

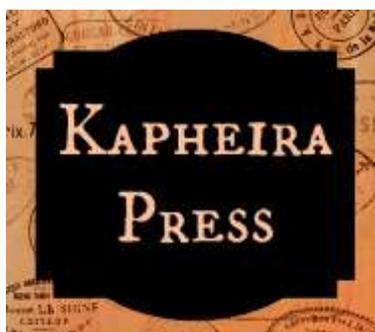
JENNIFER MUELLER

The Angel of
Ballyferriter

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By

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Chapter One

Baile an Fheirteraigh—Ballyferriter to the English speakers that came through on tour buses— was a pretty crescent shaped village that curled at the foot of Croagh Marhin Mountain. The Dingle peninsula of Ireland is rather visited, after all, though most just passed through.

“The richest square mile of Christian Heritage in Ireland, Ballyferriter is steeped in history and antiquity. The rugged landscape is littered with ancient monuments from the Gallurus Oratory, and stone crosses to ring forts, and Ferriter’s castle. The jagged peaks of the surrounding hills are offset by Smerwick harbor and the beautiful white sands of Beal Ban beach,” read the website Robert Ahearne researched before he left Boston.

Ballyferriter afforded: one church, one post office, one school, a museum, two shops and restaurants, numerous places to stay, and oh yes, four pubs. Then, since it was on the tourist route, the requisite golf, fishing, walking trails, beaches, and even Fungi the dolphin.

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There was one other thing that Ballyferriter offered the world, the Gaelic school, *Oidhreachta Chorca Dhíde*. Being an Irish-speaking enclave in Ireland, Ballyferriter had opened a school to help teach the language to a new generation.

“Ta Me, Ta Tu, Ta Se, Ta Si, Ta Muid, Ta Sibh, Ta Said.”

“All right class, again.”

* * * * *

“Come on, just one pint. My tongue feels all tied in knots. If I don’t untangle it soon, it’s going to stick that way,” Jack Cahill demanded as they passed a group of kids playing soccer. He turned off the road toward one of the pubs before Robert could answer. Both men were American of Irish families. Both were spending two weeks of July in Ireland learning the language of their ancestors. Tying their tongue in knots was only a side effect.

“Maybe your wife would prefer it that way,” Robert Ahearne kidded as Jack pulled the door open.

Class started yesterday. The two men hadn’t known each other before. Jack was a retired electrician from New York; Robert, a high school English teacher from Boston. The only thing the two had in common was that they were the only men in the Irish for Beginners class.

“*Pionta beorach*,” Jack called as he found a table, holding up his hand for two. Second day of class and the man could order a drink, if nothing else.

“So, what’d you do wrong if you’re here and she’s not?” Robert asked.

“Karen’s a travel agent. She wanted a trip to Antarctica and I took Ireland. It’s ice and water for Christ’s sake. You married, Robert?”

“Was. She died in a car accident. Lord, has it been fifteen years now?”

“Sorry.”

Robert didn’t feel like Jack really cared, since he couldn’t take his eyes off the woman who brought the glasses. Naturally wavy red hair, tall, curves to cause distraction, and not to mention gorgeous, even though she was easily in her forties.

Robert could almost see a line of drool escaping from Jack's mouth before the glass hid his features.

"Slainte!" Jack's eyes never left her as he quickly finished his pint.

"Aren't those Antarctica trips on luxury cruise ships?" Robert asked.

Jack pulled his eyes from the woman's curves with a shrug. "We're separated. Karen spends more time with that business of hers and her damn functions than she ever has with me. She's visited eighty countries. Me? Four—oh, five with Ireland."

Robert hid a groan in his ale, regretting he'd ever tried to make small talk.

Jack didn't notice. He was already waving over another glass. "Big-boned bitch of a woman, my wife. She always said she doesn't make enough to afford to take me with her on her jet setting. I pay for everything and she doesn't make enough to take me with her. Makes enough for jet setting it seems. Deals everywhere for her and her clients, but she can't find a single way to let me go with her. It's not as if we see so much of each other that she needs a break from me. Makes all kinds of time to earn awards, but can't make enough time to vacation with her own damn husband."

The red-haired waitress set down another glass, though Robert had barely finished a fourth of his in the time it took Jack to guzzle one.

"Went to her competition to book the flight when I left. Let her get the commission." Jack started laughing hysterically, drawing attention from the entire pub and he wasn't even drunk yet.

The red-haired angel in a fitted black sleeveless dress brought over five pints, one after the other. Jack just kept calling for more.

“So my fine Irish lass, care to go back to my hotel?” Jack finally said when she brought over the sixth.

Robert grabbed Jack’s hand before it could touch her ass, but it didn’t stop her from slapping Jack’s face hard. She tried again before Robert could get Jack out the door.

* * * *

Robert spent several days ignoring Jack, not because he got drunk or, hell, even tried feeling up the waitress again, but because he never shut up about Karen. Now that it was out that they were separated, Jack was telling everyone — before class, after class, and during breaks. Far and wide, every patron of every pub in Ballyferriter knew what a bitch and tightwad Karen Cahill was.

Robert left Jack behind at the school, so as he sat with a pint—his first since he’d rushed Jack out of harm’s way— it was a surprise to hear Jack behind him, slaughtering the Irish language.

“*Beidh me. . .*” The rest turned unintelligible.

If Robert could make it out, it sounded like Jack was trying to proposition a local in her mother tongue. Robert looked around and found the red-haired angel behind the bar. “Can you help? If he sees me, he’ll never shut up about his wife.”

She finished pulling a glass with a perfect head of foam and handed it to a patron at the end of the bar. “You think you got it bad. He’s been in here every day since your class started. Can’t stop staring, can’t stop drinking, can’t stop touching.”

“Separated from his wife recently.”

Finally, the angel smiled. “Never would have guessed. I’m ready to take him to that ship of hers personally and then sink it.”

“Can I help? I’ll find the torpedo.”

She smiled wickedly. “He wants another pint. Sneak out when I deliver it. He’ll be distracted.”

“I owe you one.”

She nodded as she pulled Jack’s glass. “Sure do. There’s a dance this Saturday night. If you don’t pick me up here at eight so I don’t have him seeing me there alone, I’ll tell him you’re interested in hearing of Karen.”

“You are mean.” Robert didn’t need a second hint though. He slipped out the door, grinning as she blocked the view with her magnificent assets. It was only when Robert was safely outside that he realized he had a date with Jack’s obsession and he didn’t even know her name.

* * * *

Thursday and Friday came and passed slowly. Jack was just as profuse as he had been. Only now it seemed that anywhere Robert went to relax after class, Jack was there. There were three other pubs in town and the minute Robert entered one, Jack was there. A soccer game with a local phenom, Jack was there. The museum, the post office, the restaurants? The man could appear anywhere, even after they had just left him firmly ensconced elsewhere. The two-week class was half over and it seemed to have lasted years. It wasn’t just Robert. Everyone wanted Jack gone.

The pub was almost empty when Robert walked in the door. It smelled of stale smoke more than usual, but like a ray of light, the red-haired angel shone from the gloom. She handed him a pint with a smile.

“*Slainte do bheo agus trocaire do mharbh,*” she called to him.

“Health to the living and mercy on the dead.”

The corner of her mouth turned up again as she turned away from him. “And may Jack Cahill join the latter soon. Drink your pint or we’ll be late.”

Robert grinned as he emptied the glass. “You know, names are usually in order on a date.”

“Are you saying, Robert Aherne, that you never heard my name from your friend Jack?”

It was a small town. She’d probably heard the names of every one in class.

“There were many names he called you, none of them proper.”

She linked her arm in Robert’s as she led them to the door. “I suppose being an American like him, you agreed.”

Robert still couldn’t believe she was on his arm. Six-feet, tan, and still slender even if he was nearing fifty, but he was left with only a crown of hair, white at that. Kept short, it ringed his head, but his wife always said he had the head for it. He’d never considered himself ugly, but she was truly an angel. A statuesque, beautiful angel.

“Never. Since the day I first stepped foot in the pub, you were always the red-haired angel.”

There was a faint sigh that she tried to hide. “That might just get you a dance tonight.”

Robert tried not to grin. “In that case, I’ll just have to compliment you more often. I’ve got a week of evenings and nothing to do.”

It had been a long time since he had thrown out compliments and flirted. At home, a wrong compliment turned into something hated, and flirting was only done in

bars where no one ever found anyone worthwhile— at least not without copious amounts of alcohol involved. Even at work, most parents and teachers were married.

She laughed wickedly. “Then I shall try to leave myself open for compliments. I wouldn’t want to leave a guest in my fair town lacking for entertainment. I’m Alana Riordan, so you can address me properly.”

The sea air blew away the smell of stale smoke from their senses. The shades of the setting sun over the ocean were an artist’s masterpiece. “With a view like that . . .” Robert couldn’t finish though.

“What?”

Robert’s laugh filled the air. “I don’t know, just with a view like that.”

“I left for college, I won’t say how many years ago, and the whole time I was away, that view stayed with me. It’s why I came back.”

“You make a living waiting tables at a pub with a college degree?”

Alana tensed. “Is there something wrong with that?”

“No. Just asking a question.”

“Ca bhfuil ag obair?” Alana asked.

“Oh God, you’re going to make me practice.”

“Come on, answer me.”

Robert knew it was a distraction from his questions, but he answered with where he worked anyway. “*Ta me ag obair i meanscoil.*”

“Very good, high school teacher.”

“It didn’t sound like the teacher did when she taught it to me.”

“The class is only two weeks. What did you expect?”

The number of people picked up as they neared the dance. Fiddle music poured out the windows.

“So, can you dance?” Alana asked.

“Not a step. I would say teaching me will give you a reason to turn down Jack if he asks...”

“Only if you promise to be hopeless. He’d catch on otherwise.” Alana’s green eyes sparkled as she took Robert’s hand and led him into the fray.

“I don’t think you have to worry.”

They danced close to half an hour, Irish dance at that. More than once, Robert stepped on her toes, but she didn’t say a word. It was too loud to hear anyway.

Alana flew from Robert’s side in a move that had nothing to do with the dance.

Jack had arrived.

“Should have known you’d try to steal the one woman worth having in this dump when my back was turned.”

As much as Robert wanted to punch the asshole, a dark-haired boy did the honors without waiting for anyone to answer. Jack hit the ground easily. He was already drunk, as usual. Big-boned bitch or not, Jack didn’t seem to be taking the separation well. The music stopped and the room went silent.

“You all right, Ma?” the boy asked. He was the serious soccer player Robert had seen all week.

Alana looked at the man out on the floor. “Just fine, Dillon.”

With a smile, the boy turned back to his friends as if his actions were nothing at all.

“Why do I get the feeling that isn’t the first time he’s had to do that?” Robert asked as he got them something to drink.

“Those American tourists of yours cause trouble.” Alana grinned. “Single men are the worst.”

“Then why ask one to bring you tonight?”

Alana bit her lip as the music finally got going again once Jack was dragged away. “Stupidity probably.”

“Most likely, but would you care to try to dance again despite that?”

“Sure.”

Robert was by no means proficient, but when he finally stopped, it had been some time since he had knocked into anyone, stepped on someone’s toes, or generally stuck out like a sore thumb. Alana, on the other hand, was quite proficient when he didn’t hold her back.

Robert sank in a chair on the edge of the room, exhausted. He hadn’t been that active in a while, and that included his three times a week at the gym and being assistant basketball coach. Alana was flushed but smiling as she danced with her son. The room was emptying out, probably the only reason she got him out there.

It was two in the morning, after all.

“Walk me home.”

Robert opened his eyes at Alana’s voice. “Why’d you put up with me all night?”

She smiled as she pulled him up. “I like having a good time.”

“I thought I was the one that was supposed to be giving the compliments.”

“Night, Ma,” the boy called.

Robert looked at him more closely. Alana’s son was a tall thin boy, but the punch he threw showed the thinness was deceptive. He was good looking; took after his mother in that.

“You get home, too, Dillon. It’s late you don’t get enough sleep,” Alana answered back.

“After I see Siobhan home.”

“Then get going. I’ll walk slowly but if you aren’t back by the time I get home, I’ll come get you myself. I promised your grandmother we’d come by tomorrow and see her to church early.”

The boy grabbed a girl’s hand and they headed off. It was obvious he wanted a little time alone with her before he went home. Alana slipped her arm in Robert’s as if it were the most natural thing to do. The dark of the night engulfed them as they slipped into the empty village of Baile an fheirteraigh.

“Tell me the truth. You danced more than just in your spare time, didn’t you?” Robert asked when the last noise of the dance was behind them.

“Primary and secondary school, but I haven’t practiced since college; never competed, if that’s what you’re thinking. And I’ve already told you, that was more years ago than I plan on admitting. Like riding a bike, isn’t that the saying you Americans use?”

“I suppose I shouldn’t mention I can guess when that might have been.”

She tensed again even though Robert had been teasing. “Dillon, you mean? I suppose you think I should have mentioned him?”

“Why? For all you know, I might have a wife and ten kids back home.”

The arm linked with Robert loosened. “Do you?” Alana asked with some of the old flirting in her voice.

“Widower. She died in a car accident a long time ago. I have a daughter, Jolie, in the Peace Corps. I’m on my way back from seeing her in Botswana. Helped her teach school for a month. I’ll go visit her next summer, too, before she gets to come home.”

“And now, you come alone to learn Gaelic for two weeks?”

“I might stay and take some of the more advanced classes. Perhaps there is a beautiful red-haired angel that might take me in.”

Alana’s laugh was genuine. “Except for the angel part, I would have expected that from Jack’s mouth, not yours.”

Looking at the woman on his arm, the flirting came easy. “How about just one angel then?”

“Ahh, that’s more like it, but don’t you have to get back to work?”

Robert spread his hands as if laying all the cards out. “I’m a school teacher, remember. I have the summer to just roam.”

“I should have known. Every summer you go find some secluded place and leech off a local woman.”

“You’d rather Jack’s sort, then?”

Alana shoved him away, laughing. They left the streets of the village behind, and the full moon lit the landscape as they turned off on a dirt lane. “I was just joking. That was a downright threat.”

“All right then, no more joking. Did I pass the test to be able to see you again before I leave?”

“If you only want to see me again, you can just go to the pub any night. If you’re asking if we might go out again, I think you might just have squeaked by.”

Robert hid the smile. “Then just let me know when you don’t have to work.”

Alana stopped in front of a house, one of the old traditional cottages. This one stepped out onto the beach. “Admit it. You just want someone to practice your Gaelic with.”

“Teach me some curse words to tell off Jack and I won’t utter a word of my horrible attempts at your native tongue.”

Alana reached over and kissed his cheek. “Think you can find your way back here Tuesday? We’ll find somewhere to go where Jack won’t show up.”

A whistle came out of the night. Dillon was home.

“Better not get fresh here with me Ma. My hand may still hurt but that won’t stop me.” He clapped Robert on the back playfully, his grin as big as the crescent moon above.

Alana pushed Dillon toward the door. “Wouldn’t have let him bring me back if I was worried of that.”

Dillon disappeared in the house with a yawn.

Robert, on the other hand, had started walking back down the lane headed for town. “I think I should be offended that a beautiful woman doesn’t even consider me a threat for getting fresh with her. You could have at least lied to save my ego,” he called back.

Alana tried to hold it in, but the grin sprang forth. “Stop by the pub tomorrow night. I’ll make sure your ego doesn’t suffer.”

Robert wondered just what she meant the whole way home. The images that came to mind were not those of a gentleman, not by a long shot.

Chapter Two

The pub had decent food, so Robert made his way over in time for supper. Pushing the door open was like flipping a switch. All noise inside stopped, but heads went together. It couldn't be heard, but the gossip was evident. Robert leaned across the bar to where Alana was getting someone's drink. "Just what did you say?"

"Me? Not a thing." She was lying. It was written all over her face.

"Then why do I feel like it's the first day of class and I'm not prepared for it."

She laughed, but leaned near his ear, only adding to the gossip. "It was Dillon done the talking. About how you hadn't left the house until we were going to collect my mother for church. He was quite persuasive."

"I suppose the priest will come paying me a visit, too?"

Alana grinned as she took the glasses across the room. Everywhere Robert looked, there were eyes upon him. Then in the corner, he saw Jack glaring more than the rest. As if Jack had actually been seeing the woman and Robert had stolen her. As if Jack's heart were crushed, when Robert knew it was nothing more than she was there. Jack may have claimed Alana was the only one worth having in town, but Robert knew there was at least one, if not more, in each pub that had trouble with Jack Cahill.

"That isn't quite what I figured you'd do when I pretended a bruised ego," Robert murmured after he ordered his meal.

Alana leaned on the bar in front of him. She seemed to relish her part in the show, doing all she could to make it seem that Dillon's story was true. That it gave

Robert a view of her magnificent cleavage was only an added benefit. “Getting punched out last night didn’t seem to faze him. Dillon was here eating lunch when Jack started bothering me again. I guess he figured a true competitor would be more of an obstacle.”

“No fair. If they’re going to call me your man, I would expect to have at least kissed you. I mean, I have to put up with all the abuse and get none of the benefits.”

The smile on her face was devilish, not at all fitting with her words. “Benefits you have to earn.”

“With that incentive, I might have to stick around my last month instead of traveling about.”

“I know at least one red-haired angel that hopes you do.” Alana leaned over and kissed him lightly. Jack stormed out of the building and with that, Alana finally turned to take care of the order that someone called to her.

When Monday came, Robert sat in class sensing something was missing even before he realized what it was. Jack sat at the back as usual, but there was no blow-by-blow account of Karen Cahill. Silence reigned. When a whole break went by without a word from Jack, the entire class let out a sigh of relief.

Tuesday it repeated. They had to wonder if Dillon had broken his jaw or if it was just his pride. The women, not being pub goers, probably hadn’t heard the news, but Robert had a feeling it was pride all right, just not over a boy punching him out while he was drunk.

“Robert, can I have a word with you?” the teacher called as they emptied out of the room at the end of the day.

“Haven’t had a test, yet. You can’t be letting me know you’re going to tell my parents.”

The teacher grinned, then her levity faded. “So, I understand you’ve gotten together with Alana Riordan. Rather quick, isn’t it?”

It wasn’t the first time he had heard this since Sunday night. “You know if I was fifteen, you might have some cause to talk to me, but seeing as I’m older than you are, I don’t see that it’s your business.”

The woman straightened noticeably. “That boy’s a bastard. She fornicated out of wedlock.”

“Oh, and I’m so sure you’ve never done the same. Is it just that you never got caught? Is that how you can stand there and condemn her?” Robert walked out wondering if Jack had heard that story before and thought she was easy.

For some reason, Robert felt he needed to check over his shoulder to see if Jack was following him as he headed to the cottage on the beach. He knew it was paranoia. Jack never left the pubs of Ballyferriter. In full light, the cottage wasn’t so traditional other than the exterior design.

Dillon answered the door when he knocked, but didn’t call out for Alana. “Ma says you’re a teacher. What subject? Ma won’t let me play soccer if I don’t get a good mark on this.” he asked instead, as Robert took in the interior of the house. Chinese slate floor, TV lounge, study— it was not what he had expected to find.

“English.”

“Brilliant. I was hoping you’d say that. I have a report due on Friday, and I keep getting marks taken off and don’t know why. Maybe you can explain it so I can understand.” Dillon headed for the table without waiting for a yes or no, perhaps reasoning that if Robert was interested in his mother, he’d want to get in good with her son. As the boy slid into the chair, he seemed to remember why Robert was actually there. “Ma ran to the store. We were out of something for supper. She’ll be back soon.”

“You play a lot of soccer then?”

A massive grin took over the boy’s face. “I was on the U-17 world cup team last year. Ma works so much I hardly see her so I can afford to compete. I have a full scholarship to Dublin University in sport science and health as long as Ma doesn’t stop me playing because I don’t keep this grade up.”

That was how Alana found them, with Robert playing teacher to a boy that spoke Gaelic before English. She didn’t say a word though, just went to the kitchen, a solid cherry wood room that seemed as red as the hair of the woman that cooked in it.

“There now, do you understand why you were getting it wrong?” Robert finally asked as he sat back.

“I think so, but could I show it to you Thursday so you can check it over before I hand it in.”

“Sure.”

With that, Dillon was already half way out the door. “Ma, I’ll see you tonight then. Siobhan asked me to supper. Your new friend didn’t come to see me.”

“His name is Robert. Seeing as you put us in bed together, you should know that. Sit down so we can have supper like a family when I’m home. Two or three meals a week isn’t asking too much, is it?”

“I promised Siobhan.”

“Oh, and that I saw her parents on their way to dinner in Dingle had nothing to do with your wanting out of my way. They said they’d be back at nine. You’re free to go over then until your curfew. Now, go wash up and set the table.”

Robert joined her in the kitchen once Dillon was out of sight. “You have that mother tone perfected.”

“I don’t kid myself it isn’t happening, but that doesn’t mean I have to make it easy for them.”

“And that you have a reason to want to keep a close eye on him doesn’t fit in there any?”

Alana raised her head slowly. The look in her eyes broke his heart. He regretted his words.

“Small town gossip I suppose,” she whispered, knowing exactly how he knew.

“Is it that they’re worried I’ll lead you down the wrong path?” Robert whispered. “After all, you have to watch out for us Americans.”

Dillon returned, saving her from having to answer, but she stayed distracted. Dillon made up for it though, pumping Robert for information on America. At least he didn’t ask soccer news he knew nothing. When the dishes were through, he was gone. The magic hour of nine had arrived.

Robert put up the last dish to find Alana had disappeared as well. Only when he looked outside did he find her on a bench, looking out at the ocean. She didn't even look over when he sat next to her. The view he had found incredible spread out before them in the late summer sun.

"It's the 21st century. You'd never guess if you went and talked to that town," Alana finally muttered.

"They're all just jealous. They want what they can't have."

"God, where were you seventeen years ago? I could have used you in my corner."

"Then you would have been out of luck. I don't think my wife would have approved of that."

Finally, Alana looked over and shook her head, but she didn't hide the grin. "Maybe I shouldn't have bad mouthed Americans so long."

"And if Jack was all you'd met, you'd still be cursing us?"

"Case by case basis then."

"If we're sleeping together, don't suppose you'd tell me your version?"

Alana laughed slightly. "And no, my complaining about Americans isn't from this. He was Irish. I had just graduated from college with a degree in archeology, of all things. Twenty-five and I thought we were going to get married. Swore he was the one until he was gone. Just vanished off the face of the earth. Didn't even know I was expecting until after he left. I think most of the town would have let it go if my mother hadn't acted as if she was some medieval mother superior. She deigns to have us around, but I know she

spends her time when we're not there complaining about how I should never have any happiness with another until he dies."

"Seventeen years and I've not seen him even once. For all I know, he is dead. Or she thinks I should be put on bread and water as penance. She lives down the road a ways in Dunquin. At least she isn't right in town to spread her anger."

"I take it Dillon got used to defending your honor?"

"Yeah," she whispered. She looked so uncomfortable sitting there. Then she raised her eyes and the stiffness faded a little. "How come you're so good at listening to this?"

"High school teacher in a large school in a large city. I've listened to a good number pour out their souls when they found out they were pregnant or got their girlfriends that way."

"Of course, should have known."

Robert pulled her over so she rested against his shoulder. She let it happen without comment. He had passed the test it seemed. "And that's why you're here working in a pub when you have a college degree?"

"You try and run a boy around the country and world with a normal job."

Robert nudged her slightly. "Not sure it's worth getting annoyed at American tourists that try to pick you up?"

"I seem to remember I picked you up. So you must be different or I must be stupid, seeing as you leave at the end of the week."

"I squeaked by and talked them into letting me into the Irish conversation class that starts the ninth. And, I put my name down to rent a room at a writer's retreat in

Inch for the days in between them. Then it will be time I get back for the school year to start.”

Her voice was hard to hear over the sound of the surf. “Because of what I said?”

“No, because I’ve decided if I’m going to seduce an Irish angel, it should be done in Gaelic.”

Alana laughed into his arm. She was just enjoying the fact that there was someone to talk to that didn’t care what her mother tried to push on the town. “They won’t teach you those words. Why do you think Jack is having so much trouble?”

“Could be I told everyone he’s still married. Could be they see him for the ass he is.”

Alana slipped her fingers in Robert’s. “You do realize by the time you’d be able to speak well enough to not get your face slapped, it will be time for you to leave.”

Sitting there with an Irish angel in his arms, Robert felt half his age. Were fifty year olds supposed to be so damn horny? “Is that a hint you want me to try in English?”

“Just saying I’ve heard you speaking Gaelic. You’ll be a lonely man if you’re waiting for that.”

Her fingers in his kept him from being able to move her away. Finally, he just stood up and she, by necessity, had to come with him. He slipped off his shoes and Alana followed suit. Beal Ban—the white sandy beach stretching out before the house—was calling as the sun set.

Robert never asked any of those words that he would have needed to propose anything. He’d only known Alana a week after all, but, God, it felt right as they walked along the beach with his arm around her neck.

They headed back in time to make sure Dillon made his curfew.

“I have Friday night off,” she added as Dillon oversaw Robert’s departure.

“*Pog* is the word you want to use. You’re not going to leave without a kiss goodnight are you?” Dillon called as he headed to his room.

“*Pog mo thon.*” Robert called to him as he walked off.

Dillon stopped in the hall. “I know the school didn’t teach you kiss my ass.”

Robert grinned. “Heard Jack being told it often enough to figure out what it meant.” Even Dillon was laughing.

“I’ll see you Friday then?” Alana asked low enough that Dillon didn’t overhear.

“I’ll see what Gaelic I can learn before then and prove to you that I won’t be lonely long.” Robert closed the door before she had a chance to answer.

Thing was, he would be gone in not even a month and she needed someone that would stay around longer than that. Robert knew it and he still couldn’t stop himself from saying such things.

Chapter Three

Meeting Dillon at the pub to look over his report only made the rumor more believable. Then Friday came and the class was over. Jack was out of the village and all of the students were out of the village of Baile an Fheirteragh.

While Robert sat at the bar, Jack's braying laugh suddenly filled the room. Maybe he hadn't gone so far after all.

"Why do I get the feeling he's a henpecked bitter man?" Alana asked under her breath. Even over the smoke that hung in the air, he could smell her perfume.

Robert spun around to find the man that had annoyed them all with how much a bitch his wife was, hand in hand with a woman that could be none other than Karen Cahill. There was a decided difference to them. Jack was short and thin, his wife tall and heavy. Domineering and henpecked did come to mind.

What if Jack really was just an ass that said he was getting a divorce when he wanted some fun? Karen visiting eighty countries without Jack must have given him a lot of time to pretend the papers were soon to be signed. It wasn't that farfetched of an idea.

"Looks like the women of Ballyferriter might just be safe again," Alana whispered. "And without resorting to murder."

Robert laughed and turned back to her. "Come back with me. You don't have anything holding you here."

Alana raised a pale red eyebrow. “And what do you call Dillon? He’s in his last year of school. Besides, never even had me in bed. Long way to go to find out there’s no spark.”

“Already feel one. Want to find out if it’s going to be a flame? I’m not getting any younger to leave a woman I would very much like to get to know better while she sits here waiting for the next Jack to paw her when I leave in three weeks.”

From across the bar, Alana rested her chin on his shoulder as he looked out over the scene. “Would you have uprooted your daughter her last year of school to go following after some woman you’d barely met?”

“No, but . . .”

“The offer’s very tempting. It’s not the right time though. Let’s see where things are when it’s time for you to leave. You might have gotten sick of me by then.”

With her so close, Robert could smell her perfume clearly. He tried to keep his mind from thinking of anything else. “Doubt that.”

Her chuckle was loud in his ear.

“Is this the one that’s fucking my daughter!” came a yell from across the room.

Robert barely had time to adjust his gaze before he found another large-boned woman coming at him.

“The woman’s forty-three. It’s not as if it’s any of your business.” He turned to Alana, “Can I get a pint?”

The white haired harridan shook an umbrella point at him, almost taking an eye out. “Not my business? I was the one left to live with the shame of her pregnant out of wedlock. Every person on the peninsula knows about it.”

Alana handed over a glass but refused to look him in the eyes as he took it from her. Robert turned back to face the old woman as he took a slow drink from his glass. Over her shoulder, Jack sat grinning like the cat that ate the canary.

“Dillon started that story to stop that man in the back of the room from hitting on his mother, because he obviously thought she was easy after hearing all the gossip you keep stirred up with your incessant hounding. The woman I’ve gotten to know is nowhere near the woman I heard gossip about. Mrs. Riordan, I’ve not so much as kissed your daughter. Doesn’t mean I don’t want to, like every other man in the room. Quit your yelling and let her live her life.” He felt like a teacher again, trying to calm a distraught parent. Never thought it would be the woman he was interested in he was defending, not at his age.

Robert barely had his speech out when Karen Cahill started screaming. “You damned liar. You said that girl was the last one.”

No one was paying them any mind when Alana leaned back over the bar nearer his ear. “So much for that ego of yours.”

“I don’t care that this town thinks you’ve shot me down, as long as you don’t actually turn me down in private.”

Karen’s shrill voice filled the air when Alana’s whisper filled his ear. “Turn your head.”

His head barely had to move and her mouth was on his. Despite being in a public house and her mother standing feet away, she didn’t seem worried that anyone might see them. Finally, after a long while, she pulled away, her breathing a bit ragged.

“Robert Aherne, I don’t think you have to worry about being shot down in public or private,” she whispered once more before she straightened up and started filling glasses to take around.

“Pull up a stool, Mrs. Riordan, and have a pint. Should be quite a show,” Robert called, once he knew Alana was well out of range for the irate mother to gather what had just happened. The old woman watched the fighting in the back for a moment before she sat.

“You did that on purpose?”

Robert looked over his shoulder at Jack Cahill in the fight of his life. He couldn’t keep the smile from coming to his face. “Yes, ma’am, I did.”

“You truly haven’t slept with Alana?”

“I’m a fifty year old widower with a twenty-five year old daughter, and that is none of your business.”

Alana came back and handed her mother a glass. Mrs. Riordan raised her eyes, the same brilliant green of her daughter’s. Robert could picture her having that same red hair, perhaps being just as beautiful, though with the years it was hard to tell now.

“He speaks Gaelic?” she asked Alana unexpectedly.

Screams from the back of the room broke the calm before Jack went running with Karen in close second. Then silence.

“He’s here for the school. He’s learning.” A call for another pint pulled Alana away while Mrs. Riordan stared at Robert.

She pulled a napkin over and wrote a few lines down. “You might need these then. I hope you use them in that order. You’re the first man to stand up to me in fifty

years. Hope I'm not putting my faith where it shouldn't be." She picked up her pint and drained it quickly before she walked out.

With a smile, Robert pulled the napkin over.

Pos — Marry

Craicean a bhualadh le — to have sex with

He was still staring at it when he felt Alana's hand slip around him from behind.

"You been asking after class to get those words?"

"What if I said your mother just handed them to me? Said it should be used in the order she wrote it."

Alana growled. "Of course she would."

Robert spun on his stool so they were face to face and with a grin, he turned the piece of paper so it was upside down. "There now, we can have some fun and not offend your mother."

Alana bit her lip, trying not to laugh. "It's been a while. You might have to keep me after class until I get it right."

"Just don't be too bad. I'd have to call your mother to have a talk if you were hopeless."

Alana's head fell to his shoulder as the laughter poured out. With her in his arms, he felt like an eighteen year old unable to control himself at the mere thought of a woman. Hell, he didn't even have to go back that far, back in the days he was courting his wife.

"You're going to start stories again with this behavior," he whispered, trying not to run his hands all over her.

The laughter stopped and she looked him in the eyes. “Robert, why did she give you those words?”

“Said I was the only man to stand up to her in fifty years.”

A single long curl fell over her eyes as she turned her head to him. “Now that I would believe,” Alana replied as she went behind the bar.

Sitting in the writers’ retreat in Inch, Robert wrote a letter to his daughter. He had rented the place for the week between the beginner class and the intermediate, but now that he sat there, it was too far from seeing Alana at the pub every night as she worked.

God, he knew he sounded like some teenage boy mooning over some crush but he couldn’t help it. Coming back from the post office, he stopped when he saw the door to his room slightly open. Clouds had rolled in as the night hastened to black and a light mist was falling. It was easy to see a light coming from the room. Not as bright as the lamp, but a light nonetheless. Peering in the door, Robert could only stare at the sight of Alana, long curly red hair loose as she lit a candle.

“Who’s making sure Dillon isn’t getting into trouble?” Robert asked softly, trying not to scare her.

“My mother came to stay for the week”

“No wonder you’re hiding out here.”

Alana straightened with a smile as Robert pulled the door closed behind him. She came so close he could feel the heat off her. “Not hiding.”

Her fingers started slipping the buttons of his shirt free until the gray hairs on his chest were open to view. Sliding her hands beneath the material, Alana watched his eyes

slide shut as her fingers explored. “I’m not young like I once was, but to see you watch me, the years might as well have vanished.”

Robert opened his eyes in time to see her smile. “How can you even say such a thing? You’re gorgeous.” He couldn’t keep his hands to himself. The skin of her neck was as soft as silk as his fingers grazed it. The smell of roses emanated from her as his face drew closer. At the slightest touch of his lips, her head fell back, exposing a long expanse of neck as white as the sand on the beach.

Her smile grew as she unzipped his pants. “I took the week off. We have time to get it right.”

Robert’s hands covered hers before she could slip them inside. She wore a dress that buttoned from neck to hem. Anxious to see all of her, he just grabbed the hem and pulled it over her head.

He smiled as his eyes grazed every curve.

“What is that smile for?”

“Jack was wrong. Spent days listening to him talk about what you would look like out of your clothes. He wasn’t even close. You’re perfection. That and you must be horny, since you didn’t even wear any underwear to come and seduce me.”

Alana laughed as Robert pushed her to the bed. “Worked, didn’t it?”

Only when he was looking down into her face as she lay on the bed did he answer. He didn’t take his pants off even if they lay lined up just right. “You had me seduced that night on the beach. You could have never taken your clothes off for me and I would still be dreaming of you when I go home.”

“True, you asked me to go back with you already and that was even before a kiss.”

His mouth stopped any more words from forming. Her lips opened under his probing tongue.

When he pulled his head up, the candle looked far shorter and they had done nothing more than kiss. God, an hour at least of making out like two teens.

“I think I’ve been at a high school too long watching kids in the hall.” He remedied it quickly enough as his hands started to explore. “What is it about you that makes me feel like a kid again?”

“You want me to act like an adult. Will that help? *Pog mo ba*,” she whispered.

“You’ll have to help me with this one. *Thon* is ass and I learned *Cioch*.” He pulled his head down and flicked her nipple with his tongue.

“Definitely learned that one.” Alana gasped before he took it all in his mouth. His tongue played with the hard nipple, pulling a moan deep out of her throat.

“Do I get a hint?” Robert finally asked.

Alana was in the process of another moan as his fingers kept up where his tongue had vacated. She only spread her legs beneath him.

“I think I might learn a lot more Gaelic this way than I did in class. All week is it?” Robert murmured as his fingers found the bright red curls between her legs. “If you only spoke Gaelic, I’d be fluent when I have to go back to class.”

“None of it you should repeat,” Alana said before Robert’s fingers parted the curls and found the flesh beneath. Her sigh needed no translation.

“Like you should be teaching me that. Most undignified for a good girl.” Robert started grinning. “But since you asked so nice. Just be glad the beds are so big here. I’m getting too old to twist into a pretzel.”

Alana laughed until his tongue reached where his fingers had just teased. “Oh, god.”

“Just remember you have to confess for this.”

“Been fourteen years since I had to confess anything more than ill feelings toward my mother. I’m due for something juicy to tell. Just don’t . . . stop.” The last word gasped out as he plunged his tongue in as far as he could go.

As dawn filled the room with light, Alana woke with Robert’s arms around her. She moved a fraction, and his fingers entwined with hers.

“I could get used to waking up next to you,” he whispered in her ear.

She could guess where that was leading. “I won’t uproot Dillon.”

“I know. Just thinking I’ll just have to get as much of you as I can before I have to leave.” Robert rolled her flat on her back. There was no hurry to his kiss as he woke her properly.

“Now how about you show me some of Ireland? I need a little time to recover, even with the sight of you naked next to me,” he said.

Alana laughed as she pulled herself out of bed. “Liam has some pills for that problem. Should I go ask if you can borrow a few?”

Alana was distracted when she saw Robert had no need for any such help as he grew before her eyes, just at the thought. The pillow caught her in the head without warning.

“Just for that you have to wait until tonight.”

It rained for most of the time, but by supper that third day, it finally cleared. They pulled the table outside to dine in the glorious sunset.

“How long have you been married?” the caretaker asked as he did his rounds.

Alana was inside refilling her glass and Robert could only try to keep a straight face. “Will you kick me out if I said we aren’t?”

The caretaker’s eyebrow rose a bit. “Look like you are,” was all he said as he walked away.

Robert was still smiling when Alana came out. “Just the thought of me sends you into goofy grins. How old are you again?”

“Caretaker thought we were married.”

“You realize everyone will probably know exactly what we were up to now.”

“So? I can live with it if you can.” Robert pulled her into his lap. “If everyone’s going to know, it’s going to be the truth this time.”

“Already is.”

“Just in case there are any doubts.” Robert’s hand slipped under her shirt and found a breast. He could see the caretaker coming back over her shoulder but that didn’t stop him from kissing her.

“*Scaoil amach do bhoibili’n.*” The man muttered as he passed by.

Alana started laughing.

“What was that? Can’t say I’ve learned that one from you.”

“He told you to go for it.”

“Well now that I have permission...” Robert took her by the hand and firmly closed the door as the caretaker smiled.

Chapter Four

Even though they had arrived back in town separately, and Robert didn't show up until class was over for the day, everyone in the pub did indeed know what had happened in the last week. Even more, Mrs. Riordan sat there eating her supper.

"Don't listen very well, do you? Went and screwed up the order of my list." She didn't say it when Alana was right there to hear it though.

Robert still had it in his pocket and was able to pull it out with a grin. "I can read upside down. You never said which end was up," he said quietly as he pushed the napkin over.

The seventy-year-old woman started to shake, trying not to laugh. "Pull up a stool and tell me about yourself. I'm Bridget."

Sitting in conversation class Monday, Robert could answer most of the questions that were put to him. It was the same teacher from only a week before and she narrowed her eyes at how he had improved.

He kept many words he had learned unspoken though. His mind wasn't in the classroom anymore. It was sitting at a bar in a pub. Three weeks was all it had been. Three weeks ago he had come to town unattached, with no plans of anything. Not a red-haired angel named Alana, for certain.

When he talked of home, she listened politely and smiled, but she never brought up his offer. One he wanted to make now even more than he had a week ago, though he didn't make it again.

He walked into the pub after class, but Alana rushed about, barely able to give him a smile as he came through the door.

"Hope you appreciate it. She had to make all sorts of deals to take off last week. It's the height of the tourist season," the cook said as he brought out his food. "Don't expect anything this week. She'll be working."

"And what would I be expecting?"

The cook stopped and looked back at him until a call took him to the kitchen.

Sitting outside Alana's house staring at the ocean, Robert closed his eyes. Why did going back to Boston suddenly seem like such a chore?

"And what are you doing here, Robert?" Alana's voice broke the silence.

He opened his eyes slowly as she slipped into the crook of his arm that was draped over the back of the bench.

"Seems to be the only place I can sit without being whispered about."

"I thought my mother hadn't been spreading hate anymore."

Robert couldn't help but grin as he pulled her closer and leaned near her ear.

"Now they all seem to be wondering just how I was able to crack the heart of an angel. You might want to come back with me, save yourself having the entire single male population having their chance at it."

“I’ll go buy myself a ring so they all think you’ll come and take care of them if they dare.” Alana pulled the arm around her until his hand rested on her breast. “I have ten minutes until I have to leave. We might as well not waste it.”

“Where’s Dillon?” Robert asked as he pulled her onto his lap. Her forehead rested against his, and in that, he felt as if she were telling him she’d go with him if she were able.

“Pleading to get a feel of the same probably.”

“Good, wouldn’t want to get belted for attacking you,” Robert whispered before his mouth descended on hers, cutting off her smirk. The little sigh that slipped out of her mouth as he dipped his hand down the front of her dress made him wonder how he would ever be able to leave.

God, he loved that sound almost as much as her laugh.

It was Friday evening as he ate supper at the pub when Alana leaned near his ear as she passed. “Don’t suppose you’ll ever come back this way again?”

“Do you want me to?”

She slid into the chair across from him. “Aye, I do. When you go gallivanting around again, you’ll know where to find me.”

“It might not be until next summer.”

“I don’t move on so quickly. You should know that by now.”

Robert lowered his head, hiding his grin in his glass. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“You done eating?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ll leave with a proper goodbye then. I’m off now.” No angel showed in the smile she gave him.

Chapter Five

Five months later

The ground was already white outside the window of his classroom as Robert watched the snow fall heavier each minute. The students were restless. It was almost time for lunch and it was Friday. The day seemed as if it would never end. Winter break was over. There were no holidays to look forward to for some time. He was grateful when a knock on the door provided a distraction.

No one entered.

“Come in.” Robert called, drawing the attention of all the students. The door opened, but it was a second before anyone appeared. As a coat hood was pulled down, Robert caught a flash of red hair. He didn’t need to see anymore.

“Alana?”

She looked up with a smile, wearing the ubiquitous Irish wool sweater, but even in that she looked good. “You don’t mind me dropping in, do you?”

“You said you couldn’t leave.” The classroom was gone; he could see only her.

“You kept asking about right then. I never heard you say anything about later on. Figured I’d surprise you.”

“You did that.” The students laughed, but still Alana walked closer. “Why now and not five months ago?”

“I suppose you forget that the schools in Ireland go year round and start in January. I saw Dillon off to university last week and now I’m free of commitments. Assuming you haven’t moved on so quickly, I’m here to ask if your offer still stands.”

“Baile an Fheirteraigh is your home.”

“Still will be. You wouldn’t mind a summerhouse in Ireland, somewhere to retire someday. I’ve spent enough years there for Dillon’s sake. High time I see a bit of the world again. That is one wonderful thing about waiting tables at a pub — I can drop it at a moment’s notice. I’m not giving up a career after all.”

Robert wanted not to smile. He was a teacher standing in front of his class and he wanted nothing more than to take her home to show her how much he missed her. “You couldn’t have shown up at my house?” he said instead of what he was thinking.

“Now why would that be?” she answered and the class burst out laughing. “I thought of that contingency. I called ahead so you have a sub coming for your afternoon classes.”

Robert groaned. “I hate to think of what excuse you used on the principal.”

“I just told him I was family visiting from out of town on the spur of the moment and I wanted to surprise you.”

The bell rang and the students rushed past them, but the sidelong glances as they passed was enough to let Robert know the story would be around the school quickly. One or two seniors even slapped him on the back, almost in congratulations.

“Why did I ever consider you an angel?” Robert muttered when the room was finally empty, but he was pulling her close even as the last student shut the door.

“There is one thing I didn’t mention in front of your students.”

Robert stopped short of kissing her at her words.

“I only have a tourist visa. That means you have three months to figure out if I’m worth keeping.”

“I’ll have to call Jack then and see if he would want to meet us in Ballyferriter for a March wedding. American schools have spring break then, or is that moving too fast for the woman that had the town thinking we were sleeping together long before we ever did?”

“You’re bringing up his name to me!”

Robert finally kissed her, stopping her protest. “Why not? If it wasn’t for him, we would have never gotten together.”

Alana cocked her head. “If you go and tell me you’re friends with Jack, I’ll go back and curse American men for the rest of my life.”

“If you can wait all of twenty minutes, you can use his face as a target on my dart board. I had it made special when I got back.”

“That’s more like it.”

God, he had missed that laugh.

The End

About the Author

As a Peace Corps volunteer in Kenya a few years back I traveled quite a bit and now I just wish I was. A lot of the places I've written about I've been to, a lot of them I haven't. Rafting on the Nile in Uganda, living in a Montana ghost town, African safaris, European youth hostels, the Black Hills of South Dakota all fill my scrapbooks. Now a daughter takes up most of those pages, but I still travel in my head every time I write.

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