



Chasing  
Eternity

*a novel*

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## Chapter Ten

Ryan hated cemeteries, grassy ground full of dead, decaying bodies. It was macabre, dressing up the dead and sticking them in satin-lined boxes, then driving the boxes to the cemetery in a black station wagon with pulled polyester curtains.

As a little game, his childhood friends used to hold their breaths when they drove past a cemetery. Once safely past the rows and rows of plastic flowers and slabs of marble, they'd let their breaths out in a collective whoosh.

Already acquainted with death at that point, Ryan didn't play the game; he breathed and breathed until he would almost hyperventilate.

They would chant,

*Don't ever laugh when a hearse goes by, or you may be the next to die.  
They wrap you up in a bloody sheet, and bury you under about six feet.  
All goes well for a couple of weeks, but then your coffin begins to leak.  
The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out, the worms play pinochle on your  
snout.  
Your stomach turns a slimy green, and puss comes out of you like whipped cream.  
You lap it up with a piece of bread, and that's what you eat when you are dead.*

Ryan would hold his ears and hum loudly until their laughter subsided.

Cemeteries held no pull over him; they only reminded him of his paucity of belief. The so-called souls of his mother, father and brother weren't in the ground, he knew. He didn't believe in souls, and he didn't believe in heaven or God, waiting for the believers to arrive at the holy gates. He believed in worms. He believed in bones. He didn't believe in anything that he couldn't logically deduce.

So it surprised him when he found himself walking up the hill, no trace of tightness in his chest. He took in evenly spaced breaths of the clean air, and thought of Aisling's face, dripping sweat, as if the loss was manifesting itself in perspiration. He had

tried his best to comfort her, despite her obvious precariousness. Grief, he knew, had a way of wringing the cloth of personality into a twisted, bitter rag.

He couldn't believe Cleona was really gone. One hundred-eighty years old, he thought, his mind expanding to consider the possibility. *It was absurd*, he told himself. *Wasn't it?*

From the top of the graveyard, the gravestones spread down the hill in a chaotic calamity, but the view of the rocky hills and lake was breathtaking. The ocean flattened itself to the horizon, not far from where he stood. The spot suggested eternity, unlike most of the manicured golf course-cemeteries found in America.

Tall weeds and grass grew wildly over the stone slabs and Celtic crosses, often obscuring the names of the buried. He parted some of the grass growing against one of the older looking ones. It bore the inscription: *James O'Flaherty, 1872-1930. Father, husband, brother, one with the sea.*

He passed among several other tombstones; some were newer, with clean lines and cross-shaped boxes full of dirty plastic flowers adorning them, and some were older, covered with moss and clearly forgotten.

A couple with the surname of McNally, a few with the surname of Connolly and Fitzgerald and Finnegan. After a few minutes of searching, he found a small, rectangular gravestone with the name Owen. *Orla Owen, 1931-1985*. He thought of the barman's story, and considered whether Aisling's mother, who had perished in childbirth, was buried beneath his feet. He'd never heard of a woman having a baby at the age of 54, unless it was scientifically orchestrated.

More intrigued, he moved to a similar stone next to it. It read *Michael Owen, fisherman, husband, father*. This was Aisling's father, who had died in a bad storm at sea at the age of 58, in 1990.

He moved to the next stone, but it wasn't an *Owen*. He searched through the next set of stones for several more minutes, but with no luck. Happy to have found Aisling's mother and father, he decided to head back to the hotel.

But as he walked through the grassy meadow to reach the low road, he tripped over something hidden in the grass. He crouched, parting the grass with his hands, and saw an old stone, dark grey and split almost in two. It appeared to have once had carvings, for he could see faint marks on the surface.

He straightened up and scanned the meadow for more possible hidden stones, but could see nothing obvious. So he began crawling through the thick, yellow meadow, hoping that no one happened by on the low road.

After a few moments of careful searching, he found another stone, dark green and cracked down the center. He cleaned his glasses of dirt and dust with his shirttail and bent close to the stone. He saw an O, and he traced his finger over the four lost letters. Yes, it appeared that this was an *Owen*, but the first name had been lost to time. He brushed away some dirt and weeds that covered the bottom of the marker. The dates, although worn in places, seemed to read *1542-1688*.

He ran his fingers over the numbers, as carefully as if he were reading Braille.

"My God," he said. He looked away, the blood zinging in his ears so loudly that he couldn't hear the gulls directly overhead.

To be fair, the first “8” could possibly have been a “5.” It was almost impossible to tell which it was. If the dates were what he thought they were, the person had lived for either 146 years or 116 years. *If* he could trust the marker, the person buried in the plot below had been a super-centenarian—110-years-old or older—and he or she had achieved this milestone during a time of famine, plague and poor hygiene. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the average life expectancy was around 35 to 40 years.

He laughed out loud. Hadn’t anyone on the island seen this stone before? Hadn’t any tourists stumbled across it while roaming about the fields, chasing birds? Surely it would have been publicized by now, ridiculed on the internet and discussed by news media.

*Maybe the carvings weren’t even accurate*, he thought. The stone-cutter had made a mistake in his math, or had perhaps been illiterate. Or had listened to a confused family member.

Even so, Ryan spent the next two hours crawling around the cemetery like a hungry wolf. He examined each and every hidden stone in the meadow, yet most of the carvings were completely worn away by the rains and wind. There were dozens of them.

Still sitting in the cemetery, Ryan pulled out his cell phone and called Rose Buxton, five hours back in the States.

“Hello?” she answered groggily.

“Hi Rose, it’s Ryan.”

“Ryan!” She coughed a couple of times, clearing her throat. “We haven’t heard a thing from you since you left! Tell me everything!”

“Listen, Rose, I’ve got a question for you.”

“Oh.” She sounded disappointed. “Wakes me from the most delicious dream and then won’t even tell me about his—“

“Say that I want to find out how old a body is,” he interrupted. “How would I go about doing that?”

She took a couple of seconds for her to respond. “Whose body? Is it dead or alive?”

“A skeleton.”

She huffed. “Ryan, what on earth? Why are you asking such a question?”

“Look, I’m in a cemetery that appears to contain a very long-lived dead person.”

“Really?” she asked. “*How* long? Like, super-centenarian long?”

“Yes. That long.”

“Wow!” She paused. “You’re in a cemetery on Halloween?”

Ryan ignored her. “You’re a pathologist, right? Isn’t there a way to figure out exactly how old the bones are?”

“I’m *studying* to be a pathologist.”

“Come on, Rose.”

“Well, there is a way, of course. It’s a bit tedious, though.”

“Go on…”

“Are you sure you have the time to listen? I mean, you sound a little rushed.”

“Rose!”

“Okay, okay. It’s called the Kerley method. The pathologist slices off a wafer-thin cross section of a long bone, such as a femur. The cross-section reveals circular canals, or osteons, that carry blood and nourishment through the bone. Good so far?”

“Osteons, yes! Go on!”

“Well, concentric circles form around the osteons, like the age rings of a tree. The older a person gets, the more fragmented the osteons become. The pathologist compares the number of healthy osteons to the fragmented older ones and applies them to a math equation. Ta-da! The age at death can be calculated pretty reliably.”

He ran a hand over the old tombstone. “Rose, could you do that for me? On one of the bones from this cemetery?”

“What?” she barked. “Are you insane?”

“A little bit, yes,” he admitted, blinking in the light that shone off the lake near the cemetery. “I need confirmation of the dates on these tombstones. I would never forgive myself if I left this island, having seen this, without knowing the truth.”

He could hear Rose’s parrot Louie squawking in the drawn-out silence. She finally said, “It’s doable.”

“How long will it take?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never done the test before,” she said. “You should really wait for my dad to help with this, Ryan. He could fly out, check out the stone himself.”

Ryan groaned. “Too much red tape,” he said. “He’ll want to notify the Irish authorities and everything. You know your dad. I want to do this now. Myself.”

Rose was quiet for a few moments. “Have you thought about what you’re saying? You’ll need to get a bone from the grave.”

“I know.”

“You’ll have to actually dig up the ground and open the coffin and---!”

“I know.”

“And I’ll have to sneak around the lab, and use equipment I’m not authorized to use,” she moaned. “And I know that it’s very time-consuming. It’s used mostly on old mummies, stuff like that. Only in unusual circumstances.”

“This *is* unusual.”

She exhaled loudly. “Did you even speak with the old women yet?”

“No...I haven’t,” he said. “Rose, one of the women died today. Cleona Owen.”

“Oh no!” she groaned. “She was the one with pneumonia, right?”

“That’s right,” he said.

“Guess you can’t request a cheek swab from her now, huh?”

“That, and there’s no documentation in sight,” he sighed. “You wouldn’t believe how these women live! They don’t use electricity or indoor plumbing! It’s really backwards.”

“But the twin ...she’s old, right?” Rose asked hopefully.

“I think so. Her sister looked biblically ancient. I’ve never seen anyone quite like her in my life.”

“You could get a sample from Catherine then,” said Rose.

“I’ll try to, after the funeral,” he said. It would be hard to wait, he knew. “Rose, I’m going to go now. I’ll try to mail the bone to you.”

“Why don’t you just bring it back with you?”



“I don’t want to go through the baggage check with an undocumented human femur bone.”

“I suppose you’re right,” she said, chuckling. “Well, I’ll be on the lookout for a long, skinny box, I guess.”

“Thanks Rose. This means a great deal to me. You know that, right?”

“Yes, I’ll bet it does.”

“Don’t tell your dad, okay? Don’t tell anyone.”

She paused. “Are you okay, Ryan?”

He bit his lip. “Not really.”

“You sound like you’ve gone off your meds.”

He realized with surprise that he hadn’t taken his anti-anxiety medication, nor any vitamins or supplements, since yesterday morning.

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