me is loud and shrill. A bark of turbulent astonishment. There are so many things wrong with his request. But for one moment a sliver of longing pierces through me. Longing for a wild adventure that the girl of my childhood would have grasped without thinking.

“We’ll leave you two alone,” Brigid says, and the three of them say goodbye to Finn, then kiss my cheek. “We’ll see you in the morning,” she says to me, and they depart.

I knew Finn had to leave sometime. I didn’t know when or expect it so soon. The end of the week was what I had in mind. At least a few more days to be with him, to explore Galway and the surrounding towns, to share in Brigid’s success—of course she’s going to win.

This news ruins all of that because I was expecting ... I was expecting what? That he would want to stay? That he would fall in love with me? That I would fall in love with him, a sailor? Even I know that’s absurd.

“Claire, I don’t want our time together to end just yet.” He holds both my hands, his gaze deep and earnest. His eyes pull me in, and I feel like I’m falling into something wonderful and scary. “Will you ...” He pauses and my breath pauses too, gathering for something momentous. “Spend the night with me on the boat. We can talk, look at the stars, whatever you like. Let me show you how it feels to be on the water.”

I’ve never spent the night with any man. But the idea of being with him on a boat on the water has the makings of a fantasy. A beautiful fantasy.

If only I could.

“I can’t, Finn,” I say with deep regret. “You know I can’t.”

“Do you trust me?” he asks.

I nod. I do.

“Then let’s try.”

He stands and holds out his hand, and the night of our chocolate venture comes rushing back—the risk, the thrill, the enormous satisfaction. Then the trouble.

“Is this going to get us into trouble? I’ve had enough of that for a while.”

“There won’t be any trouble. You can even talk to the guy who owns the boat.”

This time he looks completely serious. And I want to try. The day has been full of ups and downs, but there was magic along the way.

Maybe we can conjure up a little more.

“I trust you,” I say. “Let’s go.”

Chapter 19

My dad's the romantic in our family. The gentleman who opened the car door for my mother and closed it after her. The guy who bought her flowers on a weekday just because. The one who liked to hold her hand when we went for family walks despite her protests about public displays of affection.

When I was little my dad and I would cuddle on the couch and watch old black and white movies from the '40s and '50s. Dramas with Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. Mysteries with Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman. Musicals with Gene Kelly and Judy Garland. There was a code of honor in those films, he explained. The way a gentleman treats a lady. *That's how I treat your mother*, he told me. *And that's how you should be treated when you get older.*

I loved being with my dad, our hands colliding in the popcorn bowl, breaths stilling as the hero fought the villain, hearts soaring when the two stars professed their love for each other.

But life isn't a Hollywood movie. No male I've ever spent time with came close to my dad or his romantic views.

Until Finn.

I'm walking along the dock at nine o'clock in the evening and the thought of setting foot on a boat stirs up a case of panic—nerves firing in my arms and legs that feel like mini-fires scorching my circuitry. The closer we get to the boat, the stronger the panic flares. There's no nausea or utter revulsion. But I'm hanging onto Finn's hand with all my might, dragging my feet, my body telling me *don't do this*.

A few yards from the boat Finn stops. "Claire, if you don't want to do this, we don't have to."

I lick my lips and shake my head. "No, I do. It's just ..."

"I get it. It's a big step."

"The biggest step ever."

Like the romantic heroes in those old-time movies, Finn sweeps me into his arms and carries me onto the boat so quickly there's no time to think or worry. "You're safe now," he says, and I feel like one of those heroines. Protected, secure, cherished.

Finn stands on the foredeck looking out at the bay. Ahead of me is a swath of blue that goes on for miles. A light breeze ripples the water in a series of never-ending circles, and to my left and right are a line of boats.

A heady rush runs through me, sweet and effervescent.

I'm on board.

"Put me down." I slap my hand against his shoulder.
"Put me down. Now."

"Yes, ma'am," he says with a laugh and sets me gently on my feet.

I hold onto his shirt with one hand, waiting for my world to tilt. But I feel solid, grounded, even though I'm a couple feet above the water.

I walk to the bow, my hands on the rail as I gaze at the water. The flying scene from Titanic comes to mind, but I'm not brave enough yet. And I'd need a huge ship. Someday, when I can board on my own and sail on the open water, then I'll show off. For now, this is good.

With my arms spread wide I say a silent thank-you—to God, to the fairies, to whatever being or beings have worked their magic. Then I walk up to Finn, with his hands in his pockets, looking so natural, so in his element. No wonder he loves sailing. "I'd like to see this boat. Show me around?"

"At your service." He slips my arm through his and we face the water. "You just happen to be on a Dalpol Phobos yacht, twenty-nine feet long. This is the foredeck, as you know, with two benches for lounging." He points out the mainsail and headsail, the cockpit with lockers, helm, and radio controls. "You

said you were on a dinghy when you were little. Have you been on a yacht before?”

“Not a moving one. I got to stand at the helm and turn the wheel while it was docked. Kind of like now. But that was it.”

“If I weren’t leaving tomorrow, I’d take you out. She’s a smooth sailer.”

“That’s okay. I like having her stationary. I don’t think I’m ready for actual movement yet.”

“But you will be soon. Mark my words. A couple weeks from now you’ll be a master mariner.”

The sparkle in his eyes makes me long to do just that. Wouldn’t that be something? In the meantime, there’s more boat to explore. “What’s below?”

We navigate the stairs down the hatch where he shows me the roomy storage space, the shower that isn’t too cramped, the twin and double beds, and a two-burner stove. Living here wouldn’t be bad at all.

“Is this the kind of boat you have back in the States?”

“I have an old Beneteau that I’ve stripped for racing. As long as there’s a place for food and somewhere to lay my head, I’m good.”

He grabs onto the stair rail. “Ready to go up? The sunset should be nice tonight.”

“Sure.”

“Ladies first. I’ll be right there.”

I settle on a bench on the foredeck and look at the clouds scudding across the sky, like streaks of choux pastry on a cookie sheet of darkening blue. My fight with Mam seems far away, and my stomach rumbles, chastising me for not eating much dinner. But I wouldn’t miss this for the world. I may be merely sitting on a boat at the dock, but if I focus on the horizon I could be on holiday in the Caribbean, searching for lost civilizations in the Aegean, hunting for pirate treasure off the coast of Africa. What a day this has been.

Finn emerges from the hatch and sets a bottle on the seat next to me. Then he pulls out two wine glasses from a hamper on the deck. “Champagne?” He pops the cork and pours.

I take the glass from him. “You just happened to have champagne here?”

He shrugs and grins. “I made a call just in case.” Then he raises his glass. “To you and your extraordinary courage.”

A blush warms my cheeks. I don’t feel extraordinary. Everything I’ve done today seems like an ordinary step, something any other person would have done without thinking. “You shouldn’t be toasting me. I haven’t done anything.”

“I think you need your memory examined. Didn’t you meet me on this very dock this afternoon, even though you’re terrified of water?”

“Yes, but—”

“And didn’t you try to step onto this boat on your own?”

“But I—”

“And didn’t you put your feet in a river and then sit in the water with no repercussions?”

“I did, but—”

“And didn’t you tell me that you wanted to come aboard this boat tonight?”

“Yes.” I wait for him to interrupt me again but now he’s silent. “You’re right, I did all that. But none of it is special. People stand on the dock all the time. They wade in the river. They get on and off of boats hundreds of times. Thousands of times. All those actions are perfectly ordinary.”

“For someone else. But not you. I’m trying to congratulate you on your accomplishments. Why are you feeling so unworthy?”

I don’t think I’m unworthy. But why am I fighting him? Why can’t I just accept the praise?

I look away from Finn and hear my mother’s voice, words from long ago when I was in hospital—after the

accident. The doctor had come into my room while I was resting and my mother asked about my condition. My eyes were closed so he and my mother didn't know I was listening. He said the scar would be large but my leg would heal. But he wasn't sure about my mobility. A lot depended on how hard I was willing to work. How determined I was to get past the pain. That I'd always be handicapped but I could have a "normal" life.

My mother assured him that "normal is good enough." Then she and the doctor left me alone with that awful verdict.

Tears trickle down my cheeks as I think of that scene from the past. Something I haven't remembered since it happened. Is that why I'm always striving for more? Trying to be better? Because I want to prove my mother wrong?

"Claire, I didn't mean to make you cry. What did I say?" Finn reaches out to me—to wipe my tears?—but I turn my head and dry my own eyes. Then I look at him. This man who sees something in me my mother can't.

I raise my glass to him. "Cheers. To me. To us. Thank you for bringing me here, for saying those wonderful things about me, for everything you've done."

He gives me one of those precious Finn smiles. “It’s easy with you.”

Finn takes a selfie and sends it to me and we exchange numbers and emails. Then we clink our glasses and sip champagne, watching the sky and the water and the wheeling gulls. Splashes of pink and orange sherbet paint the clouds, with accents of lavender, as night begins to fall. A lamp comes on over the cabin, illuminating the deck with pale light.

Of all the places to be and all the men to be with, I picked well. Maybe Dad was right about those movies. Romantic gestures are nice.

Time passes and we sit in an easy silence. The sun slips lower on the horizon, and the sky darkens to a solid sheet of indigo. A smattering of stars twinkles above, seeming to gather their light from the lustrous full moon. I’m struck by how far removed this night is from any of my imaginings.

To have gained a collection of new friends who accept me as I am. To be sitting next to a man that I like, someone I’m comfortable with, who encourages me to want more from life. All this is so much more than I expected.

I’ve never thought my life was boring. But in comparison with what’s happened in the last week, it wasn’t full. And now that it’s varied and even a little bit

exciting, I'm not sure I can go back to how it was before.

And then there's Finn.

How do I categorize him? A friend? Boyfriend? A force passing through that wreaks havoc in interesting and delicious ways? If he weren't leaving, could we be more to each other? Would we have a future?

"You're glowing," Finn says, and I turn to see his look of wonder.

The comment makes me smile and I nudge him playfully with my shoulder. "I guess I'm happy."

"No, your earrings. They're glowing."

"They are?" I slip one off and cup it in my hand. The emerald pulses a brilliant green, bathed in a pool of light that seems to be coming from the moon. As if Rhiannon, the Celtic moon goddess, has just shot a moonbeam into the center of the stone. I wonder if the emeralds possess some magical quality, like Brigid's ring. Complete phooey, a voice in my head says. But Brigid tells a different story. And both Gran and Maureen have gifts of insight. "Do you believe in magic?" I ask.

"Maybe. I don't know."

"Brigid was telling me about her ring. The visions she has that tell her things from her past and her

future. Maybe the earrings do something like that.”

“What would they do?”

The way he looks at me, the heat of his gaze, as if he wants to lap me up like a juicy treat. I feel the thrill of it run through me, a heady nectar that’s rich and succulent with a powerful bite. I lick my lips and Finn gives a little groan. “You want me, don’t you?” The words spill out of my mouth before I can stop them. Words I’ve never said to any man. Right after I ask the question the taste shifts, grows bolder with the darkness of bitter chocolate tempered by cognac.

Finn clears his throat. “I don’t want to pressure you. I’m trying to be a gentleman here, but it’s not easy, Claire. You’re everything a man could want. Everything I want.”

A delicious heat spreads through my body, a warmth that makes me feel as cherished as the most beautiful woman. Even if I’m not. “I’ve never had a man look at me the way you do.”

“Then all the men in your life have been idiots.”

He follows that with a smile and there’s another shift. A relaxing. The boldness gives way to a breezy freshness, like a minty spray of ocean waves.

Does the glow of the earrings have something to do with these tastes, these feelings?

“You didn’t answer my question about the earrings,” he reminds me.

No, I didn’t. If I tell him about the sensations I’m feeling, I’m sure he’ll call it a night. And I don’t want it to end. Besides, the glow has vanished.

I thread the earring through my earlobe and take his hand, glad of his care and consideration. How easy it is to be with him. “Never mind. It’s probably nothing.”

“Well, whatever it was, I’m open. I’ve heard some of Brigid’s stories about her ring. And my dad’s been telling me stories about the Irish since I was a kid. I doubt you can surprise me.”

I bet I can, but instead I say, “You’re just trying to get on my good side.”

“Sure, partly. It’s fun to flirt with a pretty woman.” Pretty. My heart starts to beat faster. “But it’s more than that with you.”

More than that. “I like that.”

“You do?” He strokes my cheek. “Well, just in case you haven’t noticed, I like you.”

“I like you too.” The impact of that hits me squarely in the chest. Finn should be getting ready to leave for his sailing gig. He should be packing, scheduling a ride to the airport, confirming plans with his friends. Instead, he’s spending the evening with me.

Suddenly, I don't want him to go. What if he stayed? A few more days. A week. Maybe more. With the progress I'm making on the water, I might be able to go sailing for real in another month or two. Being out of practice doesn't mean I've forgotten the basics. And I'm a fast learner. I could crew with Finn on a small boat in no time.

I take a breath, amazed at the river of thoughts flowing through my mind. The pull of the water—the bay and the ocean beyond that—feels magnetic. Energizing. I love the idea of us sailing together.

If only he were staying.

“Claire,” he says and my name is a prayer on his lips. He pushes wayward strands of hair behind my ear, his fingers tangling in the ends, teasing them out. My body goes on instant alert with a hum and a deep want. I'm like a cat arching into a purr as I lean into his touch. Then he kisses my neck just below my ear, my cheek, my forehead, and sparks erupt. He looks into my eyes, his gaze dark, intent. “I'm falling for you, Claire. Deeper than I've ever fallen.” A pause as his eyes search mine. “I just thought you should know.” Then he kisses me lightly on the mouth. “I really wish I didn't have to leave. And there's something about being back here, in Ireland. Like an old memory telling me I should stay.”

“Then stay.” I hold his face in my hands and watch his expression, the dance of his eyes, the creases on his forehead as he seems to wrestle with my words.

“You could come with me,” he says.

“I can’t.” Too many things hold me here. And I’m not ready.

He doesn’t argue. We sit, gazing at each other, then he kisses me deeply, his mouth silently communicating his feelings for me, my heart pounding in response. When he lifts his head, I see the question in his eyes before I hear the words, “Will you?”

Nerves jump and electricity dances along my skin. Now that the moment has come, I hesitate. It can’t be any worse than the thirty-second fumble and grunt in the back of Robbie’s truck when I was nineteen. And it could be a whole lot better.

Clouds cover the moon and raindrops fall, urging us along. I nod, shy now, and Finn leads me to the bed below. He moves the pillows aside, folds down the covers, and sits on the edge, pulling me close, his hands on my waist. “Whatever you want, Claire. As much or as little as you like. You have my word.” Then he simply holds me.

The rain falls in earnest now, tiny hammers tapping on the top of the cabin. A melody of sweet

surrender. Finn is offering me the world. Just like the heroes in those romantic movies. How can I refuse?



In the aftermath, I lie next to him, my head cradled on his shoulder, my body loose and content. Even my hip is at ease. I worried over Finn's reaction and shut my eyes while I bared the ugly scar. He traced it tenderly, telling me, "It's just a scar. Bigger than some, smaller than others. It's a piece of you and there are millions of pieces of you and I love them all." He used the word *love*. Then he kissed every part of it as well as lots of other parts, kisses that heated and stoked and dissolved every fear as we climbed to the edge of the world and stepped off into bliss.

I sigh at the thought of how well he loved me. Tender and gentle, kind and giving, my body has never felt the hundreds of things I felt when he touched me. I may be a fool for being with him, knowing that this is farewell. But I made the choice willingly.

"I have some questions for you," Finn says.

The edges of my mouth curl up. Questions for me?
"Fire away."

"What's your favorite flower?"

Ah, the getting-to-know-you questions.
“Carnation.”

“I thought women liked roses.”

“I like roses. Especially the ones with different colored edges. But carnations smell spicy. They remind me of cinnamon.”

“Good to know,” he says. “What’s your favorite food?”

I stretch and curl my toes, enjoying the discussion. I remember asking him the same question, but I never volunteered my choice. “Those Irish oat cookies are close, but I’d have to say a chocolate croissant. You get bread, butter, and chocolate rolled into one.” As I picture it my taste buds clamor for that sweet satisfaction.

“One more question. What’s your favorite book?”

“Don’t you need to write everything down?” I ask first.

“I’ll remember. I have an excellent memory. Now about that book.”

I don’t have an easy answer for this one. “I don’t read much,” I confess. “I used to when I was little—adventure stories, fantasies, detective mysteries. But baking takes up most of my time now. There’s always something to plan or create or dream about. Do you read?”

Finn chuckles. “Not much. I’m a lot like you, if you substitute sailing for baking. When I was little, I read stories about explorers. I loved learning about faraway places and different cultures. But now when I have free time I often look at the stars.”

“An astronomer in the making,” I say.

“Or just a guy who likes to marvel at the wonder of the universe.”

I can imagine looking at the stars with Finn, my head resting in the crook of his arm, the warmth of his body next to mine while the vast expanse of the world shines its luster overhead. I wish I had time to do that with him.

“When do you leave?” I ask.

“Never,” he says and rains kisses on my head.

“Finn.” I love how relaxed I feel with him.

He gives a little growl. “Nine a.m. A car’s taking me to Shannon Airport. I catch a flight from there.”

“And where’s the race?” I want to learn as much as possible so I can keep track when he’s gone.

“First, I’m visiting friends in Chicago, who have a house near Lake Michigan. It’s the first leg of the SailGP, one of the biggest races there is. Year long. Last year the race started in Bermuda. This year it starts in Chicago. I told my friends I’d be there to cheer them on.”

“But you’re not racing.”

“Nope.” His voice tightens and I taste a bittersweet regret. “I did it last year. If you’re into car racing, this is like Formula 1. Lots of different teams traveling around the world with tons of pressure to be number one. The final winner gets \$1 million, so everybody’s fighting to be the best. And if you can’t cut it, you’re out.”

His regret curdles like sour milk, which tells me he got cut. I don’t press him for more. The idea of being on call for a year, trying your hardest despite unpredictable weather conditions, the nonstop pressure from your crewmates and your boss, all boggle my mind. “And after Chicago?”

“The following week there’s a race in Newport, Rhode Island. On the eastern coast.”

“How much does that one pay?”

“Nothing. It’s for fun, to see how good your boat is.”

“My dad and I used to take part in races in the bay. I loved them. But we were in our little dinghy. What kind of boat will you have?”

“All the entrants have yachts. The team that I’ll be with has a Transpac 52. The ultimate Grand Prix Racer. An uncomplicated boat with a simple build, but fast. Some of the best sailors around the world have them.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll win. I have faith in you.”

“That’s all I need.”

We lie there, quietly, the boat rocking like a baby’s cradle on the pull of the waves. Then Finn says, “Come with me. I really want you to.”

“Please don’t say that.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t come. I have important things here.” The chocolates. My mother. “You’re asking me to come with you to your race, but I’m the one who should be demanding that you stay. How can you desert me in my hour of need?”

“What do you mean?”

“The chocolates. I have an order to fill for next week.”

“Today’s only Wednesday. You have plenty of time.”

“But I need you.”

“A man likes to feel needed.” His fingers make little circles on my shoulder and my body sighs and smolders. “But you have three other people who can help you.”

“It’s not the same. You’re my sous-chef. I need that attention to detail and the willingness to follow orders.”

“You sound like Jimmy.”

“Who’s Jimmy?”

“The captain of the US team for the SailGP.” He moves onto his side and wraps the ends of my hair around his fingers. “We could make it work, you know. My friends have a big house. They’ll love you. And you could spend some time in Chicago. A very cool city.”

“I want you to stay here as much as you want me to come with you. I don’t think it would work for either of us.”

His breath releases in a heavy sigh, then he tugs me close and holds me tight. “You’re probably right. But I had to ask.”

I feel the comfort of his arms around me, the safety of our cocoon. If only this could last. Then guilt comes to haunt me. This fear that my mother and I will never be the same. That I’ll be cast out of the bakery—my haven—forever. The people close to me have told me to be patient. But how can I be when the gap between me and Mam seems to widen every day? The fact that she hasn’t called yet feeds the fear and makes me restless.

I shift in the bed, my legs pushing against an invisible barrier, seeking the comfort I just had.

“What’s wrong?” Finn asks.

I can’t bring myself to ask the real question. But it might help to talk about something closely related.

“Do you miss your mom?”

A long time passes before he answers, his voice so quiet I strain to hear it. “Yeah.”

“How old were you when she died?” I ask softly.

“Six.”

Six years old. I try to remember my parents when I was six and have only the vaguest snatches of memory—catching sand crabs at the beach with my dad, blowing out candles on my birthday cake, riding on my dad’s shoulders at a summer fair. Try as I might, I can’t see my mother and that makes me sad. She had to be there.

“Do you remember her?” I ask Finn.

“I think so, but I’m not sure. Brigid told me that our mother used to read us stories before we went to sleep. I can see her sitting on the bed with Brigid on one side and Maebh and me on the other. She had the most beautiful red hair that would curl on her shoulder. And she was an amazing reader, acting out the parts of the characters. I could’ve listened to her for hours. At the end of every story, she would tell us to make a wish and hold it close because that’s how wishes come true.”

The picture that he paints of his mom and his siblings is so vivid I can see them. “I love that about

wishes. What a sweet thing to say. But your memory sounds pretty specific. Why aren't you sure?"

"Brigid showed me a photo of our mother when I was a little older. My dad took it one night when she was reading a story. The photo shows us exactly as I thought I remembered. So I don't know if I was remembering her in person or making up a memory based on a picture."

I press against him. "I'm sorry. If it makes you feel any better, I can't seem to remember my mother from when I was that age. I'm positive we did a lot of things together, but the few memories I have are with my dad."

"Why are you asking me this?"

My voice is hushed, a thread of what it normally is. "I miss my mother."

Finn strokes my hair, his hand a comfort that I lean into. "Tell me about her," he says.

As I think about her, image after image scrolls through my brain. Her many years at the bakery, taking care of the business and feeding hundreds of people with the recipes she's perfected. Her steadfastness throughout my recovery from my accident. But there are also little moments of joy I'd forgotten. Dressing for golf in a white blouse and blue plaid skirt her first time on the course and Dad and I laughing so hard when she almost brained him with

her club. Building sandcastles with me at the beach with flags made out of popsicle sticks and patterned paper. Dancing with Dad in the living room to old movie music, her laugh ringing out when he dipped her low. A knot of sadness tightens in my chest and now I miss her even more. “She’s always been there for me,” I tell Finn. “So many times in the past, the three of us were together and she was having fun. I’d forgotten that. My dad loves golf and she was terrible at sports, but she tried, for him, and I remember us laughing. I miss her laughter. She’s been more serious since my dad retired and she took over the bakery.” I turn on my side so I can look at Finn. “I want her to laugh again.”

Finn kisses my forehead. “She will. Hold your wish close and you’ll see. You’ll figure it out.”

He said that before and it didn’t happen. “But what if I don’t?”

“You will. I know you. And I can feel it.”

I marvel at that certainty, because the way I see it, Mam and I are two little corks in the ocean of life, bobbing fitfully on the waves farther and farther away from each other. And I don’t know how to pull us back together.

“Hush, Claire,” he says with a soft kiss on my head. “You’ll find a way. Now sleep.”

There's no more discussion. Just the silence of the night surrounding us. Our bodies curve together as if we came from the same mold and sleep eventually weighs down my eyelids. I wait for my brain to click off, waiting as time passes until all I know is darkness.

Chapter 20

THURSDAY, JUNE 29, GALWAY

Light fills the cabin when I open my eyes, just in time to hear Finn scamper down the stairs and watch him approach the bed. He places a coffee cup and chocolate croissant on the ledge near my head, then he leans over and kisses my cheek. “Wake up, sleepyhead.” He sits next to me and I move over to give him more room. “Sorry about the early rising, but it’s eight o’clock. The car will be here at nine and I wanted to give you time for a shower and breakfast, if you want.”

My heart starts to ache, and we haven’t even said goodbye. Why did I stay? Why did I make this harder on myself? But of course, I know the answer.

Finn’s hair is damp, from his own shower, I presume. I’m surprised I slept through the noise. I sit up, careful to keep the covers wrapped around me. One night with a person does not mean I’m ready to bare my skin.

I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss his skin, the curls at the base of his neck, beneath his jaw, his cheek, and finally his beautiful mouth. We sit there, locked in oblivion for several moments before he eases away and shines a beaming smile on me. I wish I felt as attractive as he looks.

“I told them about you and it’s all set,” he says. “You’ll have a room in the main house with your own bathroom. I was pretty sure you didn’t want to share with anyone. Katherine and Isabel handle all the meals, but they’re looking forward to having you help out. And they can’t wait to taste your desserts. I might have raved a bit about those. And you can come down to the pier anytime to watch us practice, go for a ride, whatever you’re in the mood for. I know it’s just for a few days, but it’ll be a cool adventure. What do you say?” He runs his fingers through my loose hair and kisses the tip of my nose.

I’m still trying to process the first five words. “You told them about me?”

“Yeah.” His face lights with the excitement of opening a present, the one you’ve been waiting for all year. “We’ve been texting this morning. Katherine is so eager to meet you. She’s hoping you can share some ideas about how to make the house more accommodating.” Finn pulls me close and nuzzles my neck. “God, you smell good this morning.”

I ignore his mouth, his warmth, the way his arms wrap around me. “More accommodating for what?”

He trails kisses down my neck and along my collarbone. “Injuries. Handicaps. People in wheelchairs, like Katherine. That sort of thing.”

Clarity pushes through, one terrible sliver at a time. “They know about my accident?”

Finn loops his arms around my waist and leans back. “The basics. Just enough to give them an idea of how amazing you are. So what do you think?”

His smile—the one that usually feels like a taste of sweet, dark chocolate—mocks me. Anger rumbles inside my chest, a molten mass of rock and magma that spews.

First, he tells Brigid about my fear of water. Something I would have been mad about had it not been for Brigid’s wedding, and her kindness. But these people aren’t family. I don’t know anything about them.

Tears spring to my eyes as I lash out. “You had no right to share that! I told you that in confidence.”

He flinches. “Claire, I didn’t say anything that would make people think less of you.”

I push him away. “My life is private. I’m not a circus act to parade in front of people.”

He reaches for me, but I slap at his hands. “No, you’re not,” he says. “And I don’t think of you that way.”

“But you told your friends about me. About my accident. Without asking me.”

“I thought you’d be excited about the opportunity. Especially to be with people who understand your

predicament.”

“My predicament?” The taste in my mouth is hot and raw, as if my tongue has been blistered by a chili pepper. I pull the covers high and cross my arms, to contain my anger, to shield myself from him. I glare at him and his eyes turn a hard almost-black, a reminder of our first trip to the dock when I couldn’t face the water. We’ve come full circle. “You thought wrong.”

“I guess I did,” Finn says. “I’ll take you back to the hotel.” He stalks out of the cabin.

There’s no need for a shower here. I can bathe later. For now, I throw on my clothes and grab my purse. On the deck, I look out at the bay, the sun casting prisms on the water, my body an agony of want and torment.

Last night there was moonlight and magic.

Today grim reality shows its true face.



Finn carrying me from the boat to the dock—one gigantic step—is humiliating. A punishment. I should be able to navigate that space on my own. Without having to depend on him.

When he sets me on my feet, I turn away, my face hot with tears and shame. I tell him a curt, “Thanks,”

and start to walk away but he grabs my hand and pulls me toward him.

“I said I’ll take you to the hotel.”

I wrench my hand from his grip. “I’m fine. I don’t need your help.” *I never needed your help*, my inner voice cries out. But that’s as much a lie as saying that I’m fine.

“Claire,” he calls in that soft voice that threatens to undo me. “Please. You’re being ridiculous.”

I wish I had my sunglasses or a wide-brimmed hat. Anything to cover my eyes so he can’t see how much he’s wounded me. I bite the inside of my cheek hard to stem my tears. I’ll show him ridiculous. “You know, Finn. I was going to say thanks for last night and tell you how special it was. But it really wasn’t.” I see the shock in his eyes, the moment his face loses color. “I have to go. Good luck with your race.”

Then I walk away, down the dock, across the parking lot, everything a blur.

At my room, I throw myself on the bed, thankful that Annemarie is gone, and sob, huge, horrible tears, feeling like a mass of leftover dough, raw and sticky. Unwanted and unloved.

I hate crying. Crying doesn’t solve anything and it never makes you feel better.

Damn Finn.

Damn the Clearys.

Torpedo them all.



There's one problem with heaping all the blame on the Clearys. Only one Cleary is at fault. Brigid had nothing to do with Finn's actions. And I've promised to be there for her at the contest. This morning.

I stow the earrings in my purse. A shower rinses away the tears and any traces of last night. Too bad the hot water can't scour my heart and take away the pain. Today I dress in a sensible shirt and trousers—no more pretty dress or fancy earrings that led to seduction and betrayal. Dad was wrong. There's no place for romance in this girl's life. I'm much better off without it.

A final pat on my hair, a tug on my clothes, a fresh swipe of lip gloss, then I'm out the door and off to the contest. Trying not to cry. Trying not to bite my lip, which will mess up my lip gloss. Trying to act perfectly natural when I don't feel natural at all.

Brigid is about to go backstage when I meet up with the group in the conference room. Hugh gives her a last-minute pep talk and tells her to relax and be herself. When he leaves, I move forward. "I'm so sorry I'm late," I tell her. Then I throw my arms around her

in a big hug to cover up my distress and wish her good luck. Not the typical good luck blessing, and the Irish have a lot of those. But one that Gran says when she wants a laugh: *If you're lucky enough to be Irish, then you're lucky enough.* Brigid chuckles, and that's good enough for me. I ease back as Annemarie hugs her and Andrew kisses her and squeezes her hand, and she goes off with the other contestants.

We take our seats in the middle of the long, rectangular room with a decent view of the stage. A video screen to the right of the stage displays the words "Welcome to the annual Irish Storytelling Contest" in big green letters. At center stage sits a wide armchair and a standing microphone. I wasn't expecting a large turnout, but the room is packed with several hundred people—all ages and sizes from little kids to elderly adults. I must have given all my luck to Brigid because a tall fellow with the broadest shoulders sits right in front of me and blocks my view. Fine, I tell myself. It's all fine. I'm doing my part by being here for Brigid. I don't need to see her. Storytelling is an oral art. I can just listen.

When the first speaker takes the stage, I lean against the velour back of my chair, rest my hands in my lap, and close my eyes. The man begins a story about two fishermen out on the sea, hoping for a big catch, and my mind drifts. Soon the audience laughs, but I'm seeing Finn. Flirty Finn with the strong legs

and nice rear end and mesmerizing blue eyes who took me to the castle on his bike, then winked at me instead of apologizing for ruining the cupcakes. Sporty Finn who can drive on the left side without any qualms. Playful Finn who made chocolates with me in the castle kitchen. Encouraging Finn who believed in me and told me to stand up for myself and my creativity. Tender Finn who worshipped my body last night and showed me how much he cared for me.

My heart beats an arrhythmic tempo of self-pity and I draw in a shaky breath that ends with a loud sniff. How could I behave so badly? How could I say those awful words? I was so cruel. Heartless.

A lump forms in my throat, hard and knotted.

Annemarie looks at me. “Are you okay?” she whispers.

I nod quickly, even though I’m far from okay. Something heavy presses on my chest and my lungs strain as if I’ve been holding my breath too long. My eyes sting and prickle and the lump in my throat won’t go away no matter how much I swallow. Rubbing my eyes and clutching my chest doesn’t help. I have the strange sense that something is trapped inside.

“Claire, come with me,” she says, supporting me with a strong arm while she guides me out of the room.

In the quiet of the hall, I lean against the wall and shudder, gasping for air as my lungs refuse to work. *C'mon, lungs, breathe. I need air.*

This isn't better than crying. In fact, it's a hell of a lot scarier.

Annemarie squeezes my hand firmly and rubs my shoulder. "It's okay," she says softly. "It's okay."

We stand there for minutes, her soothing hands comforting me while I slowly settle down and my breathing calms.

"I think you had a panic attack. Is it Finn?"

I can hear the pity beneath the concern. I hate pity. "I've made a mess of things."

"He left this morning, didn't he?"

I nod and finally swallow the lump in my throat that reminds me of the words flung in anger.

"I know you two were getting close. It's okay to miss him."

"It's not that. He said ..." Now is not the time for her to worry about me. "Never mind. You should get back inside. Isn't Brigid up soon?"

Annemarie checks her watch. "In about ten minutes."

"Well, then." I rub my chest, which still feels achy but the pressure is gone. "I'm okay. I'll be right in."

Her face softens with concern. “You sure?”

“I’m sure. Thanks.”

She squeezes my arm and then walks away.

After she leaves, I keep leaning against the wall, the cool plaster solid and tangible, unlike the dream I was wrapped up in last night.

I remember the part of those old movies I used to hate, the part that never made any sense—the breakup. How could two people in love do that to each other?

It makes perfect sense now, and Finn and I weren’t even in love. He said I was being ridiculous, and he was right. It’s ridiculous to believe in love and romance.

That only happens in the movies.



A litany of excuses piles up in my mind as I head back to the conference room. I never should have said yes to Annemarie. I never should have come to Galway. I never should have flung myself at Finn on the dock or shared the story of my accident. I definitely never should have spent the night with Finn.

Oh for a magic charm to undo everything I did wrong. But I'd need to go farther back than this latest foray. I'd need to say no—an adamant no—to Mam when she first asked me to take the cupcakes to Brigid. That was the start of this chaos. If I hadn't made that trip, none of this would have happened. Life would have continued on its merry little way.

A dull way.

A boring way.

A completely tasteless and uneventful way.

I don't like the thought of going back to how life was, but I can't seem to move forward. God, what a mess. I wanted a light adventure, something to lift the spirit and chase away my cares. And it was like that for a brief shining moment. Until I got wrapped up in Finn, let down my guard, and had my feelings trampled.

I wince at my thoughts. Trampled seems a bit overblown. But my heart's tender edges have bruises. All because I fell under Finn's spell.

I creep into the conference room as quietly as possible and take my seat. Enough of Finn. The announcer introduces Brigid who steps on stage. Andrew applauds wildly, finally calming down so that she can begin. She stands in front of the microphone as the crowd waits, her hands clenched, mouth tight, and body stiff. I have to put my own drama aside

because I'm here for Brigid. To show her she has our support. My support. My heart can overflow with woe some other time. Right now, I need to smile and cheer.

With single-minded concentration, I send Brigid a beam of love. A powerful beam that fills her with light and courage, that gives her tremendous confidence. As I watch, her hands unclench, her body loosens, she stands tall and proud. And when she begins, her clear voice fills the room with warmth.

She tells the story of the little lamb lost in the woods and the animals it meets. Her voice rises and falls in tune with the adventure, her expressions matching her words. She's been practicing for almost a year and the long hours have paid off. She's polished. She's captivating. The story is enchanting. And when the moonlight guides the lamb back to the fold, my eyes fill with tears, but not for the lamb or for Brigid. For me, for that stupid heart of mine that didn't know any better.

At the end of the story, Andrew leaps to his feet with a loud "Bravo" and more clapping. Annemarie joins in and I want to. I want to be here for Brigid and her wonderful success, but I have to leave. I need to be alone. Away from these people who remind me too much of Finn.

While Andrew and Annemarie go up front to congratulate Brigid, I sneak out as quietly as I came in and pray that Brigid will forgive me.

In my room, I pack up my bag, then I call my dad. When he answers and I say, “Dad, can you come get me?” my voice cracks.

“I’ll be there in a flash, sweet pea.”

The fact that he hasn’t called me that for years makes my lip quiver. I sit down on the bed and wrap my arms around myself.

If Gran could see me now, she’d be so proud of me. Or laugh out loud. I’m blowing the lack of perfection across the bay and into the ocean. I think I need to have a good talk with her when I get home, because I don’t like this one bit. I was nasty to Finn and I’m letting Brigid down.

No wonder my mother is questioning me.

With a sigh, I grab my suitcase and go down to the lobby. Dad will be here in less than an hour. In the meantime, I send Brigid an apology text.

I’m so sorry I left right after your story
but I wasn’t feeling well.

The truth, but for a different reason. I continue.

I must have caught some kind of bug.
Going home to recover.
Congratulations on the wonderful
performance. Have fun at the awards
ceremony. I'm sure you're going to win.



my best, Claire.

All

Then I wait for my dad with an enormously tight throat and a strangled heap of knots in my stomach. If there is a god of do-overs, please, I want one. Wipe the board clean with a dry erase cloth and let today begin again.

I stand by the doors to the balcony overlooking the water one last time. That insistent urge to be outdoors, the one that sent me into Finn's arms, is absent. I have no desire to be outside now. I'm quite content to stay indoors, to chew on the folly of my decisions like a piece of tough bread.

And finally, my father collects me, gives me a tight hug, stows my bag in the back of the car, and we drive

to Claremore. I don't know what awaits me at home.
But it can't be any worse than what I've had here.

Chapter 21

CLAREMORE

Home is the respite away from Galway, away from the disaster of Finn. A place to regroup and rest and relax. But my falling out with Mam laces the air with brittle tension.

Brigid sends a text in the afternoon.

I'm sorry you're not feeling well. Please don't worry about leaving early. It was wonderful to see you in the audience. That helped so much! I appreciate all your encouragement. Feel better soon.

I wish I did feel better.

I spend the rest of the day in my room, knackered, unable to sleep, unable to make sense of a life without the love and support of my mother. Sounds from the kitchen climb the stairs when Mam comes home for dinner—bits of muted conversation, the occasional clang of a pan, the low hum of the radio. Sounds that make me long to be included, to be welcomed. But I avoid the certain discord and languish on my own. Afterwards, Dad brings me a tray and sits on the bed to talk, but I have nothing to say. I don't know where to start. He gives me a hug and a kiss on my forehead as he's always done to comfort me. Then he leaves me alone.

With no breakfast or lunch I should be starving. The chicken casserole with carrots and tomatoes looks delicious. But the first bite tastes like dirt and I spit it out. Even the iced tea is as bland as water.

There is nothing from Finn. I check every hour, punishing myself every time I look at the selfie of us on the boat. So content. So comfortable together.

I don't know why I expect something, why I hope for something.

I look out the window at the rolling fields behind the house, the grass a rich green with the thinning rays of the sun.

This is the longest day of my life.

Chapter 22

FRIDAY, JUNE 30, CLAREMORE

There's no sign of Mam the next morning when I go down to breakfast. Dad reads his paper all alone at the table, his coffee cup half empty, his lips pursed as he skims the sports page.

I stand at the counter adrift on a sea of feelings. Even my jeans and t-shirt feel odd, as if I'm missing my bakery uniform. "Dad, where's Mam? I was hoping to see her."

He mutters a hmph, then, "Damn Fitzpatrick. He was supposed to win," then he folds the paper in half. "She's at the bakery." He studies me with his gentle eyes. "How are you today?"

I wish I knew. Nothing in my life feels settled. I lean down next to him and give him a hug, folding myself into the crook of his arms, the weight of his hands on my back. It would be so nice if I were a child still and all my problems would vanish with a hug from my dad.

I ease myself away and ask, "Did she say anything about me?"

He exhales heavily and something feels amiss. "What are your plans for today?" he asks, skirting the question.

"Have breakfast. I didn't eat much yesterday."

“She left some blueberry muffins for you by the mini oven.” He sets the paper on the table, finishes his coffee, and gives me a kiss on the forehead. “She loves you, Claire,” he says. “I’m off for golf with some friends. Have a good day.”

The kitchen feels desolate without him, so I turn my attention to the muffins. Blueberry. The superfood I heard about after the accident that was sure to heal me fast. Mam put her heart into everything blueberry —on my cereal, in milkshakes, in muffins, even adding them to my plate at dinner. My tongue was constantly blue. Two weeks out I had a rash on my stomach, then on my chest and arms, followed by trouble breathing. The doctor immediately took me off blueberries and my symptoms went away. I’m grateful I can eat them occasionally now.

I look at the muffins, brushing a finger over the mounds of fruit, and my chest tightens with the love that Mam put into these. I’d rather talk to her than make her bake for me. Why couldn’t she stay for a few minutes and tell me how she feels?

After peeling away the papers, I load two muffins on the tray and heat them in the oven. Then I pour a glass of orange juice, butter the muffins, and sit at the table for my treat. I can smell the warm toastiness of the crumb, anticipate the burst of sweetness from the berries. But even with the butter, the muffin is blah. The orange juice the same.

I don't understand what's happening to my taste buds, to my life. Everything was fine before Brigid's wedding. Before the fight with my mother.

I thought the tasteless dinner experience from last night was a one-off. Some bizarre combination of nerves and stress.

But nothing has changed. I'm facing a food connoisseur's nightmare. Eating has gone from an extravaganza of sensory delight to plain, one-note vanilla.

I've turned into my mother.

I force down both muffins and drink the juice, praying that this strange reaction goes away, fast. My body needs fuel and it's so much more enjoyable when things taste good.

Then Maureen calls.

"Come for lunch," she tells me. Before I can protest that eating has lost its appeal, she says, "I won't take no for an answer. Be here at noon and don't worry about bringing anything besides your lovely self."



This is the second time in just over a week that I've been to Maureen's house. Aside from Gran's knitting group, I don't spend much time with her. So I'm a bit

hesitant about her wanting to see me. Not to mention the regret that hangs over me about the incident at the castle.

Maureen ushers me inside, all sweet smiles and caring, looking lovely in a sage green dress. Despite my gloom, I feel a lightening of the energy around me, as if I'm a block of taffy being gently pulled and stretched to ease out the kinks.

She guides me to the sofa, where a blue enamel teapot and matching cups sit on the coffee table. "I thought we'd have some tea before lunch. Chamomile and lavender to relax." A steady stream of golden brown liquid fills our cups but I'm not in the mood for tea. She sits back and looks at me, her gaze steady and kind. "You've been through a lot these past days."

My chest squeezes and my eyes sting. How does she know exactly what to say to stir me up? Such simple words yet soft and deadly with their thrust. I swallow and mumble, "Mmm-hmm," not ready to bare my soul.

"You're safe here, Claire. Anything you want to say will never leave these walls. And you're welcome here anytime. You don't have to wait for an invitation."

I clear my throat. "Thank you."

She sips her tea, the model of perfect ease. An ease that's escaped me for days. "I hear Brigid did well in the storytelling contest," she says. "Third place is

admirable for her first try, especially against all those seasoned pros.”

I didn't know. “Third is great.” I should have stayed. I should have been there to celebrate with her. I should be ecstatic for her. But there's an empty well where my happiness used to be.

“She also told me you weren't feeling well.”

“I think I caught a virus,” I fib. The truth feels much too complicated.

“I see,” Maureen says. “Those can be tricky.” Then she says nothing and we lapse into an awkward silence.

I look around the room at the hand carved wooden furniture, the soft-colored pillows and afghans on the chairs and sofa, the watercolors on the walls. A fantasy dreamscape come to life that usually welcomes me with a hug and a squeeze, an uplift of the heart. But today everything feels flat, almost lifeless. And I don't know what will change that.

Finally, Maureen says, “I do hope you know you're forgiven for the incident at the castle. I let my feelings get the best of me and took them out on you, and I apologize for that.” Her lovely eyes show sorrow and regret. “And Michel has put all that behind him.”

It's nice to hear that, even though the scene of Maureen confronting me and Finn is etched in my

brain. I don't remember the precise words, but I can see all three of us standing there hurt, confused, angry. I remember the swirl of my dress around my ankles, the rapid breathing of my heart, the tickle of the earrings against my neck.

The earrings!

Glad for a change of subject, I root in my purse for them and bring them out. "I meant to give these back to you." I hold out the emeralds and they glow in my hand for a moment, forest green turning light with pale yellow in the center.

She folds my fingers over them and I feel their heat. "They belong to you," she says.

"I thought I was borrowing them. Didn't they come from Brigid's mother?"

"They were in a box with her clothes."

"So Brigid should have them, not me."

"I never saw her mother wear them, and I'm not sure they were hers. I believe they're meant for you."

"But why?"

"Call it a feeling. You have a connection to them." She retrieves a large, red book from a bookcase near the fireplace. "Myths and legends of Ireland," she says as she sits down next to me. "Has Brigid told you about the legend connected with the ring?"

“No. I didn’t know there was one.”

“There is. You may have heard the line ‘By wearing the green we capture the light.’”

“I heard it in school. Kids mentioned it a few times, but no one knew what it meant. Lots of wild guesses, but nothing definite.”

Maureen gives the little smile that always makes me wish I could see inside her mind. The things she must know and sense. “That’s what happens with legends,” she says. “The facts they’re based on become obscure over time, layered with conjecture and quite a bit of nonsense. You have to sift through all the fiction to find what you need.” She strokes the book cover and turns to a bookmarked page. “When Brigid and Andrew were here last year, we all uncovered a verse of poetry that seemed to pertain to Brigid’s ring. I think I found another verse that’s written for you.”

My eyes widen and a burst of energy wakes up my lethargic body. I used to love reading stories about the gods and goddesses of Ireland, but they’re all make-believe. Could this be real?

Maureen chuckles at my excitement. “You can judge for yourself. Here.” She settles the book between us and points to the verse.

*We carry the joy in the tears in
our eyes*

*Whether sweet or sad they bury
the moonlight*

*No matter wherever we finally
call home*

*By wearing the green we capture
the light.*

Tears in our eyes? Bury the moonlight? I read the lines several times but poetry and I have never been fast friends, or even acquaintances. “I’m not very good at poetry,” I confess.

“First of all, there’s no right or wrong interpretation. All that matters is what it means to the reader. I’ve puzzled over that verse a bit in the past, then let it go because it seemed unimportant. But in light of what Brigid found with her ring, and the fact that you have these earrings, I think it may be important.”

The emeralds in my hand are quiet now. Green stones—do they relate to the green of the verse? “Are you saying these have something to do with Brigid’s ring?”

“What if they did? How would that make you feel?”

How *would* I feel? I stare at the gems and think about the night on the boat with Finn, the first time the earrings glowed. The idea that maybe they were magical. The heightened emotions and tastes and

sensations I was experiencing. How amazing everything felt. How bold and full of life I was that night before everything imploded. Then I shake my head. I'm not sure I can do that again, soar so high to fall so low.

“Talk to me, *leannán*,” Maureen says. “Tell me what you're thinking.”

“That I was better off without these. Before all this.”

“Before all what?”

I've been holding everything in, keeping it private, locked away under threat of catastrophe. But my life is already a mess. Maybe speaking about it will lessen the drama.

I tell her about my day with Finn, discovering my freedom with water, even if it was just a little step. How supportive and encouraging he was with me, always there at my side, so easy to be with, so easy to talk to. Then our night on the boat, a night of glowing earrings, of dreams shared, of wonder and magic. And then the crash and burn of the next morning, plus the lack of taste.

“I can't go through that again, Maureen.”

“I know, sweetheart, I know.” She takes me in her arms for a long, soothing hug, rubbing my back and stroking my hair. Then she sets me away from her.

“But you’re stronger than you think. I told Brigid the same thing. It must be the lot of us women to love and grieve and grow stronger for the grieving.”

“Well,” I sigh, “I’ve certainly done enough grieving, but when do I get to the love?”

Maureen laughs in a wonderful, hearty way. “Are you telling me you’re not in love?”

“With whom?”

“With Finn. It’s been all over your face since the moment I saw you.”

“How can I be in love with him? I’ve only known him a few days.” Less than two weeks. “And he betrayed me.”

“He did, to your point of view.”

A surge of anger heats my chest. “What other point of view is there?”

Maureen squeezes my hand. “There’s always another side to a situation. Have you tried to see it through his eyes?”

I haven’t been able to get past the hurt. Knowing how much I cared about my privacy and then revealing my innermost fears. How could anyone do that? How can there be another side to this?

Maureen straightens one of the earrings in my palm so that the gold moon lies flat. “Are you familiar

with the moon and what it represents?”

The name Cerridwen comes to mind, the moon goddess, keeper of the cauldron of knowledge. When I was a teenager, I used to fantasize about drinking some of the brew in that cauldron and being blessed with knowing everything. I would be queen of the school, with hundreds of friends and followers scrambling to grant me my every wish. But as I got older, I realized the folly of my fantasy. How knowing everything would take away the joy of surprise. How knowing all the fears and woes and worries of everyone would be such a heavy burden. But I never thought about the aspects of the moon, why that was her symbol. “I remember that Cerridwen is the moon goddess, but I don’t know what that means.”

“The moon represents our feminine essence. It controls the ebb and flow of our female energy, the same way it has power over the tides of the ocean. And it governs our emotions. Feelings tend to be heightened during the new moon and full moon.”

A moon appears in my memory, full and luminous in the sky that night on the boat with Finn, shining on me and my earrings. Were all those amazing feelings because of it?

Maureen continues. “Cerridwen was also the keeper of the cauldron of knowledge, which has to do with inspiration and rebirth. When Cerridwen and the

moon come into play, it's a time for transformation. Time for something to die so that something else can be reborn."

"What has to die?" I know Maureen is speaking metaphorically, but I can't help thinking about physical death. Relatives that have passed on over the years, a friend who died unexpectedly in primary school, the death of my ability to run and play like a normal child because of my accident. There's been enough transformation in my life already.

I slap the earrings on the table. "You can have them back. I don't want them anymore."

"I understand," Maureen says softly. "Not everyone is ready to undergo a big change, especially when it means being uncomfortable. I'm happy to hold on to the earrings until you're ready. And I'm sure the unease you're feeling and this phase where everything tastes so bland won't last too long. Who knows, in a month or two you'll surely be back to normal."

A month or two? That's indecent. Totally unacceptable. I look at Maureen, at the earrings, at the glimmer of a smile around her mouth. "I know what you're doing." She's trying to trick me into wanting something I don't want.

Maureen regards me with a kind but neutral gaze. There's nothing devious in her eyes or expression. Yet I feel a magnetic pull to take the earrings, to change

my mind, and I don't know whether it's coming from her or them.

"I'm not pushing you either way, Claire. I want what's best for you, whatever you choose. But you wouldn't be here with those earrings if you weren't meant to have them. And the fact that you have them, that you feel their power, tells me that a big change lies ahead."

"But I don't want a big change." The whine in my voice makes me sound like a little kid, and I laugh at myself in my head.

"Change is difficult," she agrees, "even for those of us who experience it a lot. It's rarely easy, but oh, the rewards."

What rewards? Even as I think those words I remember—the sizzle and sparkle of Brigid's wedding; the ocean taste of Finn, salty and seductive; the lure of the water and pull of the moon. The love we shared. I'm not ready to concede to *being* in love, and I'm still angry about his betrayal, but I can't forget the tenderness, the way he touched me and caressed me and worshipped my body.

I pick up the earrings and look at Maureen; my eyes smart with tears. "What do I do?"

"Listen to your heart, *leannán*. Always listen to your heart."

She puts the book away in the bookcase. Then she turns to me with a soft, tender gaze. “And now I have a surprise for you. Are you ready?”

Before I can answer there’s a knock at the door. Then the door opens and I hear a cheery, “We’re here!”

Chapter 23

FRIDAY, JUNE 30, CLAREMORE

rigid, Andrew, Annemarie, and Gran—my grandmother?—charge into Maureen’s house with smiles and laughter and loud conversation. **B**The complete opposite of the hushed, tentative mood of before.

“Claire,” Brigid cries and throws her arms around me for a quick but tight hug. “I’m so excited about today. Thank you for trusting me ... us ... to help out. I hope we do okay.”

Trusting them? She hopes they do okay? “What are you talking about?”

I see my confusion echo on her face. “Aunt Maureen?” she says.

“I thought we should surprise Claire,” Maureen says.

“I’m definitely surprised.” And now I notice Annemarie and Gran carrying grocery bags.

“Hello, dear,” Gran says with a kiss on my cheek. “Maureen, where should we set up?”

“The dining room table and kitchen are as clear as I could make them. But you may want to consult with the person in charge.”

Five pairs of eyes—shining, happy, excited—focus on me, awaiting my command. And all I can do is stare. “Okay, what’s going on?”

Annemarie pipes up. “We’re here to help you make chocolates. For the order from Galway. Everything you need is right here. We just need you to tell us what to do.”

I turn to Gran, who’s standing closest to me. “I thought you were visiting your sister.”

She cups my cheek with a sweet gaze. “I came back early.”

For a moment I bask in the satisfaction of having everyone gathered here. For me. My heart swells with the beauty of that blessing. But with all the drama of the past few days, chocolates were the last thing on my mind, and truthfully, something I wouldn’t have pursued. I’m not a chocolatier, I’m a baker. I’ve had enough trouble trying to convince my mother to accept my baking innovations. She would never go for adding chocolates to the bakery. I close that door in my mind before it can even swing open. Better to just let that little adventure die.

“It’s really sweet what you’re trying to do. I appreciate it,” I say in my most gracious voice. “But ... no.” I watch the smiles falter, the excitement dim.

Gran gives me a stern frown and a huff. “Claire Elizabeth Francis.” It hurts almost as much hearing

those words from her as from my mother. “Since when do you back down from an opportunity?”

Since I got my heart stomped on, I want to say. But Gran had nothing to do with that. Neither did Brigid, Andrew, or Annemarie. They’re simply offering to help and I just rejected them. My heart shrivels a little at my coldness. The way I felt when Maureen chewed me out, when Mam yelled at me for my indiscretions, when Finn betrayed me. Is that the person I’ve become?

My hand tightens and the earrings I’ve been holding dig into my flesh. Just a few days ago I wore them and I was happy. Open. Adventurous. Tasting feelings I’d never tasted before. Maybe I could be that way again because I am tired of bland and closed down.

I take a deep fortifying breath and thread the wires through my earlobes, half expecting a miraculous sparkle to light up the room. There’s no shimmer, no pop of fireworks, nothing that I could call the least bit magical. But I’m hoping that will come in time. Now I have troops to command.

First, I say a heartfelt thank-you to everyone, then I issue a steady stream of directions and assign people to tasks. Maureen and Gran—people who already understand food—to the kitchen, Brigid and Andrew on preparing the molds, and Annemarie on the gift

boxes. The house becomes a hive of activity, workers like busy bees melting chocolate, heating sugar, parceling out candy papers, and assembling gift boxes. I have a little meltdown moment when Maureen shows me the Callebaut chocolate and tangerine sugar she got from Chef Alexandre.

“But how?” I ask.

“Oh,” she shrugs, “I gave him one of your chocolates and he couldn’t do enough for me.”

I smile for the first time in a long time. “I don’t believe that for a second.”

“There may have been a little sweet-talking before that,” she says. “But he loves the chocolates. He said so several times.”

I hold that close to my heart.

The overwhelm comes when Annemarie presents me with the labels. One sheet of printed circles—caramel-colored with a dark brown rim and tiny blue dots just inside the rim. Over the top of the circle are the words Sweet Dreams in blue script. And in the very center is the word Claire in melted chocolate, looking so real I want to lick it off the paper.

My heart lurches, does a triple beat, and finally settles into a rapid patter of excitement, love, and wonder. I have a logo. My own company logo.

“Annemarie,” I begin and stop. I don’t know what to say.

The fountain of hope in her eyes starts to fade when I pause, and she speaks in an emotionless monotone. “I played with the design after you left. Blue is for your bakery logo and brown represents all your baked goods. The chocolate in the middle is because you’re such a chocolate fan. But these are just temporary. We can change whatever you don’t like.”

I clasp the labels to my chest, carefully, so I don’t wrinkle them. “They’re perfect. Absolutely perfect. I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“You wouldn’t ... Oh ...” Her expression shifts from bland to electric. With an enormous grin, she says, “Thank you.”

I kiss her cheek. “Thank you! You’re amazing.”

Then she shows me the product card that we’ll insert in the gift box. “I thought we could call the chocolates Salted Caramel Bursts—rich, dark chocolate paired with salted caramel and a pop of citrus.”

I’m in a pink bubble of deliciousness. Maybe the magic is happening. “You’re good,” I tell her. “That makes me want to eat one right now.”

“Let’s hope your customers feel the same way.”

Let's hope. I leave her with the labels and return to the kitchen to pipe the caramel into the chocolate shells, then I cover the shells with another layer of chocolate and put them in the fridge to set. Maureen clears a space on the kitchen table for a pitcher of lemonade and a large platter of ham and cheese for sandwiches. Simple food for hearty appetites. When I take a bite, I almost cry with joy that my taste buds can taste again.

While we eat, I tell Gran about Annemarie shopping in Galway and my suggestion that she get a cardigan handmade by an expert. The smiles on both their faces, the shine of their eyes as they iron out the details, help to start mending my emotional bruises.

After lunch, Annemarie steps outside to take a phone call, Maureen goes upstairs for a breather with her books and herbs, Gran retreats to the sofa for a catnap, and Andrew and Brigid return to the dining room to ready the gift boxes for the candy. I stay in the kitchen, savoring the last bits of my sandwich, the sweet-tart tang of lemonade, the warm buzz of happiness inside me from unexpected assistance and camaraderie.

Minutes pass until I pick up the low hum of voices. Brigid's and Andrew's.

"He didn't mean to hurt her," Brigid says. "He was trying to look out for her."

Andrew responds. “Sometimes what we think is well-meaning to us isn’t that way at all for someone else.”

Who are they talking about? I move quietly to the doorframe where I can see but not be seen.

“I guess.” Brigid huffs and inserts more candy papers in the gift box. “I asked him what happened.”

“Were those your exact words?”

“Why does it matter?”

“Because words carry a subtext. An underlying feeling. Especially in writing.”

“Oh. Well, I said, ‘What did you do?’”

Andrew doesn’t laugh, he just smiles. “And?”

“Finn said, ‘Why am I always the bad guy?’”

The mention of his name feels like a hard knock on my chest with an underlying ache. Watching Brigid and Andrew, seeing their sweet love for each other, makes me miss Finn and wish we’d had more time together.

“Is he always the bad guy?” Andrew asks.

Brigid shrugs. “Probably. I don’t know. He’s been pretty cavalier about most of his relationships with women.”

Andrew smooths the label on a box lid. “I can’t speak to those relationships, but I don’t think he was

cavalier about Claire.”

“No, I don’t think he was. But he hadn’t apologized. So I told him to do that.”

I wish he had. I haven’t seen anything from him.

“What did Claire say?”

Brigid shakes her head. “I don’t know. That was the last I heard.”

“Oh.” Then Andrew laughs, a hearty chuckle that makes Brigid raise her head and stare.

“Why are you laughing?”

He caresses her cheek and I remember Finn’s fingers on my own cheek, warm and tender. “Because it sounds a lot like us. When you were mad at me about Alice.”

Brigid’s eyebrows raise and I hear a sigh. “Alice. What a mess that was.”

“But we worked our way through it and look at us now.”

They share an adoring glance. “Brilliantly and wonderfully in love.” They kiss and return to their tasks.

I stand glued to the door frame. Alice. That uproar with Eva’s bookshop and the woman who looked like a model. Last year it seemed so preposterous. Something like that could only happen because a

famous person was involved. But Brigid isn't just married to a famous author. Andrew is a real person. A kind and generous person.

How did they get past the misunderstanding? Will Finn and I ever get past ours?

I want to resolve the hurt. I hate this Twilight Zone I've lived in the past couple days, this place of barely existing.

I wish Maureen had given me straight answers. Something clearly defined. How can listening to my heart give me direction?

While I contemplate my fuzzy future, the front door quietly opens and I see a figure I've been desperately missing for days. So many things happen at once.

My body jolts with electricity. My mouth swims with the sharp bitterness of regret, the sweet joy of recognition, the buttery hope of forgiveness. But they're not my feelings. They're hers.

Mam. Looking worn and wrinkled in a nondescript blouse and trousers and more frail than I can remember.

My eyes flood with tears—my own bittersweet feelings—and we meet in the center of the living room in a clumsy embrace, each of us holding on for dear life and rocking back and forth.

“Mam,” I say, the only word I’m able to manage.

Her hand is on my hair, my cheek, my back, clutching me tightly. “My sweet Claire.”

When we part, everyone has gathered round, their eyes full of questions. Maureen, who must have come downstairs, gently separates my mother and me from the crowd and guides us to the stairs. “Go, talk,” she says, and gives us a gentle push.

I follow Mam upstairs where we take a seat at the long trestle table, side by side. Before she can open her mouth, I jump in, the words flowing from me like a swift current. “I’m so sorry, Mam. So very sorry. For everything I’ve said. Everything I’ve done. You’ve been running the bakery for so many years and done a beautiful job. An amazing job. I’m so impressed with all the things you handle. I’m sure I’d make a mess of them. But you don’t have to worry about me anymore. You were absolutely right about sticking to the tried and true recipes. You understand our customers better than I ever could. So I won’t get in your way. Whatever you say goes. I’ll be your obedient little soldier, ready to follow your every move. You just tell me what you want and I’ll deliver. I’ll make sure the bakery cases are fully stocked, every day, and I’ll ... I’ll ...”

My words die as fat tears roll down her cheeks, her nostrils flare, her mouth quivers like a shaken aspic.

Here I thought I was saying what she'd want to hear, but something's obviously not right. "Mam, what is it?"

She pats my cheek, then fumbles in her pocket for a tissue and dabs her eyes. "Claire," she says, her eyes still wet, making mine wet too. "My darling girl. None of this is your fault."

That makes no sense at all. "Of course it is. Finn and I"—I have to take a deep breath at the mention of his name; that wound is still a bit raw—"shouldn't have been in the kitchen at the castle. We know we were wrong. I understand why you got mad."

She holds my hands, a gesture that takes me back to childhood, to the time after my accident. A time of uncertainty. I taste the acrid bite of fear and my heart gives a painful thud.

"You're right," she says, "you shouldn't have been in that kitchen without permission. Though you're not the only one who's ever been in trouble. I have a story that would curl your hair." Her revelation stuns me. She's been so proper for so long. But the kind of woman who danced with my dad in the kitchen couldn't have been proper all the time. "But what I said to you that night," she continues, "I shouldn't have said, and I've regretted it ever since. I wasn't ... I didn't ..." Her mouth wobbles again and now I'm scared. I've never seen my mother look so vulnerable.

Which means something is very wrong. Something I don't want to know.

“I have a lump in my breast,” she says quietly. “They did a biopsy a couple days ago, and it's malignant. But it's small, so the doctor thinks my chances are good. They want to—”

I throw my arms around my mother for the second time today and hold her. A well of sadness rises up, filled with fear and worry and a sense of failure, feelings my mother has been holding in, and I just keep squeezing gently. I don't know how or why I'm aware of what she's feeling, but I give her all my attention and hope I can soothe her the way she used to soothe me. “I love you, Mam,” I tell her, thinking that's a ridiculous thing to say in light of her news. But I remember needing to hear it when I was little, so maybe she needs to hear that now. Then I say it again, and again, crooning to her, hoping that she can feel my love and know I'm here for her.

Eventually, she pulls away from me and wipes her eyes. “I meant to comfort you,” she says, “and here you are comforting me.”

We share a smile, then I say, “I'm so sorry. This is ... I had no ...” Now I'm the one fumbling and she squeezes my hand.

“I'm sorry, Claire. I had no right to yell at you like that. I was frightened and I took it out on you.” Her

eyes glisten and I feel the sting in mine. “But I want to say that I’m so very proud of you, this beautiful young woman you are, and you were right about the bakery. I’ve let it become stodgy and old-fashioned. Your father convinced me that it’s time. ‘Change is inevitable,’ he said,”—she makes a grimace—“and he’s right, though I didn’t want to hear it. I like our routine with the Barmbrack and scones. It’s comfortable. Known.” She peers at me and pauses with another twitch of her mouth, which I realize is nerves. Who knew my mother would be nervous about baking after all these years.

Finally, she says, “I got scared, and I’m not proud of that. I don’t like not being in control.”

“Of course you don’t. You’re a Francis. We like being in charge of our destiny.”

“Well, it looks like I might need some help with that. Will you help me?”

Last week this admission would have been the greatest joy of my life. Now I worry that the sweet words have no substance. “Do you mean it?”

“I do. And there’s no time like the present. We can start next week.”

“I’d like that, Mam. I really would.” My eyes shine with hope and my chest has a bit more room to breathe. “Can we talk about what happens next ... with you ... with your breast?”

“Yes, but will you do me a favor first?” She dabs at her eyes and pockets her tissue. “Do you remember when you had a bad day at therapy how I’d take you out for ice cream?”

I nod and there’s a catch in my throat at the memory.

She gives me a weak smile and smooths her trousers. “I think I’d like to do that with you.”

I will the lump in my throat to dissolve. “You’re on. We can go right—” I suddenly realize where we are, what I’ve been doing. The people downstairs. “I have to finish the chocolates. They’re all done, we just need to put them in boxes for the order and then clean up.”

“You got an order?”

I smile a deep, cleansing smile and give my mother a kiss. There are troubled times ahead, but we’ll get through them, together. We stand and I slip my arm through hers. “A lot has happened since the wedding.” Then I walk her downstairs, telling her about my adventures.

Chapter 24

After I pack up the chocolates and say goodbye to Maureen and my fabulous crew, my mother and I stop at Kenny's for ice cream, a tiny white cottage with a bright blue door and barely enough room inside for Kenny, the ice cream counter, and a place to stand. We order scoops of toffee and banana on a chocolate cone for me and a dish of plain strawberry for her. She's still not an adventurer, but I keep my comments to myself. We take our treats outside where we sit on a bench in the warm afternoon sun.

I have so many questions, so many thoughts, my brain fighting with my body to stay relaxed and neutral when I want to scream and shout to the world *You can't do this to my mother*, all the while my ice cream is dripping down the cone. Mam sits quietly, taking tiny spoonfuls of strawberry, her silence thick. Weighing. I force myself to eat, to appear as if I'm enjoying the treat. Because I can't break down now. Our roles have reversed. I have to be the one in control.

Halfway through her ice cream, Mam sets it aside. "Thank you for doing this," she says.

I take one last bite of banana, then I throw my cone in the nearby trash bin. I don't know where to

start, so I ask, “How long have you known?”

The lines on her face are deep and pronounced and unlike the vibrant mother I know and love. “About the cancer, just a couple days. About the lump, for several weeks.”

“Several weeks!” All the turmoil of wanting to know and not wanting to know. I would’ve been a bloody mess. How did she bear it? No wonder she was snapping at me. “Does Dad know?”

“Since the beginning.”

I try to swallow my fear. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Her voice is soft, papery. “I didn’t want you to worry. And you had other things on your mind.”

“What things?”

“Brigid’s wedding. Going out with a very handsome man.” She tries to smile but her mouth quivers, and my heart hurts so much for her.

“Oh, Mam. I would’ve been there for you.”

“I know, sweetheart.” She squeezes my hand and her grip feels flimsy. “But there was nothing for you to do except worry. I couldn’t stand that. I wanted you to have fun with your new friends.”

She was worrying about me all this time instead of focusing on her. Thank God she has Dad. I can’t imagine her coping on her own without him. “So what

happens”—I swallow and force out the words—“with the lump?”

“I have surgery a week from now.”

She doesn't say *And we hope for the best* but I see the worry in the stillness of her face, the clouding of her eyes.

“Oh, Mam.” I lean against her and will myself not to cry. She's doing her best to be strong. I can do the same. “How can I help you now?”

“By being the brilliant daughter you already are.”

She reaches up to smooth my hair and I come undone. A sob escapes and we both laugh a little and cry quite a bit. “I really wish this wasn't happening,” I say.

“I do too. But I know you can handle it. I trust you, Claire. Your father and I have talked it over, and we've agreed you should run the bakery while I'm recovering from my lumpectomy. The doctor says I'll need about a week off after surgery. About six weeks after that I'll have radiation for one to two weeks and may have to take some additional time off.”

She's said the words I've longed to hear for years. *You can run the bakery.* But now that freedom comes with a price. A double-edged sword of honey and vinegar. “Of course, Mam. I'll do whatever you need.”

“I know you will. But it’s time to spread your wings a little. You’re an excellent baker, Claire. As good as I was in my prime, maybe even better.”

Did my mother just tell me I’m better than she is? Holy smokes.

“So surprise me,” she says. “You’ve been wanting to make new things for a long time. Show me some of your crazy ideas.”

“Do you mean it, or are you just saying that because you’re not well?”

“I’m saying it because it’s true.”

Warmth spreads through my chest and a real smile blooms. “I can’t wait to surprise you.”

She kisses my cheek. “I look forward to it. Just remember, a little bit at a time. We still have a lot of old-fashioned customers who love the classics.”

“I know, Mam. I promise.”

She nods and stands, her hand digging into my shoulder for support. I wait until she’s steady, then I notice how her body sags and her shoulders hunch.

“Let’s go home, Mam. I have a lot to think about.”

She slips her arm through mine and we walk home, our steps heavy. But my mind is clear. I’ve never felt closer to my mother than I do now. I’m relieved we’ve

had this talk and cleared the air. Now if I can just live up to her expectations.



I can't remember the last time I had a serious talk with my dad. He's always been the fun guy in our family, the one who laughs the loudest, cries at sad movies, can't wait for adventures. He was the one who arranged our Sunday family picnics and boat outings, the one who loves the ocean and taught me how to sail. We haven't spent much time together since I've grown up and he retired. But I need to talk with him about Mam and the bakery and our future.

That night I sit on the couch next to him where he's been watching a replay of last year's golf tournament. "Can I talk to you?" I ask.

He puts the program on hold.

"I wish you had told me what was going on," I say.

He gives me a level gaze, not a smile or the laugh that I expected, and I feel how hard this has been on him too. The flashes of worry he does his best to hide. The tiredness in his body. "If it were you and not your mother," he says, "how would you have reacted?"

I would have told someone springs to my lips, immediately followed by the many years I haven't

wanted to talk about my accident, my injury, the frequent pain. How close-mouthed I've been about that.

"You're a lot like her," Dad says. "You're both incredibly stubborn."

The corners of my mouth turn up a smidge. Then the gravity of the situation brings them down. "She should have told me. I could have helped out more."

"Claire, you know how private your mother is. Just like you are about certain things." He waits, and I finally acknowledge him with a nod. "She didn't want to burden you," he says, "and she doesn't like not being in control. I think you can understand that."

"I do." I think of those long months after my injury, the times when I yelled and ranted because my recovery was slower or more painful than I expected. And Mam was simply there, absorbing all that rage, all my dashed hopes, all my tears. I look at my dad with such respect, at his composure, his inner strength. And he looks back at me with such tenderness it makes my eyes swim. "I'm scared I can't be there for her," I say, and my voice cracks. "Be enough for her."

He takes my hand in his large ones, wrapping it with his solid warmth, the warmth that has comforted me through the years. "You'll do your best. That's all we can ask. And you have me to fall back on."

“So you’ll help me at the bakery,” I say through my tears.

“Not a chance,” he answers, and we both laugh. Then he quiets. “Jenny has been helping out. She’s a smart girl and dependable, and she’s quite good at making up the standard breads and pastries. I suggest you keep her on.”

“I will, Dad. Thanks.” I’m in no hurry to pull away from him and rest my head on his shoulder.

“You’ll get through this,” he says. “You’re a Francis.”

I snuggle into that sweet spot between his neck and shoulder. “We’ll get through this.”

“We will.” He pulls me close, then he starts up the program again.

The announcer’s voice describes the weather, the crowd, the statistics of the golfer on the course, and my eyes close. Whatever lies ahead, we have each other.



The next morning, I pack up the chocolates for Santé in Galway and hope my dad is in an adventurous mood.

Mam is still working her usual hours at the bakery, helped out by Jenny, and Dad reads his paper at the

breakfast table. My stomach is on edge, nervous about the delivery, but I try to look calm and composed.

I sit across from him, set an open gift box on the table, and clear my throat. Dad looks up. “Would you like a salted caramel?” I ask. I’ve never known him to pass up chocolate, no matter what time of day.

“Sure,” he says and pops it in his mouth. There’s a flicker of surprise followed by a long pause and a hint of a smile. “Where did you get these?”

I’m trying my best not to smile. “I made them.”

“Really?” he asks as if he doesn’t believe me. “I thought you’d given that up.”

“Well,”—I lean forward and prop my elbows on the table—“Finn and I were playing in the castle kitchen one night.” I pause when his gaze narrows, intensifies.

“Playing? I haven’t heard you use that word before. You’re always very precise about your creations.”

He’s right. “I know. I am. Was. These were a spur-of-the-moment thing. No planning at all. Just throwing a bunch of stuff together.”

He laughs. “I bet there was a lot of care. But they’re good. Really good.” He picks up the box and turns it around, lifts it high to look at the bottom, then sets it down. “What is this box?”

“It’s the gift box the chocolates come in. Annemarie designed it for me. I have an order to

deliver in Galway. Fancy a drive?”

I hold my breath. I haven't thought this out at all. If he isn't willing to go ...

He takes his car keys from his pocket and jingles them. “You know how I love Galway.”

I get up and give my dad a big hug. “You're the best.”

He kisses my cheek. “And don't you forget it.”

The drive south is getting to be so familiar I've almost memorized the motorway signs along the way. Dad relays golf stories from the recent tournament. I fill him in on the story of the chocolates, skimming over the making-of part in the castle and focusing more on Annemarie and how she charmed the manager of Santé into placing an order. Dad's support and encouragement of my candy endeavors hits a sweet spot and lifts my spirits. It doesn't hurt that he's a chocolate fan, and we reminisce about the good old days when he made chocolates with the beautiful rabbit mold I'll never forget. He thinks we still have it somewhere, but it's long buried. We talk a little about costs and margins, an area where I have no experience and understanding, and he promises a long discussion with me later. If I'm going to start a business, he points out, creativity is important. But if I don't understand the financial aspects, my business will fail before it gets off the ground.

Numbers swim in my head, weaving and separating and crossing over each other in choked swarms until I have to let them go and simply watch the scenery. We pass by the small towns of Kiliane, Knockaraha, Knockadoon, and Creggaun. On either side of the road the countryside stretches out in a giant mosaic of tan and green, and I marvel at the richness of the land. The beauty of this country I call home.

I shift in my seat and look at my dad, two hands on the steering wheel in a comfortable grip, not at all like the one-hand driving of Finn. My thoughts go back to that day with Finn, the day that I met him on the dock, the day that I braved the water. That amazing feat I haven't shared with either of my parents. "Dad."

"Hmm?"

"I don't think I'm afraid of the water anymore."

"What's that, Claire?"

He gives me a quick glance, his thick brows slanted in a question. He must have been daydreaming. I turn to face him. "I think I'm over my fear of water."

Dad tightens his grip on the steering wheel, glances left, then changes lanes and pulls off the road onto the shoulder. He faces me with a hint of a smile and a wide-eyed look. "Say that again?"

I can taste his hope, sweet and fresh, and the tang of surprise, and I stroke my earrings, once, twice,

grateful for their gift. “Something happened when I was in Galway with Finn. I’m not really sure how or why, but it started after I got the chocolate order.”

I tell him about coming back to the hotel after lunch, waiting for Annemarie to check in and walking over to the windows overlooking the bay. The incredible urge to step out on the balcony, to stand at the railing and see all that water and not be afraid. Then seeing Finn on the dock and running to meet him and standing in his arms just a few feet from the water. I describe our trip to Clarinbridge and wading in the river, and then I mention that I actually sat on a boat with Finn, conveniently leaving out the rest of the details.

Dad hasn’t uttered a word throughout the whole saga. But when I finish, he quietly tells me, “Get out of the car.”

“Get out? What?”

“You heard me. Out.”

I watch him unbuckle his seatbelt and scan for traffic as he eases his door open, steps out, and meets me on my side. He pulls me several feet away, onto the thick grass, then he gives me a full Francis grin, the kind I see when his favorite golfer wins. His arms wrap around me and he picks me up and swings me in a circle several times, his joy as thick and comforting as strawberry jam. When he sets me down, he’s still

grinning. “I’m so proud of you, Claire. I prayed this day would come and here it is.”

My eyes well and I blink away the sudden prick of tears. I hold him close and kiss his cheek, our happiness vibrating in my chest. Then I step away. “I’m not cured yet, you know. I can’t board a boat on my own and who knows what will happen if the boat’s moving.”

Dad shakes his head, his happiness mellowing to a steady glow. “You’ve already taken a whole bunch of steps. The next ones will come.” He slaps the top of the car and lets out a whoop. I laugh. I think we both needed some good news.

We get back in the car and Dad eases into traffic. “Today’s your lucky day, Claire. I still have a friend with a boat in Galway. I think I’ll give him a call when we get there.”

That lighthearted feeling gives way to knots of anticipation. “There’s no hurry.”

Dad taps his fingers on the steering wheel. “No time like the present.”

Easy for him to say. All I can think is *grand. Just grand.*

Chapter 25

SATURDAY, JULY 1, GALWAY

Joe Egan meets us on the dock in Galway, the same area where I spent the night with Finn. Offshore, **J**boats cruise in the bay, their sails flapping in the gusty breeze. The ends of my ponytail whip into my face and I tuck my hair inside the collar of my shirt.

My stomach twists and my fists tighten as the three of us walk to Joe's yacht sitting proud and gleaming in its berth. She's larger than the one Finn was using, but size is irrelevant. My mission is to step on board—make that simple move from dock to boat that most people don't think about because automatic reflex takes over. Except in my case, where my body shuts down and refuses to move.

Moments of years past flash through my mind, times when I turned away from the ocean out of fear. Avoided it to feel safe. But today—now—is about moving forward.

I wish Finn were here.

Dad and Joe chat a few feet away from me, then Joe climbs on board and turns to face me, his hand extended. His jeans are faded from wear and the rolled-up sleeves of his shirt revealropy arms. His

hair is a mix of light brown and gray, cut short, and his weathered face holds a kind smile that crinkles his eyes. I look at his hand, his smile, his steady stance, and wish I could just get on with it, but some things can't be rushed. Then I turn to my dad, standing next to me. He nods and says, "You've got this."

If only I did.

I don't know how many times I swallow or take a deep breath or try to relax my legs and fingers. Two things going for me are no nausea or petrifying terror. Today it feels more like facing the unknown—doing something I've never done before, even though my body has made this very move thousands of times.

Now, Claire.

A swell of fear and sadness rises up in my chest and breaks. A taste of regret that it's taken me so long to find the strength to try again.

My mind whispers to me once more. *Now, Claire.*

This time I bite my lip and take Joe's hand. His grip is firm, solid, reassuring, as if he has all the time in the world. If patience were a prize, he would win the gold.

Then I feel my dad's hand on the small of my back, and that little extra support propels me into action.

I step up.

Joe gently pulls me on board and my dad follows, standing next to me.

I look into his smiling face and my eyes well with tears of joy, salty, tangy, bursting with brightness and overflowing with pride. “I did it!” And for the second time today, Dad swings me around with a whoop you could hear all the way to Claremore.

I wish I could share this with Finn. My heart clenches when I think of him witnessing my success, giving me that gorgeous smile of his and a hug and a sweet kiss. If only I hadn’t wrecked whatever we had. He’s surely off at a race with a gorgeous girl waiting for him when he wins.

Somehow Dad’s taking photos of me and him, me with Joe, then the three of us together, all ecstatic smiles and happiness, then Joe disappears and I hold on tight to Dad’s arm, looking out on the bay, the whitecaps on the water, the sailboats in the distance. The fresh air and sun and wind on my face bring me back to those magical days when I was a kid. When I was so happy being on the water.

Then the engine starts to vibrate and my legs wobble. My heart races. A not-so-pretty panic starts to move through me. “Dad,” I say with a quiver in my voice.

He guides me to the railing, tells me to hold on, then he goes into the cabin and seconds later the engine dies. Relief floods my jelly-like legs and when Dad and Joe join me, I feel much more solid.

“I’m sorry,” I say to Joe and he shakes his head with a quick grin.

“Never mind, lass. I’ve had all kinds of people on my boat. Some worse off than you. You do what you can and maybe next time we’ll take you out for a little putter.”

He should get a reward for what he does. “You’re a sweet man, Joe Egan. I might take you up on that offer.” I kiss his cheek in thanks and he turns away as a blush darkens his face.

After Dad and I leave Joe, we head for Santé. I have so many hopes and expectations around dropping off the chocolates. The people there will be excited, thrilled, beaming, eager to sell them, effusively thankful and grateful that they’ve found this amazing supplier of extraordinary culinary delights—me.

The truth is that the manager is out, so the hostess accepts the delivery with an uninterested nod, stashing the bag of gift boxes inside her stand. Her only words are, “I’ll let Henri know.”

I mumble my thanks and my dad steers me out of the restaurant. I try to mask my disappointment as we walk to lunch, his favorite pub on Dominick Street. Once we’re seated and lunch is ordered, Dad nurses a pint of Guinness while I sip a soft drink. I fidget with the paper from my straw, rolling it into a ball and unrolling it until it turns to shreds. Silent moments

with him have always been comfortable, but I can't get past the anticlimactic experience with Santé. "Why weren't they more excited?" I ask.

Dad looks at his watch before he answers. "Thirteen minutes and thirty-nine seconds. I think that's a record."

"What are you talking about?"

"How long you waited before you asked for someone's opinion." He grins, part understanding, part teasing, and I roll my eyes.

He's right. I always want to know right away what people think about my food. Cakes, scones, muffins, bread, it doesn't matter. And now salted caramel chocolates. But the equation has changed. I didn't hand over the chocolates for tasting. I delivered an order. I have no way of telling who's going to buy them or what they'll think.

"This is so different," I tell him. "When I give somebody my food, I want that touch of satisfaction. Without it I ... I ... I don't know what I am." I'm feeling sadly deflated.

Dad squeezes my hand. "You're Claire Francis, owner of Sweet Dreams by Claire. Nice name, by the way." His smile perks me up. "Personal interactions at the bakery or with friends are different than business deals. Your product still needs to be amazing, but you have to let go of all those warm fuzzies." He winks and

I feel my chest loosen. I know what he means. “At the end of the day,” he continues, “it’s about money. You have to make sure you keep your costs down so the end result is profit. If you do that, and you have a good product—which you do—then you’ll have a thriving business with satisfied customers.”

All these years working with my parents in the bakery and I ignored how smart they are. “Did you know all this when you were my age?”

“Not a lick. Your grandfather taught me the ropes when I married your mother. And I taught your mother before I retired.”

I picture my mother at her desk in the back room, sorting through receipts and invoices, paperwork I’ve never bothered to understand. Busywork that has always seemed unimportant compared to imagination. “But if you get so focused on costs and profits, won’t that drain your creativity?”

Dad takes a drink of his Guinness and wraps his hands around his glass. “You have to find a balance. When you get successful, you can hire a bookkeeper or accountant to manage your finances so you can spend your time improving your product line. But most new business owners multitask. You get to play all the roles at once. Your mother and I were lucky to split the work between us.”

The pizza arrives, a wonderful combination of cheese, spicy sausage, and roasted vegetables. I inhale several bites of crisp crust and chewy goodness before I slow down and ponder the pros and cons of being in business. I don't mind hard work or learning new techniques, but I wonder if I'm suited for all those different roles. Which takes me back to my dream of having my own shop. How naïve I was to fantasize about all the baked goods I would create without ever thinking about where the money would come from for expansion or how much that expansion would cost.

"Don't overthink it, Claire," my dad says, startling me. "It's a process. You should be proud of yourself for getting that order. You'll learn the rest."

I swallow my bite of pizza. But will I? With Mam's health issues and needing to take over the bakery, is now the time to start a new business?

"Thanks, Dad, for today and the boat adventure. But with everything going on right now, I think I should concentrate on learning how to manage the bakery."

Dad takes my hand in a firm squeeze, strong and warm, and I taste the richness of his love, the earthy burst of pride. "You've always been a sweet girl, Claire, and you've grown into a bright, creative, hard-working woman. Your mother and I know that you'll

give the bakery your all. But your own dreams are important too. Don't let those die because you're trying to take care of ours."

The bittersweet advice makes it hard to talk. "I won't," I say, even though I feel like I'm lying. Because I don't know how I can possibly do both.

I sip my soda in the pause that settles.

"Now tell me about Finn," he says, and I spray my drink on the table.

Thanks, Dad.

My father has never asked about my friends, or boys in the past. Is he worried? Just curious? "What do you want to know?"

"Oh, the usual things. How you met, your first date, if you like him, if you've had sex."

My face burns and I can't believe he's said those words. When I was a teenager, my mother sat me down for that oh-so-uncomfortable mother-daughter chat, where I wanted to cover my ears and go hide in a corner. But that's one subject fathers and daughters should never discuss. And as much as I love my dad, I'm not about to break tradition.

When I finally look him in the eye, I notice the crinkles at the corners and the twitch around his mouth that shows he's trying not to laugh. He hasn't

teased me this badly in a long time. We haven't really talked in a long time.

"Funny, Dad." I allow a tiny smile.

"I thought so." Then he chuckles and takes a swig of ale. "But I do want to know about your fellow, if you're willing to tell me."

I never expected my father to be the one to get me talking about Finn. But today has been full of unexpected moments all having to do with the man in question, and now that I'm thinking about him, and picturing him, it makes sense to share a bit more with my dad.

"The first time I saw Finn, I was delivering cupcakes to Brigid and he was about to run me over with his bike." I keep to the facts plus a little about how much I liked him. As moony as my dad gets over old romantic movies, I'm not ready for full-fledged gushing from him about my love life.

As I count off the various times I spent with Finn—the cupcake disaster, trauma at the dock, dinner at the castle and making chocolates, Brigid's wedding, a glorious afternoon and evening in Galway—I'm struck by how much fun and adventure and emotion we packed into such a short time. How much I've changed my relationship to the water. How much I enjoyed being with Finn, someone I felt a deep connection with. I've heard stories of people falling

for each other after just a few days, but that always sounded like pure fiction. Until now. The ache inside me when I tell my dad about Finn is real. And the more I talk about him and picture him, the more I want to be with him and wish he were here.

My body sighs in disappointment at the way I left things with Finn. If ever there was a need to redo a moment, that would be it. My eyes mist and my heart beats a slow dance of longing.

“Have you heard from him lately?” Dad asks.

I shake my head. “We didn’t ... I said some things ...” I swallow and gather my courage to face the truth. “I was hurt and said some things I shouldn’t have and we haven’t spoken since. Plus, he’s out racing somewhere in the States.” Or on the other side of the world.

“You like him, don’t you?” Dad asks.

I play with the condensation on my glass, painting wide vertical strokes with my fingers. Then I nod.

“Maybe even love him?”

There’s the romantic in my dad. But I don’t mind now because I think he and Maureen are right. And if they are, I need to sort out what to do.

Chapter 26

MONDAY, JULY 3, CLAREMORE

Little more than a week has passed since Brigid's wedding and Mam banning me from the bakery, but it feels like a lifetime of separation. I'm so ready to put all that behind me.

Mam and I are about to leave the house, then she can't find her house key, her glasses aren't in her purse pocket, and there's something she's supposed to bring for Jenny, but she can't remember what. Seeing her flustered like that and feeling the claw of her frustration makes me edgy and I snap at her. "Mam, we're going to be late," as if the day will fall apart. She looks at me with her sweet brown eyes wet and shimmery and I want to bite my tongue. I give her cheek a kiss, find her glasses and her key, call Jenny, and we're out the door minutes later. I make a mental note to curb my temper. To be kind. Mam needs my support, not my irritation.

Low clouds turn the sky a pearly gray, a hint of rain showers ahead. I rub my bare arms in the cool air and look forward to the warmth from the ovens.

Jenny has already started when we arrive. The front of the shop is still dark but the door to the back room is open, showing a warm glow of light. When I step into the bakery, this home away from home, I feel

a molecular shift. Even though I'm barely inside and the showcases lie empty, I can smell the rich fruity sweetness and spice of the Barmbrack, the yeast of dinner rolls, the buttery goodness of scones. As much as I've whined about these classics, the bakery wouldn't be the same without them.

Like Jimmy Stewart in the Christmas classic when he realizes he's back in Bedford Falls and hugs the tree that dented his car, I want to hug our breads and cakes and give them a warm kiss of welcome. Instead, I embrace them in my mind and follow Mam to the back where we store our belongings and grab our aprons. It's time for work. And a bit of a change.

The day passes in a blur of activity and steady rain. Jenny handles a bigger than usual stream of customers out front while Mam and I produce a hearty supply of baked goods, including my chocolate cherry cupcakes, which sell well. (No surprise there.) The surprise is Mam's matter-of-fact agreement that they're a good addition. Along with, "I can't wait to see what you do next week." I have to have a sit-down after that.

In between the proofing and baking, Mam introduces me to the world of finance—invoices, order forms, baking supply distributors, and balance sheets. I learn about wholesale vs. retail prices, where to order in bulk, and where to buy specialty items.

At lunchtime I wolf down a ham and cheese sandwich Mam packed at home, then I measure out the dried fruit for more Barmbrack, and Eva calls in an order for chocolate cherry cupcakes for a book signing tomorrow afternoon. I barely have time to smile in acknowledgment before I'm readying baking pans and the mixer is churning chocolate batter.

By the time the bakery closes, my eyes are glazed over and my brain permanently tattooed with a column of numbers from last month's balance sheet that means next to nothing—I have only the vaguest understanding of assets and liabilities. Jenny says goodbye, then Mam gives me a hug and kiss and a “Well done, you” and says goodnight. I sprawl in her chair and stare at the papers still scattered on her desk—an array of bills to be paid: one for flour, granulated sugar, powdered sugar, brown sugar, salt, and baking powder; one for raisins and sultanas; another for lemons and oranges.

There's nothing to be done with them tonight, but I make an orderly stack. Then I box up six chocolate cherry cupcakes and head out for Gran's house for the knitting group.

Before sharing responsibilities with Mam—when she was in charge of the bakery—I usually arrived early for Gran's knitting group. Today I'm the last one there. The ladies crowd around Gran's dining room table, helping themselves to a plate of shortbread

cookies and lemon-ginger tea. When they see me set down the bakery box and open the lid to reveal the cupcakes, I can feel the energy soar and their anticipation bubble like a soft drink. A layer of weariness falls away, then I kiss them all hello, pour a cup of tea, and sink into my regular chair in the living room. The ladies soon follow suit and the group happily consumes the sweets. I lean my head back, close my eyes, and listen to the hum of conversation while my body takes a well-deserved break.

Gran whispers, “Your mother said you worked hard today.”

I manage a quiet, “Mmm.”

“She also said it was nice to have you back.”

At that I open my eyes and see Gran’s warmth shining back at me. It must have been hard to see her daughter and granddaughter fighting, something I didn’t bother to take into account. I was only concerned about myself, my ideas, my dreams. Pricks of shame stab at my heart. “I’m so sorry, Gran. I shouldn’t have been thinking only of myself.”

She kisses my cheek. “All part of growing up.”

Teacups clink on their saucers and the ladies move the china aside and pull out their knitting. I reach into my bag for my gray scarf, a study in mishaps and errors that usually makes me want to rip it out and never see it again. Tonight I run my finger across the

all-knit stitches, fascinated by the hills and valleys, the optical illusion of two upper ridges connected by a lower ridge, or is it two lower ridges connected by an upper? And I easily see the places where the yarn is too tight—a narrow ridge—or too loose—a wide, sloppy one. *I can do better* whispers through my mind, and I pick up my needles, not for battle but for an adventure. They feel friendlier today, the yarn more like a part of my hand. I hear a small inhale and look at Gran watching me intently. I smile and say, “I’ll get this,” and she nods and turns to her own work.

I focus on my moves—insert the right needle into the left loop, wrap the yarn around the needle pointing left, pull on the yarn and push the left tip under the loop so it’s in front of the stitch, then slip the stitch off onto the right needle. Repeat. Again and again. After several successful stitches I feel a rhythm to the movements, a slide, wrap, pull, slip. My hands relax a little and the yarn seems less twisty and easier to hold. This time when I look up Gran is smiling to herself and Maureen’s eyes crinkle at the corners. Have they been watching me? I feel good about my progress today.

“Claire,” Maureen asks, “when do you deliver the chocolate order?”

I set down my knitting as Eileen parrots, “Chocolate order?” She licks her lips as if there’s another treat coming.

“Claire sold her wonderful, salted caramels to a restaurant in Galway,” Maureen says. “A French place. I heard Henri was very impressed.”

“Oh my,” Eileen responds and I laugh.

How Maureen leads people on. But now everyone’s waiting for an answer. “I delivered them early. On Friday.” A happy swell of accomplishment fills my chest. But there’s been no news since then, and I was hoping for some acknowledgment, some word of praise. “Unfortunately, Henri was out so I left them with the hostess.”

Maureen’s eyes twinkle. “She was thrilled, no doubt.”

Eileen and Orla lean forward and sweet Nora clasps her knitting to her chest, waiting? Hoping? I could tell them about the non-event and resulting disappointment. But I play along with Maureen and say, “No doubt.”

The ladies smile and comment on how delicious the chocolates were that I shared with them. How they hope more will be forthcoming.

Maureen winks at me. “I’m sure if we ask nicely, Claire will grace us with her amazing treats.”

“How about next week?” I say, thinking of the extra boxes at home, the leftovers from that wonderful afternoon at Maureen’s.

Eileen points a finger at me. “Don’t you forget now. I’ll be dreaming of chocolates all week.”

“I won’t forget.”

We return to our knitting and I survey the recent rows on my scarf. The stitches are looser than before, a little more uniform. My hands don’t feel cramped. My jaw is soft, without the usual clenching. Even my breathing is unhurried. The differences between the evenness of my knitting and the other experts here is wider than the Irish Sea, but I am making progress. And proud of it.

Then Maureen says, “Brigid and Andrew are leaving for New York tomorrow. I’ll miss them so. I wish they would give an old woman peace of mind and move here. It would be so good for both of them.”

Leaving? So soon? But of course they are. Brigid’s contest is over; they have nothing else to keep them here. Annemarie too. Once again, I’ve been so wrapped up in my own affairs that I’ve forgotten about my new friends. I need to say goodbye. Thank them for their help, their friendship. Their incredible support.

Before I can fully wrap my head around their departure, Gran looks directly at me. “Whatever happened to that young man Finn?”

And there goes my peace of mind.

“He’s gone, Gran. You know that.”

“Oh, really? I must have forgotten.” She ends with a little pout that seems so pretend.

Sweet words that hook with a barb. Gran’s memory is as sharp as ever. She doesn’t forget a thing. Another reminder that I’ve been locked away in my own personal trauma.

“I’m sorry, Gran. I thought I told you.” Meaning I told my dad, who always tells my mother, so why hasn’t the family gossip spread?

“Who is Finn?” asks Nora, her hands stilling for a moment on her pink cables.

“Brigid’s brother,” Maureen answers. “The young man Claire was dancing with at the wedding.”

“The one she was kissing?” Orla asks.

At the same time, Nora says, “Oh, that one.”

Eileen, Nora, and Orla turn to me, their eyes alight, their faces open doors of curiosity. Did everyone see us kiss? I’m wondering how to respond when Nora ducks her head and resumes her knitting with rapid clacks of her needles. “He’s very handsome,” she says softly.

Orla nods. “He is.”

“And you look good together,” Eileen adds.

I decide on honesty. And agreement. “He is handsome. And it was a great kiss.” Okay, that makes my blood pound a little.

“Are you two an item?” Eileen asks.

Maureen chuckles and I launch an invisible arrow of silence her way. Of course, I have absolutely no power over her.

“No, I don’t think so,” I finally say. But I might not mind that. If I ever get a second chance.

Eileen gives a little sigh. “That’s too bad.” She resumes her knitting.

Everyone seems to be involved with their projects, so I gather my yarn and needles, ready to start again.

Then Maureen announces, “I hear he’s coming to the UK in September.”

My hands slip and my scarf slides to the floor.

“Who’s coming to the UK, Maureen?” Nora asks, her eyes wide and innocent.

I reach down to retrieve my knitting as Maureen answers. “Why, Claire’s young man. Brigid says there’s a race the second week of September in Torquay, a lovely town on the English Riviera. Quite the spot for a holiday, don’t you think, Oona?”

She smiles sweetly at Gran and I can hear the gears in their brains spin and click and fall into place. But

whatever they're hatching can't involve me. I have a bakery to run. A business to plan. Plus, there's that little problem of not being in communication with Finn. He may not want to see me.

"A perfect place," Gran says. "I was reading about the Yacht Club with its excellent restaurant and beautiful gardens. And September is such a nice time of year for travel."

"Then it's settled." Maureen makes a note in her calendar, then casts a long, unsettling glance at me before turning to the others. "Ladies, you're all invited. I'll look into reservations. But we need to move quickly. I'm sure the event will be sold out in no time."

Nora claps her hands, Orla nods, and Eileen gives a wide smile of unexpected delight. Maureen takes up her knitting again, everyone thoroughly relaxed and at ease. Everyone, that is, but me.

Part of me wants to grin and clap my hands along with Nora. But another part is frozen in place. A trip to the English Riviera? I've never left Ireland before; do I have the courage to do that? Then there are the million questions about Finn. Do I contact him? Do I wait for him to contact me? Either way, what do I say? My feelings ricochet against my ribs like a pinball. The last time we spoke my sharp tongue got the better of

me, so I'd like to make sure I have a game plan this time.

I just wish I knew if he was coming for more than the race.

When people are leaving Gran's house that evening, I stop Maureen at the door. "Quite the plan you have," I say with a pleasant tone. I like to think whatever she's doing is not to hurt me but for my benefit.

Her eyes tip up at the corners, warm and thoughtful. "I just thought I'd help move things along. People can be frightfully slow sometimes, can't they?"

I know those "people" are me. And she's right. I have been procrastinating.

"Just remember," she says, "every moment is a choice for love. You can either be out or in."

Chapter 27

TUESDAY, JULY 4, CLAREMORE

This morning Brigid and Andrew come to the bakery to say goodbye. It doesn't seem possible that in such a short time they feel like old friends. So much has changed in my life since I met Brigid.

"I'm sorry I've been out of touch," I say. "I should have called or—"

"Nonsense." Brigid shakes her head with the kindest gaze, reminding me so much of her aunt. "We interrupted your busy life and now we're letting you get back to normal."

I don't tell her the old normal was rather boring and I much prefer the new standard. But they have their own lives to lead, back home in the States. Though wouldn't it be exciting if they were to live here? Maybe Maureen and I can convince them to move.

Andrew gives me a sweet kiss on the cheek and presents me with a package wrapped in brown paper. "I have a little going away present. The first five chapters of my new book. I know it takes place in Scotland, but I thought you might enjoy it anyway."

The first chapters of his book? I look from him to Brigid and back again at this unexpected treasure. I want to rip open the paper and start reading immediately, but there's too much going on with the bakery, with Finn, with my mother. Now is not the right time.

"I don't deserve this," I say and hand it back to him.

He doesn't accept it. "You do. You've been a wonderful friend to my wife"—he blushes adorably when he says that—"and an inspiration to me. But there is one condition."

"A catch. I knew it." I offer a weak smile, so sad that they're leaving.

Andrew presses my hand. "You have to let me know what you think."

I clear my throat. "Well, that's easy. I can tell you right now. I love it."

He laughs. "Really, Claire. I look forward to your comments. Likes, dislikes, whatever. Don't be shy."

"Thank you. Thanks a million." I turn to Brigid, my eyes already wet.

We come together in a tight hug, a hug of warmth and comfort, of thank-yous and gratefulness, of support and acceptance, mutually given and mutually shared. When we step away from each other, we wipe our eyes.

“Come back,” I say, knowing I’ll miss both of them.

“Please write,” she tells me.

Then Andrew calls out *Slán leat* (goodbye) in impeccable Irish and they’re out the door. I clutch Andrew’s writing to my chest, my heart heavy and sad and wishing they could’ve stayed longer.

The rest of the week passes in a repetition of baking classics and poring over financials, which give me a headache. I have a deep admiration for people who are good at maths, who view numbers with a sense of magic and wizardry. To me, they’re drudgery. Never-ending columns of black spots that swim before my eyes and arrange themselves in meaningless shapes. Thank goodness for trusty calculators that make adding and subtracting easier. And after several days of Mam’s ever-so-patient lessons, I now understand the secret formula for costs and profit margins.

The chocolate cherry cupcakes continue to sell well, a bright spot that reminds me why I love to bake. But today, Friday, Mam is at hospital for her lumpectomy surgery, and I’m a mess of nerves, jumping at the smallest sound, my hands twitching when I try to pipe so icing spatters and runs in all the wrong places. I can’t bear to wait for news, but I can’t bother my dad, who told me fifteen times he would call when she’s out of surgery. In the meantime, I’m

making Jenny barmy with my pacing and fretting and glancing at the clock every other minute.

Mid-morning an email comes in from an unknown sender. When I start to read the message, I wonder if Maureen has woven a web of magic threads to connect me with Finn in strange and mysterious ways.

Hi Claire,

I've thought about this for much too long and finally had to say something. I've known Finn for almost 8 years. When we first met, he was this happy-go-lucky guy who lived for the water. All he really cared about were boats and racing. He used to come visit my (then) boyfriend and we'd all go sailing and have a great time. Then my car accident happened, my boyfriend vanished during my recovery, and I met the love of my life—my husband—also a sailor. He and Finn have become great friends and our relationships have deepened over time. Finn mellowed quite a bit, matured, and pays attention to the people in his life.

I've never heard him so excited about a woman as he was about you. I think he talked about you more than sailing. You have to know what a compliment that is. I'm not trying to excuse what he did. I just wanted you to hear from someone else how much he cares for you. And how miserable he is without you. Knowing he hurt you.

Whatever happens between you is between you.

Nevertheless, I hope I'll meet you someday. Soon. If you're even one-quarter as amazing as Finn says you are, I know we'll hit it off. I love to cook and I adore desserts, and whenever you're ready, I'd really like to take you for a ride on Lake Michigan. My boat has wheelchair access and a ton of other cool stuff.

Thank you for letting me say my piece.

With love,

Katherine Willett

125 Sea Walk Lane

Chicago, IL 60649

P.S. – Here's a photo of me and Finn after the US won this leg of the SailGP.

My heart is in my throat; my stomach aches; my ears ring with a sweet, high tone; and my mouth has a taste of cranberry sorrow layered with cinnamon-apple hope. How brave this Katherine is to write to a stranger with such honesty. How bold! What a dear friend she must be—warm and loyal and kind. The type of friend Finn deserves, and maybe a person I can be friends with, if what she says is true. I study the photo of Finn and a windswept blond, tan and full of life with a sprinkling of freckles across her nose. She looks so at home with Finn and the sails in the background, the sun on the water. I tamp down the

flash of jealousy that rises up. She has a husband, a man she dearly loves.

Did Finn race? Our last night together he told me he wasn't chosen; he was there to support his friends. But the smiles in the photo could indicate otherwise.

I read the message again, lingering on the part about Finn paying attention to the people in his life (like he did with me), how much he talked about me (I'm getting goosebumps thinking about that), how he told Katherine I was amazing (I wish I could have heard him say so). The fact that she wants to meet me and included her address.

The cinnamon-apple hope gets a big scoop of French vanilla ice cream as I let my imagination wing across the ocean to Lake Michigan. What a marvelous adventure that would be. Definitely something to dream about.

Now to compose a reply.

I type *Hi Katherine* and stop. Thoughts swirl in my head too fast to hold onto, ideas and feelings that I need to explore, tease out, reconcile with. How much do I tell her? Can I be as honest as she is? I'm not used to sharing my feelings, even with people I know well.

Hi Katherine,

It's so lovely to get your courageous message. Hearing from you about Finn was a great surprise entirely. He's

How do I sum him up in one word? The color of his eyes that reminds me of the ocean on a clear day. The gorgeous smile that makes me feel giddy inside. The warmth of his hands that gives strength and comfort. His support and encouragement, his belief in me, his tenderness and sensitivity. All those things that I've come to know to be true.

I continue, trying to be as honest as I can.

Hi Katherine,

It's so lovely to get your courageous message. Hearing from you about Finn was a great surprise entirely. He's amazing and I look forward to getting to know him better. Everything you say about me is wonderful (and a bit hard to believe). I handled things badly with Finn and hope to sort things out. I just don't know where to start.

Many thanks again.

Love, Claire

P.S. – I look forward to meeting you too someday and



going for a sail.

I read over my response, particularly the line “I just don’t know where to start.” The voice in my head urges me to erase that. It’s too honest, too vulnerable. But what impressed me about Katherine’s message was her honesty and vulnerability.

So I leave it alone and send it off before I can think twice.

Right now, there are two cakes to ice plus another batch of scones, because I forgot to add salt to the first batch. But as I spread chocolate icing on a lemon cake, that doesn’t stop my mind from wondering about Finn, where he is now and what he’s doing. What might have happened if I hadn’t snapped at him that morning. If I had curbed my tongue and simply talked through my hurt. I know he had to leave, but

would we still be talking? Finding a way over the many miles apart to continue getting to know each other?

There's nothing I can do to change the past. But perhaps I can bake a better future.

My phone dings with an incoming message. From Katherine.

Start anywhere.





My heart does a double flip with a heavy thud. It's so much easier to voice the doubt; the hard part is following up. Actually taking action.

Tonight, I promise myself. I'll write to him tonight. Then I shrug off my jitters and get to work.

Early afternoon I finally hear from Dad. No pleasantries; he jumps right in. "The surgery went

well. She's still groggy but we're coming home. She'll see you tonight."

I grip the phone so hard my fingers are going to break. "Thanks, Dad." My grin stretches so wide my mouth hurts, and I do the happiest happy dance in the back room, spinning in a circle until I'm dizzy. Then I jump for joy, cherry and raspberry with a splash of lemon curd and a dab of whipped cream. Jenny pokes her head in the back and I tell her the news, then we share a hug. I know there's more to come, that this is the first step and there will be radiation later. But for now, I'm so, so grateful. And I want to tell Finn. The other person who was so supportive and encouraging when I was hurting. But we're not talking yet.

An hour later I put the finishing touches on a Harry Potter cake for a little boy named Timmy. The bottom layer has dark red and gold fondant for the Gryffindor colors. The next layer—slightly smaller—is white with the letters HP in gold. A black broom lies atop the bottom layer on the left; on the right is a Golden Snitch with a small gold sphere and silver wings. The crowning glory is the black Sorting Hat, weathered and creased. I'm smoothing out barely noticeable wrinkles in the white fondant when my favorite customer (not!) walks in.

"Hello, Mr. Foley," I say quickly before he reaches me and I take a deep breath, holding it as calmly as possible. I have the thought of throwing myself over

the cake to protect it from his foul odor, but that would be extremely rude, and probably disastrous for the cake.

He approaches the counter, opens his mouth, and beneath the rotten breath, a cloud of misery washes over me. A deep sadness that pierces my heart and makes my eyes sting.

“I’m here for that,” he says, pointing to the cake.

“This cake?” Now I do want to shield it from him with everything I’ve got. How can he possibly claim this masterpiece?

“For my grandson.”

Ah, Timmy, the cute brown-haired boy I’ve seen in the shop with his mother on occasion. The boy who always pretends to wave a magic wand and mumble spells from the Harry Potter books. I hadn’t realized he was related to Mr. Foley.

I do my best to smile sweetly and push the cake closer. “Well, here you are. I just need to box it for you.”

“Hmph,” he says gruffly, and his sorrow tugs at me. I turn away for a moment to take another deep breath and remember Maureen’s words from Monday night. *Every moment is a choice for love.* She was talking about Finn then, but the words repeat in my head a

second time. I decide to give them a try, even as I don my imaginary battle armor.

After I ring up the sale, Mr. Foley hands over the cash right away. None of the usual tug of war, which makes me even more alert. Maybe it's because of the good news about my mother. Or because of Maureen's words. Before I can even think about how inappropriate my behavior might be, I put my hand on his and ask, "Are you okay, Mr. Foley?"

The cloud swirls and gathers into something denser, harder, and I taste a heavy bitterness overlaid with a spicy anger. A picture of his wife comes to mind, a sweet woman with short, graying curls and dark brown eyes who used to come to our bakery every week, so polite and gracious with me and Mam. I remember she died last fall.

Mr. Foley turns away from me and coughs. I wish there was something I could do to ease his pain. Gran and Maureen would have clever words, kind words. All that comes to me is, "I miss Minnie too. She was such a kind woman." Then I pack Timmy's cake in a tall, corrugated box for easy carrying.

When I finish, Mr. Foley has tears in his eyes and a wistful smile. He nods at me, lifts the box ever so carefully, and heads out. Then he pauses at the door and turns to me. "The kindest woman," he says.

My eyes smart and my heart does a little knock as I watch him go. I can't remember the last time I saw him smile.

Did a miracle just happen? Is that what a little love can do?

I stroke my emerald earrings and whistle a happy tune. *Thank you, Maureen.*



Mam looks good. Her breast is a little tender, she's afraid to make sudden movements, and her appetite isn't back to normal yet, probably due to all the medication. But she's home and resting and Dad and I are so grateful and happy we can't stop smiling.

After dinner I sit in the backyard on a deck chair, my phone in my hand, and stare into the evening sky, a soft blend of charcoal and onyx sprinkled with powdered sugar stars. I start with an easy task first, texting Brigid and Annemarie with updates on the bakery and the chocolates, imagining their surprise and delight. It amazes me that I can have two new friends in such a short time. If only they weren't so far away. Then I think of Finn. The first step of contacting him feels like an enormous plunge into the relationship unknown. I imagine standing on the edge

of a cliff and looking down miles and miles to sharp peaks and craggy towers. A world of hurt below.

Snap out of it, Claire.

The phone isn't a sentence of doom, but a lifeline. A bridge of possibility. A path to conversation. If I can step aboard a boat on my own, after all these years, I can certainly sort out a message.

The problem is there are so many things to say, so many choices to make about how to start. I keep going back and forth between apologizing first and apologizing later. There should be a manual on relationship etiquette—After the Breakup: Five Steps to Happiness. But since there isn't, I have to take that flying leap.

Two things stand out in my brain. Keep it simple, and do it now.

I open the conversation with a photo from a milestone event. Once I've pulled it up, my fingers speed over the keys.

I wanted to share my latest miracle—I stepped on the boat by myself! (From left to right: Dad, me, Joe Egan – boat owner)

The photo is taped to the wall by my bed, greeting me every night before sleep and every morning when I wake. We look like we've just won the lottery, our smiles all teeth and wider than the whole of Ireland.

I waffle about adding hearts and smiley faces to the message, accents I typically use, but I don't want to overdo it. Not now. Not yet. My finger hovers over the arrow button while my brain whispers *Send, Send, Send*, until I finally press it and see "delivered."

Then I wait, nerves jumping in my arms and legs until I forcibly take deep breaths to calm myself.

Five minutes, ten minutes, a half hour passes and no response. I'm about to go inside when my phone rings. Not a text, an actual ring. I answer and the voice in my ear sends a fountain of shivers down my spine.

"Claire, it's Finn."

My breath stalls and a distant roar in my ear reminds me of listening to a conch. Then a fragrant tide of lavender rises in my chest and fills me with warmth and a wave of nostalgia.

Finn.

I want to speak an encyclopedia of words but all I can manage is "Hi."

There's a soft rumble, maybe a chuckle. "I got your photo. I'm so proud of you."

I slide onto the grass and stretch out my trembling legs, the cool lawn helping to ground me. "Thanks. It was a big day."

"I bet. I wish I'd been there."

I remember thinking the same thing right after I took that step. “I wish you’d been there too.”

In the silence that follows I imagine gazing into Finn’s eyes, seeing his pride in me, feeling his warm hand on mine, and I know that I don’t want to let him go. I’m working up the courage to say I miss you, I want you, can we work this out?—some version of *please come back*—when he says, “Well, I’ve gotta go. It’s good to talk to you.”

I lie back on the grass, my brain whispering *Please don’t go*. But all I say is, “You too,” and leave it at that.

Then the conversation ends and I’m left with a pit of emptiness as deep and salty as the ocean.

Chapter 28

MID-JULY, CLAREMORE

Mam settles into working mornings at the bakery, still rising every day at six a.m., even on non-workdays and holidays. Jenny and I do the heavy lifting, allocating the easier jobs of shaping, filling, extruding, icing for my mother. Watching my mother at work—paying attention to her speed, agility, the graceful movements so like a ballet—takes my breath away. For years I've taken her for granted, believing that the bakery ran itself. That I was more than capable of doing the job my mother does.

How naïve I was.

She glances my way, pausing as she pipes lemon-thyme shortbread cookies (a new recipe from yours truly), her face a study of concentration, her hands exuding the precise amount of pressure on the piping bag. I give her a quick smile and turn away, back to my kneading. I'm so impressed.

I slap bread dough on the countertop, pressing the heel of my hand into its elasticity, stretching and folding and rotating. Mam would be a wonderful teacher to young wanna-be bakers. I bet there are plenty of teens or college-aged kids who would love a chance of learning how to bake in a real bakery. And it

would supplement our income. Something to talk about later.

At noon, Mam packs up her things and goes home to rest, and Jenny and I take over for the remainder of the day. Afternoons give us a chance to talk. To learn about each other. To discover that we both despise seafood but love chocolate—hot chocolate, chocolate ice cream, just about anything chocolate, the darker the better. When I tell her about my salted caramel bursts, her eyes go wide and she dances in her seat. And when Santé in Galway calls in an order for fifteen boxes—almost triple the original order (my mouth hurts from grinning)—she begs me to let her help.

We clear off a long table in the back and get to work. The difference, this time, is that Jenny isn't a novice like Finn. She knows how to handle molds and temper chocolate and make caramel. I have my very own sous-chef working with me, both of us feeding off the other's excitement and love of the ingredients.

At each step of the process, I taste to confirm, and in short order the molds are filled and set in the fridge for the chocolate to harden. Then I go to the storage area and pull out the candy supplies and show them to Jenny.

She picks up the sheet of labels designed by Annemarie and traces a circle with her finger. "Sweet Dreams by Claire. That's such a great name. And I love

the blue and brown. What made her choose those colors?”

“The brown is for chocolate and baked goods in general. The blue is borrowed from the bakery logo.”

“Oh.” She smiles. “That’s brilliant.”

She’s right. It is.

With two sets of hands, the fifteen boxes are prepped in no time with candy pads ready and labels affixed.

Jenny and I start cleaning up. “When you take over the bakery, will you change the name to Sweet Dreams by Claire?” she asks.

“I haven’t thought about it.” Having my own shop always seemed a distant speck in the future. Something that might happen someday if I worked hard. But now that Mam has put me in charge, is that day coming sooner? “Did my mother say something to you?”

“Just that I’d be lucky to work for you when you take over.”

When you take over. I’m pondering that when the timer dings. We take the chocolates out of the fridge and carefully unmold them on the counter. Their glossy sheen never fails to make my heart swell with pride. As if I belong to a select society of chocolatiers and I haven’t let them down.

Then I take a deep breath. “It’s time for the test of truth.” I nod to Jenny.

She brings a chocolate to her nose and inhales. “Scent—deep notes of dark chocolate.” We both giggle at the imitation of a wine enthusiast. “Taste.” She bites into the candy, careful to catch the drops of filling, and I watch her sigh, then chew slowly, then look at me in awe. “Ohmigod, Claire.” She eats the last bit and licks her lips. When she’s finished, she puts a hand on her heart and breathes deeply. “You should sell these.”

“I am selling them.”

“I mean here, in the bakery.”

I shake my head. “I can’t. I promised them to Santé.”

“No, silly.” She claps a hand over her mouth. “I’m so sorry. That was rude.”

“Jenny,” I say with a smile, “I hope you’ll always be honest with me. And I can take a bit of teasing.”

“Okay. What I was trying to say is that you can take orders for your chocolates and sell them wherever—more power to you. But you should definitely sell them here, in the bakery. Maybe put a few boxes by the cash register to tempt people when they’re paying. You could even offer mini bites for people to sample. One taste and they’ll be hooked. Plus, you’ll make more money.”

Intrigued, delighted, amazed—those words don't cover my reaction to her ideas. "Who are you? You're working with my friend Annemarie, right?" I ask, half joking, half serious.

"Who?"

"The woman who designed the label for the gift boxes. She's a marketing expert."

"I took some marketing classes at university," Jenny says shyly.

"Well, you're good at it. Okay, let's try it. What if I pay you to help market the chocolates?"

"You're already paying me to be here. I don't need any more."

We leave it at that for now. But I have a feeling there's a bonus in her future.



Late that night, a ding from my mobile wakes me. 12:02, according to my screen. I grab it, barely awake, and read a brief message from Finn.

I know it's been a while since our last call. I'm sorry for what happened between us. I look forward to talking to you soon.

It may be after midnight, but I can't pass up the chance to talk to him. "Hey," I say when he answers.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“I’m a light sleeper.”

I hear him drag in a breath. “I wanted to apologize,” he says. “I should have earlier.”

I’ve been waiting to hear that, needing to hear that, and the words are a honey-coated balm to my pride. But I’ve had a lot of time to think about what happened and it’s as much me as him. “It was my fault. I was wrong. And I said some nasty things.”

“You were hurt. I shouldn’t have assumed you were okay with me telling people about you. You know what happens when people assume.”

“Thank you, Finn.” In the pause my body relaxes and I feel looser and freer than I have in days.

Finn chuckles. “Now that we’ve flogged ourselves a bit, what do you say we move on? How’s my favorite baker? I’ve missed you.” His voice is soft and tender.

A wave of contentment runs through me from head to toe. I turn on my side and snuggle into my pillow, the phone pressed against my ear. “I’ve missed you too,” I say. “By the way, I heard from Katherine.”

“My friend Katherine?”

I nod, though he can’t see me. “Your friend Katherine. She emailed me and told me what an eejit you are.”

Finn laughs, that hearty sound I like. “That sounds about right.”

I love that he takes everything so easily. Laughter is so good for the soul. “I’m teasing, you know. She admires and respects you a lot. It sounds like you’re really good friends.”

“We are. Did she tell you how much I talked about you? I told her so many stories I’m surprised she still wants to be around me.”

“She attached a photo of both of you, so I think your friendship is safe.”

“What photo?”

“After the US won the SailGP.”

“Ah,” he says, and I taste a burst of citrus joy in the way he draws out the word. “That’s a great picture.”

I have to ask about the race. I meant to on our last call but the moment didn’t come. “Did you race? You told me you weren’t planning to.”

“I did. There was a change of plans, a very fortunate change of plans. The race was fantastic.”

The citrus joy spreads into a soft cloud and wraps me in his pleasure. I wish I could have seen him. “You two look happy,” I say. “And she’s very pretty.”

“Her husband thinks so too.” There’s a slight pause, then, “You have nothing to be jealous about.”

“Who’s jealous?” But I am, a little. “I hear you’re coming to Torquay in September.”

So much for easing into that. I wasn’t going to say anything, at least not until we got back on safe ground. But maybe we’re already there because my brain did not want to wait.

“Word gets around,” Finn says, and I hear the humor. “The Dragon Class race should be fun. Maybe we can meet up afterwards. I might be able to take a few days off.”

I turn on my back with glee. Meeting Finn. Seeing him in person, touching him, holding him, kissing him. I give a little groan, then hope to God he didn’t hear. Then I hope he did hear. “That would be great. Maybe we could go for a sail.”

“Are you up for that?” he asks.

“Not yet. But a lot can happen in a couple months.”

“I’d love that, Claire.”

Me too.

“Well, I know it’s late,” he says, “so I’ll let you go back to sleep.”

There’s one more thing I want to let him know before we hang up, so I blurt it out. “Mam and I worked things out.”

“Claire, that’s fantastic! Can I say I told you so?” he says in a warm, supportive way.

“I’ll let you, this one time.”

“What happened?”

It isn’t easy to talk about, but I say the words simply. “She had breast cancer. A small lump, and the surgery was successful. But she was scared and that’s why she got mad.”

A painful silence follows and I worry that I’ve shared too much. “I’m so sorry you had to go through that,” Finn says. “Knowing someone you love is in pain is one of the hardest things to bear. She’s lucky she has you and your dad.”

And that’s when I know my dad and Maureen have been right. I’m in love with Finn. His words are so soothing, like the softest, warmest blanket to shield me from hurt. I wonder if he’s talking about Katherine and her accident, but it doesn’t matter how he knows. He understands.

“Thanks for calling,” he says. “And thanks for telling me about your mom.”

“Thanks for talking.” Talking? How lame is that.

Finn chuckles, and I can’t get over how much I love the sound of his voice.

“Until next time,” he says.

Next time. There's going to be a next time.
"Goodnight, Finn."

I hang up and hold my phone in my hand, not wanting to let go of the connection. I talked to Finn. And he said he misses me. What a glorious thing.

Then I remember those fateful words. The ones I so casually uttered. *Maybe we could go for a sail.*

No more puttering around with the ocean. It's time to accept Joe's offer.

Chapter 29

LATE JULY

In the days that follow, Jenny is proved right. Several boxes of Salted Caramel Bursts sit next to the cash register, along with a plate of mini bites. **I** Every time a customer tastes a sample, exclaims “Oh, my” or “That’s amazing” and then purchases a box, I feel the same amazement I do at the end of *It’s a Wonderful Life* when the family is reunited and the bell rings on the Christmas tree. Even Mam seems happy with the sales—something I never would have believed. At this rate, we’ll run out of chocolates by the end of the week. How great is that?

I keep telling Jenny, “That was a brilliant idea,” and each time she says, “Stop. It’s nothing.” But the color in her cheeks says she’s happy I’ve noticed.

Thank goodness for the smooth operations at the bakery. I didn’t think planning a little boat outing would be such a big deal, but as the days tick down to Sunday my anxiety grows larger. Baking helps to push it down. Making more chocolates on Saturday helps a bit. But I know the worry won’t go away until I’m on the boat.

Dad invites Mam to go with us, to make it a family outing with a picnic lunch. But she turns him down, and I understand. The love of water is something my

dad and I share and she doesn't mind that. But she has her own preferences. Today she and Gran are going out for lunch and then some shopping.

At the dock in Galway, Joe breaks into a wide smile when he sees me and Dad and offers me his hand to step on board. His bright white shirt compliments the white gleam of the boat sides. I squeeze his gnarled fingers and take that step with confidence, then I make my way to the bow. Clouds cover the sun, and the water is a pewter gray, the gray of dashed hopes and dreams. I was hoping my sky blue T-shirt and tan shorts would encourage fair weather. But choppy waves slap against the hull in rhythm with the slapping of my stomach. The scar on my thigh tightens, pulses, throbs. The taste of dread is sour, repulsive, and I swallow several times, trying to erase the sensation.

Dad stands next to me, his hand light on my shoulder, his touch warm and steady. "Are you ready?" he asks.

I nod, even though I'm not because I know the only way to deal with fear is to go through it.

Dad signals Joe and I hear the engine rumble as it comes to life, then vibration rolls through my feet. The fear hits hard and strong. My hands clamp down on the rail, my fingers squeezing so tight they hurt. My stomach churns, nausea rises, and I drag in a

series of deep breaths. Then the memory plays and I feel the pain from long ago.

Who was I kidding? An unmoving vessel is one thing. But a moving vessel? I can't do this. Not today. Another time, maybe. My body obviously doesn't want this, and I shouldn't fight my body.

The engine dies; Dad must have signaled Joe to stop. I relax my hands and shake out my cramped fingers. "It's alright, Claire," he says. "You tried. That's all anyone can do."

I stroke my earrings, frustrated that they haven't helped, all the while seeing my dad's kind eyes that make me want to weep. I think about the long trip down here, going back home without a victory. I need to do more than try.

Hands on the rail, I growl at my dad. "Tell Joe to start her again."

The engine rumble feels more vicious this time, angry, as if I'm testing its patience. Well, I'm angry too. I brace myself for the vibration and let it move through the fear.

Then I hear Finn's voice from our call the other night. The softness as he said *I've missed you*. The laugh that makes everything right with the world.

I tighten my grip. *I can do this. I'm stronger now.*

I think of him. Imagine him standing tall with the wind in his hair. Watch him tackle the rigging to change course. I see the muscles flexing in his arms, the flash of his blue eyes, how they squint against the sun. There's salt in the air, warm sun on my skin, and I'm standing next to him as our boat slices through the water. He throws his arm around me and pulls me close as we laugh with delight, free and happy.

“Claire.” Something squeezes my shoulder. “Honey, are you alright?”

I blink and I'm on Joe's boat, my dad next to me, and we're out in open water. Sunlight streams through a break in the clouds, while gulls wheel by, their cries loud and lively. My stomach has calmed, my legs are steady, my hands relaxed on the rail. I'm not afraid.

A smile begins and grows and stretches.

“Oh, Dad.” I throw my arms around him, tears in my eyes.

He wraps his arms around me and holds me tight. “I've got you.”

I lean into him for several seconds, then I step back and look at him. This kind man who's sheltered me, cared for me, supported and encouraged me and given great advice. How lucky I am to have him. “Thank you for being there for me.”

“Always.”

The certainty of that word lodges deep inside.

He puts his arm around my waist and rests his head on my shoulder for a moment, the way he used to when we watched movies. “Do you mind telling me how you did it?”

I wish I could say it was due to him. Out of all the countless adventures we’ve had on the water, any one of those might have done the trick. But I’d rather be honest, and I think he can handle it. “I thought of Finn. I imagined him sailing, and I felt the sun and the wind and the salt in the air. I saw the two of us together and we were happy. And I wasn’t afraid anymore.”

He kisses my forehead and touches his head to mine, and I feel his pride in me as we stand there together, so close, so loving. *Thank you*, I whisper in my head. To him, to Finn, to everyone along the way. *Thank you.*



July flies by and half of August. Mam is safely past her radiation treatments with only mild discomfort, which is almost behind her, and Dad and I can’t be more grateful. The scare she gave us will last a lifetime, and my heart goes out to all those people who suffer much more.

Every week the business financials get a little easier. Income and expenses, cost of goods, payroll for the three of us, the little bit of advertising we do at the local shops—those don't feel like so much Greek anymore. And the Salted Caramel Bursts constantly sell out. Jenny says we should double production, and I think she's right.

On Sundays Dad and I and Joe spend several hours out on the water, my body and senses relearning how to steer, how to navigate, how to read the sky and the clouds. There are no sails on Joe's yacht, no tiller, no tacking into the wind. But first things first. I'm getting my sea legs back. Every accomplishment, no matter how small, is a well-earned victory. All in preparation for sailing with Finn.

We talk as often as possible, given Finn's schedule. I've grown used to his voice and miss it when there's an absence. As busy as he is, I appreciate him finding the time for me, for us. He shares about the wins, the losses, the stories of his teammates, the wildness of the sea. I tell him about the bakery, my blossoming friendship with Jenny, Mam's health, and, of course, the chocolates. My own sailing I'm keeping a secret. Until I can surprise him.

I'm also teaching him a little Irish. The first time he asked, I sat in the quiet of my room with my mouth hanging open. Why would an American want to learn Irish, a language that's only spoken by a handful of

people? Then he said, “I wasn’t born there like you, but Ireland’s a part of me, and you’re there, and I want to be closer to you.” I melted then, like a soft caramel candy, and so began our lessons. Easy words and phrases like *Dia dhuit* (hello) and *Slán* (goodbye). *Sláinte* (cheers) and *Go raibh maith agat* (thank you). He doesn’t have the ear for language that Brigid has or the practice that Andrew has put in. But he’s not bad.

And every time we say goodbye there’s an ache in my chest and a taste of salt on my lips.

Mid-week, in the back room, Mam makes an announcement while she kneads dough for whole wheat bread. “I’m retiring.”

My finger slips on the hand mixer and the speed jumps from two to ten. Clouds of icing sugar billow in front of me and dark brown icing spatters everywhere —on our clothes, in our hair, on the counter, on the floor. We look like a crime scene in chocolate. Thank goodness Jenny is out front where she can’t see us.

Mam laughs, wiping chocolate from her face, but I turn off the mixer and gape. It wasn’t hard to guess this day was coming, but a part of me kept hoping it wouldn’t. I’ve been baking with her for over twenty years. Where would I be without my mother? What will I be without her?

“Claire, it’s time. You have Jenny now. You don’t need me anymore.”

I look at her and my eyes well. “I’ll always need you. Even when I’m old and gray.” I can’t imagine growing old, but the sentiment is true. I’ve learned almost everything I know from her. It seems so long ago when I was dreaming about being on my own, having my own shop. I remember the conversation with Finn where I told him I didn’t want to work for anyone else. I had to be my own boss. Now that the time is here, I don’t know how I can do this without her.

She wipes her hands on a clean towel and gives me a hug, our aprons squishing with chocolate icing. I hold her close and breathe in her perfume of sugar, flour, and yeast. The fragrance I used to call “Bakery in a Bottle,” sure it would be a bestseller because it smells like love and good food.

“You’ll be fine,” she says when she steps away.

“I know. But I’ll miss you.”

“You have Jenny.”

“I know.” *But she’s not you.*

Jenny taps on the door to the back. “Are you really leaving us, Mrs. Francis?”

“Rose, Jenny. How many times have I asked you to call me Rose?”

Jenny simply waits.

“At the end of the month,” Mam says with a smile that’s soft and radiant and makes her look twenty

years younger. “Your father and I,” she says to me, “are going to do a bit of traveling. I haven’t really explored the UK and we’re not getting any younger. And I hear there’s a wonderful sailing race in Torquay in September.” Her eyes twinkle. “Your father’s already made reservations.”

My parents going to Torquay? To watch Finn? “But you don’t even like sailing.”

“I like it well enough, especially when my daughter’s boyfriend is taking part. Which means you better get your act together so you can come with us.”

A sweet little thrill flutters in my chest and takes flight. My mother’s inviting me to go with them to Torquay. And she called Finn my boyfriend, a word I’ve thought about and whispered to myself but never uttered out loud. One I like the sound of and could get used to hearing it more often. “That’s grand, Mam, but I can’t go. I have to watch the bakery.”

“I’m sure we can find someone to help Jenny for a few days.”

Ever since Maureen mentioned the race at the knit group, I’ve wanted to go. Been afraid to go because I wasn’t ready to cross the ocean. Decided even if I could be ready, I had to stay behind and take care of the bakery. But now I’m ready and Mam is giving me her permission.

“Do you mean it?” I ask.

She nods, and I hug and squish against her once more, doing a little wiggle at the news while Jenny laughs.

Jenny returns to the front counter, Mam to her bread, and I finish up the icing for a confetti cake, sneaking looks at her every few seconds to make sure I haven't dreamed what just happened. After several minutes of everything being perfectly ordinary, I start to relax.

"Claire," she says, and I tense. So much for relaxing.

"Yes, Mam?"

She works the bread, her hands folding and kneading, creating that important elasticity. "I'm very proud of you."

She's going to make my head swell.

"You've always been capable," she continues, "and so creative. But I wasn't sure you could manage the business side. You've proven that you can."

She looks at me, and her love is sweet, earthy, warm, and solid, one that surrounds me and cradles me with care and tenderness.

I let it swirl over me while I try to ease the tightness in my throat. I manage to croak out a soft, "Thank you. That means so much."

Chapter 30

LAST WEEK OF AUGUST, GALWAY

This Sunday is the last Sunday before the Dragon race arrives, before Mam and Dad and I leave for Torquay, that beautiful jewel (according to the Internet photos) on the southwest coast of England. I'm a bubbling pot of emotions about our trip—leaving Ireland for the first time, traveling across the water, witnessing a professional sailing race. And Finn. It's hard to contain my nerves and excitement when I think about him.

In honor of my desire to sail with Finn, Dad has promised me a lesson on a sailboat. A chance for me to spread my water wings. Something I've been looking forward to almost as much as seeing Finn.

As we drive to Galway, I think about my lessons so far. Joe—sweet Joe with the weathered skin and more patience than I'll ever have—has taken me far on his great motorboat. I can navigate the bay like a pro. And the little hull scrape—okay, two feet is not so little—has been repaired and looks like new, and nobody mentions it. But I see the grins and winks between him and Dad when they think I'm not looking.

I'll miss Joe. He's a wonderful man and a good sailor, and I'm proud to have learned from him. But it's time to move on.

I turn to my dad. “Tell me again about the boat.”

“It’s a Topaz dinghy. Small and manageable, big enough for two people. Not much different than what we used to sail when you started out. But these go a little faster in a good wind, so you’ll need to hang on.”

The scar on my leg pulses when he talks about our old boat. One throb and then it’s quiet, a reminder of the past that knows better than to interfere with the present. “I’m ready, Dad.” I’m even wearing my favorite navy blue tee and tan cargo shorts in honor of my second maiden voyage.

He squeezes my hand and grins at me. “I know you are.”

Dad lets me out at the dock to park the car and says he’ll meet me in front of the dinghy with the white sail that says “topaz.” I walk down the path slowly, tilting my face towards the sun, the breeze blowing the ends of my hair. I breathe in the salt in the air and imagine being on the boat, cutting through the waves. Excitement builds, and with it the prickle of nerves. It’s a big day today. But I’m not terrified, just on tenterhooks a bit. Up ahead, I see the dinghy and break into a smile. Then I raise my hands to stroke my earrings, to give me that little extra luck, and the earrings aren’t there. I grab at my ears, pulling on them as if that will make the earrings appear. But of course nothing happens.

How could I forget them?

I stop. Panic. Close my eyes and bite my lip while my body tenses and strains. Every time I've been out on the water, I was wearing the earrings. They're what began my whole water adventure with Finn. They're the reason for getting over my fear. Without them ... I can't do this without them.

Then a voice says, "It's a beautiful day for a sail."

My body shivers. I know that voice. But it can't be. I'm imagining it. He's thousands of miles away from here.

When I open my eyes, Finn stands not ten feet away holding a bunch of pink carnations. The sun limns his body in a golden aura. His hair waves in the breeze and his white shirt and denim shorts show off his glorious tan and well-defined muscles.

I don't think, I run and throw myself at him. There's an "oof" when our bodies collide. Then strong arms wrap around me and pull me close as our lips meet in a deep, delicious kiss. A drink from the well of Finn that I don't want to end. When we finally part, I see the carnations on the pavement, thankfully undamaged.

"Sorry," I say. "I couldn't help myself."

"A kiss over flowers?" He grins. "I'll take that any day."

I gather the flowers, breathe in their essence, and hold them close. “You remembered.”

He strokes my cheek. “I have an excellent memory.”

“So you said.” I hug him again, careful of the flowers, then step back. “What are you doing here?”

“Can’t a guy surprise his girl?”

His *girl*. That sounds so nice. “I like surprises.” I smile to show I’m sincere. “But I thought we were going to see each other next week.”

“We are. But I was counting the days until I could see you again, and I didn’t want to wait.”

He pulls me close for another kiss and I melt in his arms. But when we part this time an unsettling thought creeps in. “Are you trying to tell me you won’t be in the race?” I was counting on having more than a day or two with him.

He tucks some loose hair behind my ear. “When did you start worrying like Brigid?”

“So you are racing?”

“I’m definitely racing.”

Good. “But there’s something else.”

“There is. If I didn’t know better, I’d say the Cleary magic is rubbing off on you.”

“Maybe it’s Francis magic. My gran is very intuitive.”

He strokes my cheek, his fingers soft and warm, and the fact that he's stalling makes me nervous. "What is it, Finn? Just say it, please."

He drops his hand and swallows, and I see that he's a little nervous too. "I hope this is a good thing," he says. "I want it to be a good thing. I got offered a job at the Galway Bay Yacht Club as a Senior Instructor. They have an emphasis on disadvantaged youth and families, so when I heard they were looking for someone to run their training courses during the season, I thought it might be fun."

That bubbling pot of emotions I was feeling earlier explodes into hope, elation, and disbelief. Is he saying what I think he's saying? "Here? In Ireland? You're going to be here in Ireland?"

"Here. In Ireland. Galway, specifically."

This is too good to be true. There has to be a catch. "But what about racing?"

"I can do that in the off months. If I still want to."

"Why wouldn't you want to? That's who you are."

"That's who I was. Then I met someone. A beautiful woman who changed my life." He kisses my nose and attempts a smile, then his eyes darken and he studies my face. "I've missed you, Claire. I keep thinking about you when I'm racing, and that's not safe or good for

the team. Plus, I don't want to be away from you all the time. I'd rather be with you."

"Here," I say like a parrot. "In Ireland."

He nods. "It's a beautiful country and the home of the woman I love."

Oh, Finn. Hearing him say that lights me up like a sparkler. We've never said those words before and I imagined I would be the one to say them first. But it doesn't matter who's first because I feel the same way. "*Tá mé i ngrá leat.*"

He cocks his head. "Say that again?"

"*Tá mé i ngrá leat.*"

Maybe he feels all the love I have in my heart because he gives me one of his gorgeous smiles, the kind that makes me sigh and float. "What does that mean?" he asks.

I step close and press myself against him. "I love you," I say softly.

He captures my mouth in a sweet kiss. "I love you too."

"So you have a job in Galway," I summarize. He nods. "And you just happened to be on the dock when I'm here for a sailing lesson."

"Finn." My dad joins us. "Good to see you."

"Mr. Francis."

They shake hands and they're both grinning. Which means one or both of them is responsible for the setup.

"I was just about to ask Claire to go sailing," Finn says.

"Sounds like a great plan," Dad says.

"But what about our lesson?" I ask.

Dad squeezes my shoulder. "I think your young man can teach you anything you need to know. And I have a date with an old friend."

Joe waves in the distance and Dad kisses my cheek and saunters off.

Finn turns slightly to a yacht with a navy blue hull and two sails. A familiar-looking yacht, where we spent the night before our awful breakup. I'm so glad we're past that. "So," he holds out one arm toward the boat, "how about that date?"

I'm about to say yes, I'd love to, when I remember. My missing earrings. The disappointment is so sharp, so quick, like a deep slice to my chest. "I'm sorry." I shake my head. "I can't."

"Claire." The empathy in his tone is a warm compress on the hurt. "I know you're ready. Your dad's been telling me all about your progress. How in control you are of Joe's boat. I've never heard a man so proud."

Oh to be there during those conversations. But this has nothing to do with my lessons. I look at Finn in despair. “I don’t have my earrings.”

“You’re pretty enough without them. And it’s probably better if you’re not wearing jewelry.”

Men. Sometimes they can be so dense. “It’s not about my looks. Those earrings are what gave me the confidence to be on the water.”

“Are you sure?” He takes my hand and kisses my fingers one by one, his lips soft and gentle and so intoxicating. “Maybe they gave you a boost in the beginning. But I bet you don’t need them now.”

My heart stutters and my chest seems to widen, expand, as if a cool breeze has just wafted through. Could he be right? Is it possible I don’t need them?

He tugs me gently toward the yacht. It only takes a few steps to stand before the boat. And now that I’m in front of it my body gives an enormous shudder.

Still holding my hand, Finn boards the boat and turns to me, our arms extended, waiting. All I have to do is take a step.

A step towards love.

A step towards our future.

My heart says yes. A wild, emphatic yes that matches the shine in his eyes.

I take the step.

Finn swings me into his arms and kisses me hard. “I love you, Claire. You’re one of the most courageous women I know.” Then he carries me to the helm and sets me down so we’re looking out on the ocean. Sunlight glints on the water like a show of fireflies and the breeze stirs the current back and forth.

When he starts up the engine, there’s no fear at all. Just anticipation and the excitement of being on a boat with Finn. And when we both steer the yacht into open water, my heart sprouts wings and I feel like I’m soaring, just as I did so many years ago.

Finn squeezes my side and holds me close. “You have so much ahead of you,” he says with a kiss on my cheek. “To your dreams, wherever they may take you.”

My eyes well at the love of this man, at how often he puts me first. But this time he’s wrong. It’s not *my* dream that counts. It’s *our* dreams. I slip my arm through his and lean against him. “To *our* dreams. Wherever they may take us.”

THE END

Glossary of Irish Words/Phrases

Dia dhuit ('jee·ah ghweetch) – hello

Go raibh maith agat (guh ruh 'mah a·gut) – thank you

Inis Mór ('in·ish more) – the largest Aran island

Leannán ('lah·nin) – sweetheart

Sláinte ('slawn·cha) – cheers

Sláinte mhaith ('slawn·cha wah) – good health

Slán (slawn) or *Slán leat* (slawn ly·'at) – goodbye

Tá mé i ngrá leat (taw may ih n·'graw ly·at) – I love you

Taoiseach ('tay·shuh) – prime minister

Tuatha De Danaan ('too·ah day 'dah·nin) – the folk of the goddess Danu, the deities of pre-Christian Gaelic Ireland

Author's Notes

Thank you for reading *Sweet Dreams by Claire*. That means so much! I'd love to hear what you thought. If you have any questions or comments or just want to chat about your favorite dessert, please contact me at nanette@wordsofpassion.com. If you enjoyed this book, would you consider rating it and reviewing it? Getting a review is like eating one of Claire's chocolates. Just exquisite! To post a review, go to the *Sweet Dreams by Claire* sales page on Amazon. Many thanks in advance!

Prequel

Get an introduction to the lovely town of Claremore and in *For the Love of Brigid (Capture the Light, Book 1)*. When Brigid, a shy librarian, meets Andrew, a famous writer, mutual attraction develops. But nothing happens until Ireland beckons, and a legend pulls them on a powerful journey. As the legend comes to light, they'll discover an unexpected path to love and the dreams they desire. Visit nanettelittlestone.com/for-the-love-of-brigid-2 to get your copy now!

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To stay in the know about new releases, giveaways, inside scoops, and author events, sign up for my newsletter at nanettelittlestone.com/newsletter.
Thanks so much!

Acknowledgments

It's such a pleasure to be back in Ireland again, even if just in my imagination. The warm and friendly people of Claremore, the green grass sparkling with morning dew, the magic of the legend ... they all make my heart swell with joy.

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sense of the word. I am eternally grateful for all that he does, and is. *Mo chroí.*

About the Author

Nanette Littlestone's emotional stories take the reader on a journey of the heart. A food lover and award-winning novelist, Nanette believes in happily ever after. Her pragmatic side realizes that most people don't live fairy tale lives, so her stories explore the struggles we face, the plans that backfire, the heart-wrenching decisions we have to make, plus the joy, the delight, the happiness when we courageously embrace our dreams. It's all about the love, and good food.



When she's not working on her next book, she loves to dream of living by the beach, read (historical fiction, romance, and YA stories), go for walks, watch romantic movies, cook, and savor dark chocolate. She currently lives in a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia with her husband, her own romantic hero and most avid supporter.

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Also by Nanette Littlestone

FINDING ANSWERS IN THE HEART, VOLUME I

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THE HEART OF EVERYTHING

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