

POST CARD



NAME AND ADDRESS



The Cork Contingency

R.J. GRIFFITH

The Cork Contingency

R.J. Griffith

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

The Cork Contingency

COPYRIGHT 2015 by R.J. Griffith

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version^(R), NIV^(R). Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.TM Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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

White Rose Publishing Circle and Rosebud logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2015

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-469-5

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my family, for believing that I am capable of more than milking goats and making cheese.

1

The security line stretched through the airport like a python basking in the sun.

Margaret rubbed her thumb against the plastic handle of her carry-on bag and shifted her weight to the opposite foot.

Several airport security guards rushed by speaking into the radios strapped to their shoulders. A black and tan German shepherd wove through the sea of people, its nose twitching. The man grasping the leash reminded Margaret of a professional boxer.

She stopped massaging her calf muscle, stood tall, and hoped the yogurt-covered pretzels in her carry-on wouldn't draw the dog's attention. *Why did I let Janet talk me into this? What kind of person agrees to an international vacation with just twenty-four hour's notice?*

The hulking man and his dog sauntered past. The dog sniffed the air, still searching for a scent.

Margaret unzipped the front pocket of her carry-on and pulled out her travel information and passport. A neon pink sticky note clung to the top page.

Hi sis! Here are the tickets and info. Sorry the passport photo is dated. It's the only one I could find at Dad's house. Have a great time!

*Love,
Janet*

Margaret cracked open the booklet and cringed. The girl with dark brown curls springing from her scalp in all directions wearing scrubs couldn't be her.

When was this picture taken? The last time I wore dark blue scrubs, I worked at the city hospital.

Margaret touched the tight bun on top of her head. Four years and several tubs of hair gel later, she could tame it again. *Come to think of it, Janet talked me into that horrible haircut, too.* Margaret snapped her passport closed and shuffled through the brochures in the packet.

"Blarney Castle, Charles Fort, Blarney B and B...what is this?" The words *Gatorland, Florida* scrawled across a picture of a mega croc leaping out of swamp water, jaws closed around a chicken.

She imagined her sister grabbing a handful of brochures from the travel agent and stuffing them into the packet. Margaret pulled out her boarding pass and double-checked her destination, just in case. The typed print read *Cork County, Ireland.*

Margaret tucked her information packet back into the front of her carry-on bag and took one step forward. A lightning bolt of pain shot through the back of her leg. She looked down at the four-inch burgundy stilettos torturing her feet and groaned.

She could still hear her sister's nasally voice ringing in her ears. "Margaret, you're thirty-two and single, you haven't had a boyfriend within the last decade. This pair of burgundy pumps is just what you need."

"Pumps don't find husbands, Sis. If they did, Glen would have some serious competition, considering your entire closet full of heels."

Janet pinched the bridge of her nose. "It's not a

closet, it's a shoe rack. Take the pumps, Margaret." The heels dangled from Janet's fingers until Margaret lifted them off.

"If it makes you happy, I'll wear them on the flight."

Margaret cringed as another cramp cascaded down her calf muscle. *Promise or no promise, these shoes are coming off.* She fumbled with the buckle across her ankle, tugged the strap loose and slipped her foot from the shoe. Margaret hurried to free her other foot, dropping the handle to her carry-on. It flopped to the floor and spilled her travel packet across the swirls of blue carpet. Not only did the security line creep like molasses, but her favorite shoes, a pair of worn, low top sneakers, boarded the plane long before she would. Margaret knelt on the floor, careful not to snag her pantyhose, and collected the papers.

"Keep the lines moving, please," said an older security guard. He stared down at Margaret until she stood and closed the three foot gap.

Why am I doing this?

"Please have your tickets and ID ready," an official stated to the crowd from behind his post. He wore a sour expression on his angular face.

The line moved forward allowing Margaret to read his nametag, Milo.

She pulled her license from her purse. She grabbed the packet and rifled through for her passport and tickets. "That's strange," she said out loud, shuffling through the stack a second time. Panic inched up the base of her spine. *I must have lost it when my bag tipped over. What if they arrest me?* She checked behind for anyone waving a passport in the air. The line opened up and Margaret found herself shunted into Milo's

lane. "Excuse me. I need to get in that li..." her voice died as she looked up at the stony faced man behind her. "Never mind." Margaret faced forward again and re-checked her bag.

"Ma'am, I need to see your tickets and ID. Ma'am?" Milo rose from his stool and reached for his side. His bushy eyebrows tangled together as he furrowed his brow at Margaret.

Is he reaching for a gun? She panicked and thrust the tickets onto his counter. "I'm having trouble finding my passport," Margaret said. She bent again to rummage through the front of her carry-on.

"Ma'am, I need some ID or you'll have to go to the end of the line." He bent his face to the radio and pressed the talk button.

"Wait! Here, take my license. Will that work?"

"Yes, ma'am, that will work." Milo took the license and made several check marks on Margaret's ticket next to her name, flight number, and date of birth. He glanced from Margaret to the license several times. "Not very photogenic, are you?" His monotone voice made it clear he wasn't asking a question. "You can pass." He waved his pen to the next person in line. "If you don't find your passport, ma'am, they won't let you into Ireland." Milo's expression didn't change.

"Thanks." Margaret wondered if she had imagined his kindness.

He handed her tickets and license back.

Margaret whisked them into her purse, zipped it up, and walked toward the next station.

Maybe God let me lose my passport because He doesn't want me to take this trip after all. She searched her carry-on pocket again, while loading her things into the tubs for the scanner. No passport. She pushed the tub onto

the rollers and started calculating how long it would take for her to flag down a taxi and make it home. Margaret calmed her excitement. No need to draw attention and be detained by security. She pictured the German shepherd from earlier tackling her. The thought of being questioned in a booth all morning made her stomach turn.

“Please step into this line, ma’am.” A tall, graying man pointed at her, and then the body scanner.

Margaret’s victory balloon deflated a little. Why couldn’t her sister have surprised her with a gift certificate to a spa instead? She stepped into the booth, mimicking the picture on the wall, and held her breath as the scanning arms turned around her. Security guards milled about. One spotted Margaret. He held out his metal detector wand and walked her direction.

“She doesn’t need that.” An older woman in blue said, stopping the man. She turned to Margaret. “Go ahead, honey. Enjoy your trip.”

“Thank you.” Margaret returned the woman’s smile. She reclaimed her purse, shoes, and carry-on from the large white tubs. There, peeking from the edge of the zipper pocket was a little blue book—her passport.

“How in the world...” She opened it up and saw a familiar face peering back at her.

“This is the final boarding call...” The announcer gave out Margaret’s flight information from New York, U.S.A. to Cork, Ireland.

Margaret stepped back into her heels and made a wobbly dash to the gate.

“You just made it, ma’am,” the blond stewardess said. “Have a wonderful trip and thank you for flying with us.”

Thirty-two is not old enough to be a ma'am! Margaret went down the jet bridge toward the entrance. A tall man stood in Margaret's way. His thick, sienna hair brushed against the collar of his heather-gray sweatshirt as he spoke to the steward.

He's tall, I'm not quite eye level with him in four-inch stilettos.

The man threw his head back in a loud guffaw.

She stumbled over her carry-on and thumped against the wall.

"Looks like you'll have to move, Donnell. You're holding up a passenger," the steward said.

She straightened.

"Excuse us, miss. I didn't know you were waiting," he said in a soft brogue.

Margaret looked up into a kind face with stunning emerald eyes. *Stop gawking Margaret!* She tore her gaze away and ducked her head.

2

“Excuse me, gentlemen.”

A few seats remained open toward the back. People hoisted their luggage into the overhead compartments and mothers dealt with squirming toddlers.

Margaret moved to an aisle seat matching her ticket number. She wedged her bag into the compartment above, shoved her purse under the seat, and sat.

“Hello there,” said the older woman next to Margaret. “Do you mind if I trade places with you? My knees aren’t as good as they use to be and I didn’t realize the seats would be so close together. I can stretch my legs in the aisle when people aren’t going by.”

“Yes. I can do that.” Margaret stood up and traded places with the woman. A floral scent wafted when the woman sat back down. Margaret stifled a sneeze and bumped into the sleeping businessman next to the window. He slept on. *At least I can’t see out the window.*

“Please fasten your seatbelts and place your trays in the upright position...”

Margaret bowed her head and whispered a quick prayer.

“Did you see that fine looking man who took the seat a row ahead? He is a handsome one.” The woman reached over and patted Margaret’s hand. “I noticed

you don't have a ring on your finger." She gave a wink.

Margaret glowered down at her empty finger. "I'm not married. I've been too busy taking care of my dad the last few years." She gave the woman a firm smile.

"Oh, so you do have a sweetheart, then?"

"No, no sweetheart. What I mean is..." Margaret fumbled for the right words. *I don't need to give this woman details. Change the subject.* "What I mean is...I didn't see any handsome man."

"You had to see him coming in. He was the last one besides you to get on the plane. He looks like my son when he was that age. You can't hide Irish good looks."

She has to be talking about the man with the jade-colored eyes. Margaret slammed the door on her thoughts. "My name is Margaret. What's yours?"

"Kathleen, but everyone calls me Grandma K."

"You said you have a son?" Margaret asked.

"Yes, but he's much too old for you now. Last month he turned fifty."

Margaret scanned the forward cabin for empty seats, it wasn't too late to change places. She spotted one two rows forward. She gathered her purse from under her seat and started to rise when a little blond head popped up from behind the seat.

His impish gaze locked with hers and he let out an earsplitting scream. His mother pulled him low, but not before he tossed his fistful of brochures into air.

Margaret slumped back into her seat and gave the conversation one last try. "Where are you flying to? Are you on vacation or heading home?" Margaret asked. She held her breath. *Please work, please work.*

Change the subject.

"I'm heading home from visiting my sister. She moved to the US several years ago. She doesn't come home often enough, and I'm not getting any younger." Grandma K. stared at her knobby hands. "This year I took holiday by myself and spent a week with her." A slow smile pulled across the woman's lips. "It felt good to see her. Sisters can be trouble, but they can also be a lot of fun."

Margaret didn't know if she could agree with the latter. Janet "surprised" her with this trip to Ireland twenty four hours ago and Margaret didn't feel ready to acknowledge this as fun. She should have seen the storm coming when Janet asked to take her out to an Italian dinner.

"Margaret, look at you! Grungy stretch pants every day, you watch all Dad's channels on the TV, and lately," she lowered her voice, "lately, I've even noticed you talking to yourself." She poked a single olive with her fork and placed it between her ruby lips.

"That's not fair, Janet," Margaret said, twirling the spaghetti into a massive ball. "I'm not talking to myself. I'm filling the spaces for Dad because he can't talk."

"Mm...hm." Janet raised a pencil-thin eyebrow and watched Margaret stuff the spaghetti into her mouth. Janet had a way of making Margaret do things when she didn't want to. Six hours before her departure Janet stopped by to help Margaret to pack.

"Oh, Margaret, this trip is perfect for you. All the time you've been hiding away in this stuffy house." She held out a dress Margaret hadn't worn for years and folded it into the zebra-print suitcase. "You need an adventure," she said, flinging Margaret's favorite t-

shirt to the floor.

Margaret hurried to pick it up. "Janet, I can't leave without meeting the person who's taking care of Dad."

"Oh!" Janet clapped her hands together. "That's something you don't have to worry about. My co-worker's mother is a licensed home health nurse." Her sister inspected her perfectly manicured fingers. "She even has experience taking care of stroke patients. I think her late husband suffered a stroke or Alzheimer's or something. She took care of him for years."

"Janet, a stroke and Alzheimer's are two totally different things."

"The point is, Margaret, she knows what she's doing." Janet stopped stuffing clothing into the suitcase. "Listen, sis. This is happening. No more excuses."

"Fine," Margaret had said. Her thoughts drifted back to the present.

Grandma K. was staring at her, waiting for a reply.

"Yes, they can be fun, but no one knows how to get their way quite like a sister," Margaret replied. She wiped her face thinking of the spaghetti.

A twinkle lit the older woman's eye. "Once, my sister convinced me to go out with this terrible flirt of a man. You know, the kind who winks at girls they don't know."

"What happened?" Margaret leaned in, braving the heavy perfume.

"I married him." Grandma K. grinned.

Margaret chuckled. *Someday, Janet and I could be like this.*

"You are now free to unbuckle your seatbelts and turn on your electronic devices," a female voice announced.

Margaret laid her hand on Grandma K.'s soft freckled arm. "Do you think I could squeeze by you? I want to get to the bathroom before the food cart comes around."

"Would you like me to order you something?" Grandma K. asked.

Margaret ran her fingers across the bumpy plastic of the tray. "I'll take a soda and some pretzels. Thanks so much." She shuffled into the aisle and made her way forward.

The sign above the lavatory flashed red for occupied.

Margaret observed the sea of faces before her, so many different people, families with children, businessmen, and commuters all on this jet together. *God, you make such beautiful people.* She backed closer to the bathroom as a stewardess pushed her cart down the aisle and bumped into the man exiting the lavatory.

"Excuse me miss," a familiar tenor said.

Margaret whirled around. "I..." *Stop staring, Margaret.* "Excuse me." She concentrated on his heather sweatshirt. "I didn't know you were there." Without her heels on, the man towered over her.

"No bother, miss," he said, stepping aside. "My name's Donnell."

"Nice to meet you." Margaret scooted into the bathroom. She slammed the door, and then threw the flimsy lock for good measure. The wall wobbled as she leaned against it. Margaret ran water onto a paper towel and dabbed to extinguish the humiliated burn spreading across her face. *Why did I have to get Dad's dark, curly hair and square nose and then get saddled with Mom's fair skin? This Donnell guy keeps popping up at the worst moments.*

The seatbelt sign blinked above the door.

She breathed in one last cleansing breath then strode out. "Eyes on your seat, Margaret," she coached herself.

"Did you say something to me?" A businessman lowered his magazine.

"No." Margaret shuffled by Grandma K. to her seat in time to hear the pilot's announcement.

"We'll be coming into some turbulence shortly and we ask that everyone return their trays to the upright position and buckle your seat belts."

The jet bounced like a car on a washboard road. Margaret gripped the armrests and squeezed her eyes shut. The shaking lasted less than a minute.

"Thank you for your patience, folks. You may unbuckle your seatbelts and resume your previous activities."

"Are you feeling airsick? You were in that bathroom for quite some time, and you look as if you're sweating." Grandma K. adjusted her glasses to scrutinize Margaret. "You know they're saying the change is happening sooner to women these days."

"Oh, no, no, no...I'm only 32. I just needed to use the bathroom," Margaret reassured her. *Oh, no. I didn't even use the toilet.* "I'm fine."

Margaret pulled out one of the complimentary magazines. The emergency brochure fell into her lap. *In case of water landing...* she stopped reading and shoved it back into the pocket. She flipped open the magazine, *Best Vacations to Lakes and Rivers*. She squirmed. If she got up now Grandma K. might ask her more questions. Margaret started counting people with brown hair.

"While you were sick in the bathroom the

stewardess came and took the order. Your drink will be here anytime now."

Margaret forced a grin. "Thanks so much." She leaned back against the headrest. *Nothing about today is planned out. All this spontaneity is going to kill me. Is it even possible to plan a trip in twenty-four hours? Why did I agree to this insanity? At least the B and B Janet booked for me came up as a five star.*

Margaret had sketched out a small list of sightseeing places on the drive to the airport. She pulled the crumpled paper out of her jacket pocket and unfolded it. She retrieved a pen from her handbag and etched a number one by Blarney Castle. She scanned the next destinations, English Market, Charles Fort, the butter museum, and the words "buy cabled Aran knit sweater." *I have no idea where any of this is.* Margaret tucked the paper and pen back into her handbag.

Her life of late was monotonous. Details of the day to day dropped between the floorboards of her mind, and all she could recall were generalizations. She hadn't cared, until Janet jabbed her posh, manicured finger into it.

Margaret's thoughts wandered back to the Italian restaurant.

"I love Dad, too, Margaret, but you have to think of yourself," Janet said.

Margaret washed her oversized bite down with ice water. "I'm not putting him in a facility, sis, I'm just not. This is where God wants me. I am happy to do it, you should be happy about it."

"What if I'm not happy about it, Margaret? What if you're just hiding away using Dad as an excuse not to go and have a life of your own? What if God wanted you to go to...to Africa or something?"

"You're grasping, Janet. God doesn't want me to go to Africa." Margaret poked another forkful into her mouth.

Janet pulled an envelope out of her designer purse and pushed it across the table to Margaret. "I've been praying about it, and I think God wants you to get away and see the world just a little. I've already arranged for someone to be with Dad while you're gone."

Margaret swallowed hard. "Gone?" She turned the envelope over and slid her finger along the seam. "Tickets to Cork? Cork, Ireland?"

"Pull your jaw off the floor and trust me on this, Margaret. I know you better than you know yourself. Plus it's non-refundable and I used our nest egg on it. Take this trip, see the world, and then come back to use up the rest of your life taking care of Dad." She sipped at her glass of water.

Margaret looked up from the tickets. "You used your baby fund to send me to Ireland? I don't know what to say."

"A simple 'thank you' or an elaborate 'you're the best sister in the world' will do."

"What are the trip dates, it might not work for my schedule." She took another gulp of water.

"That's the best part, Margaret, you leave tomorrow."

"What?" she sputtered. "I can't do that. What makes you think I can do that?"

"Faith, Margaret. I have faith you'll NOT waste my hard earned money by refusing, quite possibly, the nicest thing I've ever done for you." Her sister skewered a single cherry tomato from her Caesar salad.

Margaret would be hurting more than a bank account if she refused. "I'll go." Margaret stuffed another bite of spaghetti into her mouth, unable to taste the savory oregano and garlic.

After Janet dropped her off, Margaret sat down in the living room with her father. She leaned against the itchy wool couch and breathed in its familiar musk. "What do you think, Dad? Should I go?" Margaret wished her father's speech would return long enough to get his counsel.

He raised his working arm and then lowered it down again.

Margaret slid closer and leaned against his bony shoulder. She lingered there and studied her father's lopsided face for an answer.

A single tear escape the corner of his eye and rolled down his cheek.

"OK, Dad. I'll go." She snatched a tissue from the coffee table and wiped away the moisture. "Don't plan on doing anything crazy while I'm gone, or I'll bring back a kelly green bowler hat and make you wear it for a week." *I'm so glad I can still count on you, Dad.*

The overhead announcement pulled her back to reality. "Dinner will be served shortly followed by a complimentary movie choice. Headphones can be purchased for a minimal fee from your flight attendant."

The screen in front of her flickered to life. The display advertised two movies, the first a romantic comedy. The screen showed an unattractive woman who, Margaret guessed, would be transformed with the help of friends into a stunning woman who would ultimately find love. The other image boasted a muscular bald man holding a shotgun with some sort