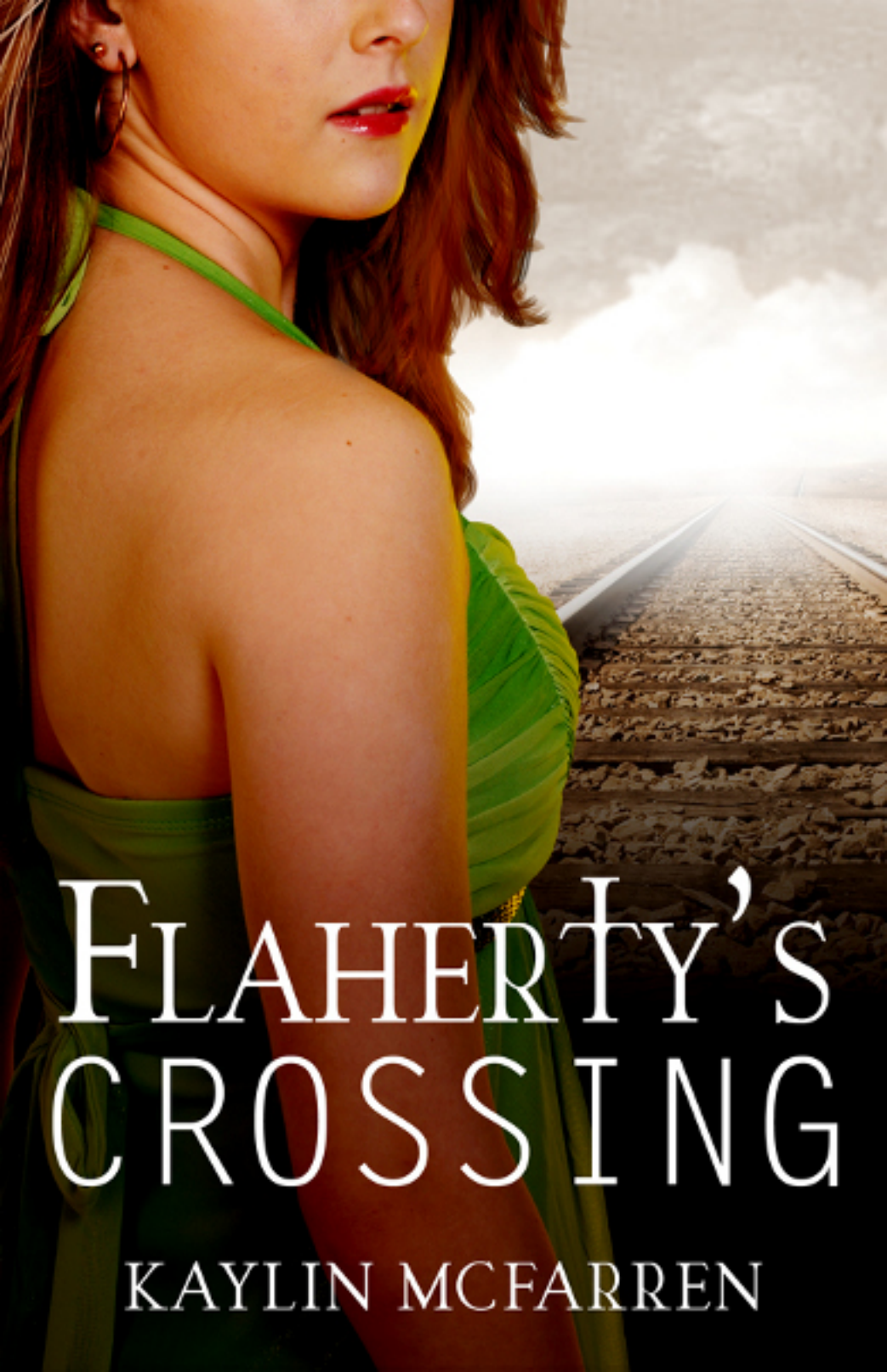




FLAHERTY'S CROSSING

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The Journey Begins...

One

The last grain of sand was about to drop in her father's invisible hourglass and there was nothing Kate Flaherty could do to stop it. The realization launched a shudder up her spine.

She'd known this day was inevitable. Yet it still came as a shock when she'd learned only hours ago that his final days had arrived. She should have come back sooner.

No--it was his fault, not hers. She'd had every right to stay away after discovering the truth. So why did she feel remorse encroaching on her anger, his gurgling breaths draining strength from her limbs?

In his curtain-drawn bedroom, she perched on the edge of the mattress, a few inches away from what had become a mere sketch of a man. The lamp's amber glow cast shadows across his features, accentuating how much he'd deteriorated in just under a month.

Surgery, chemo, radiation therapy. For two years, she'd watched his heavyset frame shrink with every trip to the hospital, his sixty-three year old body blast through a time warp. But never ravaged to this extent. She barely recognized the sheeted man beside her. Mussed strands of thin, ghost-white hair, matching jagged mustache, and stubbly chin were all that remained of the father she knew. He was more of a stranger than ever before.

Slowly, he lifted his eyelids and turned his face. When their gazes met, a spark of recognition flickered. "You're here," he rasped as he reached for her hand.

She accepted reluctantly. His palm was cold and clammy, his skin sallow and tissue-thin. She swallowed hard, wanting to pull away, but the child in her resisted, the part of her that had never stopped longing for his affection.

"Where've you been?" He inhaled a labored breath. "I was waiting for ya."

"I..." A lump of guilt formed in her throat, blocking any answer.

"Is the baby ready?"

She stared at him, shocked. His words made no sense. "What, Dad?"

"We gotta go. Don't wanna hit traffic, Iris."

Kate's heart plummeted before she could remind herself of what he'd done. She slipped her hand away and clenched her fists, her nails biting into her palms. She tried to reignite the rage she was entitled to, but he appeared so defenseless, she summoned only the foreboding of imminent loss.

She leaned toward him. His gaze fixed on the ceiling. All she had to do was say good-bye, just as she'd done countless times throughout her youth. It would be a relief-- for both of them.

"Dad, it's me, Katie."

"Mmm. Smells so good."

She sniffed automatically, half-expecting the aroma of her father's favorite rosemary-garlic potatoes roasting in the kitchen down the hall. Instead, she inhaled only the nauseating odor of disinfectant, bodily fluids and medication. Her stomach reeled.

"Dad, can you hear me?"

"How long till supper, darlin'?"

The question caught her off guard. "Are you...hungry?"

"He can't eat anymore, dear," a woman reported from behind her. Kate turned toward the doorway where Doris Shaffer stood. The portly hospice nurse, her knotted hair as white as her smock, looked on with kind eyes.

When Doris's comment sunk in, a wave of horror rolled over Kate.

"What about his protein drinks?"

"He isn't able to keep any food down, I'm afraid."

As though cancer wasn't bad enough. Now he was starving.

"You're welcome to give him some ice chips. I'm sure he'd like that."

Doris pointed at the nightstand next to Kate. There, on the corner of the table, his thick-rimmed glasses rested beside the remote control for the small

television he'd watched during her last series of visits--visits in which *The Price is Right* appeared more interesting than any conversation she had to offer. But then, after all these years, why had she expected anything different?

In the center of an aged doily sat a metal soup bowl dotted with condensation and filled with a mound of ice slivers. She glanced at the raw corners of her father's mouth. Compassion guided her hand to retrieve the spoon poking out from the bowl.

"Lamb, corn, potatoes..." As he rambled off the menu, Kate pictured her apron-clad mother peeking into the window of the heated oven. But just as her mom had vanished from their lives, so did the image. "Think I'll need a bigger belt," he said and chuckled, a sound Kate hadn't heard in years.

She placed a spoonful of melting ice on his tongue, and without taking her gaze off his face, she asked Doris in an even tone, "Isn't there anything else you can do for him?"

"At this stage, we're just trying to keep him comfortable."

At this stage. Such finality in those words. Kate fought the tremble in her hand as she transported a second scoop toward his mouth, but a good portion landed on the crumpled sheet. Immediately, she set down the spoon and brushed the ice off the bed in frantic sweeps.

She had to get this over with. "Dad, can you hear me?"

"The showerhead needs changing." He'd begun to slur.

"Dad?"

"Closet door needs oiling..." He trailed off in a gurgle.

"It's the morphine," Doris explained. "Sends him off on tangents that don't make a whole lot of sense."

Not always the case. Sometimes those tangents made all too much sense.

A cavernous moan caused Kate to jump. It took her a second to realize the sound had actually come from her father. This wasn't fair. How could she maintain resentment for someone enduring such suffering?

Just then, fluctuating numbers on a green screen captured her gaze.

Resembling a large calculator, the morphine pump parked between them blinked to attention. A timed dose of truth serum flowed through the tube, disappearing under the white bed sheet.

"He'll sleep for a while now," Doris said. "I've put some tea on. You're more than welcome to join me."

"Thank you." Kate shot to her feet and led the way. She needed to breathe, to escape the stifling weight of the room.

The walls lining the narrow hall spoke through symbols: empty nail holes her father had never filled and rectangles defined by contrasting shades on the faded floral wallpaper. All evidence of where framed photographs had hung when she was a kid. Memories her father had done his best to erase.

Upon reaching the family room, Kate edged around a low coffee table and slid into the cushy sofa chair, her favorite seat in the house. She recalled her mother saying she'd purchased the avocado-green furnishing to match Kate's hazel eyes. Together they'd spent countless evenings in that very chair until Kate had insisted she was too old to sit on her mom's lap for bedtime stories.

If Kate had known what was to come, she would have cherished those sweetly spoken tales, those moments nestled in the safety of her mother's arms.

"Lemon or milk, dear?" Doris asked.

"Excuse me?"

"For your tea."

A standard question, yet it suddenly held no significance. "Either is fine."

Doris smiled as she strolled into the adjacent kitchen. Kate watched as the woman lifted the whistling kettle from the stove and reached in the cupboard.

Kate cringed at the sight of another female roaming the house with such familiarity. To dilute her discomfort, she focused on her surroundings. Decades-old books, collectable antique glassware, and stacks of magazines

littered shelves like a garage sale display after the Friday morning rush. Lint appeared woven into the brown shag carpeting. Alcoves bore patches of spider webs, and pine needles on the skylight strained grey rays from the early evening sky.

Her mother's only sibling, Aunt Sophie, would have had a conniption if she'd seen the house in such a state. Even after Sophie had moved out following Kate's graduation, the place never looked so neglected. Kate had offered to hire a housekeeper months ago, but her father wouldn't have it. He said he didn't need a stranger meddling with his "Lil' bit o' heaven," or so the place was called according to the engraved sign above the front door.

She shook her head at the irony. Her father's handmade cabin, hidden in the serene woods of Washington's Olympic peninsula, featured traits no more heavenly than an Antonin Gaudi mosaic--a vision of beauty from afar, but in reality, a composition made of broken pieces that had once been part of something whole. A deceptive masterpiece.

"Mr. Flaherty told me about all the collectors you have," Doris called from the kitchen. "You must be a very successful artist."

Kate glanced down at her tattered jeans and oversized umber sweatshirt, both splattered with an array of paint colors from the new commission she'd been working on when Doris phoned. Not until she had hit Highway 101 did she realize she'd left without scrubbing the acrylic residue from her nails. Certainly not the ideal picture of success. "I'm doing all right, I suppose."

"So what type of art do you do?"

Experience had taught Kate that the average person wasn't genuinely interested in hearing a detailed definition of multimedia abstract naturalist paintings. "Modern."

"How fascinating. You know, I once took a tole painting class at a friend's house, but all my hummingbirds ended up looking like roosters."

Kate's lips flirted with a smile, before a dull moan from the bedroom reminded her of the purpose of her visit. "Is my father ever lucid?"

Doris reentered the room balancing a pair of teacups on saucers, each

piece bearing blue and white colonial scenes. "He has his moments, though they've gotten less frequent since we had to increase his dosage." She handed over a teacup set, then sank into the lumpy russet davenport across from Kate. The scent of peppermint sweetened the room's burly smell of pine.

"I hope he hasn't been too much of a challenge for you. Accepting help has never been one of his strong points."

The corners of Doris's mouth curved up. "Well, as they say, 'Pride's been known to bring down empires.'" She winked and sipped her tea that surely contained a spoonful of sugar. All she needed was a twittering bird on her shoulder and she could play Mary Poppins on the forty-year reunion special.

"It's so nice to finally meet you in person," Doris continued. "Mr. Flaherty has raved on and on about you and your husband."

Kate passed over her words, confident the woman was embellishing to be polite. "How often have you been taking care of my father during his..."

"Transition?"

Kate lowered her gaze to the tawny liquid before her.

"I've been relieving Sarah three or four days a week."

Sarah. The Energizer Bunny with the hypnotic unibrow.

"Has anyone come to visit?" Kate asked.

"I don't believe so. Not while I've been here anyway, but I could ask Sarah for you."

"That's all right. It's not necessary."

"On second thought, a nice fellow did drop by last weekend. A tall gentleman. Silver beard. I don't recall his name, but I think your father knew him from years ago."

An old trucker buddy, no doubt. Kate raised her cup to hide her frown and blew on the steaming tea. She tested the temperature with a cautious sip. The balanced flavors of citrus and mint skimmed her tongue and warmed her throat. When she took a second sip, her necklace clinked against the saucer.

"My, that's a lovely locket," Doris remarked.

Kate glanced down at the violet jeweled keepsake. Inside, cut into a heart shape, was the only photograph of her mother she had managed to salvage. "Thank you. It was my mom's."

"She passed on, I take it?"

Passed on. Kate hated when people used that phrase, as if they were referring to a passenger on a bus who'd decided not to get off at their usual stop.

"She was killed by a drunk driver," Kate said as coolly as the reporter had on the six o'clock news. That was all Doris needed to know.

"I'm sorry."

"It happened a long time ago."

Silence settled densely around them like fog blanketing a cemetery. Kate snuck a subtle glimpse at her watch, wondering how soon her father would be awake. She drank from her teacup. "I imagine your job is tough, being surrounded by death all the time."

"Well, I must say, it's never easy letting patients go. But I take pride in easing their passage. Often when I tend to their needs, I end up feeling much like a member of the family."

Kate felt the unspoken accusation hanging in the air. She shifted in her seat.

"I suppose it's always been my calling," Doris continued, "to offer support for souls crossing over. And for the troubled ones left behind. Losing a loved one can be a traumatic and confusing time for even the strongest people. Thankfully, God never gives us more than we can bear."

Her spiel sounded suspiciously like something memorized from a hospice employee manual. The evangelical bonus chapter.

Doris tilted her head, her brow furrowed. "Was it something I said?"

Kate's face must have betrayed her distaste for religious adages. "I think we have very different beliefs, that's all." She hoped that would end the topic.

"You don't believe in God, dear?"

Spectacular. "It's not that I don't believe in Him, I just don't..." Surely, Doris wasn't someone who would agree with the rationale behind agnosticism. "Forget it."

"No, go on." Doris set her cup and saucer on the round oak table beside her. Claspings her hands on her lap, she looked at Kate with interest. "I'd love to hear your thoughts."

Religion and politics. Two subjects destined for disaster.

Kate shrugged. "Let's just say I've never been a big believer in angels floating around with feathery wings and harps. Or in a guy named Peter who stands at a gate in the clouds, checking off names like a restaurant host. To me, it's all a bit...far-fetched."

Surprisingly Doris giggled. "I admit, when you put it that way, it does seem a bit silly. But I suppose that's where faith comes in."

"Yeah, well, faith tends to run in short supply in my family." In fact, with every man in her life.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Doris sighed. "Life can be a challenging journey without faith to guide you. My husband and I would've been two lost souls for certain." She patted the silver cross that hung on a short chain encircling her neck.

Kate rolled a handful of darts around in her head, debating which Judeo-Christian belief she should target next: the claim that Noah was able to not only gather but squeeze a pair of every animal species on earth into his handmade boat, or the alleged miracle Jesus performed because a wedding couple couldn't afford cases of cabernet at their reception. They all made for great childhood stories--water to wine, staff to a reptile--but so did Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. Part of growing up meant separating fact from fiction, no matter how much someone wished for proof to the contrary.

"More tea?" Doris asked with a smile.

"No, thank you." Kate tucked her darts back into her skepticism box. Clearly, Doris's stance wasn't going to change any time soon, and taking potshots at the kind woman's gullibility was hardly necessary.

"How about a snack?" Before Kate could refuse, Doris rose and toddled

toward the kitchen.

As Kate waited, she caught sight of a hardcover book next to the caregiver's abandoned teacup: *Heaven's Light*. Had her father sought a soul-redeeming insurance policy by joining Doris's book club? Was he seeking forgiveness for his sin?

Kate quelled the notion as she shoved her fingers through her hair. The feel of small dried clumps prompted her to pull a lock into view. Snowy streaks of paint had artificially aged her long auburn strands. She was thirty-four, not sixty-four. Unfortunately, it would take more than a good shampooing to remove the fine lines permanently framing her eyes.

"Here we are." Doris sauntered back into the room. She placed a platter of sandwiches and a bowl of green grapes on the marred table dividing them, then resumed her position on the couch.

"Iris," her father's gravelly voice called.

Kate stiffened. It was time to do what she had come for. Whether he recognized her or not.

"Iris!"

"Yes, dear!" Doris replied.

"I love you."

"I know, dear."

Kate stared at the stranger in disbelief.

"It keeps him calm. Usually puts him right back to sleep." Doris gestured to the sandwiches. "You should eat something, honey. It won't do you any good to get sick."

Kate studied the dainty triangles of crustless bread, her stomach too knotted to eat.

"If nothing else, I do have broad shoulders." Doris smoothed her hand over the top of her dove white hair. "So if there's anything you'd like to discuss, I'm more than willing to listen."

Thanks, but I'm fine. Kate's standard response sat on the edge of her tongue. Brief and versatile, it had proven effective in countless situations with her husband, Drew, when she wanted to be left alone. Instead, she

pressed her lips together.

Here was an opportunity to finally receive affirmation that her feelings were justified. That even as Collin Flaherty's death coach neared, his only child's absence was perfectly understandable.

She couldn't resist.