

Prologue

*Wellington Cross Plantation
Diary of Bronwyn Wellington*

December 1763.

My first memory of Aunt Niamh was when I was seven years old. I held my ma's hand as our family walked towards the burial mound, called Brú na Bóinne, near our home in County Meath, Ireland. It was nearly dawn, and there was a chill in the air with white flakes of snow flittering about, tickling my nose. I wiped each flake off with my handknit mittens. As we approached the giant mound, our family joined friends who were already gathering.

No one knew the ancient mound's origin or purpose, but local villagers would come once a year on a morning around the time of winter solstice. It was this time of year, and only this time of year, when the central passageway inside the mound would light up when the sun rose, shining through a stone structure situated above the passage entrance. If the sky was clear and you could see the sunlight inside the chamber passage, it meant good luck for the coming cold winter season. The villagers would also gather food, light candles, and pray for their loved ones they had lost during the previous year, and pray to God for good health for the coming year.

At the time, I had two older brothers, three younger brothers, and Ma was carrying her last bairn in her belly, Fergus. We walked towards Ma and Da's friends, Kathleen and Connor Doran, and their many children, including my best childhood friend, Killian. Killian had dark hair, green eyes, and was nearly a foot taller than me then. I let go of Ma's hand and ran over to join Killian near the entrance.

“There ye be. I didna ken ye were already here,” I said to him.

He grabbed my hand and squeezed it. “Aye. Da woke us up early. Too early. I wanted to walk with you.”

“Ma had to go to the privy again before we left. Da wouldna leave her.”

“Come on, let's go inside the caves,” Killian said. His eyes sparkled with mischief, and I smiled.

“Aye, let's go.”

I glanced back at my ma and da, who were busy talking to their friends, so I followed after Killian, who pulled me by the hand inside the narrow passage. Inside, candles were lit all along the passageway and into the different rooms. The children liked to pretend it was some dark mysterious cave full of pirate treasure. Killian and I joined our other friends in a chamber to the left.

“Do youse want to play hide-and-seek?” a fair-haired boy with freckles named Ailm asked.

“Aye, let's go,” I answered. “Not it.”

“Not it,” Killian quickly said.

The boy who initiated the game ended up being “it” first, so the rest of us set off inside the rocky chambers to hide. Killian pulled me along with him to a far distant chamber where no candles were lit. We hid in a dark corner and waited till Ailm came looking for us. I tried to still my galloping heart, pulsing with every breath. Killian put his hand over my mouth to quiet my deep breathing from the running. I moved his cold hand and wrapped my mitten hands around his.

“You're cold,” I whispered. I grabbed his other hand to warm it up, too.

“I'm fine,” he replied.

We waited and listened as Ailm counted to ten and then set out looking for the other children. One by one, he found our friends, but he dared not venture down as far as Killian and I had hidden.

I let go of Killian's hands and stood up.

Killian pulled on my wet dress hem. "Get down, Ailm will see you," he said.

"He's not coming," I said. I looked all around in the darkness and that's when I noticed a glow on the wall behind us. I peeked around the corner and saw a lit candle in the far reaches of the chamber we were in. "Where's that light coming from?" I asked.

Killian stood up and looked where I pointed. "Let's go and find out," he suggested.

The two of us slowly crept around the corner and saw an older woman down at the far end. Her hair was loose and wild, sticking out in the shadows of a single candle lit on top of a flat rock. Also on that rock was a bundle of something. I wanted to find out what that bundle was. The woman seemed to be chanting something at the bundle.

As we crept closer, Killian let out a sneeze. I froze, eyes wide, and looked at the woman to see if she heard it. She did. She looked our way.

"Go on, get out of here," she called after them. "This is a private ritual."

"I'm sorry," Killian whispered, meaning he was sorry that he had sneezed.

I then looked again at the bundle on the rock and realized it was a bairn. I gasped and then turned and ran the other way, pulling Killian with me.

We passed Ailm on our way to the main passage.

"There ye both are," Ailm said. He tagged me. "You're it now."

"I have to find my ma and da," I said, still running. I found them at the entrance, just as the sunlight hit the inner chamber.

All of the adults gasped in awe at the sight, and I looked down, realizing I was right in the middle of it.

"Shift yourself," a man told me. "Ye'll bring us bad luck if ye're caught in the sun's light."

I quickly pressed myself against the cold rock wall, and Killian did the same, standing right beside me.

"God bless ye," I said to Killian.

"I'm sorry that I did that."

"It doesna matter. Did ye see the bairn on the rock?"

"That was a bairn?"

"Aye, I'm fairly certain 'twas."

"Did she kill it, I wonder?" Killian asked.

I was struck cold with fear, wondering if the old woman would kill me and Killian as well, since we had seen what she was doing.

"Bronwyn, there ye are," my ma said. I realized that the sun's spectacle was over. The passageway was darkened again.

"Ma, there's an old lady in a back chamber with a bairn," I said.

"We think she killed it," Killian said.

"A bairn?" Ma looked around. "Where's yer da?" She found him. "Declan, could ye come here for a moment?"

"What is it, Catriona?"

"Bronwyn says an old lady has killed a bairn in one of the back chambers."

"Show us, cailín. Where is this old lady?" my da said.

Killian and I led them down the passage and into the long set of chambers.

"Ye shouldna have been this far back, Bronwyn," my ma scolded.

"Where is the lady?" my da asked, urging me to keep going.

We turned into the back chamber where we saw the woman in front of a roaring fire.

"She's burning the bairn," I yelled.

"What are ye doing?" Declan yelled at the woman.

"Declan, stay back. This is none of yer concern," the woman said.

"Niamh, is that you?" Declan asked.

"Aunt Niamh?" I whispered. I glanced at Killian, who raised his shoulders as if to say he didn't know.

“Niamh, what have ye done?” Declan said, now running towards the woman.

“I had it on good authority to be doing this,” Niamh said. “The bairn was taken away by the fairies. I am trying to bring him back.”

“By burning it?” Declan exclaimed.

“No, ’course not. I’m merely...”

Before she could finish, Declan seized the bundle, catching his sleeve on fire.

“Declan!” Catriona yelled, running to him.

Declan then slapped Aunt Niamh. “Ye are hereby banished from this village. I want ye to leave now.”

“Ye have no authority to do such a thing,” Niamh said.

A deep voice bellowed into the deep chamber behind them. It was the village’s leader, Angus. “I do, and I enjoin it to be so. Ye are banished, Niamh Kerrigan, never to return to our village again. Make haste and depart, for behold, the sun is now upon us.”

Aunt Niamh hung her head in sorrow, gathered her candle, and walked shamefully past each of them on her way out. As she passed by me, she patted my sleeve. “Have a care, young Bronwyn. Ye will see me again, of this I am certain.”

“Stay away from my daughter,” Declan said.

I watched as my da’s sister left the chamber, and our lives, and I thought I would never see her again.

And I did not see her again until many years later when I was married to Baldwin and living on our Wellington Cross Plantation in Virginia.

Chapter One

*Carson Farm
Pungo, Virginia
Late June 2023*

Courtney blew a loose strand of hair out of her face, sweat pouring down her forehead into her eyes. It was hot and humid already at 10 in the morning. She had just gone inside her and Owen's little barn shop where they sold produce, fresh eggs, baked goods, jams, and other homemade items, as well as fresh raw milk, butter, sour cream, yogurt, kefir, and now that it's summer, ice cream. Three of their female cows had already given birth to calves earlier in the spring, and so they had an abundance of milk. They had purchased refrigerated units to store all the dairy products. She was just opening up the farm shop on a Saturday morning. She was a veterinarian and had quit working at Coastal Veterinary Hospital on the weekends after she and Owen were married, so that she could spend more time with him on the farm.

She tore a paper towel off the wall and wiped her face with it, then pulled her blonde hair up and secured it with a big clip. She flipped the switch for the overhead fan to come on, and soon the soft whirring of the fan created a nice breeze. Owen's old Navy buddy, Jason Barnes, had helped build the barn shop, which looked like a barn, as well as run electricity out to it, which she was so thankful for. Next she opened the front windows, which faced their long driveway, and two back windows to create more breezes.

The barn sat in the shade of a tall maple tree beside a white fence near the busy road by their property. They placed it here so that it would be easy for people driving by to see it and want to pull in and buy farm-fresh items. She had convinced Owen that it should be painted yellow with white trim to match their house, rather than painting it red like the big barn and stables which housed the horses and cows. This small barn shop had a black and white sign hung outside above the doors that read, "Carson Farm." It was a gift Courtney had asked Jason to make for Owen as a Christmas present last year.

It was a sunny day and no chance of rain, which would be good for business. The gravel-covered parking area nearby would soon be full, she hoped. Birds were singing sweetly in the tree above, and she filled up the feeder just outside, which hung in a low tree limb. It was reachable from a covered porch which spread across the front of the barn. Courtney had insisted on the porch because it would be nice to place items there like pumpkins in the fall, both for sale and for decoration.

She pulled out her basket she had brought from the house, full of baked muffin tops, a big hit that always sold out by day's end. She spread them out on a table in flat baskets, sorting the flavors together, including blackberry, peach, and lemon poppyseed. Each muffin was kept in its baking cup and wrapped individually in plastic wrap. A sticky label was made using a printer with the flavor name, which she stuck on top. To make the large muffin tops, she baked the muffins on a cookie sheet rather than a muffin pan, which allowed the muffins to spill over and spread while baking. She then would sprinkle each muffin with coarse sugar on top while they cooled.

She heard a car pull into the drive, and she quickly placed her big basket under the counter and then turned her iPad on for sales. A little bell rang over the double front barn doors as she opened both of them up, propping them open with two cast iron weighted floor stops. The stops were little puppy statues with a long scroll-art handle for easy movement, and she had two of them, gifts from Owen when they first opened the barn shop.

She also had a big refrigerator and freezer in one corner of the shop which held their dairy products. They were also making raw milk ice cream, just vanilla for the time being, and selling that in the same corner of the shop.

Her friend, Sherry Crowe, had housesat and worked in the shop while Courtney and Owen were on their honeymoon. Sherry was Courtney's ex-sister-in-law, but they continued to be friends after Courtney divorced her brother, Junior. Sherry lived on her family's dairy farm in Rappahannock, Virginia, which was two hours away, but she came to help Courtney out in the shop two Saturdays out of the month. She would not be coming today. Courtney needed to think about hiring someone else to help on the days when Sherry couldn't make it. It was too much for one person, and Owen was busy on the farm.

As Courtney finished propping the second door open, she heard female voices and turned to see Brooke and Cassie walking towards the porch, along with baby Adriana in a stroller. Brooke and Cassie were cousins and worked for Courtney as receptionists at the veterinary hospital. Brooke used to be an Amazon driver but recently came to work for Courtney, and as she understood it, she was the spitting image of a Cassie's real mother, Josie. Cassie had just had her second baby, Adriana, which Courtney helped to deliver, six weeks ago. She had been out on maternity leave.

"Good morning, ladies! What a nice surprise!" Courtney said. "How's that baby girl?" She peeked into the car seat carrier to see the baby girl, who was wrapped up in a lightweight pink blanket.

"She's doing great," Cassie said. "Luckily, she has plenty of babysitters so that I have time to rest. Arielle has been so helpful with her. How was your honeymoon/family vacation?"

Courtney and Owen had recently spent several days at The Greenbrier, a resort in the mountains of West Virginia. The first couple of nights were just the two of them, and then soon after, Brooke, Jen and Luke Callaway, Cassie's dad, as well as Jen's dad Tom and his wife Evie, and Jason and his wife Sarah joined them at the resort. They had taken a tour through England, Ireland, and other parts of the U.S. in what they called their B&B tour, which stood for Baldwin and Bronwyn, their ancestors. They visited all the places that Baldwin and Bronwyn had been to in their lives. The family had recently pooled funds together to jointly own Wellington Cross Plantation, which had belonged to Baldwin and Bronwyn in the late 1700s. It was located out in the country in Charles City County, which was located near Williamsburg and Richmond on the James River.

Since Cassie had been on maternity leave, she hadn't talked to Courtney since the trip.

"It was heavenly. What a wonderful resort that place is," Courtney said. She turned to go inside, hiding the blush that she felt color her cheeks from thinking about the wonderful time she and Owen had had exploring the resort, the outdoor gardens, as well as each other. "Come on inside and have a look around. First item is free for you both."

"Oh, we couldn't," Brooke said.

"We shouldn't," Cassie said.

"I insist," Courtney said, "and I also insist on holding this baby," she said, taking the carrier from Cassie. "We can leave this carrier out here on the porch." She sat the carrier down on the porch and leaned over to pick Adriana up. She carefully placed the sleeping baby up next to her neck and breathed in her scent. Courtney closed her eyes and smiled. "What a wonderful smell babies have," she murmured.

"You wouldn't say that once you changed the first poopy diaper," Cassie said, laughing.

"Oh, she's just doing what nature calls for when that happens. Just like every creature," Courtney said.

Courtney and Owen had only been married six weeks, and they were thoroughly enjoying each other, but Courtney longed to have a baby. She could literally hear the ticking of her maternal clock sometimes. She was 40 years old and had not been able to get pregnant with her first husband, something she was glad of since he had cheated on her. But she longed for a child, especially one with Owen.

"Let me know any time you need another set of hands or another babysitter," she told Cassie. She walked around slowly while the other ladies looked at items in the shop.

"Oh, I love muffin tops," Brooke said. "I'm going to stock up on these."

"Me, too," Cassie agreed.

"Help yourself. I made plenty this morning," Courtney said.

The girls filled up plastic shopping baskets with muffin tops and produce, and soon other cars pulled into the drive.

"Courtney," a deep voice bellowed behind Courtney, sending chills and thrills down her arms, despite the heat. She turned to see her husband standing in the doorway in all his cowboy glory, hat, boots and all. Desire in his eyes quickly changed to endearing and he walked up to her. "Is this Adriana?"

"It is," Courtney said, smiling. She turned the baby sideways carefully so that Owen could have a better look. "Isn't she a sweetheart?"

"She is. I would spoil her rotten," Owen said.

Courtney smiled.

"Maybe we'll have one of our own to spoil soon," he whispered in her ear.

"Maybe so," she agreed, grinning. "What brings you to the shop?"

"I wanted to introduce you to our new hired hand." He turned and walked to the open doorway. "Come on in, Dillon."

A young man wearing a cowboy hat, short-sleeved plaid shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots stepped inside the shop. He had dark hair, a trim beard, and an easy grin.

"Dillon, this is my wife, Courtney. Courtney, meet Dillon McGregor."

"Pleased to meet you, ma'am," Dillon said with a nice Southern drawl.

"Nice to meet you, as well. I hope you'll enjoy working for us here on the farm."

"I'm sure I will, ma'am." He turned and saw the two young ladies in the shop, Cassie and Brooke, together in a corner, while some other shoppers entered the barn behind Dillon.

"Good morning," Courtney said to the newcomers. Turning back to Dillon, she said, "Let me introduce you to these pretty ladies," Courtney said, walking over to the corner. "These two are cousins who work for me at my veterinary clinic. I don't know if Owen told you what else I do for a living, besides running this shop and helping out on the farm."

"No, he didn't. That's pretty convenient to have a vet around with all these farm animals," Dillon said.

"I'm no fool," Owen said, winking.

"This is Cassie," Courtney said to Dillon. "She's married," she added quickly.

"Nice to meet you, ma'am," Dillon said.

"Nice to meet you, too," Cassie said, laughing at Courtney's remark.

"And this is Brooke. She's not married, but I understand she met a fella in Ireland that she took a fancy to."

Brooke blushed. "Oh, you're funny, Dr. Courtney." She turned to Dillon and shook his hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise," Dillon said, his voice a little softer. He swallowed visibly hard, as if he were struck by her beauty. Brooke had long blondish-red hair and clear blue eyes, a beauty for sure.

"How much are the muffin tops?" a lady asked Courtney.

She turned around to greet the customer, even though the price sign was on a small chalkboard on a stick right beside the muffin baskets. "They're three dollars each," she said. She turned back to Owen. "Would you like to hold Adriana? I need to get behind the counter."

“Of course.” Owen gently took the baby out of Courtney’s arms and nestled her against his chest. My, didn’t he make a handsome dad.

She walked around and got behind the counter, checking her phone for any messages while the two ladies filled up their baskets and then approached the counter to check out.

“I’m so glad you opened this farm,” one of the women said. “I just love fresh produce. Will you have strawberries to pick your own in the future?”

“Maybe in the future. We just started them this year. We could probably expand next year since they did so well.”

“That would be nice. I love making strawberry jam.”

“Me, too,” Courtney said. “I made some and canned them. They’re in jars over there in the corner if you’d like to purchase some today.”

“Oh, I would. Hold on.” The lady walked over where Brooke was talking to Dillon. “Excuse me, if I could just grab a jar of jam and then I’ll be out of your way.”

“Of course, I’m sorry,” Brooke said, moving out of the corner.

The lady brought two jars over and Courtney finished checking them out. “Have a great day,” she said to both ladies as they were leaving.

“You, too,” they both said.

“I best get out of your hair,” Owen said to Courtney. “I need to start showing Dillon the ropes anyway.”

“I like you in my hair,” Courtney said, smiling. He leaned over and kissed her lips.

“Where shall I put Adriana?” Owen asked.

“I’ll take her until these two have finished shopping,” Courtney said. Owen handed the baby back to Courtney.

“See you later,” he said, kissing Courtney on the forehead. “I can’t wait to see you with one of our own,” he whispered in her ear.

She smiled, counting the weeks back to her last cycle, and thought that she might already be pregnant with a child of their own.

Chapter Two

Brooke Meadows was immediately struck by Dillon McGregor's handsome rugged features, and his cowboy hat if she was being honest. He was clearly attracted to her as well, not taking his eyes off her since they were introduced in Dr. Courtney's farm shop.

But Brooke couldn't forget about the handsome, funny guy she met in Ireland just two weeks prior. She along with her family had been visiting their ancestor Bronwyn Wellington's homeland in County Meath. It was an ancient area steeped in tradition, folklore, and mystery. They had visited Newgrange, which was where Bronwyn had written about going to every year as a child with her family, to view the sun's entrance in the huge mound, as well as praying for loved ones lost and for good health and luck in the coming year. They had also visited the Hill of Tara, where ancient Irish kings had gathered, and they visited Hill of Slane, where old abbey ruins stood beside a graveyard full of big crosses. All featured beautiful views of the green landscape around them.

Tired, they had ventured into a nearby pub called "O'Donnell's Pub." They were seated at a big round table in a corner, and Jason had offered to walk up to the bar and order drinks for them. Brooke volunteered to help him carry them all back to the table for the seven of them. When she and Jason reached the bar, the dark-haired thin guy behind it was busy pouring drinks and chatting in a sing-songy Irish brogue. He glanced over at her and Jason, then back to the Irish chap he was talking with, and quickly did a double take to look at Brooke. He then excused himself and walked down towards her and Jason on the end of the bar.

"How may I help youse?" he asked them, looking straight at Brooke.

Jason took over and ordered drinks for himself and the others at the table.

"And for t'e lady?"

"I'll have a Smithwick's," Brooke replied.

"Good choice. One Smith'icks coming right up."

Brooke made note of the way he pronounced it, without the "w". She watched him pull the lever and pour the drink, and she heard a violin tuning behind them.

"Here you go, love," he said, handing her the beer, inadvertently spilling some over the side as she took it. "Let me help ye with that," he said, reaching for a couple of napkins. "It might help if ye take a big sip of it first, so's we can wipe t'e side of t'e glass."

"Okay," Brooke said shyly. She slurped a sip and then set the glass on the counter. He wiped it off for her and handed her a couple of clean napkins. "Here ye are."

"Is a band going to be playing?" she asked before he could turn away.

"Aye, my cousins have a band. They'll be playing some traditional Gaelic music soon enough."

"Wonderful," Brooke said.

She then helped Jason by carrying another glass of beer.

"Here, let me help youse," the bartender said. He placed four of the glasses on top of a small round tray. "Lead the way," he said, walking around the bar and following Jason to the table. She walked behind him, noting how his dark hair bounced as he walked.

"Thank you very much," Jason said when they reached the table. He was all smiles. He was clearly enjoying being back in a country that he had lived in in the past with his deceased wife, Belle Wellington.

"I'm sorry, I could have helped you with that," Luke Callaway said.

"'Tis no problem at all," the bartender said.

"Hey, would you happen to know if there are any tours to Glasnevin Cemetery in County Wicklow?" Jason asked.

"Aye. I happen to give tours there myself on Saturdays. Where would ye be staying?"

"We're staying in Dublin. Just up here for a day trip," Jason said.

"Ah, well, it just so happens I originate t'e tours from Dublin, so you're in luck."

"Excellent."

"Give us a minute and I'll write down the information for youse," the bartender said.

"Oh, I can make notes on my phone," Brooke spoke up before he left the table.

"Ah, good."

She pulled her iPhone out of her small purse and opened up the notes app. She started a new one and handed him her phone. "Do you want to type it, or I can if it's easier?" she said nervously. He had a nice smile, smiling green eyes, and his dark wavy hair bounced over his forehead as he leaned over.

"I can do it, 'tis probably easier." She watched him type on her phone, noting his long eyelashes against his face, cheeks slightly pink as though he had been out in the sun recently. "Here ye are," he said, handing the phone back to her. She noted that he smelled like a combination of coffee and alcoholic spirits, like Irish coffee, she thought, smiling.

"Meet us at the Starbucks in the Temple Bar area at a quarter to seven. We'll be pulling out at 7:00 sharp. Saturday morning."

"Thanks so much," Jason said, shaking his hand.

"Look for me. Tiernan's the name."

"Nice to meet you, Tiernan," Jason said.

They enjoyed their beers, a large plate of Irish fries and Guinness stew, and listened to music. Brooke had watched Tiernan as much as, if not more than, she watched the band. He was too busy to come back over and talk to them.

When Saturday had arrived, Brooke tried on six different outfits before she settled on one, wearing layers in case it got warmer as the day wore on. The mornings had been cool during their visit. She had butterflies in her stomach when she laid eyes on Tiernan, who stood by the small tour van when they arrived.

"Top of the mornin' to ye," he said, smiling. She laughed at his well-known Irish greeting.

"And a good morning to you, too," she said.

"I'll take your ticket, and ye may enter my carriage. Sit wherever ye like."

Brooke was the odd man out on this family trip, all the others being coupled together, so she sat in the front seat where she could talk to or at least look at Tiernan. Her family filled up the seats behind her.

The van was soon filled, and Tiernan greeted everyone, introducing himself and his driver, Aidan, who happened to be a cousin. They were soon on the road, and Tiernan spent the next half hour talking about places they passed on their way south to the Wicklow Mountains. Eventually he sat down in the front seat opposite the driver, who was on the right side instead of the usual left. He turned around and talked to Brooke from time to time, giving her folklore and jokes, making her laugh.

Soon they reached the area of Glendalough, which means valley of two lakes. Jason led the way quickly to find Glasnevin Cemetery, where his deceased wife Belle Wellington was buried. Brooke didn't want to rush, she wanted to take it all in.

"I'll meet you all there," she said. "I need to go to the rest room and then I want to walk to the lakes."

"Pardon me for eavesdropping, for you will pass through the cemetery on your way to the lakes," Tiernan told her. He turned to her family. "I can make sure she makes it to the graveyard."

"Thanks so much," Jen said.

"Yes, thank you," Brooke said. "I want to take it all in and not rush anything."

“I understand completely. Come, I’ll show you t’e way to t’e toilets.”

He walked her to a building which housed the toilets, and then back to the pathways that led to the cemetery and walking trails to the lakes.

“What’s t’e rush to t’e cemetery?” Tiernan asked.

“One of our ancestors is buried there,” Brooke said, being careful not to mention that Jason had been married to her many, many years ago, since he was half dark angel. He had the gift – or curse – of longevity.

“Ah, t’at’s excitin’.”

“It’s not like it’s going anywhere though,” Brooke said.

“True, true. It’s not far up this trail here.”

Soon they entered the cemetery which was part of a monastery settlement, now ruins and a tall tower. Jen found them and showed them where Belle’s tombstone was. There was talk about the possibility of moving her casket back to Virginia. Tiernan told them who they could talk to about that, and then Brooke urged him to come on the lake walk with her.

“I would love to,” he said. They walked through the cool trees and ferns till they reached the first lower lake. Brooke immediately made her way towards the muddy shore where some ducks waddled towards them.

“I wonder if they like apples?” she said.

She pulled out an apple from her backpack and took a bite for herself first, and then took another bite and offered it to the ducks. Sure enough, they did like the apple, gobbling it right up. On the other side of the lake were mountains on both sides. It was a beautiful sight.

“There’s a bigger lake up ahead,” Tiernan said after her apple was gone.

They walked on to the other lake, and Brooke found a log to sit on to rest for a bit.

“Ireland is so lush and beautiful,” Brooke said. “Do you take the walk every time you come here? Every week?”

“Nah, maybe once a month.”

“Do you do these tours every week?”

“Aye, I do.”

“You’re awfully busy,” Brooke said. “Not that that’s a bad thing.”

“Both businesses keep me busy. I co-own the pub with my da and my cousin, Fred.”

They continued talking about Ireland and places Tiernan thought she should visit, until he looked at his watch. “We need to be going. Want to make it back to Dublin before t’e sun goes down.”

“Okay,” Brooke said reluctantly. She could stay in this spot with him forever. She had to admit she had a crush on him. He had such a sweet spirit about him. She sensed he had troubles from his past that drove him to work so hard, but she didn’t want to pry.

They retraced their steps back to through the ancient village and back to the rest rooms before boarding the van. Tiernan ended up sitting beside her on the drive back, playing Irish music softly in the background. The movement of the van along the roads nearly lulled her to sleep, but she didn’t want to miss a single moment with Tiernan. She felt herself falling for him.

When they got close to Dublin, Tiernan put his “tour guide hat” back on and recommended some nearby pubs to have dinner at when they got off. Brooke could only think of one pub she wanted to go to, and that was the one Tiernan co-owned.

They stopped at the same Starbucks where they had met up that morning, and everyone piled off, except for Brooke. She was the last person off. She felt teary eyed as she slowly stood up and walked towards Tiernan. He had been outside and walked up the steps to see who else was onboard.

“Time to go, love.”

“Aye, I kno’,” she said, mimicking his accent.

He picked up her hand and brought it to his lips to kiss in a cheerful, chivalrous manner. "Till we meet again and pray t'at be soon." His smile disappeared and his consternation became serious, almost sorrowful. She knew it echoed her own. "It has truly been a pleasure gettin' to know ye," he said.

"Yes, it has been for me, too."

He leaned over and surprised her by kissing her cheek. She was sure it tasted salty, for she felt tears escape her eyes. He stood back up and she wiped her eyes.

"When are ye leaving back to America?"

"Tomorrow, I think," she said, feeling like a frog was in her hoarse throat.

"Safe travels to ye then."

"Thank you."

"*Dia duit.* May God be with ye."

"It's nice to meet you." The cowboy in front of her stirred her thoughts back to the present.

She blinked and smiled. "Nice to meet you, too."

"So how are you two related?" Dillon asked, glancing over at Cassie.

"We're cousins. My grandpa and her grandpa were brothers."

"Oh, I see. So you work at a vet clinic?"

"Yeah, Coastal Vet."

"What do you do there, if you don't mind me asking?"

A lady excused herself in the conversation to get to the jam jars behind them.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She moved to the other corner, Dillon following her. "I'm a receptionist. I was an Amazon driver before that, but it was hard work, all that driving and lifting heavy boxes. I much prefer being around animals, and my cousin, of course. We're just getting to know each other. I used to live in Tennessee until about a year ago when I moved here. I came on vacation with some friends and fell in love with the area."

"It is a nice area."

"Have you lived here long?"

"All my life. I'm a Pungo boy, born and raised. Went to Kellam High School."

"That's great."

"Come on, Dillon," Owen called out. "We've got work to do."

"Yes, sir," Dillon said. "It was a pleasure meeting you. Maybe we'll see each other again." He shook her hand and grinned under his cowboy hat.

"Maybe we will." She smiled and shook his hand back.

After he left, she thought about Tiernan again. She had gotten his phone number and they had texted each other a few times, but she knew nothing would come from such a long-distance relationship. She had contemplated applying for Trinity College in Dublin, but it wasn't the education that she had wanted. It was Tiernan. And such thoughts just weren't practical, especially when she just found family and a new home here in Virginia.

She realized she had left her heart in Ireland.

She would have to call it back home now, for one might need that heart with such a handsome, strapping cowboy about.