

Chapter 1

Dina

1993

It was wet and forgivingly mild for a February in Ireland. A tender breeze spilled off the Atlantic, dancing over the slate rooftops and up the Garavogue River before sifting through the open window to stroke Dina Benet's cheek like a mother's caress. A single leaf wobbled on the tree branch outside, a match to the trembling inside of her.

The smell of frying potatoes, bacon, and eggs drifted through the corridors of the bed and breakfast, reminding Dina the body could feel hunger when the mind could not conceive of eating again. The body chose, of its own volition, to go forward and survive.

She was a mother, and yet she was a mother no more. Handing her baby over to Colleen and to a better life than she could offer continued to send waves of grief rolling through her body. Her mind said she'd made the right decision, so why did she feel like a failure yet again?

They would have let her stay at the cottage outside Sligo for a few more days, but she wanted to walk away, to work through her sadness alone before taking the train to Dublin where she'd finish her classes and, eventually, head back to the States for good. She'd rented this room in Sligo for a few nights. Kathleen, good friend that she was, had sworn she'd pick Dina up before noon and spend the day with her. Kathleen insisted Dina should not be alone. But Dina

had no intention of waiting for her. She was here in the beloved birthplace of her grandmother—and now her own child. Despite Kathleen's good intentions, Dina needed to be alone. A hovering, mothering friend would only exacerbate the piercing pain of the sorrow that blanketed her like the gray clouds she watched scuttling across the sky as she finished dressing. A walk on the beach after breakfast, even if it came with raindrops pattering across her umbrella, might soften her feelings. Nothing would wash away the detritus inside, but she had made this decision on her own. Perhaps, here where Yeats had expelled his own emotions into onto the page, Dina could find a way to write again, releasing herself into the healing powers of poetry.

The voice of her grandmother, Maeve O'Malley, rolled up from within her like a strong wind, cursing God. Dina wanted to mimic Granny's fierce ability to curse heaven and earth today, but she could not. Maeve's lilting cadence had more often read to Dina from Yeats than spoken blasphemy, making her shocking outburst the day Dina's mother, Justine, died a moment that lived in perfect clarity in Dina's memory. She'd watched as Maeve's strong, straight back crumpled inward, her sturdy white work shoes folding under her as she dropped to the floor and pulled her daughter's lifeless body into her arms. Dina remembered seeing the light trace of white foam lying on her mother's bluish lips and smelling the harsh odor of vomit, dried on her T-shirt, before Maeve motioned to a police officer who gently took Dina's arm and steered her through the apartment door onto the steps outside. The breeze from Lake Erie, so clean and refreshing, had done little that day to mask the smells of beer, cheap wine, marijuana, and death.

"Justine, how could you do this?" Dina heard her grandmother whisper before she began keening for the loss of her only child. A second police officer walked Dina across the street and down the block to the small apartment she shared with her grandmother and sister, Celia. There

Dina curled up next to Celia, the strong, responsible, first-born child, on the porch steps and they waited together, stoicism intertwined with fragility, for Granny to return.

Dina could not curse God today as her grandmother had done all those years ago, nor could she keen with practiced ease for her own loss of her child, still so fresh and raw. She'd made a sacrifice Maeve and Justine had not, but she felt neither courageous nor relieved. It was, she believed, a curse upon the women in her family that motherhood did not inspire the best within them to rise to the surface. If Dina could navigate a worthier path for herself, she hoped, one day, she would be a good mother to some as yet unimagined child.

Sliding her fingers into the pocket of Granny's old gray sweater, she gently touched the worn rosary, lying where her grandmother had always kept it. Although Dina was not a particularly religious person, there was a comfort in talking to God, an expiation of loneliness that she could not explain, even to herself. Pulling the rosary out, she set it in her lap and began moving her mouth in time with her hands to the rhythmic *click, click* of the worn glass beads. Silently, Dina slipped into the numbing relief of this ritualistic familiarity that moved the memory of her mother further away and wrapped her in her Granny's arms once again.

Granny had often pulled young Dina close after Justine died, as if she were trying to fill the space she carried in front of her body like an open pouch connected to her heart, only the sound of wind and dust blowing in and out of it. Celia had been less inclined to allow hugging and touching. She was twelve going on forty when they went to live with Granny. She'd been caring for and feeding Dina since she was six, as Justine graduated from smoking pot to shooting up heroin in seemingly less time than it took Celia to make peanut butter sandwiches when they were hungry. And they were hungry much of the time.

“Oh, Granny, I wish you were here,” Dina whispered to herself as the rustling of the leaves outside her window mixed with the creak of the old stairway to the bed and breakfast’s dining room below. But her grandmother had been dead over a year now.

Dina was tempted to call Celia, but her sister’s support would come with small disapproving remarks amidst overt nurturing that hinted at silent condemnation lurking beneath the surface. Celia believed Dina was weak, and over the short span of her life, Dina had come to agree. She would never tell Celia the truth about this past year, or this past week. It wouldn’t be the first secret she’d kept from her sister, but it was the biggest, by far.

Click, click, click. Hail Mary, full of grace. Maybe the rosary would pave a road out of her most recent failure. If she turned to look back along the same road for a moment, she could be nine years old once more. Dina’s memories brought her a vision of Granny sipping her tea as a cool breeze blew in, rustling the curtains and spiraling the steam from her mug across the room. Early May on the Great Lakes brought sunshine that hinted at a promise of warmth the lake winds would not yet allow. Outside the window, the leaves on a large oak tree had swished in the wind, some still unfurling, others outstretched reaching for sunlight.

Dina was sitting on a bed that day, too, next to a sleeping Celia and watching their grandmother pray aloud to the Holy Mother and then to St. Brigid.

“Prayer calms me, Dina,” Granny had said. “It gives me a sense of balance, of setting upright that which has tipped over and begun to spill about, here and there, in my life.”

Dina was always left with the sense that, as her grandmother prayed, she gathered herself and her life into a neat and orderly place. Despite Dina’s best efforts, it had never worked as well for her, although she continued to try, as she was doing today. She retained a slight hope that if

she kept trying she would, eventually, latch on to the same rhythm that had steadied her grandmother, finding a way to anchor herself.

“Granny, do you forgive God and Mommy?” Dina had asked that morning.

“Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. Luke 7:47.”

“Your eyes were closed an’ you were makin’ funny noises when Mommy died,” Dina said, pushing for an explanation.

“I was keening, as is the way of the Irish when a loved one dies,” Granny said. “It’s sorry I am that it scared you so, but Justine was my daughter.”

“Why do you call it ‘keening,’ Granny?” Celia was awake by then too.

“Ahhh . . . I’m not sure. My mam and the old Irish called it *ullaloo*.”

Dina pulled her mind back to the present. *One day, far in the future, will I remember Sligo as a sanctuary of healing or a place of utter sorrow?* Dina wondered if she could keen out on the Sligo beach, screaming into the wind coming off the Atlantic with the sound lost to all but her ears and God’s. Perhaps Granny and even Justine would hear her cries from their perch in the heavens and sprinkle her with some sort of comforting fairy dust to help her move forward. Granny had been a big believer in the magic of fairies, despite her staunch Catholicism. She’d also believed Dina carried within her the great Irish writers and that, one day, she would show the world her talent. She’d had never lost that faith in Dina or stopped supporting her, despite Celia’s complaints that Dina was irresponsible, that she was a dreamer who needed to find a stable way to earn a living.

Dina put away the rosary and stood up. Running a comb through her short, bobbed hair, she looked at the bare branches tapping the shutters and thanked her grandmother for her love of

Irish poetry and her belief that, against the odds life sent her way, forgiveness was a cure for all ills.

Sweet, there is nothing left to say,

But this, that love is never lost.

Granny had loved those lines from C.S. Lewis.

“Someday you and your sister will forgive your mother,” she’d told Dina often. “You’ll see and understand when you’re older.”

In some ways, she’d had been right. Dina grew to become a woman who could forgive all but herself, while Celia looked away, her gaze always hard and cold when Granny talked about Justine. There had never been any forgiveness in Celia’s heart for their drug-addicted mother and the life they led with her before going to live with their grandmother.

An hour later, Dina was walking alone along the Sligo beach, sifting cold sand through her bare toes, the sun warming the rest of her as it sat, middling and not yet to noon, in the sky. She preferred the early morning hours, when the sun rose, angling softly over the horizon and spilling across the water in a spectacular burst of brilliance, its carrotty, golden-tipped rays crossing over the waves and sand. But today she’d slept late, dreaming of the baby girl she’d handed over three days earlier to a better life than she could provide. Dina had held her child for a full thirty minutes that would have to last a lifetime, while the fear that she was failing this baby by giving her away mixed with the fear that she would somehow end up a failed mother like Justine. As she’d released the baby from her arms, she’d never needed her grandmother’s love and reassurance more.

“Will you name her Maeve?” she’d asked in those last moments as she held her child.

“We’re set on naming her Katie,” Kathleen’s cousin, Colleen, replied.

“It was my granny’s name, and I thought it would give her strength.” Dina could hear her voice faltering.

“Well, perhaps Kathleen Maeve would be a good name for our Katie,” Colleen said, patting Dina’s shoulder.

The words “our Katie” hurt as much today as they had when she handed her daughter over to Colleen. Dina was not part of “our.” She could only hope someone had taught Colleen the secrets to mothering that Justine had never given to Dina. Katie deserved better than what Dina could offer. She deserved a mother, a father, and a safe home. When Kathleen approached Dina with the suggestions that she allow Kathleen’s childless cousin, Colleen, and her husband, Jack, to adopt the baby, it had seemed the perfect, selfless solution.

But nothing in the calm of the waves or the quiet of the beach, punctuated only here and there with the cry of a seagull, could remove the anguish of giving Katie away or the overwhelming desire to go back to Colleen’s cottage and retrieve her, never letting her go again. Dina dropped to her knees and began rocking against the breeze, face upturned to the sun and sky, but no sound would come. She could not keen for the loss of her child as her grandmother had once done for Justine. She was impotent within her own pain.