

*Until the  
End of  
the Line*

*Hazel Yeats*



# Chapter 1

DANI MORRISON CLENCHED THE STEERING wheel of her beat-up Ford. The dashboard clock indicated that she was now forty minutes into a commute that should have taken her fifteen at most. She tried to keep her patience. Tried to avoid the damn potholes. The rain was coming down hard, and she had to drive at a snail's pace. She should have left work earlier, but she'd been trying to make up for slacking lately. Hadn't counted on this traffic. Or on this weather.

Again, she checked the clock. She really wanted to video-call her sister, and it had to be tonight. The wedding invitation had arrived in the mail yesterday, and she was desperate to talk to Jane about it. She counted the hours on her hand like a child—it was almost midnight in Northern Ireland now. Luckily, Jane was a night owl, or perhaps the years spent in remote corners of the world had made her a little more relaxed about the concept of time. In any case, after Jane's move to Belfast a couple of months ago, Dani had been able to talk to her on a regular basis, and that was an absolute delight.

Twenty minutes later, she finally made it home. After having changed into comfortable clothes, she poured herself

some iced tea, picked up her laptop from the dinner table, and fell down onto the couch. She smiled when her sister's face appeared on the screen. "I guess this is as good a time as any to tell you, Jane," she said in lieu of a greeting.

Jane dropped her smile. "Oh God, what is it now?"

"Mom is crocheting your something blue."

Jane swiped the back of her hand across her forehead. "Phew. Glad to hear it. No wedding is complete without it." The corners of her mouth went up. "So, how is Mom? I thought she looked a little pale the other day. She told me she had the webcam adjusted that way. I think she might be keeping stuff from me because of the distance."

"Well, you should have thought of that before you moved 3,618 miles away, perhaps?" Dani grinned, but there was a definite edge to her voice. She hadn't realized that maybe she felt a little abandoned by Jane. Now that she was finally done roaming the globe, couldn't she have settled down a little closer to home? Somewhere in the state of North Carolina, at least, instead of Northern Ireland?

"I still care," Jane said, sounding a little piqued too. "About all of you guys. You're no less my family now than you were when I lived across the street from y'all!"

"I know. Sorry. We miss you, that's all."

Jane smiled. "It's okay, I know. I miss you too."

"Anyway, Mom's fine. Still has that problem with the leg." Dani patted her knee. "But she's seeing this new therapist now, so fingers crossed. And Dad's team has won yet another bowling trophy, so he's been in a good mood lately."

"And now they're pretty much just waiting for the grand-baby to arrive? I have to say, Jack seems pretty relaxed about the whole thing."

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“I guess.” Dani nodded along. “Can’t really picture our boisterous brother as a father yet, but he assures me that he’s ready. Took the Lamaze class and all. And Abby’s huge but not freaking out. Must be nature’s way of securing human reproduction, I mean, imagine having to push—”

“Dani!”

“What?”

“Mike and I are hoping to have kids of our own one day. So, please, no horror stories.”

“Fine. I’m just saying that Abby looks about ready to pop.” Dani pressed a hand against her stomach. “You’d think she was having twins, but it’s just our one niece with her giant head.” She paused, readjusting some throw pillows behind her back. “I can’t wait to see everyone. I promised them I’d stop by before I fly out.”

“Fly out?” Jane beamed.

Dani had always been a little envious of Jane’s magnetic smile. It drew people in like moths to a flame. Dani knew full well that her own pleasantness took a little more effort to be coaxed out.

“Uh, I can hardly swim there now, can I?”

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying? My big sister is coming to my wedding?” Jane was more squealing than talking at this point.

“Well...uh...*yeah*. How can I say no? Not that the whole thing didn’t throw me for a loop a little bit, but who cares about the logistics, huh? I’ll figure it out. Wild horses couldn’t keep me away.”

“Fun fact: we actually considered having the ceremony in Australia. Northern Ireland doesn’t sound so bad now, does it?”

Dani imagined herself on a twenty-hour flight. The horror of it. “Not bad at all. Especially since I’ve come to realize that this is exactly what I need right now. A break. A little time away from home. Away from its...you know, *demons*.” Truth be told, she couldn’t wait to hop on that plane. “Honestly, this couldn’t have come at a better time.”

“So you’re still pretty sore from the breakup?” Jane tilted her head sympathetically. “I’m so sorry to hear that, Sis. It’s never easy, is it?”

“Nope,” she said, popping the *p* in an attempt to sound breezy. The truth was that thinking about Nadine still hurt like hell. Not that she was going to tell Jane that. It felt weird to pour her heart out on a screen. If she and Jane had been together in her kitchen with a bottle of wine or a couple of tubs of Ben and Jerry’s between them, maybe. But perhaps not even then. Why spoil Jane’s special moment by rehashing how she got dumped by her girlfriend of more than two years? “But I don’t really wanna get into that. Let’s just talk about the wedding, okay? I have to say, I wasn’t expecting you guys to tie the knot quite so soon.”

“It’s just...” Jane sighed. “When you know, you just know, right? So why wait?”

“Exactly. Although there were those six hundred other times you knew. So I thought—” Dani stopped herself. This was hardly the moment to bring up past promiscuity. “Then again, who’s counting?”

“Apparently *you* are.” Jane tucked her hair behind her ears. It was very dark these days, almost black, interspersed with what seemed on the screen like blue highlights. Dani herself wasn’t the dyeing kind; she’d had the same wavy, blonde locks since childhood.

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“I’m sorry, Sis. I was just kidding. I know Mike is the real deal, and I’m happy for you, I really am. It’s just that everything happened so fast, we haven’t had much time to talk about it.”

“What you gotta understand, Dani, is that I wasn’t serious about any of the guys I dated before Mike. But when I met him, I knew I’d met the person I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. He’s smart and handsome, and we have so much fun together. And he gets me. Doesn’t try to change me either. He loves me just the way I am.” She looked doubtful. “Does that sound sappy?”

“Little bit.” Dani gave her sister a wink. “But who cares? It’s sweet. So tell me more.” She sank back into the cushions. With nothing positive going on in her own life, she might as well live vicariously through Jane. She picked up a mug she’d left on the side table next to her and peered inside of it. After swirling it a couple of times, she was pretty sure that the odd-looking thing at the bottom was a fossilized apple core. Why had she left it there? God, she needed to seriously rethink her housekeeping habits.

“Well, when it comes down to it,” Jane said after taking a moment to think, “I just realized that I love him. And I don’t want to spend another day without him. Ever. You know how he collects rocks and fossils and that kind of stuff, right? So I’ll watch him as he potters about with his treasures. The meticulous way he’ll pick up and study and store and categorize even the tiniest feather and cracked egg and little skull, is so... I don’t know, what guy *does* that?” Her face softened. “It’s just so precious. So gentle.”

Dani smiled. Gentleness was one of the very best qualities a person could possess, even though the whole collecting dead

animal debris sounded a little creepy. Still, it was the thought that counted. “You’ve got it bad, Jane,” she said, “that’s for sure.”

Jane rolled her eyes but kept on smiling.

“But you know, I actually thought that for you guys, Ireland was little more than a layover before returning to the outback. But now that you’re getting married, I need the detailed story from the very start. Complete with creepy bugs crawling into your sleeping bag in the middle of the night and Mike sucking out the venom.”

“Ugh,” Jane said. “That never happened. But anyway. When Mike had to return home from Australia and he asked me to join him, we were hardly serious yet. I just really wanted to see this place and see his home—by the way, he has *the* cutest accent.” She dipped her head, and in an unnaturally deep voice said, “These wee boggers take an oir to cook.”

Dani laughed. “Is he Irish or from Mars?”

“Don’t mock me! I haven’t really mastered it yet. Suffice it to say the accent’s beautiful—really light and musical.” She gestured impatiently for Dani to stop interrupting her. “So, anyway, I wasn’t really sure if it was okay to accept the invite because, I mean, what exactly *were* we to each other? But then when Mike told me his mom ran this B&B, I figured it was okay to go home with him even if we weren’t actually involved because, I mean, I could just be a friend coming to stay for a while, right? A paying guest. But then...”

“Yes. Tell me again how you got involved.”

Jane laughed. “There are *so* many stars in the Australian sky at night, you have no idea. Imagine yourself and your...” Her voice trailed off as no doubt she realized how painful this must be for Dani.

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“I can still imagine myself with someone, you know,” Dani said. “You don’t have to spare my feelings or anything. Life goes on.” It did. Life went on, bleak as it was. And, despite what she had just told Jane, she couldn’t imagine herself with someone.

“I wouldn’t want my happiness to bum you out.”

“Trust me, it could never do that.”

“Alright, then. It’s pretty magical sitting on a beach together in the middle of the night, huddled around a campfire in each other’s arms, staring up at a sky that’s glistening with the light of a billion stars. It’s something I’ll never forget as long as I live.”

Dani pictured it, and, true enough, her heart sank when it struck her once again how alone she felt. Sure, life went on, but could she have the courage to put her heart on the line again? A heaviness settled inside her, and she sat up straight and took a deep breath, trying to fight off the feeling.

“Belfast really grew on me really quickly, though.” Jane placed her left hand on her right shoulder.

*Yes, Dani wanted to shout, I can see the damn thing—14K white gold embedded with diamonds.*

She had never worn an engagement ring herself; none of her relationships had reached that stage. For a long time, she had thought it was in the cards for her and Nadine.

Honestly, how gullible could a person be? Or had Nadine once believed it too? Dani remembered how devoted to each other they’d been when they were first together—surely that couldn’t have been fake! Or had it been? Dani had a hard time trusting her own memories these days—hindsight tainted with the knowledge of Nadine’s betrayal and general awfulness.



“Which was funny,” Jane continued, “because I had sort of assumed I wouldn’t care for this place, you know, what with the weather and all the political tension, but those troubles were resolved years ago, and I felt at home right away. And then Mike and I just knew—even if it might seem a little soon—that it was time to take the next step—I mean, the ultimate step. To let the universe know that we have faith in our future.”

“Right,” Dani said, taking a deep breath to calm her thoughts. “Jane, I don’t want to be a party pooper here, but I need to ask: are you a 100 percent sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I can feel it in my bones. We want to get married. And we figured that not telling anybody up front about our plans but to just send out the wedding invitations would make this more of a surprise, like, *whaaat*, these crazy kids are getting *married*?”

Dani snorted at her sister’s antics. She would have appreciated a little heads-up. But right now, seeing how happy Jane was, all she wanted was to support her sister as best she could. And it wasn’t like she needed to move a lot of stuff around to hop on a plane to Northern Ireland. There was her job, but she had plenty of vacation days, and it wasn’t exactly like she had a brimming social life that required maintenance. In fact, the wedding invitation was pretty much the only thing on her social calendar.

“We know that to some it’s a little bit of a hassle. But it’s just so freaking exciting! I mean, of course not having Mom and Dad there, *or* Jack and Abby—that’s horrible; of course it is...”

“*I’ll* be there, right?” Dani said. “Let it be my job to make them feel as if they’re actually there. I’ll send them videos

and a thousand pictures, don't you worry." Dani once again wished they were in the same room so she could pull Jane into a hug and reassure her. "I have to say that I'm really looking forward to meeting my new brother-in-law. I know so little about him except that he's brutally handsome, of course. As your older sister, though, it's my duty to give him the shovel talk," she said gravely.

"Oh, please don't!"

Dani chuckled.

"He's great, Dani, you'll see." Jane swooned. "He's everything I've ever wanted in a man. I can't believe I found him—I mean, what were the odds of us being in the same place in that vast country at the same time, huh?" She sighed. "The universe really went out of its way to bring us together. Doesn't that tell you that everything happens for a reason?"

Dani shook her head. "At the risk of being a buzzkill, I have to tell you that the universe is ruled by coincidence and chaos."

"Whatever. So, anyway, what's going on with you? I mean, are you hanging on?"

"Well." Dani sighed. It was imperative that her tale of woe be ultra short. Talking about it only made it hurt more. "It's been a rough couple of weeks, but I'm okay now. I'll survive. I'm all about focusing on the positive right now, on things that bring me joy, like your wedding. So tell me—"

"Please don't put on a brave face for me, okay, Dani? Breaking up after such a long time is huge."

"Jane, I really don't wanna get into this right now."

"Okay, but I blame Nadine for this." Jane wasn't the sort of person who would drop a subject when asked. "She never

struck me as a very warm person. Or as someone who had anybody's best interest at heart but her own."

Behind Jane, a section of her drab and dull living room was visible, with its mismatched furniture and boring white walls. Jane was planning a makeover for the entire house. If only that sort of thing was possible for a life too, Dani thought. She wished it were as easy as getting a new rug and some pretty vases to bring the color back to her days.

She grappled for something positive to say about Nadine. "She changed after her mom died, that's the thing."

"Did she really, Dani? Or are you making excuses for her?"

She considered this. Jane might be right. Maybe she was making excuses because she felt foolish for having chosen a cheating narcissist for a partner. "We were really good together for a while," she said weakly. "And I sort of clung to her because she was my last link to Grace, you know? Her mom? You remember how close Grace and I were, right? I mean, we were close when the times were good but way closer when they were bad. Being needed the way Grace needed us when she got sick made Nadine very uncomfortable and awkward; for me, it was the opposite. I guess that's when we began to grow apart."

Jane nodded. "Of course I remember. I'm just so sorry. I know how much she meant to you, and this will probably sound trite, but Grace lives in your heart despite the way things ended with Nadine."

Dani swirled the screen away from her face abruptly.

"Hey!" Jane shouted. "Where'd you go? Are you okay?"

Dani wiped her eyes, swallowed, and put the laptop back in place. "Sorry, just chasing away a fly."

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“Anyway, we’ll set you up with someone nice once you get here, okay?”

“I *urge* you not to do that, Jane. That’s the last thing I need right now. Now, let’s talk about the wedding. Any details you want to disclose?”

“Well, the whole thing sort of got away from us a bit, to be honest. It seemed fitting—I mean, considering the people we are—that we would keep it small and simple and laid-back.”

Dani laughed. “But then your girly alter ego took over, am I right?”

“Well, yeah. Sort of. And then I heard about how Belfast Castle was a popular wedding venue, and Mike was totally on board. I mean, we’re still making this totally our own unconventional thing, but I’m sorry to tell you that wearing cargo pants is now a definite no-go.”

“I’m sure I’ll find something decent, don’t worry.”

“Uh...there’s one other thing I’d like to run by you, though, Dani.”

“Sure. Shoot.”

“Well, naturally, I want you to be my maid of honor.”

“I’m flattered.”

“But here’s the thing: I would like to appoint an assistant to help you put it all together. Think of her as a bridesmaid with a bit of extra leverage.”

“Because I’m not up to the task?” Dani wasn’t sure if she should feel slighted. Not that she was by any means an experienced party planner—maybe having a bit of help would be a good thing.

“No, I think you’ll do a great job, but I may have to swing my story that way.”

“Why? Who is this person?”

“Her name is Sophie. She’s my friend from college. She graduated with honors, which I’m only telling you because it’s sort of typical of her discipline and perseverance. We shared a dorm. She was gruelingly homesick, but her parents wouldn’t allow her to transfer to an in-state college, not just because her mom was a Chapel Hill graduate herself and these people are all about their old boys’ network but also because being away from home was considered character-building.” Jane shook her head to convey her disapproval of such a thing. “Resulting in Sophie’s refusal, now, as a grown woman, to ever cross the Massachusetts state line again.”

“So what are you saying? I have to look her up in Massachusetts to plan the bridal shower together?” Dani would do anything to make this wedding a success, but she had neither the money nor the energy to travel to New England to convince a total stranger to join her in planning a party.

“No, nothing like that. It’s just that she’ll need some persuading to fly out. She’ll be here in a heartbeat if we can convince her that this whole thing will blow up in our faces without her.”

“I’ve learned to steer clear of schemes like that, Jane, so this is all on you. But I’m fine with having an assistant.”

“The thing is,” Jane said, “I have an ulterior motive too. Mike has this brother, see? David’s officially his half-brother, but we don’t really make that distinction. Both Sophie and David have had a lot on their plates lately, and I’m looking forward to introducing them. A little voice tells me that this is an opportunity to make two lonely people very happy.”

“You do realize that setting people up ends in disaster nine times out of ten, right? It’s a scientific fact.”

“I daresay I’m rather good at knowing who’s right for whom. I’ve been setting up people all over the world.”

Dani laughed, putting her hands up, palms forward, as if surrendering. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you. So, Mike’s mom runs a bed-and-breakfast. But what about his dad?”

Jane turned serious. “Actually, he passed away six years ago. Apparently, he had this heart condition he never knew about. It was a big shock, as you can imagine. Although in all honesty, he doesn’t come across as a particularly warm individual or involved father from the stories I hear. Now, *David’s* dad is somewhat of a mystery. Eileen had David as a single mom, years before she even met Mike’s dad. It’s all kind of hush-hush. My guess is he was a *flippin’ Catholic*.” She chuckled. “Please don’t tell anyone I said that, because it’s not actually funny. Obviously.”

“So can we expect three prospective daddies to be popping up in the goat shed in the weeks before the wedding?”

“Who knows?” Jane said, laughing.

“This is getting more interesting by the minute.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. I can’t wait to see you.” Jane glanced sideways. “But it’s like one in the morning here right now, and I have to get up early for work.”

“You call that *work* now—fixing Mike his breakfast of smoked herring and blood sausage?”

“Actually,” Jane said smugly, “I’m starting my new job. It’s nothing special or exciting. They need an extra hand at Mike’s pharmacy—to answer the phone and stuff. And since

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I'm between jobs, I offered. It's just two days a week, anyway. How about you? Any plans for your day off?"

"I'll be at Cynthia's. Having my ass kicked about the state of my life."

## Chapter 2

THE FOLLOWING DAY, DANI WAS sitting on her best friend's couch, pressing her fingertips to her temple as she reminded herself that Cynthia had nothing but her best interest at heart. Which didn't necessarily mean that she was in the mood to have her sorry excuse for a life analyzed.

"I don't know," Cynthia said from the kitchen. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I've always felt that there was very little chemistry between you guys." She walked back into the living room carrying two tall glasses, offered Dani one, and sat down. "Frankly? It was painful to watch at times."

Dani took a sip of her drink. "This is just a club soda," she frowned. "If we're going to discuss my life, I'm gonna need something a little stronger."

Cynthia rolled her eyes and chose to ignore her, crossing her legs as she sat down, her skirt riding up to reveal tanned, slender legs. "I mean, you're gorgeous, Dani. You know that, and I'm sure that Nadine does too, in her own way, but two rights can sometimes, you know, *still* make a wrong. Like two poles of a magnet repelling each other."



“Thanks for not holding back.” Dani raised her glass and drank. “With friends like you, who needs enemies, huh?”

“You’ve kept this relationship alive on willpower alone, deluding yourself into thinking that Nadine was your type when you know just as well as I do that your type is the tomboy—the petite, boyish elf.”

“Oh, great.” Dani scrunched up her nose. “Now I’m picturing myself on a date with Dobby.”

Cynthia wasn’t easily distracted. “As far as personalities go,” she continued, “your type is a woman who’s kind and funny, caring and loyal. Someone much like yourself.”

“Aww. Maybe you’re a friend after all.” How to explain why her relationship with Nadine had dragged on long after she should have put it out of its misery? Did she even know? Dani traced the pattern etched onto her glass of club soda. “I guess there was a time when Nadine *did* have all those qualities. They just sort of vanished over time. Everything changed after her mom passed away. We couldn’t find our way back to each other. Dealing with tragedy will often do that to a couple.”

“Dani, honey? This crisis started to build way before Grace ever got sick.”

“Maybe you’re right. But you know as well as I do that in any long-term relationship, however successful, there comes a time when the honeymoon is over. Every marriage has an ebb and flow to it. Even nuns take the occasional break from God.”

“Occasional break? That’s not what this is, though—right? I’m expecting this to be a permanent parting of the ways.”

“It is, don’t worry.” Dani looked down at her lap. “It’s over. Did I tell you what she said the last time we went out

together, to her stupid office party? She said that what I was wearing looked like something I'd found in a cardboard box at an eighties yard sale."

"The woman is mean," Cynthia said. "But that is shocking even for her."

Dani thought it best to be grateful for the support and change the subject. Cynthia was probably not the right person to ask for a thumbs-up as far as her appearance was concerned.

"She was never very subtle to start with. I see that now," Dani said.

"I'm glad you do. There are many reasons why this breakup, as horrible as it may feel right now, is a blessing in disguise. Not all relationships are meant to last forever. Once all the sand has passed through the hourglass, your time is up."

Dani nodded but didn't say anything.

Cynthia reached out to squeeze her hand. "You deserve better than her."

Dani had to swallow the lump in her throat before she could say anything. "I feel like my whole life is a joke right now. And not a very funny one."

"If you're in a crisis, you should stay over tonight." Cynthia squeezed Dani's hand again. "That's the rule."

The apartment Cynthia had moved into after her divorce was tinier than any apartment Dani had ever seen, but she was every bit as hospitable now as she was back in the day when she had a spacious guestroom and a professionally landscaped backyard to offer. Downsizing even to this extent was a small price to pay for getting out of a terrible marriage with a terrible man. Even Cynthia's son never complained about

the downgrade—he was perfectly happy crashing on the hide-a-bed in the tiny second bedroom when he came home from college for the summer.

“Sure,” Dani said. “I’ll stay. That would be nice. Thanks. But isn’t it also the rule in times of crises that people are offered a little alcohol to take the edge off?”

“There’s some beer in the fridge.” Cynthia pointed to the kitchen. “It’s foreign stuff. And before you ask, it’s for when I have people over.”

*People over?* What people came over to Cynthia’s prohibitionist haven that drank imported beer? She walked to the spotless little kitchen and found the beer hiding behind an astonishing selection of pudding cups. “I’ll drink it from the bottle.”

Cynthia shook her head. “And you wonder why I call you butch.”

Dani sat down and took a big gulp.

“Actually, it’s not beer. It’s lager.”

“Well...” Dani held up the bottle. “It tastes like piss no matter what you call it.”

“Never mind that. So, what’s the next step?”

“Forgetting about her,” Dani said. “Focusing on what’s good in my life. My sister’s wedding. My new niece. And finishing my novel.” She cocked her head. “Speaking of which, have you had a chance to read what I’ve got so far?” She brought the bottle to her lips and drank.

“Okay, so I know you’re upset. And I don’t want to kick you while you’re down, but Dani...” Cynthia shook her head in the slow way of someone disciplining a child. “You really shouldn’t gulp this stuff down like that. This is not the right time to get drunk.”

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Cynthia was always a little nervous around alcohol—one more thing her husband was responsible for. He hadn't held his liquor well, and Cynthia had grown wary of the stuff.

Dani set the bottle on the table. "So? The book?"

Cynthia walked to a small cabinet at the far end of the room and came back with the printed manuscript in her hand. She sat on the couch next to Dani, resting her hand on the binder. "The bad news is, this is not Pulitzer Prize material. The good news is, most manuscripts aren't."

"So?"

"It needs a little work."

"As in, the ocean has a little water?"

"What's the theme of this novel, anyway?"

"The *theme*?" Dani giggled. "You're going all middle school English teacher on me now? Very well. I want to say... love conquers all."

"Okay. Fair enough. The problem is, Dani, that these people don't come off the page the way they should. They're like cutouts. If you prick them, they do not bleed."

Dani shook her head. "Now you're just showing off."

"A good book is like good sex, you know? I expect it to transport me to a state of bliss and oblivion."

"That's a lot of pressure to put on a book. On sex too, for that matter."

"And still," Cynthia said, "I expect nothing less. From either."

"So, what about the romance? Did you enjoy that, at least?"

"Meh. I was actually rooting for the saintly social worker and the cop lady with the tough exterior and the golden heart to get together, but anything goes as long as it's done well."

She paused, then cleared her throat. “I’m not saying it’s *badly* done. You have some nice metaphors there, some okay descriptions, and it’s quite funny in places. I mean, you *know* how to write. You get paid to correct other people’s writing, for God’s sake. But this is fiction. Fiction has its own rules.”

“And judging by your face, I broke most of them.” Dani’s heart sank. Some positive feedback here would have gone a long way toward not feeling like a loser at all aspects of her life.

Cynthia put her hand back on the manuscript. “What can I say? It’s so...*convoluted*. The way people leave a room. It’s like you’re playing Scrabble and are trying for extra credit. I don’t know why people never take basic writing advice seriously. Less really *is* more.”

“Oh, okay.” But Dani was devastated. Mostly because it was true—she had ignored simple advice, convinced that she knew better. “You do know it’s not nearly finished?”

“I know. But can I be brutally honest here?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Look, it’s time for some tough love. You’re thirty-four years old, and it’s time to grow up. Trust me, you don’t want to be a full-time writer. I don’t know why you ever thought you did. You got that one story published, and it made you crazy. And then it was an escape. But I honestly believe that this isn’t for you, unless you pursue it as a hobby. That could be fun. Enter another writing contest. Write a blog. Oh!” she said excitedly, “make it about your pet peeves! Like people cutting in line at the grocery store. You *hate* that.”

“Jesus,” Dani said. “I was aiming for the next great American novel.”

“Come on, Danielle. You weren’t really, were you?”

“You don’t understand.” Dani took another gulp of beer. Who cared if she got drunk? “What do I have when I give this up as well?”

Outrage erupted on Cynthia’s face. “You have plenty without it. You know very well that your success as a human being is in no way related to your success, or lack thereof, as a writer. You’re beautiful and loving and the most loyal person I’ve ever met. You’re a great friend, a protective sister, a loving daughter, and a brilliant copywriter. You are so much more than just this manuscript!”

Dani bowed her head. “Thanks. That’s sweet.” She loved Cynthia, but she had this way of not cutting her any slack, and this was a time where a little encouragement would go a long way.

“Stop bumming us out now, okay? Instead, tell me more about this *wedding*.”

Dani almost sighed with relief. The upcoming trip and wedding provided a pleasant diversion these days. And who knew? Once in Ireland, maybe she would see her problems in a new light and find some answers. She perked up a little. “Okay,” she said, leaning over, feeling her excitement grow. “So, I’m flying into Dublin, and Jane and Mike will pick me up at the airport. I’ll be staying in a small coastal town close to Belfast, where Mike’s mother will put me up in her somewhat mysterious B&B, and then we’ll just take it from there. I mean, Jane’s only got this temporary part-time job right now, so there will be plenty of time to do lots of fun sister stuff. The wedding and reception are going to be held in this amazing old castle. I picture groomsmen in tuxedos, waiters in tails and white gloves, and Jane in some lavishly decorated white dress.”

“Sounds amazing.”

“This is just my fantasy, mind you. I mean, it’s Jane we’re talking about here. She’s more into boho-chic than quiet luxury.” Dani grinned. “Maybe we’re all supposed to wear purple pantsuits and ribbons in our hair and dance across the castle grounds holding hands, feeling ethereal. I don’t care either way, I’m just happy to be a part of it. And frankly, I could do with the change of scenery too.”

“I agree. See things from a different angle. Make a plan. Have some fun. Forget the past.” Cynthia gave Dani an approving glance. “Get your act together. So you’ll be leaving in what—two weeks or so?”

“Afraid not,” Dani said. “I thought I might as well get there early, before Jane hits that insufferable bride-to-be frenzy state. And I had some comp time stored.” She clapped her hands. “I’m actually leaving the day after tomorrow.”

## Chapter 3

LOOKING AT THE DATE ON the calendar tacked to the door of her rented room, Dani couldn't believe she had been in Northern Ireland more than a week. It seemed like only yesterday that she'd walked into the airport entrance hall, clutching her passport in nervous anticipation, her carry-on heavy on her shoulder.

She'd had no trouble spotting Mike—at six foot one, he'd towered above almost everyone else. Dani had taken a good look at him: he was even more handsome in real life with his blonde crew cut, his smoldering brown eyes, and his light stubble. “Excellent choice, Sis,” she'd whispered under her breath.

Dani extended her hand in greeting, but Mike pulled her into a warm hug, a good start.

“Jane's waiting for us at home,” he said. “She didn't want to cry in the airport. And I figured it'd be a good chance for us to start getting to know each other.” He shrugged, then took her bag.

Dani couldn't help but smile at him.



“So, my car is not far. Do you want to get some food or use the bathroom before we start? It’s a two-hour drive up to Belfast.”

“I’m okay for now, Mike. Thanks.”

It was early morning, and traffic was light as they passed through the picturesque Irish countryside. There were no physical border checks as they entered Northern Ireland, just some signs indicating the change in jurisdiction.

Mike gave Dani a broad-stroked overview of his life, not going into much detail until the point where he met Jane. There was no doubt that he carried a real torch for her sister. And that was all Dani needed to know, really, to get 100 percent onboard with this wedding.

It had been easy to like Mike. He’d actually asked Dani questions about herself, in that way of people who are truly interested, and their conversation had flowed easily. Now, after a week of getting to know him, there was no doubt in her mind that this was a match made in heaven.

She flipped through the calendar, looking for the wedding date, smiling when she saw that it was circled with a gold marker. No doubt this was Jane’s work—she would circle the day on all the calendars in the world if she had the chance.

As Dani was deciding whether to have more coffee first or to hop into the shower, a loud knock on the door startled her. Wasn’t it way too early for company?

She’d been going about her business in what Nadine used to call her early morning hobo look—sweats, hair up in a messy bun, fuzzy slippers, walking around in a daze. Not that she minded having someone come over unexpectedly the way it bothered her at home. She didn’t feel quite as responsible

## Until the End of the Line

for the mess now. After all, she was a guest in this place, and she could always blame the clutter on a previous tenant.

If ever there had been one, that was, because even now that she was here, the B&B was still a bit of a mystery. It was actually no more than an extension to the back of Eileen's house, more like a fancy conservatory than the backyard Airbnb she had pictured.

As soon as she unlocked the door into the backyard, it flew wide open and Jane stepped inside. "Don't tell me you were still in bed?"

Dani shook her head. "I'm up, but not by much. I'm on holiday, remember? Also, it's the middle of the night for me. Who died?"

"I know you're not a morning person, but it's past nine." Jane inspected her the way a disgruntled mother might. "Anyway, nobody died, I just thought I'd check in on you, see how you're settling in. How are you and Eileen getting on?"

"Famously." Dani smiled, thinking back on their meeting.

One thing Jane had been right about was that Dani would take an immediate liking to Eileen.

"So you're the wee sister," she'd said to Dani when Jane had first introduced them. Eileen was a large woman with kind eyes and curly hair that had quite a bit of gray in it. She'd looked Dani up and down critically, and then they had had some kind of stare down.

Dani obviously passed a test, because Eileen's features softened and she took Dani to what she referred to as the guesthouse to show her around, then went to put the kettle on. Which turned out to be an actual kettle that she warmed on the stove. It was understood that they were supposed to

have tea together. And things had just gone on from there, and now they were great friends.

“That’s wonderful,” Jane said. “Told you so! I just knew you and Eileen were kindred spirits.”

“Not really,” Dani said. “Eileen is the sort of person who’ll take whatever life throws at her and make the best of it. I have yet to master that admirable skill. And I like the way she likes her life, unhindered by that pesky sense of ambition that most of us have. She seems perfectly happy spending her days cooking and watching TV and going out on the *toin* in that little car of hers.”

“She’s an awful driver.” Jane shook her head. “No doubt you’ve noticed. David’s always going on about it.”

“She’s not that bad,” Dani said. “She likes it when I go to the grocery store with her. It’s fun. So she honks her horn a lot, so what? It’s not her fault half the drivers around here are melters.”

“So you guys have sort of set up house together now, have you?”

Dani grinned. “We’re like two old peas in a pod. We’ll have dinner together and then huddle around that little coal-burning fireplace in the living room to watch a game show or a crime drama on the BBC or listen to Radio Ulster.”

“Jesus,” Jane said. “It’s like it’s 1927.”

“It’s just what I need right now.”

“I doubt that.” Jane blew a strand of hair from her forehead and looked around. “It’s awfully small here, though, isn’t it? I keep forgetting how tiny it actually is. It’s hardly more than a glorified bedroom.”

The guesthouse was just one space that was both living room and bedroom, and a tiny full bathroom. The double bed

took up most of the floor space, but they had somehow managed to create a little sitting area by squeezing in a small table and two chairs. There was a kettle, a mini fridge, a bookcase filled with musty-smelling old detective novels, a picture on the wall of a ship struggling to stay upright in wild, frothy waters, and a great deal of home embroidered pillows in various clashing colors. Dani loved it—it made her feel as if she were a gnome living inside a tree. She glanced at Jane, somewhat offended. “Are you here to criticize the facilities?”

“Actually,” Jane said, “I was wondering if you’re up for a little trip. It’s Mike’s day off and he wants to go birdwatching, so we thought we’d drive up to the Giant’s Causeway, which is a haven for seabirds and a bit of a tourist attraction too.”

“That sounds great. But can we have some coffee first?”

Jane flopped down on one of the chairs. “Sure, I’ll join you. I’m frustrated because I can’t seem to persuade Sophie to come to the wedding.”

“Did you tell her she gets to collaborate with me?”

Jane grinned. “I did, but it seems to carry little weight.”

“Maybe just let it go, then. Can’t force someone to fly across the Atlantic when they don’t want to.”

“It’s not just for me. It’s for her too.” Jane sat up and unzipped her coat. “She really needs a break.”

“From what? *Luuuuv*e trouble?”

“Of course not. Sophie’s been single since the dawn of mankind. I want to introduce her to David, remember?”

“Right, that was the plan. Marrying her off to the in-laws. Will David be happy about the setup, you think?” Dani put the kettle on.

“Definitely. Sophie’s gorgeous. And super sweet. But we have to treat her gently because of her trauma.”

“What trauma?”

“Not that I’m not totally okay with whatever baggage she’s bringing. I want her to know that this is a good place to heal.”

“Yes, Belfast does have that reputation.”

“Don’t be snarky. I meant, because *we’re* here. *We* will heal her.”

“But why is she broken in the first place?”

“Oh, there are a lot of family issues. But I don’t want to go into it too much. It’s not really my place to tell.” Jane checked her watch. “There are literally a *thousand* things I need to do before the wedding.”

“*Literally* a thousand things?”

“Don’t be a wiseass, okay?”

“Sorry,” Dani said. “My best friend is the head of the syntax police, remember?”

“Ah, yes, how *is* Cynthia?”

“She’s fine. It seems that there is finally a new man in her life.”

Cynthia had texted that she was dating the uncle of one of her students, whom she had stumbled upon in the hallway at school after a particularly trying PTA meeting. He was actually the guy the imported beer was for.

“Good for her.” Jane swooned. “You know, there’s just so much love going around these days.”

“Isn’t there? It’s like the Age of Aquarius all over again.”

Jane stretched her legs in front of her, the tips of her shoes almost touching the bed. “Mock me all you want, Sis. *Be* sarcastic, I don’t care. I feel that this is a time where we’re all supposed to find love and be happy, even the cynical and the despondent among us.”

“I can’t help but have the nagging suspicion,” Dani said, searching the mini fridge for milk and coming up empty, “that I and I alone am the cynical and despondent you speak of. We’re having our coffee black, is that okay?”

“Fine. But it’s not *just* you. There’s David and Sophie and Claire. Maybe even Eileen.”

“Who’s Claire?”

“A friend of ours. My point is, that this is just a magical time somehow. Which is why I would like your help persuading Sophie to come to the wedding. So that she can be a part of it.”

“And how am I supposed to do that, exactly?”

“We’re FaceTiming tomorrow. Join me, okay? Spend the day at our place. We’ll have lunch. I’ll set up the laptop on my desk and you can sit with me—or better still, wait in the kitchen until I give you the signal and then breeze into the room in a so-called casual way, mosey over to where I’m sitting, say hi to Sophie in that slightly offhand manner you have, and then I’ll take it from there. I will introduce you guys, and then you can tell her what an incredibly good time you’re having and that Sophie should definitely get her ass over here ASAP so we can all play together.”

“Geez, Jane, I don’t know. That sounds awfully contrived. Also, I don’t want to play with her.”

“Please?” Jane pouted in that way Dani had always had a hard time saying no to. “Come on, Dani. This is my wedding. Help me out here, okay?”

Dani sighed. “Fine. I’ll do it. On the condition that you don’t try to set me up with anyone.”

“Agreed.”

They shook on it.

“Okay,” Jane said, “so where do we stand on the bloody coffee?”

Dani picked up the coffeepot and filled a mug to the rim. “Here’s yer wee mog now.” She got her own mug and sat on the only other available chair.

Jane laughed and winked. “Is it just me or are you beginning to be your old self again? You seem lighter somehow. I’m glad, but I wasn’t really expecting it. I mean, even though Nadine never sounded quite like my kind of person, you must miss her.”

“It’s okay. This place is actually making me feel quite serene.”

“Serene? That doesn’t sound like you at all. So, tell me: what’s the last thing Nadine said to you?”

“I’d really rather not.”

“But you have to. It’s important in the process of finding closure.”

“Are you sure? Is it not better left buried deep under the pile of *shit* that was our love?”

“Aw, Dani, I’m so sorry. But no, absolutely not.”

“Very well, then,” Dani said. “So, this is not a literal quote, mind you, but the gist of her last words was that now that she was rid of me, she was happier and more excited about the future than she had been in years.”

“Ouch.” Jane flinched. “That must have hurt. Was there someone else?”

“She did bring up the name of one of her coworkers suspiciously often. In that way of people who manage to turn literally *any* topic into a story about their crush. Peanut butter? Crush likes it on a cracker. Death? Crush has a dead grandmother. Insurance? Crush once met a person whose

college roommate's neighbor sold insurance. She just went on and on about this person—about how in charge of her life she was, how intelligent, how talented. Must be a true Renaissance woman. And, more importantly, my opposite in every way. I suppose that was her main attraction.”

“So how did that make you feel?”

“Not great, Jane, to be honest. I couldn't actually decide whether to lie down on the floor and sob uncontrollably or bash her head in with her own iPhone.”

“See? You need to work on that.”

“I do?”

Jane nodded vigorously. “Negativity is toxic. It will eat you up from the inside. Let me help you turn these feelings around, turn them into something more positive, make you understand that this relationship was a learning experience that has made you a better person. It will help you move on and invite love into your life again.”

“But I don't *want* to invite love into my life again.”

“Of course you do.” Jane took off her coat and threw it onto the bed. “Let's start right now, okay?”

“I thought we were driving up the Giant... thing-y?”

“The birds will keep.”



TO CONTINUE READING,  
PLEASE PURCHASE

UNTIL THE END OF THE LINE

BY HAZEL YEATS

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