

## **Back to Belfast**

***(Fiction yet based on a true tale. And a reason to always believe in love stories).***

*There she sat, seven years later in a beach hut in Donaghadee with the woman who could have been her mother in law.*

When asked how she had planned to live her life, a thirteen year old Christina Reale said simply with doughy eyes, "I want to see the world". As she grew, so did her love of cliches and red roses. She wanted, simply, to experience love stories. Falling in love seamlessly with new cities, languages, and--occasionally, she decided--men. Becoming an orphan at seventeen threw a wrench in that plan. Until, of course, the day when she would be interrupted during the second half of her double at Pepper's Pizza in Chapel Hill. Drew swung open the door as it hit the wall a bit harshly. Several customers turned at the commotion as Christina stood in front of her table staring at her best friend, unamused.

"They sent out decisions today."

UNC study abroad decisions. She had no money to her name, so a scholarship was the only escape.

She looked back at Drew without the slightest change in demeanor.

"Sort of in the middle of something, Drew. I'll check when I get home, it's no big deal."

"Right..." he responded quickly, clearly not believing her.

"I'm not working tonight so you know where to find me."

*If it's a no, you tell her now. If it's a yes, you have to tell her later.*

"I'll be right back with your drinks," she concluded at her table.

She walked straight past the fountain and into the kitchen without meeting an eye.

"Christina? You good?" A line cook called.

"Grabbing more straws from the storage. Someone skipped their side work at lunch," She said effortlessly.

She opened the door to the storage closet and closed it behind her. She pulled out her phone, hand shaking, as tears met her eyes.

“Dad, please.” She muttered, voice cracking.

The letter loaded in what was the longest twenty-six seconds of her life.

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Edinburgh was the home of all the great writers. Sir Walter Scott. Robert Louis Stevenson. JK Rowling. Christina Reale.

It was only her home for a year, and she would certainly make the most of it. In her first few weeks, she found both libraries. The one she studied at and the one in the student union that was actually a bar. She went to all international student events. She joined school societies. And, to make up for the beer she was drinking, decided to join the kickboxing team (until, they may inevitably kick her out). One thing was for certain--two months in and she had barely even thought of home.

That is, until home found her.

“Hello?” She answered, surprised in the dairy aisle of Sainsbury’s in Cameron Toll.

No answer.

“Hello?” She asked again as she pulled her phone away from her ear to end the call.

“Christina?” Drew’s voice echoed back at her.

She froze.

“Drew! Hi! How on earth did you get this number?”

“You gave it to my mom in case there was an emergency, remember?”

“What? Oh God, what happened?”

“No, no, no--Christina it’s fine I’m sorry. I just--missed you. Wanted to hear your voice, you know?”

“Oh.”

The silence, however short, left her incredibly flustered.

“Uh-well, maybe we can skype later! This phone call is going to get quite expensive, but Liz wanted to do a call so maybe you could just go over to her place and we could all chat!”

“Yeah,” Drew said, sounding concerned.

“Or--you know--we could talk alone some other time.”

“Drew,” Christina began, “you don’t sound okay. Are you alright?”

“I just really miss you and was thinking about us and things like that.”

“Okay. Well, it’s good to hear your voice! I guess we can talk another time then.”

The phone abruptly clicked before she had the chance to say goodbye. She smiled thinking about how it reminded her of when they were kids--a long time ago when his parents went to dinner and they stargazed on that cooler, North Carolina night. She wished upon the first star for her dad’s cancer to go away. She wished on the second that she would marry Drew.

It’s funny how much she believed in dreaming, but the clearest ones rarely come true.

But, she supposed the right ones do. She did end up here, after all.

A few weeks later, Christina had found her routine as she always had. A long walk to campus in the morning (because, alas, she didn’t do her research when she picked her flat), a class, a cafe to study, and occasionally a happy hour or pub trivia with friends she had met from the international student group. Although an extrovert, she had a certain joy that surfaced when she was completely alone. She felt after twenty one years, she had found her stride.

She looked up from her computer in the crowded cafe, The Elephant House, to see her flat-mate, Rebecca, staring back at her.

“I only came in here ‘cause I saw yeh through the window,”.

A Scottish accent from Edinburgh was one thing. Inverness, however, was another world.

“What?” Chrstina asked, barely looking up from her screen.

“I’ll never understand why you come here all the time. It’s touristy, no? Tourism is not very on brand for Christina from Carolina.”

“North Carolina and soon to be New York, thank you,” she responded again, finally making eye contact.

“And I love JK Rowling. So touristy or not, I want to come grab a table here and stare up at the castle that once inspired her to write ‘Hogwarts’ on a page.”

Rebecca laughed as she pulled out the empty chair at Christina’s table.

“Real talk,” she began setting down her bag. Christina took the cue and shut her computer.

“Kickboxing society is fun, no?”

“I mean, I’m not the most fit of the bunch but I like it,” Chrstina answered earnestly.

“Great, well, I’m going to give you an inside tip,” Rebecca answered, lowering her voice as if to reveal a secret.

She leaned in and continued.

“The best part are the parties.”

Christina laughed.

“I’m more of the ‘read at home’ type.”

“Oh c’mon, love, you’ve barely been out! You’re such a free spirit and bright and have all this energy. When ye smile it’s like Julia Roberts. Let’s put it to some good use then!”

Christina smiled her large smile and laughed again.

‘Okay. What am I agreeing to?’

“8pm we have friends to the flat for a pre-drink. Wear a blank white shirt. Trust me.”

“What? What kind of party is this?”

“Grafitti.”

Christina never understood pre-games. If you’re already going to a house party, why get drunk before you even get there?

Regardless, Rebecca did not disappoint. Ten friends and one handle of gin later, Audrey from Brazil spun Rebecca around and pulled out a marker.

“Still believes in SNP” she scribbled across the back.

*Oh. Graffiti.*

“Whatever you do, do not lose this marker I’m about to give you. You’ll regret it immediately.”

Feeling a bit lightheaded from the gin, the girls hailed a cab to Stockbridge in New Town.

“Craig has this huge flat that his parents used to rent out but let him use it now that he’s at uni. It’s gorgeous,” Rebecca said simply.

“Also, if we all end up sleeping on the floor, remind me to take you to Hamilton’s for breakfast down his street.”

“Christina,” Audrey said over the music coming from the speakers.

“Have you found any guy yet that you’re hoping to shift with?”

Rebecca snorted with laughter.

“Audrey, you don’t say ‘hoping to shift with’. It’s more of you hook up with someone and then say you did the shift.”

“Whatever,” Audrey said, joining the laughter.

“My point is--have you taken interest to anyone yet?”

Christina blushed.

“I’ve barely paid attention, honestly. As much as I love being surrounded by accents of course.”

“You will melt everyone with that American accent, love.”

“What? I don’t have an accent.”

The girls all laughed.

“You sure do and you better thank Hollywood because it’s made you the best catch in the room,” Audrey said.

“And what about you?” Christina asked.

“Oh. I have a huge crush on Craig. Don’t--how do you say--‘wait up for me’.”

The cab pulled up as the girls continued to giggle, ringing flat 5C.

Craig flung open the door as the contents from his red solo cup splashed onto the floor.

“Ah fuck. Leave it. Sure, I’ll have to clean everything later.”

Christina squinted to read “Lost again to William” through the numerous phallic symbols scribbled across his shirt.

“Would you ladies like some punch?”

Audrey looked at him and smiled.

“Where’s William?” She asked plainly.

As Audrey initiated her game, Rebecca and Christina made their way to the punchbowl.

“I can sense she’s doing that thing where she pretends she’s not absolutely ecstatic that he’s flirting with her. She doesn’t even smile. And then she pretends to flirt with someone else? Why do we always do this?”

“The drinks, love. Also, warning, this punch tastes like shite.”

“And what about you?” Christina asked, confirming Rebecca’s description with the first sip of the punch.

“Any guys on the horizon?”

“None for me. I’ve known this lot too long.”

“Yeah, I feel that way about the guys at home,” Christina said, nodding.

“Except, I sort of have this weird feeling that my best guy friend is suddenly interested in me.”

“Absence makes the heart grow fonder. You did say you love cliches right?” Rebecca said, taking a sip of punch.

“Yeah. I mean maybe. We’ve just known each other for so long. Our parents were friends and with mine not being around anymore...”

“Sounds like there could be worse life sentences,” Rebecca said with a wink.

“But in the meantime, let’s find you a good snog, shall we?”

“Oh, that won’t be happening.”

“Christina, come on then! Have a little fun! You’re living far away, no one will know your mistakes!”

“No, it’s not that!” she said, taking another sip of punch.

“I just--I’ve heard I’m intimidating when it comes to that sort of thing. I’m just a bit...stubborn?”

“Assertive or independent,” Rebecca corrected.

“So let’s relax a little bit, shall we? Take a look ‘round.”

Taking another sip, Christina rolled her eyes and humored her friend.

“Him?” Rebecca pointed.

“I sort of like tall guys.”

“Tall? Aidan is tall.”

Christina looked over at Audrey and William.

“No, not William. Aidan,” she said as she put her hands on Christina’s shoulders to point her in the right direction.

He was absolutely gorgeous.

Six foot three. Bright, green eyes. Christina stared at his smile as it curled on each end while he spoke to a group. A group, not surprisingly, of five or so single women.

“He looks...arrogant,” Christina said immediately.

“What? Christina he’s really not. Go talk to him.”

Christina looked to see *Kiss me I’m Irish* scribbled across his shirt.

Rebecca, reading her mind, laughed.

“He’s from Belfast.”

Something about him really pissed her off. She finished her drink and marched over.

“So, how often does that actually work?” She asked him.

Aidan, surprised, did a double take.

“So, you’re the new American, eh? You know there’s an old Irish saying that translates to, ‘there’s no second chance at a first impression’.”

“Very poetic.”



“Well, it’s Chris right? To answer your question, this shirt has a ninety percent success rate.”

“It’s Christina.”

“Can I call you, Chris?”

“No.”

“Can I call you anything else? Christina sounds so formal, no?”

“You can call me, ‘Ten Percent’.”

“Well, Chris,” he began sardonically.

“Come here, then.”

He stared at her for a moment before putting his hands on her shoulders. Christina froze, staring into his eyes and questioning what suddenly turned her stomach inside out.

Before she could move, Aidan spun her around and scribbled across her back. They heard Audrey laugh as she turned to ask innocently,

“What does ‘not the 10%’ mean?”

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Christina awoke suddenly to the sound of running water. Her mouth felt like it was stuffed with cotton. Her head was already throbbing.

She opened her eyes. It was not her apartment.

“Shit,” she said aloud.

She looked around her. A stack of Physics textbooks and a soccer ball.

*I have to get out of here.*

Completely mortified, she vowed to stay silent and run. She slid out from under the covers to quickly to find her underwear and jeans. She found one heel intact and one

broken. She felt tears begin to form. Remaining on all fours, she quietly lifted the comforter to examine the contents under the bed. She moved a stack of papers and found a soccer ball and cleats.

*Thank God.*

The next problem was, her shirt was gone. She looked over to see the shirt donning “Kiss me, I’m Irish” in the corner. She swallowed her pride, and snuck out the front door.

This was, she thought, a modern day love story.

Except for the “love” part, of course.

She had never really, “dated” or had someone she “just slept with”. But the two didn’t really question what they were doing. They didn’t question what would be or assume what wouldn’t be. They just *were*. And they were really good to each other.

Perhaps it started as sex. They would talk about past relationships. Aidan even once said he was still in love with his ex-girlfriend. Christina confided that she wondered if she would date a friend of hers when she returned home. Suddenly those conversations grew into late nights in bed talking about futures and dreams. Soon those late nights became early mornings with breakfast in bed. Those mornings sometimes led to peaceful afternoons in the library, the two sneaking a kiss or two amidst the chapters.

Somehow, six months had passed. It was easy. It was vulnerable and open and selfless. It was, perhaps, the only time in her life she had succeeded at living in the moment.

Somehow, it was the day she had to fly home.

Christina, as always, was completely disorganized with packing.

She pulled out a box to hand to Aidan.

“Okay...so if you want it...my scale, whisk, and European adapter...do you want the air mattress too?”

“That all sounds good. I’m very impressed with you, Chris. You were up all night AND you still haven’t finished,” he said with a wink.

“Ha. Ha. Very funny. I did this the night before I left the States. I stayed up with friends, got home at 4 in the morning, and had to pack for one year in under an hour. It’s a specialty of mine,” she said with a smile.

Christina put the box in the car as she returned for her suitcase. At each step she took, Aidan would interrupt by pulling her close and kissing her. Her laugh echoed across the flat each time he did it.

Christina closed the door to her Edinburgh flat with sadness. Soon, she'd be home to start her senior year. Soon, she'd be in Drew's arms at the airport—something she'd once hoped for.

*So why am I so unhappy?*

Aidan held her hand in silence for the entire ride to the airport. They were happy to be able to wear sunglasses, since the sun only shone in Scotland for what felt like three days a year.

*This must be a special day.*

They were both silent thinking what the future would bring. Aidan turned the corner after the hill onto Waverly bridge as Christina took it all in. Arthur's Seat. The Edinburgh Monument. The *Top Shop* on Princes Street that she went to all too often with Rebecca. Waverly station. The clock of the Balmoral Hotel. Aidan squeezed her hand as they drove past.

As they drove through New Town, Christina gracefully wiped away tears hoping that he wouldn't notice behind her sunglasses. Aidan kissed her hand all too knowingly and to no surprise, held it until the last possible moment.

As they pulled up to the airport, Christina was surprised to see Aidan pull into the parking lot.

"I'd regret not giving you a proper send-off, love."

Christina and Aidan walked hand in hand to the check-in counter.

"Passport, please?"

Christina dug through her carry-on but couldn't find it.

"Here you go," Aidan said to the check in agent.

"You left it on the counter, Chris."

The British Air agent smiled as she took the passport from Aidan's hands.

"Your boyfriend is a keeper I see," she said while she typed in Christina's information,

"Bag up here, please."

After checking the bag, they walked hand in hand to the base of security.

"Well then," Aidan began as Christina felt the tears fill her eyes and threw her arms around him.

“I’ll wait until you get through security but all I’ll get at that point is a wave,” he said, his voice breaking.

He held her for a moment before she took a deep breath and kissed him. For a woman that idolized cliches so much, it was the first time she had ever felt time stop.

“I don’t believe in good-byes,” Christina said after she pulled away,

“So, I’ll just say—be seeing you.”

“Sounds like a line from a movie,” he said, wiping a tear before pulling her close. With a deep breath he whispered simply,

“You know where to find me.”

Christina kissed him—too nervous to say anything back.

*Don’t suddenly panic and throw out an “I love you”.*

*It won’t make this easier. It’s not worth the confusion. You’re going home. You’re going to be with Drew.*

*But what if he truly asked you to stay?*

She took a deep breath and parried:

“Be seeing you.”

Christina turned and walked towards security. She waited for nearly ten minutes, aware that Aidan was watching her every move. Finally, when she got up to the scanner, she turned with tears and blew him a kiss. Aidan gazed at her and waved goodbye.

There was something a bit invigorating in not knowing what would come next. As Christina stared at Aidan wave, she closed her eyes to remember this moment.

*Ask me not to go.*

They stood for moments consumed with each other. Christina Reale grew up with a gift of intuition. She planned her life down to a minute. As she turned away towards Aidan and walked towards immigration, she realized that for once she didn’t know what would come next

To call it a decision was an understatement. Drew always fit like an old glove. But it was Aidan’s arms she longed to run back to.

*I was just caught up in the moment.*

Aidan and Christina chose to remain friends. Both were too wise beyond their years to allow such a special connection to be thrown away entirely. They started speaking rather often. Christina, guilt ridden, revealed rather quickly that she was dating Drew a

few months after she returned home. Aidan would mention female names here and there, but mostly spoke of his mother, Emily.

“The best woman in my life, she is. I still regret not taking ye to Belfast while you were here,” he said on a call during the first few weeks of her senior year.

“Oh sure,” Christina said.

“And introduce me as what to your mother? The girl you were sleeping with?”

Aidan offered a soft, sincere, smile.

“Oh. I told my mum about you. I told her you were my other half.”

The calls became less frequent, but friendship remained. The following Spring, Christina called Aidan with her big news to receive a less than enthusiastic reply.

“Engaged?” He repeated back to her.

“Aren’t ye a little young to be engaged?”

Christina went quiet. She didn’t understand why so many people were questioning her decision. Christina had always been non-conventional. What was so wrong with marrying your best friend?

“I mean younger than I thought but--it’s Drew. He’s everything to me. He went back to college for me. His parents are like my parents. I’m really happy, Aidan.”

The joy left her; exasperated with each word.

“I’ll ask this once and then I’ll never say it again. Are you sure?”

She smiled through the screen.

“Of course, I am.”

“Well, then, congratulations are in order, Chris.”

Christina soon learned these were empty words as Aidan stopped responding to her messages.

*What did you actually think would happen?*

The most hurtful avoidance was when he didn’t respond to her “Merry Christmas”. Her joy dissipated; confusion took over.

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“Hello?”

“Christina? Christina Reale?”

A familiar accent spoke back to her on the phone that January 2nd.

“What? Yes--who is--?”

“My name is Emily Craig. I’m Aidan’s mother.”

Her heart fell into her stomach.

“I finally had the chance to look through his phone and knew I needed to tell you.”

Stage four inoperable brain tumor. Hospice. Twenty four years old.

Aidan used to say to her late at night that “everything happens for a reason.” Emily said it was one of the last things he said while he had the ability to speak.

On February 2nd at four o’clock in the morning, Christina mourned an angel on earth as he transitioned to one above.

It was a bit indescribable, of course, to mourn one love while you’re planning a wedding to the other. A sense of guilt was in all of her interactions with Drew. Something was off. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but turned inward to cope with her grief.

And on that particular day, her grief turned her to a book.

She moved her right hand across the title.

A pink and orange exterior. *PS I Love You* written at the top.

She turned to the first page with a slight smile. It read

“February 2, 2017,

**A sunbeam to warm you**

**A moonbeam to charm you**

**A sheltering angel so nothing can harm you**

**~ Irish blessing**

**May your dear friend live in your heart, forever**

**All my love, Rebecca**

She had read the inscription a multitude of times since she received the book weeks ago. When she called Rebecca to thank her, it was clear what made her think of Christina and Aidan.

“Have you seen the movie?” Rebecca said, sweetly.

“In the book, the couple is Irish. But in the film,”

“Holly is a young American who meets Irish Gerry while studying abroad,” Christina finished with a closed smile.

“I can see why it reminded you of us.”

Christina sat there wishing Aidan had left her something--any possible piece of him. She wished others could understand. But, at least she held this symbol in her hands that depicted a few people *did* remember their story. And perhaps, that validated it was all the more real.

She turned the page for the first time since receiving the book.

“Holly held the blue cotton sweater to her face and the familiar smell immediately struck her, an overwhelming grief knotting her stomach and pulling at her heart.”

*I don't know if I can handle this.*

Except she couldn't put it down.

“Gerry was gone and would never be back. That was the reality.”

She thumbed each page slowly, selfishly comparing each line to her and Aidan.

*I wish you left me something, love.*

“Gerry wasn't prepared to go without a fight. Looking back on it, she knew that she needed him more than he needed her. She needed to be needed so she could feel she wasn't just idly standing by, utterly helpless. On the second of February at four o'clock in the morning, Holly held Gerry's hand tightly and smiled at him encouragingly as he took his last breath and closed his eyes.”

She froze.

“What?” she exclaimed out loud.

She turned back to page 31 and began to read the line again.

“On the second of February at four o'clock in the morning, Holly held Gerry's hand tightly and smiled at him encouragingly as he took his last breath and closed his eyes.”

Her hands started to shake.

Christina Reale definitely believed in signs.

So she tore the book apart and read it cover to cover to find her sign from Aidan.

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That October, she walked down the aisle to her best friend. She knew, amidst Drew's struggles, that he had the potential to give her the entire world. And she certainly fell in love. With that potential.

The danger of marrying potential, of course, is that not everyone chooses to rise.

It's alarming yet quite textbook to see a young marriage fail. Drew's pride for his wife slowly turned to resentment. Her success, however small, started to represent his failure. She no longer was the fun, young woman that he had grown up with. In his eyes

she was controlling and “nagging”. Another moment where she fulfilled some sort of cliché.

It felt like a jolt. One day she was on a pedestal. He would boast with pride to his friends about how she was out of his league. The next, he was ignoring her calls as she dug for uber receipts to see where he was sleeping.

Surely, they had to work through it. He was her best friend, after all.

She decided it was time for a solo trip. Drew supported the idea fully, both probably secretly hoping absence would make the heart grow fonder once more. She could stay with Rebecca. She could visit Edinburgh and take time for herself.

She looked up at her bookshelf and saw PS I LOVE YOU staring back at her. Without hesitation, she picked up the phone, scanning through her contacts for the number she needed.

It only rang twice before she got her answer.

“Emily? It’s Christina. I know this sounds crazy but I’m going to be in the UK in a week and was wondering if--what? Yes? I would absolutely love to come to Belfast. I’ve never been.”

This was what she needed. She needed to save her marriage. There was no other way. Drew’s family asked her to remain loyal to the “Don’t-air-out-your-dirty-laundry-south”. Rebecca was safe and knew no one. She could tell Rebecca about the late nights and the other women. The worry. The anger. The potential.

Before she went to Belfast, of course. There was no need to tell Emily her marriage was in shambles.

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Emily, after losing her son, had purchased a beach hut in Donaghadee. When there was no fog, you could not only see the sea but a glimpse of the Isle of Man on the horizon.

“I was thinking we could have a little Pimm’s and girl talk,” Emily said, re-entering her living room with two drinks.

“So, congratulations. You just got married, yeah?”

Christina smiled faintly, moving a wisp of her hair as her wedding band hit the light sneaking in from dusk.

“A little over two years ago, yeah,” she answered.



“Still newlyweds, really! Do you all want kids?” she asked politely.

*I'm already married to one.*

“Not yet. Eventually, yes,” she said politely.

“Aidan would've been such a good dad,” Emily said with a faint smile.

“But up and until the very end he just kept saying, ‘mum this happens for a reason, it's fine’. I'll never understand.”

Christina took a gulp of Pimm's as she looked out at the Isle of Man. Aidan had said he wanted to take her there one day.

“Well, it looks like you and Drew are very happy from your pictures. Aidan said you grew up together, yeah?”

Christina tried to force a smile again as she nodded.

“It's really lovely that Aidan shared so much with you. And he always spoke so highly of you.”

“That's so sweet of you to say,” Emily said with a genuine smile forming.

“He thought so highly of you, too.”

To neither of their surprises, the two women exchanged any story of Aidan possible. With each tale slowly building upon every chapter of his life and the Pimm's flowing, Christina finally talked of their relationship and how happy they were when she was at Edinburgh.

She looked down at her wedding ring again as tears filled her eyes and she began to tell the silly story that was pressing on her heart. She told Emily the story of PS I LOVE YOU.

“You know, Aidan must have had a real laugh watching me tear that book apart from cover to cover looking for a sign. I guess, there are no such things as signs.”

Emily lost the color in her face momentarily as she took another swig of Pimm's.

She took a deep breath as she met Christina's eyes.

“Yeah, I bet he had a real laugh alright because your sign was in the title.

Aidan loved you. He wanted to come to the US and tell you not to get married. That--he wanted to be with you--but sometimes, I guess, we run out of time."

There are numerous cliches that say one moment can change your life. Christina Reale returned home and dismissed the quiet voice in her head that buried the truth. She pictured a marriage based on independence, compromise, and humility. She realized, people change. And just because they do, and just because they hurt you, doesn't make the history you had any less real. Sometimes, artists come together to collaborate on a painting. Both must walk away when the artwork is done--and it doesn't make that piece any less beautiful.

She thought of true love and how it perhaps can lead you across the Atlantic to confess your feelings. She realized there is no potential--no *what could be*. There is only now.

And with that, Christina returned home. She packed that man's bags and left them by the front door.

Ten years later, she still believed in love stories. She knew that after it all, she deserved someone who was committed, compassionate, resilient, and kind.

*But the truth is? She's been here all along.*