

# A NEW WORLD

**Patricia McLinn**

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To Dad, for his stories of Gloucester and Ireland.

To Mom, for her insight to the human heart.

To both, in honor of fifty years of marriage, family and romance.

The author extends her gratitude to  
Séamus, Mary and Andy Costello,  
and Lori McKeever  
for sharing their experiences and  
expertise.

Affaire de Coeur  
Contemporary author of year finalist

## Chapter One

“Look at him, Ellie—the perfect man.”

Eleanor Thatcher grimaced at her cousin. Not that it would do any good. You might as well hope that every driver in Boston would use turn signals as hope Valerie would watch what she said, even in a public place.

“I mean, there he is. Just what we need. He’s the perfect man for us.”

The red-bearded man to their left was actively eavesdropping, Eleanor decided. If she hadn’t already suspected it, his stillness and the way he averted his eyes, thus putting his right ear directly in the path of Val’s voice, would have convinced her. Of course, it didn’t require much effort to pick up what Val said. It wouldn’t be so bad if she mumbled. But since her multitude of jobs had included six months as a public radio announcer, Val’s enunciation was flawless. No Boston accent for her.

“Cahill McCrea. He’s perfect for us and you know it, EI.”

“Val—”

“Just look at him. And listen. That’s all I asked—that you come and listen to him sing. That’s all I want.” Val’s mobile face shifted to an expression of supplication, wide brown eyes limpid as a waif’s.

Eleanor almost laughed out loud. Valerie Trimarco hadn’t *asked* her to come to this small South Boston pub at all. She’d badgered until, knowing how long the barrage could go on, Eleanor had surrendered, driving in from Cape Ann through a cold March rain teetering on the edge of sleet.

So here she was on a Saturday night, at O’Herlihy’s

Saloon, where the bartender did a steady business, where everyone seemed on a first-name basis except them, where decades of elbows kept the wooden bar polished smooth and where the cumulative effect of curious eyes was like a searchlight trained on the scarred table she and Val shared.

And the only way to escape with some sanity was to do what Val wanted. Eleanor knew that; she'd known it since they'd shared a playpen as toddlers. For sixteen years—as teenagers and adults—they'd hardly seen each other, but in the past year as Val's partner in The Fishwife, Eleanor had learned just how little her cousin had changed from the days when they'd scrambled over Dog Bar Breakwater as children.

A sigh slipped through her lips. Sometimes she felt as old and weary as the only grown-up shepherding second-graders through a glass factory.

“All right, Val. I'll look. And I'll listen. But that's all.”

“That's all I ask.”

The thrum of a guitar announced a song, and Eleanor hitched her chair around for a clearer view of this man her cousin wanted her to weigh against perfection.

A guitar slung easily over his broad shoulder, he sat ten feet away. He had a hip on one stool and a foot propped on the rung of another. The second stool held a tin whistle, a harmonica and a beer mug freshened through the good graces of his audience.

Cahill McCrea. The name suited him. He was more ruggedly interesting than handsome. But attractive, definitely attractive.

A stiff sea breeze could have tousled his thick dark hair off his forehead that way. But not even the strongest gale seemed likely to make an impression on the prominent bones of brows and cheeks that, under the makeshift spotlight of O'Herlihy's Saloon, shadowed his eyes.

He turned for a sip from the mug, and Eleanor considered a profile that dropped in a nearly straight line

from his high, wide forehead to a bump midway down his nose. A memento of a fight? With the thrusting lines of that stubborn jaw, she didn't doubt it for a minute.

Considering the muscle and sinew of forearms revealed by the rolled-back sleeves of his faded blue shirt, she wondered what had happened to the other fellow. The broad shoulders and wide chest stopped just this side of burly, and jeans worn to a powder blue encased powerful thighs.

A quiet note from the guitar pulled her attention back to his face. Without seeing them, she sensed his shadowed eyes resting on her as his comfortable baritone began to sing of his love with the ribbon in her hair. Her heart gave a startled jerk.

Eleanor felt familiar, despised heat push up her cheeks. She thought she'd overcome that weakness. How ridiculous! A woman of thirty-one blushing. Blushing was for silly, giggling schoolgirls, not for competent businesswomen. Especially not just because a stranger caught her staring at him.

Looking at him, she amended.

And she had every reason to look at him, she reminded herself during the second chorus. He was an entertainer, after all, and it was as an entertainer she assessed him. That was the reason Val had insisted she drive more than an hour from Gloucester to this working-class bar in South Boston.

She frowned at her own thoughts.

Entertainer? Somehow the tag didn't fit. If she'd seen him on the street, she'd never have picked him as an entertainer. Even now, sitting and listening to his songs, she sensed an incongruity in the picture. Oh, his voice and his instruments blended pleasantly enough, but she had the odd feeling he wasn't really performing. Her frown deepened as she tried to pin down the elusive impression. He didn't sell his music the way other performers did. Maybe that was it. He just sent the songs out there to be accepted or not, and whichever happened wouldn't affect him.

“Well?” Val demanded simultaneously with the last sad, clear note.

“I’m not sure that Irish music—”

Val waved the objection away. “He does other things, too. That’s just for here, although Irish music is awfully popular. Besides, it’s not just his music,” she said with a fervor Eleanor recognized all too well.

Oh, no. Another of Val’s enthusiasms.

Eleanor glanced at the bent head of the man testing his guitar’s tuning. Could a man like Cahill McCrea be hurt because the fire of Val’s interest burned bright and high, but never burned long? Her surge of concern was probably totally irrational.

“Look at how good he is with the people,” Val continued. “He really gives this place an atmosphere. And that’s what we need at The Fishwife.”

That was true. With Val planning the menu and Eleanor directing the business, they gave customers a delicious meal and efficient service. But if they didn’t find a way to give them something more, The Fishwife wouldn’t last another season. Perhaps not even half a season if they had as many bad-luck expenses as they’d had last summer. To cover the bill the second time the air conditioner broke down, they’d had to ask the employees to wait three days for their wages.

She didn’t voice the admission, though, because Cahill McCrea began a song just then—a stirring tune that had her tapping her fingers against the table while more demonstrative listeners clapped.

Maybe Val was right. Maybe this man, with his voice as smooth and potent as the oldest Irish whiskey and his careless smiles, could draw in summer customers and keep The Fishwife afloat another year.

The song came to a rousing climax with the audience joining in on the last chorus and cheering the finish. One male voice, heavy with beer, rose over the calls of appreciation and demanded the singing of “I’ll Take You Home Again, Kathleen.”

“No!” The negative chorus seemed near unanimous.

Looking past the bulk of the red-bearded man at the next table, Eleanor picked out the requester from among the crowd at the bar. He had to be at least half a foot shorter than her own five foot eight and easily a decade past retirement age. He wore a tweed cap, flanked by feathery white tufts above his ears.

“ ‘I’ll Take You Home Again, Kathleen!’” he insisted above the protests. “And I’ll fight each and every one of you who doesn’t want it, do you hear?”

The idea of the little man fighting anyone seemed laughable, but she felt no urge to laugh. *Someone* in the room wasn’t laughing at all. She sensed tension.

She scanned the faces around the wizened, pugnacious man at the bar and saw expressions ranging from good-natured smiles to mildly irritated frowns. None produced the uneasiness she felt. But somewhere— “I’ll fight you, Cahill McCrea, if you’re thinking you won’t sing it. Fight you to the death. Do you hear that, Cahill McCrea?” The man’s challenge drew stifled chuckles.

Eleanor’s search ended at the next table. The red-bearded stranger—it was his tension she felt. The tight line of the beefy back and broad shoulders straining his white shirt communicated it as clearly as words. How strange. How could the little man at the bar possibly cause this bear of a man a moment’s concern? He wasn’t even looking in that direction. Instead, she realized as she followed his frown, he focused on Cahill McCrea.

The singer still rested at ease on the stool, although his smile appeared oddly tight. But that could have been an effect of the lights.

“Can’t you just imagine that?” Valerie gleefully murmured in Eleanor’s ear. “It would be like Mickey Rooney challenging Mike Tyson.”

Eleanor didn’t answer and didn’t take her eyes off the red-bearded man and McCrea. She had the feeling a drama was being acted out that only she could see.

Cahill McCrea ducked under the guitar strap, further shadowing his face, but his voice held only easy confi-

dence when he called out, "I'll sing you 'Brennan on the Moor' next set, Michael. Will that be doing you?"

She held her breath. Ridiculous. Nothing's going to happen. But still she didn't breathe. Warily, she watched the elderly man addressed as Michael slide off his stool. The red-bearded man seemed to coil, as if preparing to spring. McCrea held totally still, his face unreadable.

But Michael only doffed his tweed cap to McCrea with great ceremony before returning it to the nest of white tufts and resuming his seat.

Air rushed out of her lungs, letting relief in. *Relief over what, for heaven's sake?*

McCrea responded with a brief salute, then turned to rearrange his instruments on the stools. Eleanor considered his back for a puzzled moment, but it told her nothing. Nor did the now relaxed profile of the solitary red-bearded man at the next table. Had she imagined the whole thing?

She turned, studying again the faces at the bar. Certainly no one there seemed to consider that anything out of the way had occurred, least of all Michael. The little man sipped from his beer mug between emphatic comments to companions on either side of him, nodding approval or thumping an adamant fist on the bar.

Nothing.

"What's the matter with 'I'll Take you Home Again, Kathleen'?" came Valerie's voice.

Why on earth would her cousin ask her? How would she know? She started to turn to ask Val that very reasonable question, but never said the words. Val hadn't asked her; she'd asked Cahill McCrea.

He stood not three feet away, looking down at her and smiling. With only the scarred wooden table separating them, he appeared even more powerful, his shoulders wider, his chest broader, his arms thicker. And, tilting her head back, she added taller to the list.

Experiencing his smile from close range gave her a new understanding of Val's enthusiasm for the man.

He split a grin between her and Val as he dropped

into the chair opposite them and answered the question.

"It's just that Michael cries every time he hears it."

"Is it sad?" asked Val.

"Indeed. It's the story of a man promising to take his wife back to Ireland where her heart's grieving for, but he never does till it's to take her home to bury. It tears Michael up. He gets terrible maudlin, he does, though no one knows why." He paused and looked from Eleanor to Val and back. "His wife's name's Mary Margaret and she's likely to live another twenty years."

Eleanor and Val joined his laugh.

"Then he must have liked that last song. It sounded upbeat," offered Val.

He turned to Eleanor, with the quirk of an eyebrow making her his accomplice in whatever he was about to say.

"Did you listen to the words, Valerie?"

"No," Val admitted.

"That 'upbeat' song's about a man going to be hung."

"That's terrible," breathed Eleanor.

"Not a'tall," he contradicted, grinning. "He was hung a hero. There's a saying that Ireland's a land of sad love songs and happy war songs. That's one of the happy war songs. Now, what'll I be getting you ladies at the bar before we have our talk?"

Val's voice cut in before Eleanor had the chance to reply. "Ei will have wine—white wine, the driest they've got. And I'll take red."

He nodded cheerfully and set off, his progress impeded by handshakes and snippets of conversation at nearly every table.

"So you've already talked to him," commented Eleanor evenly, noticing that the red-bearded man joined McCrea by the bar.

"Oh, a little."

She turned to look at her cousin. "Val, what have you told him?"

"Told him? I don't know why you think—" Val shifted her thin frame on the wooden chair seat. Occasionally,

Eleanor recognized that her lush build had advantages over Val's spare wiriness. Advantages like a shade less discomfort from sitting on a hard chair. Right this moment, though, she had every intention of adding to the discomfort of her cousin's conscience.

"I don't think. I know. I know you and it's obvious the man expects to talk about more than the lyrics of Irish folks songs."

"Well, I did talk to him some, El," admitted Val in a burst of candor. "Oh, not to negotiate. I'll leave that up to you, of course. But just to feel him out. I didn't want to ask you to make the trip in here on a weekend if he wasn't interested at all in coming to Cape Ann."

"How considerate of you," Eleanor said dryly. "What exactly did you say, Val?"

"We talked about his singing and how he's traveled all over the United States. He's been coming here as often as he could since he was a teenager—on vacations, visiting family and sometimes singing. He's picked up lots of songs that way, you know. American folk songs, too."

"Val—"

"And of course we talked about Ireland. He's from County Donegal, way up at the northern tip of the whole island, but it's not part of Northern Ireland and—"

"Val." Eleanor made sure her no-nonsense voice couldn't be ignored this time. "Did you offer him a job?"

"I told him we'd love to have him come sing at The Fishwife," said Val. Her brown eyes, dominating her thin face under the volume of dark hair, met Eleanor's. One thing about Val, once you convinced her she had to face the music, she always faced it squarely.

"Did you also tell him we can afford to pay him next to nothing, and that's on the good days?"

"I told you, we didn't negotiate at all. I know you're the wizard at business, El."

"Wizard?" Exasperated, Eleanor scoffed. "I'm going to have to be a wizard *and* a magician to figure out a way to pay this man anything. If the firm hadn't brought

me back to do this temporary accounting work during tax season and you weren't teaching cooking and photography at that junior college, we wouldn't have the money to open this season at all. Not at all, Val."

"We'll open this season if I have to stand in front of Faneuil Hall begging for quarters." Eleanor recognized bone-deep determination mixed with the humor in Val's voice. "Franklin Britt won't have the satisfaction of driving us out of business—ever."

"I don't care for him any more than you do, Val, but we can't close our eyes to the facts. Don't you realize how close we are to having to give up?"

Val put her hand on Eleanor's arm and squeezed it.

"That's why we need Cahill McCrea. I just know he'll give *The Fishwife* what it needs to be a success."

Eleanor looked at Val and knew she was lost. Just like when they were kids. Val, for all her intelligence, had never cultivated more than a nodding acquaintance with reality. Twenty years ago, when Val wanted to see Gloucester from the top of the lighthouse, she hadn't bothered her head with how they might accomplish the feat. She'd left it to Eleanor to convince the caretaker they needed to climb to the top for a school assignment. Now Val's imagination was set on making a success of *The Fishwife*, and she left it to Eleanor to come up with the ways and means.

"As long as Cahill McCrea doesn't expect *The Fishwife* to give him anything he might need, like a salary," she said grimly.

"I'm sure it will work out, El. Just wait and see. You always worry too much."

"It's impossible to worry *too* much in this family. I could spend all my time worrying and still be behind." She heard the echo of sharpness in her own voice, but Val chuckled and she felt an answering smile tug at the corners of her mouth.

"You just have to look on the bright side more, Ellie. With your attitude and your surroundings. Even with your clothes. Take today, for example."

Cahill McCrea arrived at the table just then with their drinks and a fresh mug of beer for himself. Eleanor's smile lingered as she looked up to thank him, and found his eyes on her. He held the look as he dropped into a chair. The shadows cast across his face lifted for the first time, and she stared into eyes of pale green framed by thick black lashes. Lashes that dark and that dense should have overwhelmed the soft color, but Eleanor felt certain nothing could overwhelm the vibrancy of those eyes.

With a slight smile fanning lines at their corners, his eyes seemed friendly and calm, like the ocean on a peaceful day. And like the ocean, she thought with unaccustomed fancifulness, these eyes could change in an instant to something powerful, intense and frightening.

She shook her head free of such thoughts.

"I think that wonderful rose sweater-dress from the boutique would have been perfect for tonight," Valerie continued.

Eleanor pulled her attention back to the topic Val had pursued while her mind had wandered to eyes and oceans.

"First of all, I don't own that rose sweater-dress."

"I told you to buy it."

"And second, even if I did own it, that dress would hardly be appropriate for this weather. Cashmere doesn't mix well with spring mud and rain."

Or with me, she thought. She'd looked in the boutique's mirror when she'd tried on that dress, and seen hips that flared too widely, a stomach no one would call washboard flat and breasts too lush. The color suited her sandy brown hair and fair skin, but she preferred clothes that didn't advertise quite so clearly that she didn't have the slim, straight figure of her cousin.

Val could talk all she wanted about envying her "sexy" figure, but Eleanor would trade in her curves for fashionable thinness in a minute. And, as long as she

indulged in some useless wishing, she'd take full, pouting lips over her wide, straight mouth. She'd seen too many candid photographs not to know that the combination of a very slight overbite and the habit of pulling her lower lip in when she concentrated could make her look like a child aspiring to solemnity. Her eyes were large enough, but gray—a color likened not to oceans but to dreary skies that produced the kind of cold rain pounding outside, she thought with a mental shrug.

“That’s very practical of you,” said McCrea with amusement seeping into his voice.

It was practical of her; she was a practical person. She'd noted the weather and dressed for it with a loose-fitting pale gray sweater and charcoal wool slacks that would hide any errant spots of mud. Leave the red bolero jacket and winter-white skirt to Val, who could carry it off.

So why did she resent Cahill McCrea’s amusement?

He chuckled, blatantly inviting her to join in. He was probably the kind who found amusement in everything, the type who laughed off flat tires, unpaid rent and failing businesses.

“Yes, very practical,” she said, and watched his eyes change at her cool tone. The laughter didn’t fade, but it was complicated by the immediate recognition of her reserve and a spark of curiosity.

“Oh, yes,” said Val, glumly contemplating the ruby liquid in her glass. “Eleanor is the practical one. Sometimes I think if she’d been Cinderella, she’d have told the Fairy Godmother the coach was entirely too glitzy and she’d just take the bus.”

Cahill’s laughter cracked out, fading into a cozy rumble. This time Eleanor, a little to her own surprise, did join in. Val was probably right.

Val looked up with the wide-eyed stare of someone who hadn’t realized she’d said anything funny, then started chuckling, too. After that, when Val pointedly said that Eleanor’s practicality was the reason she’d wanted Eleanor to talk to Cahill about singing at The Fishwife,

no awkwardness lingered as the conversation smoothly shifted gears.

Eleanor's questions drew out details on the sketch of his background Val had given her—he was Aidan Padraic Cahill McCrea, age thirty-two, from near Lough Swilly in County Donegal and a veteran of five trips to the United States, mostly to visit numerous aunts, uncles and cousins spread around the country. She also discovered that he had a mother and seventeen-year-old brother in Ireland and he was unmarried.

“What do you do in Ireland, Mr. McCrea?”

“At the moment I don't do anything, Miss Thatcher, since I'm not there a'tall.”

“C'mon, El. What difference does it make?” asked Val, her patience with the job interview obviously past. “And for Pete's sake stop calling each other Mr. And Miss. It's Cahill and Eleanor.”

Eleanor wasn't entirely sure she could say what difference it made what he'd done in Ireland, except that it had something to do with his reluctance to talk about it, something to do with her earlier thoughts about him as an entertainer, and something to do with the challenge implicit in the slight tilt of his right eyebrow.

“What did you do in Ireland before you left? Last October, wasn't it?”

“October, yes.”

Eleanor waited for more; he said nothing. “What did you do?”

He looked into her eyes a moment, then over at Val, answering her sympathetic frown with a grin. Finally, he looked back at Eleanor and shrugged. “I worked in a small hotel, Eleanor. More of an inn, really. I often sang in the evenings there, and in the days I did . . . a bit of everything.” He dropped his chin, and again shadows masked his green eyes.

“But . . . then you won't be able to stay . . .” The realization brought a sharp disappointment. A disappointment, of course, that resulted simply from her very justifiable irritation that all this had been one of Val's

wild-goose chases.

"I've gotten one extension. There'll be more," he said with confidence.

"But your hotel will want you back for the summer season, won't they? That's the busy time in Ireland, too, isn't it?"

"The hotel?" His puzzled frown cleared in an instant.

"We're talking at cross-purposes, Eleanor. I thought it was of your Immigration Service you were talking."

"The INS? Is there a problem with your visa?"

"Not a bit of it. It's just a matter of going back for extensions now and again so they don't feel entirely useless in this world."

Val chuckled, but Eleanor looked at him with a frown. Cahill McCrea's casual attitude didn't seem realistic. But his next words drove that thought from her mind.

"As to the hotel, there's no cause to be going back there. I quit."

"You quit? But I thought jobs in Ireland were so hard to find. I read unemployment—"

"Is very bad indeed," he finished, perfectly cheerful. "It is. But no McCreas are on the dole yet, Eleanor. My mother and brother are taken care of and I . . . I get by here with my singing and a bit of help from my friends and relations."

His smile widened. Oh, yes, with that charm and that smile and that brogue, she could well imagine he "got by." Some people didn't need to be practical and realistic to get by; they did it with charm and good looks. Or they tried to. She'd been raised by one; her family was dotted with them. So, Cahill McCrea was one more.

At least this charmer was no responsibility of hers. It was no concern of hers that his voice could make any name sound like an endearment. That his smile would never fail to soften a heart. That his hair would always look as if a sea breeze—or a woman—had just tousled it. In bed with Cahill McCrea it would be impossible to resist sliding your fingers through those dark waves.

Eleanor's fingers slipped off the stem of her

wineglass.

*In bed with Cahill McCrea . . . sliding fingers through his hair . . . ?* She never indulged in thoughts like that about a man, especially not a perfect stranger. What had gotten into her?

Only Cahill's quick-diving recovery of the glass prevented the slop of wine on the table from becoming a flood.

Heat crept up Eleanor's throat. If only her discomfort didn't translate into raw color for all the world to read.

"El, what's the matter?" Count on Val to call attention to her state.

Eleanor willed the heat and color to disappear.

"Nothing's wrong. I just was clumsy, that's all. Now, Mr. McCrea—"

"Cahill," he corrected.

"Cahill," she conceded. "I hope you understand that my cousin and I are running The Fishwife on a very narrow margin. We're hoping to begin renting out a meeting room for parties this summer, but in the meantime we have only a small dining room with the bar in the same room and, in good weather, outdoor seating on a deck. This will be only our second season and getting established is difficult. Our salary offer is very limited." She named a figure and waited for him to turn it down. She could come up with a few dollars more a week, but even that would barely be a living wage. He'd say no, and that would be the end of Val's brainstorm to have Cahill McCrea sing at The Fishwife.

He looked at her with the pale green of his eyes just a vague impression of lightness beneath his strong brow bone. He didn't say anything.

"You'd work every night except Tuesdays, plus lunchtime on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and holiday Mondays."

Still, he said nothing.

"Well?" she finally demanded.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say it was 'well,' " he said judiciously, "but it'll do."

Eleanor heard Val let out a sigh of relief, and was surprised by her own breath being released. She hadn't been aware of holding it.

"If..." he added, and paused again.

Instantly wary, Eleanor prompted him with a neutrally even tone. "If?"

"If I'll be keeping any tips from the generous hearted."

"Of course."

He nodded acknowledgment of her agreement and added, "And if I can take my meals with you there."

She looked over his large frame consideringly. It would be no small matter feeding him. Still, there had always been leftovers last season. Surely this year there would be more than enough to feed the staff, even with him added.

"All right," she said, meeting his smiling eyes. She knew he'd read her thoughts.

"I'll not eat you into bankruptcy."

She couldn't help but smile back.

"Then it's a deal." Automatically she put out her hand and he met it firmly.

She'd never considered her hand—long-fingered and strong—particularly delicate, but it nearly felt that way, engulfed in his strong grip. He brought his other hand up to cover the back of hers. Warmth seeped into her from the tips of her fingers to her wrist, where his fingers brushed against the skin just below her sleeve. She felt the slight scrape of calluses on the pads of his fingers against her sensitive skin. From the guitar, she thought, trying to block the sensations. The nerves all along her arm quivered like guitar strings from the touch.

She retracted her hand without meeting his eyes. Really, she was acting so strangely tonight.

"This is great. I just know you'll be perfect for The Fishwife," enthused Val as she shook his hand in turn. "I can't wait. We'll be open for weekends starting the end of next month. There aren't many customers then, but it'll give us a chance to get everything settled in before

Memorial Day weekend. And, of course, you'll want to come out before that. What are you doing, El?"

She finished pulling on her coat before answering. "Our business is done, so there's no sense in my staying. It's a long drive home."

"You could stay to hear another song or two," suggested Cahill, and Eleanor thought she caught a chuckle just below the surface of his voice. "You might want to know you're not buying a pig in a poke."

Eleanor was saved from having to answer that by Val.

"Oh, stay a while longer," her cousin said. "You don't have to work tomorrow morning. Although—hey, that's right. You know, you have a point there, El." Eleanor saw from his expression that Cahill shared her confusion at Val's apparent shift to another topic. But she knew her cousin would eventually provide a connection. "That's going to be quite a commute for you, Cahill. It's more than an hour, and you'd be driving late at night. You better look for a place on Cape Ann. That'd be a lot easier on you."

"It'll be a bit of a drive, but it's hard to beat the price of my present accommodations," he said. "My mother's cousin won't let me pay a penny, just my share for food."

"You sure couldn't find a deal that good on Cape Ann," agreed Val. "Especially during the season, with the summer tourists, the rents can really be—oh, wait! What am I thinking of, you can stay in the room above The Fishwife! It's not fancy, but there's a bathroom and bed and a great view. You look over the rocks right onto the ocean. And your meals are already taken care of. It's perfect."

"Val, I don't think—"

"It's a great idea." Valerie's enthusiasm flooded Eleanor's effort to stem the proposal. "With Cahill there, I bet we won't have any of that vandalism we had last year, either. It helps him and it helps us. What could be better?"

Before Eleanor could find a polite way to say that she

could think of at least half a hundred things better than having Cahill McCrea in proximity twenty-four hours a day all summer long, he'd accepted.

His solemnity was complete—and totally failed to convince Eleanor—as he added, “It seems a most practical scheme, doesn't it, now?”

\* \* \* \*

Cahill McCrea sang the tale of a brave highwayman that he'd promised old Michael, and considered the cousins who would be his employers for the summer.

If you could call it employment, he thought with a slight smile. Certainly not the kind of employment he'd left behind in Ireland nor the kind he'd come to America seeking. But that kind of job wasn't his, not yet. He knew his abilities and he knew the value of his resume. But too many potential employers didn't look at either. They looked at his passport, and they saw potential hassles. He'd fought long and hard to overcome that. Now, if he could bide his time until next spring . . .

In those moments right after Eleanor Thatcher had named his trifling wage, he'd thought of all that. And of the mixture of concern and determination he'd seen in both women's eyes. He'd decided that he could afford a summer's poor pay, a summer by the water perhaps helping to ease that burden of concern, a summer to store up strength for another attack on the dream he'd inherited from his father.

Still, he thought with a wry inner grimace, he'd best hope for generous tippers, indeed.

He hadn't been paid such a small wage since he'd carried bags at the Inishowen Hotel after school, in the days when Kiernan was so small their mother couldn't work, those first dark days after Dad and Patsy . . . He shut the memory off, even as his voice slid into the second chorus of the familiar song. His mother had ordered him to stay in school, even when better-paying jobs beckoned, and she'd insisted he accept the scholarship to university. She'd been right; the hard times had paid off. Hard times, hard work and hard

choices had created a comfortable life for the three of them.

Comfortable, but not what he truly wanted. Not what he and his father had talked of so often. So, here he was, in this land where so many of his countrymen over so many decades had sought their futures, hoping he had a future here, too.

For the next few months his future would certainly be linked to the two young women sitting a dozen feet away. An odd pair, they were. Valerie Trimarco, with her energy and enthusiasm, and Eleanor Thatcher, with her practicality and calm.

He'd liked Valerie from the moment, nearly two weeks past, that she'd come up and told him about the pub she and her cousin owned on Cape Ann. He enjoyed her vivid looks and animated expression, but he found his eyes following her cousin as they prepared to leave.

Eleanor Thatcher held up practicality like a regiment's standard. Yet the load she clearly carried on her shoulders hadn't squeezed all the humor out of her. She even retained the ability to laugh at herself. He admired those qualities.

*Admiration, indeed.* He could practically hear his mother laughing at that. What he'd felt when he'd caught Eleanor Thatcher's hand between both of his had been something a mite more elemental. He knew he'd disconcerted her. He'd seen the same reaction earlier, when she'd knocked her glass, although he hadn't an idea what the cause had been then.

It certainly wasn't her cousin. She took Val's waywardness in stride. No. Eleanor Thatcher seemed more likely disconcerted by her own thoughts than by anything someone else might do.

That intrigued him. She intrigued him.

He liked her quick competence, and the suggestion of more beneath.

He returned Valerie's farewell wave as he launched into the final refrain. Eleanor nodded once, then turned

away before he could respond. But at the door, as his song finished with the poor highwayman cruelly betrayed by a false-hearted woman, she hesitated a moment and smiled back at him.

It could be a most interesting summer.

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