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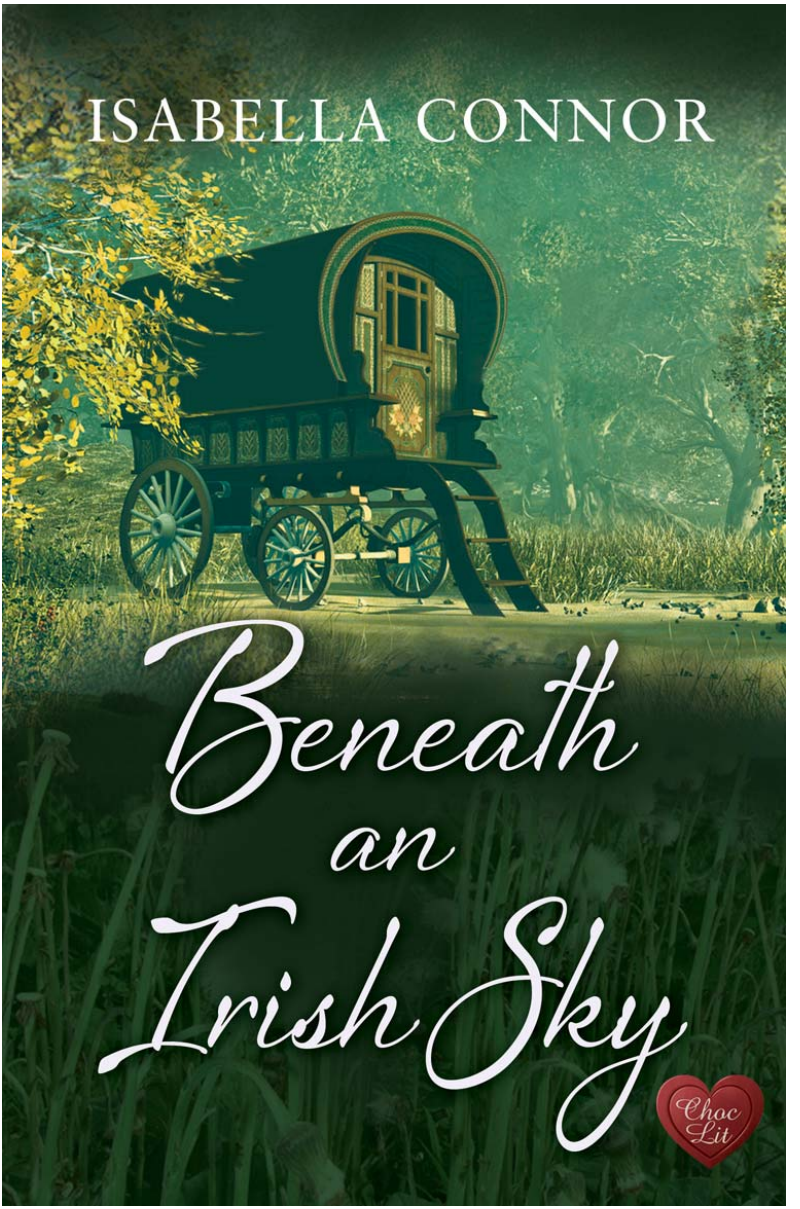
Beneath an Irish Sky

Written by Isabella Connor

Published by Choc Lit

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ISABELLA CONNOR
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Published 2013 by Choc Lit Limited
Penrose House, Crawley Drive, Camberley, Surrey GU15 2AB, UK
www.choc-lit.com

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78189-004-2

Chapter One

'I'm here to identify the body of Annie Kiernan.' It was so long since Jack had spoken her name, the words almost stuck in his throat.

'And you are?'

The Guard was chewing a mouthful of sandwich. Jack caught the faint stink of onion through the gap in the security glass and his stomach turned. He shoved his passport into the tray and watched the police officer leaf through it.

'Are you next of kin?'

'Husband,' Jack replied, for want of a better word.

'Oh – sorry for your loss. Fill out this form, please.'

A paper and pen were pushed into the tray. The pen didn't work, so Jack took the Montblanc from his inside pocket. He pressed the words deep into the paper, a habit from years of signing contracts in triplicate, and passed back the completed paperwork. 'Where do I find the morgue?'

The man shook his head. 'It's in another building – only next door, but there needs to be a Guard with you to record the ID.'

Bloody bureaucracy. Jack would prefer to be alone when he saw Annie. He might do anything. Cry. Even slap her face. Better to have no witnesses to such loss of control.

'You came over from England?' the Guard asked.

'Yes.'

'Your wife lived in Ireland, though?'

'We were separated.'

Was that a flicker of interest? Or pity? That was worse. No one pitied Jack Stewart, least of all some desk sergeant in a crummy Dublin police station. He glanced at his Rolex. 'I'm booked on a return flight at two.'

'Right. Take a seat. Someone will be with you shortly.'

Jack wandered over to the decrepit waiting area with its rows of green plastic seats, where he joined the slouched bodies of the weary and the troubled.

‘Shortly’ was nearly thirty minutes.

‘Jack Stewart?’ A policeman scanned the waiting area.

‘Yes.’

‘I’m Sergeant Flynn.’

A handshake, as if Jack mattered. Christ, when did he become so cynical? But he knew the answer to that one. It was when she left him.

‘Sorry for your loss.’

That platitude again. As if these people had any idea what he and Annie had shared, had lost. Of what he’d suffered because of her.

‘If you’ll come with me. We’ll try to make it as quick as possible.’

Quick. Like her death. Alive one minute, driving her car, thinking of work or shopping or whatever she did these days, and then … gone. Wiped from the roll of the living. It was as much as he knew. As much as the police in Manchester knew. When they’d shown up in his office yesterday, telling him of an accident, he’d panicked and thought of his son, Matt, in Amsterdam on a stag night. That policewoman, oozing compassion, didn’t know Jack had dropped down in his chair with relief, not grief. He’d refused to go to Dublin at first – Annie was firmly in the past – but then the police had pointed out he was still officially her next of kin. It wasn’t until later the shock of having her reintroduced into his life hit him.

Flynn led Jack out of the police station and into the morgue next door. They were directed to a viewing room at the end of a corridor, but before they entered, Flynn said, ‘The desk sergeant told me you and Mrs Stewart were separated. When did you last see her?’

Sod this. Weren’t things bad enough without Jack having to announce his failure as a husband to everyone he met? ‘I last saw her over twenty years ago,’ he said, quietly enough, yet the words seemed to echo down the long empty corridor.

Flynn raised an eyebrow. ‘So there’s a chance you might not recognise her?’

Jack thought about that. Annie would have changed. No longer the young girl he’d married. Forty now. Maybe a few wrinkles, some grey hair. That could be a blessing. Like looking at a stranger. ‘I’ll know her,’ he said, with more certainty than he felt. ‘Let’s get it over with.’

The fluorescent strip lighting in the viewing room was harsh, its relentless blue-white glare attacking every corner. A clock registered almost midday. The body lay in the centre of the room, covered with a sheet. The hairs on the back of Jack’s neck prickled, although he’d seen a dead body before. Just once. An asthma attack had taken his first wife when she was only twenty-four. Jack had cradled Caroline in his arms as if he could will some of his own warmth back into her. His tears had soaked her face and hair, the grief like a knife in his gut. And now his second wife had left him behind, although she’d actually discarded him years before.

‘Ready?’ asked Flynn.

Jack nodded. He was as ready as he’d ever be. The sheet was folded back, and he was looking at a heart-shaped face, wounds prominent on skin the colour of chalk. Dark silky hair, maybe the only part of her alive now. He’d read once about people opening a coffin and finding the corpse’s hair still growing. Annie would be in a coffin soon. In the dark earth. God, he wanted to throw up.

Flynn was at his elbow. ‘Is it …?’

Jack swallowed hard, attempting to make his voice normal. ‘It’s her.’

‘I’ll give you a moment.’

The door closed and Jack was alone with Annie. At least, Annie’s shell. He didn’t touch her. She’d feel like ice, not warm the way he remembered her. Was she watching him? Her spirit floating around, looking down, wondering why he was there? No chance now to find out why she’d left him. The dead don’t talk.

'Why?' His voice surprised him. Thinking out loud. 'Why, Annie?'

The lights hummed, the second hand on the clock moved. Nothing else. No miraculous revelation, no gift of closure. Nothing for him here. Jack pulled the sheet back over the face still as familiar to him as his own, and walked away.

In the next room, Flynn had organised tea. Jack gulped it down, feeling the hot, sweet liquid revive him a bit. Almost done now, then back to Baronsmere and normality.

'Just sign here. It says you've formally identified the body.'

Jack scribbled his name, not even bothering to read the form.

'Do you need the name of an undertaker?' Flynn asked.

'Sorry?'

'I have a list of local undertakers.'

'Why would I need that?'

'Well … for the funeral. We're releasing the body to you.'

'I can't take care of that! I only came here to identify her. I've got to get back to Manchester.'

'The body can't stay here, Mr Stewart.' Flynn spoke slowly, as if explaining something to a child.

'But what am I supposed to do with her?'

'The undertakers can move her to a funeral home. There's one – McBride's – near the hospital, which would be practical. They'll help you arrange the burial.'

Arrangements. Paperwork. Phone calls. Red tape. This was ridiculous. And why was a location near the hospital 'practical'?

'She has other family,' Jack protested. 'What about them?' Was he the only relative here? That seemed more than a bit strange given Travellers' strong family connections.

Flynn consulted his paperwork but shook his head. 'The car was registered to Joseph Kiernan, but no one seems to know where he is. He and his brother work away a lot, apparently.'

Useless bastards her brothers were, anyway. No-hopers, who

never forgave Annie for marrying an outsider. 'And there's no one else?' Jack asked, not really wanting the answer. Even now, he preferred not to think about Annie in another relationship.

'Her father's dead, according to neighbours. Your son might be able to tell you where other relatives are.'

How the hell would Matt know that? Just how incompetent were these people? 'What are you talking about? My son hasn't seen Annie since he was four.'

Flynn flicked back through his paperwork. 'Your son, Luke, was in the car with your wife when the accident happened. He's in St Aidan's Hospital.'

Jack shouldn't have been surprised, but it still rankled that Annie had found happiness with someone else – started a family, even used the name they'd planned for their own son. His hand curled into a fist in his lap. 'No one told me she had a son,' he said, his voice hard. 'So why haven't you contacted the father, her … partner?' The Traveller. The one she'd shacked up with after leaving him and returning to her own people. 'He should be taking care of all this.'

'There is no partner, as far as we're aware,' Flynn told him. 'The birth certificate identifies her son as Luke Stewart, although he appears to be using the name Kiernan now, and you're named as his father. I'm sorry, I thought the Manchester police explained this to you.'

'How old is he?' Jack asked.

'Twenty.'

The walls of the room seemed to close in. Not enough air. Jack closed his eyes. A son he never knew about! Not possible. Why would Annie do that? It was monstrous. Cruel. If she weren't already dead, he'd probably have killed her.

'You okay?' Flynn poured more tea, but Jack couldn't drink it.

'He's not my son.'

'But the birth certificate …'

'It's not true.'

Flynn nodded. ‘Well, perhaps you should still go and see him. He might be able to tell you who to contact to take charge of the funeral. We’ll have to interview him about the accident at some point, but he’s been in Intensive Care.’ He handed Jack a sheet of paper. ‘Here’s the list of undertakers. They’ll know what to do.’

That was good, because Jack didn’t. All he could think about was what he’d just been told. A twenty-year-old son he’d known nothing about …

‘Will you be okay? Do you want me to drive you anywhere?’

That look of pity again. Jack felt a flash of anger. He was no helpless victim. He was New Business Director at Stewart Enterprises. A successful man, renowned for coping with anything. He’d get through this. Somehow. ‘I’ll find my own way – thanks.’

The taxi dropped Jack at the entrance to St Aidan’s Hospital. He stood next to a few furtive smokers. Should he go inside or just walk away? He could pay some local undertaker a hefty sum to take care of everything. What else was money for if not to ease the rough patches in your life?

Someone thrust an open pack of cigarettes in front of him. He looked down at an elderly woman, bent under the weight of her widow’s hump. ‘No … thanks.’

‘Might take the edge off, son.’

So he looked like he felt. Gutted.

The old lady patted his arm. ‘God’ll take care of everything, y’know.’

‘You don’t happen to have his number, do you?’

The woman tutted and moved away. He was in one of the most Catholic countries in Europe. Insult God and it could be taken personally. Jack didn’t believe in heavenly help or miracles, though. He was on his own. So he might as well talk to this young man who was supposed to be his son. Perhaps at last he was going to get answers.

‘Good afternoon, Mr Kiernan.’

‘My surname is Stewart. My wife and I were separated.’ How many times would Jack have to repeat this?

The consultant, O’Meara, looked uncomfortable and glanced down at his notes. Probably preferred broken bodies to broken families. ‘I’m sorry – my mistake. Luke’s driving licence says Kiernan.’

‘And his birth certificate says Stewart. Please just tell me about – my son.’ This wasn’t the place to voice doubts about Luke being his. The staff might get iffy if he wasn’t a relative, and then he wouldn’t be able to ask the kid any questions.

‘Luke suffered concussion, bruised ribs and some torn knee ligaments.’

‘But he’s okay, yes?’ That was all he needed to know. Why couldn’t doctors just cut to the chase?

‘Mr Stewart, Luke arrested at the scene. Luckily, a driver who came to help was familiar with CPR – resuscitation. Luke still needs to be monitored in case of complications, but he’s stable. We moved him from Intensive Care this morning.’

‘Does he know? About his mother?’

To Jack’s dismay, the doctor shook his head. ‘He’s been on morphine so in and out of awareness. Not a good time to talk to him.’

Great. Jack would have to book into a hotel. This thing could take days.

‘His leg will take a few weeks to heal, same with his ribs. He’ll need crutches for a while.’

Jack wasn’t going to be hanging around for a few weeks. Hopefully the Kiernans would show up soon and take over. ‘When can I see him?’

‘A nurse can take you now.’

Jack stood up.

‘One more thing, Mr Stewart … Luke has bruises on his face and body that weren’t caused by the crash. The colouring

suggests he got them some days earlier.'

Why was Jack being told this? Were they afraid he'd sue them for malpractice?

'Do you know anything about those bruises?'

God, O'Meara thought he'd done it. Beaten the kid up. Obviously had him pegged as a bad father. 'I haven't been near Luke in years,' he said. The truth, although twisted.

'Well, I'd guess some time recently he's been badly beaten. He'll need peace and quiet – and support – to heal. The past couple of weeks have obviously been very traumatic for him.'

So Luke was the kind of person who got into fights. Not surprising, really, with uncles like Joe and Liam Kiernan. Some start in life. Things would have been very different if Luke had grown up in Baronsmere. *But he's not my son.* It disturbed Jack that he'd forgotten this. He didn't want to get emotionally involved.

Thankfully, Luke was in a single room. No nosy fellow patients or visitors to worry about. Jack watched from the doorway as the nurse checked the IV.

'Why don't you sit with him for a while?' she suggested. 'I'll fix you a cup of tea.'

'Thanks.'

Jack slumped down into a chair, hoping the boy wasn't going to wake up just yet because he didn't have a clue what to say. The hospital bed made him look small and young, about seventeen, maybe eighteen. Unfortunately, the birth certificate said otherwise. He focused on Luke's face with its cuts and bruises, and tried but failed to find any resemblance to the Stewarts. Luke was his mother's son. With his long dark eyelashes and black hair, the kid was so like Annie that it actually hurt. Jack had thought he was over the pain, but all this was bringing it back.

What exactly had Annie told her son? Luke had probably seen his birth certificate yet he'd never tried to make contact, which

seemed strange, especially given the Stewart's wealth. And if Annie wanted nothing more to do with him, not even financial help, why did she put Jack on the birth certificate at all? It didn't make sense.

A monitor beeped, and he flicked his attention back to Luke, whose eyes were now open. He looked confused, and Jack wished he'd gone to a hotel for the rest of the day because now he'd have to say something reassuring, and probably identify himself. Standing up, he moved towards the bed. 'Luke? You're in hospital, but don't worry, you're going to be okay.' He sounded and felt awkward. 'You don't know me, but …'

'I know who you are. I've seen your picture. You're my bastard father.'

Jack froze, his mind replaying the words.

'You threw my mother out because – what was it? – you didn't want a *gypo* kid!'

Luke was staring daggers at him. Annie must have said Jack had rejected *her,* instead of the other way round. 'What the hell are you talking about? I never even knew you existed before today.'

'Liar!' Luke's voice was raised and cracking with the strain. He struggled to sit up, winced, and sank back against the pillows. He looked exhausted but somehow found the strength to sweep a jug of water from the locker beside him towards Jack. It missed by inches, clattering against the wall, its contents flooding the floor.

A nurse hurried into the room. She spoke gently to Luke but it had no effect. He was obviously distressed and in pain. A male nurse appeared and frowned at Jack. 'If you don't mind, sir. We need to settle the patient.'

A firm hand on his shoulder steered Jack towards the door. As if it were his fault. He flushed at the injustice. That was it. He was out of here, on a flight back to Manchester that afternoon.

'Where's my mother? I want to see my mother!'

Glancing back, the despair on Luke's face told Jack he already suspected the truth. Part of him was thankful he wouldn't have to be the one to tell the kid his mother was dead. The other part of him felt like a total shit, but what could he do? It wasn't his problem. It was all very sad but nothing to do with him. If he didn't go now, he'd miss the flight. Luke was not his son. But although his head said one thing, his heart said another. He couldn't walk out now and leave those terrible accusations unchallenged. 'I'll wait in the Relatives' Room,' he told the nurse.

Emer Sullivan sipped a strong black coffee and wished she still smoked. Five years without a cigarette and she was still waiting for those occasional cravings to disappear. They came when her in-tray was overflowing. Being a hospital counsellor was great, but to get through all the paperwork, you'd have to give up talking to the patients. One of life's little ironies.

She opened the file on her desk. A new case had just developed into a crisis. The details were sketchy: a woman killed in a car crash, her son badly injured. The father had just appeared on the scene and there'd been an argument. Emer had been asked to tell the son, Luke Kiernan, his mother was dead. She glanced at her watch. An hour since the incident. His tranquilliser would be wearing off but he should still be calm enough for her to talk to him. Emer left her office and reached Luke's side room at the same time as a nurse finished taking his blood pressure. His eyes were fixed on the ceiling.

'Luke?' said Emer, after the nurse had gone.

There was no response.

'Luke, my name's Emer. I'm a trauma counsellor. I'm here to talk to you about your mother.'

'She's dead, isn't she?'

He must have guessed when nobody would give him a straight answer, which was what he needed now. 'Yes, Luke, I'm afraid she is. I'm so sorry.' No matter how many times Emer gave

people bad news, it never got any easier.

Luke turned to her, pain evident in his sad eyes. 'What happened? I can't remember.'

He had a right to know the facts. Once he accepted them, he could start the grieving process. She pulled out the police report. 'An oncoming truck hit your car on the driver's side, making it roll over and hit a tree. Another driver got you out. The emergency services got your mother out later.' Cut her out from the tangled mess of metal, but he didn't need to know that. 'A priest from the local village was with her during her last moments.' Maybe it would comfort him to know she'd received absolution and hadn't died alone.

'Thanks,' murmured Luke as he turned his head away.

It was a dismissal and Emer didn't blame him. He needed time alone to absorb what he'd been told and to start mourning his mother. She stood up. 'If you need to talk, just ask for me. I'll look in on you tomorrow.'

He didn't respond. There was nothing more she could do for him at that moment. Now she had to find the father.

Jack sat alone at a table in the Relatives' Room, nursing a cup of cold coffee, his mind focused on Luke's harsh, unjust words.

'Mr Stewart?'

Jack looked up to see a redhead, dressed in jeans and a Trinity College sweatshirt.

'My name's Emer Sullivan. I'm a counsellor. I've been talking with your son, Luke.'

Jack fixed his gaze on the coffee in front of him. He was in no mood to talk to anyone, least of all a counsellor. Perhaps if he was silent, the woman would take the hint and go away.

'That's pretty much the same treatment I got from Luke,' she said as she sat opposite him.

When Jack glanced at her, he was pinned by the intensity of her gaze. She had green-yellow eyes, like a cat.

‘People react to grief in many different ways,’ Emer continued. ‘Some people keep busy. One widow I know cleans her entire house every day. The makers of bleach never had it so good. There are those who start a new life almost immediately, sell up and leave all the old ties, while others shut down, retreat into their grief, and let no one in.’

‘And then there are those like Luke, who throw things,’ said Jack. ‘How should I deal with that?’

‘You’ve both suffered a terrible shock. You’ve lost your wife. Luke’s lost his mother. The next few days are going to be critical. You need to find a way to talk to each other. I can help you do that.’

She was well wide of the mark there. Thought she knew it all. ‘Look here, Oprah …’

‘Emer.’

‘Look here, Emer, I lost my wife over twenty years ago. She never told me I had a son. In fact, I’m not even sure he’s mine.’

She didn’t look shocked, just thoughtful. ‘But you’re still here,’ she said. ‘You could have washed your hands of it all, but you didn’t. Why?’

‘To make sure he’s okay. To see if … if he needs anything. I’m not the total bastard he thinks I am.’ Although maybe he was. Because he wasn’t on a mercy mission. He’d come for his own reasons – looking for closure. He felt a tiny trickle of guilt. Looking out of the window, he saw dusk approaching. He was losing track of time in this place. Losing track of himself.

‘Luke is injured and grieving – and probably very frightened,’ said Emer. ‘Right now, he’s hiding behind anger, but that anger won’t last. And when it’s gone, he’ll have nothing left.’

That made sense, but all Jack could see was Luke’s face. The hostility and the hatred. How could he fight that? He wouldn’t know where to start. Wouldn’t have the patience.

‘I’m sure you have questions for each other,’ said Emer. ‘I’ll talk to him tomorrow – try to persuade him to see you.’

‘Good luck,’ Jack murmured, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice.

‘Mr Stewart, look at me.’

He looked at her determined face.

‘I know how hard this is for you, but if you walk away now, you won’t get answers and that will eat away at you for the rest of your life. I know – I’ve seen what regret does to people. Stay a while longer. Don’t give up on Luke. He needs you, whether he knows it or not.’

Her expression was kind. She wasn’t judging him, just trying to help. Perhaps she could work some kind of miracle. ‘Do you know a good hotel?’ he asked, and she smiled. That turned out to be quite a reward in itself.

Chapter Two

When Emer arrived to see Luke the next day, he was sitting up in bed, supported by a mound of pillows, and pushing pudding around a dish. She pointed at it. 'Don't touch that custard. It's lethal. You'll wish they'd left the drip in.'

He responded with a half-hearted smile.

'I'm Emer,' she said, pulling up a chair and sitting down. 'I came to see you yesterday. D'you remember?'

'Sure. You're the shrink. Come to see if I'm mad or not.'

He was mock cheerful. Raising barriers, just like his father. 'I've come to see how you're feeling,' she said.

'Me? I'm feelin' fine. Thanks for askin'.' Luke shifted his gaze to the window where a steady rain streaked across the glass. Emer watched it with him. Most people found extended silences uncomfortable, and the discomfort forced them to speak. It took a little longer than usual with Luke, but eventually he turned to face her. 'Aren't you goin' to show me ink blots?' he asked.

'Why would I do that?'

'Isn't that what psychiatrists do?'

'I'm not a psychiatrist. I'm a trauma counsellor. It's a little different. I try to help …'

'I don't need any help,' he said, picking up his spoon and sloshing the custard around again.

'I think you might, Luke. Shall I tell you why?' The spoon slowed. He was listening. 'You've been badly injured. You've lost your mother. You could suffer sleeplessness, nightmares, flashbacks, guilt or panic attacks. And – last, but by no means least – your father shows up for the first time ever and you're angry about that.'

'Damn right I'm angry!' The spoon clattered onto the tray. 'Wouldn't you be?'

'I don't know. It's not me it happened to. Why are you angry?'

He threw up his hands in frustration. 'For Christ's sake, isn't it obvious? The bastard didn't want me when I was born so sure as hell won't now.'

'Then why is he here?'

Luke hesitated but then maintained his resistance. 'I don't know! Guilt? Maybe he wants to be seen doin' the right thing? Why don't you ask him?'

'Why don't *you* ask him?'

'Because I don't want to talk to him. I don't even want to look at him – ever.'

'That's a shame, because then you'll never know.'

'Know what?'

'Why he came all this way, why he sat by your bedside waiting for you to wake up. He didn't need to, so why did he?'

'I told you, I don't know, and I don't care.'

He sounded weary but she persevered. 'Luke, you have a chance to ask him why he wasn't around for you. Maybe you won't like his answer, and you won't want him in your life. That's your choice. But I think not to have at least one conversation with him is a mistake.'

Emer studied him. He seemed torn, maybe between curiosity and a desire for revenge. The latter might satisfy him for a while, but then he'd never have proper resolution or closure. She willed him to take a risk.

'I can't,' he said, rubbing his hand over his eyes. 'Just the thought of him makes me mad. I'd end up punchin' him, I know it.'

'Well, I can be here with you, if you like,' she offered. 'I used to referee girls' football teams. I know when to show the red card.'

He gave a wry smile. 'Girls can't play football. Too scared of breakin' their nails.'

'Cheeky bugger. Show me a bunch of men defending a free kick and I'll show you real fear.'

'I'm good at football.'

Evasion again, but she'd indulge him.

'I used to dream of playin' football for Manchester United. And Ireland. Earnin' millions. People chantin' my name and buyin' shirts with Kiernan on the back.'

She could identify with that. 'I dreamed of doing backing vocals for Take That. Used to mime to their songs using my hairbrush as a microphone. I was devastated they split up before they discovered me.'

He smiled and Emer was tempted to leave things there, but she remembered her promise to Jack. 'C'mon, Luke. What's there to lose? Just listen to what your father has to say.'

He was quiet for so long that Emer thought she'd lost the argument, but he surprised her.

'Okay – on condition you'll be there, like you said.'

That was a given. Luke and his father really did need a referee. 'I promise.'

He nodded. 'I owe it to Mam to make sure he doesn't get away with what he did.'

The edge in his voice left Emer in no doubt that Luke Kiernan was much tougher than he looked.

As Jack walked through the hotel lobby, the muscles in his neck were knotting again. So much for that massage in the hotel spa. He'd also managed twenty laps in the pool and some time on the treadmill. Trying to *exercise* his demons. He almost laughed aloud at that but dreadful puns didn't mask the fact the 'exorcism' hadn't worked. He couldn't block out Luke's words, or the memories of Annie.

Emer had arranged a three o'clock showdown. She'd be there as well, at Luke's request. Too scared to be alone with his wicked father? It was so bloody unfair.

He got to the hospital fifteen minutes early and went into the foyer shop to buy chocolate and fruit, not quite sure why he was bothering. Because it was the thing to do, he supposed.

'I hope the patient feels better soon,' smiled the assistant.

'Me too,' Jack said, and meant it. He had a job and a life to get back to. Now if he could just get some answers …

Seeing Luke again was a shock. Jack had tried to forget how much he looked like Annie. The long lashes, the hair colour – the far-too-discerning blue eyes. It was unnerving. Luke was scowling at him, chin jutting defiantly. Emer, seated on the other side of the bed, was smiling encouragement. It was like good cop, bad cop.

Jack put the fruit on the bedside locker. 'Vitamins,' he said. Then he held up the chocolate. 'This won't do any harm either.'

Luke said nothing. Probably guessed it was just for show.

Jack sat down, scooting the chair back slightly as he gauged the distance between himself and the water jug. He cleared his throat. 'First off, I'm sorry about your mother, Luke – truly sorry.'

'Sure you are.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Jack was being sincere, and the little git was mocking him.

'Course you're sorry,' Luke replied. 'You're afraid you might be saddled with me.'

There was some truth to that. Deep down, Jack wanted to get away with giving the kid money, setting him up in a job somewhere. Not having to see him on any regular basis. Perhaps not having to see him at all because Luke's face was Annie's face, and the similarity was too painful. 'Is that what you think?' he asked, stalling for time.

'It's what I know,' was the response. 'You didn't want me before, so don't pretend you do now.'

There was that accusation again. 'I already told you – until yesterday, I didn't know you existed.'

'That's a good one,' Luke retorted, 'but not what I heard.'

'Then you heard wrong!'

Luke's eyes flashed, and Jack was startled again by the hostility there. 'Don't call my mother a liar!'

Emer put her hand on Luke's arm to calm him, giving Jack a warning glance.

This was hopeless. He was only making things worse. 'I'm sorry, Luke. You obviously don't want me around. Do you know where your uncles are? I can call them.'

Luke shook his head, his eyes wide. 'No! I don't want them here!'

He seemed panic-stricken, his breathing rapid. Not just panic, though. Fear.

'Calm down,' said Jack. 'I won't call them. I don't even know where they are. Just relax, okay?'

'I think that's enough for today,' said Emer, but Jack wasn't finished. He'd been unjustly accused. He couldn't shrug that off. Perhaps now Luke had exhausted himself, he'd have a chance to speak.

'Luke, you have to believe me when I tell you I never knew Annie had a child.' Luke sighed and closed his eyes. But he couldn't close his ears. He would hear what Jack had to say. 'I don't know why your mother told you what she did. She must have had her reasons, but what do I do? Let you keep believing I threw her out? There was obviously a huge misunderstanding. I was working a lot – maybe too much. Perhaps she told me what was troubling her, and it didn't register.'

It was the best he could come up with, though it could be true. He'd probably never know. There was no response from Luke. The meeting had been a waste of time. Jack left, feeling bitter disappointment.

I didn't know you existed until yesterday. Yeah, right. The man must think Luke an idiot. As if he wouldn't have been told what a scumbag his father was. He'd wanted to confront Jack Stewart ever since the day he learned his life had been a lie ….

Why didn't he stop? Even with his hands over his ears, Luke could still hear his uncle shouting. Annie was crying and that

always made Joe even more mad. Only a matter of time till he slapped her. But Luke was eleven now. Time he did something to help her. 'Leave her alone, you bastard!' Annie wouldn't like him swearing, but it was what men did. 'If my da' was alive, he'd show you …'

Joe turned his attention away from Annie and started to laugh. 'If your da' was alive …'

'Joe, don't – please.' Annie was tugging her brother's arm, but he shrugged her off, still laughing.

What was so funny?

'Your da' is *alive, you stupid little mongrel. And he isn't a Traveller. He isn't even Irish. You're half-Brit and your precious father didn't want you. Or her. Didn't want the embarrassment of a gypo in the family. And d'you know the best bit? He said she should have got rid of you.'*

That was worse than the punch he'd expected. 'You're a liar! Mammy – he's a liar, isn't he?' But the look on Annie's face and the hesitation before she said 'Yes … yes, of course he is,' told Luke his uncle wasn't lying. His heart was thumping and he couldn't breathe properly. He was vaguely aware of his mother's arm round his shoulder, and then Joe suddenly in front of him, waving a piece of paper. 'There you are. Read that, and see who's the liar.'

'Liam!' screamed Annie. 'How could you? I showed you that letter in confidence! I thought you'd destroyed it, not given it to Joe!'

Despite his mother's attempts to prevent it, Luke managed to see the words he'd never forget. Later, Annie talked about her husband, showed Luke his picture, said they'd been happy in the beginning. Had wanted a baby. The damage was done, though. One day Jack Stewart would pay.

'Why would she tell Luke I didn't want him?' Jack asked Emer as they talked over tea in her office. 'The Annie I knew was never cruel. Why would she let her own child think he'd been rejected?'

He didn't usually discuss family business with outsiders, but there was no one else to talk to about this madness. As a counsellor, Emer would be discreet and her insight could prove useful.

'You might never know, because to answer that you'd need to know *why* she left you,' Emer replied.

Her words stung. *She left you*. 'I wish to God I did know!' Jack snapped. 'I came back from a meeting in Brussels and she just wasn't there. She'd packed her suitcases, cleared out her bank account and left. No note. Nothing. As if *I* were nothing. A mistake she just rubbed out. Do you know what that feels like?'

'I'm sure it must have been very hard to cope with. Did you look for her?'

'I had … a bit of a breakdown.' That was hard to admit, even to a sympathetic person like Emer. Jack hated to think of how he'd gone to pieces back then. Not working, not eating, not sleeping. Living on booze. He viewed his behaviour then as the worst kind of weakness. 'My mother hired a detective. He found Annie, but she said she didn't want to come back. And she was with a man. A fellow Traveller.'

Emer was Irish so would know about Travellers. Ireland's outcasts. Some still on the road, following the nomadic lifestyle, some settled. Stereotyped and scorned. Annie had told him a lot about her people's problems.

'Did you never want to confront her in person?' asked Emer.

'When we got the news from the detective, I was devastated. Just couldn't face it.' Old guilt resurfaced. Had he let her go too easily? His mother had been furious about Annie leaving. Said how ungrateful she was, and how insulting that someone like her had rejected the Stewarts when they'd given her everything. Harped on constantly about how Jack had a duty to the business and the family name. Lady Grace Stewart had encouraged the anger and the hurt that hardened his heart, and she'd finally convinced him trying to bring Annie home would be a waste of

time. That she'd just go again, and how unfair it would be on Matt. That had clinched it. 'I accepted it. Cleaned myself up and focused on taking care of my son Matt, who was only four. His mother, my first wife, died when he was two. Then suddenly his new mother wasn't there any more.'

'Were there any signs at all that Annie was troubled?' asked Emer.

Jack shook his head. 'And that's what bothers me. The suddenness of it. People have affairs and marriages break up. But this happened virtually overnight. We were so happy, then she was gone. It was all too quick, and that's what's never made sense.'

'Perhaps she just couldn't adjust to a settled life?' suggested Emer. 'Did Annie like the place where you live? Where is it?'

'Baronsmere – a village in Cheshire. About eight hundred people. It can be hard for newcomers, but Annie had friends. She worked in a bar in the village for a while. That's where I first met her. She'd only been in England a couple of weeks with her father and brothers and a few other Traveller families. Work was slow so they were trying their luck in England.'

'How long did you know Annie before you got married?'

Jack smiled. 'Three months. It was a whirlwind romance. There didn't seem much point in waiting. For me, it was love at first sight.'

He'd been on a pub crawl through the villages with his mates. They'd all flirted with the new barmaid at The Fox and Feathers, except Jack. Something about Annie had captivated him from the start. He'd wanted to be attentive, respectful. His mates had teased him, but he didn't care. For the first time since Caroline's death, there was a woman who made him feel something again.

'What did your parents think about you marrying Annie?'

It still hurt to think about it. His mother had actually screamed at him. Called him selfish. His father, Sir Nicholas Stewart, knight of the realm and prime bigot, had spent days trying to talk him

out of it. *The shame of it* he'd said. *A gypsy in the family.* 'They weren't exactly overjoyed. They didn't come to the wedding.'

But it had been fine without them. Annie's delicate face framed by a white tulle veil. Matt, a charming little pageboy. Dave, his best man, calling him a lucky sod. Maggie, his housekeeper, crying for England. It had been a great day.

'And Annie's family? Did they come to the wedding?'

'No. They were back in Ireland by then.'

Annie had begged her father to come. She'd cried uncontrollably on the phone. No good, though. Jack always blamed her brother Joe for that. He'd likely persuaded the Kiernan family to cast her out because she refused to conform to their idea of how she should live – full-time housemaid for them until she married a fellow Traveller. But Annie was a free spirit – she wasn't afraid, like so many Traveller girls back then, of being on the shelf if she hadn't married by her eighteenth birthday. She wanted to earn a living and marry when the right man came along. In the end, Tony Hayes, owner of the pub where she'd worked, gave her away.

'Did Annie have much contact with your parents after you were married?'

'Not really,' said Jack. 'But there were times when they couldn't avoid each other.' He thought about the awkwardness of such occasions. The memories weren't pleasant. Like the elaborate cake his mother bought for Matt's birthday. Matt had preferred the one he'd helped Annie bake – Chocolate Mess they'd called it. You could have cut the atmosphere, never mind the cake, with a knife.

'But there were people who adored Annie,' he continued. 'My housekeeper considered her the daughter she never had. My sister, Claire, thought of her as family. And to Matt, she was simply his mother. *I* adored Annie. There was nothing I wouldn't have done for her. And, before you ask, we both wanted children. Even chose the name for our first child. Rebecca for a girl … and

Luke for a boy. We had Matthew and would joke about eventually having Mark and John, too. I'd *never* have thrown Annie out. Or our child. *She* left *me*!' God, he felt like he was going to cry. All the memories. Things he hadn't thought about in years. It was too much. Emer must have guessed because she poured him more tea. The answer to everything.

'I believe you,' she said. 'And it must be terrible to be accused of something you haven't done.'

That was unexpected. He'd thought counsellors stayed neutral.

They did.

'I also believe Luke … well, I believe that *he* believes it. He's been told you rejected him and his mother. You never showed up to contradict that. So why should he trust you – a stranger – over the people who've taken care of him all his life? Can you see that, Jack?'

He could, but there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

'In a strange way, the accident might help,' Emer said. 'Luke's not in a position to walk away right now, so you should have some time to try and convince him you care.'

'I don't know if … if I do care.' There, he'd said it aloud. Voiced the fears he'd held ever since Flynn told him of Luke's existence. He looked at Emer, expecting to see disgust.

'You've had a terrible shock,' was all she said. 'Not only learning your wife has died, but also finding out you have a grown-up son. And you don't know Luke. He's not like a child you've raised from birth. You can't be expected to feel instant love.'

'I don't even feel instant *like*. And if he isn't mine? That Traveller the detective said she was with, after she left England – he might be the real father.' He didn't tell her he wanted that to be true so he'd be off the hook.

Emer flicked through a form on her desk. 'Luke was born on the 28th of October. When did Annie leave?'

'Late February. So Annie was pregnant before leaving

Baronsmere – unless Luke was premature. But …'

'But what?' prompted Emer.

'But maybe she met the Traveller in England. An affair would have been a reason for her to leave.' And what better time to do that than when Jack was abroad for a week? No arguments, no drama. But if that were true, then he'd completely misjudged Annie's character. And she'd given a performance worthy of an Oscar.

'A DNA test is the only way to find out for sure if you're the father.'

Jack nodded slowly, but he wasn't sure if he wanted hard proof that Annie had been unfaithful to him. Why put himself through all that? Luke hated him, and would want nothing more to do with the Stewarts when he got out of hospital.

'Luke might react very badly to a request for a DNA, though,' Emer commented. 'In his mind, it would be like another rejection. If he really is your son, you could lose him completely because of that. Perhaps you should wait until he's fully recovered from the accident.'

Jack frowned. 'He'll be back with his family then. He's not likely to want any more contact with me.'

Emer shook her head. 'I don't think so. Remember what happened when you asked about his uncles?'

True. Luke had seemed terrified. 'That would be any sane person's reaction.'

'Were they violent?'

'Liam Kiernan wasn't so bad. Annie told me they'd been quite close until he suffered a head injury on a construction site. After that, he had mental health issues and suffered bouts of aggression that were aggravated by booze. Joe Kiernan had a real temper. He got involved in more than one pub fight while he was in Baronsmere.' Jack gave a wry laugh. 'One of which was with me.'

'Do you think Joe was responsible for Luke's bruises?'

Jack shifted in his chair. He remembered the doctor's words: *He'll need peace and quiet … and support … to heal*. But Luke was an adult. He could make his own decisions. 'It's possible. Or a brawl … who knows? You'd have to ask Luke.'

'You know he and Annie were leaving Ireland,' said Emer. 'Luke told me they were going to Wales.'

'No, I didn't know that.'

'It's odd, though,' Emer said. 'There was just one suitcase between them. The hospital staff opened it, looking for information. There were a few personal items but little else.'

'So?'

'It seems they left in a hurry. Didn't even pack clothes. I wonder why.'

Jack sighed. 'You're asking me to guess the motives of a woman I haven't seen in more than twenty years. Well, I can't. Luke's the one who has all the answers, and he's not talking.'

'Not yet.'

Not ever, probably.

'There was no definite plan according to Luke. No job, nowhere to live.'

'I'll give him money,' said Jack. 'I'll make sure he's not homeless.'

'I see.' There was clear disapproval in Emer's voice.

'What's wrong with that?' he asked. 'It's probably more than anyone else would do for him.'

'Yes, I'm sure,' Emer agreed. 'But money isn't always the answer.'

In Jack's experience, it usually was. It bought comfort, security, opportunities. What more did people want? 'Emer, even if he is my son, he hates me. I'll do everything I can for him, but I'm not a miracle worker. I can't change the past.'

'You could take him home with you. At least for a few weeks until he's fully recovered. It'll be hard for him to manage on his own.'

He wished she hadn't suggested that. It was ridiculously out of touch with reality. Luke couldn't even bear to be in the same room as him. There was nothing to build on. No prospect of even liking each other, let alone the love a father and son should share. 'How would I explain to everyone back home who he is? Introduce him as my maybe-son?'

'I'm sure you could find a way to deal with that.'

Jack was silent, mulling it over.

'Are you ashamed of him?' asked Emer.

'No!' He was insulted she'd even asked. 'I'm not a bigot. I married a Traveller, didn't I? It's just … Luke's so angry. And hard. I don't even know if I can feel anything for him. It wouldn't be fair to give him expectations.'

'I doubt very much he's hard. Give him the benefit of the doubt. Try to get to know him – and let him get to know you. Show you're making an effort. You still need answers. If you get closer to Luke, break down those barriers, he might tell you everything Annie told him.'

'Maybe …'

The phone rang, and Emer answered it. 'Okay, I'll be there soon.' She replaced the receiver. 'Sorry, Jack. I have to see a patient.'

'Are you free later for a drink?' Jack asked. 'Talking to you really helps.' The prospect of another evening spent alone in his hotel room was depressing. He'd only brood and rake over the past.

She held up the in-tray. 'Alas, I'll have to spend the evening with all this paperwork.'

'Lunch tomorrow?' God, he sounded desperate.

'I usually grab a sandwich in the hospital canteen around one o'clock.'

Jack smiled. 'I might see you then.'

At the door, he glanced back, appraising Emer this time as a woman rather than a counsellor. He liked what he saw, especially

the long red curls. He noticed the light sprinkling of freckles on her nose, and her mouth had an enticingly full lower lip. She thankfully wasn't thin as a rake; the blue dress she wore showed curves in all the right places – and enough of her long legs to set a man's imagination alight. No 'might' about it. Jack would be in the hospital canteen tomorrow for sure.

Emer leaned against the kitchen counter and watched the tuna casserole begin its solo circular dance inside the microwave. It was a godsend to have a sister living close by. Maeve kept Emer supplied with all her favourite home-cooked meals, believing a single woman who worked for the health service would have no time to shop or cook for herself.

She wasn't far wrong. The hours as a counsellor could be punishing and the irregularity made a personal life tricky. Emer glanced at the fridge, singling out the photo of her and Colm on holiday in Rome last year. She really should take the picture down. Their five years together were well and truly over. All through the autumn and winter she'd forced herself to look at it, and each day the pain eased just a fraction. Now she still felt sad at the sight of Colm but no longer had the urge to drown her sorrows in red wine. Emer had heard through the grapevine he was engaged to the woman he'd two-timed her with. Good luck to her. Once a cheater, always a cheater …

The food was ready and Emer served it up, brushing aside the guilt about not preparing a salad to go with it. Healthy eating took time and energy, and she was out of both this evening. Besides, she had a mission.

Moving through to the living room, Emer set the plate of bubbling food on the desk and settled down in front of her laptop. Once the search engine flicked up, she typed in *Jack Stewart, Baronsmere*.

She was spoiled for choice. The internet was teeming with information about the man Emer had met for the first time

yesterday. Business magazine profiles jostled with short announcements in financial newspapers. Local Cheshire websites focused on Jack's charity work on literacy programmes and a scheme he'd set up to provide a taster of business work experience for older teens still at school.

There was a standard photo used in many of the articles and Emer enlarged it. Taken a few years ago, she reckoned, because there wasn't any grey in his hair at all. No hint of a smile but the eyes flashed an alertness, a power, that spoke of a man who knew how to get what he wanted.

And now he'd been blindsided by Annie and Luke. The Jack she'd seen in her office earlier was quite different from the man the internet articles portrayed as an astute and in-control businessman. Today, he'd been angry, confused and vulnerable. Was that why she'd refused his offer of a drink? Not because of any work conflict, certainly, because he wasn't her patient and she could have met him in the pub with a clear conscience. But Jack's life right now was complicated, and she wasn't sure if she could handle that.

Her mobile rang and she glanced at the caller information. Maeve.

'Don't tell me you got all the kids in bed,' Emer said, by way of a greeting. Her three nephews were proving to be night owls. 'That must be a record.'

'For sure,' laughed Maeve at the other end of the phone. 'Don't jinx it now. I'm sitting here, feet up, glass of wine in hand. Nothing good on the telly, of course. What are you up to?'

Emer clicked and saved Jack's photo to the computer. 'Oh, nothing much. Just a bit of research.'

'All work and no play …'

… makes Jack a dull boy. Emer mentally finished the proverb and smiled. Perhaps it was a sign. Of what, though? Emer decided to give the analytical side of her brain the night off. And the warning bells could sod off, too.

After she'd finished talking to Maeve, Emer went into the kitchen, took the photo of Colm from the fridge, and relegated it to the bin.

'Goodbye to all that,' she murmured.

Jack woke with a start. Where the hell was he? The window was in the wrong place. And what was that wardrobe doing near the door? Then he remembered. This was the Beaumont Hotel in Dublin. He had a new son and a corpse to take care of. He glanced at the bedside clock. Past nine. Darkness had fallen outside. He'd slept for two hours, needing a break from the memories of Annie that kept flooding his mind.

He went into the bathroom and splashed water on his face. That woke him up a bit. Drying his hands, he assessed himself critically in the mirror. Forty-six but still looking good. Some grey flecks in his fair hair, but his mother said they made him look distinguished. Not balding at all, thank God. Some wrinkles on the forehead and round the eyes, but he could still pass for forty in the right light. He patted his stomach. No paunch. He exercised every day in the gym at work.

What age was Emer? Mid-thirties? No wedding ring. Admittedly, women didn't always wear them now. She was a looker. And sharp. The pillow talk would be great. He felt a stab of guilt. A dead wife and an injured son, and he was working out how to screw the bereavement counsellor.

Back in the bedroom, he stood by the window, watching worshippers leaving the church across the street. Sunday was almost over. How would he have spent the day in Baronsmere? A workout, the newspapers, lunch with the family at Edenbridge, an afternoon walk with the dogs, a drink or two in the evening with friends. No romance, although that flicker of hope he'd find someone special hadn't yet gone out. It had been his choice to end things with Sarah a couple of months ago, so he had no right to complain about being lonely. They'd broken up so many times

over the years that the villagers were probably placing bets to see how long it was before they were back together. It was final this time, though. She hadn't made a big fuss when he'd broken things off, and had made no attempts to win him back, although she'd been a bit quiet of late – it was hard to know what she was really thinking.

He could guess what his parents would think, though, if he brought Luke back to Baronsmere. His would-be son, the thorn in his side. They'd think Jack had lost his mind. Emer had no idea what she was asking. Damn her. Damn Annie. And damn Luke. It had taken Jack so long to get over the shock of Annie leaving, but he'd survived and got his life back on track. The last thing he needed right now was a constant reminder of all that trauma in the form of a twenty-year-old with an attitude. And what the hell was all that about not being wanted because he was a *gypo*? Jack had never used that insult in his life, and he and Annie had wanted a child of their own, a brother or sister for Matt.

Matt! He'd have to tell him in case Luke got it into his head later to phone – or even worse, turn up on the doorstep. Then there would be some explaining to do. Jack took out his mobile and dialled his son's number.

'Dad!' It was good to hear Matt's voice. 'What's going on? Maggie said you're in Ireland.'

He hadn't given his housekeeper any details. Didn't want her weeping all over the place. 'Matt – I'm here because of Annie.'

'Annie? *Our* Annie?'

'There's been an accident …'

'Shit! Is she okay? Where's she been all this time?'

Jack had expected anger or indifference. How could Matt sound so concerned after Annie had abandoned him?

'Dad?'

'Matt, I'm sorry … she's dead. A car crash. I had to identify her.'

'Oh my God! Why didn't you tell me? I'd have come with you.'

'You had the stag night.'

‘Fuck that! This is more important than some piss-up. Look, I’ll come over …’

‘No!’ That was the last thing Jack wanted. Things were complicated enough.

‘But what about the funeral? I should be there. And Maggie. We’ll—’

‘Stop! Just stop. There’s something else. She had a son. He was with her in the car.’

‘Is he dead too?’

‘No, but he’s injured. He’s in hospital.’

‘Poor sod,’ said Matt. ‘So his family are there, yeah? That must be tough for you.’

Jack was tempted to leave it there. Say Annie’s family were taking care of things. But what if the truth came out later? Matt would know he’d lied. ‘Well, that’s the thing, Matt. Luke seems to think we’re his family.’

‘Come again.’

‘Luke’s twenty. His birth certificate says he’s mine.’ Jack hated doing this over the phone. He wished he could see Matt’s reaction. ‘Matt? You still there?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What are you thinking?’

‘For starters – why the hell didn’t Annie tell you?’

And now the questions would start. The last thing he needed. ‘It’s complicated. Too much to go into right now. I’m still trying to get my head round it.’

‘I can imagine. So what’s he like?’

Hostile, stubborn, unforgiving, throws things. That about summed it up. But he didn’t have the energy for that now. ‘He looks like Annie,’ was all he said.

‘I want to see him.’

Jack knew that tone of voice. Matt, determined to get his own way. ‘It’s not a good idea. He’s not strong enough yet …’

‘All the more reason to see him, then. He’s my brother, and it

sounds like he needs us.'

Matt's anger sparked Jack's own temper. 'You don't know he's your brother! That could have been the reason Annie left.'

He hadn't meant to say that. Instantly regretted it. He'd never told Matt that Annie had found another man.

'You can't believe that, Dad! Not Annie! No way!'

Matt sounded really upset. Jack was botching this badly. 'I don't know what to believe. This whole thing has been a nightmare, and I'm shattered. Please – just give me a bit more time to talk to Luke, to see what he wants to do.'

'You'll be bringing him home, though?'

Now Matt was suggesting it! And any attempt by Jack to dismiss it as a bad idea could bring Matt over on the next flight. Would Luke want to come back to Baronsmere anyway? Maybe he'd refuse and Jack could offer him start-up money for his move to Wales. Matt could visit him if he wanted. Win-win.

'Okay, Matt, I'll ask him, but just don't get your hopes up.'

ard.

To be continued …

Available as an ebook July 2013 and in paperback from 7th August 2013.

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Liv Thomas was born and raised in the South of England. She always had the dream of becoming a writer, but never had the confidence to pursue it completely. After positive responses to Lord of the Rings fan-fiction, she decided it was time to make the dream a reality.

Wife and mum, Liv works for the NHS, and is employed at the hospital which first featured in Channel 4's One Born Every Minute. Liv has travelled extensively, and as far afield as the United States and the Caribbean, without setting foot on an aeroplane as she has a fear of flying.

Reading tastes vary from contemporary women's fiction to works by Dean Koontz and Terry Pratchett, with Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter thrown in for good measure. Anything with an Irish theme will find itself on the book-shelf.

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Valerie Olteanu grew up in Scotland, and her childhood ambitions were to travel and to be a writer. After studying English and Art History at the University of Glasgow, she moved to London where she worked in the Literature Department of the Arts Council England.

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