

A love story

**I Love You**

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## *Prologue*

# *Down Cathedral*

### *Down Patrick, Ireland*

“Looks like a big slab of rock, not a tombstone,” I said, looking down at the huge, flat stone embedded in a block of asphalt. I turned to my wife, Erin.

“You’d think Saint Patrick would have an imposing marker, something of marble,” I added. Looking at the spires of Down Cathedral, I raised my arms dramatically to the overcast sky, which was as heavy and gray as the tombstone. “Why not a mammoth figure of the saint sculpted by Michelangelo, towering to the heavens!”

Erin pulled one arm down and kissed me on the nose. Her kiss and her smile were my reward for the absurd theatrics.

As I took a picture of the huge tombstone, our Irish guide, Rory, said, “During World War Two, American soldiers chipped away at the stone with their knives. Souvenirs of their visit to Ireland.”

I noticed a slick spot where a sliver had recently been cut away. “Looks like people still take away souvenirs,” I said.

Rory thrust both hands in the pockets of his wrinkled jacket. “Pilgrims from all over Ireland, and even America”—he

grinned at Erin, his teeth brown from cigarette smoke—“come to Down Cathedral to honor our patron saint.”

*Except us*, I thought.

We were here for another purpose. Erin and I had hired Rory, a red-haired, paunchy native of Down Patrick, as our tour guide. We wanted him to help us discover the burial place of her family ancestors. Erin knew from family records and letters that her mother had been born in Belfast, only forty miles north, and her grandmother was from Down Patrick. We were looking for a family lineage that could be traced back, perhaps, 200 years.

Earlier we'd visited two other churches, but the doors were locked. I wandered through the graveyards, looking at moldy tombstones set in the ground like jagged teeth. The leaden sky hung like a coffin cover over the scene of the dead. Our reward had been cold feet and soggy shoes.

Down Cathedral displayed more promise; the gravestones were old but more elaborate. Most of the graves had markers of varying sizes, some with sculpted figures, including one of an angel with folded wings. There were several large vaults, penned in by metal fences thickened with rust. The withered branches of the late autumn trees looked like the bones of dried skeletons. Rather apropos for a church graveyard, I thought.

I took Erin's hand and we followed Rory to the rear entrance of the cathedral. Erin wore white slacks and a black sweater. An Irish shawl, which she had bought at a linen factory in Belfast the day before, was draped over her shoulders. A wide-brimmed black hat fitted snugly on her head, not to shade her eyes, but to cover her head.

She had lost her hair.

The chemotherapy treatments had deprived her of her lustrous red hair ten months earlier. It had started to grow back

into a pixie style that she liked, but on this cool day she had decided to wear one of her hats.

She stumbled on a cobblestone, and I clasped her arm, steadying her. Her forty-seven-year old body had withstood aggressive cancer treatments and the chemotherapy had taken its toll. Yet, her doctor had told us that, “Everything is significantly improved, and I couldn’t have wished for better.”

“Think this is the place?” I asked, trying to take her mind—and mine—off the cancer.

She looked up at me, her pale, jade-green eyes glowing. In a firm voice said, “I *know* it is.”

Directly in our path as we entered the Cathedral stood a massive stone font. Erin dipped her fingers into the water and made the sign of the cross. I nodded my head in respect, as I always did when she took me to a Catholic Church. She loved the Spanish Mission in Santa Barbara, California and we often went there to Sunday mass, immersing ourselves in the historic church’s peace and tranquility.

“The font, worn from millions of hands touching its rim, is made of granite,” Rory said in his Irish accent, offering a little guidebook insight. “‘Tis said to be the base of a stone cross dating a thousand years ago.”

Erin looked around at the bare walls in the entryway. Seeing nothing, she continued into the nave of the cathedral. As she approached a stained glass window, Rory whispered, “The Saint Patrick window.”

Erin nodded at the four figures of St. Patrick etched into the glass, then turned to look at the choir loft with its huge organ whose brass pipes almost reached to the vaulted ceiling. From her purse, she slipped out a folded letter, which was wrinkled from decades of handling. It was a letter that had been written to Erin’s mother in November 1956 by a registrar of the cathedral. Erin’s mother had marked these words:

*Cork Millner*

*We remember your mother well. She was the daughter of Mr. Henry Smyth, a much respected member of this town. She was brought up an Episcopal (Church of Ireland), was a good singer and a member of Down Cathedral Choir.*

Erin eased onto a wooden bench and sighed, “My grandmother sang in that choir loft. It’s . . . as if I can almost see her.”

I didn’t say anything. Erin was clairvoyant. If she said she’d seen her grandmother, I’d believe her. She had revealed her psychic abilities to me on several occasions in the past.

She turned to Rory. “I need to talk to someone who works here.”

Rory led us past the granite font to a back room with wood-paneled walls. The room smelled of dust, age, and forgotten records. A stocky woman, hips bulging in a plaid skirt that fell to her ankles, shook hands with Rory as he explained that we were looking for ancestral records.

“And the name of your ancestor?” the woman asked, a friendly smile creasing the deep lines around her mouth.

Erin handed the letter to her and pointed at the name, *Henry Smythe*.

“Ah, not to be a problem.” So saying, the woman slid a huge leather-bound ledger, its edges frayed with time and use, from a shelf. With a grunt, she plopped it on a table. I watched with fascination as the woman leafed through the stiff pages, which crinkled like fall leaves. I noticed Erin studying the gold-framed pictures on the walls. I assumed they were drawings and photographs of past Bishops of the church. But I knew Erin was looking for something else—a photograph of *us*.

*Lost in time . . .*

*I Love You*

When we first began our romance five years earlier, Erin told me, “The photograph, the one I had a vision of, haunts my mind. I know it’s of two people. The woman is a redhead, the man blonde with blue eyes, like you.”

The next morning she shook me awake. I snuggled into her soft breast.

“Uh, uh, not now, lover.” She pushed my head away. “What if the Irish redheaded girl was Catholic and the handsome, exciting man was Protestant? Like us. At that time the church would never allow them to marry. What if they were not destined to be together in *that* life, you know, because of the church. What if they made a vow to be together in *another* life! What if . . . my mind is racing.”

She settled back down in the pillows. I stared at her. Even with her red hair in disarray, her smooth, line less face bereft of makeup, she was the loveliest creature on Earth. I watched as she closed her eyes as if to will her mind into another time. After a moment, she began to speak in a voice that I could only describe as ethereal:

*“We will meet again—somewhere in time. ”*

“You have the prettiest eyes,” the matronly churchwoman said as Erin turned from her study of the pictures on the wall.

I smiled, having been seduced countless times by those remarkable eyes. Erin’s eyes were startling, a pale, luminous green like soft jade. Looking into her eyes, I always had the feeling I was seeing deep within her soul.

“Ah, here we are,” the churchwoman said, turning one more page of the old ledger. She pointed to two names in the book and read: “Margaret Smythe, died 1865, age forty-seven.” She ran her finger down to the next line. “And this must be her

husband, Robert Smythe, died 1866, age sixty-eight. They died only a year apart.”

Erin stared at me, and I could guess her thoughts. Margaret, who must have been her great-great grandmother, had been twenty years younger than her husband, Robert. And Erin was twenty years younger than *me*. She was forty-seven. I shrugged it off as mere coincidence and pulled my camera off my shoulder.

As I snapped a picture of the ledger page, Erin asked, “Are they buried in the Cathedral’s graveyard?”

“Aye, they are,” the woman said, pointing at the page with a chipped, red fingernail. “See, the register even lists a lot number.”

“How do we find it?” I asked, clicking a final picture.

The woman closed the pages of the heavy book and brushed the dust off the cover. She went to a drawer and pulled out a linen scroll, browned with age, and unrolled it. The scroll showed a diagram of the graveyard. “Ah, here ‘tis. Come, I’ll show you.” The woman laid the scroll on the open drawer. With a crook of her finger, she beckoned us to follow.

The sun had burned away the covering of clouds and the sky had turned a powder blue. I slipped on my sunglasses. The woman trudged past Saint Patrick’s memorial stone, stumbling over one of the many lumps of thick, yellow grass, toward a tomb that stood about six feet high, enclosed by a rusty metal fence. “That’s it,” she said, wheezing, hands on her hips.

*A tomb*, I thought, impressed as I walked around it. There were only a few tombs in the graveyard, but this one, evidently Erin’s family tomb, was, or at least had been, imposing. It appeared that no one had cared for it in decades. A growth of prickly holly obscured any sign of a marker.

Rory began to pull aside the holly at one end of the tomb. I helped, wincing as thorns pricked my skin. Finally, we

uncovered a gray marble marker. Clearly engraved on its surface was the inscription:

**MARGARET  
DIED AT DOWNPATRICK JULY 1865,  
AGE 47 YEARS  
WIFE OF ROBERT SMYTHE,  
DIED JULY 1866, AGE 68.**

Erin stared at the uncovered inscription as I took pictures. With one hand on the railing to steady herself, she said, “My ancestors, my great-great grandfather and grandmother. I never really expected to find their tomb.”

I pointed behind me. “And only twenty feet from Saint Patrick’s stone. Your ancestors must have been rich.”

“Undertakers,” the churchwoman said, dusting off her plaid skirt. “The last Smythe died twenty years ago. I read the obituaries. They were all undertakers.”

I took a few more pictures, several with Erin standing by the tomb. Thanking the churchwoman, we walked away from the cathedral. I had my arm through Erin’s when I felt her body go rigid, something I had seen before on our travels, usually when a ghost or apparition materialized. Eyes glazed, she said, “There’s *something* here.”

I said, “We found the tomb of your ancestors, the reason we came.”

I could barely hear her voice as she whispered, “No, I mean *something* more.”

A light breeze stirred the stark branches above us. Erin glanced upward and held her gaze until the breeze steadied. She shook her head. “It’s . . . nothing. But for a moment I thought . . .”

I noticed a silent tear roll down Erin’s cheek. She never cried aloud, even with the pain and anguish from the cancer,



*Cork Millner*

just the sad tears. She snuggled into my shoulder, and I could smell the floral scent of her perfume. “We’ll find it,” she said, her words muffled by my sweater. “We’ll still find it somewhere—”

“—in time,” I finished.

In the office, the churchwoman put the ledger back on the shelf and then walked to where the linen scroll was draped over the edge of the drawer. She wound the scroll around its stick and started to put it back when she noticed a thin object in the back recesses of the deep drawer, something she hadn’t seen before. She reached in and pulled out what appeared to be a letter, one that had been sewn with thread in stitches to a stiff card. On the front of the yellowed envelope was the name:

***Margaret***

The woman looked around the room for a moment, then turned the envelope over. Printed on the card was a faded photograph of a man and woman. The woman was dressed in a long, full gown with ruffled bows, a flowered bonnet on her head. She was sitting, her cupid-bow lips pressed together in a slight smile, her attention on something in the far distance. The man, older than she, but handsome in a frock coat and cravat, stood next to her, hand resting on her shoulder. The photograph had been tinted in a few places: The man’s wavy hair had been colored blonde and the woman’s cheeks were pink. Her eyes . . .

The eyes had been tinted *jade green*.

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