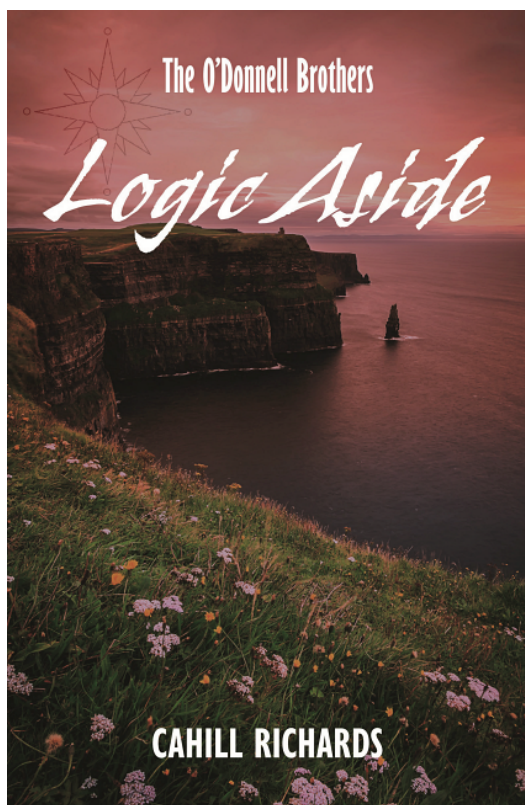




Patrick O'Donnell lives on the road, hiding his secrets behind the noise of rock bands. Allie Nolan is fighting for her future and her freedom. When their worlds collide, they must choose logic—or risk everything for unexpected love.

The O'Donnell Brothers: Logic Aside

By Cahill Richards

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The O'Donnell Brothers

Logic Aside

CAHILL RICHARDS

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Chapter One

Patrick

“ARE YOU SURE WE’RE GOIN’ THE RIGHT WAY, LI?” PATRICK O’Donnell asked his brother as he urged the old ‘76 Ford Ranger up the twisting mountain road. They’d passed through the small town of Winding Hills near the Santa Monica Mountains a few minutes before, and now appeared to be in the middle of nowhere and climbing ever higher up a peak.

“These are the directions Aidan gave us, Trick,” Liam replied, scanning the road ahead for some sign of civilization. “The Jamesons’ house must be up here somewhere. I say we go on a bit farther, and if we don’t see anything, we can turn around.”

Patrick gave an obliging nod as his mind wandered to his brother Aidan. He still couldn’t believe Aidan had defied their father and left the family business for some girl, but deep down inside he wished he could be so lucky.

Of course, Aidan’s fiancée Meghan wasn’t just any girl. She was the eldest daughter of Matt Jameson, the co-founder of Toxic Joy, one of the highest grossing rock bands in the nation. The band was comprised of Matt and his two brothers, who all hailed from Dublin, Ireland. Matt was their powerhouse drummer, Taylor played bass and fronted the band, and Marcus, the youngest, was the lead guitarist. All three were extremely

talented and skilled musicians and songwriters, and this, coupled with the fact that they were all very attractive men, had earned them a huge fan base and more than a decade of tremendous success.

Patrick and his brothers had known the three Jameson brothers professionally for some time. They were also from Ireland, and worked for their father's sound, lighting, and rigging company, providing stage set up, roadies, and techs to touring bands. He and Liam were on a short hiatus from touring at the moment, and he was more than happy to have a respite not only from work, but from his father's harsh treatment. The road crew had finished up a tour with an alternative rock band in Phoenix the night before, and they'd have two weeks off before picking up a short tour with another band, which would last only a month.

The timing of their break and their next tour had worked out well since Aidan and Meghan's wedding was planned for the latter part of April, more than two months away, and he and Liam were both serving as best men. Aidan had coaxed the two of them into paying him a visit by reminding them that the male members of the wedding party were obligated to be fitted for tuxes, and so as soon as the sun had come up they'd started their trek from Phoenix, arriving in the small mountain town of Winding Hills ahead of schedule. And now here they were, in the middle of nowhere, surely off course and lost.

"Maybe I should turn around, Li," he said after another half mile or so. "I don't see any sign of a house up here. We must've made a wrong turn."

"Here comes a car," Liam said, his eyes fixed on a silver Land Rover heading towards them from the opposite direction. "Maybe we can ask the driver if we're goin' the right way."

Patrick slowed the truck to a stop and waved his hand out the window just as the Land Rover approached them, and the driver of the other vehicle lowered the window and popped her head out.

"Patrick?" a female voice exclaimed.

“Mara?” he said in surprise, gaping at the pretty girl who was Matt’s second oldest daughter. “Are we goin’ the right way then?”

Mara giggled and said, “Yep! We live in the boonies! Just keep going until you see a guard shack on the left. They’re expecting you so they’ll let you through. Allie and I will be back as soon as we pick up my little sisters from school.”

He peered past Mara into the Land Rover and glimpsed a striking young woman with hair the color of a pint of Guinness, and a complexion that suggested she spent a fair bit of time in the sun. The contrast between her dark brown hair coupled with her tawny skin tone called even more attention to the lightness of her large, greenish eyes and full rosy lips. Her hair was parted on one side, framing her heart-shaped face, and he noticed her high cheekbones and thin, straight nose, which made her appear as delicate as a porcelain doll. His eyes locked with hers and he froze momentarily, mutely gaping at her, before he came to his senses and was able to speak. “Uh, yeah, alright,” he stammered out to Mara, his heart racing a little, and he hoped she and the young woman she’d called Allie would return very soon because he definitely wanted a better look at her. “We’ll see you when you get back then,” he said, putting the truck in gear.

Mara smiled, waved, and sped off down the mountain road as he turned to Liam in disbelief, remarking, “Mara’s all grown up, isn’t she?” and then chuckled at the stunned look on his brother’s face.

As the guard shack came into view, he slowed the truck to a near stop before being waved through by security and making his way up the long driveway.

“Did ya get a look at Mara’s friend, Li?” he asked, glancing at his brother.

“Can’t say that I did,” Liam replied. “I could only see Mara.”

Chapter Two

Allie

ALLIE NOLAN SHIFTED IN THE PASSENGER SEAT OF THE LAND Rover, craning her neck to look back at the old pickup truck that had just passed them. The driver of the pickup had locked eyes with her for a moment and she'd felt an unfamiliar twinge of excitement when he had. She was well aware of the fact that Aidan's brothers were coming for a visit, but she hadn't expected the one Mara had called Patrick to be so freaking gorgeous. Aidan was a very attractive guy, but Patrick absolutely took her breath away with his shoulder-length wavy blonde hair and roguish good looks. He had a square jawline which ended in a rather pointy chin, and his eyes were the most amazing shade of blue she'd ever seen, reminding her of a sparkling sapphire ring her mother often wore. She could make out what looked like dimples on either side of his full bottom lip, which gave him a certain boyish charm, but his appearance definitely shouted 'all man' to her. He looked a little like forbidden fruit, as far as her father would be concerned anyway, and she couldn't wait to check out the rest of him.

"Those guys in the truck are Aidan's brothers?" she asked Mara, hoping she sounded casual.

"Yep," Mara said with a big grin as she glanced over at her. "Patrick was driving and Liam was the dark-haired one."

"*The Liam?*" she asked. "The one I've heard you talking about incessantly since I've known you?"

"The *only* Liam," Mara said with a giggle. "Isn't he the sexiest guy you've ever seen?"

From the glimpse she'd gotten of Liam, he was certainly attractive (although he wasn't really her type), and there was no doubt that Mara had a huge crush on the young man. "I... um... didn't get a very good look at him," she stammered. "I really only saw Patrick."

Mara glanced at her again and she tried to hide her reddening cheeks by looking out the side window, but Mara had already noticed. "Ooooh, you have the hots for Patrick, don't you?" Mara exclaimed more as a statement than a question. "And I saw him checking you out, too!"

"What?" she asked, feigning astonishment. "I wasn't checking him out. I just looked at him while he was talking to you, that's all."

"I think you and Patrick would be a super cute couple, Allie," Mara said in a teasing voice. "Of course, there is the Jonathan problem."

True, Jonathan *was* a problem, she speculated, not so much for getting to know Patrick, but just in general. Jonathan was the boy her father had chosen for her, and she'd dated him for more than two years. It had been a fun, light-hearted relationship for a year or so, and then Jonathan had done an about face, wanting to control her almost as much as her father did, and that's when she'd finally wised up and decided she'd had enough.

"I'm not looking to be part of any couple," she said, setting her jaw. "I'm done with Jonathan, and I just want to concentrate on finishing my degree and going to law school."

Mara audibly gasped as she brought the car to a screeching halt on the side of the road, then turned to look her square in the face before she asked, "Done with Jonathan? As in you broke up with him?"

She dropped her eyes to her lap and got very interested in her manicured nails, wondering how best to phrase her confession. "I told

him yesterday morning I don't want to see him anymore. He didn't take it very well," she said quietly.

"Does your dad know?" Mara asked softly.

"Not yet," she said, feeling uncomfortable with the question. She knew her father well enough to realize he was going to go ballistic when he heard she'd ended it with Jonathan, who happened to be the son of one of her father's most influential business associates, but she shook the thought out of her head. Better to steer the conversation back to one less fraught with complications. "So when did you first meet Liam?" she asked Mara.

Mara looked at her with what appeared to be sympathy before she pulled the Land Rover back onto the road, and Allie breathed a silent sigh of relief that Mara had let it drop. "I met him about six and a half years ago... not long before I met you... when I was thirteen," Mara said. "Daddy took me out on the road with him and the band, and Liam was running lights. I hung out with him and helped him with the lighting stuff, and he and I became friends. He called me his mini apprentice and told me he'd never met any girl who was brave enough to climb the light rigging."

"How old was he back then?" she asked, hoping their relationship hadn't been a romantic one when Mara had been so young.

"He was seventeen, I think," Mara replied. "He'd just started working for Pete back then."

"Pete?" she asked.

"His father," Mara filled in, pulling a face. "He's a horrible man. He's so mean to his sons."

"Why do they work for him?" she asked.

"I guess they had no choice," Mara said. "He made all six of his sons join the road crew once they finished school. Patrick joined when he was seventeen, too."

"So did you and Liam have a thing way back then?" she asked as delicately as she could.

“We were just friends back then,” Mara said. “He probably thought of me as a pain in the ass little monkey. I was a tomboy in those days, remember?”

Allie thought back to when she’d first met Mara and recalled how her hair had been cut into a choppy bob. She’d dressed in baggy T-shirts and jeans with no makeup at all, but over the last several years, she’d grown her hair out and had begun acting a lot more girly. She was a very pretty young woman now, with strawberry blonde hair that reached down her back, and she wore clothes that accentuated the curves on her thin frame. She still didn’t use a lot of makeup, but she didn’t really need to thanks to her flawless porcelain complexion sprinkled with light freckles and dark pink lips, so she generally only put on mascara and a touch of lip gloss.

“Do you plan to let Liam in on the fact that you have... um... other feelings for him?” she asked, praying Mara’s hopes wouldn’t be dashed. The guy was four years older than her and probably a hell of a lot more experienced in the romance department since he worked around rock stars and throngs of attractive grown women on a daily basis.

“I guess I’ll just see how it goes,” Mara said breezily. “He may not even recognize me now that I’ve grown up.”

“I’m sure he’ll recognize you, and he’ll be totally blown away by how gorgeous you are,” she said reassuringly, and Mara blushed a little and smiled at her.

“Aww, thanks, Allie!” Mara said. “But I’m waiting for the fireworks show once you and Patrick see each other face-to-face.”

“Not going to happen,” she retorted as Mara pulled the Land Rover up to the academy her younger sister Branna attended. “I told you, I just want to be single for a while. And I’m sure Patrick has all kinds of girl-friends in his line of work.”

Mara frowned slightly and turned to stare at her before she said, “Maybe he does, but that doesn’t mean he has anyone as special as you. I

think you should just let your hair down and have a little fling with him... see where it goes."

She was about to respond with a resounding, "No thanks," when Branna flung open the back door and flopped into the back seat. "Why are you picking me up?" Branna asked rather rudely.

"Mom and Daddy are busy with Aidan's brothers coming so they asked me to," Mara shot back. "And hello and you're welcome."

"Sorry," Branna mumbled in a sarcastic tone. "What time are they supposed to get there?"

"They should already be there," Mara replied. "We passed them on our way down the mountain."

Branna nodded her head and reached into her purse, withdrawing a brush and a tube of lip gloss. Allie glanced back at her several times and watched her fix her hair and apply the gloss, and she wondered if maybe Mara wasn't the only one with a crush. "Have you met Aidan's brothers before?" she asked the teenager.

"Yeah, a long time ago," Branna said, blushing slightly, which confirmed her suspicion. "I met them on one tour they worked for Dad's band."

"Are they anything like Aidan?" she asked, thinking of how envious she was of her bestie's good fortune in finding a guy as sweet and genuinely kind as Aidan was. Meghan had really lucked out when she'd stumbled upon Aidan because he was Meghan's true complement. Aidan was very laid back and had a way of tempering Meghan's fiery nature, and on top of that, he was an amazing father to Meghan's baby, loving Teaghan like she was his own.

"Yeah, I guess so," Branna replied with a shrug, yanking Allie from her thoughts. "Liam looks a lot like Aidan."

Ah, so it's Liam she has a crush on, she thought, and it seemed to her that Liam would certainly have his hands full during his visit with two girls vying for his attention.

“And Liam is kinda shy like Aidan, too,” Mara put in. “Patrick on the other hand is very outgoing and likes to joke around. He and I pulled some epic pranks on Liam and Aidan back in the day.”

Allie got quiet then, her thoughts drifting back to Patrick’s strong, roguish face. She was dying to meet him in the flesh and talk to him, and she silently reprimanded herself for even imagining a relationship with him. He was only going to be in town for a short time after all, so a fling would be all he could offer her, and, she reminded herself, she’d been raised to be sensible and dependable, not impetuous, throwing caution to the wind. No, her best course of action would be to admire him from afar and follow her life plan, but she couldn’t quite shake the giddy feeling she had when she thought about meeting him face-to-face in a few short minutes.

Chapter Three

Patrick

PATRICK PULLED THE TRUCK UP TO THE LARGEST HOUSE HE'D ever seen, and Aidan was standing on the front steps, waiting to greet them. Beside him stood his bride-to-be Meghan, whom, like her sister Mara, they knew from tours they'd crewed for her father's band. Meghan was red-headed like her mother, with coppery, light auburn locks that hung a few inches below her shoulders. She looked a lot like Maggie, in fact, with her blue-green eyes and small frame, except she was quite a bit taller than her mother, and she smiled warmly as he and Liam got out of the truck and walked towards her and Aidan.

Aidan raced to meet them, giving them both hearty hugs, and Patrick exclaimed, "Jaysus, A, you're living in a five star hotel!"

"Welcome to Castle Jameson," Aidan said, grinning at him. "Wait until you see the inside, Trick. You're goin' to be gobsmacked! How was the drive? You made good time."

"Luckily, traffic was light," he said. "We took a room at the Wayside Motor Lodge right by the motorway in Phoenix so we could grab a little sleep after pack up and load out."

"Did Niall lend you the truck then?" Aidan asked, perusing the rusty old pickup.

"He did, yeah," Liam replied. "We dropped him and Flash off in Flagstaff and promised to pick them up again before we head to the show in Albuquerque in two weeks."

"Brilliant!" Aidan said. "Maggie's been in a frenzy making sure everything's ready for your visit. She'll be pleased you can stay awhile."

"We ran into Mara on the way up this bleedin' mountain," Patrick said. "Good thing, too. We were about to turn around thinking we'd come the wrong way."

"I think Trick wanted to turn around and follow them so he could make a move on her friend," Liam said with a wink as he gave a laugh and punched his arm, and Patrick knew what was coming next.

"Oh, you met Allie then, did ya, Trick?" Aidan said with a wry grin, winding up for some good-natured ribbing. "You always have had an eye for the pretty girls, and the ladies can't seem to get enough of those enchanting blue eyes and that dimpled smile of yours, can they?"

"And let's not forget about his wavy, blonde hair," Liam teased, grabbing a handful of Patrick's shoulder length locks. "Allie doesn't stand a chance when she gets a good look at him."

"You both think you're so amusing, don't ya?" he said, putting on a look of annoyance. "And I didn't exactly meet her, A. I just got a peek at her while I was waiting for Li to put his tongue back in his gob after he'd spotted Mara."

Liam laughed and gave him another shot in the arm as Patrick glanced over at Meghan waiting patiently to greet them, watching the happy reunion of the three brothers with a big smile lighting her face. She was a very pretty girl with angular features and a long neck, and she was model thin even though she'd given birth to a daughter just nine weeks before. He had to remind himself she was off the market or he might start flirting shamelessly with her, and with that in mind, he smiled back and walked over to her, giving her an awkward hug.

"How are you, Patrick?" she asked, receiving his hug a lot more gracefully than he'd managed to give it.

"Just a bit tired and road weary at the moment," he answered, stepping back a few inches to look at her. "Nothing a pint won't fix."

"I think we can manage a pint for you," she said, smiling at him again.

"You're looking well," he went on, reminding himself again to mind his manners. "You sure don't look like you've just become a mother."

Meghan blushed a little, and Aidan teased, "Same old charming, Patrick, I can see. Work your tricks elsewhere, little brother. She's spoken for!"

Liam approached them and gave Meghan a hug with a bashful "hello" before she said, "Why don't we get your bags and we can arrange that pint."

Patrick and his brothers stepped back to the pick-up to unload their duffel bags, backpacks, and a battered guitar case from the truck bed. "Where should I park her?" he asked, thinking the old truck looked very out of place in front of this stately mansion.

"Just leave the truck right where it is," Meghan said. "Put the keys on the driver's seat and I'll have someone take it to the garage."

"We even get valet service?" he joked as he carried his bags in through the front door, and once inside the foyer, he and Liam both stopped uncertainly. Meghan motioned them into a living area and he looked around in wonder at the huge room they'd entered, its walls soaring two stories high. The entire back wall was glass and looked out onto a sweeping lawn with a forest of trees beyond it, and there were richly polished wood beams across the ceiling's expanse as if the house were a Swiss mountain lodge. Various seating arrangements were placed here and there on the floor's hand-scraped hardwood planks, which had been draped with plush area rugs in earthy colors, and a large stone fireplace graced one wall, with a sofa and chairs arranged around a huge fluffy rug in front of it.

Patrick closed his gaping mouth in an attempt to conceal his awe at this kind of luxury and said dryly, “Well, it’s no Wayside Motor Lodge, but it’ll do.”

“Just leave your bags here and we’ll go into the kitchen,” Meghan said, ignoring his sarcasm. “We’ll get them to your rooms later.”

They set the bags down on one side of the large foyer, and Patrick stooped to retrieve a small gift from his duffel. He pulled out a slightly bedraggled bunch of carnations and daisies in a clear plastic sleeve, which he’d picked up on one of their quick stops for fuel, then followed Meghan and Aidan to the kitchen, his eyes taking in everything he saw.

The kitchen was also enormous, he noticed, with a huge square island in the center flanked by a dozen leather-upholstered bar stools with backs and arms. He suspected the top of the island was some kind of marble in a warm rosy cream, with a large vase holding an arrangement of freshly cut exotic flowers placed in the center, and he glanced down at the sorry looking blossoms in his hand, wishing he’d left them in his duffel bag.

Between the island and the French doors leading to the backyard, there was a large kitchen table with eight chairs, and just off the kitchen was a massive cedar deck that spanned the length of the entire house. From what he could see it was filled with wicker furniture topped with cushions in a white and citron green pattern, surrounded by potted palms and an array of flowers, and a large round table with at least eight chairs was shaded by an oversized patio umbrella. Matt and his wife Maggie were out relaxing on the deck, but when Meghan called to them from the kitchen, they got up to come inside.

“Hello, boys! Welcome to our home! We’re so glad you’re here!” Maggie said cheerfully, a warm smile lighting her face. She gave Liam a big hug and then moved to him, and he hugged her and handed her the bouquet of flowers in his hand.

"Sorry they got a little squished and are in desperate need of some water," he said, feeling a little embarrassed. "Just a little token to say thanks for having us here, Maggie."

"Oh, Patrick, they're just lovely and they'll be good as new once I've gotten them in water. Thank you, love," she said as she gave him a kiss on the cheek, and then she crossed to a large butler's pantry off to one side of the kitchen and went into it, reappearing a moment later with a glass vase. She carried it over to the sink where she filled it with water, then took kitchen shears out of a drawer and began carefully trimming each flower's stem.

He watched Maggie as she worked, a little amazed she was the mother of six children and looked as good as she did. Maggie had only been seventeen when she and Matt had said "I do" and now, at almost thirty-nine, she looked like she might be an older sister to Meghan rather than her mother. She was thin and petite, standing barely over five feet tall, with shoulder length ginger hair and bright intelligent eyes. And even though she was a very pretty woman, Patrick had discovered long ago that Maggie's beauty wasn't just surface level; she radiated warmth and welcoming to all she met.

"How are you lads?" Matt asked as he stepped through the French doors, rushing over to shake their hands. Before they could answer his question he added, "I'm sure you're tired and hungry. Can I get you something to tide you over until dinner?"

"I think they're thirsty, Da," Meghan said, giving Patrick a wink and a grin.

"Thirsty are you?" Matt said, smiling, and Patrick replied, "I'm gaspin'!"

"Well, you wouldn't be Irish if you weren't!" Matt jested. "Have a seat and get comfortable, and I'll get you something to quench your thirst," he said, motioning towards the island barstools.

Patrick and his brothers took a seat while Matt walked to a cabinet and pulled out four pint glasses, then strode over to an enormous double door refrigerator built into the wall. He pulled out four bottles of Smithwicks, popped the tops with a wall mounted bottle opener, and poured the amber liquid into the glasses, handing one to Patrick and one to Liam before returning to get the other two. He passed a glass to Aidan, then lifted the final glass in the air, toasting, "Here's to a long life and a merry one, a quick death and an easy one, a pretty girl and an honest one, a cold beer and another one. Sláinte!"

They all raised their glasses calling "sláinte" or "cheers" before bringing the glasses to their mouths and drinking deeply while Maggie finished at the sink and brought the vase of flowers to the island. She picked up the floral arrangement that had been sitting there when they'd all walked in and moved it to the table, then placed the flowers Patrick brought in the center as she gave him a big smile. "There, I told you they'd be good as new," she said, taking a seat next to Matt. Patrick had to admit they did look a lot better the way she'd arranged them, and he smiled back at her, grateful she was such a gracious hostess and a genuinely kind human being.

Meghan, who'd been helping Maggie at the sink, took a seat next to Aidan, and the six of them began talking about the drive and the tour they'd just finished. They recounted how they'd left one of their traveling companions, a pyrotechnics genius nicknamed Flash, in the hands of their waitress when they'd stopped for a bite, and said they hoped there'd be something left of him when they returned.

"If it's the same Flash I remember, I think you'd better hope there's something left of her!" Matt said, pretending to shudder. "He's one scary dude."

"He's actually alright. He just looks sinister," Patrick said as he finished his beer. "I think Lisette was into that sort of thing."

"She was quite impressed with all of his piercings and tattoos," Liam said with a smirk. "I'm sure he's shown her every one of them by now."

Maggie, who was acquainted with Flash, looked a little appalled at this, and Patrick gave Liam a nudge with his elbow to remind him there were ladies present just as boisterous little voices could be heard coming nearer.

"Sounds like the girls are home from school," Matt explained as Meghan excused herself and got up to leave the room. Charging past her into the kitchen came a tiny little girl with dark hair and big chocolate brown eyes like her father's. She wore a school uniform and her stick-straight hair was tucked behind her petite little ears, and when she saw Patrick and Liam sitting in her kitchen she stopped dead in her tracks to eye them suspiciously. Matt stood up and said, "This is our youngest, Melody," and then he looked down at his little girl and said, "What? No hugs for Daddy?"

Melody kept her eyes on Patrick and Liam as she inched closer to Matt, who knelt down and scooped her up into his arms, and Melody put her tiny arms around his neck and gave him a tight hug. "How was your day at preschool, Sweet Girl?" he asked.

"It was awesome, Daddy! Robbie brought in his pet lizard. His name is Godzilla!" she exclaimed, still eyeing the strangers sitting at the counter, and Matt snickered at the expression of uncertainty on her little face before introducing the newcomers to her.

"Mellie, these are Aidan's brothers," Matt told her. "This is Liam, and this is Patrick."

Liam smiled at her and held out his hand to shake hers, but she clung to her father, not willing to give up her hand to a stranger, and Patrick, seeing Liam's attempt rebuffed by the small child, put his hand up for a high five instead. She glared at Patrick for a moment, but finding this gesture of greeting much more satisfactory, slapped her tiny hand against his.

"Nice to meet you, Mellie," he said with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. When he grinned at her, she flashed him a small, coy smile before shyly glancing away, and he pondered how best to win her over.

"How old are you?" he asked, and she looked to her father for reassurance. Once she got a nod and a smile from Matt, she answered, "four" in a tiny voice while holding up four of her fingers.

"Well, you are a big girl, yeah?" he gushed, alluding to her age rather than her size, and Melody smiled and nodded. "You'll have to tell me more about Godzilla sometime! I think lizards are brilliant! Will you do that?" he asked, and she nodded and smiled again, then wriggled in her father's arms to get down.

"Would you like a snack, Mellie?" Maggie asked, and the little girl raced to her mother as soon as her feet hit the floor, giving her a big bear hug and a kiss on the cheek as she answered, "Yes, please!"

"Go take a seat at the island and I'll get you something," Maggie instructed, and Melody perused the empty seats around the bar, finally deciding on the one next to Patrick. She put her feet on the rungs of the chair and began climbing haphazardly onto the seat, and Patrick, concerned for her safety, offered a hand to help her and she took it.

"Looks like you've made a fast friend," Matt said with a hint of astonishment. "She usually takes a lot longer to warm up to people she doesn't know."

Maggie went to the fridge and poured Melody a glass of water and gave her an individually wrapped cheese stick and a few crackers on a small, unbreakable plate, and Melody began happily munching a saltine. When she asked Patrick to open the wrapper on her cheese stick for her, he took it from her and pretended it was a magic trick he was doing as he hid the cheese behind one hand. He quickly separated the plastic wrapper and let the mozzarella stick rise up from behind his hand, and Mellie's eyes got wide as a big smile spread across her face and she squealed in delight. "Do it again, Patrick!" she ordered, which made him laugh.

"Ah, well, cheese sticks only have one trick in them," he said. "We'll try it again tomorrow, alright?"

"And that's one of the many reasons we call him Trick," Aidan told the small girl, clearly impressed by his little brother's speedy acquisition of Mellie's trust and affection.

"Watch out! He's a smooth one," Liam jokingly cautioned her, and Melody glanced at Liam, then hid her face behind Patrick.

"It's okay, Mellie. Li's not as bad as he seems," he said with a laugh, and Liam punched him in the arm.

Maggie chuckled lightly as she got out more cheese and crackers and placed them on two plates. After pouring three more glasses of water, she put grapes and apple slices into a bowl, adding some to Mellie's plate as well as the other two. Matt spoke up, breaking the momentary silence, and jokingly said, "Wait for it..... 3, 2, 1," and no sooner had he gotten 'one' out of his mouth, than a second small girl appeared, whining, "Mom! I'm hungry!"

"What'd I tell ya?" Matt said with a wry grin. "It's like clockwork."

A little girl with dark auburn hair hurried into the kitchen, also still in her school uniform, and headed towards the island. She was quite a bit taller than Melody and wore her hair in two braids, one on either side of her head. She ignored the strangers in the kitchen, more focused on filling her belly at the moment, hopped onto a chair at the island across from her father, ripped open her cheese stick, and took a big bite. Patrick was a little astounded that she'd pulled this off so easily since her two front teeth had obviously gone the way of the tooth fairy recently, but that didn't seem to stop her from savoring her snack.

"Awww, Renny! You shoulda let Patrick do his magic trick!" Melody said with disappointment in her voice, and Renny looked from her little sister to the young man sitting next to her and shrugged, taking another big bite before shoving an entire cracker in her mouth.

"This is our second youngest, Renny," Matt said to Liam and Patrick, and not to be outdone, Liam put his hand up for a high five, but she only looked at him disdainfully and went back to eating.

“Face it, Li. Some of us got it and some of us don’t!” Patrick teased, and when Liam punched him in the arm a second time, Melody looked at him sternly and said, “Hitting is bad.”

Liam gave a snort of laughter at Mellie’s scolding as two more girls arrived, and Matt stood up to retrieve four more bottles of beer from the refrigerator as he said, “And here are the rest of them. This is Shea,” he said, patting the head of a red-headed girl of about nine, “and this is Branna,” indicating a much taller and older girl. She was dark haired like her father and looked like a much older version of little Melody, and Patrick figured she had to be fifteen or sixteen. “You may remember Branna from a tour or two,” Matt said to him and Liam. “Girls, these are Aidan’s brothers. This is Liam....” and Liam gave a small wave, “...and Patrick.”

Patrick said, “hello,” looking from one girl to the other, and Branna caught his gaze and blushed a little.

“I do remember you,” he said to Branna. “You were quite helpful in gathering cords and loose drumsticks the last time I saw you,” he said with a grin. On one tour his crew had done for Toxic Joy, Branna, who was about twelve at the time, had followed Patrick around like a puppy dog. He was already fully grown and thought it was cute that this little girl had a crush on him, and so he’d been very sweet to her, even if she had driven him a bit mad by being ever present.

He continued to study her, and she blushed some more as he added, “You’ve certainly grown up!” not just as a compliment, but as an acknowledgement of how much time had passed since he’d seen her last. At twelve, she’d been awkward and fawn-eyed, but today Branna looked more like a young woman, and a very pretty one at that. She’d grown much taller, and filled out a lot, so much so that even in her school uniform he couldn’t help but notice her curves.

“Nice to see you again,” she said politely to him before becoming very interested in her bowl of fruit.

"And where are your chauffeurs?" Matt asked Branna, and she swallowed her grape before she replied, "They went to find Meghan and the baby."

Patrick finished the last sip in his glass and Matt slid another bottle in front of him, and as he poured the brew into his pint glass, another girl came into the kitchen.

"Ah, here's one of them! Come in and say hello to Aidan's brothers, Sunshine," Matt said, and as Patrick turned to see a young woman approaching the island, he stood to greet her.

"Hello, Mara!" he said to her with a big smile as he gave her a hug, and she returned his greeting with an enthusiastic, "Hi, Patrick! Looks like you made it to the boonies!"

She looked over his shoulder at Liam, and asked, "Hey, Liam, how's it hanging?" and Liam nearly knocked over his chair rushing to get up to embrace her.

"Mara, how are you?" Liam asked, grinning from ear to ear, and then he held her at arm's length as he said, "Let me look at you! You're all grown up, pusheen!" using the nickname he'd given her more than six years ago. It meant kitten in Irish, and she'd earned it the first time she'd climbed the rigging and then had to be coaxed down.

"Well, I am almost twenty now," she said, teasingly. "You're still remembering me as a silly little thirteen-year-old monkey," she said, laughing softly.

Patrick's attention focused on her, and he was amazed by how much she'd changed in the relatively short span of time since he'd seen her last. She'd always been a pretty girl, but she'd been tomboyish in both appearance and demeanor, with a straight figure, a flat chest, and always dressed in jeans and an oversized T-shirt. She'd gotten taller, and like Branna, had filled out considerably, her very slight build only enhancing the curves she now had, and her once short strawberry-blonde hair had grown down her back. Her rosy lips were full and turned up slightly at the corners, giving

her the appearance of someone hiding a particularly juicy secret, and her eyes were a warm shade of light brown with a mischievous sparkle to them.

Patrick grinned as he watched his brother stand there with a big, goofy smile on his face, seemingly mesmerized by Mara. He didn't think he'd ever seen Li so smitten. He supposed Aidan must have noticed it, too, because he stood up to offer Mara his seat, and after she readily took it, she and Liam began chatting about old times as if there was no one else but the two of them in the room. Caught up in his own amusement, Patrick had almost forgotten his new little friend in the seat to his left until she remarked, "Allie, do you want a cheese stick? Patrick will do a trick with it!"

At the sound of his name, he turned to look at Melody, his gaze rising slowly until he locked eyes once again with the pretty girl he'd glimpsed in Mara's SUV. He couldn't help but think she was one of the most stunning young women he'd ever seen, and his heart raced a little as he looked her over. She had straight dark brown hair that ended just past her shoulders and hazel eyes that seemed to look right into him. Her full lips formed a small smile and he wanted nothing more at that moment than to feel them against his own, but instead he continued to peruse her, noticing she had long graceful arms that he longed to have wrapped around him. He couldn't stop himself from glancing down to admire her full bosom, slim waist and hips, and long slender legs tanned to perfection under her short white skirt, and then he let his gaze rise once again to her eyes, feeling his pulse quicken even more as he found himself completely captivated by her.

Allie had noticed his appraisal of her, and grinning shrewdly said, "Hi, I'm Allie Nolan," as she extended her arm to shake his hand. Before he could say anything, Matt interjected with, "Forgive the lack of introduction, Patrick. Allie is Meg's best friend, but she's also as good as family. We call her our spare daughter," he said with a laugh, causing Allie to look away from him briefly to grin at Matt.

"Hello, Allie," he said, feeling slightly dazed as he took her hand in one of his own and covered it with his other hand. "I'm Patrick O'Donnell. It's very nice to meet you," he said with a genuine smile, staring straight into her warm eyes, and she stared back, her hand still in his, seemingly as entranced by him as he was by her.

He was used to girls acting a little silly around him, not cool and collected like this one. Most of the girls he encountered attempted to flirt with him not only because he was a decent-looking guy, but because they were usually hoping to use him to get to their favorite male rock star, and it was because of his typical experience with women that he found it remarkably refreshing that this beautiful girl was unabashedly staring him down. No silliness, or giggling, or eyelash batting, she'd simply initiated a handshake to meet him, and he loved that. He admired directness in everyone, but especially in confident, attractive women.

The others in the room took notice of the long handshake and he realized the smattering of conversations had stopped, and when he glanced away from her to see everyone's eyes glued on the two of them, his awareness of this finally brought him to his senses. "Why don't you take my chair," he said to her, offering her the seat between Melody and Liam. He pulled it out with a grand gesture as Branna eyed the two of them with a sullen look, and then looked down at her lap when she realized he'd noticed her gaze.

"I don't know about all of you, but I'm dying to see this cheese stick trick," Allie said to acknowledge Melody's comment as she gave the little girl's head a gentle pat.

"I think it's only fascinating if you're four," he said, his eyes full of mirth, just as Mara leaned around Liam and said, "Allie, this is Liam, another of Aidan's brothers," and Liam turned in his chair and shook her hand.

"Nice to meet you, Liam," Allie said, shaking his hand quickly and flashing him a smile. "So which one of you is the oldest?"

Patrick moved his glass to the other side of Melody and stood at the counter, still stealing glimpses of Allie, as Aidan answered her. "I'm the oldest one here, although we've three brothers older than myself. Li here is twenty-three, and Trick is the youngest and he's turning twenty-two tomorrow!"

With this announcement, Patrick dropped his face into one hand feeling embarrassed by his big-mouthed big brother's disclosure.

"Your birthday is tomorrow?" Allie asked, looking surprised, and he nodded sheepishly. He never liked much fuss over his birthdays, and he'd never gotten much. Li and Aidan had always acknowledged them by taking him out for a drink or by giving him a small gift, but he'd never in his life had a birthday party, not even when he was a small child, and he was okay with that now. When he was a boy he'd have liked the cake and balloons and all the hubbub, but as a grown man he preferred to honor the day of his birth quietly, with a pretty girl and maybe a roll in the hay.

"I take it you're not much for parties?" Allie asked him, scrutinizing his expression.

"Eh, not really. Not parties for myself anyway," he said honestly, and he shifted uncomfortably and took a sip of his beer while Allie continued to stare at him. She finally looked away, and it was then that he decided it was time to get the focus off himself and to do a little interrogating of his own. Hell, he wanted to find out as much about her as he possibly could. How old was she? Was she serious about anyone? Would she go out on a date with him? These were the questions that came to mind immediately, but instead he asked, "When's your birthday, Allie?"

"Believe it or not, my birthday is tomorrow, too," she answered, glancing back at him, and he returned her gaze with a hint of disbelief on his face.

"Are you taking the piss?" he said.

"Am I what?" she asked, smiling broadly at him.

"You're pulling my leg," he said, nodding.

"I'm not!" she assured him. "Tomorrow is February twenty-first, right?"

"It is, yeah," he said.

"So that makes tomorrow my golden birthday," she said, still smiling at him with that sensuous mouth of hers.

"Golden birthday? What?" Liam asked, looking confused.

"It means she's turning twenty-one. You know, twenty-one on the twenty-first?" Mara explained. "When's your birthday, Liam?"

"The first October," he replied.

"So your golden birthday was when you turned one," Mara informed him.

"And there I was not knowing about any of it," Liam said, and then chuckled. "I hope I had an extra large helping of mother's milk that day!"

"No doubt you did!" Aidan said, chortling at his comment, but only Patrick knew why Aidan was laughing. Liam had always had an extra large appetite, and he also had a great fondness for women's breasts, which in turn caused Patrick and Aidan to tease him mercilessly that their mother had either nursed him too little or too much as a baby.

Patrick laughed and opened his mouth to take a poke at Li, but seeing the little girls around him, thought better of it and directed his attention back to Allie instead. "Turning twenty-one? That's a big deal here in the States, yeah? Being legal to drink and all," he said.

"Yes, I guess so," she said with a shrug.

"What are your birthday plans?" he asked, hoping they suddenly included a certain Irishman who was also turning another year older.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," she said. "The Jamesons invited me to come have dinner here."

"No party?" he said, raising his eyebrows and grinning.

"Guess I'm not big on them either," she said, her grin matching his.

"I can't believe you're going to spend your twenty-first here and not going clubbing!" Mara said emphatically.

"I'll do that next month when Meghan turns twenty-one," Allie said. "We've already planned it all out. I'm just happy I'll be here tomorrow night and not stuck at home."

"We can toast each other," Patrick said, appearing calm on the outside while his insides were turning to jelly and his heart did a flip.

"That'd be really nice," she said, smiling at him yet again, and he salted her image away in his mind. He wanted to go to sleep tonight thinking about her beautiful smile.

Branna piped up then, her glum expression turning devilish as she asked, "Is Jonathan coming over, too?"

Allie looked over at Branna, then dropped her eyes. "Um, no," she answered, appearing uncomfortable with the query, and her reaction did not go unnoticed as he immediately thought, *Shit, she has a boyfriend.*

"Your boyfriend isn't coming over to spend your birthday with you?" Branna asked, stressing the word boyfriend and glancing at him.

"I think he has other plans," Allie said rather coldly, then hurriedly added, "We broke up yesterday."

"Oh, Allie!" Maggie said with great concern as Branna frowned and looked down at the counter. "You and Jonathan split up? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, but I really don't want to talk about it right now," Allie said, putting her head down to close the subject.

Maggie gave her a small smile and said, "I'm here if you need me," and then she spoke to everyone. "Okay you lot. If we're to have dinner tonight you'll all need to clear out for a bit."

“Let’s go out on the deck, lads,” Matt said, beckoning the three O’Donnell brothers. “Mara, Allie, you’re welcome to join us, and the rest of you girls, off to do your homework!”

Everyone got up and scattered, the little girls going in one direction, protesting loudly, with the rest heading to the French doors that led out to the immense deck. Melody doubled back and walked out onto the deck, looking up at her father with pleading in her eyes. “But, Daddy,” she said in a small voice. “I don’t have any homework.”

Matt looked at her sympathetically and said, “Come on, Sweet Girl. We’ll go help your mam,” and he took her small hand in his giant one and started towards the door, looking back as he did. “Help yourselves, lads,” he said, pointing to a small refrigerator disguised as lawn furniture.

Patrick sat down on the wicker love seat, hoping Allie might join him there, but Aidan sat next to him before she had the chance. *Get a clue, Aidan!* he thought ruefully as she took the chair nearest him instead, and she, Aidan, and Mara started discussing the upcoming wedding while he pretended to listen, although his mind was on the conversation that had occurred moments ago in the kitchen. Allie had just broken up with her boyfriend! It was too good to be true and terrible all at the same time. On the one hand, he’d have a clear path to get to know her better, but on the other, she might not want to get involved with anyone right now. He sure as hell didn’t want to be some revenge fuck or rebound guy.

At one time, not too long ago, he might have jumped at the chance for a little casual sex with someone like her, but he’d tired of one-night stands, and now what he wanted most was a real, grown-up relationship. The biggest obstacle to sustaining any kind of long-term relationship with a girl was his job. He was fairly certain there weren’t many women who wanted to spend the better part of a year having phone sex and conversations via video chat, which was a lesson he’d learned the hard way with a girl back home named Daireann.

Daireann Deegan had been his first love. He'd grown up with her in the small town of Lisdoonvarna in County Clare in the western part of Ireland, and their friendship had blossomed into mutual love when they were both fifteen. Daireann was tall and thin, with ginger hair and glacier blue eyes, and he'd fallen head over heels in love with her and had youthful plans to marry her when they were both of age. He'd taken her virginity, and she his. With both of them being so new to sex they'd practiced at every opportunity, sneaking off into a barn or a remote meadow, or even Daireann's bedroom when her parents were out of the house. Their passionate romance had continued throughout their completion of secondary school, and then he'd been forced to go on the road to learn his father's trade, spending months away from home.

He'd remained faithful to Daireann and had phoned her every chance he got, but when he made his first visit home after eight months on the road, she'd seemed somewhat distant and aloof to him. He'd chalked it up to the time they'd spent apart, and reckoned she might be feeling like he was more a stranger than her lover of more than two years. He'd been so excited to be able to book them a room in a nearby town where they could rekindle their love affair, but the romantic night he'd envisioned and dreamed about for months had turned out disastrous. His plan of an elaborate proposal followed by hours of lovemaking had turned into a short, very unsatisfying romp between the sheets with Daireann just going through the motions. Her once fiery passion for him had seriously waned, and she'd treated him more like he was a john and she a prostitute with a bus to catch.

He soon discovered why three days into his visit when he walked in on Daireann and his best friend doing the bold thing in her bedroom while her parents were out doing the shopping and errands. He'd pulled Jamie Fitzpatrick right off her and beat him senseless before storming out of her bedroom and her house, vowing never to return. Heartbroken, he'd cut his visit short and returned to the road where he'd thrown himself into his work and at every available female who crossed his path. He grew taller

and more muscular as the months passed by, and he learned how to easily charm the knickers off the ladies during his second year as a working man.

On his next visit home to see his mother he'd run into Daireann on the street, wearing a simple gold wedding band and carrying a tiny baby in her arms. She'd looked overjoyed to see him, but he'd just stared at her, turned around, and walked the other way without a word.

The last time he'd visited, only a few months before, he'd seen her again. He'd been sipping a quiet pint one afternoon in one of the local pubs when she burst in the door with two tots in tow and a big pregnant belly, pleading with her husband Jamie to come home. He hadn't even noticed his former best friend drunk as a skunk at a nearby table, but he'd watched the to-do that ensued with a little amusement and a lot of pity. Daireann had hurled insults as she left, furious at Jamie's refusal to accompany her, and afterwards, Jamie had lamented loudly to anyone who'd listen what a trollop he'd married and how he wasn't sure the baby she was carrying was even his.

"Trick?" he heard Aidan say, shaking him out of his reverie.

"Yeah?" he asked, realizing Aidan was talking to him.

"You were a million miles away just now, weren't you?" Aidan said with a laugh.

"More like five thousand," he mumbled.

"Allie asked you a question, Trick," Aidan said, getting up from his seat. "I'm goin' to see what's keeping Meg. Be right back."

"Mara, would you show me where the bathroom is?" Liam asked as he rose from his chair, giving him a wink, and Mara nodded and took Liam's hand to lead him inside, leaving him alone with Allie on the deck, and grateful to his brothers for the opportunity.

"I'm sorry," he said, turning his head in Allie's direction. "I must've been daydreaming. What was your question, Allie?"

"I just asked if you planned to do any sightseeing while you're out here," Allie said with a grin, and he gazed into her eyes thinking the only sight he wanted to see was the one he was staring at presently.

"Are you offering to be my tour guide?" he asked flirtatiously.

"I'd be happy to show you around if you'd like," Allie said, not breaking eye contact with him.

I'd be happy to see anything you want to show me, he thought, but checked himself before he voiced that particular notion. "I think that'd be brilliant, Allie," he said instead, smiling warmly at her and showing off his dimples. "Whenever you have time I'd love to have you show me around."

"Okay, great! I'll look at my schedule," Allie said. "Tomorrow will be a busy day for you with your appointment at the tux shop, but maybe Saturday would work. Have you ever been to LA before?"

"Only for work," he said, studying everything about her face. In the sunlight her eyes were more green than hazel he noticed, and her full lips drove him to think once again about what they'd feel like pressed against his own. "I hope you don't have to work on your golden birthday," he said, resisting the urge to bring his hand up and touch the soft skin of her cheek.

"No," she said softly. "But I have an early class in the morning."

"You're in college then?" he asked, impressed that she was not only beautiful, but smart, too. This girl was the whole package, and the fact that she seemed as interested in him as he was in her amazed him, but it also worried him. Maybe he wasn't good enough for her.

"I'm a junior," Allie replied. "Mara and I attend the same university, but she's a year behind me. Did you go to college, Patrick?"

He dropped his eyes and stammered out, "Uh, no. I started working for my father when I was seventeen."

"Wow!" she said. "I'll bet you've seen a lot of the world already then."

"We've done some European tours, but we're mostly here in the States year round," he replied. "And I generally only see the inside of arenas and crew buses for the most part," he added with a chuckle.

"Meghan says you're a drummer," Allie remarked.

"I'd like to be a professional drummer, but for now I'm a drum tech. My job is to keep other drummers on track for their shows," he explained, glancing into her eyes again to try to read her thoughts. Had she been asking Meghan about him before she'd made her appearance in the kitchen? That had to be a good sign she was interested in him, didn't it?

"Do you play any other instruments?" Allie asked.

"A few, but drums are what I like best," he said. "Are you musically inclined, Allie?"

"I played violin when I was a kid. Probably badly," she said with a small giggle. "But I have a lot of respect for people who master an instrument. It takes so much dedication and passion. It's like mastering a foreign language."

"I never really thought about it that way," he said, intrigued by the way her mind worked and how she viewed things. "Playing music just feels as natural as breathing to me. It's a great escape from my worries."

"You have worries?" she asked with raised eyebrows.

"From time to time, yeah," he said, thinking his biggest worry was keeping out of Pete's way on a daily basis. "My father isn't the easiest man in the world to work for."

"Does he expect more from you than everybody else?" she asked with an odd expression. He thought it looked like it might be pity on her face and there was no way he wanted her to feel sorry for him like he was some doormat.

"I guess you could say that," he said, glancing away.

"I'm sorry. I know how that feels," she said, and when she got quiet then, he did likewise. He didn't like to think about Pete's treatment of

him and enjoyed talking about it even less. He never voiced it to anyone, in fact, other than his brothers, mostly because he was ashamed that he allowed Pete to bully him the way he did, but also because he couldn't stand to be looked at as someone to pity.

When he was a small boy he'd gotten plenty of those looks from people who'd glimpsed the marks Pete had left on him, and he'd often wondered why nobody had ever done anything about the abuse he'd always suffered. By the time he was eight or nine, he'd become an expert at hiding the signs that indicated Pete had flown into a rage yet again. It was easier to mask his pain than to acknowledge, even to himself, that no one cared enough to stop it.

He felt the warmth of Allie's fingers on his arm, and she very quietly said, "I really like your wristband," as she touched the tattoo that wrapped around his right wrist. "It's a Celtic knot design, isn't it? Does it have a special meaning?"

He felt his heart race at her touch as he answered, "They're shield knots. The ancient Celts used them as protection against evil spirits... or they think they did, anyway."

Allie traced one of the square knots with her index finger, and as she did, he felt an instant connection to her like they'd just clicked. "I love the intricacy of the design. It looks good on you," she said softly, and he put his left hand on top of hers to flirt a bit more, but mostly because he couldn't resist the temptation to touch her.

"Thanks, Allie," he said as he looked into her eyes again. "I had it done on my eighteenth birthday as a gift to myself. Do you have any tattoos?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I think I'm too much of a chicken to get one, and I've never been able to figure out what I'd want anyway. I'd want it to have a special meaning, you know? And what if I decided down the road that I hated it?"

"Sometimes you just have to go for it," he said with a grin. "Throw logic aside and see where your heart takes you. I think the right tat can be very sexy on a woman, depending on what it is and its location."

Allie's eyebrows shot up and she looked at him expectantly as she asked, "And which location would you suggest?"

"Well, I don't know," he said with another grin as he turned her hand over and caressed the soft flesh of her inner wrist. "Maybe something small here," he said, drawing an invisible doodle on her skin with his index finger. "Although hip bones are my favorite place to see ink on a girl."

"And have you seen a lot of hip bones?" Allie asked, looking him right in the eyes.

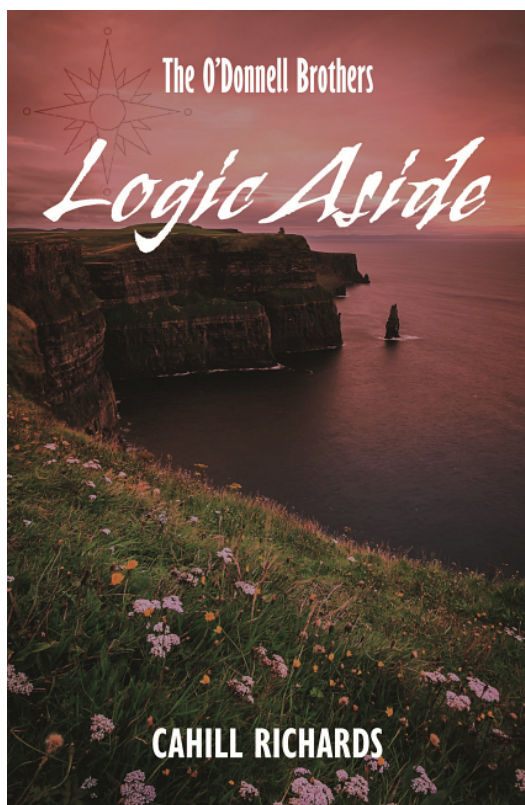
He gave a little chuckle at her joke, but quickly realized she'd been serious because she kept her eyes fixed on his as if she was peering inside him for the truth. "Not recently," he said, flashing his dimples at her as he gave her a big grin.

The French doors from the kitchen opened and Aidan walked out onto the deck. "Sorry to interrupt, but Matt asked me to bring you inside, Trick," Aidan said with a smile as his eyes focused on Allie's hand in his. "He thought you and Li might want to clean up and settle into your rooms a bit before dinner."

"Uh, right," he stammered, not wanting to look away from Allie's beautiful hazel eyes. As much as he wanted to stay right where he was with this stunning young woman, he also didn't want to be a poor houseguest, so he stood up and offered his hand to Allie. "Shall we go in?" he asked her.

"You go ahead and get settled," she said. "I'll straighten up out here."

"There you go being logical again," he said with a wink and a warm smile, and then he turned to follow his brother into the house.



Patrick O'Donnell lives on the road, hiding his secrets behind the noise of rock bands. Allie Nolan is fighting for her future and her freedom. When their worlds collide, they must choose logic—or risk everything for unexpected love.

The O'Donnell Brothers: Logic Aside

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