

THE LUCK OF THE IRISH

by Megan Reddaway

Kyle is English, and he's lucky. He's going to Dublin for St Patrick's Day, and his boss is paying.

Declan is Irish, and he's unlucky. His friends are off to Tenerife for a weekend of gay clubbing, and Declan will be stuck in Dublin alone on St Patrick's Day. But bad luck is nothing new for Declan. He's been plagued with it ever since he was cursed by a leprechaun on the night he was born.

When the two of them meet, there's magic as well as mayhem. But can Declan escape his bad luck long enough to make a real connection with Kyle before Kyle has to fly home to England?

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This story was written for the 'Choose Your Own M/M Story' event in the M/M Romance group on Goodreads.com. Members held a poll and I was asked to include:

- a Mexican cantina restaurant in Dublin, Ireland
- one protagonist who believes he has been cursed by a leprechaun to have bad luck and he must find a way to break the curse
- a real leprechaun
- an awkward meeting with the boss of one of the main characters
- a shillelagh
- a reference to Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*
- a three-legged dog

It's set in Ireland and England and written in British and Irish English. If you're not used to reading British English, please be tolerant of variations in spelling and usage. There is a short glossary below.

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GLOSSARY

Banjaxed: broken.

Bevvy: drink, usually alcoholic (from 'beverage').

Bogs: washrooms, toilets.

Colleague: co-worker.

Craic: pronounced 'crack'. Fun, especially amusing conversation.

Fair play to you: well done.

Feck, fecking: a milder version of the F word.

Get your hole: have sex.

Hump off: go away.

Lead (dog's): leash.

Leprechaun: a mythical fairy-like creature found in Ireland.

Lift: elevator.

Motorway: freeway.

Ride (verb): have sex.

Pisky or pixie: a mythical fairy-like creature found in England, mainly in the south-west.

Sasanach: Irish version of a word found in the Gaelic languages meaning an English person, from 'Saxon'. The Scottish spelling 'Sassenach' is better known.

Shillelagh: usually pronounced 'shi-LAY-lee'. The narrative will reveal what this is.

Waistcoat (Brit.) = vest (U.S.)

Wee folk: little people, e.g. leprechauns, piskies, fairies.

Kyle

Dear Carl, Kyle typed, It is with regret –

“No it’s not,” he said aloud, deleting the last four words.

His friend Adam strolled across Sedgethorpe & Broyné’s main car showroom twirling a key ring. It was 10.30 a.m. on a wet Wednesday in February and the place was dead. Not a customer in sight. Not even the faintest whiff of a customer. At times like this they were supposed to make sales phone calls, but Adam had already covered all his leads for the month. As for Kyle, a potential customer had just slammed the phone down on him for what he’d decided would be the last time.

“Let’s buzz someone we know and get them to book a test drive,” Adam said. “What are you doing? Facebook?”

“Writing my resignation.” Kyle looked up from the computer and took off his glasses. “I’m about as much use here as a sieve in a sinking boat.”

“Oh, come on. You’re doing OK. The man who bought that last Focus specifically told me it was the way you had her set up like the queen of the forecourt that made him take a second look and come in.”

“Right, but *you* still had to sell it to him. I’d rather do something creative, even if it’s unpaid.”

“Make up your mind. Last week you told me you wanted to save up to move to London.”

“Yeah, because I’m sick of sharing a house where I can’t bring guys home,” Kyle said.

“I didn’t know there was anybody you wanted to bring home.”

That didn’t make Kyle feel better. “There’s not. But if there was.”

“It doesn’t bother me. If the others say anything, tell them to get stuffed. You told us you were gay before you moved in and they didn’t raise any objection.”

The glass door banged. Adam smoothed down his jacket and started forward, but it was only Carl Broyné, the company’s sales director.

He wasted no time. He came in frowning and said, "Kyle? A word, please."

Kyle followed him into the back office, hoping he'd at least have a chance to resign before he was sacked. It wasn't always easy to get a word in, with Carl.

The boss dropped his briefcase on the desk and said, "Performance, Kyle. Not great."

"No, I wanted to talk to you about that."

"Two sales in – how long is it you've been with us?"

"Three weeks."

Kyle was taken aback when Carl said reassuringly, "Early days. The branch's sales as a whole are up. Of course, we're out of the January doldrums, that has something to do with it, but that whatchamacallit you did on the showroom, we're pleased with that."

"Interior design."

"Rearranging the cars and so on. Good plan."

"Thank you. Interior design is what I do."

"What you did before, yes. Thought you might do the same in the other showrooms, what do you say to that? We'd give you a small budget. You could spend a week on each one. It would mean a bit of commuting but none of them's more than an hour's drive or so. Lend you a car, of course. Think you could do that?"

Kyle blinked. "Sure."

"Then some more sales training wouldn't go amiss. I've booked something in Dublin next month. Not just you, the whole S & B sales team. A full day of training with an external provider and opportunities to get together as a group outside of the training sessions. It's a weekend, but the other directors can cover the showrooms. We're flying out on the 16th and back on the 18th of March."

"But isn't that –" Kyle stopped.

His boss looked up. "Problem?"

"No. Just that I think the flights might be rather expensive that weekend."

"Doesn't matter, it's already booked. Air miles, or whatever they call it now. Dates all right for you?"

“Fine.”

“So, what did you want to talk to me about?”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter,” Kyle said. “The design work – that’s a great idea. Where shall I start?”

“Bath’s looking tatty. I’ll let them know to expect you tomorrow, shall I? Strike while the iron’s hot. Tell Adam about the training, will you?” Carl picked up the phone on his desk and began dialling.

“Sure.”

Kyle left the room, dazed.

“So what happened?” Adam asked. “Shall I start the collection for your leaving present?”

“Nope. He’s sending me out to work my magic on the other showrooms, which is cool because it’ll look so good on my CV that I’d have done it for free, and then he’s taking us all to Dublin for training, the weekend of the 17th of March.”

“The 17th – ”

“St. Patrick’s day,” Kyle said, grinning.

* * *

Declan

Declan and Joe were sitting on a bench in Stephen’s Green in Dublin. It was lunchtime on a cloudy, cold Monday in early March. The first daffodils were out and the grass carried the fresh, damp smell of spring. Declan wore a green and white beanie over his blond hair. He’d been walking his dog Guinness, a plump little black-and-tan dachshund with only three legs. Joe was on his break from work. They were both eating burgers.

“So it was all fixed up,” Declan said between mouthfuls. “No salary but a good commission on door-to-door sales of these DVD rentals, and they told me I could start as soon as I’d done some sales training that was supposed to be happening next Saturday at the Stayalot on the M50, and then what happens? There weren’t enough people enrolled for the training so it’s cancelled and I have to go the week after instead. That means the bloody training is now on the 17th, can you believe it?”

“Ah, that’s a bummer,” said Joe. “What kind of eejits would run something like that on St Paddy’s day? But aren’t you supposed to be performing in the parade?”

“Yes, so I told the performance director about it and he turned straight round to one of the substitutes and said, ‘Right, you’re in.’ He didn’t even suggest I might take the training another time. I’d already tried that of course and they’d said no, but he didn’t know that and it would have been pleasant if he’d asked.”

“It’s a shame, so it is.” Joe frowned in sympathy. “But you know, with your luck, Declan, it was only to be expected. Something was bound to happen.”

Declan threw a stick and they both stared gloomily as Guinness set off after it. The dachshund couldn’t run like other dogs because of his missing front leg; instead he went lolloping over the grass like a drunk rabbit, yapping madly and tugging on the extendable lead that Declan had tied to the bench.

Joe gave a sudden snort of laughter.

Declan grinned, running his hand over the short golden stubble on his chin. “There’s nothing like a three-legged dachshund for cheering a fellow up, is there? It’s lucky he likes to see people laugh, because nobody can help laughing at him. Ah well, I’ll miss the parade right enough but the training finishes at four so I’ll have plenty of time to get into town for the evening. What about you? Have you any plans for Paddy’s night? Do you want to get some dinner at our place and head on to the George after, maybe?”

“Eh... no, I don’t think so Declan, I’m a bit busy that weekend.”

“Don’t tell me you have a date. Who is it, then? Is it that Conor with the red hair? I said you had a chance there.”

“It’s not a date, exactly, but some of the boys have made plans for the weekend. Davey Walsh is organizing it, and of course Conor’s a good friend of his, and you were right about his relationship with that Bulgarian, Davey says that’s on the rocks and Conor’s not bringing him, so I thought –”

“You thought you wanted a bit of that, so you’d better go along? Fair play to you. So what’s happening?”

Joe kicked at the patch of dry mud below the bench where a thousand shoes had scuffed away the grass. "That's the thing, Declan. We're going to Tenerife."

"*Tenerife?* Tell me that's the name of some new club I've not heard of."

Joe still wasn't looking at him. "Tenerife the island."

"You're going *out of Ireland* for St. Paddy's day?"

Declan's voice rose so high in his surprise that Guinness thought there was an argument and started yapping furiously at Joe.

Joe inched his feet away and explained, "The lads were saying they've had enough of all the shenanigans and they fancied getting away from it for a change this year, you see, Davey especially. I wasn't planning to join them at first but then Conor asked me if I was going and – well, you know, it seemed like it might be a bit more than just a friendly question."

Guinness was attacking Joe's shoelaces. Declan reached down to pull him away. The dog was reluctant to give up hope of a scrap and kept on barking, but with less conviction. Declan gave him the stick and he began gnawing at it as if it were a bone.

Declan said, "Well, of course you could still wear the green and so on. Yes, I can see the Irish might have a powerful time over there on the day. Maybe I'll say I'm sick for that training, then. I couldn't have done that and been in the parade in case they saw me, but if I'm out of the country..."

"You wouldn't want to get into debt, now. It won't be cheap."

"I could ask my Mam if she'd lend me a couple of hundred. It wouldn't be much fun being stuck in Dublin on my own on the 17th."

Joe was silent for a moment. He shuffled his feet. Then he said, "I don't know how to tell you this, Declan, and it's not coming from me, you'll know it's not, but the thing is, with your luck and all, the lads aren't keen."

"What do you mean they're not keen?"

Joe swallowed. His face was beginning to redden. "It's nothing personal, Declan, everyone loves to have you around for the craic, you know that, it's just your bad luck that's the problem. It doesn't bother me at all, I'm used to it, but some of them were saying if you were coming along with us, the plane probably wouldn't even leave the ground. There'd be a snowstorm or a strike and none of us would get there."

Declan didn't answer.

"And to be honest with you, Declan – of course you and me have known each other a long time, and I know your bad luck's never killed anybody nor even really hurt anybody but yourself, except for the time when you fell in the Royal Canal and Sean Meehan jumped off the bridge after you and broke his leg in three places –"

"You can't blame that on my luck. Sean Meehan hasn't the sense he was born with. Only a complete muppet would do a thing just because I did it."

"He thought it was a dare. And then there's your three-legged dog."

"Oh, no, Joe, that's not fair. Guinness had lost his leg before I ever saw him."

At the sound of his name Guinness staggered to his feet, dropped the stick and fixed his big brown eyes on Declan's face, wagging his tail madly.

"I know that, but stories get around, and one or two of the boys – not Conor or Davey, but the others who don't know you so well – they were saying if you were with us, they'd be hoping the plane *wouldn't* take off."

"What does that mean? They'd be thinking it was going to end up in the sea? Ah, go on."

"The truth of it is, Declan, half of them are scared to get on a plane at the best of times, and when they think they might have to sit next to someone who's been cursed with bad luck by a leprechaun –"

Declan threw the stick again, and Guinness hopped and rolled after it.

Joe said, "Sure, it's only because of the flying. They'd love to have you there otherwise, I know they would. I never imagined you might want to come along, since you were supposed to be in the parade and all, but if you do, why don't you book yourself on a different flight?"

Declan sighed. "But they're not so wrong, are they? Of course the plane wouldn't crash – the little bastard's not going to kill me, he's having too much fun tormenting me – but otherwise it's not so far off the truth, what you're saying. Something would be sure to happen to stop me getting there. You'd all be sunning yourselves on the beach and I'd be stuck at Dublin airport in the blizzard or the strike or whatever. I'll save my money, which I don't have anyway, and not even think about it."

“But I can’t let you be all on your own when you’ve not even the parade to look forward to – not when it’s your birthday and all.”

“Don’t worry about it. There’s nothing to be done.”

“I could stay behind too.”

“And what will your man Conor think of that, when you tell him you’d rather stay in rainy Dublin with me than go off for a weekend of sun, sand and sex with him? No, you go ahead, I’ll do that training and then I’ll go round the pubs. I’ll be fine. Maybe I’ll get a date.”

Joe’s relief showed on his round, red face. “Of course you will, with all the tourists that’ll be about. You may not have the luck but you do have the looks. You could set up something on the internet, no trouble. Or you’ll meet someone at the George.” He glanced at his watch and threw his balled-up burger wrapper into the bin. “I’d better be getting back. Will we go out this Saturday, anyway?”

“Sure.”

Declan watched as Joe joined the lunchtime crowd spilling out of the park to head back to their offices. Then he untied the lead, called Guinness to heel and began walking home.

It was true enough that he never had to go home alone from a bar unless he wanted to, but he didn’t want that kind of date any more. He was tired of the club pickups and the internet hookups. Something always got in the way to stop them going any further. He was lonely in the daytime, especially at weekends. He wanted someone who would stick around, someone to have fun with, out of bed as well as in it.

With his luck, he thought sadly, it wasn’t likely to happen.

* * *

Kyle

Bristol airport was not so big that passengers needed a bus from the terminal to the plane. The sales team from Sedgethorpe and Broynne, eleven men and one woman, walked briskly onto the runway with their hand luggage.

The light was fading but the terminal was well lit. Many of the other passengers were Irish, heading home in pairs or groups for the celebrations.

They laughed and smiled at a little old woman in a long green coat who was handing out items with a St. Patrick's day theme on their route to the plane.

"It's a leprechaun," Adam whispered to Kyle as they approached her.

She might have been old but her hearing was sharp. "I be no such thing," she said in a high, offended voice. "I be a Cornish pisky, boy. They leprycarns be men, every last one of 'em. Here be thy gift."

She thrust a large plastic shamrock at Adam's chest. Thinking she was collecting for charity, he tried to give her a couple of coins, but she waved him away and turned to Kyle.

"And here be thine, me 'andsome," she said more warmly, giving Kyle a knobbly black walking stick. "A special gift for a Cornish lad. Look after 'un careful, now."

The stick was unexpectedly heavy, so heavy he almost dropped it. He grinned. "Thanks, but I don't think I'll be let on the plane with this. They don't allow weapons in the cabin."

"Don't fret, now, that be taken care of. Just carry 'un across the water and keep 'un handy. He'll bring good luck to thee and thine."

A little dazed, Kyle moved on and she turned to the next passenger.

"How did she know I was born in Cornwall?" he said to Adam as they climbed the metal steps to the plane.

"From your passport?"

"I didn't show her my passport."

"It's all on computer."

"She didn't exactly look like Border Agency staff, though, did she?"

Adam shrugged. They stepped onto the plane and the cabin crew greeted them without a glance at Kyle's walking stick. He stowed it in the overhead locker with his bag.

During the flight, Carl Broyne handed out copies of their schedule for the weekend.

"Bloody hell, he's got every minute covered," Adam said. "Team-building at the hotel tonight. Training all day tomorrow, then more team-building over dinner at Maggie's Mexicantina – what the hell's that?"

“A Mexican restaurant, I suppose. Doesn’t sound like a great spot to spend St Patrick’s night, does it? They probably don’t even serve Guinness. It must have been the only place he could book a table.”

“Or the cheapest. But it says it’s in the city centre and there’s nothing else until ‘taxi to airport’ at eleven on Sunday morning, so at least we can go clubbing after the ‘team-building dinner’.”

Kyle agreed without much enthusiasm. Straight clubs had their dangers for him. After a few drinks he would sometimes forget where he was and make eye contact with guys who would become aggressive because they thought he was staring. He’d prefer to go to one of Dublin’s gay clubs, but he knew there was no chance of Adam venturing into a gay club or even a gay bar without the protection of a girlfriend.

Of course, Kyle could go on his own. Plenty of guys did. But then he’d be so obviously available and that never worked out well for him. He always seemed to end up with the wrong kind of man.

It bothered him that he could never get the attention of the guys who interested him. He was too hesitant, or too quiet, or too average-looking – he didn’t know exactly what it was, but he was rubbish at picking them up. He’d be looking at someone, trying to decide on the right way to approach him, only to watch as somebody else got in first and carried off the prize. Or before he could make a move, Kyle himself would be approached by someone who wasn’t so much his type; polite by nature, he was easily persuaded to say yes to a drink or a dance, and then he was trapped.

Most guys expected him to be passive, even submissive, because he didn’t seek attention or talk a lot. But that wasn’t really how he was. He would go along with other people’s plans most of the time but his friends knew that on anything that was important to him, he could dig in his heels and it was ‘my way or I don’t play’. It wasn’t unusual for Kyle to leave a club with a guy and then disappear along the way because he decided he didn’t want to fill the role that was expected of him. It would have been better for both of them, of course, if he’d said no much earlier. But if he did that, how would he ever get to know anybody at all?

The plane hardly had time to level out before it began its descent. They bumped back down through the clouds, emerging at last to see the lights of Dublin below them.

Kyle grabbed his bag from the locker and followed Adam. The plane had stopped a short distance from the terminal and they had to descend another metal staircase. There was a light drizzle and the steps were wet. Kyle slipped on the last one and fell, turning his ankle painfully.

“Are you all right?” Adam said.

“I don’t know.” Kyle tried to stand. “Shit. No, I think I’ve sprained something. It’s bloody painful.”

“You haven’t broken it, have you?”

“I can wiggle my toes.”

“Can you walk? Where’s your lucky walking stick? Hasn’t brought you much luck so far, has it? Or do you want a wheelchair? They’re bound to have one somewhere.”

“God no, it’s not that bad. The stick might be useful, though. I must have left it on the plane.”

“Wait there, I’ll get it.”

Adam fought his way back up the steps and returned a few minutes later with the black stick. By that time Kyle was on his feet, leaning on the shoulder of another colleague. He took the stick gratefully.

That solves the clubbing question, anyway, he thought with disappointment. There’d be no dancing now.

They saw nothing of Dublin that night. The hotel was just along the motorway, a short and boring drive from the airport. The road signs were bilingual but otherwise they might have been in England. They ate at a pizza place beside the hotel and drank in the hotel bar. The receptionist fetched Kyle some frozen peas in a plastic bag and he strapped them against his ankle with a bandage from the hotel’s first aid box.

In the bar the sales team began talking of the cars they stocked – engine sizes, petrol consumption, acceleration speeds and the tricks they could use to make sure a potential customer enjoyed the test drive. The conversation gradually drifted off topic until most of the guys were talking about their own cars, then football and TV shows. Kyle tried to talk to the solitary woman but

she brushed him off, not knowing he was gay. He took the squishy pack of defrosted peas off his ankle and by tossing it around the room he was finally successful in bonding with the team. Dirty jokes were made about his 'lucky stick' and someone wrapped the whole length of it in the green tissue paper the staff had been using to decorate the bar. They put that in his hand and the peas on his head and took photos. "Now you're all ready for St. Patrick's day," they said.

In the morning the swelling was almost gone and Kyle didn't bother to replace the bandage. Not wanting more jokes, he left the stick in his room and went down to see what the day would bring.

Declan was in a familiar situation: on the wrong side of a Great Divide. On the other side, there was a team of car salespeople in suits who'd come all the way from England and another team of car salespeople in suits from Dublin. Altogether there were about twenty of them, almost all men. Declan could see them eyeing each other up warily, wondering who made the most commission. The Dublin team might just have the edge because they wore smarter suits, but there wasn't much in it.

Then on Declan's side of the divide, the wrong side, there were seven other unemployed Dubliners (two men, four women and one emo goth of indeterminate gender), glad to have the chance to knock on doors selling movie rentals at €7 a month. Only one of the men was in a suit and it looked like it had been bought for its white-haired owner's wedding, circa 1972. The others wore a wide and clashing array of clothing, including a pale lilac tracksuit, a black velvet jacket with lace trim, an orange pullover, hot pink leggings and Declan's green and white beanie.

The only thing the two groups had in common was that most of them were wearing the green in the form of shamrocks pinned to their lapels or whatever else they had on. Even the English wore them.

The trainer, a woman, talked about pre-qualifying and listening to the customer. The training was sound and Declan made a few notes although he'd heard most of it before. He'd done similar jobs and enjoyed them, but with his bad luck the companies had all quickly gone out of business for one reason or another. He liked to think he was pretty good at selling, but he listened because he knew he only had to get one useful new technique to make the whole day worthwhile, and it seemed there was a good chance of that.

At coffee break Declan let everyone file out of the room while he checked his phone. There was a text from his mother, who was heading out with her three staff to try to leaflet everybody watching the parade, and one from Joe

wishing him a happy birthday 'from me and Conor ;)'. Declan grinned at that, then closed his phone and looked up.

The last person out was holding the door for him – one of the car salesmen. He was young but nothing special at first sight, with light brown hair, pale skin and glasses that he was taking off to stow in the top pocket of his jacket. Still, something about him made Declan look twice.

As Declan approached the door, the guy held his gaze for a moment longer than most straight men would. Then he smiled, and suddenly his whole face came to life in the most magical way.

It was a smile that stopped the world for a moment. It lifted Declan's heart and made him glad to be alive. He felt an urgent need to see more of it.

Of course, with his luck, the guy was sure to be one of the English, going home tomorrow. But there's always tonight, he thought.

The coffee was served in an open area right outside the door. Declan barely had time to thank the guy for holding the door and notice his slight limp before a girl from the hotel staff was asking what they would have.

"Let me take it for you," Declan said quickly, holding out his hand for the cup and saucer.

"I can –" The guy looked down at his foot. "Well, OK, thanks." There it was, the English accent.

"How about we sit here?"

"I think we're having a team thing over in the corner."

Declan swore silently in his head. It was true, right enough: the group had split into three teams, or rather, two teams and some random people looking lost. He put down his own cup on the nearest table and began to carry the English guy's across the room.

They'd hardly gone two steps when the large lady in the lilac tracksuit gave a shriek and cannoned backwards into Declan, knocking the coffee all over him. The cup smashed on the floor with a crash that made everyone turn. The coffee girl rushed to their side with a dry cloth and the lady in lilac began complaining that she was soaked and scalded, Declan had no right to be standing so close, and what was more, there was a big ugly beetle in the room that she'd swear was a cockroach although it was the first time in her

life that she'd ever come face to face with one and she certainly didn't expect to do so here in the Stayalot that was supposed to be so clean.

The boss of the English sales team called, "Kyle!" and the guy with the gorgeous smile turned away. Declan was helpless: the coffee girl had an iron grip on his arm while she swabbed at his jeans. The old man in the 1972 suit caught the beetle, which was examined, judged not guilty of being a cockroach and ejected through a window. And another English car salesman who'd been keeping a seat for Kyle (friend? boyfriend?) got up and fetched him a fresh cup of coffee.

Ah well, Declan thought, it was only to be expected, and at least I found out his name.

Lunch went much the same way. Kyle limped out among the last few and Declan tried to stay right there with him, but this time the man in the 1972 suit had a hold on Declan's arm and was asking if he thought there might be somewhere around here where a fellow could have a quiet smoke. By the time Declan had sent him off towards a fire exit, Kyle had filled a plate and was taking his place at the row of tables marked 'Sedgethorpe & Groyne', while his boss waved the name card in the air saying, "Excuse me? It's *Broyne*, actually."

The trainer went over and apologised for the mistake. The emo goth (male, by the sound of his voice) said "Groin" and sniggered. Declan took a seat between him and the lady in lilac, who had forgiven him for the coffee incident and was in full conversational flow about her nieces and nephews. The emo goth sat hunched over his plate, carefully removing anything green from the cheese salad sandwiches and ignoring all of their friendly attempts to include him in the conversation, until the girl in the hot pink leggings told him he looked like death warmed up, when he muttered "Thanks."

Declan glanced over at Kyle's table from time to time. His team seemed to be having a private question and answer session with the trainer and it didn't look like they would be released any time soon. The staff cleared away their plates but none of them moved.

On the positive side, there was a good chance that Kyle was gay, and probably single too, because if he wasn't, Declan's bad luck wouldn't be working so hard to keep them apart.

So he gave up temporarily and joined the rest of his crew in the bar for a bevvy before the afternoon session. At least, that was the plan. But just as it was his turn to be served (they were each buying their own, of course, since nobody had any cash to speak of) his phone rang.

It was his mother. "I know I'll be calling you at a bad time, Declan, but I just need a quick word with you."

Declan moved away from the bar. "It's all right, Mam, it's the lunch break. How's the parade going?"

"That's the thing, Declan. It started off brilliant, everybody was taking the wee flyers and Guinness was getting a lot of attention, Michael had him, but somehow he got his lead caught up in somebody's wheelchair and Michael did himself an injury to his wrist and Edel thought he should get an x-ray. You know how Edel worries about him. She wouldn't let him go off with the St. John Ambulance on his own, so they both went."

"Oh, Mam. You could have left Guinness in the yard, I told you that."

"I couldn't bear to, he was breaking his little heart. I think he knew you were supposed to be in the parade and he didn't want to be denied the chance to see you. Anyway, that left Jenny and me and you know she's afraid of dogs so she went off across the bridge and left me with all the leaflets, and I was going to take Guinness home and then I realised Edel has my keys. So I called the Murphys and John's going to bring your little dog up to you there in his taxi, all right?"

"Mam –"

"He's had a lot of exercise this morning, he won't be any trouble. So will you give your keys to John to bring back to me? And another thing, Michael's not going to be fit tonight and I'm guessing we won't see much of Edel either, so I'm sorry to ask, Declan, I know you must have plans, being your birthday and all, but I was hoping you might be able to help us out, just for a couple of hours to get us through the busy time."

"*Busy* time?"

"Yes, believe it or not we've two group bookings and three couples. It's being the date that it is, of course. We've never been open for it before. If you recall, last year we had the flood, and the year before –"

Declan saw the trainer herding people back into the seminar room. "All right, Mam, I reckon I can spare a couple of hours this evening."

"You're a star. So how's your day going, anyway? Any use?"

"Grand."

"Are you learning a lot? Eh, now there's some kid tipping everything out of the boxes. I'll see you later, Declan, all right?"

Declan switched his phone to silent and took his place in the seminar room. He made notes as the trainer talked about different types of questions. After half an hour of that she explained the technique of using leading questions to elicit the answer 'yes'.

"People prefer to answer 'yes' if they can. So by asking the right questions, you can pre-qualify your prospects and get them used to saying yes to you at the same time, so when you come to close the sale they'll automatically give you another 'yes'. Choose your first question carefully so that anyone at all who might be a potential customer will say 'yes' to it. Now, of course, in real life you'd want to mix this with some open questions to give you a chance to see what your customer is looking for, but for this exercise we'll just concentrate on the leading questions." There was a knock and the door opened. "Yes?"

"Is there a Mr. Connat?"

Declan stood up.

"Somebody to see you in reception."

"All right," the trainer said, "we'll break for five minutes and then come back for the exercise. Let's mix it up a bit and have everybody pair up with someone from a different team this time."

Hearing that, Declan tried to make eye contact with Kyle, but the young Englishman was looking down at his notes. Declan followed the receptionist along the corridor to the foyer where big John Murphy waited with Guinness on his lead. The dachshund was beside himself with excitement when he saw Declan.

"I'm to give you my keys," Declan said, "so could you not just take him back and put him in our yard?"

"That's not what your Mam said," John Murphy told him doubtfully. "And when he looks so pleased to see you, and all."

“OK,” Declan said with resignation. He took the lead and sat in the foyer with Guinness until the little dog had calmed down, then led him back to the seminar room. “I’ll settle him down under my chair,” he said to the trainer. “He’ll be quiet as a mouse, I promise.”

Fortunately, his mother was right and the morning’s excitement had left Guinness exhausted. Happy to be reunited with his master, he lurched under Declan’s chair and lay down. When people began to come back into the room he did no more than look up. In a few moments he was asleep.

Declan had looked for Kyle outside but hadn’t seen him. As the participants filed back in, it was clear the pairing hadn’t gone according to the trainer’s plan. With the exception of Kyle’s friend, who came in with the girl in hot pink leggings, the English car people had paired up with the Irish car people, leaving the DVD team with nobody but each other. Kyle was not there at all. The trainer began to split up some of the more approachable pairs of car salesmen and soon one of them was heading Declan’s way. Time for a swift exit.

Kyle had been thinking he'd made a big mistake, coming here. The training was entertaining enough: hearing the trainer expound the techniques of selling to the public was fascinating, like watching magicians show how they do their tricks. But every time they split into pairs and he had to put something into practice he could think of nothing to say beyond praising the features of this or that vehicle.

Then Carl wouldn't give them a break, not for a minute. Given a choice, Kyle would have preferred to eat lunch with the big lady in lilac, the goth, and the gorgeous guy with the deep blue eyes whose straggly blond hair curled out from under his beanie. They looked a lot more interesting than his colleagues.

When the blond guy was called out of the room during the afternoon, Kyle assumed he wouldn't be coming back, and the last spark of Kyle's enthusiasm left the session with him.

Kyle filed out with the others but he didn't want more coffee. He wandered down the corridor in the other direction. He saw an old chap with thick white hair nipping out through a fire door to have a smoke and followed him, refusing the cigarette that the old guy offered, just wanting some air.

Going back inside a few minutes later, Kyle caught his foot on the step and pain shot up his leg. It was just like at the airport, he could barely walk. The old man was out of sight. Luckily Kyle could see a lift a few yards further down the corridor so he made for that and went up to his room, where he wound the bandage around his foot and retrieved the stick, still wrapped in green paper. Jokes or not, its solid length made walking much easier.

The corridor was empty as he limped back towards the seminar room, but just as he arrived the door opened and the blond guy slipped out. The blue eyes sparkled and the guy's face broke into a broad smile. Kyle's stomach gave a familiar lurch as the blood rushed to his lower regions. This guy was hot.

“There you are,” the blond said in a thick Irish accent, speaking as if they were old friends. “We’re working in pairs. You’re with me, is that all right?”

“Sure.”

The guy looked down at the stick. “I’m glad to see you’re getting into the spirit of Ireland’s big day.”

“I’ve sprained my ankle.” Kyle followed him into the room to a chair in the corner with something dark and woolly-looking beneath it.

“You’ve dropped your coat,” Kyle said.

“My coat?”

Kyle pointed. The blond grinned. “That’s my dog.”

“Oh God, sorry.”

“It’s OK, he’s asleep, he’ll not have heard you.”

Kyle found another chair and set it down, leaning his stick against the wall. “What’s his name?”

“The name on his birth certificate is Desmumhnach Fítheal Muirheartach the Third, but I call him Guinness.”

“Because of his colour?”

“That and I was hoping if I walked round the park yelling ‘Guinness!’ somebody might buy me a drink, but it’s not happened yet.”

Kyle laughed.

“And I’m Declan, by the way.”

“Kyle.” They shook hands. Declan’s clasp was warm and firm, friendly, not aggressive. It felt good. Almost too good. Kyle found he didn’t want to let go.

The trainer came over and handed Kyle a thick paperback book. “That’s what you’re selling,” she said. “A good salesperson can close on anything, so in this session we’re moving away from your own products. Have a go at selling that to your partner, now.” She moved away.

The title of the book was *Moby-Dick, Or, The Whale*.

“I’ve heard of this,” Kyle said to Declan. “Is it Irish?”

“I think it’s American. It probably tells you on the back.”

Kyle turned the book over. “It’s a literary classic about a mad sea captain trying to get revenge on a killer whale. How would I sell you that?”

“Like she said, just ask me questions to elicit the answer ‘yes’.”

“OK.” Kyle looked up. It was hard to concentrate with those blue eyes so close. The mouth, too. He couldn’t help noticing the shine of moisture on the full, pink lower lip. “So... um... do you like reading?”

The blue eyes looked at him steadily. “Yes.”

“And you like the classics?”

“I appreciate a good book, yes.”

“I have a really good one here. *Moby-Dick, Or, The Whale* by Herman Melville. Have you ever read it?”

“You’ll not want me to say ‘yes’ to that.”

“Oh. No, I suppose I don’t.”

There was a moment’s silence, then Declan said, “Have you not been doing this job very long?”

“No, and I don’t think I’m going to be doing it much longer.” Kyle glanced at the trainer, who was moving among the pairs on the other side of the room. “Were you just answering ‘yes’ to my questions to be nice?”

“Not at all. I do like a good book, although I’m not sure if that one would be at the top of my list.”

“I haven’t sold it to you, then.”

“Yes you have. I wouldn’t tell you a lie to be nice, but I’d buy a book from you to be nice.”

“How about a car?”

“If I had the money. But just now it’s a struggle to find the price of vitamin G.”

Kyle was concerned, thinking he must have some health problem. “Why do you need vitamin G?”

“Ah, sorry, it’s one of our names for the black gold. Guinness.”

Kyle laughed but he felt a little stupid.

Hearing his name, the black-and-tan dachshund raised his head and lurched to his feet. He sniffed at Kyle’s feet and stared up at him with big brown eyes. Kyle reached down to scratch him behind the ears.

“You’ve a friend for life there,” said Declan.

It was not until the dog turned to present his other side for petting that Kyle saw the stump and realised what was missing. “How did he lose his leg, if that’s not a rude question?”

“Oh, he doesn’t mind us talking about it, he’s very well adjusted,” Declan said. “It’s a sad tale, though. He has an excellent pedigree – he’s practically royalty among dachshunds – but his life changed when he had his accident. It seems he was trying to ride a big Labrador bitch that was lying down and she rolled on him; I don’t know if she was trying to help him out or see him off, but whatever her motives, she turned the whole sorry attempt into a disaster. When the people who owned him heard he was going to lose his leg and his manhood too, or doghood I should say, so he’d be no good for breeding, they were all for having him put down rather than spend the money on the amputation and the healing. But the vet was a friend of mine and he fixed him up anyway and gave him to me, thinking he’d make a good companion for a man who was cursed with bad luck at birth by a leprechaun.”

“Cursed – what did you say?”

“Ah, now you’re thinking either I’m joking, or you’ve fallen in with a madman. That’s because you’re not Irish. If you were Irish you’d cross yourself and run for your life. There are not a lot of people in Ireland who’d want to be sitting next to somebody who’s been cursed with bad luck by a leprechaun, as I know to my sorrow.

“I’ll tell you how it happened,” Declan went on. “Most of the country’s free of the wee folk these days, of course, but I was born over in the west of Ireland where there are still a few of them left. Now, as anyone who knows those parts will tell you, the leprechauns are bad-tempered old individuals and you have to treat them well or they’ll have their revenge. So in our village there was a tradition that every house would put out a glass of whiskey for the local leprechaun on the evening of St. Patrick’s day. But there was my poor Mam nine months pregnant and my Da nowhere to be heard of, and she went into labour on St. Paddy’s day in the afternoon and I was born just before midnight, and with all the bother and the pain and the blood she completely forgot to ask the midwife to put out the whiskey for the leprechaun.

“So the little old fellow burst into the room in a fury at five past midnight, and when my poor mother tried to explain why she didn’t have his drink ready, he said, ‘So it’s all the fault of that wee bugger, is it?’ and cursed me with bad luck. Then he cursed her, too, as he was leaving. So I’ve had bad

luck ever since, and so has she, though hers is a little bit milder, being more of an afterthought, you might say.

“She brought me to Dublin to try to escape it but it was no use. The only way out is to find a way to break the curse. My thinking is that it’s something to do with his shillelagh. He comes along every year on this day to taunt me with it, but I’ve never managed to lay a finger on the bloody thing.”

“On what?”

“On his shillelagh.”

Kyle stared at him. Declan looked completely serious. Then suddenly his mouth bent up into the hint of a smile and his blue eyes started to dance. Kyle laughed. The little dog, not wanting to be left out, yapped happily.

“I thought that animal was going to be quiet,” said the trainer.

“He’s just helping us along,” Declan said. “He barks every time we slip out of role.”

“Well, settle him down, will you? It’s time to switch, anyway.” She clapped her hands. “Change roles now, the seller becomes the buyer.”

Declan got up and pushed Guinness back under his chair. As he sat down again, Kyle gave him the book.

“I’ll not bother,” Declan said. “We can just go on chatting.”

“You might as well show me how it’s done. I’m here to learn. I need a job, and this is the only one I’ve managed to get since I was made redundant from the work I used to do.”

“What was that?”

“Interior design for pubs and restaurants. The company I worked for went bust and nobody else is hiring, with the economic climate what it is.”

“Ah, that’s a pity. That’s a powerful thing to be able to do, interior design for pubs and restaurants. I admire a man who can do something creative like that. And I might –”

“Which of you’s doing the selling?” The trainer hovered over them.

“I’m just getting around to that now,” Declan said, holding up the book.

“But nobody would really buy it, would they?” Kyle said. “You can get all those classics as ebooks, for free.”

“People still buy books too,” the trainer said. “Ask yourself why that is. When you have the answer to that in your mind, you can set up your leading questions.” She looked expectantly at Declan. “Go ahead.”

Declan looked at Kyle. “So I’ve knocked on your door –” he rapped twice on the table, gently, to avoid rousing Guinness again, “and you’ve answered and I’ve asked you how you are today and all that. Now, you see this book here in my hand?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I don’t know if you’re much of a reader – from what you’ve said I’m guessing you’re not – but every room looks better for having a few books on the shelves, does it not?”

Kyle said, “Yes.” Satisfied, the trainer moved away.

“And is it not even more impressive if some of those books are literary classics?”

“Yes.”

Declan lowered his voice. “But a man wants masculine books on his shelves, even if he happens to be a gay man. I know that, being a gay man myself, and I think you might be the same, am I right?”

The deep blue eyes looked into his. Kyle held his gaze.

“Am I right about that, Kyle?”

“Yes.” Kyle felt his face growing hot, although it was no secret.

“That’s good to know.”

Declan let those words hang in the air for a moment. Then in a more business-like voice he went on, “So as we agreed there, a man, gay or not, would want the masculine classics on his shelves. And if you don’t mind me saying so, I’ve always thought the English classics are a bit lacking in their masculinity, with your Jane Austen and your Brontë sisters and all. Even your man Dickens, he’s a great writer sure enough, but he was writing for all the family and wasn’t afraid to show his feminine side in his books, to my way of thinking. But when it comes to the Irish classics now, or the Americans, you have fellows like James Joyce and Hemingway and” – he glanced down at the book in his hand – “and Herman Melville, and there’s a lot more of a masculine feel to that kind of literature, do you see what I mean?”

Kyle thought he could see where this was going. He had the feeling once again of watching a magician revealing his tricks. "I do, yes."

"For example, I have something here by that same Mr. Herman Melville that we were just talking about." He looked at the blurb on the back. "It's all about Captain Ahab who's determined in his blind fury to take revenge on a killer whale that destroyed his boat and bit off his leg. Now isn't that a very masculine plot? Just the sort of thing you'd want to have on your shelves."

"Yup."

"And the title is *Moby-Dick*, which I believe is the name of the whale. Now there's a name that could start some interesting discussions when you bring a date home, don't you think, especially as whales are known for having the largest penises of any animal in creation."

There was an earnest frown on Declan's face as he said this. Kyle started to laugh.

"And if that's not enough to tempt you, there are sure to be plenty of sailors in it, too. So would you not agree this sounds like the perfect book for any gay man to own, Kyle?"

"You're too bloody good at this."

Declan ignored him, although the blue eyes were twinkling. "What's more, it's a nice fat book with the title written in big letters on the spine here, so everybody's going to see as soon as they walk in your room that you're a man who's not afraid to tell the world your preferences, and your preference is for di—I mean, *Moby-Dick*. Have I sold you this book?"

"At least five minutes ago."

"And while we're on the subject and you're in the habit of saying yes to me, I have to tell you that a gay man in Dublin on St. Patrick's night can either have the time of his life or he can find himself in hell, depending on what kind of place he's drinking in."

"You mean because—"

"Because there are a lot of drunks around, and not all of them are friendly. It seems to me that those people you're with are all straight, am I right?"

"I think so, but they're OK."

"I'm sure they're sound as a bell, but all the same, if you stick with them you're very likely to end up in the wrong kind of place for a gay man, and

that would be a real pity when if you just had someone to show you round, you could have a ball. And here's me single and without a date. So would you like to come out with me in Dublin tonight?"

Kyle laughed and looked away. This guy was so far out of his league. "Like I said, you're too good at this. If you were serious, I'd be starting to feel manipulated."

Declan stared for a moment and then said, "I *am* serious."

"Really?" Kyle looked up and met the blue eyes. He could suddenly hear his own heartbeat.

"I've been trying to get close to you all day."

There was a moment's silence, then Kyle said, "We've got some kind of team dinner."

"No problem, I have a thing to do first anyway, I've promised my Mam. But after that, I'd love to show you around gay Dublin."

Kyle wasn't going to say no to that. "OK, great."

"I'll give you a call, shall I? Or you can call me if you're free first. What's your number?"

Declan reached into his pocket for his phone. Kyle was no longer thinking that coming to Dublin had been a mistake.

* * *

"What's a shillelagh?" he asked Adam in the taxi. It was 7.30 and they were heading into the city for dinner.

"A musical instrument, isn't it?"

"Is it the Irish name for bagpipes?"

"I think it's more like a banjo."

Kyle said, "You're thinking of a ukulele."

"Oh yeah. No idea what the other thing is, then." The taxi drove past a group of girls in green hats and streamers, shrieking and staggering on their high heels. "Shit, look at that. This town's jumping. I wish we could skip dinner and go on a pub crawl."

Kyle was wishing the same thing, but it wasn't Adam he wanted to go with.

The bloody dishwasher was stuck again. It was a big commercial machine that was supposed to take plastic trays full of plates through a wash and rinse cycle automatically on rollers, and it was not doing its job.

Declan leaned forward to press the green button. Miraculously, the machine started up and a stream of scalding water cascaded onto his hand. He jerked back so sharply that his foot slipped in a puddle on the floor. He clutched at a tray of plates to save himself and it skidded along the rollers. He twisted round to stop the plates toppling over the side, his shoulder went down and his phone slipped out of his top pocket into the bowels of the machine.

“Shit!”

“What is it, Declan?”

“My phone!” He pulled the tray to one side and opened the plastic curtain. Water splashed all over his shirt.

“Switch it off, now.”

He hit the red button. The cascade stopped. He reached into the container below but the water was too hot; he had to wait while it drained away. Finally he rescued the phone and tried to switch it on. Nothing happened.

“It’s drowned! Ah, feck it.”

“It wasn’t an expensive one, was it?” his mother said. “You told me you’d not get another expensive phone.”

“No, but I need it to fix up a date tonight.”

“You can take mine.”

“I don’t know his number. It’s stored in here.”

“Maybe it’ll be all right when it’s dried out. Oh, Declan, don’t look like that. Perhaps he’ll call you.”

“But this is the only number he’s got, and it’s not going to ring, is it? Ah shit, why didn’t I give him the landline? I should have known.”

“Take it apart and put it by the oven,” his mother said.

Declan did as she suggested and left his phone, in pieces, to dry. An hour later he put it back together, but it was still dead. He tried his SIM in his mother's phone but that didn't work either.

His mother said, "Never mind, petal, if it's meant to be, you'll run into him again soon."

"He's from England. He's flying back tomorrow." Declan looked at the useless phone in his hand and said sadly, "Oh, Mam, he had the sweetest smile I've ever seen."

"I'm so sorry, Declan." She twisted a tea cloth between her hands. "Do you not even know where your fellow's staying?"

Declan's face cleared and he gave her a quick, crushing hug before disappearing outside with her phone.

* * *

The receptionist at the Stayalot Hotel was having a difficult evening. The computer was down, there was a party in the Green Room and she could hardly hear herself think.

The fellow on the phone was saying, "He'll not be in his room just now but can you leave him a note? I don't know his last name or his room number but his first name's Kyle and he was at the sales training in your seminar room today. His company's from England, they're called something and Groyne. No, Broyne. You'll have him on a list, will you not?"

"Sure and we will."

"Tell him it's Declan. My phone's banjaxed so I don't have his number and he can't reach me on the number that he has. Ask him to please call me tonight as soon as he gets back, on this other number." He reeled it off and she wrote it down, a mobile. "Any time of the night, it doesn't matter how late. Have you got that?"

"I have." She read the number back to him to confirm it.

She put the message to one side, meaning to look up the other fellow's room number as soon as the computer came back on line. But just as that happened, a van arrived with a delivery of flowers for 334 and while she was sorting that out, someone came out of the Green Room with the gift of cake on

a plate which they put down on top of her scribble pad. It wasn't until she was handing over to the night receptionist at ten o'clock that she picked up the empty plate to take to the kitchen and saw the note that she had written a couple of hours earlier with the number scribbled below:

kyle broin seminar declan lost n°. call urgent any time night

"Ah, shit, I'll miss me bus. And I can't read me own writing here. Can you look on the computer for me? Have we a guest, male, called something like Bran?"

The night receptionist was a superior type of gentleman and he sniffed at the idea of not being able to read one's own writing. "We have a Brown and a Broyne."

"I don't think it's Brown. Could be Broyne. How do you spell it?"

"B-R-O-Y-N-E. Room 232."

"First name Kyle?"

"Carl, with a C."

"That's probably it. It was bloody noisy. Was he in the seminar room today?"

There was a pause. "He was indeed, while Mr. Brown, whose first name is Matthew, was not."

"Broyne it is, then. Could you try the room for me quickly while I copy this out?"

The night receptionist dialled 232. "No answer."

"OK." She wrote out the message in full sentences, addressed it to Mr. C. Broyne, put it in the slot beside his room key and ran for the bus.

* * *

Kyle laid his stick on the floor beside his chair. He hadn't wanted to bring it but he'd noticed that any time he left it behind, something happened to make him wish he had it, so here it was. The green paper was beginning to come unstuck at the bottom but the covering was still a good disguise. It made him look like someone celebrating St. Patrick's day, rather than someone who couldn't walk without a stick.

He didn't have to worry about his image in Maggie's Mexicantina. The place was an interior designer's nightmare – or a dream, if you could throw everything out and start again. Plastic cacti wearing straw sombreros lurked in every corner. The walls were covered with grotesque murals in clashing colours, the tables wobbled and the chairs felt like they would give way under anybody who was unwise enough to sit down in a hurry.

They were served by a rabbit waitress whose hands shook as she put down their plates. The food was surprisingly good but there was hardly anyone else in the place, just their group and a few tables for two. Half way through their meal, Maggie herself came out from the kitchen to ask how they were liking the food. She was a small, thin, chatty lady who wore a lot of red lipstick. They all made enthusiastic noises. Fortunately she didn't ask how they liked the décor.

The meal seemed endless. Carl asked them all to share their experiences of the training. Kyle felt he'd only had one memorable experience – meeting Declan. He said something about the 'yes' questions and the book. His colleagues ate their way through three courses excruciatingly slowly, knocking back Mexican beer. Finally Carl ordered coffee and disappeared out to the washroom.

Kyle looked at his watch. It was ten o'clock. His phone was in his top pocket where he'd have felt it vibrating even if he hadn't heard it, but he took it out all the same to check. No missed calls.

Should he call, or had Declan just been flirting this afternoon? He'd said he was serious, but even if he'd meant it at the time, he was probably out somewhere already and he could have met someone else by now. Perhaps Kyle should forget it and be glad it happened, not sorry it was over.

On the other hand, what harm could it do to try?

He stood up. "I'm going to look for somewhere quiet to make a phone call," he said to Adam.

"Head for the bogs, there's a kind of courtyard. And don't forget your lucky stick."

Someone sniggered, but Kyle took the stick. By now he was superstitious about it, sure he'd fall if he didn't have it. Some of the green paper caught on a plastic cactus near the door. He tried to fix it back but it looked such a mess

that he tore off the rest of it, exposing the stick for what it was: a knobbly black walking stick. Leaning on it with each step, he made his way out into the courtyard and propped the stick against the wall.

His heart was thumping as he found the number and pressed the 'call' button. He wasn't prepared for it to go straight to voicemail and for a moment he couldn't think what to say. But he made the effort to keep his voice light and casual as he gave his name and added the fact that they'd almost finished eating at a place called Maggie's Mexicantina if Declan still wanted to meet up.

He'd ended the call and was about go back inside when he heard a low whistle, and a dog started barking.

* * *

"That's fine now, petal, you can get on your way," Declan's mother said as he released another trayload of crockery from the clutches of the dishwasher.

"Do you want a bit of spending money?"

"I've no big plans now," Declan said. He'd lost the chance to meet up with Kyle, and his best mate was in Tenerife. "I'll just take Guinness for a walk. Can I keep your phone?"

"Sure."

Declan took off his apron and went up to his room. He put on a jacket with a zip pocket where the phone would be safe. He'd left Guinness in the enclosure he'd built for him near the toilet block in the yard. In fine weather the little dog didn't like being shut in upstairs alone.

He grabbed Guinness's lead and whistled to him through the window before going back downstairs and out through the restaurant kitchen.

Right away he saw something hunched over beside the dog, who was barking furiously. Declan started to run. At once the figure straightened up. Not the little beast he'd been expecting, but a human. Declan slowed to a walk. Then he recognised Kyle and his heart lifted.

He grinned. "What are you doing here?"

Kyle was smiling right back at him and Declan felt it hardly mattered what he said. His eyes were speaking loudly enough.

"We're eating here."

"Are you telling me this is the place your boss picked for your team dinner?"

"Yes. It looks a bit tacky but the food was great. How did you get here so fast? I only just called you."

Declan decided not to bother with the whole phone story. Kyle's time in Dublin was too short. "I live here. See the dormer window up on the top floor? That's my room."

"And this is your dog?"

"Sure."

"I was wondering how many black three-legged dachshunds there could be in Dublin. The same leg missing, too."

Declan moved a little closer. "Did I tell you that you have an amazing smile?"

Kyle looked away. "Thanks."

"Does a compliment embarrass you?"

"I find them a little hard to believe, sometimes. It's your Irish charm."

"No, it's the truth. I've never told you any lies."

"Like that story you told me about the leprechaun?"

Declan nodded. "All true."

Kyle laughed. "Yeah, right. So were you really born on St. Patrick's day?"

"I was indeed, and baptised Patrick Declan."

"That would mean today's your birthday."

"It is. I'm twenty-three today."

Kyle moved closer. Declan's eyes didn't leave his face.

Kyle said, "In England we have a tradition –"

"Oh yes?"

"If it's someone's birthday, you have to give them a kiss."

"Ah, I've heard of that. In fact I think we have it over here too. It's a grand tradition, isn't it?"

Kyle closed the gap between them. They were just the same height. One of his hands slid inside Declan's jacket and the other grasped his shoulder. Then he angled his head and their lips met.

Electricity shot through Declan's body as Kyle's mouth moved against his. He closed his eyes until he was aware of nothing but the kiss. He sucked on Kyle's lower lip and felt Kyle's tongue peek out to lick along the wet parting of his mouth. He felt the slight roughness of Kyle's chin, and the firmness of the hand around his waist as Kyle began to draw Declan's hips towards him.

A door banged. Kyle was startled and began to break away. Declan sought his mouth, trying to hold him there. But then a male voice said, "Kyle?" and they both looked round. It was Kyle's boss.

Carl was still holding the handle of the door marked 'Gents'. He looked from one of them to the other and said, "I didn't know you were – ahem." He seemed to have issues with the G word.

"Not a problem, is it?" Kyle said.

"No. Absolutely not. Consenting adults and all that. Each to his own. Sign of the times. Are you – er – coming back to join us?"

"I don't think so. We're done with dinner, aren't we?"

"Going on somewhere, I think."

"You could go without me."

Carl shook his head. "Not a great plan, Kyle. Breaks up the group dynamic."

"The rest of the group is straight. Don't you think it's a little discriminatory not to let me go where I can be myself?"

Carl stared at him open-mouthed for a moment. Then he must have decided it was safest to agree, because he said, "Right. Absolutely. Have a – well. Taxis are at eleven."

"I'll be there."

Carl disappeared into the restaurant.

"Taxis at eleven?" Declan repeated.

"In the morning."

"Ah, right. I thought he meant tonight. So weren't we in the middle of something there?"

Kyle ran his hand through Declan's hair and pulled him back into the kiss. His tongue ran along Declan's lips again. They parted to let him in. He could feel the heat of Declan's body through his shirt. Their thighs met and Declan's hardness brushed against his. The thrill of it coursed through Kyle's blood like a sting.

A maniacal cackling laugh rang out from somewhere above them. Declan's shoulders stiffened. He pulled away and started swearing. Kyle

looked up. Something was perched on the wall above their heads. It looked like a massive bird on the wall. Guinness yelped and ran to his shelter.

Then a hoarse voice began uttering what sounded like a storm of curses in a language whose intonation was familiar, but not the words. It wasn't a bird but a little old man hopping on the wall, a skinny old man with a long white beard, his arms spread wide. He wore a sparkling green waistcoat over tattered dark clothes and clutched a thick black walking stick.

Kyle said, "He's got my stick."

But Declan's attention was on the intruder. "You can say what you like, you old bastard," he shouted. "Your curses won't settle on him, he's from across the water, you've no power over him."

Kyle said, "Is that—"

"That is the evil old beggar of a leprechaun I was telling you about," Declan said.

A leprechaun?

OK, Kyle thought, so this is what they call a leprechaun: an old guy who likes dressing up for St. Patrick's day and yelling at people. But how did he get up on that high wall?

The old man spat into the yard and switched to English. "Did ya find yerself a little friend, now, did ya? And was he going to give ya a wee birthday present? Did ya think this day would pass without the old fellow coming along to give ya yer chance to break the curse? Would I deprive ya of that, now?"

Declan yelled, "No, because you're bound by your fecking curse as much as I am. But you've paid me your annual visit now, so hump off."

"And let ya get yer hole? Ah, no, I don't think so."

The little man leaped down from the wall and landed without a sound about six feet away from them. Kyle stared. No man, even a young one, could have jumped from that height and landed so easily. This guy was old and he was very small, less than four feet tall. He looked so brittle, every bone in his body should be broken after a fall like that.

This was no ordinary old man. Could it be a real leprechaun?

"Would I leave ya to spend Éire's special day with a Sasanach?" he went on without even pausing for breath after his jump. "Dublin's a fine place to

be on a night like this. It's in me mind to see him off and then stay around for the craic having a glass or two with ya."

Declan lunged for him. The leprechaun cackled and leaped away. He pointed his stick at Kyle and started forward as if to run him through with it. Declan yelled, "Grab his shillelagh!"

"What the fuck's that?"

"His stick!"

The leprechaun stopped in his tracks and began spinning like a top so that neither of them could get near him.

"It's *my* stick," Kyle said.

"What?"

The little man shrieked, "I'll see him off! I'll see him off!"

Kyle felt a thwack on his right shoulder. He spun round to clutch at the stick, twisting his ankle painfully, but the leprechaun had already jumped away. He cackled at Kyle and a few seconds later Kyle felt the stick thump against his buttocks. It hurt.

"Ah, you'd best go inside," Declan said. "He'll not let you near him any more than he lets me, and you're not so used to dodging him. Will you wait for me, though?"

"He's not going to – ow!"

The stick had connected with the back of his knees. Kyle staggered.

"I'm seeing him off! I'm seeing him off!" the leprechaun chortled.

"Will you go up to the flat? Ask my Mam to let you in. Take Guinness, if he'll go with you. But don't leave. Please don't leave."

"Pleeeeeeeeease don't leeeeeeeeeave," the leprechaun mimicked in a high, girlish voice. He came at Kyle again with the shillelagh. Declan lunged for it and the leprechaun spun away to the opposite corner of the yard. Declan chased him, cornered him and then swore when the leprechaun jumped right over his head.

Kyle decided to rescue Guinness as Declan had asked, then look for something to defend himself with, since the leprechaun seemed to have stolen his stick. He leaned into the shelter where the little dog was cowering. Kyle called his name softly and let the dog sniff his hand while Kyle kept his eyes on the leprechaun. Then he picked Guinness up. The dog seemed fine with

that, glad to take refuge in Kyle's arms. He even gave his cheek a wet lick as they crossed the courtyard.

Declan and the old man were racing around the yard, leading each other such a dance, it was hard to say who was chasing whom.

Kyle couldn't see how to reach the flat, where he assumed he'd find Declan's mother. Its entrance must be on the street and the only direct route to the street from the yard was through a high, locked gate. He was not keen to walk through the restaurant in case his colleagues were still there, and it didn't seem right to be taking the dog through the kitchen, even if there was a route that way.

As he hesitated, Guinness began yapping madly and struggling to get to the ground. Kyle set him down, afraid the dog would hurt himself if he jumped. Guinness backed up against the wall, still frantically barking at the whirling leprechaun. And leaning on the wall right beside him was Kyle's stick.

Surprised, he picked it up. The leprechaun still had the shillelagh: he was teasing Declan with it now, holding it just out of reach and then whipping it away whenever Declan came close. The two sticks looked exactly the same, except for the scraps of green paper still sticking to this one below the handle. Kyle had his weapon.

He kept close to the wall as he made his way back around the yard. He walked easily now: his ankle felt fine. Neither of the others had seen him; they were too intent on their battle. Guinness was waiting quietly by the kitchen door.

"Ya'll not get yer hands on this, ya big clumsy bugger!" the leprechaun was yelling. He twirled the shillelagh in the air, spun himself round and then aimed for Declan's head. Declan ducked and reached up but the shillelagh only smacked against his fingers before the leprechaun danced away with it.

Kyle tried to creep up behind him but the little old man turned at the last moment.

"What's this?" he shouted with insolent glee. "It's the little friend, so it is, with a shillelagh of his very own! Isn't it a brave little friend that ya have now, coming back for more after I've seen him off? Does he think his shillelagh's a match for mine?"

Declan went for him. The leprechaun dodged out of the way and brought his shillelagh down on Kyle's. Kyle's stick hit the ground but it didn't break and Kyle didn't let it go.

He brought his arm up again and the two sticks clashed in the air. Declan whooped and bore down on the leprechaun, grabbing at his beard. The leprechaun twisted out of the way and as he did, Kyle gave his shillelagh such a whack that it sent a shock through every bone in Kyle's body.

The stick flew out of the leprechaun's hand up into the air. The little man jumped for it but Declan got there first. He caught the stick in one hand, brought it down and broke it in two over his knee.

The leprechaun shrieked and stamped his feet.

"Is that it?" Declan yelled at him. "Is that what I needed to do?"

"Ya'll regret that, so ya will, ya big sap!" But the leprechaun's voice was just a whine now, and when Declan approached him, he backed away instead of twisting and leaping.

"You've no choice," Declan said. "You're bound to tell me. Is it done?"

The leprechaun grimaced and spat. Then he muttered something in the other language.

Declan whooped again. He ran to Kyle, threw his arms around him and danced. "The curse is broken! We fecking did it!"

They kissed greedily. Kyle broke away first, fearing the leprechaun might sneak up on them. But the little old man had disappeared, along with the pieces of the broken shillelagh.

Declan said, "He'll have vanished into thin air, he does that a lot." He looked down at the shillelagh that Kyle was still holding. "Where did you get this?"

"It was a free gift, souvenir kind of thing."

"A *free gift*? I've tried every kind of genuine smoke-cured shillelagh that is made in Ireland on him, and you come over here and get a free souvenir and it works?"

"There's no need to sound so pissed off about it."

"I'm not pissed off, I'm staggered. Who gave it to you?"

"A woman at the airport yesterday."

“Don’t tell me it’s the stick you had at the seminar, wrapped up in green paper?”

“That’s right.”

“That was a leprechaun-beating shillelagh, all the time?” Declan said. Guinness barked. “Ah, shit, I’m sounding pissed off again. I don’t mean it like that. But this has to be a very special shillelagh, for it to have the effect it did on that evil old beggar. Think about it. You got nowhere near him on your own.”

“It’s special all right. Like I left it on the plane —”

“They let you on a *plane* with this? I thought you meant you were given it at Dublin airport.”

“No, Bristol. There was this woman —” He stopped. Then he laughed. “A little old woman who said she was a Cornish pisky.”

“Ah, you may laugh, but now you’re making sense. Tell me more.”

“She was giving out St. Patrick’s day gifts. Most of the others got a shamrock. I got this. It was a bit weird. She told me I should keep it with me, and when I forgot it, I sprained my ankle.”

“You were lucky it was nothing worse. When the little people tell you to do a thing, you don’t have a choice, you know.” Declan thought for a moment. “They say there’s a feud between the piskies and the leprechauns. Do you think you were meant to give it to me to use against him?”

“She didn’t say that.”

“So what exactly did she say?”

“That I was to keep it handy, and bring it across the water, and it would be allowed on the plane, which it was. The cabin crew acted like they didn’t see it.”

“They probably *didn’t* see it.”

“And of course she said it would bring me luck. That seemed a bit ridiculous when I kept spraining my ankle.” Kyle grinned and moved closer. “Actually she said ‘it will bring good luck to thee and thine’.”

“To you and yours? So I’m yours, am I?”

“According to the pisky.” Kyle slid his hand down Declan’s back. “Perhaps we should find out whether she’s right.”

This time their lips had barely met before the kitchen door banged open and a woman's voice called excitedly, "Declan! Declan!"

Declan ended the kiss by sucking at Kyle's upper lip before turning round.

"Ah, I'm sorry, love, am I interrupting? I didn't know there was someone with you."

"This is Kyle, Mam."

It was Maggie from the restaurant. So Maggie was Declan's mother. That explained a few things for Kyle.

She said, "Is this the one that –"

"This is the one. You can have your phone back." Declan unzipped his pocket and slipped the phone into her apron.

"Didn't I tell you you'd run into each other again?"

"You did, and you were right, but only because he was carrying a magic shillelagh from the piskies of Cornwall with which we have broken the curse."

"You've broken the curse?"

"We have."

"Oh, Declan." She hugged him, then Kyle, then both of them together. "I'm so pleased to meet you, Kyle. And the two of you have broken the curse. I thought something must be happening with all the noise there was out here. But there's such a rush on in the dining room all of a sudden, I didn't have a minute to come out and look."

"Do you need me back in there?"

"No thanks, Declan. Michael and Edel just came in. It turned out there was nothing wrong with his wrist at all, so they're helping. No, what I came to tell you was this: you know the second group booking that didn't turn up? Well, they just arrived after all, and that fellow who works at the small business advice office is among them and he said one of the businesses they'd awarded funds to has closed down, so we can have our refurbishment grant if we put in a claim by the end of the month. He said don't quote him, but it's ours. Isn't that marvellous, now?"

"It is indeed."

Maggie went on, "I think I saw you eating in the restaurant tonight, did I not, Kyle? So you know how shabby it looks. It's always been that way since

I took it over and I've been trying to raise the money to have it done up but something always goes wrong. They'd run out of funds or our claim was lost or we didn't qualify for some reason. Of course that could still happen again." Her brow creased with worry.

"Things like that are not going to happen any more, Mam. At least, no more often than they happen to other people. The curse is broken."

"So it is. I keep forgetting. Oh Declan, that's wonderful. Will you come in and have a drink to celebrate?"

Declan looked at Kyle. "You have customers, Mam, and I promised Kyle I'd take him out in Dublin tonight. Another time."

"Ah, look at Guinness. Did he help fight off the nasty old fellow too?"

The little dog was lying patiently near the door.

"You know Guinness, he's no hero," Declan said. "I'll just take him upstairs and then we'll go."

"All right," his mother said, heading back to the kitchen. "You have a good time, now."

When she had gone, Declan ran his hand through his hair and said, "How's your ankle? Do you want to go clubbing or would you rather not?"

"Perhaps not. A bar might be better." Kyle thought Declan looked disappointed so he added, "My ankle's OK but I don't know about dancing. And I'm sure they wouldn't let me take the stick in – I mean the shillelagh."

"You might not need that now. It's probably done its job."

"Well, whatever you like. If you want to go to a club, that's fine."

"That wasn't what I meant." Declan picked up Guinness. "Are you coming up for a minute, anyway?"

"Sure."

Kyle followed him through a series of doors and passages to the staircase that led up to the flat. When they reached the top of the first flight, Declan closed a safety gate across the stairs and set Guinness down on the floor.

The flat was as cheerful as a place could be on very little money. Beside the stairs to Declan's attic room was a bulletin board full of photos of Declan at different ages. "Ah, don't look at that," Declan said, but he didn't try to turn Kyle away. "Me in all my glory." He stood behind Kyle and slid his arms around his waist.

“Who’s this?” Kyle asked, pointing to a dark-haired kid who was in a lot of the photos.

“That’s my friend Joe. You’ll meet him when —” He stopped.

“What?”

“I was going to say you’ll meet him when he gets home from Tenerife, but of course you’ll be back in England by then.”

They watched Guinness limp into the kitchenette and Declan said, “That’s him away for the night. He’ll go to his bed. How about you?”

“Me?” Kyle pulled back a little. He felt shy, as if the bright light in the flat had put a distance between the two of them.

“Ah, never mind. We’ll go out. I did say I’d show you Dublin.”

“Wait.” Kyle caught Declan by his waistband. “If you were asking if I want to go to bed, the answer’s yes.”

Maggie's phone rang as the last customers left. Edel had done a grand job and Michael had kept up a cheery line of repartee around the tables. Even Jenny the rabbit joined in with the jokes. None of them seemed to mind being stuck here working when the whole city was celebrating. You'd almost say it was lucky. But of course, Declan had broken the curse. Maggie did a little dance as she took off her apron.

"That thing's making a noise," Edel said.

"What is?"

"Your apron."

Maggie remembered the phone and extracted it from the front pouch. She didn't recognise the number and it was late for anybody to be phoning her on her personal number that never received many calls, but she took it all the same.

It was an English fellow on the other end. He said a name that she didn't catch and then, "Message to ring a Declan on this number?"

"That's my son," Maggie said. "He's out just now. Will I tell him to call you back?"

"Urgent, apparently. What it's about?"

"I don't know, I'm sorry, and his own phone is broken so there's no other number I can give you. What name did you say?"

"Carl Broyne."

"Oh, but this is Maggie from Maggie's Mexicantina that you've rung, Mr. Broyne. Would you be the Mr. Broyne that had the group booking here earlier tonight?"

"That's right."

"So it must be related to that. It's funny my son didn't say anything to me but there's been a lot going on here tonight. Did you leave something here? Your credit card, maybe?"

There was a pause, and then the fellow came back on. "No, my credit card's here. Must be something else. Let me give you my number."

Maggie wrote down the name and number and later, when everything was cleared away and she'd had a couple of drinks with the staff, she left the message propped up against the kettle in the kitchenette upstairs, where Declan was sure to see it when he came in.

* * *

Kyle woke at dawn and used the bathroom. Then he drew back the thin curtains and leaned into the window nearest the bed. The whole city looked grey in this light. In the street below, a guy was walking home from a party, staggering a little, with a battered hat still on his head and a feather boa around his neck.

He heard Declan stir behind him, and turned to see the blue eyes watching him. Kyle's body responded to that with a desire so strong, it frightened him into fighting it.

Declan said, "You've not seen much of Dublin, have you? It seems a pity to leave now."

Taxis at eleven, Kyle thought.

"Maybe I could come back sometime," he said. "If your mother needs ideas for that refurbishment, I could help."

He hadn't mentioned that last night. He'd been afraid Declan might say no, or worse, that he'd be embarrassed by the suggestion and hedge around the subject.

But Declan's face lit up with enthusiasm. "Ah, yes, that's what you do, isn't it? Brilliant. Can you come over next weekend?"

"I work weekends. I'm off on Monday afternoons and Tuesdays."

"Even better. You could change your flight and stay now until Tuesday night."

It was tempting. "I'd love to, but I'm supposed to work tomorrow morning. They've paid for me to come here—I owe them something."

Declan shrugged. "You're way too nice. Your training's an investment for them. They'll make more money than it costs, unless of course you decide to stop what you're doing and come over to Dublin on a longer term basis to

manage the refurbishment for my Mam and try for more of your design work over here.”

Kyle felt a smile creeping over his face. “We haven’t known each other very long to be talking about that.” But he liked the idea. He liked it a lot.

Declan propped himself up on his elbow, revealing his firm pecs and the golden down on his chest. “There’s no hurry. Meanwhile, do you want to stop wasting the time that we have and come back to bed?”

Kyle swivelled around and slid back under the quilt. But before they could even get into a kiss, there was a hesitant knock on the door.

“Ah, not again,” Declan said. He threw back the covers and went to the door in his underpants, opening it just a crack.

A moment later, he came back holding a piece of paper and a phone. “She heard you in the bathroom and thought it was me. So I’m to ring some guy I’ve never heard of and it’s urgent.” He began punching out the numbers. “Though I have a feeling I do know this name from somewhere. Hello, is that Carl Broynne? Declan Connat. I had a message to ring you.”

Kyle’s eyes widened. “That’s my boss,” he hissed.

Declan stared. He said into the phone, “Yes, I know what time it is. I don’t know why, that’s just the message I was given. No, not me. I didn’t call you last night.”

He covered the phone with his hand. “Mam said it was me he asked for, but she must have misunderstood. Do you want to talk to him?”

Kyle took the phone. “Carl? This is Kyle.”

“Kyle? What’s going on? Was it you that left me this message?”

“No, I didn’t leave you a message.”

“Said to ring this number that you’re calling from now. Declan. Call any time of the night. So I called the number last night, but there was no Declan, just the woman from the restaurant. Now you wake me up at 6.30 on a Sunday morning. What’s going on?”

“A message on your voicemail?”

“Hotel reception. ”

Kyle looked up at Declan. “Did you leave him a message at the hotel?”

“No. Ah, shit. I left *you* a message at the hotel.”

“To call this number, any time of the night?”

“Yeah, because my phone was fucked and I had no other way to reach you.”

“But I rang you.”

“I didn’t get that,” Declan said. “It was just luck that we met up last night. Luck from your lucky shillelagh.” His hands moved over Kyle’s shoulders, thumbs digging into the muscle, massaging him.

Kyle turned back to the phone. “I think that message was a mistake,” he said to Carl.

“6.30 on a Sunday morning, Kyle. No time to be playing silly buggers.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry, but it’s the hotel’s fault. The message was supposed to be for me, not you.”

“Feel you haven’t taken this weekend seriously.”

Kyle lost his patience. “What, because I didn’t want to spend the whole of last night in a huddle with the rest of the team? You don’t own every minute of our time, you know, Carl.”

“You woke me at dawn to tell me that?”

“I didn’t—” Kyle stopped, remembering that Declan had made the call. “Listen, the hotel made a mistake, and you weren’t supposed to get that message, but since we’re talking, I was thinking of staying on here for a couple of days. Can I take tomorrow morning from my leave?”

“Not convenient, Kyle. Adam’s out tomorrow.”

“Then there must be someone else covering the afternoon, when I’m off. Couldn’t they do the morning too?”

“Not convenient.”

There was a moment’s silence. Kyle leaned back into Declan’s arms. Declan bit down on his shoulder and reached out to interlock fingers with the hand that wasn’t holding the phone. That gave Kyle the strength he needed. “I’m sorry, but I need to take tomorrow morning, convenient or not,” he said. “I’ll be back in on Wednesday morning.”

“Doesn’t bode well for your future with the company,” Carl said.

“Fine. I don’t think this is the right job for me anyway.”

“Four weeks’ notice and I’ll need it in writing,” Carl said, and cut the connection.

Kyle sat looking at the phone for a moment. A door had closed but many more stood ready to be opened. He turned to see Declan's deep blue eyes, and the gold in his hair, and the nipples that Kyle was going to be tasting in a very short time.

But first he had to press some buttons.

"What are you doing?" Declan asked.

Dear Carl, further to our conversation...

"Texting my resignation."

- - -

About the Author

MEGAN REDDAWAY has been entertained by fictional characters acting out their stories in her head for as long as she can remember. She began writing them down as soon as she could. Since she grew up, she's worked as a secretary, driver, waitress, and flower-seller, among other things, but she always has a story bubbling away at the same time. She lives in England.

Visit her website at: <http://meganreddaway.com>

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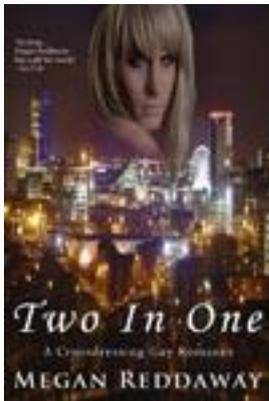
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