

Chapter 1

Ellen found her way to the facility cafeteria without much trouble. She stepped into a large light room. She looked up at the skylight, something she had always wanted. Maybe she would have a skylight in her next house, whenever that might be.

Must have picked the right time for lunch. There wasn't much of a line.

"Good afternoon," said a short pleasant man behind the counter. "Haven't seen you here before. Just visiting us today, Miss?"

Ellen smiled and said, "For a little longer than that. I'm here on temporary assignment."

"Welcome to Dublin," he said.

"Thanks. What's good to eat today?"

"You might want to try the Shepherd's Pie. It's near perfect today."

"I'll take your word for it."

He handed her a dish of Shephard's Pie.

"Thanks. I'll just add a salad and I'll be good."

She put a salad on her tray, paid the cashier, and looked around for a table in the almost empty room.

To her right, an athletic looking man with short auburn hair looked up from his book. He smiled and nodded, and she smiled back before choosing an empty table close to the entrance. Probably a local man. Wouldn't mind getting to know *him* a little better.

She took a bite of the Shepherd's Pie. The man behind the counter was right about it.

A few minutes later, she drained her coffee cup, glancing toward the auburn-haired guy.

He looked up, and she quickly looked down at her almost empty plate.

She smiled to herself. Busted.

She checked her watch. Didn't want to be away from her office long on the first day.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the auburn-haired man coming toward her table.

As he passed, he said, "Good afternoon, Ma'am."

She did not reply, but watched him walk slowly toward the door.

He was definitely a man who worked out in his spare time. Broad shoulders and small waist. Not your typical tech guy.

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About 4 o'clock a dark-haired man poked his head into her office and said, "Ellen? Ellen Porter?"

Ellen looked up. "That's me."

“I’m Frank Quinlan.”

Ellen stepped from behind her desk and offered her hand, “You’re my supervisor.”

They shook hands.

“I am. Welcome aboard.”

“We’re looking forward to having you here on assignment. We might try to steal you, but you probably wouldn’t want to go through the government red tape for that. Have the folks in HR gotten you squared away?”

“They have for now.”

“Do you need any help with orientation to Dublin?”

“They gave me some maps. I’m a pretty good tourist. I’ll find my way.”

“Anyway, I’ve got to get going. We’ll have a group meeting at 9 on Friday. I just wanted to drop by to say hello.”

He drew a card from his pocket and handed it to her, saying, “I know you have stacks of information, but it might be handy to have my card until your computer and your telephone system are squared away. The IT people are good, but we work them hard. Sometimes it takes them a day or two to get everything settled for a new person.”

“Thanks for stopping by, Mr. Quinlan.”

“You bet, but it’s strictly first names around here, Ellen. See you soon.”

“OK, Frank. Thanks.”

He was gone.

Nice friendly supervisor. So far, so good.

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Ellen sat on the bench, waiting for her bus.

A short almost plump woman with huge brown eyes and short pixie-cut brown hair plopped down next to Ellen.

She said, “Hi, Ellen.”

“Hi. I’m sorry I can’t place you yet. Are you in my group?”

“Yes. I’m Cara.” She held out her hand. “We all got a memo about you and when you would be showing up. What did you think of your first day?”

“It was good. I spent most of the day getting squared away. Frank stopped by late this afternoon to welcome me.”

“That one is a sweetheart. Doesn’t seem like a supervisor at all. But I’ve seen someone get crosswise with him. Mind that you don’t do it. He’s nice about it, but you’ll know you’ve been set straight.”

Ellen said, "I'll try not to make a bad move. I don't have long to stay out of trouble."

"What made you apply for this temporary assignment?"

"My divorce, mostly."

"Now there's something I know about. I'm coming off a nasty one. Was yours a bad one?"

Ellen was silent a few moments. She said, "Mine was completely unexpected. We were rocking along, happy enough I thought. Then one day he said he wanted a divorce right away."

"Another woman?"

"No. He just got tired of waiting for me to decide to have a baby."

"Brutal! My ex-husband was a bastard. He never saw a pretty girl that he didn't want to chase. Everybody warned me about him. I should have listened, but I married him anyway. Truth be told, I have myself to blame. I thought I could change him. Eejit, I was. Now I'm free, and I intend to find a real husband. How about you?"

"I'm not looking for a husband anytime soon, maybe never. I just want to be in control of my life. I thought I was in control of my life when I was married, but I wasn't."

"You can't just close yourself off and never trust another man. Good ones are as scarce as hen's teeth, but I'm looking for one of them."

"I wouldn't mind a little casual dating, but that's all."

"You might change your mind. Anyway, tomorrow maybe we can have lunch together in the cafeteria. I'm dying to ask you about things in the United States."

"Sure, what time tomorrow?"

"11:30 before things are picked over."

A bus pulled up to the stop. Cara said, "That's my bus. See you at lunch tomorrow. Take care."

"See you," Ellen said.

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On Friday evening when Ellen stepped out onto the street, she breathed in the spring air. It felt a lot like San Francisco. But that whole scene of her failed marriage was behind her. In her rear-view mirror. Not going to dwell on it. She was glad to be alone in control of her life in a fabulous city she had always wanted to visit. She felt almost happy as she peered into several pub windows and studied their menus posted outside. She paused at a pub that promised a live band at 7 o'clock. She checked her watch. It was 6:30. Why not.

She stepped inside the pub alive with laughter and conversation. Struggling to speak above the noise, she said, "I'd like to be seated near the band."

The waiter said, "They're a loud bunch. Are you sure, Ma'am?"

"I'm sure."

“Will anyone be joining you?”

“No.”

“All right then. I have a very small table for two very near the band. Right this way.”

She followed him past a bar where mostly men perched on high stools. She noticed a man giving her an admiring glance as she passed. Good to know. She was divorced, not dead.

She took her seat at the tiny table a few feet away from a stage that was no more than 6 inches higher than the floor. Four microphones, two speakers, and a chair were ready for the band.

The waiter handed her a menu. She shouted, “Don’t go. I know what I want. Fish and chips and a pint of Guinness.”

“Cod or Haddock?”

“Cod.”

“Are you sure you are up to a Pint of Gat? You being an American woman and all alone. Are you sure, Ma’am?”

More than a little annoyed by her helpful waiter, Ellen frowned and said, “I guess Gat must mean Guinness. If I don’t have that, what would you recommend?”

“How about a wheat beer?” He pointed at an item on the menu.

“OK, if you’ll bring it with lemon.”

“That I will, Ma’am.”

In minutes he returned with her beer and Fish and Chips.

“Enjoy, Ma’am,” he said.

“Thank you.”

She sipped her beer and ate her meal, occasionally looking around the crowded room. It was good to be in a happy noisy place.

At 7 o’clock four men strolled past her table and stepped onto the stage. They began taking the instruments out of their cases and preparing to play.

The only instrument Ellen recognized was a fiddle. One man started warming up on a round thing that appeared to be some sort of drum. Another man had a very short wind instrument and then there was the man who sat down in the chair and took several pieces out of the case, snapping things together. She watched as he strapped a bellows looking thing to his right elbow. He positioned a bag under his left arm. Then he lay three pipes across his lap and put another part of the instrument down on his right thigh. He looked over at the fiddle player and nodded.

The fiddler stepped forward and said, “Good evening, Ladies and Gents. So glad to be with you tonight. Are you ready for some trad?”

After a thunderous “yes” from the crowd, the fiddle player said, “Let’s go, Boys.”

The musicians burst into action, filling the big room with a lilting Irish tune.

Ellen was mesmerized by the musician in the chair as he thrust himself into the tune, his muscular body swaying and his fingers flying. He was amazing.

As the tune ended, the audience applauded, stomped, and whistled. The man in the chair lifted his cap for a moment and looked straight at her.

Ellen sucked in her breath. She couldn't believe it. This musician was the auburn-haired man she saw in the cafeteria on her first day. Why hadn't she recognized him immediately?

The band continued the set as Ellen's attention moved from one musician to another, always lingering on the auburn-haired man playing some kind of strange bagpipes.

When the set ended, the crowd yelled for more. The auburn-haired man got up and whispered something into the fiddler's ear.

The fiddler nodded and passed the word to the other musicians and then said to the crowd, "All right then. We'll play one last song in honor of an American lady visiting us tonight." He pointed to Ellen.

Astonished, Ellen looked at the auburn-haired man who tipped his cap and smiled at her before the band launched into "Thank God for America."

The audience started clapping and swaying to the tune, and Ellen joined in.

When the last note ended, the fiddler said, "It's a wonderful audience you've been. Thank you friends. Good night."

After that, the musicians stood at the edge of the stage shaking hands and chatting with several people in the audience before they started packing away their instruments.

The man from the cafeteria looked at Ellen, cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Wait for me, please. I'll be right there."

She nodded yes and watched him taking apart his instrument and packing the pieces carefully into his case. He closed the case and set it down at the edge of the stage before stepping down to stand in front of her.

Smiling at her, he asked, "May I join you?"

Returning his smile, she said, "Of course."

Sitting down opposite her, he leaned over and said, "Since you keep popping up in my life, I think it's time for an introduction. I'm Tomas Brandon."

He held out his hand, and she grasped it, noticing how warm and strong it was. "And, I'm Ellen Porter. How did you know I am American?"

"You look a bit Irish. I'll give you that, but truth be told, I got the memo about an American female engineer coming on temporary assignment. Welcome to Dublin."

Her hand still in his, she said, "Thank you, I'm glad to be here." He held her hand a second longer.

"So, tell me about yourself Ellen Porter. Where you come from and what you are about."

"I got my engineering degree from the University of Texas at Austin. Got my first job in our San Francisco facility. Got married and divorced in San Francisco, transferred to the Austin facility, stored all my stuff there, hopped on a plane to Dublin, and here I am."

"I won't pry about the divorce, but I'm glad you're here. What are you drinking? Want another one?"

"I wanted a pint of Guinness, but a nosey waiter talked me out of it, so I'm drinking wheat beer."

Tomas threw back his head and laughed. "For sure it was Benny. He's always looking after the ladies. Maybe he has a daughter. I don't know."

Tomas raised his hand, and Benny quickly appeared, asking, "What can I get you?"

Ellen studied her companion's profile. Up close, he was ruggedly handsome with a strong jaw and prominent nose.

"Two wheat beers like the lady is drinking," Tomas said.

"Yes, sir."

Tomas turned full face to smile at Ellen. His short auburn hair, wide face, and high cheekbones framed his deep-set golden hazel eyes.

She smiled at him and said, "So, tell me about yourself, Tomas Brandon."

"I'm an electrical engineer by day, a musician by night once in a while, and an officer in the Irish Army Defense Reserve some weekends and some summer days."

"Wow, that sounds like a complicated life."

"It's going to be less complicated soon. I'm getting out of the Reserve when my current term is up."

"When is that?"

"About two months from now, but who is counting?" He laughed.

"You're tired of it?"

"Not really tired of it. Just ready to have more time for a personal life."

"More girl friends?"

"I'll be going more for quality than quantity, I think." He held her eyes for a moment.

Benny returned with their beers.

Tomas took a sip and asked, "What about when you finish this temporary assignment? What then?"

"I'll settle into Austin. Get oriented to the Austin facility. Find a place to live. Make a friend or two. I'm looking for a quiet, simple life. Thank goodness, my brother and his family live there. That will help a lot."

He nodded yes.

"I've heard Austin has some good music."

Ellen laughed. "Austin calls itself 'The Musical Capital of the World.' I think that's a stretch, but the music scene is good."

She took a sip of beer. "I loved hearing you play tonight. You're very good at playing whatever that is."

"Uilleann pipes They're Irish bag pipes."

"It looks very difficult. Where did you learn to play?"

"The pipes are a family thing. I learned to play from my uncle Timmy in Galway. He used to push me. Said I would thank him when the girls gathered round to watch me play. My cousins and I, we got pretty good at the trad, at least we thought we were good."

"Did you grow up in Galway?"

"Yes, Galway is my home."

"Did you go to the University of Dublin?"

"I almost went to Trinity College Dublin. My girl and I had planned to go there, but we broke up our senior year. We were close. Very close. For years we thought we'd get married and have a boy and a girl and a sweet life together. I couldn't bring myself to go to Trinity after we broke up, so I went to MIT."

"My goodness. That was a long way to go to avoid an ex-girl friend," Ellen said.

"Not such a stretch. I have an aunt who lives in Boston. That's the only reason my mam let me go. I didn't live with my aunt, but she kept tabs on me, as sure as the sun rose. When I finished, I came back to Ireland. My mam was in a huff. She said I didn't even sound Irish anymore. Maybe my brogue changed a little, but that was a long time ago."

"You sound Irish enough to me."

"I never heard it put that way, but I'm glad not to disappoint you."

The corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled at her and took another sip of beer.

"My family has a lot of connections with America. An uncle of mine way, way back was an Irish emigrant who served in the Irish Brigade in the Union Army. With some distinction, if you believe the family tales my mam peddles."

"Do you think you would ever emigrate to America?"

"No reason to. Most of my family is here, and I have a good job here. I like living in Dublin just fine, but I might move farther into the suburbs when I have a wife and family some day."

He looked at his watch. "Seems it's about time for me to let you go home. Are you cabbing?"

She shook her head. "I walked. I live very close by in an extended stay suites hotel. I love being able to walk to just about anything. I do take the bus to work."

"May I walk you to your place?"

"I'm not afraid to walk alone."

“At this time of night, you probably should be. Not everyone out there is sober and friendly. Truth be told, we have more than our share of thugs on the street these days.”

Ellen studied him, and he nodded yes

“OK. I’ll take you up on that.”

They split the tab and left a tip.

On the way out, Tomas paused to say, “Thanks, Benny, for looking after the American lady tonight.”

They stepped out into the night.

“It’s a lot cooler now,” Ellen said, throwing her sweater around her shoulders.

“Here, let me help you with that.”

They stopped while he helped her into the sweater. He patted her shoulder. “There, that better,” he said.

“Thanks. Yes, it is.”

He took her hand and they strolled down the street.

Ellen said, “I was wondering about the other instruments in your band, besides your pipes.”

“I’m sure you know the fiddle, but you may not know about the bodhran.”

“The funny drum?”

“Yes, the funny drum. Got to have a really good bodhran player for trad. I’ve tried to play it, but I’m not very good at it.”

“And, what about the wind instrument?”

“It’s an Irish tin whistle, as authentic as they come.”

“I think the band is wonderful.”

“The Chieftains, we’re not, but we have a lot of fun.”

“Who are The Chieftains?”

“A very famous Irish group. They’ve been playing for decades.”

Ellen pointed to her suite hotel just ahead.

“That’s where I live.”

“Do you like it?”

“It’s OK. I have a tiny fridge and stovetop and sink, some dishes and pots and pans and utensils. I eat out a lot.”

He walked her up to the front entrance of the hotel.

Ellen turned her face to meet his eyes. “Thanks for walking me home. I had a great time. Perhaps I’ll see you in the cafeteria next week.”

“I hope so. Good night, Ellen.”

She pushed through the revolving door, and he turned to retrace his steps to the pub.

Only one bartender remained as he walked back to the stage and picked up his pipes case.

“Good night, Danny,” Tomas said, as he passed the bar again.

“Good trad tonight,” the bartender said.

“Thanks, Danny. See you next time.”

Tomas walked out to the small parking area behind the building. He put the case into his Jeep and hopped in. Smiling, as he thought of how beautiful Ellen was, he pulled out into the deserted centre city street. He liked her long wispy dark hair and gray-green eyes. Almost as tall as he, she looked athletic with sturdy shapely legs, not skinny. He wouldn’t call her a babe, but she was plenty curvy. She would fill his arms with warmth and softness. Attractive and smart, the kind of woman he wanted to spend more time with. The kind of woman he was looking for to settle down and have a family with. But this one would soon be heading back to America.

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Ellen snuggled under the covers, still enjoying the evening with Tomas. Not exactly an evening with him. They were just colleagues who had a couple of chance meetings. That’s all. A handsome Irish man would do just fine for a little casual dating. She just didn’t want her life to go spinning out of control.

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