

Kate and Alastar

Ireland 1975

Deleted Chapter from
An Irish Miracle
by
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Seasons slipped quietly past the Connolly farmhouse. One day no different than all the rest, talk about having children had just faded away. Alastar spent longer and longer hours working at the stable. Kate tried to fill the loneliness spending time with the horses or working in the garden. Gray, blustery winter days were the hardest. Sitting for hours on end in the empty house, wrapped in a blanket, Kate shivered and stared out the front window. She usually managed to dress herself and feed the horses before Alastar got home from the stable. Usually, but not always.

“Your breakfast is getting cold.”

Yawning and still buttoning his shirt, Alastar walked into the kitchen and dropped into the chair with a heavy sigh.

“Hot, cold, what’s the difference? All you ever make is porridge. Did you forget how to make anything good?”

Kate slammed the iron pot against the old stove and whirled around. The look in her eye could have turned Alastar into a pillar of salt right where he sat. The pot in her hand could have pounded that pillar of salt into the ground.

“Hey! Don’t be banging on your stove like that. I’m not buying you a new one if you break it.”

With the pot raised, Kate took a menacing step toward the

table. “Maybe I should bang on you instead, you ungrateful *lout!*”

“I thought I broke you of that nasty little habit a long time ago.” Alastar pointed a finger at Kate. She was still in her nightdress. “Don’t you even *think* about it.”

Alastar tensed as Kate stalked across the room with the pot still in her fist. She leaned toward him and let out an anguished cry. He flinched and tried to hide behind his open hands when she swung the pot and let it clatter across the table. She jerked the empty chair out, sank into it and buried her face on her arms.

Shaking his head, Alastar lightly brushed his fingers through her hair. “I’m sorry, Katie.”

“You are, you know.” She looked up slowly, took a deep breath and sat back in the chair. “I suppose I am, too.”

Kate stared into her coffee cup while Alastar moved the gummy porridge around with his spoon. Queenie’s whinnying drifted in through the open window.

“She’s hungry,” Kate said.

“I’ll feed everyone before I leave for the stable. Just like yesterday. Just like every day.”

“Do all the days feel the same to you, too?” Kate said.

“Pretty much.”

“At least you see your friends at the stable every day. It’s so quiet here. I get lonely, even with Queenie and the ponies. Clara’s always busy chasing her boys around the house.” Kate dropped her eyes but when she looked up again, there was a touch of fear in them.

“And your habit of going missing for days at a time doesn’t help any. I picked up the phone the other day, Alastar. I was going to ring up my mom. I needed to talk to her in a bad way. Then I remembered she’s—she’s gone.”

Alastar covered her small hand with his. “I’m sorry,

Katie.”

Kate’s lips tightened briefly and she nodded.

“I have an idea,” Alastar said. “Maybe Clara could use a break once in a while. The twins are good boys but Angus doesn’t call them the Terrible Two for nothing. Why don’t you ask her if you could watch them sometime?”

“You know, you’re a bright man, for the most part.” Kate frowned and shook her head. “What’s beyond me is how you can be so *daft* at times.”

“What?” Alastar opened his hands. “I thought it was a good idea. Those two boys would keep you busy and they’d certainly take your mind off being alone while I’m at work, wouldn’t they? What did I say that’s so wrong?”

“Having those lovely little boys here with me would be a constant reminder that we don’t have children of our own, that’s what’s so wrong with it.”

“Oh . . .”

“Besides, I’ve already offered. I told Clara that I’d be happy to look after her boys any time she needed me to.”

“You did? Wait, I thought you said . . . I mean, what did she say?”

“It wasn’t so much what she said.” Kate stared out the window toward the barn. “By the look of her, you would’ve thought I’d offered to slice those little boys up and fry them for dinner. She covered it up quick enough, but I know what I saw. She’s a good lady and a good friend, but she wouldn’t trust me alone with her children for two seconds. Just the thought of it scared her half to death, though she’d never admit it to my face.”

“I can’t believe that, Katie. You’d be great with those boys. Why would Clara—”

The look on Kate’s face stopped him cold. When that look appeared, the best thing was to just quit talking, unless he

actually wanted to see the good dishes flying across the kitchen again.

“Do you know what Saturday is?” The challenge in Kate’s voice caught him off guard. All he could do was shake his head. The whites of his eyes gave away any upper hand he had imagined.

“Saturday.” Kate sighed and pushed her plate away. “Saturday is our fourth anniversary, my dear, thoughtful husband. Four’s only the flower one though, for all that’s worth.”

“I knew that. I just . . . I just forgot for a minute. You surprised me.”

“Beggin’ your pardon. Of course you knew.” Kate smiled instead of just calling him daft again. “You probably had plans all made up. You were just waiting to spring them on me at the last minute. That’s how it is, isn’t it now?”

“Well,” Alastar said, “now that you mention it, why don’t we go to the King’s Head to celebrate? There’ll be music. We can have a few drinks and talk, I guess. What do you think about that for a plan?”

“Sure, sure, that’s a fine plan,” Kate said. “No matter we went there for our anniversary last year. Hell, no matter we went there *last* Saturday night.”

“Do you want to go somewhere else, then?”

“The King’s Head’s as good a place as any. At least there’ll be people around. Why don’t you invite Bert along? I never get to see him anymore.”

Alastar shook his head. “Bert’s taking a couple of horses to race down at Listowel this weekend. He won’t be back until late Sunday night, Monday if he wins big. Let’s ask the Sweeneys to come along. Angus is a hoot after a few jars of stout.”

“They never want to go anywhere these days,” Kate said,

“now that the boys have come along and all. I think it’s just you and me again, Alastar. Just like always.”

“Well, that’s okay, isn’t it? Maybe if we start tipping Missy early, she’ll sit and talk with us for a while.”

Alastar and Kate both waited for Saturday night with a mixture of anticipation and apprehension. Conversations that strayed too far from horses had a way of ending up strained or worse. When the big night finally rolled around, an uneasy silence marked the long ride into town.

“It’s packed in here already.” Alastar leaned out of the booth. “I can hardly see the front door from here.”

“Are you expectin’ someone special?” Kate said. “It’s Saturday night. Yesterday was payday for most of these folks. You might as well hold on to your extra coppers. Missy is only going to be spending time with her tray on a night like this.”

Like Moses parting a sea of potato farmers, men shuffled aside and Missy appeared with two pints of Guinness balanced high above her head. She waltzed up to their booth and deposited them with a broad smile.

“Happy anniversary! You’re the happiest couple I know and two of me favorite customers!”

“It’s very sweet of you to remember,” Kate said. “I’m impressed.”

“Well,” Missy said, “I’ve always held that a good barmaid’s for a sight more than just servin’ up food and drink!”

“How have you and your family been?” Alastar said. “I heard that your husband got a new position out at the mill.”

“Oh, everyone’s just grand!” Missy looked over her shoulder and turned back to the booth. “Busy night, you know. Shout when you’re ready for another round. Happy anniversary!”

With that, the barmaid waddled gracefully back into the

sea of farmers and was gone. Surrounded by folks talking and laughing among themselves, Alastar raised his eyebrows and Kate answered with a wry smile. In the midst of the crowded pub, they were quite alone again.

Alastar picked up his glass. "Happy anniversary, Kate."

"And to you. Happy anniversary."

They touched glasses. Kate sipped a bit of the rich, cool stout through the creamy head floating on top. When Alastar set his glass down, it was almost empty.

"A little more than four years ago, I was sitting right over there." Alastar pointed to a table near the booth. "Bert brought you over from the bar and told me to pull a chair up for you."

"Oh, I remember it well enough." Kate smile wistfully. "When I sat down, you could hardly put two words together without stammerin'. For the first little while, I thought old Bertram was trying to fix me up with a real muttonhead."

"Hey, that's not very nice. You were beautiful then. I remember that you smelled like clean horses and heather and it made me a little lightheaded. I just didn't know what to say right off, that's all."

"Well! You *used* to be handsome, too, but right at the moment, I'm still leanin' toward *muttonhead!*"

Alastar frowned and looked down at his glass. A heavy sigh smoothed out his brow and his shoulders fell. "I'm sorry, Katie. You know I didn't mean it like that. I still think you're beautiful."

"Hmpf," Kate sniffed. "How very flatterin'. I'm sure just about any girl would be overjoyed to hear that you still *think* she's beautiful."

"God, Katie, can't we just quit this? It's our anniversary. Can't we just talk? We have had *some* good times, haven't we?"

Kate stared across the table at her husband of the past four years. He was the handsome, tongue-tied man she had

met a few feet from where they sat, a little older though not one wit wiser. He still looked like the same man but somehow—somehow, he wasn't quite the man she had needed him to be.

She sighed and pursed her lips. "I suppose we've had some good times, at that."

"What was your favorite time since we've been married?" Alastar said.

"There's been so many, it's a thorny bit to single out just one."

"Come on, Katie, I'm serious. What was your favorite?"

"Well." Kate took a slow sip from her glass. "Seein' as you're serious and all, it would have to be the day I met the ponies. They were a lovely surprise and their companionship has been a great joy for Queenie . . . and for me."

Alastar nodded and smiled. "That was a pretty great day, wasn't it? I remember our picnic in Athlone—you sitting by the river—like it was yesterday."

"Okay, I've told you mine. You take a turn," Kate said. "What's been your favorite part in our four long years together?"

"That's easy." Alastar chuckled and a smile lit up his eyes. "Our evening rides with Queenie, Molly and Wilbur. I'm particularly partial to the ones where we go to that nice, quiet clearing with the little creek running through it, especially when we take the big red blanket with us."

"I'll drink to that." Kate laughed and tipped up her glass. Alastar caught Missy's eye across the pub and held up two fingers. When he turned back, Kate was daubing a bit of foam from her pursed lips with a napkin.

"Since we're trading questions," Kate said, "I've got another for you."

"Okay." Alastar slid the empty glasses out of Kate's reach

and glanced around the pub. Out of nowhere, that look was back in her eye.

“I’ve been meanin’ to ask this one for a good long while now, but the time never seemed quite right. Maybe our anniversary isn’t a good time either, but just where *do* you go when you pull that disappearin’ act of yours? Whether it’s one night or several in a row, you always pretend it just didn’t happen and I haven’t pried. Until now, that is.”

Alastar frowned and actually squirmed in his seat. “You never asked, so I didn’t think you cared. I would have told you—”

“Kindly try tellin’ me now, why don’t you.”

“I don’t go anywhere in particular, really. I stay away sometimes when things, you know, when they pile up in my head. When I just need to think. Sometimes I sleep in one of the stalls at the stable. Sometimes I just walk around all night or sneak into someone’s hay loft.”

“These *things* that pile up in your head, does she happen to have a name?”

Missy appeared beside the booth. “Here’s two fresh pints!” When Alastar jumped, she laughed. “I’ve never known you to be scared of the black stuff before. Is it ‘cause these two are on your tab now? We *are* in the pub business for a wee bit of profit, don’t you know.”

“Uh, thanks, Missy.” Alastar forced a smile. “Sure you are. Thanks. That’s fine.”

With a suspicious look on her face, Missy studied him for a moment before she turned to Kate. “Is everything to your likin’ this evening, Miss Kate?”

“Oh, fine, just fine,” Kate said. “Couldn’t possibly be better.”

“If you say so,” Missy said. “Just let me know if you need anything, anything at all.” She patted Kate’s hand and shot

Alastar a parting glance before melting back into the crowd.

“Gee, what’d I do to deserve that?” Alastar said.

“Don’t you know by now that we women can smell a cheatin’ man from the far side of a meadow, particularly one who’s about to confess his sins? It’s a disgusting odor. Anyway dear, you were about to tell me her name.”

“No I *wasn’t*. I mean, there’s nothing to tell. There is no name. Maybe I’m not always easy to live with. You have your moments, too, you know. God, Katie, I can’t believe you thought I was—”

The twinkle in Kate’s eyes stopped Alastar short. Her hand didn’t quite cover the grin before he saw it, so she dropped her eyes to the floor beside their booth.

“You think this is *funny*?” Alastar said.

“Well, maybe a wee bit.” Kate batted her crinkled eyes across the booth. “Missy and I, we were likely mistaken about the smell. I think someone must’ve spilled something nasty under our table and then they forgot to clean it up.”

“Are you just *playing* with me, Kate? Do you really even *think* I was seeing someone else?”

“Of course not. It upsets me—I get depressed, if you give a care—when you leave me all alone, but do you really think I would’ve just let you go off all those times if I thought you were steppin’ out on me? If you do, you’re even slower than I give you credit for.”

With huge round eyes, Alastar watched his knuckles turn white around the glass in his hand, willing it to shatter and slash his fingers into bloody ribbons. The bottom of the glass chattered against the marred wooden tabletop but it refused to break.

Across the room, the front door opened and Rita Hobbs stepped into the King’s Head Pub. She beamed a broad smile at someone waiting at the bar. Alastar’s hand went slack in the

radiance of a smile from a woman who wasn't even aware he was in the same room.

Alastar slowly slid out of the booth and stood up. "I have to—I'm going to the toilet." He turned and shuffled toward the back of the pub, the forgotten glass still dangling from his fingertips.

When he disappeared through the swinging doors, Kate struggled against the rising sense of loss that boiled up every time Alastar left for work. She shook her head and scanned the crowd to find Missy or any familiar face, and she longed for her horses. Pulling her sweater tighter around her shoulders, she tried to imagine she was safe at home, looking out the front window at the quiet lane. Waiting for something to come and make her happy.

"Wass a purty lass like you doin' all lone on a Sat'day night? You wan some comp'ny? Maybe a nice drink or two?"

The pub snapped back into focus as the strong smell of goat and stale beer assailed her. Kate looked up and nearly all she could see was the purple-veined nose of the drunken herdsman leaning over her. She recoiled against the back wall of the booth, her small hands balled into fists.

"I am *not alone* you—you *old goat!* My husband's just in the toilet and when he gets back, he'll—"

The old man straightened and put his hands up defensively. "My mistake, my mistake. No call to sass me." He frowned and squeezed his eyes shut. "They ain't no other blokes in the toilet though. I'd a seen 'em for sure, bein' that it's a one-holer and all."

Nearly an hour later, Missy reappeared beside Kate's booth. She set her tray down and squeezed into the empty seat.

"It's near closin' time, hon. Time to settle up for the night. Where's that handsome husband of yours?" She looked across the table and smiled, but her breath caught at the frozen look

of near-panic on Kate's face.

"Dear me, did you two have a go at it on your anniversary?"

Kate gave a tiny shake of her head and a single tear trailed down her cheek. "I think he—I think he just left me here."

"Sweet Lord, Katie. Now why would he go and do a bloody mean thing like that? And on your anniversary, no less."

"I don't know." Kate pointed her chin toward the front of the pub. "I think he might have seen someone that upset him."

"Ay." Missy shook her head sadly. "I saw her too. I been here all night, though, and I never saw him leave through the front. And she's still sittin' up at the bar with her own husband. At least there's that."

"Yeah, at least there's that." Kate nodded slowly until her head jerked up with another spark of panic in her eyes. "Missy, I don't have any money with me."

"I'm not worried about your tab, sweetie. Half the buckos in here owe us enough to by a small herd each. What I am worried about is you gettin' yourself home, though. If that bloody arse of a man has truly left you here, you can stay with me and my family tonight. Okay, hon?"

Kate leaned forward and took the bar maid's hands in her own. "Thank you, Missy. Thank you. You're like a good friend, but I have to get home. I won't leave the horses alone all night and they'll be hungry in the morning. I have to get home tonight."

Missy squeezed her hands. "Well, then. If you haven't found him by closin' time, I'll just wake my Donald up and he'll drive you home. I'm sure he won't mind a bit." She gave a big wink and Kate forced a smile.

"Then it's settled," Missy said. "Come 'round before I go and let me know if you'll be needin' that ride."

Kate watched Missy walk away through the thinning crowd. She gathered her things and swung her feet out of the booth with a heavy sigh. At the thought of going out past Rita and her husband at the bar, she turned and walked past the toilets and down the dark hallway that led to the narrow street behind the pub.

Pulling her sweater tighter against the damp night air, Kate strained to see up and down the deserted street. A single street light guttered at the entrance to a dark alley. It ran up to the front of the building where they had parked before the sun went down. With one more nervous glance over her shoulder, Kate started up the alley and away from the sickly pool of yellow light.

“*Damn* you, Alastar,” she muttered, fighting the urge to break into a dead run through the darkness. “*Damn* you.” Something the size of a barn cat skittered out of an overturned trashcan and brushed past her leg. Kate screamed and plunged headlong down the black alley until she burst out onto the sidewalk in front of the pub.

Gasping for breath, her head swiveled around to see if the huge vermin from the alley was still chasing her. The deserted sidewalk throbbed every time her heart thudded against her ribcage. As her vision slowly cleared, Kate squinted at the outline of their lorry. It was still parked just down the street, right where they had left it. The silhouette of a man sitting behind the wheel was still as stone.

Eyes blazing through the darkness and hands balled into tiny fists, Kate stalked down the street ignoring watery knees that threatened to buckle with every step. By the time she reached the open window of the lorry, her cheeks were dull red charcoals. She lunged at the door but stopped dead when a finger came out the window and pointed at her.

“*You bloody arse!* Why in Creation did you leave me *sittin’ all*

alone in there?”

The finger slowly pulled back into the window but the silhouette didn't respond.

“*Alastar, you answer me now! Why are you just sittin' out here in the damn lorry? Why did you leave me all alone?”*

Kate recoiled when Alastar's face snapped toward her, his mouth contorted in a scowl. “It's not a *damn lorry*, it's a *damn truck!* Why won't you *leave me alone?*”

“Leave you alone?” Kate's voice was low and oily. “Leave you alone why? So you can be with *her?*”

The grimace faded. Alastar's eyes narrowed into dark beads but he didn't reply.

“That's right, I saw her. Missy saw her too. Hell's bells, everyone in the pub saw her, for that matter. How could anyone short of a blind beggar miss Rita, the flamin' sweet redhead with all the gorgeous smiles and all that perfect skin? Did you happen to miss seein' the *husband* sittin' right next to her? Did you miss *him?* Well *I didn't.*”

Alastar dropped his eyes but he still didn't say anything.

“Alastar,” Kate said softly, “you can't have her. You've got to get the notion through that thick skull of yours. She's *married. We're* married. What's done is done. And what's done in the eyes of the Good Lord can't be undone. You've got to forget about her. You've got to forget about her if *we're* every to be truly happy.”

Alastar sniffed loudly and pulled the back of his hand across his nose. “Get in the truck, Kate. Let's go home.”

Kate just stood in the street with her head bent while Alastar glared at her. “Where's your purse? You didn't leave it inside, did you?”

Looking down at her empty hands, Kate shook her head. “No, I didn't leave it inside.” She raised her eyes and fixed Alastar with an accusing look. “I was nearly *killed* in that *bloody*

alley, no thanks to *you*. I must have dropped it when that . . . when that *bloody huge beast* tried to attack me. Barely escaped with my *life*, that's what happened. You can bet on it as a fact that *I* won't be goin' back down that bloody alley for it. It can just lay there for all I care."

Alastar sighed and pushed his door open. "Get in the truck, Kate. I'll get your purse."

"Well, it's the least you can do after nearly gettin' me killed. And it's more than I expected from the likes of you, at that."

Kate watched Alastar shake his head as he walked back toward the corner of the pub. She slid into the lorry and saw the keys hanging in the ignition. The smile on her lips never reached her eyes as she drove into the night. She was looking forward to feeding the horses all by herself in the morning.

It was Sunday noon before Alastar finally trudged up the path that led from the dusty country lane to their farmhouse. Through the trees, Angus Sweeney was carrying two bushel baskets of potatoes across the field, one in each of his huge arms. "How are you, Alastar?" The huge, barrel-chested man's voice boomed even from nearly a quarter mile away. Alastar struggled to lift a hand over his head. Fatigue had long since replaced any anger at being left in town. Carrying a purse had dashed any hopes of getting a lift from any passing farmers, too. At least no one from the stable had seen him. Thank God for small favors.

Alastar pushed the back door open. The kitchen was empty. "Hello? Katie?" Answered only by silence, he sighed and dragged himself toward the barn. He found Kate currying one of the ponies.

"I brought your purse."

"You look a fright." Kate practically glowed with a good night's sleep, a hot bath and a morning spent with her horses.

“It was a long walk.”

“I thought you might need some time to think. Did you, Alastar? Think, that is?”

“Yes. You were right, Katie. I’m sorry I left you alone. Going to go to sleep now.”

Alastar turned to go back to the house and stopped when Kate came up behind him slipped her arms around his waist. “Thank you for fetching my purse out of that dreadful alley.”

He slowly turned in her arms and hugged her with one hand. When he laid his head on her shoulder and closed his eyes, the scent of clean horses and heather drifted up from her warm skin. “Going to go to sleep now,” he murmured next to her ear.

Kate hugged him back and whispered in his ear. “Why don’t you go in the house first?” She chuckled under her breath and shook her head as Alastar plodded back toward the house with her purse still dangling from one hand.