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Londonderry Dreaming
CHRISTINE LINDSA Y

Londonderry
Dreaming

Christine Lindsay

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LONDONDERRY DREAMING

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2014

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-345-2

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

For Aunt Maggie, and the memories of your beautiful
home and farm in County Tyrone.

Endorsement

I loved Christine Lindsay's Passport to Romance novel set in Londonderry. Its gentle romance was reminiscent of Rosamunde Pilcher. The long forgotten mystery in the attic hooked me immediately, and I was continually drawn along by the realistic, likeable characters, the lovely setting and masterful writing. ~
Rachel Phifer, author

1

Keith couldn't get the old song about marrying a girl like the one Dad married out of his head as he dusted the heavy pewter frame of his grandparents' wedding photo. His granda used to sing that song all the time.

Keith held the picture up to catch Londonderry's wintry light streaming through the parlor window, his gaze moving from his grandfather's face to his grandmother's. *A girl just like...* He cleared the roughness from his voice. Actually, someone like the girl that married his grandfather was more in keeping with what he was praying for in a wife.

Yeah, his sweet Irish Gran, no woman could even come close to the gal she used to be. The way she used to bang the piano keys when the family this side of the ocean had a good old knees up party with plenty of singing and dancing. But her laughing eyes could turn to scolding as quick as a storm coming off the Irish Sea. And then those eyes melted within moments afterward with a hug, and most likely a chocolate biscuit.

Dear Lord, I'm going to miss her and that wild sense of humor she had, not to mention her cooking.

The doorbell rang. Were his cousins back already with more boxes? Garrick and Sandra had left only twenty minutes ago, but they needed a load more containers if he was to ever get started on emptying this house.

He placed the photograph into the box of items he would take back to the States. It would sit in a place of honor on his piano at home in Albany. As for the rest...

What a royal mess he and his Irish cousins had

made of the first floor of this small, red-brick row house. He'd only just started, but there were two floors, and then the attic. *Thanks, Gran, for asking me to take care of this for you – me of all people.*

Now if all this stuff was musical gear he'd know what to do, but what was he to do with his grandmother's dainty things? She'd been so insistent though, and he could never refuse her anything. She also knew he'd take any opportunity to fly over to Ireland.

The doorbell pealed again.

He could almost hear Gran speaking to him in that lilt of hers. "Will ye run like a whippet and see to that caller."

Yes, Gran, I'm on my way.

Garrick and Sandra must have forgotten their key.

Stretching his baritone voice into the comical, falsetto tenor that he put on for his senior clients, Keith belted out the song on his way through the hall to the front door. He grabbed hold of the doorknob, amazed that even this farcical singing somehow eased his grief.

But then, it was something Gran would have done to entertain the family.

Throwing the door wide with flourish, he slapped a hand on his chest and reached for the crescendo. His voice petered out as his gaze landed on the woman standing on the stoop. The joke was on him.

Set against a backdrop of falling snow, a pair of startled gray-green eyes came level with his mouth. She was lovely. Not beautiful in that cold, glossy, magazine look that bombarded a guy's eyes at the supermarket checkout, just...lovely. Like a dolt, he couldn't think of any other word to describe her. Only the sentimental phrase of another old song came into

his mind. The one about being like a dream. So lovely.

Her blonde hair, cut to curve the line of her jaw, swung forward to touch her chin. It was almost hidden by a thick white scarf and the collar of a buttoned-up wool coat, ruby red. He remembered it was her favorite color. Snow fell over her in a drape of soft flakes, and all he could think was that above that scarf was the most kissable set of lips in the world. He knew, because he'd kissed those lips every chance he'd got. He could have spent the rest of his life kissing this one woman, if she hadn't so unceremoniously dumped him.

After she'd been gaping at him only seconds before, she snapped her mouth shut. Evidently, she was no more pleased to see him than he was to see her. Of all the girls to land on this doorstep.

"Naomi?" He croaked, disgusted that his voice should crack at a time like this. What was he—thirty, or thirteen?

While his vocal chords weren't sure how old he was, he knew this—she was definitely not the girl he'd been singing about. Somehow since he'd arrived on Irish soil a week ago for his grandmother's funeral, he'd slipped into the local brogue. In his thoughts, the words rolled with a Northern Irish rhythm, *Naomi Doyle, you're far from the saint my grandmother was, even though your eyes at this moment hold that same storm-tossed look of the sea.*

Naomi looked away from the door and down the brick-paved street. Keith Wilson? Keith? Why on earth was he here? Yes, this was his grandmother's house,

but he should be at home in the States. Not here, glaring down at her, no doubt wondering why she was not at home in New York.

To gather her myriad emotions that were galloping off in all directions, she kept her gaze trained on the distance. From here she could almost see the River Foyle and the low-lying mountains beyond. Dusted with snow, the boggy heights resembled the plum puddings her grandfather used to make with a thick coating of icing sugar sprinkled on top. The memory only made her miss Gramps, but it corralled her emotions into some semblance of order.

Ruth's letter was in her purse, confirming she had every right to come here, though she'd not taken Ruth up on the offer to stay at her place. But the house and street looked the same, even if a great deal had changed since the last time she'd visited.

Keith looked the same, too. *Dear Father God, he looks the same*—still the slender frame of a musician, not bulky muscle, but all fluid strength in jeans and a lightweight gray turtleneck, all six feet of him. A faint flush tainted his Black Irish looks—that combination of the blue-black hair of the Spanish, but instead of brown eyes, eyes the piercing color of the sky. Too gorgeous for her peace of mind, right now.

His black hair was shorter than it used to be, almost conservative with a hint of his artistic soul in the slightly overlong sweep falling across his forehead. She'd heard that he'd become a music therapist. But maybe he was still into the concert scene like he'd been during his university days in Belfast, and she'd been painting the Irish coastline. Not that it mattered anymore. What they had in the past was over. It was stupid to remember, really. So why was it that she did

remember? Everything.

He'd spoken when he first opened the door. Now he said again, "Naomi, what a...what a surprise."

"Hi, Keith. I've come at the invitation of your grandmother." She shivered with the wind keening from the north and swirling around her legs encased in black dress pants. Yes, it was January, but who'd have thought so-called soft Ireland would be this cold? *And why, Dear Lord, why does Keith have to be here?*

Still, he just stood there, holding the brass doorknob. He stepped back at last and swept his hand to invite her inside. "I think you'd better come in, then."

She caught the trace of an Irish accent as she stepped into the house. He was like her in that respect. As American children of Irish immigrants living in the States, they both could slip into the lingo as soon as they touched foot on the blessed Emerald Isle. But then, that's what had drawn her and Keith together in the first place, their Irish connection, and that both of their families came from Londonderry.

Conscious of Keith's close proximity she stopped at the bottom of a slim, steep staircase, and he led her at a sharp right into the parlor. Towards the back, lay a tiny kitchenette, what Ruth called the scullery. In the parlor, a small electric fireplace took precedence on the wall opposite, surrounded by sofas set at comfortable angles and tables filled with English china and Irish porcelain. The whole room, while humble, had an air of elegance just like his Grandmother Ruth. That was, if it wasn't for the half-filled boxes, piles of paraphernalia, and faded rectangles on the wall-papered walls where pictures had recently hung. Only the upright piano next to the scullery door looked the

same.

“Make yourself at home, Naomi.”

She sat on the edge of the sofa, trying to take in what was going on while ignoring her rapping pulse at the sight of Keith. Her cell phone quivered in its silent mode at her hip. Most likely another text from Rod. She ignored that, too. Rod always thought he could manage her. Even from across the ocean. She focused instead on Keith. “Where is Ruth? She wrote to me a few months ago and asked me to come.”

Keith moved a box from a chair and sat down, peering at her. As if it was five years ago, he absentmindedly stroked his chin that held a day’s shadow of beard, and which her fingers, traitors that they were, longed to touch. Something else to ignore, if she could.

He scrunched his brows. “Why did my grandmother ask you to come here?”

She pulled the letter from her bag. “Ruth actually wrote some months ago, but Gramps was sick. I didn’t...I couldn’t come until now. And I didn’t write back to Ruth...he passed on just before Christmas.”

“Oh, Naomi, I’m sorry.”

She and Keith had not parted well, but the tenderness in his eyes urged her on, just like it had done when they first met that autumn in Belfast. “Your gran—Ruth—said in her letter that she had something she wanted to tell me about my grandfather. And something she wanted me to have.” She kept to herself the belief that what Ruth wanted to tell her would make sense of a lot of things. But Keith’s reaction to her breaking up with him, all that time ago, still rang in her ears. It was best to keep him on a need-to-know basis.

He rose to his feet and strode to the small bay

window overlooking the street. With his back to her, he ran a hand through his hair. "It seems it's a sad time for both of us. My grandmother has also passed on...went home to the Lord...just over a week ago."

Only a month after Gramps died.

Outside, the snow still fell, obliterating her view of the houses across the street, obliterating her view of so much, the past she wanted answers to. "Ruth is gone?" The letter she held in her gloved hands crackled. "Keith, I don't know what to say. I'm so sorry. You'll miss her terribly." Through blurred vision, she dropped her gaze to the lines from Ruth that had called her across the Atlantic.

"I have some truths about your grandfather that I think you should know. Not bad things, so don't let that worry you. Brennan was always a good man, holding honor highly, perhaps too highly at times. But there are things I think you should know that will help you understand why he never returned to Ireland, why he never wanted you to remain here for any length of time. Come and stay with me awhile, Naomi. In my heart, you've always been like a granddaughter to me, and before I go home to Glory, there is something of mine that I want you to have..."

Only a month ago she'd laid Gramps to rest, and she'd been looking forward to seeing Ruth. Looking forward—what an understatement! There were no other relatives for her to claim. She'd been hungry to lean on Ruth as a family friend, hanging onto those words, *You've always been like a granddaughter to me.*

"Naomi?"

When she couldn't answer, Keith rose silently and patted her on the shoulder. "I'll put the kettle on."

He left her then, and she could hear him working in the small scullery while she wiped an impatient

hand across her cheeks. Ruth wouldn't want her to cry for long. Besides, like Keith said, Ruth was in Heaven now, and she'd see her again one day.

Instead, she stood to touch some of the Irish porcelain and marveled at its almost see-through delicacy. She studied a few landscapes on the wall, not professional by any means, those of a talented amateur and signed by Bob Wilson, Ruth's husband.

But the room was already empty of the essence that used to be Ruth. There was more of that dear, elderly woman in the letter, and she sat down to read it again. She'd always liked Ruth and never could understand her grandfather's long-held dislike of the woman. If only she'd stood up to Gramps earlier. Said how she felt about Ruth...about Keith... And now it was too late.

Ten minutes later, Keith returned with a tray the way Ruth would have laid it, and she felt her spirits rise. A fancy linen cloth covered the tray, a good china plate of chocolate covered biscuits sat alongside a Royal Doulton teapot and cups. Keith rattled the tray, fumbling somewhat, but he managed to set everything down without a crash. "Here, let me help you off with your coat. You'll get more good out of the warmth that way."

She smiled to hear one of Ruth's phrases flow so freely off his tongue. "So that's why you're here, for the funeral," she said as he helped her out of her coat.

"And I'm staying on to clear out the house. Most of the family has already taken the items important to them, and my two cousins are going to help with the rest. The others will pop in when needed. There's tons of stuff in closets and crannies that I need to dispose of or pass on. It's not just my grandparents' lives

represented here, but that of their kids. Not to mention the grandchildren and great-grandchildren that used to come in and out of this house. There are enough of us to populate a small country." A grin spread over his face from the memories.

"Are your parents here, too?" She sat on the sofa, trying not to let that grin of his send her emotions on another wild gallop.

"We laid Gran to rest a week ago, and Mom and Dad have gone home already. Dad can't leave the hardware store too long. Mom is still teaching. And strangely, it was me that Gran asked to clear out her stuff." He poured milk into a cup first, and then followed with hot tea, Irish style. "She was most particular in a letter left with her lawyer as to how she wanted the job done. So I took some time from my practice, leaving my business partner in charge." He handed her the cup.

"And your grandfather Bobs?" She ignored the little shiver of delight running down her spine that he'd remembered how she took her tea.

"Granda Bobs died a year ago." He picked up a heavy-framed photograph. "This was them on their wedding day."

The picture was of Ruth and Bob Wilson, both of them in uniforms of the Second World War, she an ambulance driver, and Bob in the same regalia Gramps had worn. But then, both men had served in the same paratroop division. Both had been shot down over Holland.

Keith resumed his seat and took up his own cup, stirring in a teaspoon of sugar.

"A lot of memories in this old house." She heard the wistful note in her voice. Unlike him, she didn't

have a load of cousins to share the grief of losing a grandparent. That's what came of a set of grandparents who had only one son, and that one son having only one daughter. But Gramps had made up for all shortages of family in her life. She'd been everything to him. And he'd tried to be everything to her.

Keith set his teacup on a table, a ghost of a chuckle emanating from him. "Yeah, there are a lot of good memories here. No money, but lots of love." But as he caught her eye, his face flushed a dull red.

The silence landed with an almost audible thud.

What warmth she had been feeling shut off, and she felt as though she was suddenly outside again on the stoop in the cold wind. She longed to explain, get it out in the open, tell him now that it had never been about money, or his family's lack of money, that had caused their breakup. At least not for her. Gramps had been another story, though. But the words stuck in her throat.

Two deep frown lines pulled his brows together, and his mouth flattened as he glanced away. Without him saying a word, she knew he still held her rejection of him against her.

They never used to have trouble talking. From the first day they'd met at Queens University they'd chatted the afternoon away into the evening. She'd been attending a series of lectures that week as a guest while he was a full-time student. By the end of the week he'd kissed her for the first time. A sweet little kiss. Just on the cheek...not like the kisses he'd given her the months following.

Her mind did a sharp U-turn from those memories. There was no sense going down that painful road again.

But Keith leaned forward, resting his elbows on his lap, dangling those long, sensitive hands between his knees, hands that stroked a guitar so that the instrument veritably sang. Those fingers used to brush her cheek, turning her face gently to his for a kiss.

But she mustn't remember those moments.

Still, her gaze searched out the fact that he wore no wedding ring. So he wasn't married. Surely after all this time he had a steady girlfriend, a fiancée? A man as good looking as him and as talented, wouldn't lack for female companionship.

"So, it seems we have a mystery." He looked up at her. "Makes me wonder what Gran wanted to tell you, and give you. Do you have any clue what that was?"

His question made her jump. In her mind's eye she'd been doing what she always did—mentally drawing whatever it saw. And how she had drawn his face over and over and over in her thoughts that first year after she'd left Northern Ireland and gone home to New York to start her formal art course.

"Ruth didn't specify."

"But your grandfather left Ireland after the war ended. What could it possibly be? I haven't really looked into all the rooms, only a cursory glance, but so far I haven't seen anything with your name on it, or his." His gaze roamed her features.

The warmth in her face flickered down to her toes.

"Naomi, since my grandmother invited you over, then I want to extend to you her hospitality. Maybe there's something in the house she was saving for you. She left me several charts listing items for family, and another one for friends and neighbors, of items she wanted given to certain people. I haven't opened the last one yet." He looked away. "But uh...how long are

you going to be in town?"

His tone had changed, coming across like warm caramel, and brought a soft response from her. "There's no rush for me to return home. Like you, I've taken some time off from my work. My gallery's in good hands with my manager, so I plan on staying in Ireland for...for as long as I feel like it." The last bit ended in a rush.

"I see." He seemed to search for words. "Well, if you don't have any set plans, how would you like to look through the house for whatever it was my grandmother had for you? You might recognize whatever it is before I would. I know Gran would have approved."

The idea of spending time putting Ruth's house in order appealed. She could say goodbye to Ruth...and her own Gramps at the same time. But that wasn't all. Far from it. She jutted her chin out, smiling to soften the gesture. She and Keith could never go back to what they'd been before, but she could do this one thing.

"OK, Keith. If you don't mind, I think I'll take you up on that offer. I'd like to stay around a few days, take a look at the house, but I'll do more than that. I'll help you clean it out."

She couldn't say the words out loud, but they reverberated in her mind. *For old time's sake, for what we used to be to each other. To make up for hurting you.*

2

If he didn't move or say something, Keith was afraid she'd disappear from his life as quickly as she did the last time. To think that after five long years he'd be alone again with this Irish-American beauty. Yeah, it was only to scrounge around in his grandmother's house, but Naomi was here. Did he want to put himself in the way of being rejected again? Let himself feel like thirteen, as if they stood at opposite ends of the school gym at their first dance, and she turned her pert little nose up at him and looked away?

"OK, then." He slapped his knees and stood. "No time better than the present. There's nothing in the kitchen." He grinned. "First place I looked since I'm staying here and cook for myself. Let's take a look first at that chart."

She finished her tea in a gulp. "You're sure I won't be intruding?"

"Not at all." How was it he could handle a full case load of senior citizens and emotionally distraught children through the aid of music, but be flustered in the presence of this one woman?

He caught the whirring noise of her cell phone.

She didn't seem inclined to answer it. Instead, she got up to follow him to the bureau next to the piano.

The envelope containing the charts that Gran had meticulously drawn was where he'd left it. Her lawyer

had handed the charts to him a few days ago when the family had met in his office. He accidentally tore it as he withdrew it from the envelope, all because of the woman standing next to him. Whatever perfume Naomi was wearing was driving him crazy. Something light, a touch of floral...no something citrusy...lemon, passion fruit? Whatever scent it was, it stirred longings within him and shoved aside his grief for Gran. But knowing Gran, she'd have smiled and said, *well sure that's the way it should be, darling boy.*

He swallowed hard and spread out the last of the charts on top of the piano, his eye travelling down the page looking for Naomi or her grandfather's name. And there close to the bottom—Naomi Doyle.

Their gazes met.

She'd seen her name too, and crowded in just that bit closer to him, to follow along the line to whatever object it was that Gran wanted her to have. If it had been anyone else, he'd have stepped aside. But somehow, Naomi's presence had the strange knack of feeling like a sweet-smelling invasion that he never wanted to be rescued from.

Her breath tickled his cheek as she turned to him. "A painting?" Her eyes held his in question. "Your grandmother is leaving me a portrait of herself. It's upstairs in the attic."

"Upstairs in the attic," he repeated like an idiot, unable to tear his eyes from the fullness of her lips. The delicate tip of her nose. Her brows, how soft—he remembered how they'd felt as his lips had brushed them all those years ago.

"Would it be all right if we went up to look?" She angled her head, her speech gently probing. "Keith?"

He mentally shook himself. "Yeah. Yeah, of

course." He practically ran out of the parlor and up the stairs, but she followed right on his heels.

Naomi Doyle, the famous artist, directly behind him.

He'd always known she'd succeed. After all, that was the reason she'd used to break up with him. Not for the first time he wondered what she'd think if she knew he'd bought several of her paintings, and that they hung on various walls of his apartment and office. His favorite was the Chilean children dancing in a festival. She was brilliant. But right now with all that brilliance following him up the stairs, he couldn't reach the second floor fast enough.

On the landing, he yanked down the ladder to the dormer attic. After climbing up first, he reached down to help her.

She poked her head through to survey the dusty place full of old trunks, wooden tea chests from half a century ago, furniture, and odds and ends stacked in tidy rows.

Reluctantly he released her hand and waited while she brushed the knees of her pants. Already a smattering of dust had landed on her snow-white sweater, and she sneezed.

Oh, Dear Lord in Heaven, this isn't fair. She's so beautiful.

He slapped the dust from his own clothes. "I was thinking I'd leave the attic for last. But now that we're here, I'll tackle that pile over there to look for this painting. You can start wherever it strikes your fancy. You might find a bunch of old landscapes by my grandfather."

Naomi smiled her thanks, but instead of going to the corner that looked like it might contain paintings, her eyes lit up at a fine old chest. She knelt down and