

Celtic Run

Praise for *Celtic Run: A Jake McGreevy Novel (Book One)*

"Romance, danger, intrigue, and personality clashes between peers . . . all make *Celtic Run* a vivid coming-of-age novel."

—*Diane Donovan, eBook Reviewer, Midwest Book Review*

☆☆☆☆☆ "*Celtic Run* is a fast-paced, action-filled novel. . . . The action starts within the first couple of pages and doesn't stop, as cars are hotwired, cliffs are dived off of, and fears are conquered."

—*Kayti Nika Raet, Readers' Favorite*

Awards for *Celtic Run: A Jake McGreevy Novel*

IBPA's Benjamin Franklin Awards:

A Silver Medal Winner (Young Reader: Fiction)

The Mom's Choice Awards:

A Gold Recipient (Juvenile Books)

Dan Poynter's Global eBook Awards:

Winner (Children's Literature)

Praise for *Chicago Bound: A Jake McGreevy Novel (Book Two)*

☆☆☆☆☆ "Art, mystery, music, humor, and adventure—*Chicago Bound* has it all. . . . This is a grand read."

—*Jack Magnus, Readers' Favorite*

"*Chicago Bound* is a powerful new Jake McGreevy novel for middle-grade audiences. . . . Readers will be fascinated to the end."

—*Diane Donovan, Senior eBook Reviewer, Midwest Book Review*

"Having spent many years searching for Mary Cassatt's 1893 mural done for Chicago's World's Fair, I was delighted to encounter Sean Vogel's *Chicago Bound*. . . . [A] thrill-packed adventure. . . . [it] is loving and eventful, and most of all a great read."

—*Sally Webster, author of Eve's Daughter: Modern Woman, a Mural by Mary Cassatt*

A Jake McGreevy Novel

Celtic Run



SEAN VOGEL

MB PUBLISHING

Text copyright © 2012 Sean Vogel

Published by MB Publishing, LLC, www.mbpublishing.com

Graphic design and cover © 2012 PageWave Graphics Inc., www.pagewavegraphics.com

All rights reserved

ISBN, softcover: 978-0-9624166-9-9

ISBNs, E-books:

epub: 978-0-9624166-7-5

mobi: 978-0-9624166-8-2

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012936347

Photo Credits

Cover: Ruby © istockphoto.com/Rozaliya; Paper © istockphoto.com/desuzcommunications; Map © istockphoto.com/bubaone; Background © istockphoto.com/hudiemm; Title Page: Cliffs © istockphoto.com/ingmarwesemann; Chapter 1: Passport © istockphoto.com/Booka1; Chapter 2: Starfish © istockphoto.com/OlivierBlondeau; Chapter 3: Table Setting © istockphoto.com/studiocasper; Chapter 4: Apple © istockphoto.com/ZoneCreative; Chapter 5: Bike © istockphoto.com/hiro-pm; Chapter 6: Keyboard © istockphoto.com/DavidGunn; Chapter 7: Tickets © istockphoto.com/davidfranklin; Chapter 8: Ice Cream Cones © istockphoto.com/HakanDere; Chapter 9: Life Preserver © istockphoto.com/SamWoolford; Chapter 10: Key © istockphoto.com/samxmeg; Chapter 11: Limes © istockphoto.com/ansonsaw; Chapter 12: Rugby Ball © istockphoto.com/OliverHamalainen; Chapter 13: Notebook and Pencil © istockphoto.com/Talaj; Chapter 14: Gum © istockphoto.com/JiriHera; Chapter 15: Glasses © istockphoto.com/clubfoto; Chapter 16: Water Splash © istockphoto.com/kedsanee; Chapter 17: Yellow Flowers © istockphoto.com/CristianBaitg; Chapter 18: Biscuits © istockphoto.com/MostafaHefni; Chapter 19: Bench © istockphoto.com/OksanaSamuliak; Chapter 20: Suitcase © istockphoto.com/JohnSolie; Chapter 21: Cell Phone © istockphoto.com/BrandonLaufenberg; Chapter 22: Chocolate Syrup © istockphoto.com/ALEAIMAGE; Chapter 23: Window © istockphoto.com/GeoffreyHolman; Chapter 24: Ruby © istockphoto.com/Rozaliya; Chapter 25: Flashlight © istockphoto.com/PetrMalyshev; Chapter 26: Rope © istockphoto.com/gokhanilgaz; Chapter 27: Wagon Wheel © istockphoto.com/ArtsemMartysiuk; Chapter 28: Horse Shoes © istockphoto.com/DeborahCheramie; Chapter 29: Payphone © istockphoto.com/DanielStein; Chapter 30: Bandaid © istockphoto.com/IgorSkrynnikov; Epilogue: Plane © istockphoto.com/Okea; End Page: Rainbow © picturescolourlibrary.com/StockConnection

For Sara,
You are my inspiration, my breath, my home



Chapter 1



Jake clenched his fists. Zach was sauntering down the airplane aisle as if he were the best thing since the iPod. *Everyone has an archenemy*, Jake thought. *Luke Skywalker has Darth Vader. Harry Potter has Voldemort. Me? I have Zach.*

Zach plopped into the seat in front of Jake and poked his head around to talk.

“Hey, twerp, having a good flight?”

Just my luck. Five and a half hours to Ireland behind the goon of the eighth grade. “I’d be having a better flight if you’d test the emergency exit.”

Zach’s eyes narrowed. “Okay, Spanky, you’ll pay for that with your leg room.” He stuffed his duffle under his own seat until it infringed on Jake’s space. “Oh, wait, you’re only three feet tall, so my bag won’t bother you.” Zach chuckled and turned back around to watch a movie on his LCD television screen.

Instinctively, Jake stretched his legs to see if he could reach the duffle with his feet. Shorter than the average student, he felt like a dwarf compared to Zach’s football-player physique. He glanced at Zach’s seatmate, Julie. *Why doesn’t she ever see this?*

Jake’s heart pinched as Julie adjusted her position to rest her head on Zach’s shoulder. Her blonde hair lay draped

between the seats, its strong berry scent sending a slight tingle through Jake's body.

Jake and Julie had grown up together. They'd been friends from hide-and-seek to Guitar Hero, which made it the ultimate blow when she started going out with Zach. *Why can't she see him for the jerk he is?* Jake kicked Zach's bag out of anger. *Good thing no one's sitting next to me.* Then, grinning, he bent forward and slowly opened the zipper.

The first thing he found was a stack of papers. A cover sheet said "The Visitors, by Zachary Maguire." Laughing inwardly at his good fortune, Jake tucked the manuscript into the seat pocket in front of him for future retrieval. *Never pass up good blackmail material.*

Next, he found Zach's security-compliant bag of liquids. *Jackpot! All that bragging about being the only eighth-grader to shave is going to haunt him.* He pulled out the travel-sized can of shaving cream and some dental floss and then pried the tab off his empty soda can.

He knew Julie wouldn't approve of what he was about to do. Like a referee who flags the guy returning a punch, she had a knack for seeing only Jake's retaliations and not Zach's instigating offenses.

After jamming the metal tab into the tight gap behind the button, he gingerly pulled forward on the makeshift lever. Mint-scented goo dribbled out. *Perfect.* Next, he strategically placed a couple of airline blankets inside the duffel to hold the shaving cream can up toward the opening of the bag. He zipped it closed as far as he could, leaving just a little access for his fingers. Using a fisherman's knot, he tied the floss to the metal tab, pulled the slack out, and tied the other end to the zipper.

He bit his lower lip as he pulled the knot tight. *Probably the last time I'll tie that knot, since we no longer have a boat.* The

feeling of loss that he experienced on the day his dad sold their sailboat to pay the medical bills had been monumental. He slid the duffle back under the seat and glanced up at the movie. *Seen it*. With his dad laid up, watching movies was about all they could do together now.

* * *

Hours later, the pilot announced their descent into Ireland. Jake finished scanning the “Trace Your Heritage” homework instructions and folded them into his backpack. He hadn’t wanted to leave New York for the entire summer, but his dad had urged him to go on this school trip, saying it would be good for him to see where their family came from.

Jake tossed his backpack onto the empty seat next to him and peered between the seats as Zach wrapped up the cords of his expensive headphones. *Showtime*. Pretending to sleep, Jake watched through slits in his eyes as Zach pulled out his bag.

Zach tugged at the zipper. It didn’t budge. He grunted, tightened his grip, and yanked again. A greenish geyser of minty foam erupted from the bag, lathering Zach from head to waist.

“Argh!” Zach’s arms flailed as he struggled to wipe the slime from his face. He stopped and blinked several times. Then he stood up, turned, and fixated on Jake.

Uh-oh. At ten thousand feet, options for escape were slim.

An attendant spoke into the intercom. “Sir, please sit down. We’re making our descent.”

Temporarily thwarted, Zach pointed at Jake before making a fist and smacking it into his other palm.

“Zach!” Julie scolded.

“But look at what he did!” Zach removed the cream from his face with the last dry part of his shirt.

“Well, what did you think he’d do if you put your bag

there? You know he can't resist a practical joke!"

Jake's heart pounded. *She noticed. There is hope.*

"And Jake, you've got to stop with the pranks." Jake looked down, not wanting to gaze into her disapproving blue eyes. She'd once confided to Jake that Zach had some insecurities and issues with his dad, but Jake didn't think that gave him the right to be a bully.

Once the plane landed in Shannon, the group of ten students made their way through customs and baggage claim. They purchased some cookies and drinks at the café and then walked outside into the mid-morning sun to eagerly await their sponsors. Although most of the students would be going to different villages, such as Ballyferriter and Castlegregory, Jake knew that Zach, Julie, and he would be staying in the town of Dingle.

He remembered the glint in Julie's eyes when she talked about her dad pulling strings to keep them all close to each other. *She wants me to be friends with her boyfriend? No way.*

Jake's name was called. He turned to see a man in faded pants and a colorful sweater bounding toward him. The powerful energy in his trim frame was clearly evident.

"*Dia dhuit, Jake. Gerald O'Connell is mo ainm,*" he said, warmly extending his hand.

Zach stopped dabbing the shaving cream from his clothes. "Whoa, I thought they spoke English here."

"We do." A girl with long red curls and a china-white complexion stepped out from behind the man. "Hello. My name is Maggie O'Connell, and this is my 'da," she said with a charming brogue.

Jake recognized her from the photo she'd sent when they exchanged introductory e-mails. He remembered she was fifteen, only a year older than he was.

Mr. O'Connell inclined his head. "Welcome to Ireland."

Not wanting to pass up the opportunity to upstage Zach, Jake said to Maggie, "That was Irish that your dad—uh, *da*—was speaking, right?"

Maggie beamed. "That's impressive. Most Americans would have called it Gaelic."

"My dad drilled me on Irish knowledge. He didn't want me to bring shame on the McGreevy name."

Maggie smiled in appreciation. "Speaking of names, remember you wrote to ask if there were any McGreevys listed in our area? Well, I was able to find a few near Killorglin—just about an hour away."

"*Go raibh maith agat.*" Jake hoped he'd pronounced the Irish translation for "thank you" correctly.

"Nice."

"'Fraid that's all I've learned so far," Jake grinned.

When Julie's and Zach's names were called, two well-dressed couples approached them. Jake noticed that as each person shook Zach's hand, his or her nose twitched, probably trying to figure out where the minty smell was coming from. Jake snickered and Zach mouthed a threat at him.

In the parking lot, the O'Connells led Jake to a beat-up hatchback. Mr. O'Connell pounded on the latch to open it and began loading Jake's bags. As Zach's and Julie's sponsors packed their luggage into their respective luxury cars, Zach called to Jake, "Hey, twerp. Want me to upgrade you to a donkey cart?"

Maggie squinted at Zach, as if to better understand what he'd just said.

Jake turned to her. "What's Irish for *caveman*?"

She giggled, mischief sparkling in her eyes. "Try *fear pluaise*."

"Catch you later, *fear pluaise!*"

All the sponsors laughed. And when Zach's face deepened

to a dark shade of red, Jake could barely conceal his pleasure. *I am definitely going to like it here.*

The car's exterior may have been dilapidated, but its engine fired right up. Jake struggled to keep his stomach steady as Mr. O'Connell sped along the highway for the two-and-a-half-hour trip south. Their lively conversation made the time fly. It didn't take long for Jake to get used to their accents, but much to his embarrassment, a few times he found himself unconsciously mimicking their inflections.

"When we get home, you can call your mum and da and tell them you're here," Maggie said.

Jake stared out the passenger window. "Just my dad. My mom died when I was young."

Maggie twisted in her seat to reach out and touch his arm, hesitated, and then put her hand back by her side. "*Tá brón orainn.* I mean, I'm so sorry."

"So this is your first time in Ireland, right, Jake?" Mr. O'Connell said, gently changing the subject.

"Yes. My dad and I have sailed to a few places on our schooner, but we've never made it *this* far."

"Where have you been?" Maggie asked.

"Caribbean mostly. The sea down there is amazing."

"I'll bet. Well, my da and the other sponsors thought you might enjoy seeing a bit of scenery before settling in. We're now on Slea Head Drive. Very soon you'll be able to get your first glimpse of Blasket Sound, okay?"

"Of course." Jake inched forward in his seat for a better view.

As they rounded the next corner, Maggie stretched her arm out the window and said, "Welcome to Dingle."

Jake's jaw dropped as the infinite ocean unfolded before him. Soaring cliffs hugged the coastline to stand guard over white-capped waves racing toward the shore like wild horses.

"It's awesome," Jake said, hoping he didn't sound too corny.

"The *National Geographic Traveller* guidebook proclaimed it 'the most beautiful place on earth,'" Maggie added with pride.

"I can see why."

Thankfully, Mr. O'Connell slowed down a bit to make the curvy ride more enjoyable. Jake glanced back and saw that Zach's and Julie's sponsors were managing to keep pace with Mr. O'Connell. After twenty minutes, everyone pulled into a small parking lot on the western tip of the peninsula.

Several families were gathered at the overlook, all taking pictures of the breathtaking view. The sight of the water overwhelmed Jake, and he swallowed hard, suppressing memories of his father's sailboat and better days. Maggie guided the group to the best vantage point. Unlike some of the spectacular cliffs they had passed on the way, this section of the peninsula was only fifteen feet above the ocean. The water appeared calm, but Jake recalled his dad's many lectures on strong currents and sudden waves.

He looked around at the other tourists and caught sight of a toddler dressed in a thick pink sweater and matching pants. She tottered after a butterfly, swinging her arms in an attempt to catch it. The insect fluttered away from the throngs of people, toward the edge of the cliff, with the child still in pursuit.

Jake swiveled his head around. *Nobody is paying attention to her.* He took off toward the girl, screaming for somebody to stop her, but before anyone could move, the child vanished over the edge. At full speed, Jake shed his shoes and plunged off the cliff.

Chapter 2



Jake slammed into the cold water. His feet stung from the impact and the salty sea burned in his nose and throat. Bobbing to the surface, he scanned the area. *Where is she?* He sucked in a big breath and submerged again. The swirling action of the water pulled dirt from the ocean floor, rendering his sight useless. Using his arms like antennae, he felt everywhere for the girl, frantic.

His lungs seared with pain, forcing him to the surface. He caught a glimpse of people working their way down a sharp trail to a small beach. A woman was screaming so loudly she was drowning out the sounds of the ocean, further fueling the adrenaline already pumping through Jake's veins. Plunging again, he kicked his legs, counting in his mind as he swam further into the abyss. Jake knew he could hold his breath for a long time, but under stress like this, he wasn't sure how much longer he could manage. The seconds ticked by without mercy.

... Eight ... nine ... ten ...

On the scuba-diving trips he'd taken with his father, he'd learned to gauge his distance underwater. He figured he was about fifteen or twenty feet deep.

... Twelve ... thirteen ... fourteen ...

His chest tightened. *No!* Resisting the fatal instinct to breathe, he made a final sweep through the water with his hands.

Got her! He wrapped his fingers around the tiny arm of the toddler. Energized by his prize, he pushed off a boulder and struggled toward the surface. With the limp weight of the toddler dragging him down, he felt as though he were swimming through wet cement. The sunlight drew closer and he gave a final violent kick.

A thunderous cheer erupted from the shore when he emerged holding the child. The color had drained from her face, and he was terrified he was too late. Seconds later, she coughed up some water and cried. *What a wonderful sound.*

As the waves carried him in, he spotted a jagged outcropping of rock. Desperate to rest for a moment, he hugged the girl to him. "Everything's going to be okay," he assured her as he clambered up onto a small shelf, limbs aching and muscles cramping. The sharp edges tore at his skin everywhere, but he brushed off the pain, more concerned with catching his breath and getting the girl safely to dry land.

The crowd hollered to him, "Watch out!"

Jake turned just in time to see the mother of all waves towering overhead. Terror gripping him, he held the girl tighter and searched for something to grab. His left hand found a bit of wood jammed into a crack on a ledge.

The water slammed into them, dragging them both under again. The unrelenting force tumbled them end over end, like socks in a dryer, but Jake didn't lose his hold on the child. Finally, the rolling ceased.

Which way is up?

Just as he began to panic, he felt the grip of strong hands pulling him and the girl onto the shore. Safe at last, Jake collapsed on the beach.

* * *

Maggie's voice sliced through the fog in his mind. "Jake! Are you all right?"

Opening his eyes a little, he managed to lift his head from the sand. "I think so," he muttered, and spat out the taste of bitter salt water.

Zach appeared beside Maggie, his eyes shining and his mouth agape. "That was unbelievable. Way to go, McGreevy—I thought that wave was going to split you in half!"

Julie gave Zach a hard stare and then knelt by Jake's side and stroked his arm. "I can't believe you did that," she said, her voice tinged with admiration.

The sensation of her delicate skin touching his elicited a shiver. He temporarily forgot the cuts and massive bruises that were already forming and propped himself into a sitting position.

Mr. O'Connell led the child's parents to Jake and introduced them. The mother almost squeezed the remaining life out of him before leaving to take her daughter to the clinic.

"You're freezing, lad!" Mr. O'Connell said, noticing Jake's chattering teeth. He pivoted and sprinted up the steep bank, calling back over his shoulder, "I'll bring you a blanket from the car."

Zach poked at the piece of wood that Jake was still clutching. "What's that?"

Jake scrutinized the object. It was a small wooden box. "I have no idea. It was jammed in the rock out there."

Zach reached for it and Jake had no energy to put up a fight. The object was covered with sand, moss, and barnacles, and Zach's face scrunched up as he flipped it over in his hands. Julie and Maggie huddled closer to the boys to get a better look.

Remnants of a dark varnish still stained the weather-beaten wood. Maggie leaned closer and rubbed a finger across it. "It's old. I wonder how long it's been in the water."

Jake pointed out some italic letters engraved on the top. "It has initials carved into it ... S.M.R."

"How do you open it?" Zach said impatiently.

"Here, let me." Jake reached for the box, but Zach pulled it away.

Julie twisted Zach's ear. "Give him his box."

Zach released it grudgingly, and Jake scraped at the sand in the seam of the wood with his fingernail. "Must be fused shut or something." He removed his belt and used the thin buckle to pry open the lid. A small object dropped to the sand.

Julie picked it up and held it for the others to see. The heavily tarnished object was in the shape of a flower with a small red ruby still visible at the center. "I think it's a pendant."

"Hey, there's something else in there." Zach pointed to the box. The rotted lining was torn away, revealing a flat piece of metal.

Jake gently freed the artifact from the lining. It was thin, two inches wide and four inches long, with a jagged edge similar to a puzzle piece. "There's writing on this, too. Looks like Spanish."

Zach grabbed it out of Jake's hand and studied the metal. With a horrible Spanish accent, he sounded out the words: "*Ciento Pasos Este en las Nubes de Dios.*"

"Thanks, you big ape."

"It means 'one hundred steps in the clouds of God,'" Julie translated.

Jake remembered Julie's nanny from Panama, who had practically raised her and taught her Spanish in the process. "But what's a Spanish artifact doing off the coast of Ireland?"

Maggie motioned toward the rock shelf where Jake had rested. "There are tons of Spanish wrecks around here. After the Spanish Armada was defeated by England in 1588, many of the ships sailed up here, but storms smashed them into the rocks. The Spanish Navy never recovered, and as a result, there was a shift in power—"

"We got it, Miss Encyclopedia," Zach interrupted, rolling his eyes.

Maggie glowered at him.

"Four hundred years ago? Wow," Jake said, turning the amulet over in his hand and ignoring Zach.

"Something like that. Many museums in Ireland display valuable artifacts—"

Mr. O'Connell returned with the blanket and wrapped Jake up in it. "What's this about artifacts?"

"I was telling them about the treasures from sunken Armada ships," Maggie said. "Jake found something that might be from one of them."

Zach twirled the piece of metal in his fingers. "Jake found? Whoa, Bessie. Possession is nine-tenths of the law."

Jake reached for it. "Hey, I found it. It's mine."

Zach stepped toward the ocean and drew back his arm, poised to hurl the artifact into the violent waves. "Another step and I can end this adventure right now."

"Enough. You kids will work together," Mr. O'Connell said. "Tomorrow you can all go to the Dingle museum. They'll help you figure it all out. Now, Maggie, we've got to go meet your mum at the pub."

Zach slapped Jake on the back. "Guess we're partners, twerp," he said, and trudged up the hill. Julie followed, while Maggie helped Jake, who was still spent from his ordeal.

"You know, Maggie," Jake said, clutching her shoulder for support, "I really like Ireland so far, but I didn't expect it to smell so much like mint."

Zach glared back at him.

Chapter 3



The jolting drive toward the town of Dingle forced every one of Jake's muscles to tighten. He gritted his teeth and braced himself against the backseat, trying to avoid another hit to his already bruised ribs.

Mr. O'Connell prepared to round a tight corner, and Jake held his breath and closed his eyes. He pleaded for gravity to do its job and keep the car attached to the road, but he swore it lifted a little on his side before the road straightened out again.

The moment Jake decided it was safe to look, Mr. O'Connell slammed on the brakes, causing the seatbelt to squish Jake's chest.

Mr. O'Connell banged his fist on the steering wheel and shifted the car into park while muttering something unintelligible that was clearly an Irish curse word.

Maggie's cheeks changed from china white to crimson.

Jake murmured, "I can probably translate that on my own."

She cringed, her cheeks darkening even more.

He peered through the windshield, finally able to absorb the scenery surrounding him. To his left, a river of white sheep blocked the car from moving any further. Longer than a football field, the flock ebbed and flowed as one, their loud bleating drowning the sound of the sputtering engine. Jake

and his father had spent every weekend in the upstate New York countryside before the accident, but he hadn't witnessed anything like this there.

Dad would love this. He pulled his smartphone from his backpack, rolled down the window, and snapped some pictures. Even though he knew he would have no cell service, he had packed the gadget for photo opportunities such as this. Then he grimaced and pulled his shirt up over his nose. The smell of the sheep was overpowering. "Is there a fence down or something?"

Maggie shook her head, appearing more bored than floored by the stench. "No, these are pasture commons—public lands where livestock can graze."

Jake's neck whiplashed, unprepared for Mr. O'Connell's sudden decision to move forward again. The hatchback zigzagged through the commotion, accompanied by the sounds of Mr. O'Connell's honking and the bleating of the sheep. Between the impromptu swim, the foul-smelling sheep, and his host's wild driving, Jake's stomach was nearing its limit.

After a few minutes, they were free. With a sudden roar of the engine, the car resumed its breakneck pace and didn't stop until it arrived at one of Dingle's most charming pubs.

Maggie twisted in her seat and smiled at Jake, her eyes twinkling with pride. She motioned toward the small tavern. "This is where my mum works. She's one of the managers. She insisted we bring you here when you arrived."

"Okay, great."

Going into a pub? Is that even legal at my age? Cool.

Jake followed Maggie and her dad into the old stone building, aware that his mouth was opening wider with each step. He admired the rough walls, the ancient oak beams, and the tight weave of the thatch roof. Decades of use had

polished the surfaces of the heavy wooden tables and chairs to a smooth sheen. To the right was a bar cut from a solid slab of walnut, fifteen feet long, trimmed with ornate knot-work and a brass rail. A few patrons regarded Jake with indifference and returned to their tall pints of ale.

"Oh, he's here — thank goodness!" A tall slim woman ran from behind the counter, aiming for Jake like a heat-seeking missile.

He wondered if this was how the slowest antelope felt, aware of the lion about to tackle it. Before he had time to react, she was squeezing the breath out of him. He gasped for air, unable to speak or inhale. He knew the Irish prided themselves on hospitality, but how many smotherings could a person survive in one day?

"Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. O'Connell," he whispered hoarsely.

Maggie's cheeks flushed, and with a practiced roll of her eyes, she said, "Mum, let him go already."

Mrs. O'Connell released him, and tousled his hair. Her lips pressed into a stern frown as she shook her head. "You're still wet!"

She turned toward the bar, tucking a loose strand of salt-and-pepper hair back into the knot at the nape of her neck. "Bring me some towels and a hot plate," she barked at one of the bartenders. Then she smiled at Jake, pressing the back of her hand to his forehead. "We've heard about your adventure this morning, lad. Story flew through the village faster than an Irishman heading to the pub on St. Paddy's day. Very heroic."

"Thank you, ma'am." Jake watched her warily, hoping she wouldn't give him another squeeze. The bruises from the battering he'd endured in the ocean were beginning to throb.

Mrs. O'Connell turned to her husband, her expression

blistering. "As for *you*," she scolded. "Putting our guest in danger like that. Tsk!"

Mr. O'Connell wisely bowed his head and apologized to his wife, even though he clearly had done nothing wrong.

Maggie grasped Jake's hand and led him toward a table in the far corner, where a waitress placed an unidentifiable dish before him. Corn, potatoes, and meat whirled together on the plate, their heavenly-smelling steam rising to meet his dripping cold nose.

"That's shepherd's pie, an Irish standard," Mrs. O'Connell said. "That'll put you right."

Maggie leaned forward and whispered to Jake, "If you don't like it, that's okay. Many Americans find it too rich—"

Jake held up his hand and took his seat. Having had only a few snacks since dinner on the flight the night before—and after all he'd been through that morning—he wanted nothing more than to eat something rich and hearty. Minutes later, he was scraping his fork across the empty plate.

"That was delicious," he said as he shoveled in the last bite, his belly full and his body warmed by the meal.

"Guess you really are Irish." Mr. O'Connell winked at him.

"I eat mostly frozen dinners and stuff. Nothing home-made like this," Jake said, wiping his mouth with his napkin. The O'Connells beamed, their warm smiles softening the years of hard living etched into their faces.

Jake figured that Zach and Julie were probably in some marble-tiled dining room with cloth napkins and servants, but he didn't need any of that. The kindness radiating from the O'Connells made this a great meal.

Mr. O'Connell excused himself from the table and Mrs. O'Connell shot rapid-fire questions at Jake about life in America.

"Be right back," Maggie exclaimed as she leapt from the booth. Jake swiveled his head and saw an elderly bartender struggling with a huge keg. Jake started to stand.

"Sit down, young man. You've done quite enough today. My Maggie's got it." Mrs. O'Connell tapped the seat of his chair, leaving no room for argument.

Maggie glided across the room with the grace of a cat, reaching the man just as he was about to drop the keg. She put her shoulder under the barrel and hoisted it away from him. Deftly, she maneuvered it into place behind the bar, gave the man a polite smile, and then walked back to the table.

"That was impressive," Jake said.

Maggie blushed. "Thanks. I've been working at a farm before and after school. It's been great exercise."

"I work some too—mostly cleaning up and fixing things for a home security shop around the corner from our apartment."

They continued to talk about their jobs until a waitress arrived with a plate of warm bread pudding. Still hungry, Jake dug in.

I could get used to this.