

RETURN TO SENDER

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&
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Dedication

This story is dedicated to the memory of someone special to both authors.
Andrea Miles Rhoads' passing has left a hole in the hearts of many authors.
Her love and dedication to helping and working with new and established authors will be missed.
Thank you for letting us work together on this fun story about lost letters and romance.

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Chapter One

Ewan was sifting through paperwork scattered over the antique desk in his great-grandfather's office. His father never did much in the room. Great-Grandpa Colin had been a quiet man and seldom went places after Great-Grandma passed, preferring the comfort of his own home. He saved things, and made a lot of money in his day, then sunk it into real estate and travel.

Now his great-grandson had returned to Charlottesville, Virginia, and spent some time trying to figure out what he was going to do. Through the years the land had produced hay, wheat, and tobacco, until finally it just grew corn. His great-grandfather wouldn't sell the land until the end, but after that, parcel by parcel had been sold to pay bills and taxes. Now it sat as five hundred acres of mainly flat farmland, with nothing growing on it except some corn for local food markets.

The old house was in shambles, and it was definitely time to go through everything since his father had passed away six months ago. As the only heir, Ewan now owned all of it. The benefit of being the only child meant he wasn't forced to deal with the drama of splitting things up. When it came to money, it was pretty much guaranteed that people would get weird and crazy.

The downside? Growing up alone and being raised by parents that blamed you for everything. There was no switching blame because it was always his fault. He never as close to his father as he'd have liked, mostly due to his work and constant battles with lawyers and the city. It was always something.

Ewan spent a lot of time out in the countryside. His grandpa let him run around like crazy on his property and told entertaining stories. He told tales of coming to America as a child from Ireland and spoke of his father with love and admiration. The old ways, he said, things with true meaning and heritage.

That's where Ewan had learned about his great-grandpa Colin from Ireland. The stories and the adventures were like something out of a book for young Ewan. Another perk of being away from it all was the release of imagination, and dreams running free.

Coming back to his parents' house brought back all those memories from his childhood. He dreaded going through everything, sorting out what went where, and who would get the various pieces of historical furniture and paintings.

People could save a lot of crap over seventy years, and Ewan was finding things he would've been better off not seeing. All the vintage Playboy magazines were a true classic find. His father must have been some sort of collector of history, and all the papers and different little metal boxes he discovered revealed the man, his personal treasures, and what he deemed important.

Losing his grandpa was hard because he'd been more like a father. He was a mentor and an icon others looked up to. Everyone assumed he was larger than life, but he was, after all of it, only a man.

If they knew about the drinking, whoring around, and his mind going, they would have looked down on him, so Ewan hid his flaws and kept the charade of the man's greatness alive. He had ruined his life so why tarnish others' perception.

As he opened some of the little drawers across the top of the desk, he heard a loud click, something hit his leg, and he looked down. A small drawer had popped open. Ewan smiled and reached down to open it, discovering a bunch of letters with a lace band wrapped around them.

Curiosity got the better of him, and he slowly unwrapped the bundle. Carefully drawing away the cloth, he saw the letters were very old but in pristine condition. This correspondence must have

been something really special. The name on the top letter was clearly legible and written in an elegant cursive style. It was addressed to *Maddie O'Hare*.

"I wonder who that was? I never heard of any relative named Maddie O'Hare." Ewan paused, curious, trying to understand the meaning of what he held in his hand.

Flipping through the stack he saw they were in chronological order. The temptation was too much, so he decided to read a couple and see what they were about.

Getting comfy in the leather desk chair he opened the first letter, and began to read.

Dear Maddie,

I can't tell you how hard it has been not seeing you. I just want to leave this country and sail to America again, so I can spend time with you. When I close my eyes, I am back in Virginia and filled with the warmth of your company. The clear sky and light breeze flowing through your long red hair. This is my peaceful place.

During these hard times, it is the only thing that gets me through the day. Remembering the way you smiled, the fragrance of your perfume, and the time spent in the old shack during the thunderstorm. Other than that spider bite on my umm, it was magical.

Just the hope that I will see you again keeps my heart beating fast, and I understand having butterflies in my stomach. Thank you for sending the photograph. I have it in a frame beside my bed and I see it first thing in the morning and the last thing before bed.

I look forward to getting your next letter.

Sincerely, Colin.

~~~~~

Cara stared at the old, beat-up dresser. "What am I supposed to do with this pile of junk?" The thick layer of dust was a testament to the many years it sat in her mother's basement. Nicks and scratches covered the top to the point it seemed beyond help. Oh, sure, the hand-me-down was appreciated, considering the few pieces of furniture Cara had for her new apartment, but the old six-drawer appeared ready for the burn pile.

"The bottom drawer doesn't even close," Ginny muttered. "Seriously, Cara, just scrap the thing."

She rolled her eyes at her petite best friend and roommate. "It was my great-grandmother's, dummy. I can't just toss it. Mom would never forgive me." She knelt down and pushed on the bottom drawer, but it didn't budge. "I think it's stuck on something."

Ginny crouched next to her, then pulled the drawer free and set it aside. "Check it out," she grumbled, as they both peered into the opening. "Looks like a stack of bills," she uttered, reaching an arm inside the dark space. "I...I can't quite reach it."

Cara nudged her friend's shoulder. "Move, let me try."

She snorted and sat back. "You and your freakishly long arms."

“Whatever.” She stuck her arm into the opening and felt around. “Got it,” Cara exclaimed before yanking the pile free. Now, in the noonday sun, she realized it wasn’t some meaningless bunch of forgotten bills. “Letters,” she murmured, staring at the pink satin ribbon wrapped around the fragile bundle. As if it were keeping the writer’s words safe. “Wow, these things are ancient.”

Ginny leaned close and whispered, “Your great-gram?”

“Probably,” Cara replied, loosening the ribbon and carefully lifting the top one from the stack. “Return to Sender,” she read aloud. “From Maddie O’Hare.”

“Whoa, wonder why they were returned,” her friend mused. “Do we read them?”

Did she dare? Cara wasn’t sure. It felt wrong. “I mean, they were hidden. Obviously meant to be private.”

Ginny tapped a shiny red fingertip on top of the pile. “But they were written decades ago. What can it hurt now?”

“I suppose that’s true,” Cara replied, before carefully opening the yellowed paper and reading the long-forgotten words.

My Sweet Colin,

I wish I could tell you that things have been wonderful. That my life is full of happiness and love. But that would be a lie. Mum has been worse than ever. Her fits are beginning to frighten me. She got out the switch today and came at Briona something fierce. I tried to shield her, she’s my baby sister, but Mum wasn’t having it. By the time it was over Bri had welts everywhere. It’s always dreadful when Da’s away. He keeps her stable. But he’s putting in double shifts at the mill just to make ends meet so he’s away a lot.

All I want to do is glimpse into your handsome blue eyes and feel your strong arms around me, holding me tight. I always feel safe with you, Colin. If I had one wish it would be to go away with you and never look back. We could travel together. Wouldn’t that be wonderful? See the world and live every day as if it’s our last. I would give anything to kiss you right now. To feel your lips against mine. What a gift that would be!

I fear that may never happen. That it’ll always be a far-off dream. After all, how can I ever leave Briona? She’s only ten years old and I worry what Mum would do to her if I wasn’t here to protect her. Please tell me that it won’t always be this way. That a day will come when this is all just a bad memory. My heart already belongs to you, Colin, and I know that someday we’ll be together again. Until then I will dream only of you, my love.

Yours forever,

Maddie

Cara blinked away tears. “Wow,” she sighed. “That’s intense.”

“Seriously,” Ginny agreed, rubbing her chin. “And Colin sounds hot.” She frowned and stared at the entry. “But who is he?”

Ginny quirked a brow at her. “Uh, your great-grandfather?”

“Nope,” she answered, thinking of the handsome Colin and his hold on the young, uber-romantic Maddie O’Hare.

Ginny’s eyes lit up. “Oooh, a mystery!”

Cara wasn’t quite as excited. After all, mysteries didn’t always lead to happy endings.

Chapter Two

Dearest Maddie,

I have read your letter over and over and wish there was something I could do to help you. Your family has so many things going on that I worry it will affect you in a bad way. You are a brave and protective big sister. Over time others will see you as I do.

One day I believe we will meet up in our special place. Under that tree overlooking the fields of gold. It's something I long for and it keeps me pushing forward. Someday it will happen, it has to.

I too have been struggling with things here. From the constant chaos, the uprising of the farmers to the government trying to take our homeland away. Farming, and taking care of the daily chores, and dealing with greedy men trying to steal what my family built.

After the famine and hundreds of our friends and neighbors migrated to America, my family line was fragmented and weak. But we stayed to hold what was ours. At times this fight makes me weary and if I could sell the land at a fair price, I would move to you in a heartbeat. Maybe buy some land and a farm. Someplace to raise a family.

Being trapped here so far away makes me feel helpless and my longing for you grows by the minute. That was the only time I truly felt peace. Simply sitting and holding your small hand in mine calmed and soothed my soul. Even now as I write this letter, I am slowly finding my inner peace.

I look forward to your next letter,

Sincerely, Your Colin.

~~~~~

“So, I have no idea who Colin is, but I can tell you that she’s not writing to my great-granddad. His name was James.”

“I can’t help but feel sorry for her. She sounds so sad,” Ginny said in a low voice. “And her mom sounds horrible.”

“Yeah.” Cara walked over to the bed and sat on the edge. “The weird thing is, I don’t remember anyone named Briona. I don’t remember my great-grandma having a sister.”

Ginny moved to sit next to her, then nudged her chin. “Read another one. I feel like we need to know more.”

“Me too,” she agreed, setting the first letter aside and picking up the next.

My Sweet Colin,

Briona is awfully sick, but Mum won't take her to town. She says Doc Roberts won't help because we're Irish. I know the things the townsfolk say about us. Calling us disgusting names behind our backs. Refusing to let us shop in their stores. Still, it's been days and Briona isn't getting any better. If anything she's worse. And Da's been gone for over a week. I know if he was here, he'd take Briona and make the doctor help. I just don't know what to do. If only you were here. I miss you so! I'd sweep up my baby sister and leave this place with you. I wouldn't have to worry about Mum's fits.

You and I could find a little plot of land and build a home. How beautiful it'd be too. We could farm the land, and maybe buy a few animals. Oh, I'm not naïve, it'd be a hard life, but we'd be together. Working until sundown and making love until sunup. I'd give anything to have your babies and raise them with love and kindness. I can see it so clearly in my mind and I know someday it'll happen. We'll be together again, my darling. It'll be everything I ever imagined. I won't give up on you. Our love will endure, and I know you'll come for me. I promise to be strong. For you.

Love forever,

Maddie

Cara gently placed the letter in her lap and tucked a lock of hair behind her hair. “This is going to sound strange, I know, but I feel like *I'm* writing these words. I can so clearly see it in my mind.”

“Well, you were related. There's bound to be some similarities between you two, right?”

“I suppose.” She picked up another letter and turned it over. A slip of paper fell out, landing on the hardwood floor between her feet. She bent and picked it up. It was a black-and-white image of her great-grandmother. She looked to be in her teens. Her hair was swept into a bun at the top of her head, and she wore a floral dress that reached just below her knees. She had her arm around a young girl at her side, sporting a big toothy smile and pigtails.

Ginny leaned closer. “Who are they?”

“My great-grandmother,” she answered, then tapped the photo. “And this must be Briona.”

Ginny snatched the picture from her and let out a low curse. “Geez, Cara, you look just like your gram.”

Cara frowned, then attempted to see what her friend was seeing. “You think?”

She bobbed her head. “Same eyes, same smile. You have her cleft chin too.” Ginny shrugged. “Put your hair in a bun and you could be her twin.”

A lump of emotion clogged her throat. God, Ginny was right. And the knowledge left her speechless.

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Maddie,

Your letters always bring a smile. Sounds like the Americas treat us Irish the same no matter where we are. Your family needing care is bad enough, yet they treat you as less than a person because you are an immigrant from another country.

Part of the reasons we fight for our freedom is to be the same and travel away from our homeland to make a new life. It is what I am building here to sell and move there so we can have a start and something that is ours.

The plowing season is coming soon, and the crops will bring us more money. I am stashing as much as I can away. Soon, things will change.

I did re-read the part about making love until sunrise. That would be heaven. I know when we did join together it was the first time for each of us. I cherish the memory and wish it never ended but we couldn't let others know or our reputations would be ruined, your family may have shunned you and everything would have been different.

But feeling your body, your hair, and every move we made as one, makes my heart ache to be with you again and again.

Someday my dream to belong with you will come true.

Until then,

Your Loving Colin

Chapter Three

Cara bit at her lower lip, unsure how she felt about the letters. Her great-grandmother seemed so overwhelmed. An abusive mother and a sick sister would be bad enough, but dealing with it all while fighting off bigotry would push anyone over the edge. And amid all the turmoil she was in love with a man she couldn't be with. How awful would that be? Ginny nudged her shoulder, gaining her attention. Jeez, she'd all but forgotten her friend.

Ginny offered her a smile. "You look lost in thought. Having second thoughts about reading these?" she asked, tapping the stack of envelopes.

Was she? "No," she answered honestly. "I just feel bad for her."

"Maybe things get better," Ginny offered. "Let's read the next one."

She glanced over at her bedside table and noticed the time on her alarm clock. Five in the evening. "It's getting late. Didn't you have plans with Jason?"

"I texted him a little bit ago and canceled." Her face turned red. "I'm too invested in this hot-and-heavy love affair your great-grams was having to go to some boring restaurant and eat fried fish and chips."

"Okay, but don't blame me if he gets mad at you."

She snorted. "Jason could care less," she grouched. "The Lakers are playing."

Cara nodded, then picked up the next letter. "Here's hoping there's good news for once."

"Seriously." Ginny crossed her fingers. "The poor lady needs a break."

She gently pulled back the fragile paper and began to read:

My Colin,

Da has returned! I've never been more grateful to see him. He was so angry when he saw Briona. He had a terrible row with Mum about it. He put his foot down and ordered Mum to take Briona to town. We leave in the morning and Da will be with us. No one would dare give us a hard time with him around. They're all too afraid of him. Doc will have to see us. Still, I'm worried. I've never seen Bri so bad off. She barely managed beef broth today. Nothing seems to stay down either. She's lost so much weight, and it frightens me. The trip to town is nearly two hours of rough road. I've sent up a thousand prayers for her recovery. I only hope God is listening.

I wish you were with me, my love. I can endure anything when I'm in your arms. When you hold me tight the world falls away and I feel so light and free. But truly I understand why you need to stay. You have so many responsibilities and you aren't the type of person to dodge them. Your sense of honor is one of the reasons I love you so. That you put others first before your own needs makes me love you all the more. I wish I could be by your side. To help you. I would gladly fight your battles with you. We make each other stronger. I believe that in my heart. Mum says love is a weakness, but I think she's wrong. Love is everything. You are my everything.

Until I can hold you close once again,

Maddie

Tears filled Cara's eyes, dripping unchecked onto the paper, smearing the ink. She quickly swiped them away with the back of her hand and folded the letter. "I've never loved anyone like Maddie loves Colin. Never. The last guy I dated cheated on me with that cashier from Grab N' Go. Talk about humiliating. I drive five miles out of my way just to get a candy bar now."

"I don't think I have either." Ginny sighed, then crossed her legs underneath her on the bed. "I mean, Jason is fun, and he fills the time, but we aren't exactly the ride-or-die couple, ya know?"

That surprised Cara. "I thought you and Jason were pretty tight."

"Eh, I think we're both just happy to be out of the dating scene. It's exhausting."

"Dating?" Cara complained. "Who has the time? Sixty-plus hours at the office every week is a surefire way to destroy a social life."

Ginny bobbed her head. "Preach it, sister. My mom keeps asking me when I'm going to give her grandkids. I just turned twenty-four, for crying out loud!"

Cara started to voice her complaints about her own mom, then stopped herself. Thinking of her great-grandmother's struggles made her realize how silly she was being. "God, look at us whining." She waved the letter in the air for emphasis. "This lady had real life and death crap she was dealing with."

"Hey, you O'Hare women are tough as nails," she teased. "And you definitely got her genes."

Cara smiled, enjoying the notion that there was a little of Maddie's blood in her. And that maybe, just maybe her own version of the handsome Colin was waiting to welcome her with open arms. If Maddie could hold out hope, then so could she.

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Ewan wasn't one to get all mushy, emotional, or attached to things. But as he read and relived some of Colin's letters, he actually felt the need to just keep on reading. It was becoming sort of mental drug and he was getting addicted.

In reality? He was alone. All his relationships had ended with the standard *'It's not you it's me'* lines. A few months of talk, dinners, movies, Netflix and chill, sex, and awkward goodbyes, had become his standard routine.

His heart did long for more. He wanted to have breakfast dates where they could wake up in the morning. Pajamas were the only attire other than the woman wearing his 80's rock band concert shirts, panties optional, and he'd wear his Cookie Monster underwear and furry slippers.

Thoughts of it made him smile and long for what his great-grandpa felt. Colin had definitely known who he wanted, that was the best part, but getting together had been their struggle. He took a swig of his beer and opened another letter to find out what happened next.

Maddie,

I'm sorry to hear about your sister's illness. I know how much she means to you. I'll pray for a speedy recovery. As time passes, I see my dream of us together fading away. Between everything in life causing chaos and turmoil, the easiest of things becomes a hard task

One day I can see us inseparable. Waking as one, going places together, the people in our circle jealous of how we can't stay apart or keep our glances and touches apart for even a moment in time.

I will make it known to all that you belong to me. Your love sets me free from the confines of having to act and talk a certain way. I won't hide the fact you make me feel alive. We will be the symbol of happiness and joy for others to look at and aspire to.

These thoughts and dreams are what I long for. They keep me striving for more.

But for now, I have to follow my duties here, protecting my home and all that I have struggled to keep.

Money is a constant issue, and I don't want to uproot my situation and come there, not knowing what is waiting for me. I want to have something to start our journey together with and not just be getting by, but having a place to plant roots into as our own. I will never be a burden, and want to be successful and sweep you off your feet, fading into the sunset with you in my arms.

You are always in my heart and even though many don't believe in love at first sight or the idea of a soul mate, I truly feel I found mine.

Sincerely,

Colin

~~~~~

“Should we read another?” Cara asked, feeling as if she were keeping her friend from a romantic evening with her boyfriend. “Are you sure you wouldn't rather be with Jason?”

“Are you joking?” Ginny replied, shoving her shoulder. “I'm too invested to stop now. Jason can wait.”

Cara laughed, then picked up the next in the pile. “Here's hoping things got better for Briona.” Her friend frowned. “Seriously. Poor Briona.”

My Sweet Colin,

It's been days since we brought Briona to visit Doc, and it didn't go well. Mum had been drinking and she was as belligerent as ever. At first, Doc refused to even see Briona, then Da threatened him. No one goes against Da. The prognosis isn't good, I'm afraid. Doc gave us some medicine, but Da says it's nothing but snake oil. What if he's right? It doesn't seem to have done a lick of good! All we can do now is hope Briona is strong enough to fight. I try to comfort her as best I can. I tell her stories until she falls asleep. She used to love my wild tales of adventure, but now she barely smiles. I'd give anything to see one of Bri's smiles again.

The long summer days aren't helping her ailment either. The heat is nearly unbearable. With each passing moment I think of you. I imagine what you're doing and if your heart reaches for mine. Do you stare up at the sky and imagine my face? Colin, if magic were real, I'd snap my fingers and bring you across time and space to be by my side. Is that silly? A young girl's fantasy, I suspect. Mum doesn't know about the letters you send me. I hope that doesn't upset you, but I just know she'd burn them if she knew. So, I hide them under the floorboard in my room. I could never live without your letters, Colin. You are the bright light at the end of a very long tunnel. And I don't want to live without you.

When we see each other again I'll wrap my arms around you and never let go. I'll sink into your kisses as if they are life itself. Thinking of your warm caress and the delicious way your eyes devour my body keeps me awake long into the night. You and I are meant to be, my darling. One day we'll look back at these harrowing days and know that our fight was worth it. Ours is the kind of love that stands the test of time.

Love always,

Maddie

Cara placed the letter aside, then let out a heavy sigh. "I'm starting to see why I never heard of a Briona in the family."

Ginny pointed toward the letter. "It's not looking good for her, huh?"

"No." Her gut clenched. "God, I can't imagine it. Her mother is all but useless. My great-grandmother was forced to be the parent."

"No kidding. I'm mad on her behalf," Ginny grumbled. "And I feel so lucky, ya know?"

"What do you mean?"

She shrugged. "These days we'd take antibiotics and zap! All better."

"True. I'm guessing it was even tougher for them because they were poor. And Irish."

Ginny shot from the bed and threw her arms in the air. "Prejudice of any kind sucks balls."

"Agreed." Cara couldn't even begin to imagine what sort of things her great-grandmother had endured. And all because they were from a foreign land.

Ginny bent and picked up one of the letters, then waved it in the air. "You know, I've been thinking about this Colin guy."

Her friend was onto something. She could see it in the way her eyes sparkled with mischief. "Uh, okay..."

“Maybe we should look him up on the internet,” she suggested, holding up her phone for emphasis. “Could catch a break and find him, right?”

“It can’t hurt,” Cara replied, curious what the mysterious man looked like. “Do it.”

Ginny typed the name into the search bar, then cursed. “Uh, there’s only about a gazillion Colin McGregor.”

“Of course.” An idea began to take root. “Seems to me like we need more information.”

Ginny grinned. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“My mom,” she blurted. “I doubt she knows anything about these letters or the mysterious Colin, but it can’t hurt to ask.”

Ginny clapped her hands together. “Go for it!”

Twenty minutes later the slim, red-haired Grace O’Hare stood in Cara’s bedroom wearing a pair of black leggings and a matching workout top. Her long, shiny curls pulled up in a ponytail. Evidence that she’d just come from the gym. She stared at the stack of letters littering the bed, then asked, “and you found these hidden in the dresser? The one I gave you?”

“Yeah.” Cara gathered the envelopes, only the ones they’d read, then handed them over. “Tucked way back in.”

“Colin, you say,” she mumbled, clutching them tighter, her gaze narrowing. “I do remember a Colin.”

“Really?” Cara asked, surprised by the answer. She didn’t truly believe her mom would know anything about Maddie O’Hare’s past love interests.

She nodded. “Grammy used to tell stories about a cute Irish boy she once knew. His name was Colin, I’m sure of it.” She shrugged. “I thought they were just silly tales she made up to entertain me.”

She snorted. “Oh, trust me, Colin is real. And she was head-over-heels for the guy.”

“And what happened to him?” Her mom asked. “Also, how did she end up with Gramps?”

Cara bent and tapped the stack of remaining letters. “Maybe the answer is here.”

Her mom grinned. “I’ll make the coffee.”

Had she heard right? “Wait, you’re staying?”

“Where do you think you get your nosey streak from, girl?” she replied, then left the room.

Ginny snickered. “She’s got you there, buddy.”

Cara had the insane urge to push both of them out the door. She wanted to be alone with the letters. Alone with the past. Alone with Colin. She wasn’t going to get her wish though. Apparently, that *too* was an O’Hare women trait.

Chapter Four

Ewan spent most days digging through boxes and boxes of paperwork and miscellaneous newspapers, and luckily found his second collection of vintage Penthouse magazines that he had spent a couple of hours with, reading the interesting articles. Just the articles.

As the day wound down, he realized he was weary. In a lot of ways, he was remembering his father, both the good and the bad. He would find photos of his mom and of his childhood growing up. While he dwelled on all the past, he began to understand how much he had missed. Rushing to move and go to college to run away wasn't the best thing to do.

Even though he was successful in his career, his personal life had suffered. Now he was almost the last link to his past. He should have stayed to help his dad while his mom suffered from cancer. And he should have made more of an effort to be there when his father asked.

Harry Chapin was right when he sang "Cat's in the Cradle." We grow up to be a lot like our parents. Ewan was basically a mirror image of his father.

So he looked forward to the escape offered by the letters from his Great-Grandfather, and read through the struggles he faced at that time. It was always work, money, security, and taking care of others instead of finding a reason to be happy.

Every letter had a longer gap between dates. It was as if time was speeding by too fast and the dream he wanted was fading away.

Ewan wanted to see Colin find and follow the dream he held on to during an era of such uncertainty. If that happened, the perhaps *he* could get a flicker of that hope and magic, and find someone that ignited his life and soul as well.

He turned off the lights except the one next to the recliner, and had a nice fire burning. The beer his dad had in the fridge was a family favorite and he remembered how much he liked it.

Opening the next letter, he began to fall into his quiet place to relax and read.

Maddie,

Live your life, follow your dreams, and never forget there is someone that holds you in their heart. Our lives didn't turn out the way we wanted or expected. Like when we met and shared something bordering on magic. You were an angel, and in the time we had I was taken away from everything to a place where there was only you.

I don't talk much and as I've gotten older and seen so many families ripped apart by war, hunger, loss of spirit, and just time, I realize the more important things are things we can't put a price on.

Family, laughter, peace, and yes, love. I haven't had too many of these true joys.

I want you to find your peace. Have a family, find love. You deserve all that and so much more. You may have already but I want you to experience life to the fullest.

My only request is now and then, send me a letter, send a photo, and let me know you are well. You will always be my true love and a reason for me to go on. You are like a star, I can't touch you, but I always admire your light and how you make me feel.

*As always,
Your Colin*

Ewan blinked, and sat up in his chair, staring at the letter. "What the *fuck?*"

He understood letting her go to live her life, and not wanting to stand in her way. If he truly couldn't be there for her, he was doing the right thing.

But in his head, he heard his own screams. "*What an idiot?*"

He was giving up on a true gift from above. She was everything he had ever wanted yet he couldn't take the risk of going after it? Not only was she beautiful, kind, smart, and had a heart of gold, she was a redhead. Those don't come along as often as you might think.

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My Sweet Colin,

Today was difficult. I buried my beautiful sister. She's been in such pain for so long and now she's at peace. I feel lost now. My reason for staying here in this awful town was Briona. Not one person came to pay their respects. It was only Da, Mum, and I. Mum was sober for once, but of course she hit the bottle the minute we got back home. She's been in bed ever since. Da hasn't said a word. He just sits on the porch and stares at the field. I would leave this place now if I could. Just pack a bag and leave forever. But where would that leave Da? He'd be so lost. I think as long as we're together we'll get through this. I just have this awful feeling that if I leave now, then Da will give up on living. There'd be no reason anymore. Mum has made it clear how she feels. The bottle is all that matters to her. Not me and surely not Da.

Colin, I never want a marriage like theirs. I know that what you and I have is sweet and beautiful. Theirs is bitter and ugly. But I don't know how we'll be together. You have obligations that you can't walk away from. And I would never ask that of you. I fell in love with you because of your sense of honor. And now that Briona is gone, I'm worried for Da. I'm not giving up on us, my love. I just don't know what to do. I can't put my own happiness before Da's. What sort of daughter would I be? I could never live with myself.

Always thinking of you,

Maddie

Cara looked up from the letter. The tears shining in her mom's eyes mirrored her own. "It's like Briona was erased from the family tree," Cara said, voicing her thoughts aloud. "It's so sad."

Her mom sighed, then reached over and clutched her hand. "I think sometimes people can't face the pain. Losing a child, a sister, I just can't imagine it. Maybe the pain is buried so deep that it's almost as if it were a terrible nightmare, ya know? That's the only thing I can think of to explain why Grammy never mentioned a sister. I don't think Mom knew about her either."

"Am I the only one here that wants to smack Maddie's mother?" Ginny asked, her brows scrunched into an angry frown. "I know she's your family, but wow."

"Yeah, she sounds totally useless," Cara replied. "I just want to hug my great-grandma. What she went through. God, it's so awful."

"And she had to be the parent," Her mom added. "Had to step up and take care of her mom and dad both. Forsaking her own needs."

Yeah," Ginny sighed.

Her mom shot to her feet. "Come on, it's time for bed. We need a good night's sleep. We can pick up on the letters first thing tomorrow."

Right on cue, Ginny yawned. "I'm pretty wiped."

Cara nodded, then scooped the letters into a pile and placed them on the nightstand. "Enough is enough for one day."

Her mom hugged her, then Ginny. "I'll bring bagels and we'll dig into this a little more." She tilted her head to one side, then said, "Also, I'll reach out to your grams and see if she knows anything about this mysterious Colin."

"You think she was told about him?"

"Well, Grammy told me about him, but I thought it was all a fairy tale. So, maybe Mom knows more."

"An address would be super helpful," Ginny chimed in.

"Doubtful, but never hurts to try."

After her mom left, Ginny shuffled off to her room, leaving Cara alone with her thoughts. She peered down at the letters, tempted to grab the next one, but resisted. Barely. She headed to the bathroom and cleaned her face. Her nighttime routine helped center her. By the time she slipped into her nightshirt and got under the covers, she was barely able to keep her eyes open. Flipping off the light, Cara's mind instantly went to Colin and Maddie. Two people so in love that it'd brought actual tears. If two people were destined to be together...and yet tragedy had torn them apart. It was so unfair. And it left Cara feeling hopeless. Would she ever find anything even remotely close? Or would she be like her great-grandmother, forced to settle?

That question kept her awake most of the night.

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Cara looked at the time on the microwave. Seven in the morning. She yawned for the hundredth time, then popped a coffee pod in the receptacle and pushed the brew button. She heard a low curse behind her and turned to find Ginny shuffling into the kitchen. Her hair a wild mess and still wearing her puppy print pajamas. “Rough night?”

“I couldn’t sleep.” She dropped into the nearest chair. “Grab me one of those too, will ya?”

“Coming right up.” Cara took two mugs from the cupboard and placed them next to the coffee pot. “I kept thinking about those letters. Think I finally fell asleep around three.”

“Same here.” Ginny reached across the table and snagged one of the letters from the stack. “How many are left?”

“One.” Cara poured Ginny a cup, then placed it in front of her roomie. “Just waiting on Mom. She’s on her way.”

“My guess is the last letter will have us all in tears.”

“Because she was forced to walk away from the love of her life,” Cara surmised, as she got out the bottle of caramel-flavored creamer and poured a healthy portion into her coffee. She took the chair opposite Ginny. “I wonder if Mom found anything out.”

A loud knock had them both shooting out of their chairs. Ginny got to the door first, flinging it wide. “Did you find out anything?” she blurted out, as curiosity got the best of her.

Her mom laughed, then nudged Ginny aside and entered the kitchen carrying a pink box. “The bagel shop was closed so I got donuts instead,” she explained, placing it on the table. “And yes, I did get a few answers.”

“Really?” Cara asked, flipping the box open and snagging one of the glazed treats.

“Mom said Colin McGregor lived in Adare, Ireland.”

“Is that all she knew about him?” Ginny asked around a mouthful of doughy goodness.

Her mom smiled at them. “Nope. She also said his middle name was Ronin.”

Cara clapped her hands together. “We have a full name and a location! I bet we can find him with that, don’t you?”

Her mom patted her on the back. “And an age. He was two years older than Grams. So, he was born in 1927.”

“Wow,” Ginny softly exclaimed. “Maybe he’s not even alive anymore.”

“Maybe.” Her mom pointed at the letters. “Did you read more of them?”

Cara dropped her donut onto the table, then swiped her hands on her jeans. “There’s only one left. We waited for you.”

Her mom pulled out a chair and sat. “Let’s see what happened between those two love birds.”

Cara nodded, then took the seat next to her mother, before picking up the worn paper. She began to read the faded words aloud.

My darling Colin,

I’m sure by now you’ve realized I chose to let you go. It’s the hardest decision of my life, but I know I must make it. Da rarely smiles these days. Briona’s death has left a hole in my family. The crops are failing because of

the drought, and I've taken up work. Washing and cleaning for the folks in town. It's hard, miserable work but the money helps. I won't abandon Da, not now when he needs me the most.

I wish you and I could've made it work. I wish fate would've been kinder. I'll always love you, Colin. Always think of you. You said you want me to find happiness. I want that for you as well. In my mind, I imagine a little boy with your dark hair and the same sweet smile. It should've been me giving you children, my love. Watching you become a father would've been a joy. I'm afraid there are just too many things standing in our way. Still, it'd give me such peace to hear from you. To know you, even from a distance, would get me through these dark days.

The bench where we met is how I'll always remember you. You stood near that giant oak tree with a handsome grin on your face and my heart nearly stopped. At that moment our souls connected. I truly believe that that connection can never be broken. Time and distance can never tear you from me. Our love took root there and it will always be the most wonderful time of my life.

Forever yours,

Maddie

Cara carefully set the letter face down on the table. "So, that's it," she said, hoarse with emotion. "She stayed behind to take care of her family. Er, what was left of it."

Her mom leaned closer and wrapped a comforting hand around Cara's forearm. "She sacrificed so much but look how things turned out. She lived a full, happy life. That's something, right?"

Ginny frowned and leaned close. "What's that on the back?"

Cara followed her friend's line of sight and saw two words in the right-hand corner. "Fairhaven, Virginia," she read. "What does it mean?"

"That's not where Grams grew up," her mom explained. "Never heard Mom talk about Fairhaven either."

The plot thickens, she thought to herself. "Could it be where she met Colin? The special place she mentions in the letter?"

"Maybe," her mom replied. "It's what...two hours south of here?"

Cara's heart sped up as she picked up her phone and checked the map. "Closer even. More like an hour and a half." She bit her lip as an idea began to take shape in her mind. "I wonder—"

"I know that look," Ginny grumbled, swatting her on the arm. "You want to go there, don't you?"

She shrugged, then slowly got to her feet. "Kind of, yeah."

Her mom smiled. "I have the day off. I could go with you."

"Me too," Ginny chimed in. "Girl's trip?"

"Uh, actually, I feel like I need to do this alone." As the pair began to argue with her, Cara held a hand in the air to stop them. "Please, I can't explain it."

Her mom glanced over at Ginny, then they both let out heavy sighs. Her mom pointed a finger at her. “You don’t know where to go? Fairhaven isn’t that big, but still. All you have to go on is a tree and a bench.”

Cara rolled her eyes at her mom’s protests. “I’m not expecting to find anything. I just want to go there. To see the place that made her so happy.”

“The place she found her soulmate,” Ginny added in a soft faraway voice. “It’s bound to look a lot different, Cara. It’s been like a hundred years.”

Attempting to stay calm and not smack her best friend, Cara said, “Obviously. It’s not about that. I just feel connected to this whole thing somehow. Like she wanted me to find these letters. And she wants me to take this trip.”

Her mom cursed low. “Fine, but you’ll inform us the minute you get there. I’ll worry until I hear from you. Got it, young lady?”

“Of course,” she answered, pulling both women in for a hug. “Thanks for understanding.”

Chapter Five

Ewan was feeling more torn. The letters seemed to be getting less frequent and his great-grandfather's life was not ending up the way he was wanting. The reunion of the two of them always seemed to be interrupted by life, fate, or just the dreaded passage of time.

The expectations of the time had weighed on him. Have a job, get married, have six or seven kids, carry on the family name, then retire and die. Do that, and pay taxes.

The things from the letters became more familiar with the stories he heard from his grandfather about his upbringing. He had just not realized this part of the family's past. Especially knowing he was in love with another woman.

He was curious about her because she sounded amazing. She had to be pretty hot too. Considering he'd waited so long and stayed dedicated to her. Nowadays such things were so fast.

Two people meet on Saturday night, go out, watch Netflix and chill, get freaky, and then it's Tuesday.

Ewan could actually feel his great-grandfather's pain of losing this woman. They say time heals all wounds but obviously the years spent building what he did had kept him away from what he loved most—Maddie.

The sacrifices he'd made, in the hopes of finding his most precious chance to be happy, all faded into the abyss because they just couldn't get together again.

He looked at the last envelope in the stack. Stamped across the top in red ink he saw it read "Return to Sender".

Dearest Maddie,

It has been a long time and I have decided to take a trip out to the States. My family and I sold our land and want to have a new start in Virginia. I hear America is a land of opportunity and a place where dreams come true. Since most of my dreams always took a back seat to life's turmoil, I decided to take a leap of faith and move my family out there.

My fondest memory of America is—and always has been—the time I spent with you. It may have been a short stay, but it was one of the only times I was truly happy. That is why I am moving to be closer to where we were at that time.

I want my sons to reach for the stars and succeed where I didn't. You were always on my mind and a star above me that I looked to for guidance and for direction in some of my darkest times. My wife Olivia passed after a severe case of polio and I raised my sons alone. I never remarried. Losing both loves in my life wasn't something I wanted to go through again.

Things didn't work out for us, but I had some good fortune and wanted to share it with the people that helped me understand the ups and downs of life. Those that shared love with me and helped me understand the feelings of loss.

Near our tree I am going to bury a small box filled with items that I treasure and things that can help you if you fall on hardships. It's the least I can do for your loyalty to me and showing me the true meaning of love. It's under our bench. Beneath where we used to sit and look up at the stars.

Always yours,

Colin

Ewan rested the letter on his leg. He really wasn't sure how he felt about it. He sipped his beer and stared into the fire and re-read the letter again.

He wondered what his great-grandpa had buried by that bench. Was it a suitcase full of money? Maybe a family heirloom? Hell, it could be an old hairbrush and a pair of lace underwear for all he knew.

Either way, he was curious. He'd invested so much time reading and learning about his family's past. What should he do?

The train ride wasn't the best and would only take a couple of hours. He didn't feel like driving, and he could get some online work done at the same time. The ticket attendant kept flirting with him asking if he'd like some free nuts. The attendant was a nice guy but still, he wasn't in a great mood from all the stops. People getting off and on, smelling bad, and the couple across the aisle were arguing about who forgot to pack the hair products and sex toys.

Still, he decided to finish what he started and was determined to see it to the end, and if he found the treasure he would give it to the family of Maddie. It's what Colin would want, and he wasn't sure that the letters ever got to her since it was stamped, Return to Sender.

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He rented a car, and a hotel room close to the park, so he could take an actual vacation for a couple of days.

Ewan followed the directions and walked to where the map had led him. He looked up and saw a majestic tree on a hill. It was off to the side of the green lawns, and in a lot of ways looked out of place. Maybe because of its size and history they had left it there for people to take advantage of the shade it offered, and the view.

Walking up the hill he saw a path covered with rocks and flowers outlining the sides. It reminded him of a nostalgic Norman Rockwell painting.

He looked back down at his map and when he glanced back up, he saw the bench and a woman reading. He couldn't really dig up a treasure chest next to the tree with someone sitting there but wanted to find the spot.

In reality he was wondering if he should bring an eyepatch and a wooden peg so he could do his best Captain Jack Sparrow impersonation. He could say he was looking for buried treasure; he already had a weakness for rum.

As he walked up the path a clearing opened wide onto green grass with the bench and the tree trunk almost in the middle. The shade from the massive canopy kept the area cool, and the breeze rustled through the branches making the tree creak a little. It was beautiful, and he took in a deep breath as he let it all flow into his mind. At last he saw what great-grandpa Colin had seen in this place.

He turned, and the woman on the bench looked up from her book.

Green eyes, red shades in her hair, all the warning signs that she could be trouble for him. If there was ever a woman put together from all his weaknesses, this was the one. He couldn't ask about tattoos or being able to tie a cherry stem with her tongue, but you never knew what fate might bring.

Smiling, he walked over to the tree. In spite of its grandeur, he saw a lot of carvings in the bark. He remembered reading that Colin had carved some during his first encounter with Maddie.

Circling around, he saw a lot of cuts and pen scribbles in the aged surface. Something drew his hand up, and under a few stray leaves he saw a flattened spot. It had a heart and the letters "CM and MO" inside it, along with what resembled an arrow between the letters.

"Oh, my God." A female voice startled Ewan. "You found it. I've been looking for that for a long time."

Ewan turned and saw the redheaded beauty staring at him. His heart fluttered, and he wanted to reply with a charming comment or something dazzling. "Uhh, ubauba...umm, yes. It must be the G spot, ha, ha."

Hoping she wouldn't run screaming as he sat down on the bench, Ewan felt a little awkward. He had just been hit with the double whammy of not only a redhead, but someone that made his body tingle with a simple look into her eyes.

He wasn't sure if it was her, or the train ride, or the stop at the Philly cheese steak and onion rings truck. As good as it tasted, that weird thousand island flavored sauce made him worry.

"How did you know about the carving?" he asked.

With a slight smile she reached down and put her brown leather satchel on her lap. Opening it, she pulled out the letters. "My great-grandmother Maddie."

After all this time, Ewan had a connection. *Jackpot*, he thought. *I just hit the lottery.*

"Wow, my great-grandfather's name was Colin." He paused in a state of shock. "Does this mean we're both kind of a part of each other's history?"

She smiled. "Yeah, I guess we are."

He caught himself staring at her again. "I'm sorry, how rude of me. My name is Ewan, Ewan McGregor."

"Isn't that the same name as..."

"Yes, I know, the famous actor. Sorry, no relation." Shaking his head, he continued. "It never fails, you know. Having the same name as someone famous. I just wish I had his talent, money, and good looks."

“Well, you do have the good looks, but I’m not sure about the other things. I’m Cara, by the way.”

Ewan smiled after she called him good-looking. A definite step in the right direction. “It’s a good thing we both came here at the same time. I would have never known anything about your great-grandmother.”

Pausing he remembered the picture. “I have something you might like. It was in my great grandfather's desk.”

He took out the worn, old photograph he found. “I never really knew what he had gone through. He was always so private, according to my dad and grandpa. I never met him, but after reading over all the letters and things he sent, in a way I feel like I know him now and it makes sense.”

She turned and smiled. “What do you mean?”

“You look a lot like her. I can see why my great-grandfather was so taken by her beauty. Umm, I should shut up now. My brain-to-mouth filter is off. I apologize.”

“It’s okay,” she said in a soft voice, a smile lifting her lips. She began to explain how she’d discovered the letters and even as Ewan sat listening to her talk, he couldn’t help but feel he knew her. Like she was someone from his past. Reading all his great-grandpa’s letters had given him a very personal insight into her family. He knew about their past, and his mind was still all fixated on her red hair and green eyes.

That awkward learning curve when getting to know someone was gone. He was a man, and certain things were a distraction. Like her body, the way she moved, the curve of her lips as she smiled. Damn, he was getting distracted again.

Ewan ran a hand over his face. “So, in the last letter he left behind he pointed to this tree. Or more specifically the bench.”

“Because it’s where they met,” she replied. “Where they fell in love.”

He chuckled. “I know, but there’s more.” He paused before adding, “Cara, he left something behind.”

Her eyes widened. “He did? Like a keepsake?” Her gaze searched the ground. “You think he buried it?”

“Yes. Seems like something he’d do,” he answered, leaning down to get into his backpack. He pulled out a garden tool set with hand shovels, trowels, and a small pick made for digging. “Grabbed this at a little hardware shop near here.”

“Good for you” she praised. “I wouldn’t have thought of that.”

“I admit, it’s not likely we’ll find it. Not after all these years.”

“Hey, can’t hurt to try.” Cara got to her knees and began feeling along the ground. “Besides, you already bought the tools, might as well use them.”

Ewan couldn’t help noticing the way people stared at them. Almost as if they’d never seen anyone searching for buried treasure before. But Cara appeared totally unfazed by the attention. Maybe she was only humoring him, but Ewan was still glad to have her on his side. “We’re going to get to the bottom of this. For Colin and Maddie.”

“Agreed,” she whispered back, before pressing her hands to the ground. Together they got to work. She ran her palms along the soft grass and among the flowers growing next to the bench, while Ewan used the trowel to dig deeper. After about twenty minutes, Ewan was beginning to think the search was futile. Then as he shoved the hand shovel really deep into the dirt, he felt it hit something. They both froze at the slight clunk from the trowel.

“It could be nothing,” he warned her, crouching to sit on her left side. “A rock or some random piece of junk.”

“Fingers crossed,” she offered, before digging at the soft earth with her fingernails. “There goes my manicure.”

“Wait.” Ewan placed a hand over hers. “I’ve got more tools here.”

She stopped, then held up her dirty hands. “Now you tell me,” she teased him.

“Sorry.” He took it out and flipped it open.

Amongst all the dirt scattered on the cement walkway, a few hapless flowers got dug up in their mad pursuit. Finally, Ewan struck something hard again. They locked their eyes for a moment, before getting to work uncovering their hidden treasure.

Cara peered closer. “It’s a box, I think.”

“Yeah.” Ewan tugged it free, then placed it on the ground in front of them. About ten inches in length and four inches wide. Rusted from time, but the words on the front were still legible. Ewan read them aloud:

COLIN AND MADDIE. TOGETHER FOREVER

Cara sighed. “Wow, he loved her so much.”

“They loved each other,” he corrected her, then tapped on the clasp holding the lid closed. “Ready?”

“So ready,” she replied with her heart in her throat.

“What if it’s empty?” They sat on the bench, dirty, and thought for a second.

“Will you just open it?” she shoved his shoulder.

As he opened the box he saw red velvet. It was the lining inside of the box. The lid fell open and they both smiled as they looked inside. There were notes, a few rocks, old photos, even one of Colin and Maddie together smiling, and a small black bag. Ewan picked up the bag and opened the small tassels. Inside he found a ring. Not just any ring, but a silver band laced with diamonds and one large diamond stone in the crown.

“Wow, that’s a big one.”

Ewan smiled, “That’s what she said.”

Cara glared at him, trying not to laugh. “Typical male comment.”

“Couldn’t resist.” He grinned. “Here, please hold this.” Ewan handed her the ring, then saw there was a note in the bag. Pulling it out he read it aloud.

Dearest Maddie,

As I waited for the right time and opportunity to come back for you, I went to a jeweler I knew and had this specially designed. This was to be your ring from me. Something to represent my love and my commitment to you.

At the time it was made it cost quite a bit but over time it became priceless. I never sold it or even thought about getting rid of it. These trinkets, photos, memories, and receipts were from our times together. It was my link to us. The ring belongs to you. I made it for you and was going to ask for your hand with it.

It is worth a lot of money so if you find yourself in need, you can sell it.

I couldn't part with it because it was my heart's wish to give it to you, but life never gave me that wish to come true. I'm not sure how much longer I'll be around but wanted you to have a part of me that I never gave up on. I never stopped loving you, you were my true soul mate. If not in this life, maybe in the next. But somehow, we were meant to be.

All my love,

Colin

Ewan stared at the letter. This was his great-grandfather's last wish. For Maddie to have this. He needed to think so he closed the box and took a deep breath.

Looking up he saw Cara with a crooked smile and tears in her eyes.

He heard other sniffles and turned to see a small crowd had gathered around where they were. A police officer stepped up to the bench, smiled, and handed Colin a piece of paper. He opened it and blinked a couple of times. "A *ticket*? For what?"

"Look at this mess, you destroyed private property and made a damn mess. Clean it up and maybe I'll make it a warning instead." The cop was pointing at the dirt and flowers scattered around.

After cleaning up the area and replanting the flowers, Ewan felt the need to talk to Cara. But not here. Somewhere they could be alone.

"How about dinner?" he asked, in a weird rush of words that made him feel like an idiot. If she turned him down, he really couldn't blame her. Hell, he'd turn himself down.

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Cara tilted her head to one side, contemplating the idea. "We don't even know each other," she answered, feeling as if she needed to insert some reasoning into the situation.

"True," Ewan agreed, his voice deep and rough. "But dinner seems like a good place to start, right?"

She should turn him down. Offer a polite thank you and leave. She'd gotten what she came for. The truth. The end of the story. But there was just something about Ewan. Something she couldn't put a finger on. And she found herself saying yes.

Ewan smiled. "There's got to be an Italian place near here."

"Sounds great to me." She placed a hand on her stomach. "Fair warning, I'm starved. I won't be the type of date that orders a salad."

“Good, my kind of woman.” Then he remembered, he didn’t know anything about this place. Thank goodness he had Google Maps and Yelp reviews to help. “Um, follow me.”

She nodded, then proceeded to stare at his backside. The man filled out a pair of jeans nicely. When they reached their cars, Cara slid in behind the wheel and took a deep breath. “You can do this,” she mumbled to the quiet interior. “He’s just a nice guy. Colin’s great-grandson. You have a common interest and it’ll be a great time to hear the other part of the story. Take advantage of it.”

Cara put her car in gear and followed Colin out of the parking lot. After what seemed like a crazy drive around the city, they reached the restaurant, Ewan pulled up near the front, leaving her a spot next to him. He got out and jogged around the back of the car, then helped her from the car. Ah, a gentleman, a woman could get used to a guy like that.

Once inside, a burst of cool air brought her temperature down a few notches. As the hostess led the way through the crowded restaurant, Cara turned back to Ewan and whispered, “I hope they have cannelloni. Might be my favorite dish ever.”

When they reached their table, Ewan held her chair for her and murmured, “Lasagna for me. My mom always made the best. Feels wrong to order it in a restaurant. But I’m hungry so why not?”

They sat across from each other near the back, large ferns and plants hid them from most of the other customers. A soft Dean Martin tune came over the speaker, setting a romantic scene. Cara’s heart sped up, nearly drowning out the simple romantic beauty of the moment. It’d been so long since she’d enjoyed a meal with a member of the opposite sex in any kind of romantic way.

Though Cara had guy friends, friendship couldn’t replace her need for intimacy. Tender touches and warm kisses—she hadn’t realized how much she missed those things.

“So, our great-grandparents,” he started. “Quite a story, huh?”

Man, he was sexy. Cara’s mind blanked as she gazed at him. In the muted light, his slight smile lit her on fire. His five o’clock shadow only added to his dark, masculine appeal. If she were bold like Ginny, she’d reach out and stroke his firm jaw. Too bad she wasn’t. He was so damn good-looking, and she really wanted to touch him. All over. For hours.

“Cara?”

“Oh, yes, it’s sad, don’t you think?” she breathed out. Lordy, even when she’d dated Freddie she hadn’t been this excited. This distracted. Thinking of Freddie and looking at Ewan, she knew there was no comparison. Freddie had been a weasel. And though she’d only just met Ewan she had a feeling he was the type of guy a woman could go the long haul with. Besides hadn’t she been stagnant long enough?

“I never knew my great-granddad was even capable of that kind of love. Until I read those letters.”

“I brought them with me,” she confessed. “I don’t know why.”

“I brought mine too.” His gaze darkened. “We could read each other’s if you want. After dinner, I mean.”

With just a hint of an ornery smile playing at the corners of Ewan’s lips, Cara had a feeling he was the sort of man who lived life to its fullest. Did she dare go down this road with him? After all, it hadn’t worked out for Maddie. She’d loved a McGregor and it’d lead to heartbreak. Still, while she watched him across the table, his hand wrapped around the water glass, Cara began to let down her defenses. Ewan was like a juicy treat sitting on the edge of the short table, and she was the hungry pet about to throw caution to the wind.

“Hey, Cara, what are you thinking?”

“Thinking?”

His eyes deepened. “You look lost in thought.”

She waved his words away. “No, it’s just...never mind.” She took a deep breath, then let it out. “I would love to read your letters.”

He nodded, then the waitress came and took their orders. Soon, they were diving into their meals. Ewan had gone for the ravioli, while she’d gotten the cannelloni. It was delicious. “How is it?” Ewan asked, pointing a fork toward her plate.

“Amazing,” she admitted, taking a sip of her diet cola. “So, you mentioned that you were entrusted with your great-grandfather’s estate.”

He nodded. “It’s been a lot of work. A bit of an emotional rollercoaster, but finding the letters made it more enjoyable.”

“Ewan, I’m so sorry for your loss.”

He glanced down, then pushed his plate away. “I’ve had time to process. Remembering the good times helps.”

“My grandmother died a few years ago. A stroke. It was sudden. I guess I’m glad she didn’t suffer from a long, drawn-out illness. Then when my dad passed, I inherited the house. Kind of tired with my family getting smaller, ya know?”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

The pain, still fresh in his voice, tore at her. Cara reached across the table and placed her hand over his. When he turned his palm up and twined his fingers with hers, the air around them changed, heated. Her comforting gesture had quickly morphed into something much more, much deeper.

Trying to act nonchalant, Cara slipped her hand from his and took a giant gulp of her soda.

The waitress arrived, asking if they wanted dessert. Stuffed, Cara started to refuse, then Ewan spoke up before she could get the words out.

“What do you have in the way of chocolate?”

The waitress’ eyes lit up. “Our chocolate lava cake is yummy.”

“We’ll have that,” Ewan replied, winking at her.

“Wait, *we*?”

He leaned closer, then murmured, “You wouldn’t force me to eat it by myself, surely.”

“I’m full,” she hedged. Her stomach grumbled, calling her bluff. “My hips can’t afford the calories. You’re on your own.”

His gaze traveled south, down her body, then back up again. “You sure I can’t talk you into a few bites of ooey-gooley chocolate?”

She laughed and caved. “Who am I to refuse ooey-gooley?”

He winked. “You only live once, right?”

All or nothing. Cara had never been that type of person. She was beginning to see the appeal.

Chapter Six

As they drove to his hotel, Ewan had to grip the steering wheel to keep his hands from reaching toward Cara. Damn, it'd been hell watching her eat the chocolate cake. The little sounds of satisfaction she made after each bite had his mind going straight to the gutter.

He took his eyes off the road long enough to see her stroking the smooth leather seat with a fingertip. Hell, Ewan wanted that finger on him. Any part of him. She wiggled as if attempting to get more comfortable. The movement made her pretty breasts jiggle beneath her black tank top. To keep from drooling, Ewan focused on the road again. When he spotted his hotel up ahead, he pulled into the lot, then killed the engine. He turned toward her. "We're here."

"Are you sure my car will be safe at the restaurant?" she asked. "What if it's towed?"

"We'll get it before the place closes, promise." His gaze roamed over her before adding, "I've been dying to kiss you."

Her gaze widened. "You have?"

"Since the moment I saw you sitting on that bench," he admitted. "I feel—"

"Connected," she finished for him, her chest rising and falling with her fast breaths. "I've felt it too."

"I can't explain it," he replied, reaching for her hand, and holding it tight. "Not sure I want to. At least not right now."

Her gaze sharpened, staring at him as if she could see right through him. "What do you want?"

"That's a loaded question. I want you," he groaned.

She bit her lip and looked down at her lap. "We're strangers, Ewan. Our families are connected, but *we* aren't. Not really."

He lifted a palm to her hair, stroking the red silky strands. "It doesn't feel that way to me. I feel as if I've known you my whole life. Sometimes things happen for a reason. You know, fate."

"That makes no sense," she blurted, closing her eyes tight. "But...I feel it too," she muttered, as if at war with herself. "Still, I'm not a reckless person."

"Neither am I, but walking away from you right now seems like a much bigger mistake."

She reached for him, stroking his thigh, and turning him on further. "I don't want to go back to my hotel and wonder what could've been."

"That would suck," he murmured, leaning toward her. When his lips were mere inches from hers, Ewan went for broke. "I've been telling myself all evening to give you a sweet kiss at your car, then drive off. But all I can think about right now is getting a taste of you."

"Kiss me then," she urged, "let's see what happens."

"I love the way you think." His lips covered hers, and his brain shut down.

Her tender lips were warm and inviting as he coasted his tongue over her. She sighed and parted for him. Taking his time, Ewan slipped inside and tasted her as if he had forever. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him in deeper, as if edgy for everything. He knew the feeling.

A groan rumbled from deep inside his chest. He palmed her breast through the soft material of her tank, eager to feel her without anything in his way. Flesh to flesh. He caressed his thumb over her nipple, feeling it harden for him. Cara whimpered, and Ewan lifted his head, his gaze zeroing in on the center console.

“Yeah, we’ve gone as far as we can in this rental car. We’re not teenagers anymore.”

Cara’s face turned a pretty shade of pink and she began to smooth her shaky hands down her tank top. “You’re right.”

His strong hand cupped her chin and coaxed her gaze back to his. “Maybe we should go upstairs?” He paused, then looked into her eyes. “You having second thoughts?”

Her hesitation only lasted a moment. “No,” she breathed out. “No second thoughts.”

He smiled. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Out of the car, Ewan came around to her side at an embarrassing speed. His nerves were shot. Energy pulsed through his veins. Within minutes, they were cocooned in the privacy of his suite.

But Ewan had no reservations, not if the need in his eyes and the upward tilt of his lips were any indication. He locked the door and moved toward her. As he came to stand only inches away, he murmured, “Don’t be afraid. I won’t bite. Much.”

Hearing his deep, masculine voice, so calm and relaxed, caused her own confidence to rise. “I’m not afraid. Well, maybe I’m a little afraid,” Cara confirmed as she stared up at him.

He closed the space between them and took her into the warm, solid comfort of his arms. “I thought as much, but you don’t have to be.” He brushed his lips over the top of her head. The gentleness of his bare touch stirred her clear to her toes.

Cara pushed out of his arms, gripped the hem of her tank, then yanked it over her head. She dropped it on the floor. Her bra went next. She left her shorts on and stood perfectly still, resisting the urge to cringe and cover herself while his dark gaze roamed greedily over her torso.

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“Damn.” Ewan couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe. She was perfect. She was his dream woman and then some. Her breasts were large, firm, pillows that he wanted to play with for a decade or so. He ached to taste the rosy tips. Lick and bite and suck until his heart’s content.

His hand reached out of its own volition and stroked over one turgid peak. She shivered, and he was lost. He stepped forward and wrapped an arm around her lower back and drew her up against his chest, pressing against his T-shirt, driving himself crazy with the feel of her all along his body. As he took possession of her mouth, Ewan lost all sense of calm as her sweet flavor hit his mouth.

He drank in her moan of excitement and licked at her full lower lip. He’d thought about tasting her. Everywhere. Imagined it from the moment he’d laid eyes on her. Now Cara was here, in his arms, clutching at him with eager abandonment.

His brain was filled with kinky thoughts and twisted perversions he had read about in an S.L. Carpenter book a while back. Slow down, stay calm, think of baseball, or something. Last thing you need is an accident. Or to act like some sex-crazed wierdo.

He wouldn’t disappoint her. He would stroke and play, satisfy her in every which way he could think of to satisfy a woman. And he could think of a lot of ways.

Ewan groaned against her mouth, wanting to savor every second with her. He took advantage of the kiss, slipping into the wet warmth, tasting their chocolate dessert, and swirling his tongue over and around hers, sipping at her with a kind of crazy fever that went beyond anything he’d ever felt.

When she whimpered and drew her arms around his neck Ewan felt the last thread on his control snap.

Keeping his lips firmly against hers, Ewan bent and hooked his arm behind her knees. Lifting her into his arms, he cradled her nude upper body close. He wanted her completely bare. He wanted to see all of her, from head to toe, so he could work his tongue over her, inch by slow delectable inch.

As Ewan laid her out on the quilt and broke the kiss, he snagged her gaze. The warm green shade had changed once again. Now they were dark, almost the shade of milk chocolate, and he could easily drown in their unruly depths. His jaw locked against the need to rip her shorts and panties down her legs and take her. Hard. Fast. To hell with being gentle.

He smoothed his palm over his hair and made one last attempt to take it slow, to make it good for Cara. As he watched, she licked her lips and shifted restlessly on the bed. The taut peaks of her nipples begged to be nibbled on. Her long, dark hair, the stuff of fantasies, spread out all around her, tucked beneath and partially covering at the same time. Ewan loved looking at her, but he was going to enjoy touching her even more.

He grasped at the edges of his shirt and pulled it off. Then he moved to the waistband of his jeans, thrilled at the eager way Cara stared in wide-eyed readiness at his fly.

Before he gave in to her silent pleas, he softly demanded, "Take off your shorts. Real slow. Make me beg for it."

Cara slipped a single finger beneath either side of her black drawstring shorts and tugged. She wiggled, and the shorts slithered downward, baring a pair of white cotton bikini panties with black polka dots all over them. *Yum*. When she had the shorts down around her ankles, she kicked her foot outward, and they fell to the floor.

Ewan's muscles tightened as he stood frozen, staring. "Christ, Cara, you're so fucking sexy. I'm dying just looking at you."

"Now you, Ewan." Her words feathered over him, bringing him out of his hypnotic stupor. "Let me see you."

He made quick work of his clothes, and was hard as a knife for her already but wanted to explore her with his mouth and tongue first.

Crawling onto the bed he was above her, then lowered his head toward her breasts. He took one nipple into his mouth and suckled. His tongue swirled the areola with greedy delight. She gasped and arched against him. He wrapped his arm around her back and lifted her, pressing her heavy breasts against his face while he toyed with the hard raspberry tip. She cried out his name, and Ewan pulled away long enough to tease her other breast with the same avid attention. Her fingers slid over his head and her lower body squirmed, as if close to coming. She moaned his name.

Ewan released her nipple. He gently kissed the delicate bud before lifting his head. "Sweet as honey."

"Ewan, please," she begged.

He smiled down at her. "You want more, huh?"

"I want you," she confessed.

"Yeah?"

She covered her eyes with the palm of her hand. "I-I can't think straight."

Ewan pulled her hand away and waited until her pretty eyes were looking at him before saying, "You're so sexy like this." Ewan touched her nipple, plucking and flicking the sensitive flesh. He

turned his attention to the other, stroking lightly, eliciting another moan from her. He let his fingers travel a scorching path down her belly to her dark ringlets.

Cara grabbed his hand and clutched it against her wet mound. “More. Please, I need so much more, Ewan.”

He moved down the bed, leaving tiny kisses along the sides of her breasts, her ribcage, then her belly got extra attention. She had the cutest belly button he’d ever seen. He groaned as he came to the notch between her legs. Ewan inhaled, taking her tangy scent inside his body for all time.

“Mmm, this is the dessert I really wanted.” It was the last thing Ewan uttered before he spread her legs wide. He stared at her pussy and his cock throbbed wanting to be buried within her. But he wanted to taste her sweet nectar like a peach and laved her with his greedy tongue.

He placed his lips against her clit and kissed the swollen and sensitive bit of flesh. A primitive growl reverberated inside his chest at the way her body started to move against his face. When he parted her with his fingers and sank his tongue deep into her slick opening, Cara practically thrust him right off the bed.

Christ, she was so fucking responsive. The sudden, burning thought of another man doing this to her had him nearly snarling. Ewan had never felt such a powerful mix of tenderness and possessiveness over a woman.

Ewan began sliding his tongue in and out of her, slowly, building her pleasure by small degrees, then he used his thumb to stroke over her soft clitoris. He licked and nibbled, plying her flesh until all too quickly she screamed and clutched his scalp, anchoring him to her as she rode out a wild climax.

When she came back down to earth, Ewan lifted himself off the bed and moved to grab a condom. He needed to bury himself in her. When he unzipped his suitcase, Cara roused herself enough to look at him. Her drowsy gaze tracked his every move. Ewan grabbed a handful of foil packets and went back to stand beside the bed. He smiled down at her and watched Cara’s expression change from that of lazy cat to aroused woman. His throat closed with some unnamed emotion.

He smiled and read the writing on the wrapper. “Ribbed for her pleasure”.

He tossed the packets onto the nightstand, his muscles rigid as he realized Cara’s entire concentration was on him fumbling and rolling the condom over his shaft. Ewan held back the need to pounce on top of her, finesse be damned.

Ewan clutched her hips in one hand and guided his hard length to her slick opening. Careful not to hurt her, he eased inside her a few inches, then stopped. Her moans tore at his control.

“Oh, God, you feel so good. I want it all.” Reaching down she pulled him into her until their bodies were one.

His chest swelled at the confession. “Holy, damn you are so tight.”

She threw her head back, shiny red hair cascading down her back. As she reached a hand over his back, her nails dragged up his spine as she moaned loud with pleasure, his thoughts scattered. “Christ, Cara.”

It was the sort of pleasure/pain that sent a man into another dimension. All Ewan needed, all he craved, was hot, liquid satisfaction. His *and* Cara’s.

He thrust into her with one powerful stroke, filling her again. She cried out his name, and it was music to his ears. He started to move, a gentle rhythm at first, then faster. Cara met him thrust for thrust. Ewan lowered his body over hers, covering her smaller frame with his own. He caged her in,

holding her to him as he pushed in and out. Hard and fast. Slow and tender. He played and tormented them both with the maddening tempo.

He touched her neck with his tongue and found a particularly sensitive spot that caused Cara to lay her head to the side, giving him better access. Ewan sucked at her sensitive skin, marking her. Her inner muscles clutched him like a fiery fist as her body spun out of control.

Ewan wrapped his hand loosely around her neck in a dominating hold as she came loud and long for him. Only him. No other. The unsettling thought came out of nowhere. When Cara quieted and slumped against the bed, Ewan released her neck and thrust deep, practically driving her into the mattress. His balls drew up close as he shouted her name.

“God, yes, come for me, Ewan,” she groaned beneath him.

Her quiet demand did him in. He lifted her hips, then pushed into her snug entrance once more, fusing them together irrevocably. He exploded, warm jets of come filling the condom.

Ewan collapsed on top of her, careful not to crush her. As he swept her sweat-soaked hair off her cheek and kissed her, peace stole through him.

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Cara’s muscles burned. Good Lord, she’d never had sex like what she’d just experienced with Ewan. She felt a bit guilty for thinking such a traitorous thought, but it was true, nonetheless. Sex in the past had been enjoyable, even wild sometimes. But Ewan had just given her a taste of something sizzling and exciting. She could so easily become addicted to the delicious man.

She forced herself to come back to reality. Ewan was a stranger. Soon he’d go back to his life in Ireland, and she’d have to get on with hers. Like Maddie had to walk away from Colin. Cara let out a breath. She simply wasn’t cut out for impulsive flings. When Ewan started to slip out of her, she instantly chilled. Already she wanted him buried deep again.

“Um, I’ll be right back.”

She turned and sat up in time to see him enter the bathroom. A large, curving tattoo covered his right shoulder blade. She was too far away to see what the intricate design was, but the ink on Ewan was sexy.

As she stood and started to pick up her discarded—and now very crinkled clothing—Ewan came back into the room. He looked at the clothes she clutched in her hand and frowned.

“Going somewhere?”

A mere two words, but they were enough to make her body respond with a rush of liquid fire. Cara straightened her spine and pulled on her tank, trying to appear relaxed, as if she dressed in front of a naked man every day.

“I need to go to my car. I can’t...I can’t leave it there.”

“Your car is safe.” Ewan crossed the room and stroked a finger down her cheek. “You know, I was sort of hoping you’d stay.”

Cara couldn’t seem to focus on his words. His gentle caress was simply too distracting. “Huh?”

All his concentration seemed to be on the finger moving from her cheek to her lower lip, he murmured, “I thought maybe you could stay the night. All I need is a Red Bull and a sandwich and

we can spend the rest of the evening, well, you know.” His voice lowered an octave. “Knowing all I have to do is reach out and you’re there.”

Cara struggled to stay on track. “You really want that?”

“I do,” he murmured. “We have something together, Cara.”

“That’s what worries me. This is not like me. I don’t have sex with strangers. I don’t do this sort of thing, Ewan.”

“And neither do I,” he replied. “But you aren’t a stranger to me. It’s like I’ve known you my entire life, which is really messed up, I know, but that’s the way it feels.”

“It wasn’t just sex,” she admitted. “I’m scared here, okay?”

“Don’t be afraid. Let’s just relax in bed. Let me hold you. We can work the rest out tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” she reiterated.

“Promise,” Ewan said, tugging her to the bed. Pressed against her back, one arm around her middle holding her close, Ewan whispered, “I think we were meant to find each other.”

“Fate,” she surmised. “You’re talking about fate.”

“Maybe,” he sighed. “Too many things had to line up for us to meet at that bench on the same day, same time. Don’t you think?”

“I think I’m tired,” she muttered. “And I can’t think straight when I’m tired.”

He pressed a kiss to the back of her head. “I’ll just lay here and look at you then.”

With a snicker she climbed back into the bed and lay on her tummy, resting her head on Ewan’s chest. It was a comfort for her. But also a way to think things through. “Goodnight, Ewan.” She said the words, but there would be no sleep. No gentle kiss when she woke in Ewan’s arms. No, she needed to get the hell out of dodge. Jesus, when had she fallen into a guy’s arms so fast? Never! What sorcery did the McGregor men hold over the O’Hare women anyway? It was magic. Had to be.

After another insane round of sex that resembled a woman riding on a bucking bronco until she fell off, Cara waited until she heard Ewan snoring before she slipped from the bed.

She gathered up her clothes and purse, then headed for the adjoining bathroom. She quietly shut the door, then flipped on the light, nearly screaming at the image staring back at her in the mirror. Hair stuck out all over the place. Smearred mascara and eyeshadow made her resemble a raccoon.

“Get it together, woman,” she scolded her reflection. First things first, Cara needed to order a ride to her car.

Next, she texted her mother. That out of the way, Cara dressed, then exited the bathroom and tiptoed from the hotel room. The last thing going through her mind was Ewan snored. And why was that adorable?

Tears ran down her cheeks by the time she was safely inside her car and heading down the highway. Would she ever see him again? Would she ever feel his arms around her, feel his kiss against her lips?

“Damn it, Maddie O’Hare, just what did you get me into anyway?”

Chapter Seven

“So, you slept with him?” Ginny croaked, staring at Cara as if she’d lost her mind.

Cara’s face turned beet red. She could feel the heat coming off. “Uh, yes, but you can stop with the shock any day now. I feel horrible enough.”

Ginny shot from the couch and glared down at her, fists on her hips like a scolding parent. “And what about STDs?” She flung her arms in the air. “Christ, Cara, he could’ve been a serial killer or some kind of con artist.”

“I know!” She forced herself to calm down. Ginny was upset and rightfully so. “First of all, he wore a condom both times. Second, it’s not as if I’m not kicking myself here, okay?”

Her friend let out a frustrated grumble, then plopped back onto the couch, tucking her feet under her. “Both times? Talk. From the beginning.”

“It’s like I said. I’d found the place my great-grandmother talked about in the letters. I saw their initials carved on the tree. The area is a park now. Sort of has a local history of lovers carving their letters on the bench and all that. A clerk at little carryout was telling me about it. That’s how I found it.” She took a breath, then said, “Anyway, I was sitting there, feeling all sorts of emotions, and then Ewan shows up. He introduced himself and we talked. “I was sort of in awe half the time. Just trying to figure out how we both ended up at the same bench on the same day.”

Ginny frowned. “Yeah, how did that happen? That’s way too much of a coincidence for me.”

“His great-grandfather passed away recently, and it fell on him to take care of his estate. Turns out Ewan found a similar stack of letters. Only his showed a map, leading him to the tree.”

“And you believed him? What makes you think he wasn’t lying or just telling you what you want to hear to get in your pants?”

“First off, he looked exactly the way my great-grandmother described Colin in her letters. Second, he showed me the stack of letters. Not to mention, he knew where to dig to find that box of keepsakes.”

Ginny whistled low. “Oh, My God, what are the odds that he shows up at the same time as you?”

Her heart sped up, thinking of Ewan and the way it felt to be in his arms. “Ginny, I know this all sounds nuts, but I swear I feel as if I was meant to meet him. I feel like my great-grams wanted Ewan and me to—”

“Do the nasty in his hotel room?” She quirked a sarcastic brow. “Doubtful, Cara.”

“No, dummy, not that,” Cara bit out. “It’s just...if feels like fate, I guess.”

“Riiiiight. So, after you two finished boinking, did you talk?”

Cara glanced away, unable to look her friend in the eyes. “I left. While he slept.”

“Oh, damn!”

“I know!” Cara shouted, feeling tears stinging her eyes. “I feel horrible, but everything happened so fast, and I sort of freaked out.”

Ginny leaned closer and patted her on the thigh. “Okay, relax, it’ll be fine,” she soothed. “Did you two exchange numbers?”

“We didn’t get around to that.”

“Do you want to see him again?” Ginny asked. “Or is he out of your system now?”

She slumped into the couch cushion. “Well, I can tell you he’s not out of my system,” she answered, feeling miserable. “I can’t stop thinking about him.”

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” Ginny gently replied. “I’ve honestly never seen you this way.”

“It sucks. I’m not a spontaneous sort of person. I don’t make rash decisions. And I don’t believe in love at first sight.”

“And yet that’s exactly what seems to be happening.”

“It’s like reading those letters unlocked something inside me. I blame my great-grandmother. Her big, romantic heart infected me somehow.”

Ginny chuckled. “I’m not sure that’s how it works, but whatever. The question now is, are you going to let him leave town without talking to him?”

“You think I should go back to the hotel?”

“I can’t believe I’m suggesting this, but I think you need to face him. In the light of day. Find out if you have feelings or if it was just the sex talking.”

Cara mulled over her friend’s idea. Did she dare go to him? It could all blow up in her face. She’d end up looking like some idiot. “He could be gone already.” Sure, it was a lame attempt at dodging her true feelings, but panic was beginning to set in.

“Or he could be asleep still. One way to find out.”

She bit her lower lip, worried she’d only be adding to her mistake. “And if he kicks me to the curb?”

Ginny started to speak, but the doorbell interrupted whatever comeback she had at the ready. “Your mom?”

“Maybe,” Cara answered, getting to her feet, and heading toward the door. “Probably wants to know how it went.” She crossed the room and two strides, then pulled the door wide. The sight that greeted her sent her stomach into a tailspin and all the blood rushed from her face. Dark hair, lean, muscular body in a pair of faded jeans and a black t-shirt. And the kind of smile that could get a girl to do all sorts of things. In his left hand was the box they’d dug up together. Still coated with dirt.

“Ewan,” Cara blurted out. “How...”

“I googled you,” he explained in a low, sexy voice that affected her in very indecent ways. “Mind if I come in?”

“Uh, sure,” she answered. Questions bombarded her brain. Top of the list: *What the hell was Ewan doing at her apartment?* He looked her over and quirked a brow. “Uh, I like the cats.”

Cara glanced down at herself. Crap. She’d forgotten she wore her kitty cat pajama pants and her white tank top with no bra. “I, uh, wasn’t expecting company,” she grumbled, holding the door in a death-grip, then moving to let him enter. “What are you doing here?”

“You left,” he growled, as he moved into the room. His gaze strayed toward Ginny. “Hi. I’m Ewan.”

Ginny grinned. “Wow, you’re cute.”

“Ginny!” Cara’s face heated at her friend’s compliment.

Her friend laughed. “Sorry, but it’s true.”

Ewan smiled. “Thank you. I wonder if I could get a few minutes alone with Cara?”

“We don’t need to be alone,” Cara interjected, attempting to ignore the note of jealousy at the way Ginny stared at Ewan. Like he was a fresh steak off the grill and she a starving stray.

“I need to get to work anyway,” Ginny announced, getting to her feet and walking toward them. She hugged her tight, then whispered, “Call me later. I’ll be on pins and needles.”

“Gee, thanks for the support,” she muttered. Cara wanted to keep Ginny close, like a lifeline. She forced herself to let her friend go, then turned and stared at Ewan.

Alone with the gorgeous hottie, Cara turned and muttered, “I’m sorry for the way I left. That wasn’t cool.”

“I admit, I didn’t see that coming,” Ewan admitted as he moved closer, stalking her like a big, predatory lion. When he reached her, cupping her cheek in his warm palm, he murmured, “I wanted to give you a few days to think. Everything happened so fast, and I’m as freaked out as you. But I found myself searching for your address, then one thing led to another…”

“We had a moment, and it was amazing,” she breathed out, knowing she was close to caving. He looked so delicious with the five o’clock stubble and his hair all messed up. And damn it, he smelled too good. Like sinful nights and warm kisses. “But is it really more than that?”

He stiffened. “You know it is. Admit it. We have something here, Cara.”

She wanted to ask him what that meant, but when he wrapped one arm around her and pulled her close it sort of caught her off guard. She melted against him. “What are you doing?”

His gaze went to her lips. “I missed you the moment I found you gone. I’ve never felt so…empty.”

“We need to talk.” Didn’t they? She was getting disoriented again. Ewan had that effect on her. Cara squirmed out of his hold, then instantly felt cold to the bone. “Just talk.”

“I’m all for talking,” he said, “as long as you don’t run from me again. Give us a chance, Cara.”

She nodded, then led him to the couch. “Want anything to drink? Coffee?”

He shook his head. “You know, I promised myself to never believe all the crazy drama from those romantic comedy movies. Not to fall for cliches. That’s not me. I came out to this part of the country after my dad died to go through his estate, sell the old house, maybe take a nice vacation but then I find those letters and end up in this adventure.” He paused. “I just, I’m dumbfounded. I read the letters and saw how a woman completely swept my great-grandfather away with love at first site. He was done, finished, head over heels. I don’t believe in all that. Then I meet you, and BAM, like a lightning bolt you just stun me. Everything was thrown into a spin and now, I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Ewan was giving her the bold truth and she owed it to him to do the same. Cara took a deep breath and went for broke. “The moment we met my brain shut down. I couldn’t think straight. I wondered if that’s what my great-grandmother felt for Colin and…it scared me. I don’t want to end up heartbroken, Ewan. I’m not as strong as she was. I’m not.”

“Cara, our night in the hotel was, well, umm, you know, fucking amazing. The things you did and being so limber and… I’m getting sidetracked here.” He shook his head. “Now you’re like a drug in my brain that I crave. All the time. It’s almost like we’re reliving the letters, making up for all their lost time.” He reached for her, cupping her cheek in his palm. “This time we have a chance to find out what Colin and Maddie may have been like if they’d made it work.”

Cara wanted it so badly. Wanted Ewan. Still, something held her back. “Doesn’t that scare you though?”

“No. It would scare me to leave here and never see you again,” he answered, his voice sincere. “No matter what, there is something I have to do.” Ewan reached into his bag, then got to the floor on his knees in front of her.

Cara sat there, shock turning her body to stone. “What…” He looked up and handed her a small box. She opened it and saw the large diamond ring that Colin had purchased for Maddie. “Umm, what is this?” Cara couldn’t wrap her mind around it. “Proposing?”

“Not exactly,” he murmured. “My great-grandfather would want you to have this. It was always for your great-grandmother. It’s yours now.”

She swallowed hard. “You’re serious,” she surmised, staring at the precious piece. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything,” he softly replied, getting to his feet before reaching for her and tugging her off the couch and into his arms. “Are we doomed to make the same mistake as them? Or are we going to finish what they started?”

Cara smiled, then dropped the little box onto the couch, ring and all, and wrapped her arms around his neck. “I don’t want to let you go. I want to know what happens when I let my heart take the lead. I want my own dark-haired McGregor to sweep me off my feet. I want my own epic romance story to tell someday.”

“Hell, yeah.” Ewan bent and lifted her into his arms. “Let the adventure begin.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon making love and learning everything about each other. Cara had even shared her great-grandmother’s letters with Ewan. Maybe it was fate that brought her to Ewan. Maybe it was a happy accident. Cara chose to believe that Maddie and Colin had played a part in it though. And that they were smiling down at them even now.

Ewan held her close, then pulled the blanket over them both. “I never would’ve thought a bunch of old love letters could change my life so much.”

Cara snuggled closer. “And to think I nearly tossed that dresser. I never would’ve found the letters if I had.” She peered up at him. “Never would’ve found you.”

He tightened his hold on her. “I would’ve found *you*, Cara.” Ewan pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “You were always meant to be mine.”

Warmth filled her with the intensity behind his words. “I believe that about you too.”

And this, Cara thought with tears in her eyes, was the happy ending that Maddie and Colin had been denied all those years ago.

The End

About S. L. Carpenter

S.L. Carpenter is a born and raised Californian. And yes, he *IS* a guy in case you were wondering. The creative gene got a double whammy when he came along, since in addition to writing wickedly warped stories, he's also the creator of countless magnificent cover art images. Both skills travel comfortably together with him wherever he goes, since not only do readers recognize his name from his off-beat backlist of nearly thirty novels, but writers welcome him as a friend who clothes their 'children' and helps sell their books.

Married to the same wonderful woman for over three decades, and the father of three kids, Scott describes his wife as his "inspiration". High praise indeed, since he's been inspired to write some of the most unique erotic tales, ranging from the misadventures of lustful cavemen to improbable goings-on in outer space. His favorite genre is that of contemporary romance, and in that section, you'll find humor (always), alongside a touch of heartbreak and a strong helping of redemption. And sizzling hot sex, of course. Scott's realistic characters and unusual storylines have helped him develop a voice that stands out from the crowd. He's not afraid to take chances, keep his characters real and deal with things like the aftereffects of burritos during intimate encounters. Yep, that's real!

If you'd like to know more about S.L. Carpenter and his writing, he'd like to invite you to check out the following resources:

His website:

slcarpenter.net (List of books, biography, odds and ends...the usual stuff, but helpful if you're looking for anything in particular)

His Facebook page - find him at SL Carpenter Author

(Feel free to follow him, and enjoy some of the funniest stuff out there.)

Also by S.L. Carpenter

Brush Strokes
(The Muse Series, Book 3)

Craving You

Friend Request

Broken

Suite 69*

Private Moments

Love, Lust and Laughter
(Print anthology)

Word Play
(The Muse Series, Book 1)

Love Notes
(The Muse Series, Book 2)

Desires of the Soul

Desires of the Flesh

Desires of the Heart

Letting You In

Chasing Dreams

Toy Story

Big Book of Lust

Happy Endings*
(*Three novel anthology*)

Feels So Right*
(*Three novel anthology*)

Full Service

Haunted Seductions*

Whole Lotta Love Series*

So Into You*

It's Alive

Big Book of Lust

Hired Help (Working Stiffs Book 1)*

Showing Off*

*Co-written with Sahara Kelly.

Most S.L. Carpenter books can be read for free if you have a Kindle Unlimited Subscription.

About Anne Rainey

International bestselling author Anne Rainey, “wastes no time getting right to the erotic heart” (Publishers Weekly). She is published with Kensington Publishing, Entangled Publishing, and Evernight Publishing. Her books have won numerous awards and have been translated into Italian and German.

In addition, Anne has dipped her toes into self-publishing with her exciting paranormal series: The Zenarians. Anne is from the Midwest and has had a variety of odd careers, including sales associate, nail technician, chiropractic assistant, and restaurant hostess. Her love of books has opened her up to a thrilling career as a romance author. Her stories are filled with passion, love, and the sometimes-exasperating bonds of family.

Visit her at her website: annerainey.com

Also by Anne Rainey

Standalone Titles

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Tempting Grace

Cape May Trilogy

What She Wants

What She Craves

What She Needs

Blackwater Series

Sam's Promise

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Vance's Rules

Reilly's Wildcard

River's Redemption

Man-Maid Series

No Turning Back

No Letting Go

Men of Silverlake Series

Maddox, Book One

Dallas, Book Two, novella

Garrett, Book Three

Rafe, Book Four, novella

Zander, Book Five, novella

Saint's Investigations Series

Mac's Vow, Book One

Jimmy's Oath, Book Two

The Dirty Trilogy

Dirty Deceptions, Book One

Dirty Addiction: Book Two

Dirty Santa: Book Three

Cohen Pass Shifters Series

Loved by the Alpha, Book One

The Zenarians Series

Zar, Book One

Kade, Book Two

Dyre, Book Three

Zadoc, Book Four

Bad Boy Investigations Series

Devil up Close, Book One

Danger up Close, Book Two

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