

# ***GIFT OF THE LITTLE PEOPLE***

## **CHAPTER 1**

### ***Western Union on the Line***

When we got the telegram early Friday morning, all of us shared the same sentiment: *“Rats! This couldn’t have come at a worst time!”* It wasn’t that we had been planning this camping trip forever . . . well . . . at least since school let out last week for summer vacation. And it wasn’t that dad had finally decided to spend his vacation with us instead of sitting in front of the television watching the sports channel. And it certainly wasn’t the fact that dad had spent this last week convincing mom that camping was nothing more than doing dishes out-of-doors.

Mom had reluctantly agreed before rushing off to Wal-Mart to stock up on paper plates and toilet paper.

The O’Donnell family may have had an Irish name tacked onto our mailbox, but that’s about as Irish as we got. Golly, if you had asked me where the Emerald Isle was, I’d have told you it was the last aisle in Randall’s Jewelry Store where the green stones were on display.

My dad, Patrick, didn't even look Irish. The man resembled my idea of a tackle for the Green Bay Packers. Athletic, with a well-built physique, dark hair, and a pair of twinkling baby-blues behind heavy-rimmed reading glasses that were in style when George Reeves claimed the title of Superman, dad looked anything but Irish.

Dad was fond of telling us that his was a mixed marriage. Mom had somehow met with the approval of his folks. Mom wasn't Irish, but with her flowing red hair, sparkling green eyes, and brandishing a name like Mary "Katie" Katherine, who cared?

At sixteen, I was the eldest son of Patrick and Katie O'Donnell. I, Danny, was the best looking. At least that's what Mom told me. I was devastated for a full minute when my fourteen-year-old brother, David, confided that mom had said the same thing to him. Holy Smokes, maybe she couldn't tell us apart!

Relatives said I took after dad. I suppose what they really meant was that my only goals in life were the ones that stood on either end of the high school football field. I cared more about sports and less about schoolwork. It showed on those school papers I brought home, often covered with bright red marks scribbled in my teacher's artistic penmanship.

“I wish I had Danny’s long eye lashes,” mom was fond of saying to those eager women starved for gossip at the beauty parlor. That is, until the day I sat her down and complained. “Mom, you’re making me self-conscious. Even strangers recognize me by my lashes. ‘Oh! You must be Katie’s boy!’ Gee, mom, can’t you pick on David for a change?”

Gosh! I was desperate. I even tried to snip off the ends of my beautiful lashes with a pair of cuticle scissors, but the Good Lord saw to it that those darn lashes grew back even longer. I quit trying while I was ahead.

Everyone thought Mom and Dad the perfect couple. Every Sunday, Reverend Quinn’s congregation would nod and smile as the O’Donnell family squeezed into one pew. Sean, the youngest at eight-years-old, never failed to engage David in a shoving match, ready to do battle for the best seat in the house . . . the seat nearest the window.

Mom and Dad always made time to attend my football games. They cheered louder than any of the other parents, proud of my accomplishments on the field. What a perfectly happy family.

But things were not all that it seemed in the Land of Oz. Lately, Mom and Dad had taken up the extracurricular sport of shouting

matches. I figured whoever got in the last bitter verbal jab was proclaimed the victor. I guessed Mom and Dad thought they were doing their three sons a favor by trying to keep their little matches hidden from us. But none of us boys had the courage to tell them we knew exactly what was going on.

David had been bestowed the royal title of “dream prince” among half-a-dozen ninth-grade girls. He never spoke of the problems brewing between our parents, but I could tell by the way he had withdrawn into his astronomy books, along with the many hours he spent taking apart and reassembling motors, that those heated arguments were affecting him deeply.

Little Sean, with strawberry freckles and a carrot-top cowlick that mom had never been able to tame, simply pretended he never heard a word. I had been noticing, though, that many candy bars were finding their way to his stomach. There was no doubt about it. My youngest brother had found comfort in a world of goeey, melted chocolate bars. Sean was keen to what was going on in the world around him. This kid was a whiz at figuring out what a person was all about.

So here we were . . . Friday morning and cramming our station wagon with canvas bags and camping equipment. I couldn't figure out

why dad had even bothered asking mom to come along. Heck, all they'd been doing since breakfast was arguing anyhow. Why spoil the trip by letting her tag along?

Dad caught my eye as I walked past him clutching a cardboard box. The carton was filled to the brim with napkins, toilet paper and all those paper plates mom had stocked up on. I was hoping dad would notice the scowl I was wearing.

"Look, Danny," Dad said, successfully reading my vibes. "This is going to be an experience you'll never forget."

"That's what they said to the sailors before they shipped out to Pearl Harbor," I groaned, adding extra glum to my glumness.

David came to my rescue before Dad could snap back. "Aw, dad, why can't I stay home? I'm old enough to take care of myself."

"You can't stay home by yourself," dad replied sharply. Oh, boy! I could already tell how wonderful this doomed trip was going to be.

"When will I be old enough?"

I mouthed the words behind dad's back as he spoke . . . those words I'd heard so many times before which were now branded into my memory. "When the Lord comes back!" Dad told him. "That's when!" *Boy, David, I thought, will you never give up?*

David's frown managed to have even more gloom than mine. Like a skilled trash collector, he hurled the sleeping bag into the back of the station wagon and stormed toward the house.

Our large shaggy dog, Shep, darted about between our legs. Maybe he thought he was going to the dog pound. I was ready to join him right about now.

But the smart animal had merely seen his feed and water bowls being loaded into the back of the wagon. He knew what that meant. Apparently Shep was the only one interested in this trip.

Sean came bounding out of the front door, tossing a football into the air. "Hey, dad!" he called out. I don't know what got into the kid, but just as dad turned to answer him, Sean cocked his arm and tossed the football. The pigskin hit dad squarely between the eyes and bounced off its target. Any other day, dad might have rejoiced to find his youngest son interested in sports, but this was not that day. Sean grinned sheepishly. "Sorry, dad!" the kid said, apologetically.

Dad glared at his youngest son. He pointed to the door and growled, "Get in there and help your mother."

"Can't," answered Sean as he dug into his

pocket and retrieved a crumpled chocolate bar that desperately needed resurrecting. “She’s on the phone.”

Dad was exasperated. “She’s on the phone while we’re out here packing this gear!”

I held my tongue, but, boy how I wanted to set it free. I was itching to point out, *You’re the one who asked her to come along, remember?* This was one time the spirit and the flesh really battled it out.

Dad disappeared into the rear of the station wagon to sort our haphazard arrangement of camping gear. “She’s talking to grandpa,” explained Sean as he tore open the candy bar and tossed the silver foil wrapper onto the grass.

Dad recoiled, thumping his head on the ceiling of the wagon. “Grandpa?” he gasped as he poked his head from the car. “She’s talking to Grandpa in Ireland? Collect, I hope!”

“How do I know?” asked Sean. “Am I my mother’s keeper?”

Golly, the kid had remembered the sermon we’d heard months ago on *My Brother’s Keeper*, the sermon I’d forgotten until now. How in the world did Sean remember such things? I thought the boy had been too busy pulling threads from his suit to absorb a word the preacher had said that Sunday.

“That’s enough, mush-mouth,” protested dad. He glared at the candy wrapper laying on the freshly manicured lawn I’d mowed only yesterday. “Pick up that trash, young man,” he ordered.

Sean stared at the foil wrapping as though it was manna from heaven. He scooped up the silver paper and stuffed the chocolate-smearred wrapper into his pocket.

Dad’s pace quickened as he marched up the front steps. I wasn’t sure if I was in the mood to hear another one of their arguments today, but I trailed along anyway, curious to learn the reason for Gramps’ call.

“What’s the matter with that woman?” dad grumbled under his breath. “She knows we can’t afford that call.”

It’s amazing how anger can blind a soul. I figured it was because dad was seething that he never saw Sean’s skateboard near the top step. The last I saw of dad before he went careening into the house was the flailing of his arms and legs. *Wow! Now that was graceful*, I thought. I marveled that dad was even able to land on his feet.

Loaded down with more supplies, David stepped aside as dad launched past him into the foyer, arms rotating like a windmill. If it weren’t for the wall that stopped him, dad might

be in orbit today.

David raised a brow and grinned. “And he tells *us* no running in the house?”

Mom spun about to find dad hugging the wall. “Patrick, please!” she scolded. “Quit playing around. I’m on the phone with your father.”

Dad peeled himself from the wall and checked his body over. Yep! All parts present and accounted for. Dad suddenly remembered the reason for his haste. He tried to pry the receiver from mom’s hand, but mom had learned a thing or two from tossing footballs to me all those years and blocked his advances.

Shep burst through the door and twirled about our legs, eager for us to hit the road. Taking advantage of mom’s inability to whack him one, Sean raced around the foyer like a B-29 bomber. With arms outstretched, the boy’s hands came into contact with the pale yellow walls. Small chocolate palm prints were the only evidence that Sean had been there. With outstretched hand, dad stood by waiting impatiently for mom to stop yakking and turn the phone over to him.

“Pops, we’ll be there just as soon as we can. Good-bye.” Mom hung up the phone. Like Lot’s wife turned to stone, mom just stood there, staring at dad and looking dumbfounded.

“Who died?” asked David, puzzled by mom’s expression of disbelief.

“Stick around, son,” Dad told David. “I think it might be me.”

“Pat, you’re not going to believe this,” said Mom.

“Then don’t tell me.”

Mom launched into one of her long explanations . . . the kind she always used when trying to prevent spilling the beans. “He misses your mother, Pat. You should have heard him. Pops says the only thing he does nowadays is visit the pub and the cemetery.”

“Good for him to get out,” agreed dad. “Fresh air and exercise will do him good.”

“Pat - -” Mom reluctantly tried to get dad’s undivided attention.

“- - That Irish beer keeps his blood flowing, and those walks to the cemetery - -”

“- - He’s not in Ireland, Pat,” mom blurted.

“- - Will keep him healthy and . . . what do you mean he’s not in Ireland? Of course he’s in Ireland. And if we don’t get on the road, we’ll never make it to the campground before dark.”

Who was dad kidding? Even a little kid like Sean knew what mom was saying. Why, the boy even said as much.

“Dad, I think mom’s trying to tell you something,” explained Sean as he zoomed

around the foyer.

I thought mom looked a little sympathetic. “How can he be there . . . when he’s here?” she asked.

Dad froze, speechless. *Parlez-vous English, Dad?* I thought the man was going to keel over in a dead faint. He came close, though, and collapsed into a chair instead. “Here?” he asked, bewildered.

Mom nodded. “That’s what he said.”

“You mean . . . here . . . like in . . . right now?”

“He’s here! He’s here!” Sean sang out joyfully and danced about.

“Aw, shut up, squirt,” snapped David. “You don’t even know who they’re talking about.”

“You mean *here*?” Dad asked again. Gee, maybe the man was hard of hearing.

“Here . . . as in the States,” explained mom.

“The United States?” Dad exploded. *Boy, dad, you catch on fast!*

“I mean here . . . as in the nearest airport!” Hurray! Mom had finally let the cat out of the bag. I watched as dad’s pale expression changed from one of surprise to one of red-hot anger.

I was just as thrilled as dad by the

revelation. “Oh, brother,” I moaned under my breath.

David surprised us all by letting out a loud whoop of joy and falling to his knees. With hands clasped in gratitude, he lifted his eyes to Heaven and proclaimed, “Hallelujah! There is a God!”

For the past week, David had let it be known to one and all that he didn’t want to go on this trip. Sure, he liked camping, but the backyard was as far as he cared to go. David didn’t go for all that bug spray and manual labor of setting up camp. He wanted a toilet that flushed and clean sheets on a mattress. The closest David wanted to come to the heavenly stars was gazing at them through the telescope he was saving up for. All that brother of mine wanted to do this summer was read those astronomy books of his and work on motors . . . cars, lawnmowers, model airplanes, electric toothbrushes . . . any kind of motor that could be taken apart, examined, and put back together again.

David leapt to his feet. “Instant re-wind, folks,” he said happily. David raced from the house with Shep barking at his heels. Through the open door I watched as David grabbed duffle bags from the wagon and tossed them onto the sidewalk.

“What about the reservations?” asked dad with fear in his voice. I could almost see the reflection of dollar bills in his eyes.

“We’ll just have to cancel,” explained mom with a helpless shrug. Just like that? Didn’t women give any consideration to the consequences of canceling? Hadn’t they ever heard those two terrifying words *No Refund*?

“Cancel?” Dad gasped. For a moment, I thought I’d have to rush into the kitchen for a brown paper bag. How he kept from hyperventilating, I’ll never know. By the look on dad’s face, you’d have thought we’d had reservations on the space shuttle. “I don’t know if I can get a refund at this late date. We should have been there by now. And besides, I’ve been looking forward to this vacation for months.”

Mom snickered. “George, you never told a lie before. Why start now, Mr. Washington?” As she started up the stairs, mom called over her shoulder. “Anyway, Pat, I recall it was Sean who talked you into this vacation.” It was all coming back now. Dad had initially been reluctant to leave his TV and sports channel behind.

It was only after Sean had spent countless hours whining about the importance of this camping trip and togetherness that the kid had

done an about-face and changed his mind, preferring to stay home after all. That was right after Sean had received a new bicycle on his eighth birthday a couple of days ago.

We all slipped quietly away, leaving dad to ponder his financial misfortune. “Sabotage,” he muttered under his breath. “That’s what it is. He’s not going to get away with this.”

Sulking, dad sauntered over to the garage where David was storing the camping gear. Dad glanced at the equipment we would not be using. Mom exchanged her camping clothes for casual wear and herded up her three sons before collecting dad.

“Katie, you know we were going on this vacation as much for ourselves as the boys. You and I have been drifting in different directions . . . the whole family, in fact.” Did dad really think pleading was going to change mom’s mind at this late stage of the game?

Mom studied dad’s face as though the man had jungle fever. “And you thought a camping trip would salvage our marriage?” she asked incredulously.

Dad gave his married future all of two seconds’ thought. “You’re right. Nothing can save us now.”

Mom stared blankly at dad. “Steaks!” she exclaimed. “I’ll need to cook something tonight.

If I defrost them now, I'll have enough time." Poor dad. Mom hadn't even heard him.

Mom dashed over to the large freezer we kept in the garage. It was half full with frozen cuts of meat alongside Sean's boxes of ice cream bars. Dad strolled over to the window and gazed out at the empty station wagon.

Dad went into the den and sank down into his favorite leather chair. He stared at the cold television screen. After a few seconds he squirmed uncomfortably.

Rising from the chair, dad glanced down at the squashed chocolate bar on the leather cushion. He twisted his body and peered at the seat of his pants. Melted chocolate was smeared across the rump of dad's khaki pants.

Sean bounded into the sunken den, clearing the two steps with one giant leap for mankind. He stopped short at the sight of dad's soiled pants. "What happened, dad? Couldn't make it to the bathroom in time?" the kid asked.

Without a word, dad scooped up the mound of melted chocolate and presented it to Sean for his inspection. Sean glanced down at the squished candy bar and grinned sheepishly. "Oh! So that's where it went!"

The photograph we kept in the den of Ian O'Donnell, our Irish grandfather, portrayed a rosy-cheeked, merry little gentleman with a

warm, inner light shining forth from his face. His hair was snow white, as was his short-cropped beard.

“Santa Clause!” Sean had proclaimed when he saw the photograph for the first time. I had figured Gramps to be in his early sixties. To some folks, that might not be old at all, but as a teen I marveled that Gramps wasn’t listed amongst the Old Testament patriarchs.

In truth, no one who knew Ian O’Donnell would have guessed the little Irishman was approaching his twilight years because, as I was soon to learn, this man was younger in spirit than me.