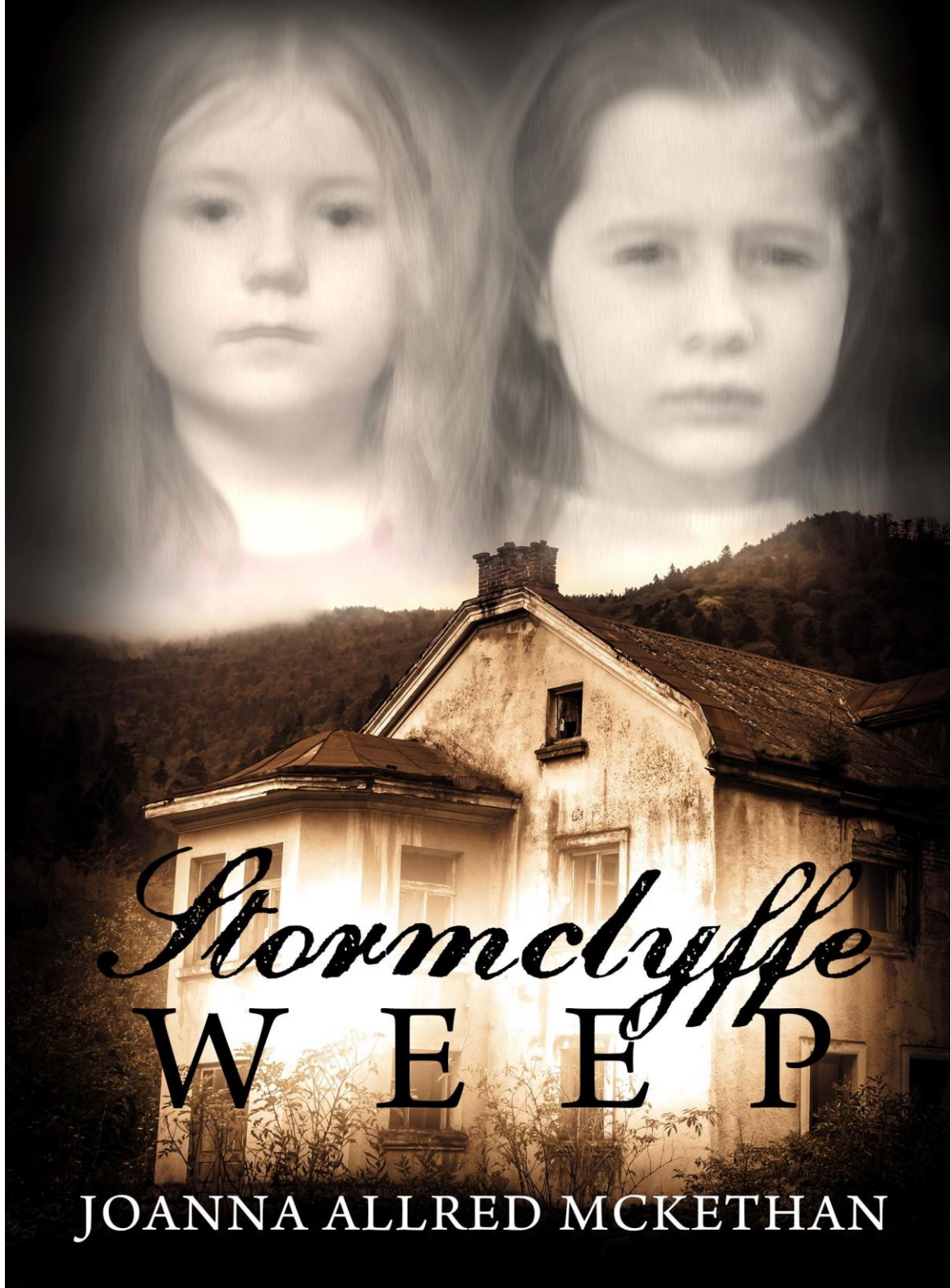


Children locked in a parallel universe...



Stormclyffe
WEEP

JOANNA ALLRED MCKETHAN

STORMCLYFFE, WEEP!

By

Joanna A. McKethan

Stormclyffe, Weep! 69 pages, 16,067 words

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Dedication
To all the abused children of the world

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The flame is a symbol of j'Originals' Art Studio, owner J. A.

McKethan

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Thank you for purchasing a book from an Indie author.

Excerpt

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Scanning left, right, and center, I saw nothing. Occasional noises drifted up from Patrick's work site. I didn't know the man, but he seemed harmless. I wasn't leery of him.

I searched for the cause of my jitters. Then I heard giggling. I jerked my head around to the door, expecting to see Patrick, but no one appeared. I heard giggling again, this time the pitches distinguished themselves as musically high children's laughter.

The chills magnified in strength tenfold. As always when I faced danger, I froze, a still puddle, and listened. By now the chills had traveled up and down calves and ankles and pretty much covered my body.

"What are you doing?" the childish words resounded as though in a hollow tunnel. Was the child talking to me?

"I'm finding a good hiding place," a new voice answered. "Where Daddy can't find me when he comes home."

"Won't work," the first said. "Won't work until the fifth can hit the floor."

"Well, this time, it will work."

"You're just a hopeless optimist."

"What's an 'optumus'?"

"Somebody that can't see what she sees."

"Why are you angry with me?"

"I'm not," the voice shouts.

"Yes you are."

"Well, maybe a little. I'm taking care of you. I gotta scare you to make you safe."

"Thank you, Sister."

Then one little girl emerged from the mist and put her arms around the other. The mist flowed in as though a fog lifted off the moors to flood the hallway.

My eyes popped.

No way would I walk into that wet cloud. I played dead, and waited; waited while cold trickles covered back to my elbows. Riveted to

the spot, I sucked in noxious paint fumes and commanded myself to run like lightning.

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Chapter 1: Stormclyffe Calls

“Of calling shapes, and beck’ning shadows dire...”--John Milton,
Comus

Long-dead souls cannot call from the other side of the ocean, cannot compel change or force you to abandon your children, aged 20 and 21, or orchestrate your leave of absence from kith, kin, and friends held dear, cannot force a city dweller to reside near the bare limestone hills among Ireland’s silvery gray moon rocks, the prehistoric rocks of the Burren.

That’s what I would have said two months ago when the letter announcing my inheritance of Stormclyffe Heights in County Clare, Ireland, near the famous circle of rocks I was told measured 250 square kilometers and was bordered by five villages.

But beckon me, they did.

“You’ve inherited Stormclyffe Heights?” the hotel receptionist who signed me in had asked last night, her eyes widening with a look I could not at first discern.

“Yes, I have. Quite a stroke of luck, wasn’t it?”

“No one has lived there for 49 years, Mrs. McClelland. By the way, I love your hair. I’ve never seen anyone with real black hair.”

“Raven curls, they say.”

She laughed.

“Rene. Just call me Rene. No? I wonder why ever in the world not.” My answer applied to both statements, so I left it at that.

“Some say it’s haunted, Miz Rene.”

“Oh, pooh, everyone always says that about an abandoned house.”

“Two children plunged to their deaths from the second story balcony. There are cliffs behind the house, you know.”

I shook my head that I dinna know. Mostly, that was true.

“Yes, the father was a drunk, they say. Sorry, I guess you might be kin. Nobody knows what happened to cause them to fall. He was never charged with a crime or anything, but people still wondered what happened that night. They still blamed him, you know. He went a little crazy after that. Now people hear things from that location.”

“Like what?”

“Like children crying after dark. People report cries and screams and wailing in the wind. Some have seen children wander up and down

the road, followed them. Yet, just as they get close to them, they suddenly disappear.” Her voice rasped on ‘disappear.’

“Well, I doubt they’re ‘children of the Korn.’ Child ghosts don’t scare me. Probably the situation needs a friendly person to bring back life and offer the children comfort.” I spoke in the purest and most innocent of bravados.

“I suppose. The last man who tried to stay there left in the middle of the night.”

“Well, thanks for telling me.” I laughed. “I think.”

“Oh, I’m sorry...but...maybe you needed to know...no one told you?”

“Don’t worry. I will manage, somehow.”

Nice to know, now, after I’d sold everything and come at great expense to claim it.

Driving snugly around the corners, my body on the right side, was an adjustment for me. I gunned it into the driveway, to mount the steep hill.

Now I stood before the house—the manor on the Heights—an imposing beauty of several stories, fumbling with the keys to the house and to the Jeep I had just rented, postponing the moment of entry. Maybe at the very least, the real estate would not turn out to be a pig in a poke, so to speak.

That drunken man had been my ancestor. And the house had belonged to his mother, who was royal in some way or other. Anyhow, he had inherited it and managed to keep it, in spite of the hard times.

“Dust to dust, ashes to ashes,” I quoted to the house’s façade, reciting the lines spoken at my husband’s funeral just three months ago that kept ringing in my ears. I wanted to say, ‘Dry bones, live again,’ because the pile of rubble that poured from the walkway and parts of the foundation dismayed me. It hadn’t been maintained very well.

I could have told the gal last night that the drunken man was my grandfather, and the two children, my aunts. I had always known something wrong had happened in the past, but Grandmother refused to talk about it, even when we begged. Now my need to know had escalated. My desire to unravel my past had reached fever pitch.

Getting answers couldn’t be all that hard in such a talkative village.

Maybe antiques inside would speak. I stumbled over uneven stones strewn at random in the pathway to the door. The key turned in the lock easily for an old house.

The stolid, massive door, bronzed with age and hardware, gave way, scraping across the threshold. The hinges groaned. Inside, light from the massive picture window in the living room faced the foyer entrance, illuminating the hall. A few pieces of furniture dotted the living room, sitting askew, but definitely better than the front walkway led me to suspect. The housekeeper named in my notice had probably been sent to ease me into the place. I breathed relief that the front filled with light.

My eyes riveted on a cobalt blue sky and a gray-green cliff's edge out the gigantic picture window, beauty enough to move the hardest criminal to tears where rocky cliff cascaded to a cold green sea. Numb grief cracked; let a tear slip out the rock I had become.

One visible drop of green ocean.

My singular passion since Eddie died was to transform my brush into a magic wand. Today I pictured dipping that brush into linseed oil and Prussian blue to create a smoky gray that would transfer the cliffs' staggering beauty, promise of eternity, onto a worthy canvas. Solitude for writing and painting, the lure of a retreat, beckoned me in that first week after receiving the letter. It even attached romantic notions of accepting my inheritance in a foreign land. How far from reality could I have wandered? I knew enough of my "heritage" to know the hideous can and did occur.

Curious, now that I thought of it.

Notice of my inheritance followed close on the heels of my husband's death. Serendipity, as artists like to say for 'at the right moment,' which in my case followed my husband's death, but the convergence could mean 'trap' just as easily. Murder was more like it, his demise resulting as it had from a stress-ridden job, from expectations that lashed him like Egypt's Pharaoh whipped the Hebrew children. Call it murder when you allow a human being no breaks, no free time, no family.

I did.

Chapter 2: Climbing the Cliffs of Moher

“Nothing happens until something moves.”--Einstein

Writing in my morning journal pained me. Words failed. Faith evaporated in steamy wisps, faster than from a boiling pot. I sat in my hotel room to which I had returned after assessing the situation and the work I had to do at Stormclyffe the day before. I doodled, crisscrossed pen marks into a drawing, while I hovered over a dry well. I must climb these cliffs of Moher barefooted, without equipment, without toehold, I wrote.

Late yesterday I had phoned painters from here at the Ballinakill Inn. From the whole list, none answered. I left messages, hoping they might respond. My agent had put out the word before I came, to no avail. With times so tight in Ireland, knowing I wanted to refurbish this house, I didn't know whether fear or pride kept them from responding. Scuttlebutt was active enough here for them to know I had money to pay them.

It would take brave men to wrest my house from rubble. My pen began to pull my finger along. For fifty years, I wrote, the house had rested, immobile.

At that moment, however, the house resumed talking.

Ask me, I will tell you. I never asked to be built. Why did men create me to witness horror? Dragons and demons stalk my halls.

My pen flew over the pages at this point and I filled my prerequisite three pages from the house's viewpoint, whether it was house or inner soul, it knew no syntax, punctuation, theme, or wrong spellings. Rumors and truths about ancestors...how was I to discern the difference? Birds carry rumors to Doolin, I wrote. At the end, I felt better, tuned up and tuned in. And intuitively these writings always contained truth.

I packed paint tubes and brushes into a tote and carried them with me down to the quaint little breakfast room. I decided I would take possession of the crate I had sent ahead, and get it taken to the site. I had it for a month. Then I could move my belongings into the house a few at a time, roll mighty easel in, and take possession of this inheritance. Once a room or two looked friendly, I would cut off my hotel stay and move in. What had looked like a decaying foundation was not, the assayer who came yesterday, assured in the letter I had found in the door. Basically, there was no structural damage, which was monumental.

I ate a nice poached egg with oatmeal, nuts, butter, and brown sugar.

Fortified, I turned my Jeep onto the cutoff to the right and floored the gas pedal to ascend the steep hill. That will be a bugger in snowy weather. Suddenly we stared at one another, me and this house of many windows, lined with an asymmetrical setting of trees.

I got out, walked along a low stone wall which swept around to the back, to the muscular backside barren of greenery, sheering and plunging to an unseen sea. With a sigh almost as deep, I returned to my Jeep.

I leaned into the back of the Jeep to reach for my paint cans for one room.

“Hello! I can help you paint,” a male voice boomed.

Jerking back up, I hit myself with the can. “Dear God, you nearly gave me a heart attack. And probably did give me a bruise.”

“Sorry,” he said, tripped off into a fit of giggling. “You want me to paint? Name’s Patrick.” He grinned from ear to ear as if he had not one single lick of sense.

“Well, Patrick, can you paint?” I asked, rubbing my bruise. “Rene, and I’m picky.”

“Oh, yes’m, yes’m, Here, let me help ye get the cans.” He reached into the back and picked up the three remaining cans.

“Come on, then.” Having a painter was a huge relief. I pulled house key out, laid down the cans I held, and unlocked the door, my second venture inside.

Patrick walked in. He made a wide sweep assessing things. “Wondered what it would look like after being closed up so long. Folks say as it’s haunted.”

“Yes, I suppose they do.” I headed through to the back side.

“You don’t mind, then?”

“I don’t feel enough to mind anything. My husband just died.”

“Ooh, I see. Sorry. They’s folks who went to bed here, then left suddenly,” he said.

He stood beside me, studying me.

“Really...how long ago, Patrick?”

“Last time was five years ago, they say. Said the man planned to buy the house, but up and left in the middle of the night.”

“Is that so? I guess I’m glad, since I wouldn’t have inherited it, had father’s relatives sold it. Ghosts and his sister’s family saved it for me.” The last thing I wanted was to give him grist for the gossip mill. I mean, how bad could it be?

“You’ve got spunk. I like that. This spot all right?” He put the cans down.

“Yes, fine. There’s plastic in the back of the Jeep. What’s your price?”

Giggling again, he said a figure. We struck a bargain.

“The back’s open, so get the drop cloths and we’ll go ahead and get started.”

He stopped giggling and left to do as commanded.

While he did, I looked over the house in peace, checking out rooms I neglected yesterday. I shouldn’t be critical of people who feel. Perhaps one day I would again. With notebook and measuring tape, I began measuring rooms. I was writing down dimensions on a quickly drawn room plan, labeling the walls, when from another room, I heard Patrick return.

Preoccupied with last night’s storytelling at the hotel, facts father never told me, the gist of which was that, fifty-five years ago, my grandparents had lived in this house for twelve years until “the accident.” It would have been longer had he not been away at war.

“The accident” referred to the fateful night Grandfather stayed home in charge of the younger children, aged 6 and 7, while my father, his older sister and brother went off with Grandmother. Grandfather Carey was on a drunk, present in the house but absent, he left the children to their own devices. For some unknown reason, the upstairs back window, low enough for a child to climb out, had been left open. No one would ever know what had enticed or drove the children to climb over the window’s ledge onto the balcony. The balcony gave way and they fell to their deaths hundreds of feet below. Noreen, my grandmother whose name I had, had packed up and left within weeks, taking her three remaining children to America, having found not enough of her babies’ bodies to mourn or bury.

Helpful villagers spoke what Michael, my father, left silent.

My grandfather stayed at Stormclyffe five years longer, drinking himself thinner than air. Drink was his psychiatrist, bread sop of guilt.

Guilty of killing his own children.

Certainly, no one granted him remission for his sins. Villagers said they heard him wailing at night. Today, they say, those who walk near Stormclyffe hear an old man’s wail and high-pitched children screams.

The story preyed on my mind...a guilty conscience and unending children’s cries could certainly drive a man mad—or jump off cliffs to death from the same spot.

Had I arrived in a normal state of mind, I would not have stayed in a place with such a history. But I felt no pangs of guilt. Besides being

numb, I felt horror for what happened to my aunts as near babies, not to mention my dad, aunt, and uncle. I empathized. I cringed at my grandfather's acts of negligence or intent, but could wrap my mind around murder.

A haunted house would not affect me. I loved children, was a magnet end for them. My own were happily married and would someday, I hoped, bring me babies to love.

If I could have traveled back in time, I would have begged forgiveness for my grandfather. What residual passion I felt would be the candle burning to undo the evil the house had seen. I would pay for the wrongs of my ancestors. Perhaps I would invite wounded children here to convalesce, do art. I wanted to release good into the world to cancel my ancestor's sins.

Yes. I shook my head, talked to myself. Help damaged children. That will heal you.

I looked up to see Patrick the painter staring at me.

"Can I help you, Patrick?" I asked.

"Oh, no'm. I just thought I heard talking. Wanted to make sure you were all right." Patrick had fresh paint all over him and did not giggle this time.

"Muttering to myself, Patrick. Artists and writers talk to themselves when they are alone, like madmen, yet they are quite sane. How's the painting coming along?"

"Just fine, ma'am, just fine. Have a look-see?" he raised his arm and turned around heading back downstairs.

I followed him down and indeed, the studio room was coming along nicely.

"Good. Nice work. You tired?"

"Not yet, no'm. But I'll have a bite of me sandwich, now."

"Here inside?"

"In the yard. Be back in twenty minutes."

"I brought my lunch, too. Think I'll break as well," I said to his retreating figure, laying down my brush. Strange little man.

Outside, I dug into the back of my Jeep for thermos and sandwich. Found. I pushed the driver's seat back and slid in, back to the passenger seat, legs stretched onto grass. I had a wonderful angle on the manor. What word described Stormclyffe best? I chewed my ham sandwich, studying long windows and carved masonry. Spooky, foreboding, creepy? No, maybe to others, but for me, the word was 'forlorn.'

I wouldn't stay here tonight, but, soon. I devoured my sandwich and mused on stately beds and sagging mattresses.

New mattresses were arriving the coming week. I had ordered them for delivery. From where I sat I observed Patrick. Simultaneously, we dusted off the crumbs of our respective lunches and re-entered Stormclyffe. Patrick returned to his painting, and I debated whether or not to join him, but decided against it. Men preferred working alone or with other men, or so my experience instructed me.

I headed for the bathroom which I intended to paint.

I don't know when it happened, because when you work long enough in one place, you lose consciousness of time, not tracking the hour well, but some time in late afternoon, just as I was finishing up and gathering dirty brushes together, cold chills ran up my spine. I shrugged my shoulders to ward it off, but only enhancing the shivers, now traveling over shoulders and down thighs in cold waves.

Scanning left, right, and center, I saw nothing. Occasional noises drifted up from Patrick's work site. I didn't know the man, but he seemed harmless. I wasn't leery of him.

I searched for the cause of my jitters. Then I heard giggling. I jerked my head around to the door, expecting to see Patrick who did not appear. I heard giggling again, this time the pitches distinguished themselves as musically high children's laughter.

The chills magnified in strength tenfold. As always when I faced danger, I froze, a still puddle, and listened. By now the chills had traveled up and down calves and ankles, pretty much enveloping my body.

"What are you doing?" the childish words resounded as though in a hollow tunnel. I thought the child was talking to me.

"I'm finding a good hiding place," a new voice answered. "Where Daddy can't find me when he comes home."

"Won't work," the first said. "Won't work until the fifth bottle hits the floor."

"Well, this time, it will work."

"You're just a hopeless optimist."

"What's an 'optumus'?"

"Somebody that can't see what she sees."

"Why are you angry with me?"

"I'm not," the voice shouts.

"Yes you are."

"Well, maybe a little. I'm taking care of you. I gotta scare you to make you safe."

“Thank you, Sister.”

Then one little girl emerged from the mist and put her arms around the other. The mist flowed in as though a fog lifted off the moors to flood the hallway.

My eyes popped.

No way would I enter that wet cloud. I played dead, waited; waited while cold of snow encased me. Riveted to the spot, I sucked in noxious paint fumes and commanded myself to run like lightning.

How long this struggle lasted and I stood there, I had no clue.

“Miz McClelland?” Patrick called up the stairs.

The fog cleared, and I re-entered reality.

“I finished the bathroom. Might need touch up tomorrow, but I’m heading home. You finished? I can wait to follow you out and lock up.”

“What? Oh, yes, please wait. I was taking my paintbrushes outside to clean.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I’m glad the utilities were turned on right at the get-go.”

He was silent. Suddenly I realized I hadn’t noticed how Patrick had arrived.

“Did you walk, or ride a bike? I can give you a lift.” I talked on my way down the stairs to ward off ghostly visits until I reached him.

“Got dropped off. Sure, I’ll take a lift.” His eyes bored holes.

“Look like ye saw a ghost.”

“I look strange, do I?”

“White. Your face is sheet white. Here, I’ll wash the brushes out.”

I followed. “Yes. I’ve seen a ghost—or two.”

“You don’t say. Well, that don’t scare me, none. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“I’m counting on you.”

I climbed into the driver’s seat on the right side. Patrick sat in back and directed me, ending conversation. All I wanted was a painter to paint the walls. Yet I had the distinct impression that this man was more than that. I didn’t have sense enough to cut him loose; he was my only company. I deposited him at his Irish cottage. A silver-haired woman hobbled out to greet him or check out the Jeep. I guessed, mother. No introductions were offered.

Waving, I drove off. Brilliant reds heralded my return to the Inn.

Chapter 3: Saints and Snakes

“Oh! He gave the snakes and toads a twist,
And bothered them forever!”--Henry Bennett

“You named for St. Patrick?” I asked my painter as he climbed in the Jeep next day.

“Yep, I wuz. And just like the great saint, I can’t stand a snake. If he had’n a-done it, I would-a chased them things out of Ireland meself.”

“How about ghosts? You hate them, too?”

“Don’t have an answer for you. Not sure I should hate ’m. They’re just poor lost souls, y’know.”

“No. I don’t really have a theology of ghosts worked out in my head. If they’re so innocent, why do they scare us?”

“Cause they ain’t from here,” he said. “It’s just that simple. They ain’t from here.”

“Good point.” I switched subjects. “Did you know any of my relatives?”

“No!” he said.

Startled, I looked at him. By gum, he was lying. Why would he lie?

“Tomorrow I’m going to the library,” I said. “Look up articles.”

“Won’t do you no good,” he says. “They just printed lies.”

“Oh,” I said softly, “and I thought you didn’t know anything about them.”

He looked at me, regretting his revelation. “I lied. I’m distant kin.”

“You’re kin to me?” I asked in astonishment.

“Not much, but some.”

I’d never heard it put that way. “So what did they lie about?”

“Everything. Your grandfather was not a mean man. He suffered from depression.”

“That’s probably the case for 80 percent of all alcoholics, isn’t it?”

“Yes’m. Guess you’re right.”

“So what more do you know?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, if you don’t mind, ma’am.”

“All right,” I said, “we’re close to Stormclyffe.” I swerved in and gunned it uphill.

“Guess I’ll start on the front room today. You can touch up the bathroom I did yesterday, and the studio you did.”

“Oh, I’ll have that done before lunch. Then where next?” he asked, grabbing the cans and leaving without answer.

Disconcerting, knowing he had agenda in signing on to paint for me. However, “when God sends a Republican,” as we used to say in the old South. It’s not like anyone was rushing me with offers.

Soon I was into the mindless rhythm of painting the walls. I loved moss green; it was soothing. I don’t recall ever liking what I would call an insipid color before.

Reminiscing about Eddie filled my thoughts, which stirred anger. Why would companies deliberately browbeat excellent, hard-working employees? *Just plain evil*. His heart hadn’t sustained the strain. If it would change them, I would sue them...but I valued what was left of my life. No need to drain it any more.

We had been painting for an hour or two when I paused to take stock.

Loud knocks sounded at the door. Laying brushes aside, I played hostess, opening the door to a handsome auburn-haired man about my age who smiled.

“I’m Art Connery. I wanted to welcome you to Doolin Village, known for its artsy atmosphere, good music and the beautiful Ballinakill Inn. I’ve brought ye a basket lunch.”

“That’s so thoughtful,” I said, smiling, nodding, and offering my hand.

He shook it and held it as I ushered him in.

“I’m Rene. Trying to get the rooms painted I’ll use first.”

“Right. Well, I see progress. You have a few pieces of basic furniture, I see.” He looked around for a place to set the basket.

“Yes, a few. Over there to my right through the door is a table.” I pointed.

Art laid the brown cord basket on the table which emitted the smell of fried chicken.

“Yum. I didn’t know fried chicken was Irish,” I said.

He blushed. “No, it isn’t, although they say the Scots invented it. I followed a Southern recipe on how to do it. I’m a bit of a chef. I thought it might banish homesickness.”

“How thoughtful. I didn’t realize how hungry I was.”

“Might I stay to eat a bite with you?” he asked, pulling up a chair. “I have to test it to see if I succeeded.”

“Of course. I’m not much at conversation nowadays.”

“We’ll get over that hurdle. Sounds like something happened.” His caring look extracted an answer.

“My husband just died.”

"I see. And you've taken on a mammoth project to keep you occupied."

"Exactly. I should call Patrick in to enjoy the food."

"By all means. There's plenty." Needing no encouragement, he picked a piece. He looked like he felt welcome everywhere. He handed me the basket and walked into the next room. I heard him tell Patrick to come eat while he talked to the Lady of the Manor.

Patrick skulked in, wordlessly. Must be history between the two.

I fished through the basket for a leg, and perched on the end of an upturned trunk to nibble. "Hmm, good. Try it," I said.

"Thanks," Patrick said

"Well, we can talk Stormclyffe Heights. You can tell me about Ireland's rocks."

"Aye, I can."

He slipped down off the chair to sit cross-legged on the bare floor.

"The house ye've inherited came through the Flaherty line, mother to son to mother to son. That last one would be your Granddaddy. He was a rounder, actually well loved all over town, but known to be a drunk, the mean kind. He and Noreen had five children: the two youngest girls, Noelle and Riley, who plunged to their death, separated from their siblings by six years. Your father went to the states, as did his sister, in the West. The other brother relocated in Ireland."

"Thank you. I lost touch with them."

Smiling and twirling his mustache, he nodded. "Of course ye would. So there was some rumor that the two little ones had another father, and your grandfather suspected."

"Ooh. He could have been charged with willful or neglectful homicide."

"Well, he wasn't. Not that the townspeople didn't try him in the street court."

"Good old public opinion."

"Exactly." He bit off chicken to eat.

"So old Carey goes around so drunk he's flying most his waking moments, and his wife gets her belly full of it and tries to have a life. I'll tell you who the rumors pointed to, later. It's probably in the old papers," he added.

"Lies, all lies," Patrick spit when he said it.

Patrick, just what is your agenda?

"Whatever." Art shushed him. "Well, anyhow, your grandfather stayed home that fateful night when your grandmother went out with the

other three children. I forget where, not that it matters. Why in heaven's name she would have left them with him is a mystery. No one knew him better than she. She had to have known entrusting small children to him was dangerous. Sorry, I'm criticizing your grandmother."

"Maybe she had to take care of an emergency," I said. "I wonder what. I'll read all the stories. And talk to people like you who know."

"You should. Well, a witness was quoted in the papers saying shots were heard, but I'm not sure that was a reliable witness. My grandfather never believed Carey was evil, but you know their bodies were never found—so there was no forensic evidence."

"So if you're a criminal, live near a cliff."

He laughed nervously. "Your humor is macabre, but funny in a sick sort of way."

"Don't worry, I'm not sick, just my humor."

He studied me. I was always surprised when people didn't understand me.

"So why did they not prosecute him?" I ask.

"He didn't have enough spite in him. His meanness was bottled; beating was as far as that went."

"Did your father know my grandmother?"

"Funny you should ask. He did. Her daughter was his first love."

"Oh, wow."

"Too bad she didn't marry him. She'd have had a good life, then."

"And neither of us would exist," I said, "which I would regret. I wouldn't have good memories, and big plans for two children's lives."

"Aye, useless speculation, that. But don't be worried about the village hating you or any such thing. They'll feel sorry for you like they did for your grandma and your mama."

"I appreciate knowing that." The air was suddenly clear and the sky bright.

"Well, don't let me hold up progress any longer," he said, wiping his hands off on a napkin and wrapping up scraps to take with him. "No garbage service yet, right?"

"No." Twice he displayed thoughtfulness, unusual for a man. I liked him.

"Patrick, good of you to paint for Mrs. McClelland." He patted his back.

Patrick pulled himself up and went silently to his work site.

"Nice to meet you, Mrs. McClelland, or Rene, if you like. Look forward to seeing you at Ballinakill." He shook my hand warmly.

My spirits lifted. Friendliness made life bearable. I could call on him in a tight spot.

I wondered if I would meet the little girls again. Pretty soon I would have to return to the room upstairs. I began to think I had underestimated Patrick. I would quickly reconsider his employment if he turned any more morose.

“Noelle, Noelle,” I heard a childish voice call. Oh, Lord, now they were downstairs. I guess they thought they lived here.

“What is it, Riley?” the younger voice answered.

“We need to warn mother Daddy’s coming. I see him wobbling up the driveway.”

“Do you really? Where is Mama?”

“Out in the shed.”

“What’s she doing there? I want her in here.”

“Well, she’s ‘getting away from it all.’”

“You go. I’m scared.”

“All right, then, hide. But remember, that sometimes makes him mad.”

“Oh, no,” she said, starting to cry. She hugged herself and began to tremble all over.

“Stop it, Noelle. Get hold of yourself. He’s not going to do anything. Just make yourself scarce.”

“All right.”

I approached the sound. The two girls stood in the hallway surrounded by mist. Such a concerned look hovered over the older sister’s face, it demanded my love. Even though chills crawled over me like an army of ants, my fear lessened. Obviously I wasn’t afraid of the girls, but of this experience of walking into another time warp, a parallel universe, or a spiritual reality, or whatever it was. Even with my artistic genes, I didn’t believe I was that suggestible. Patrick was right, “They’re not from here.” That really raised the shackles.

You could tell by studying Noelle that she lived off every word her older sister spoke. I had never seen such adoration.

I hugged myself to ward off the refrigerator chill. Could I live in this house forever, no, for even one year? I was dumping money into it; I would have to. And I hadn’t yet spent a single night within its walls. After I learned their story, would they go away? Or would they reenact such scenes forever? Like I said, I had no theology, doxology, or mental stamina for figuring this out.

This slowed my painting down and alternately, sped it up furiously.

I returned to my work station and resumed painting, mashing the paint right into the fiber of the walls, whatever the fiber was. I couldn't tell. But I kept waiting and watching, hoping to see a new installment. I wanted to know what happened next. Tomorrow I'd take a little break to read in the library, see if any information was backed by reported facts. Patrick and painting could wait half a day.

Chapter 4: The O'Reilly Children

“And we wept that one so lovely should have a life so brief.”—

William Cullen Bryant

“I need articles written in The Daily Fortune about the O'Reilly children, and what happened to the family. Can you help me?” I asked the librarian on duty.

“You must be Mrs. McClelland. Hi, I'm Bryana, the librarian, and I'm happy to help. Come on back with me. I'll show you our newspaper files.”

I followed her and sat at a desk from which I could access the old papers. My journal would not be sufficient, but I could reference the most important documents in it, for the eventuality that my children would ever have the slightest interest.

I pored over them, back and forth: the alleged affair, the husband's reactions publicly, the witnessing of the husband's drunken brutality, the bruises on the children documented by child welfare and protection. Why had they not been taken away from him before the horrible accident? What a horrible, horrible shame, I thought.

Then I found the article that described preparation of papers to do just that, papers about to be served. The children were to be taken away the very day the incident occurred, or so the agency reported. The air turned cold again. Chills gathered at the nape of my neck. Had they followed me to the library? Cursed children.

What cute little girls my aunts had been. The newspapers had photographs on file. They were faded, indistinct, a lot like the images I watched in the halls at Stormclyffe. Like an old black and white movie, only eerier. I shuddered. They were a living impression stamped onto the house that reverberated to eternity.

Grandfather...I could not stand the thought that I was granddaughter to a man like Carey had been. Curious, I researched the name Carey. The American meaning was “from the fortress.” The Irish name meant “of the dark ones.” My father had told me that. Did I have mean genes; was I addiction prone? What had his father done to him? I read more papers and found documentation for puzzle pieces to characters of generations past.

Sins of the fathers, sins of the mothers, call it something else, if you prefer. It doesn't matter, because it still affects the family for ill. You can't avoid bad truths forever, no matter what name you give it.

Besides news articles, several books had been written on my family, as well, so I picked two important ones from the pile, signed a library card, and took them with me. As agreed, I picked Patrick up after lunch and we headed for the hill at Stormclyffe.

He saw my books.

“Researching all the lies about those stories?” he asked.

“Yes, Patrick. Why would I not research?” Mentally, I was re-marking the papers for each statement of truth.

“Won’t anything good come of it.”

“Understanding; is that not good?”

“If it’s real understanding.”

“Well, Patrick, maybe what you need to do is to clear the decks. Come an hour early tomorrow, after I’ve done some reading, and you can bend my ear before we start our painting for the day. Tell me what to look for. Tell me what’s not right. Tell me where else to look for information.”

“I can do that,” he said, his head bobbing up and down repeating the phrase enough times to remind me of the Little Engine that Could. For some reason, he needed to convince me against what I did not yet suspect. Why was he involved in an old story? Maybe I would find out tomorrow, but right now, I didn’t know enough to care one way or another. Since the gift of extra sight arrived, I should have seen the red flag waving in the wind, but I didn’t. My grief made me dense, and deaf to nuances.

Arriving at Stormclyffe the next morning was uneventful. We unloaded the Jeep and hauled supplies into the house.

“We have awhile, Patrick. Here are the books I took out. Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Let me look at them, first,” he said. “Keep ’em a couple of days?”

“Sure. But why are you so adamant?”

“Because nobody knew what our grandfathers went through. Nobody. And what’s more, they didn’t care. They couldn’t find jobs, and when they did, they were war jobs, and then when they took those, they were traitors, because, as you probably know, Great Britain declared war on Germany 2 days after Germany invaded Poland. We had just fought our war of independence from Great Britain. So anybody who took Britain’s jobs or fought the new war with them, were just plain traitors.”

“No, I didn’t know all that. Hardly any of it.”

“Well it’s a wonder any of our three grandfathers survived, but that’s not something we have time to go into today. I want to get your house painted, so you can move in here.”

So we named territories, picked the right colors and began working. Paint brought friendliness into the house. Curious, even with all lights burning and picture window bringing in sunlight, it was still a dark house. Weather sufficed alone to turn it dark.

I painted until my back began hurting, and then went outside to take a brisk walk as near the sea air as I could get, getting out kinks. I wandered to the backside of the house again. The scenery was breathtaking. The back steps were tightly drawn up to the door. The drop off was dramatic. I wouldn't be easy living in a house like this with children at all, would have crossed it off the list, like a house with a swimming pool. But people get used to things, history had proved time and again, and people could put up with almost any earthly happenstance or pain.

Something worried at my brain, but I couldn't pull it out.

I walked up to the back door and looked into the house. Patrick stood there painting, talking to somebody. Who? I peered in, but saw no one, yet he looked straight ahead as if into someone's eyeballs, alternating talking and painting wall.

Something slammed my body. I looked for physical evidence and saw none. Dear God, let me get out of here. Don't end up dashed on those cliffs. I went to the door and tried to open it. It wouldn't budge. I knocked on the door loud enough for Patrick and the whole village of Doolin to hear, but he didn't.

Some force pulled me from the door. Resisting, I first grabbed onto a rock edge, then a window sill, then a jutting nail. Each projection I used to drag myself forward around the house, away from the gravitational pull. At the walkway it stopped abruptly. I walked with normal ease inside the front door to the back room to confront Patrick.

"Why did you not open the back door for me, Patrick?"

He turned to me.

"What are you talking about?"

"You look white as a sheet."

"Yes, I just saw a ghost."

"But you aren't afraid of them. Are you saying you were so busy talking to the ghost you didn't hear me pounding on the door?"

Strong edge to your voice.

"I wasn't talking to a ghost, and I didn't hear you knocking. What are you talking about?" A frown flickered across his pockmarked forehead. "But I did see a ghost."

Those chills again; the refrigerator door opened. I pulled my shoulders forward as if primordial wings protected my soft center. This Stormclyffe Manor is not a force to trifle with. Stones twice cursed—once for Adam and once for grandfather. Where every stone resists rebuilding; every wall wants paint.... I am as alone as a prehistoric rock on the bare limestone landscape. I am a layer of burnished rock pressed down in the Burren.

Ghosts, presences, forces, I could mentally wrap my head around, but what had just happened to me? Warping of the senses, never. I questioned my painter.

“Whose ghost did you see, Patrick?”

He stared at me, brush caught aloft in still motion as though the ghost held onto his weapon.

“I don’t know,” he answered. “I really don’t know.” He sounded scared

“Well, I just nearly got pushed down the cliff.”

“What? Maybe we should reconsider this thing.”

“Patrick, you are afraid, aren’t you?”

“I’m unnerved. I’ll be okay, shortly. There are strong winds today. Didn’t you feel the Jeep move on the way up?”

“This wasn’t wind.”

“Let’s paint,” he said, turning to the wall and giving me his back.

I retreated upstairs to my room, the room that would become my bedroom. I had chosen a peachy color and got a full hour in before the next visitation.

“Noelle! Where are you?” Riley called. Today I saw Riley immediately. She was poking around spots that looked empty, holding something up and looking under it, reaching for something and looking behind it, as though in pantomime. Evidently the Other-ness doesn’t extend to furniture, only to people.

“Here I am, by the wardrobe,” Noelle’s quivery voice answered. “Is Daddy here?”

“Yes, but he’s nice today.”

“He is?” Noelle did not seem at all sure. “I don’t think I like that.”

Riley knelt down to look at her.

“Let’s run away, Riley,” Noelle said. “While he’s nice.”

“I wish I knew how to take care of us,” Riley admitted, showing wisdom that belied her years. “We get hungry enough with me taking care of you here.”

“You’re right,” Noelle said.

“Uh-oh. Now he’s cursing. He’s looking for Mama. Or one of us.”

“Hide, Hide,” squealed Noelle. They ran to their previous hiding place, sat on the floor, huddled together. The pathos of those two children huddling against anticipated blows was enough to rip open a mother’s heart in whatever universe. How could a human be mean enough to mow children down? One revelation became obvious: whatever realm they lived in, their father did not, since I could neither see nor hear him or the mother.

I saw the strangest thing that made me revise my observation, two little girls’ bodies hurtled from place to place. I watched as blows landed on them, but could not see the perpetrator afflicting them. I watched until I could stand it no longer. I laid my brush over the can, and ran into the middle of the hallway, crying, “Stop! Stop! I won’t allow you to do that! You are in my house now! Get out, get OUT!”

Suddenly the blows stopped, and the children pulled themselves off the floor.

“Where did he go?” they looked at each other, arms lifted. Then they hugged one another as tightly as they could, swaying and crying in the cold and cloudy mist.

Wanting to help more than to leave, I was stuck. Logic said without conviction, they are dead and beyond help. Emotions cried out for safety, first theirs, then mine.

I yielded.

Chapter 5: And Spies, to Boot

“For sleep, one needs endless depths of darkness.”—Anne Morrow
Lindbergh

At the Ballinakill Inn eating supper, I read from a book about my family in dim, smoky light. When the waiter arrived for my order, I gave him my order of lamb stew and a small salad. In my peripheral vision sat Art, the really good-looking man who had brought me welcoming food the first day of painting. Dressed in suit, white shirt, and bowtie, I concluded he worked here and this was the costume of the inn. Why I had not run into him was testament either to my preoccupation or his invisibility.

Seeing me look his way, he saluted me. I waved friendly back. Before I knew it, Art towered over me at the table. “Well, hello. How is Stormclyffe Manor? More importantly, how are you, Rene?”

“I’m fine, Art.”

“Not convincing me, Rene. Can I sit?”

I motioned to the chair.

“Is the place wearing on your nerves, or is it just your personal tragedy?”

I loved the way he lengthened my name, the singsong lilt to his deep Irish bass.

“A little of both. By the way, thanks for your kind overture the other day. I didn’t know you worked here.”

“Owners don’t get to take time off.”

“Oh. I know nothing about the natives,” I smiled to ask for grace in my faux pas.

“I do, however. And contrary to what I just told you, I have tomorrow off. May I take you to one of the local scenes—how about O’Brien’s Tower? Have you seen that yet? I’ll have the kitchen pack Shepherd’s pies and pastries, a little smoked salmon, maybe.”

“A change of pace from smelling paint fumes. Sounds like a treat.”

“Early? 6-ish?”

“Walking shoes?”

“Most definitely.”

“See you tomorrow, then.” He flashed me a look I liked.

“Front lobby.”

I loved my pub grub at the bar; the lamb stew was delicious. I read a few more paragraphs, and then left for my room to retire early.

* * *

Fortunately, I connected with Patrick by telephone about the following day and canceled work. After his ghostly encounter, he seemed relieved at the prospect of a day off. "Do you know yet whose ghost you saw?" I asked him.

"Your grandfather's. He wanted to threaten me, but I'm all right. Fully recovered."

"Good. Then we'll take it on again day after tomorrow." I hung up.

That settled, I pulled out the clothes I would wear sightseeing. I put on a flattering top and packed convenience items in a small tote. I obviously wasn't as numb as before.

Reading in bed about my family until my eyes crossed, I turned off the bedside light, scant at best. A theme emerged: darkness.

* * *

Next morning I awoke, groggy. I bathed, splashed my face with cold water, and applied makeup. Downstairs, I ate at the breakfast buffet. I enjoyed scrambled eggs, toast, tatties, and a small tad of black pudding. I hurried back up to brush my teeth and reassemble myself. I thought of a few questions to ask Art about the area.

Punctually in the lobby holding tote and light jacket, I didn't have long to wait.

"Ready for adventure into the heart of Ireland?" a voice asked before Art appeared.

"Yes. Thanks for being my tour guide."

I felt his presence, and smelled cologne. "We'll take my sports car. Not because it's flashy, but it takes hills and curves on narrow roads better than any other vehicle."

"I'll survive flashy," I reassured him. "Bucket seats, here we come."

So we headed out in his metallic gray Ferrari. I studied him out of the corner of my eye. Tall and bulky, red highlights on dark, curly hair. His mustache curved over a pleasant mouth. I'd never dated a man of his type.

"It's a little drive to the cliffs. I thought we'd see those first and then go to the tower, if that's all right with you."

"You know best. I'll snap pictures as we drive, if you don't mind."

"Yes, do."

So we headed out on what promised to be a lovely day.

"Patrick told me the prospective buyer of Stormclyffe couldn't stay through the night was why he wouldn't buy it. Why it was left to me, probably," I threw out for his input.

"True enough. An outside buyer, an Englishman. Don't remember his name. Your great aunt Ailene at one time planned to leave it to her children. They decided they couldn't take the activity surrounding it. She's dead, and I don't think the children wanted any part of it, so they decided to let it pass on to you as next of kin."

"So my cousins left it to me, the only sucker to take it."

Art laughed. "The only one with internal fortitude, let's say."

"Thanks for that." I gave him a big smile.

"Oh, you're welcome. Anybody can see that."

"There have been some strange goings-on."

"Describe them to me when we stop for lunch. You know, someone wants to buy Stormclyffe Manor right now, someone with a vested interest in its remaining haunted."

"You're joking."

"No, I'm not. So if it gets to be too much for you, you have an 'out.'"

"Are you his representative?" I asked, cautious in how to proceed.

"Oh, Lord, no," Art says. "I own and run an inn—like bartenders and hair salon artists. Just means I know everything."

"They haven't offered me anything."

We laughed. Then Art hit me with a bombshell.

"You knew my grandfather had the affair with your grandmother, didn't you?"

"No. I wasn't even sure it was true she'd had an affair."

"It is. I have a letter or two I saved. The rest we burned."

"Will you share them with me?" I asked in a near whisper.

"Of course."

"Is that why Patrick bristles at your presence? He said he was 'somewhat' kin to me, I assumed through Grandfather Carey."

"Yes, and because he thinks I am trying to lower your family's reputation."

"Can it go lower?" I was afraid to hear an answer.

"He fears a 'murder' diagnosis. To him that would be worse. He also fears his status as a spy in World War II will emerge."

"Whose? My grandfather's or his grandfather's?"

"Now, there's a thought. Why have I not considered that before?"

"I'm confused. What have you never considered?"

"Patrick's past. His grandfather may well have been a spy. I don't know. Yours was. Mine served in the Royal Navy. The action in Ireland took place along the Donegal Corridor, in constant use during the war. Ireland remained neutral throughout the war. It did not acknowledge a war. During that time, World War II was referred to as The Emergency. Ireland refused to fight, stayed neutral, and our waterways were conscripted by the Allies."

"I had no idea." I had the feeling Art knew more than he shared.

"No. Not many in the world did. Ireland harped on our only part in The Emergency being helping out Allies spying for them."

"So why would he care?"

"Well, he could have been a double agent, you know. Or maybe he actually spied for Germany in Ireland. The country was sequestered by its total lack of ships and warring blockades. Irish mariners called the period, 'The Long Watch.' Irishmen, however, always rescued victims. Still, just fighting with the English against Hitler was enough. Irish called them traitors." That's the fate my grandfather and Patrick's grandfather endured."

"Oh. So actually, Granddaddy Carey as a spy could have known some secret that made him miserable enough to cover his grief, pain, or moral dilemma with alcohol. He might have had to kill someone. But the other grandfathers fought against the Nazis by English war orders and became Irish traitors. What year was that, would you say?"

"They began as early as 1939. Right after Germany invaded Poland."

"I'll have to absorb that. Any way I could find out details on Grandpa Carey?"

"Probably. I'll have to think." Art flashed a smile. "Ah, here we are, we can see the cliffs from here, get snapshots, and then head on toward the Tower."

We pulled up onto a scenic overhang and climbed out. I stretched my legs. At 42, they needed stretching.

"Breathtaking. Never saw anything like it."

"We love it." He placed his hand lightly on my shoulder and quickly removed it.

"Me, too." My heart quickened pace at his overture. Attracted, I was. What was Patrick's connection? Suspicious on undeclared intent. Concerned by an American?

"Does Patrick want to buy the house?"

"I don't think so, but as I was saying, 'makes you proud to live in Ireland.' You were lost in your reverie."

"Oh, so sorry, Art. House obsessed. Yes, too beautiful and amazing. I was wondering why besides painting Patrick hangs around. He's a little strange."

"Harmless enough. Full of blarney, but I've got the word to watch you. I'm on it, watching your back, sticking closer than air, all that."

"All right, Art. I like your having my back. I'll focus on us in Ireland."

Art had just been waiting for permission to advance.

Worries on hold, I yielded to the moment. We saw O'Brien's Tower. Afraid of heights, claustrophobic, I wandered it, gritting my teeth then and as we strolled through caves and narrow openings. One stalactite looked like a hanging drape. The whole cave had been expanded to give access to people like me to see this stunning stalactite. We saw ancient rock funerary. I snapped photos again and again. He handed me a rock, his fingers touching mine. Sparks. Day to remember.

I felt human for the first time since Eddie died. Art drove us back to the inn. I gathered my belongings.

"Thanks so much, Art, I loved my day, all due to you. Hope I was upbeat enough."

"My pleasure, Rene," he said, holding my hand, "Low-key is fine by me."

"Really, thanks," I said.

His kind green-gray eyes were like transparent sea.

Uncomfortable, I pulled my hand from the hand sandwich and entered the inn, took the elevator to my floor, and threw tote down in

my room. I hunkered down with a pile of reading material. I pulled out the book, Irish Traitors, and read until I yielded to dark sleep.

Chapter 6: Torn out of the Frame

“Death leaves a heartache no one can heal,
love leaves a memory no one can steal.”—Irish headstone

Next day painting Stormclyffe resumed in earnest, Patrick in his sphere downstairs, I upstairs in mine. The view outside was sensational.

A picture was sorting itself from ghostly visitations and reading. My grandfather was most certainly a spy for the Allies. He had maintained a strong connection to Patrick’s grandfather; why was not clear.

Vigorous painting did not help recreate yesterday’s lightness. My heart drug like an anchor, and I feared yesterday with Art gave me false expectations. I looked up his name under Irish names on the internet, which meant, “Bear, champion.” He was the son of Con of the Hundred Battles, a sideline to pursue later.

By a haunted day depressed. I supposed that, deep grief for Eddie, knowing normal life existed quite happily without me or him was more than I could bear. I couldn’t reach out and touch anyone, I was siphoned off.

Start a painting in the great room at Stormclyffe..

There was certainly no room in my hotel. Art could help bring my giant easel out of storage in the yard and install it in the empty space in this room. That would drive a post into the sand, move spiritual forces around.

“Oh no, it won’t!” I heard a young girl say. I jerked my head up from my work, but saw nothing. The child was telling me nothing would work, nothing would ever change. It had never occurred to me that bringing my easel in might consolidate forces the wrong way. Not then, anyhow.

To the bedroom, looking down the hall, I saw no apparitions.

Strange that the girls only manifest in fog. Their shapes emanate, ethereal. The voice belongs to the older sister, the seven year old.

“No! I won’t do that, Daddy! You can’t make me!”

Oh God, what was their father trying to force her into? Still, I see nothing. I feel Evil as a real presence, suddenly, overwhelming.

“Aye, that I can,” a ferocious voice stormed.

“I can’t spy on Mommy,” she whimpered.

“Can and will.” A sound like a foot stamping foot or a stick striking something hard rang out.

Riley sobbed. A cloud near the end of the hall materialized. I assumed Riley was in it. Her father was nowhere.

“Now git on out and check the garden house,” he commanded.

Sick.

He wanted to sully his daughter’s innocence and ruin her psyche for life.

Maybe she’s not his daughter so it doesn’t matter to him. He feels justified in asking. Sick son of a gun.

I hated a dead person.

If he murdered these girls, by the love of all things dear to me, I promised myself to take this cold case on and unveil him posthumously for the monster he was, even though it would stick to me. Patrick’s fears were realistic. Relief that my children were safe back home in the U.S. flooded over me.

I heard Noelle sobbing, too, and then her sobs receded into the distance so I could hear them no longer. I assumed she had left with Riley to check out the garden house. Nothing I could do about it.

As usual when I am visited, Patrick sensed it and peered through the door at me where I painted.

“Yes, Patrick. What do you need?” I asked.

“Seeing if you are okay, Mrs. Rene,” he said, using a new form of address.

“Yes, I’m okay,” I said.

“You saw your grandfather, didn’t you?” he asked.

“Yes, Patrick, I did. Now tell me what you know. I am not inclined to ignore evil, even if it existed in my own family.”

“All I know is what my father told me my grandfather said.”

“Try it on me,” I said without softness in voice or demeanor.

“Grandfather said Carey did not intentionally kill his children.”

“So Carey did kill them?”

“Not really. But he had murder in mind for his wife, my folks thought. He had confided in grandfather, that when she came in through the balcony, she would get the surprise of her life.”

“Meaning?” I ask.

“Meaning, he loosened screws on the balcony rails, so she would ‘accidentally’ fall.”

“Capable of murder, he was.”

“Yes, but no one knows where he was during the war. He did plenty to desensitize.”

“Crazy man. Leaving him with five children to take care of when he couldn’t handle two. That’s what a love preoccupation will do to you. She’s just as guilty. And he couldn’t handle any of them in the penitentiary.”

“Men don’t think right when they’re betrayed. No logic to it.”

“Doesn’t make sense. Had Grandfather done that, he would have been tried in court for manslaughter, willful negligence, or attempted murder.”

“Well, you see, he had given the country invaluable assistance in spying for Ireland against America. They couldn’t actually prove the balcony had been tampered with. If you ask me, they didn’t try too hard.”

“So that’s that. You can’t try a dead man.”

“Guess not.”

“But my grandmother escaped—with the oldest three—one my father. Did they ever love one another, did your grandfather say?”

“Yes, Grandfather said they did. He didn’t know what, but he knew something was tearing him up. No excuse, but something happened that caused him to forget it with alcohol. Then he got rough on his wife, and nothing kills love like that. She was susceptible to a kind soul—which is what Art’s grandfather was to her.”

“What happened to Art’s grandfather? He could have followed Noreen to America.”

“Granddaddy said neither of them could face each other again after the children died. They both believed their affair had caused it. Neither could forgive himself or each other.”

“Yes, I can see that.”

“All that was left was to forget it ever happened. Draw a line in the sand, say, forward, but never backwards.”

“So he found another woman, Art’s grandfather.”

“Yes, eventually he found a young woman who had his children—a girl and a boy.”

“And Grandmother never remarried. She said she’d had all the pain and heartache she could stand. We thought she let life beat her up. We didn’t understand. So sad.”

“It was the girl who married who had Art,” Patrick explained.

“I see. So, all three grandfathers were spies.”

Patrick’s face turned ashen. “How do you get that?”

“I just assumed it. I don’t see the problem; Ireland promoted and approved of it. Seems you were either a spy or a traitor.”

“Not all of it. Oh, I can’t explain. It’s too complicated.”

“All right, Patrick. Let’s leave the subject. But I’ll tell you—this is the second time Carey has shown up, turning the atmosphere evil. What is happening here or in some parallel universe I don’t know, but I hate it. Powers are vaunting themselves. The evil has to be demonic. I don’t believe in fairies, or that we are overly suggestible. But I can’t step over boundaries I’ve set. Talking to dead people is one of those. Like you said, ‘They ain’t from here.’”

“There are groups that advertise they’ll get rid of them for you.”

“Maybe I’ll get their number, Patrick. More paint.”

I went back to my station. In no time at all, the little girl was back. “She’s there, but she’s not alone. You said she was hiding from you.”

“Stupid little girl,” her father said.

“I am not stupid.” Riley started crying.

“Stop all that wailing. I hate it, I tell you. I hate it. Shut up, now.”

Hearing nothing more, I assumed her smarts and his anger at the wife prevented her further suffering.

That was their last appearance for the day.

My eyes hung from their sockets I was so tired. “Quitting time,” I yelled to Patrick. I wrote him out a check and took it downstairs.

“Here, Patrick; here’s your check for the week. Let’s go. I’ve had enough.”

“All right. I’m cleaning up; won’t take me long. You think you’re ever spending the night here?” His lips turned up. It wasn’t a smile. I’m not sure what the expression was, but I answered him.

“Good question. Not the coziest place in the world, is it, with hateful people from another age or dimension walking through?”

“Hnnh!” he said, which meant anything from ‘I didn’t think so’ to ‘I told you so.’

“Well, tomorrow I’m going to get you and Art to bring in my easel. You’ll be finished in here, and I’ll start another type of painting, while you carry on with more walls.”

“You think that’ll change something?” he arched his eyebrow.

“It might change me. Painting is peaceful.”

“Start on one you don’t care about.” He looked grave.

“Ooh, so that’s how you think it will come down. I’ll take your advice.”

We locked up Stormclyffe Manor. I dropped Patrick off with plans to pick him back up, and then drove to the inn. I found my research in the inn at nights pleasant. Tonight I would take several books, my pen, and pad to take notes after eating in better light. The rooms were not well lit.

After bathing and scrubbing paint off me, I dressed in something appealing. I went downstairs to eat. I sat at the bar and asked if I could linger.

“You may, indeed.”

“Thanks.”

“Of course, Mz. McClelland. The owner said, ‘give her anything she needs.’”

Nice man, Art. I settled in with water and white wine. What course of action I would take if haunting escalated into violence, I would address later. If you could. Moving back and forth across the ocean was not an option. I should have listened to my daughter.

Needing to know the story’s end trapped me in limbo. Written sources I didn’t trust like these girls’ encounters, trapped in terror, where they saved first encounters in another space and time. If not hell, it was only a few bars shy of it. Set them free.

The waiter arrived with mutton chops, potatoes, onions, carrots, turnips, and pearl barley. There was a nice horseradish white sauce on the side which went well with the turnips, and kept them from dominating the flavor.

“Boil and simmer slowly for hours; intensifies the stock. This is our speciality,” the waiter said.

“Looks yummy.”

Cutting fork-ready vegetables and lamb, devouring them, a sip or two of wine, maybe Stormclyffe would be bearable, after all. I was determined to make it happen.

By dessert, I knew more about “The Emergency.” A new fact dropped into the bucket. My grandfather actually left to go with the British to fight for two years in 1939. Actually, he had left in 1938 to work in the shipyards a year prior. He had married my grandmother in 1937. So he fought Nazis. That was something to be proud of. Finally. I relished what I could of his strong traits.

Art walked up. “Enjoying dinner?”

“Your way with Irish stew is delicious. I am, Art, very much.”

“So you might stay in Ireland? Or too soon to say.”

“Too early, but the stew is a vote in its favor. I love the area. Art, I just discovered my grandfather fought for the Allies off Irish soil. How did that happen?”

“Oh a good number of men left Ireland to fight—they didn’t agree with Ireland’s neutrality. They weren’t given an easy time of it

for having done so. No, they were given nothing but trouble by Irish people and government for having fought. May I sit a moment?"

"Certainly."

"Some were tried for desertion. Others hid their military service."

"Strange. I'm slow coming up to speed."

"It's complex. And you are still mourning. That slows everything down."

"You sound like you have experience."

"Aye, that I have. I lost me own wife, some years back."

"Sorry. Losing a mate is...well... grief and pain make one egocentric, myopic even."

He reached out and patted my hand with his long, delicate fingers, formed for fine china or musical instruments, not cooking and managing.

I gave his hand one pat with my left before removing them both from his touch. Not that it was unpleasant. Au contraire. "You are kind." I smiled.

"I've got men lined up to move the easel tomorrow. You ready?"

"Yes and no, but I will leap."

"Let's don't go talking leaps." His full red eyebrows furrowed in a frown.

I grimaced. "Right, unfortunate tongue slip." Laughing let me linger in the moment.

"Well, some problem has surely crept up, so I must be off."

"Thank you for the pleasant interlude."

"Distance yourself from the aversion you feel towards your grandfather, if you can. Everything sounds worse without knowing mitigating circumstances."

"Thank you. At least I'm proud he fought the Nazis."

"Yes, and probably more than that."

"I do hope so." I turned to read and sip the last cold coffee drop.

Art knows more than he told me. I listened for insight. Nothing came. I gathered books and headed off to slumber. I must set a date to move into Stormclyffe. Dread groaned in me at the thought. A bold move, my dear. That voice sounded sinister, a threat, a payback, even, for moving in my easel.

Chapter 7: Soft as a Kiss

“Make me immortal with a kiss.”—Christopher Marlowe, Doctor Faustus

When the commotion began at the end of the hall, we had not been working long. I was painting in the first bedroom when the girls appeared that next day.

“Riley, Riley. Where are you? Answer me.”

Silence.

“Riley, answer me now. Daddy, please tell me where she is.”

I could not believe Noelle was talking to her father; she lived in fear of him. She had bundled God and father completely, or so I thought.

Her straight blond hair flopped as she stooped to look under things. She straightened, stared, listened. She paced up and down the hall. Her features, always blurry, clarified.

Mesmerized at her person standing before me, I froze stock still, as if, like a bird, a sudden noise or slight movement might make her fly. She stared straight into my eyes. She had to see or sense me.

Crash! Bang! The front door slammed. Glass crashed to the floor.

I steeled myself to resist running downstairs to the front door.

“Riley, Daddy left. Where are you?”

“Here, Noelle, in the wardrobe,” she said in faint whisper.

Noelle ran to her. “Pretty good spot. Stay there.”

The front door slammed again.

“He’s back, Sister. Don’t get hurt. Climb in the closet.”

“Then when he finds us he’ll get furious and hurt us both. Shush. I’ll be right back.” A role reversal transpired before my eyes. Significant. Unusual.

Boots stomped up the stairs.

“Noelle, Riley, come here right this minute. Your mother is missing. She’s taken my children and left you here to torment me. To torment me, y’hear? Noelle! Oh there you are, fix me a sandwich. I’m tired. Building other people’s houses wears you out.”

“All right, Daddy, but promise me you won’t drink.”

“I can’t imagine why a fellow who bangs nails in wood all day shouldn’t have his drink at the end of it. Precious little good in life. I won’t be denied that.”

“I understand, Daddy.” I watched Noelle walk downstairs and fade from view. I never saw the father, only heard his voice.

Now Riley appeared, first head, then left arm, then torso, and finally her whole body. She tiptoed past me, looked left, right, and disappeared step by step downstairs. Why had she suddenly feared her father, and now, she was joining them? Strange behavior. I had never seen Riley avoid her father or Noelle directly approach him. Had they enacted a chapter during the night while I was gone? And then it hit me. Noelle had forgiven her dad, and Riley didn’t have to maintain the responsibility of a mother, anymore.

Willing the next episode on, I fidgeted with a patch of paint and studied the cloud-like mist. I painted a new section near the door while waiting. Craving something turned it into a primary goal. Some people thought me unfocused. Actually I had an extremely narrow focus; it just changed a lot. How I would ever stack up enough good to atone for my grandfather’s sins was a mystery, if I worked from now until I died.

Crazy. Hostage of smoke and clouds and dead people’s purposes. Drained from pursuing a cold case of sins committed by others. Children’s advocate in another warp, another dimension, whether earth or beyond. Kindred spirits, these aunts whose growth was arrested in childhood, people I could never know.

I combed the hall for them, staring straight into the beautiful sea green, smiling eyes of Art, head turned so sunlight bounced off his cheek from the window in such a fashion as to somehow ennoble him. It wasn’t his aquiline nose, or the rounded slope to his forehead. Nor was it gold flecks bursting from auburn red hair. It wasn’t how extremely good looking he was, how kind. The impact was smack, all at once, oh, I’ve seen you in another world, another time I don’t recall. Though I know I looked at you when we first met, I am seeing you for the first time, ever, except that one magic moment in another world.

Grief dulls you, too.

He brought me into reality, replacing dead people.

“Hi, how are you faring in your new residence?” He smiled.

“Well as anybody could who stands waiting for frequent, violent outbursts from children not really here—.”

“Oh. Entertaining the ghosts of two little girls?”

He understood. “Exactly...but how did you know?” I laid down my paint brush.

“I wasn’t born yesterday. You may be chosen to give them rest.”

I stood back, shifted positions, cocked my head. “That has such insight, you know.”

“So young, living violent lives ended by violent deaths.”

Art lifted his hands as if in mediation for them.

“Stalked by an angry father, abandoned by an escaping mother...those they had a right to trust, abused and abandoned them. Became children of fear.”

“In another dimension, searching for a way out.”

“You see that? My presence gives them permission. Allows them to tell their story.”

“I think so,” he said, his words soft as kisses, emotion packing every sound.

With effort, I maintained our focus. “Violence creates unrest. There’s more to haunted houses and sites than just a demonization. I’ve never put it into words. Never trusted my interpretation.”

“Avoided complex issues.”

“There you go, again, Art.” I laid a hand on his arm, jerking it back as though a hot burner, embarrassed at intimate sharing, exposed by need, I rushed into the business at hand.

“Let’s get my easel installed,” I said.

Chapter 8: Two Worlds Collide

“...our universe may be one of many—a single bubble in a huge bubble bath of other universes.”—Brian Greene, Scientist

Installation of the mighty easel went without a hitch set up before the picture window. Patrick cooperated with Art and his two workers. His surly side did not crop up.

“Now I must claim the spot,” I said, running to my storage unit and pulling out the biggest canvas I had.

“Here, let me help you,” Patrick said from behind. Having followed me, he reached out to relieve me of it.

“I thought an official installation might be good,” I said, “a little ceremony of sorts, a ‘bless this house, o Lord we pray’ kind of moment.”

His green eyes mirrored understanding. I think that was when I knew I was in love with him. I think it had happened earlier, maybe on the day he took me sightseeing, and we traveled like we were made to be together.

“Do you have a bottle of wine?” he asked.

“I do.”

He lowered the canvas slowly above the floor, letting it hover before leaning it against the easel.

Mindful.

Sweet.

I got out glasses, the wine bottle, cork-screw opener, and we divided the contents between Art, Patrick, me, and the others. Art led us into the living room. We toasted the easel, the canvas, and my future life at Stormclyffe. It felt wonderful.

Something moved. Clicked into place.

I would bet on it that work for the rest of the day would go smoothly.

The men chatted as they broke up. Getting the paint can ready, I thought about how the Irish who had left to serve in the British army in a war to save the world from Hitler had been called deserters. Bad treatment by the Irish government and citizenry was only beginning to be addressed, as official pardons were being released to living and dead. I thought of our Vietnam veterans, how they had been denied the status of hero, denied the sense of a holy cause. Like Irish soldiers who fought against Monster Hitler, both heroes had received a frosty welcome home. Irish soldiers because they had fought with hated Brits, but also because they thought

Nazis were bogeymen made up by the Allies. German concentration camps were “British propaganda.”

The three grandfathers, mine, Art’s, and Patrick’s, had been friends, classmates, born the same year or school year, at least. The three had set off to Northern Ireland together when war drums started rumbling, to seek work in the shipyards. All had had difficult re-entry, trouble earning money, and nursed psychological scars. Their fellows didn’t care a damn, but were more concerned with supply rationing than with life-death issues in Europe. All the Irish wanted to do was drink themselves into oblivion, other Irish observed.

Grandfather Carey had returned from the war early, in 1941. Sought after by intelligence because he spoke German, to spy from inside Ireland. What happened in those years to sicken his soul and drive him to drink I had not yet discovered. Something had to have. I wouldn’t call my realization tolerance or forgiveness, but a step toward it.

I heard Art’s car drive off. Patrick had resumed work.

“Maybe one of those men would help you paint, Patrick,” I called out.

“No need.” His voice clipped like scissors.

What was it with Patrick?

He was on edge.

Picking up a can of the softest, blue-ist, lemon-colored paint, I headed for the girls’ room. I had barely visited it twice. I set up in a corner.

Inside, I wondered on which side Noelle had slept, which Riley. Or maybe they had slept in one bed together. It was a time of poverty. I slipped newspaper underneath the paint. With screwdriver head, I lifted off the lid to the paint. With the stick, I coaxed the separated colors back together, all the time thoughts churning, churning. How had the room looked? Rough in a tough time.

Pictures of angels should hang on the wall. Pretty pictures of the girls. I tried to picture them, but couldn’t. Unclear newsprint and foggy visitations hadn’t imparted detail. I needed sharp-focused realism. My research had not turned up a single good photograph, so I had never really seen the girls. Grandmother and Grandfather, yes, but not the girls. School pictures. I could check out school publications or ask Art or Patrick if they had some.

Pretty soon I flowed into painting rhythm and kept on until I finished one wall. The color freshened up the old, stuffy manor without

going too primary. I hummed a tune, window raised so as not to get high on paint fumes. Now for the second wall.

“Rene!” a male voice boomed.

“Whatever in the world, Art? I thought you’d gone.”

“I did, and found something. I had to share with you. You won’t believe it.”

“All right.” I wiped my hands on my painting apron.

“Sit over there,” he commanded, pointing to a trunk.

“I was looking through what we had saved of Grandfather’s, and would you believe, I found a reference to your grandfather and Patrick’s grandmother having a ‘thing’ on the side in your grandmother’s letter to my grandfather. That explains Patrick’s eagerness to keep his story under wraps, in part. And then, look, my grandfather possessed a picture of the two girls taken not long before their deaths. It was tinted at a photography studio.”

I took the photograph, handling it from underneath. “Oh, wow. Oh, simply, wow. I might collapse from joy. Beautiful little blue-eyed Noelle, blonde wisps, cheeks with deep dimples. And Riley a fiery redhead, bone-colored skin and freckles. Cat green eyes. You know, Art, it isn’t a coincidence, your finding these when I’m painting their room for the first time. I’ve avoided this room until now.”

“No, it’s no coincidence,” he said.

“This rocks my world.”

“Keep them. It’s your history, not mine.”

“Why, thank you. I will frame and hang them right here in this room. Look how the wall color pulls out yellow-blond highlights of both girls.”

“It does, indeed.”

“Such beauty and such tragedy.”

“I’ll leave the letter. You can look at it later, and give it back.”

“Great; I will.”

“Have dinner with me, tonight?”

“Love to.”

He rose and left quickly.

The bright day turned suddenly dark. The house filled with a dank darkness. A moldy smell with dusty spores filled my nostrils with its stench. I warred against repulsion to finish the second wall before cutting in at the top and floorboard area. I won. Then I tamped down the lid to the paint can and left. Leaving the room, I paused at the window seat and looked down on the front drive. That hideous smell. Something wet fell

on me. Oh, no. A leak, just what I needed with an attic floor above. A leak would explain the smell. Droplets gathered in spots, releasing on me as I walked from area to area. However, it didn't seem to continue overall.

When I walked away, the dripping stopped.

No puddles formed on the floor.

I saw a puddle start to form, but it evaporated quickly.

A phenomenon unlike any I'd seen or heard. A house, weeping. Weeping and following me, its tears raining down on me. I hoped this was not a curse that would chase me to the end if I stayed here.

I'd heard of statues weeping, but I'd never heard of a house producing physical tears that dropped off ceilings. Would it ruin our paint job? I ran back into the girls' room and looked. Nothing had run down the walls.

Get Patrick and bring him up to look. Good idea.

I walked in on him downstairs in the far room that would be the den.

"Hey, Patrick. You've got to come see something."

"Second," he said, finishing his stroke and laying the brush neatly on top of the can.

We walked upstairs.

"What is it?"

The tears began again. "There." I pointed. "Do you see water droplets gathering on the ceiling? Do you feel drops of water?"

He held out his hand. "Yes, a few. You have leaks?"

"I don't think so. I think the house is weeping, Patrick."

He stared at me. I went to the bench beneath the window and sat. "Here. Sit here."

Two girls exchanged words suddenly in an extremely wet, misty fog.

"Do you see them, Patrick?"

"I do. I really do. Can I touch them?" He wiped a wet spot off his forehead.

"I don't think so, but I haven't tried."

He reached out, his hand cutting air.

"Where are you?" A mean, masculine voice raged.

"Run," Noelle told Riley, their strong-weak patterns exchanged. They ran towards the room I had avoided like the plague, the room with attached balcony.

"No!" I said. "Don't go in there!" I followed them, caught in their drama, determined to enter history and keep them from playing out what

had sent them to their deaths. I was not rational. That would accomplish...absolutely nothing. Their lives had been too short. I loved them, and was not ready to take their leave, yet.

“Come back here, right this minute!” Grandfather Carey’s voice thundered in high-pitched anger. He walked through me, running behind them, Patrick and I on their heels. Too late. They had already opened the outside patio door and were closing it behind them, locking us on inside, them out. They stood looking in through the glass pane.

Right behind their father, who screamed, “No! Come back in. Now! You’ve got to come in, please.” His voice, desperate, begged with uncharacteristic compassion.

The girls looked at each other, then back at their panic stricken father. He looked at the door helplessly. He couldn’t break the glass and storm the door. It was too close to them and would push them to their deaths. They clutched each other tight, simultaneously jumping up and down, catapulting the whole step unit out away from outer wall like a wavering tower. It stretched further and further out until finally, the step unit flicked them off it like insects, into the air, hurtling, cascading over and ever downward onto sheer cliffs.

“No!” Grandfather said, tearing his hair and his clothes, turning around and running downstairs, out the back to look down to where nothing could be seen.

My heart sank into despair. Yet, now I knew. Grandfather was not a murderer.

My one solace.

Guilty of scaring them to death, scaring them so badly, they ran to danger. Had Grandmother snuck back in from her trysts that way? Had he loosened screws to kill her? What Patrick said his grandfather said my grandfather said was at least four times hearsay. If so, he was guilty, but she was every bit as much to blame as he. Not a pretty truth to swallow, either.

“Patrick. You saw what I did?”

Chapter 9: Horror Transcended

'All that we see or seem is but a dream within a dream.'—*Edgar Allan Poe*

"I did."

"Patrick. Go with me to the hotel to talk to Art. Can you?"

"Guess I can." He looked sullen.

"You've got records at home, I know. And knowing you, they are all neat, compact, and in little piles. We'll go by your home and collect those first."

"I don't really want to, but I suppose it's come to that, hasn't it?"

We walked slowly downstairs. I held the picture of the girls, as well as the letter. If the house still wept, I didn't want them ruined.

We climbed into my Jeep and drove to Patrick's.

"I'll be just a minute, washing paint off and gathering me records." He sounded submissive.

"I'll wait in the Jeep."

Back in, we drove to the hotel. I was impatient to pull our knowledge together. We were silent. I parked, we debarked, and I ran into the inn. I asked the lady at the front desk to call Art, we needed to talk to him urgently.

He came out looking worried. Seeing us both, he lifted his hands, and asked, "What is it? You all right?" He looked at me, brows furrowed.

"We need to talk. Can you shake loose? And bring your most important records that concern grandparents, love letters and all?"

"Of course. Dining room all right?"

"It is."

"Actually, I keep most of that in my office here. Let me gather things. Here's a table big enough for the three of us and our stuff."

Patrick and I claimed the table, and I went to my room to bring the very few pieces I had from home, plus researched here in Ireland.

Soon Art returned. Together, the three of us unraveled threads that retraced through war horrors back to promises of love and beginning marriages. Call this *The Outpouring*. All we knew and all we thought we knew about our grandfathers and grandmothers, and what had happened all the way back. Patrick, confronted with his grandmother's affair with my grandfather, turned real. Art, for his part, admitted the affair between his grandfather and my grandmother had lasted long enough that Riley and Noelle could be as much his kin as mine.

“That’s why you had their pictures. Your grandfather had had them made.”

He looked at me sheepishly. “I think I realized that. I didn’t want it true.”

We downloaded, wrapped up all their sins and sorrows, back story to our lives.

“So the three grandfathers were classmates and buddies, their connection forged in war times by their going to Belfast in North Ireland for jobs as shipbuilders,” said Art.

“What a miracle the three of us got together,” I said, shaking my head, wondering.

“The worst of it was that they were so tight, they ended up getting consoled by the wrong wives, and that ended in their betraying one another,” said Patrick. “That’s the hardest for me to get over.”

“That your grandfathers worked for Harland & Wolff in Belfast where the Titanic had been built in 1912 was a wonderful new fact to absorb,” I said.

“And that your grandfather had worked for Short Bros. in the same city. We know they spent their time off together,” Patrick said to me.

“Yes, and that one letter my grandfather wrote your grandmother, Patrick. He had come home at an odd time, when she was angry with her husband, missing him, and needed consoling. It happened a lot, those wildfires.”

“The three men were tight spying and fighting with Britain, and loving the women they loved, I guess,” Art said.

“It’s almost like they forged a warp in time that sucked us in together,” I said.

“It’s a horror story,” said Patrick. “One with repercussions from here to eternity.”

“It’s so hard to live with your ancestors’ sins. Perhaps the little girls’ innocence paid for my grandfather’s attempt to kill Norene, if he really did.”

“No wonder he went crazy with grief,” Patrick said.

“He couldn’t live with himself after that.” Art covered my hand with his and squeezed it, hard.

We made a pact to relay what we had discovered, minus the hearsay, with the authorities.

In dated histories of the war each grandfather was by turns a deserter, written up as a spy, first, and then a traitor. That had pulled the

drawstring tight on the three men. That made the double betrayals from mates so heinous. What could have been support became betrayal.

We worked into the night on putting together every known detail about them, and then we decided how much of it we would take to the press. We planned the repair of the upstairs balcony rail photographed for legal and insurance purposes.

A peace bound the three of us together like nothing I dreamed would transpire from the horror my advent and the visits of the girls tripped off, and we relived. Art took Patrick back home. I got ready for our meal out.

I dressed in a rose-colored silk top and a black pencil skirt. Before long, Art was back. "You look beautiful, Rene," he told me, taking my arm and walking me to his car. We drove to a very nice restaurant. I had brought the picture of the girls and the letter with me.

Over a glass of wine, I looked at the girls' picture. "Art, I have to say their eyes look different. They look peaceful."

He pulled the picture closer. "Yes, they do. Strange. Photographs don't change."

"Well you know, you said it was mine because it was my past."

"Yes."

"But you know now they are your family, especially the little redheaded girl. She looks like you. Knowing what we now know, you probably want the pictures back. I'm glad to return them."

He smiled. "Maybe not."

"Why not, Art?"

"It might not matter," he said.

"Because?"

"Well, if it's like I hope, we might share them in the future."

"What six months at Stormclyffe, six months at Balinakill?"

"That's not exactly what I had in mind."

"You're playing games with me, Art. That's not fair."

"It's just that 3 months is so early. I don't dare propose something you're not ready for, like staying on as my wife. At Stormclyffe Manor on the Heights."

"Oh?" I asked. "That is a quick proposal. I hadn't heard anything about that."

He pulled my hand up to his lips and kissed it, and said, "Since you didn't jerk your hand away and slap the fool out of me, well, then, can I take that for a 'yes'?"

"I think that's a 'yes,'" I played at it, teasing him.

He pulled me close in a tender kiss, and I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him. No doubts.

Next day, I picked up Patrick and swung around to the local framer, bought two ready-made's to put the girls' pictures in, got back in the car inserted their pictures.

At Stormclyffe, we walked into the great room, paused to admire our handy work.

"Mz. Rene, look!"

"What?"

Patrick pointed to the big easel. Beautiful colors filled the canvas I had not put there. My painting had been antique gray. I saw beautiful childish scrawls in gorgeous yellow, orange, and vibrant raspberry red.

"Who did this, Patrick?"

"Twasn't me, ma'am. I swear it on me daddy's grave."

"No? Then, then, it must have been the children. They are free. They've been released. And they have forgiven their father and mother."

"It feels different."

"I'll have to hang their paintings upstairs."

"Yes, do. I was so opposed to your coming here, Mz. Rene. I hated it. I thought you just wanted to stir things up. But it looks like you've brought their redemption."

"Wonderful of you to say, Patrick, but it was all of us. The evil was meant to stick to each of our lives, divide us forever. Let's take their photographs up and hang them on the wall I finished yesterday. Go with me?"

"Yes'm."

We walked upstairs, hammer and nails in hand.

"Hold it up, Patrick. I need to eyeball it."

He did.

"To the right a little. There." Patrick nailed concrete nail into wall, and turned toward me.

"Well, that's done," I said.

"Look, Mz. Rene!"

"What?" I turned toward the door.

There stood redheaded Riley, features crisp and real, upturned nose, freckles brown from the sun. Beside her stood Noelle her wispy strands of blonde hair flying, her eyes soft aqua. She put a hand into her sister's, soft and trusting. The pair, with free hands waving blew us kisses, walked backwards into the hallway, out of the present and into another dimension, their faces radiant. They had seen me, after all.

“Patrick!”

We waved back to them, returning blown kisses. I demonstrated hugs.

“Patrick,” I said, “tonight I’m going to sleep here at Stormclyffe. And have you heard? Art and I are getting married!”



THE END