

Prologue

Don't Take the Girl

Claire

May 1995

The stench of smoke was in my nose, and I didn't like it. Mammy said it was incense; the same stuff Father Murphy burned at mass on Sundays.

I didn't like going to mass. The church felt stuffy, and old, and sad.

Worst of all, you didn't get to talk for a whole hour.

An hour felt forever when you were five.

Somehow, the church was even worse today and it was Tuesday.

It was sadder.

Looking around at all the crying faces, I plucked at a loose thread on my cardigan and swung my legs back and forth, smiling to myself every time I kicked the back of the pew in front of me.

"Sit still, Claire," Daddy instructed, placing a hand on my knee. "It's almost over, pet."

"It's stinky," I whispered back, pinching my nose. "I don't like it, Daddy."

"I know, pet," he agreed, smoothing a hand over my curls. "Be a big girl for Daddy and stay nice and quiet for five more minutes."

"Then can I play with Gerard?"

He didn't answer me.

"Can I play with Gerard today, Daddy?" I repeated, pulling on the leg of his trouser suit. "Please? I miss him."

"Maybe not today, pet," he replied, and then he did what the other men were doing. He leaned forward and pushed his thumbs into his eyes to hide his tears.

"But how come?" I argued. "He's right up there." I pointed to the front of the church. "I can see him, Daddy."

"No, Claire."

"But—"

“Shh.”

I didn’t understand any of this.

Twisting sideways, I looked at my brother. He was crying, too. Mammy tucked him into her side as he cried against her shoulder.

“Hey, Hugh?” I whisper-hissed, covering my mouth with my hands. “Do you want to play with Gerard after mass?”

“Shh, Claire,” Mammy sniffled, using the tissue tucked inside her sleeve to wipe her face. “Not here.”

Not here?

What did that mean?

I couldn’t figure out what was happening, but I didn’t like it. I had a strange feeling in my tummy that got stronger every time I looked at the coffins. That’s what Hugh called the boxes near the altar.

There was a big brown one and a small white one. Hugh said that Gerard’s daddy, Joe, was in the big brown one and his sister, Bethany, was in the little white one.

Because they drowned last Saturday.

Drowned was a new word for me, and it was hard to understand, but it still made me super sad. Because when you drowned you went in a box.

“Drowned.” Brows furrowed in concentration, I tried to spell out the word. “D-R...”

“Shh, Claire.”

Nope, it was too big for me.

Folding and unfolding my hands, I looked around and waved when I spotted Hugh and Gerard’s teacher across the row.

“Stop it, Claire,” Mammy warned, snatching my hand out of the air and placing it on my lap. “Be good.”

I thought I *was* being good.

Trying my best to be good for Mammy, I sat on my hands and didn’t swing my legs anymore.

Not until the music started and everybody stood up.

“Oasis, Daddy,” I squealed, barely able to contain my excitement. I knew this song. It was my daddy and Joe’s favorite band. The song playing was called ‘Stop Crying Your Heart

Out.'

Daddy didn't smile. He was too sad. Joe was his bestest friend in the whole world, and he was in the brown coffin, but Gerard was my bestest friend in the whole wide world, and I was happy because he didn't get drowned with Joe and Bethany.

My daddy got Gerard out of the water. He jumped in and rescued him. With his suit and shoes on. And his socks. My daddy was a hero. That's what the neighbors said.

When Father Murphy walked down the aisle sprinkling that stinky smoke, I pegged my nose and squirmed in discomfort, but I quickly forgot about the smell when my gaze landed on the coffins. They were being carried down the aisle.

The big brown one first.

Then the little white one.

The crying got louder and louder then, making me super sad. When the white coffin passed by our pew, my brother burst into tears, crying loud and hard into my mother's chest.

"Shh, Hugh," I scolded. "Be good."

"Shh, Claire," both Mammy and Daddy said at the same time.

I didn't get it.

People started to follow the coffin.

Gerard's nana and granddad, his aunties and uncles, and cousins. His mammy, Sadhbh, who was being held up by her boyfriend, Keith, and his stinky son, Mark.

I didn't like Mark. I didn't like his mean eyes, or his big hands, or how he was always scowling at us.

Shuffling along behind him, with his aunty Jacqui, was my bestest friend in the whole world.

Gerard.

Excitement bubbled inside of me at the sight of him, and I could hardly stop myself from bouncing on the spot. Wide-eyed, I watched as the blond-haired boy, with the curls that matched mine, used the sleeve of his white shirt to wipe his nose before locking his gaze on me.

"Hi," I mouthed, waving at him.

His eyes looked so sad, and his cheeks were streaked with tears, but he raised his hand and waved back at me. "Hi."

My heart started to beat superfast, like I had been running a race, and my belly flip-

flopped like a pancake in a frying pan.

“Don’t move,” Mammy began to say, but I couldn’t help it. I was already slipping out of the pew and racing down the aisle. “Peter, stop her!”

“Claire,” Dad whisper-hissed, but it was too late.

I had made it back to him. Not stopping until I was right beside my best friend, I slipped my hand into his and squeezed. “I missed you.”

Sniffing, Gerard tightened his hold on my hand and wiped his cheek with the sleeve of his black suit jacket as we trailed out of the church after the coffins. “I missed you, too.”

“I’m glad it’s not you in the box,” I whispered in his ear, leaning close enough so that only Gerard could hear me. “You’re my favorite person in the whole wide world, and I would swap everyone for you. Even Hugh.”

“You’re not supposed to say things like that,” he replied, but he didn’t sound mad. Instead, he tightened his hold on my hand as we followed the crowd toward the graveyard.

“I prayed for it to be you,” I said quickly, needing to tell him all the things I had saved up in my head since the boat. Since the drowning. “When they said someone had been saved from the water. I prayed for it to be you.”

He choked out a sob and turned to look at me. “You d-did?”

I nodded. “I promised God I would do all the good things in the world if he brought you back.” I beamed at him. “And he listened.”

“That wasn’t God, Claire,” he whispered, wiping his nose with his sleeve. “That was your dad.”

“I don’t care who it was,” I replied. “Just as long as you’re here.”

“I don’t think my family thinks like that,” he said, turning back to look at the ground as we walked. “I think they wanted your dad to save Bethany.”

“I didn’t,” I admitted honestly. “I wanted to keep you most of all.”

“Claire, come back to us please,” Daddy interrupted, catching up with us and placing a hand on my shoulder. “You can’t be with Gerard right now.”

I opened my mouth to complain, but Gerard answered for me. “Please don’t take her away from me.”

“Leave them be, Pete,” Aunty Jacqui told Daddy. “God knows the poor lad needs a familiar face at this time.”

Daddy didn't look so sure, but he let me walk to the graveside with Gerard.

"I don't know what I'm going to do now," he said when we reached the grave. "I don't want to go home with them."

"With your mam and Keith?" Scrunching my nose up in disgust, I muttered, "And stinky Mark."

Gerard nodded stiffly. "I want my dad."

"Your dad's an angel now, though, right?"

He shrugged. "That's what Father Murphy said."

"Don't you believe him?"

"I don't know what I believe anymore," he replied, and then he went quiet for a long moment before blowing out a frustrated breath. "I looked stupid."

"When?"

"At mass."

"Why?"

"Because I couldn't read it," he said quietly.

"The prayer?" I asked, thinking back to the prayer Gerard read at the altar during mass. "I thought you were great."

"I couldn't fucking read the words, Claire," he choked out, tearful gray eyes locked on mine. "I made it up."

"That's okay, Gerard." I smiled extra hard to make him feel better. "I thought you were the bestest."

"Mark said it's because I'm stupid," he added, tightening his hold on my hand. "He whispered it in my ear when I came back from the altar."

"Mark's the stupid one," I growled, feeling cross. "You're the smartest person I know. Like supersmart."

"It's when the words are on a page," he said, releasing a frustrated breath. "I swear I can remember them just fine in my head. I could have said it no problem if I didn't look down at the stupid page."

"Gerard."

"It makes no sense to me," he hurried to add. "It doesn't matter if I write it down or Mam writes it. Not one word on the page makes sense to me."

“I can help you,” I offered. “I’m getting really good at reading my *Tara and Ben* reader at school.”

“Just stay.” He squeezed my hand. “That helps.”

“It does?”

Nodding stiffly, he took a step closer to the open grave and peeked in. “It’s deep.”

“Yeah, super deep,” I agreed, peering into the big hole in the ground alongside him.

“It’s dark.”

“Uh-huh.” I nodded eagerly. “Too dark.”

“She’s scared of the dark.”

“Bethany?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s okay, though, because your daddy is with her, so he’ll keep her safe.”

“What about me?” he whispered as a lone tear trickled down his cheek. “Who’ll keep me safe?”

“I will, silly,” I replied, releasing his hand so that I could give him a hug. “I’ll keep you safe, Gerard.”

His breath hitched and I knew that he was about to cry again. But he didn’t. Instead, he broke free from my hug, turned away from the big hole, and ran down the footpath away from the big crowd, ignoring his mammy and aunties who were calling his name.

He was faster than me.

He had longer legs.

But Gerard never ran away from me before.

It made me sad.

“Hey, Gerard!” I called out, huffing and puffing out big breaths as I raced after him.

“Wait for me.”

“I’ll get him,” Hugh and Patrick both said, bolting past me like the fastest runners in Ireland.

My brother and his friends were seven. I was only five. It wasn’t fair that I couldn’t keep up with them.

A small hand slipped into mine and I turned around to see a pair of bright-blue eyes.

“Hey.”

“Lizzie!” Smiling at the sight of my other best friend, I threw my arms around her and squeezed. “You came.”

“We all came.”

“Even Caoimhe?”

“Yep. Are you going back to your parents?”

“I need to find Gerard.”

“Want me to come with you?”

I nodded happily.

Grinning back at me, Lizzie slipped her arm through mine and skipped along beside me in the direction of where the boys had gone. “I don’t like the smell in the church.”

“Me either,” she agreed. “It stinks.”

“And it’s too hot,” I added. “Mammy made me wear tights and this big cardigan.” Feeling hot, I tugged at the buttons on my cardigan and sighed loudly when they wouldn’t open. “I’m still not good with the buttons, Liz.”

“That’s okay,” she replied, reaching for my cardigan. “I’m excellent.”

She *was* excellent. Lizzie was so excellent she could even spell the word *excellent*. She always got the super-work stars from Teacher in class. I didn’t mind, though. Apart from Gerard and Shannon, Lizzie was my third favorite friend in the world.

“Do you think he’s going to be okay?” I asked a little while later when we turned a corner in the empty part of the graveyard and the boys came into sight.

Up ahead, I could see my brother, Hugh. He was holding Gerard in his arms. Keeping him close while their other friend, Patrick, sat on the footpath with his arm around the both of them. I couldn’t hear what my brother was saying to Gerard, but I knew it was something smart. Hugh was good that way. He always knew what to say.

“Who?”

“Gerard.”

“I don’t know, Claire.” Lizzie shrugged as she helped to retie my cardigan around my waist when it slipped off. “Caoimhe says that Gibsie’s going to be sad for a long time.”

“A really long time,” I agreed, feeling sad thinking about it.

“She said we need to leave him alone and give him time.”

“Time?”

“Yep.”

“Time for what?”

“Don’t know,” she replied with a shrug. “But Caoimhe says it’s important.”

“I want to hug him.”

“You should,” she told me. “You give the best hugs.”

“Your hugs are pretty good, too,” I replied. “Super squishy.”

“But your hugs feel like sunshine.”

“Like sunshine?” I frowned in confusion. “How?”

“Because you are sunshine, silly,” she laughed before skipping off in the direction of the boys. “Or maybe it’s your shampoo.”

“My shampoo?” Reaching around, I grabbed a curl and took a whiff. “That’s not sunshine, Liz. That’s strawberries.”

“I’m really sorry about your dad, Gibsie,” Lizzie said when she reached their huddle. Not stopping until she was kneeling on the footpath in front of him, she wrapped her arms around our friend and squeezed him tight. “And your sister, too.”

“Thanks, Liz,” Gerard sniffled, hugging her back.

“Oh, I brought this for you,” she added, reaching into the pocket of her skirt. “Sorry, it got bent in my pocket.” She placed a broken daisy on his lap before settling down on the footpath next to my brother. “It’s for the grave.”

“Thanks, Liz.” He shoved the daisy into his pocket before turning to look at my brother and then Patrick. “Thanks for staying, lads.”

“We’ll always stay, Gibs,” Hugh replied, keeping one arm wrapped around Gerard, while using the other to tuck Lizzie close to his side.

“Exactly,” Patrick agreed, hooking his arm around Gerard from the other side. “What are friends for?”

A hot, angry feeling stabbed my belly.

It always happened when Liz and Hugh were together. She was supposed to be my friend, but she always played with my brother when she came over, and I didn’t like it.

Sitting cross-legged on the footpath in front of them, I picked at a scab on my elbow and tried to think nicer thoughts. Kinder thoughts. I’d made a promise to God, after all. I got to keep Gerard.

“Liz!” Caoimhe’s familiar voice drilled through the air. “What were you thinking running off like that? Mam’s looking all over the place for you.”

“Aw, crap,” Lizzie grumbled, quickly climbing to her feet. “I better go back.”

“I’ll walk you back to your sister,” Hugh said, springing up to join her. “I’ll be right back, Gibs.”

“He definitely has the hots for her,” Patrick announced, staring after Hugh and Liz as they walked up the path.

“Oh yeah,” Gerard agreed quietly. “He’s so obvious.”

Frowning, Patrick added, “I think she has the hots for him, too.”

“Yep,” Gerard replied. “She’s obvious, too.”

“What’s the hots?” I asked them.

“It’s when two people want to hold hands with each other and spend all of lunchtime playing together. Just the two of them,” Patrick explained.

“But Hugh doesn’t go to the same school as Liz, so how can they have the hots for each other if they don’t play together at lunchtime?”

“They do it at home instead,” Gerard offered.

“Playing?”

“Yep.”

“But you play with Lizzie, too, Patrick,” I added. “So, does that mean you have the hots for her, too?”

“I don’t know. Maybe sometimes,” he replied, looking distracted before quickly climbing to his feet. “I’ll be right back.”

“Sorry for running away earlier,” Gerard said when Patrick was gone. “I wasn’t running away from you.”

“It was the big hole in the ground, wasn’t it?” I asked, crawling over to sit beside him. “It scared me, too.”

With teary gray eyes, he nodded slowly. “I didn’t want to see them put my sister in the hole.”

“Hey, Gerard?”

“Yeah, Claire?”

“Do you need time?”

“Time for what?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged and readjusted the knot holding my cardigan to my waist.

“Caoimhe said that you lots of need time and that we’re to leave you alone.”

“No, no, don’t go,” he blurted out, snatching up my hand in his. “Okay?”

“I wasn’t going anywhere, silly.” I chuckled, staring down how his hand made my hand look super tiny. “I would never leave you, Gerard.”

“That’s what my dad said.” He sucked in a shaky breath and clenched his eyes shut before whispering, “So just...please don’t go, okay?”

“I’ll never go, Gerard,” I replied, shifting closer so that our shoulders were touching. That was what happened when I was with Gerard. I wanted my hand to touch his hand all the time. Or my shoulder. Or my toes. I never wanted him to step back or leave. I just wanted him to stay right beside me. Even when he was super sad. “I’ll never leave you.”

“I mean it,” he urged, turning to look at me now. “I can’t lose another person I love.”

“You love me?”

He nodded sadly as another tear trickled down his cheek. “I love you most of all.”

I beamed up at him. “Even more than Hugh?”

He scrunched his nose up in disgust. “I don’t love Hugh.”

“Even more than Patrick?”

“I don’t love Feely, either.”

“You don’t?”

“Just you.”

“You know, Gerard, if you ever get super sad, I can be your sister, too. Hugh won’t mind sharing.”

“You can’t be my sister, Claire.”

“Why not?”

“Because you can’t have the hots for your sister.”

“You’ve got the hots for me?” My tummy flipped like a pancake again. “Not Lizzie? Because I heard Hugh say that she’s super pretty once.”

“Lizzie? Ugh. No way,” he grumbled, lip curling up in disapproval. “I don’t see Lizzie.”

“You don’t?”

“I don’t see anyone.” His lips tipped up in the smallest of smiles before he added,

“Except for you.”

“Gerard, sweetheart, it’s time to go home,” a familiar voice called out, and I felt him stiffen beside me when both of our families walked toward us. “We have mourners coming to the house.”

“Five more minutes,” he bit out, breathing hard and fast now. “Please.”

“We have to go now, pet,” his mammy pushed.

“Please,” he repeated, glaring at the footpath. “Five minutes.”

“Gerard...”

“He can come home with us, Sadhbh,” I offered, wrapping my arm around his shoulders as best as I could. It wasn’t easy when he was a lot bigger than me, but I tried. “We have room in the car.”

“Not today, Claire pet,” she replied, sniffing. “Gerard has to be with his family right now.”

“They are not my family,” he choked out, chest heaving. “They’re my family,” he added, pointing in the opposite direction, to where his daddy and sister were buried. “So just leave me alone, okay?”

“Gerard!” Sadhbh gasped, and then burst into another fit of crying. “I need you with me right now.”

“Let him go with his friends, sweetheart,” Keith tried to persuade. “He’ll feel better around people his own age.”

“Yeah, let him go,” Mark grunted. “I’m sick of the crying.”

“Mark, you’re not helping!”

“I can’t breathe,” Gerard strangled out, turning to look at me, gray eyes wild with panic as he began to suck in deep, sharp gulps of air. “I can’t breathe, Claire.”

My eyes widened in horror. “You can’t?”

He shook his head, looking terrified. “I’m drowning.”

“You’re drowning?” Yelping out a startled cry, I sprang to my feet and pulled him with me. “It’s okay, Gerard. You just have to open your mouth and let the air go in.”

“I c-can’t!”

“You can’t?”

“N-no...”

All hell broke loose after that.

“What’s happening to him?”

“He’s having a panic attack.”

“Gibs?”

“Gerard, sweetheart, it’s me, Sinead. Can you hear me?”

“I can’t breathe!”

“Help him!”

“No, don’t l-let g-go of my h-hand!”

“I won’t, Gerard.”

* * *

Lying in the darkness, I stared up at the ceiling and tried my best to be a brave girl. I didn’t like sleeping in the dark, but I was staying in my brother’s room tonight, so I didn’t get to choose. It wasn’t too scary, though. The moon was big and bright and shining through the window like a night-light.

“Are you still awake?”

That was Hugh.

“Yeah.” I whispered back. “Are you?”

“Obviously. I asked you a question, didn’t I?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Is he still holding your hand?”

I looked down at where mine and Gerard’s hands were still joined and nodded. “Yep.”

Pulling himself up on his elbows, my brother leaned over Gerard’s sleeping frame and whispered, “Do you need to use the bathroom before you go to sleep?”

“Super bad.” I chewed on my lip, feeling worried. “What if I wet the bed?”

“Don’t you dare wet my bed.”

“But what if I fall asleep and it happens?”

“Go to the bathroom before you fall asleep.”

“I can’t. He won’t let go and I’ve been holding his hand in all day.”

“Well, he’s out cold now,” Hugh whispered back. “They gave him that medicine to make him sleep.”

“Yeah,” I replied, brows furrowing at the memory. “He was so sad.”

“I know.” Hugh sighed heavily. “Just slip your hand out of his and go.”

“I’ve already tried.” My palm was sweaty and hot, but Gerard was still holding onto it with both of his hands. He hadn’t let go of it since the funeral. “I’m stuck, Hugh.”

“Shit.”

“Don’t curse.”

“Just give him the night with the kids, Sadhbh,” I heard my mother say from the other side of the bedroom door. “He’s already asleep, the poor crater. I’ll bring him over first thing in the morning.”

“Oh shit,” Hugh mouthed, flopping back down into sleep position.

“Don’t curse,” I whisper-hissed, mirroring his actions.

“I don’t know what to do here, Sinead,” Gerard’s mother sobbed. “He’s so broken.”

“He’s a strong boy with a wonderful mother who loves him. He can get through anything.”

“But it’s just so awful because he was already struggling with the separation, but now with Joe gone and Keith having moved in last month—” Another pained sob. “I’m afraid he’ll feel like I’m replacing his father.”

More mumbling continued before the sound of footsteps retreating filled the silence.

“She did replace Joe,” Hugh muttered under his breath.

“Hugh!”

“What? It’s true.”

“Yeah, but you still can’t say it out loud.”

“Whether I say it out loud or say it in my head, it’s still true, Claire. Sadhbh dumped Joe for Keith, and everyone knows it.”

“Even Gerard?”

“Especially Gibs.”

“He never told me.”

“Because he treats you like you’re made of glass.”

“He does?”

“Yup.”

“Oh.” Frowning, I twisted sideways to look at my brother. “Hey Hugh? What does ‘dumped’ mean?”

“It’s when someone you love gets rid of you because they love someone else more,” he replied, rolling onto his side to face me.

“Oh.” I chewed my lip and thought about it for a moment. “Is Mammy going to dump Daddy like Sadhbh dumped Joe?”

“No way,” Hugh replied in a reassuring tone. “Mam loves Dad the right way.”

“Didn’t Sadhbh love Joe the right way?”

“At one time she did,” he replied with a shrug. “But I guess she stopped.”

“That’s super sad.”

“Quit saying the word ‘super’ all the time, Claire.”

“I like the word ‘super,’” I protested. “I can even spell it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, yawning. “Okay, I think I have a plan.”

“You do?”

“Yep.” Nodding, my brother leaned over Gerard’s sleeping frame and reached for his hand. “I’ll hold his hand while you go to the toilet.”

“But what if he wakes up and gets another panic attack?”

“Then you better pee quickly,” my brother grumbled as he pried Gerard’s hands away from mine. “Now, Claire. Run fast.”

The sound of crying woke me up later that night. “Hugh?” Blinking awake, I looked around my brother’s room, feeling confused. “Is that you?”

“N-no, he’s s-still asleep.”

“Gerard?” My belly did the pancake flipping when I heard his voice, and I quickly flipped onto my side to look at him. “Hi.”

He was already lying on his side facing me, with my right hand clasped between both of his. “Hi.”

“Are you okay?”

Sniffing, he wiped his cheek against the pillow and slowly shook his head.

“Did you have a bad dream?”

He nodded once.

“About the boat?” I asked, resting my free hand on top of his. “About falling in the water?”

Another small nod.

“You’re safe now,” I tried to make him happy by saying. “Nice and warm and dry—and you’re back with me.”

He didn’t smile. Instead, he continued to stare at me, while big, fat teardrops trickled down his cheeks. “What am I going to do, Claire?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, shifting closer so that our feet were touching. I had cold toes. Gerard’s were always warm. Except for last Saturday. His and Hugh’s First Holy Communion Day. The day our daddies took our families out on that big boat to celebrate. That day, Gerard was blue and cold all over.

“Without my dad,” he whispered, covering my feet with his. He clenched his eyes shut before choking out, “And m-my s-sister.” Sniffing back another sob, he blew out a shaky breath. “I’m all alone now.”

“No, you’re not,” I whispered back, using my free hand to wipe a super big tear off my cheek. “You’ve got Sadhbh, and Keith, and Mark—”

“I hate him,” he interrupted with a sharp hiss.

“Who? Keith?”

He nodded stiffly. “And n-not just him.”

“Mark, too?”

Sniffing, he swallowed deeply before saying, “I don’t like the way he looks at me.”

My eyes widened. “He looks bad at you?”

“He looks evil at me,” he explained. “Like he wants to hurt me.”

Anger grew in my belly. “Hurt you?”

He nodded again. “Maybe even kill me.”

“Well, I will kick him in his willy if he hurts you,” I growled. “I know how to do it. Just ask Hugh. I kicked him in his willy last week for breaking my Barbie and he cried.”

“Oh yeah.” Gerard smiled. “I remember.”

His first big smile since that day.

“I like your face when you do that,” I told him, reaching up to touch the hole that appeared in his cheek when he smiled.

“Do what?”

“Smile,” I explained. “It makes my tummy wobble.”

“Wobble?”

“Uh-huh.” Nodding eagerly, I snickered when it happened again. “Like jiggly jelly.”

“Huh.” Gerard’s brows furrowed together, and he looked like he was concentrating superhard. “It’s the same for me.”

“Hey, Gerard?”

“Yeah, Claire?”

“You’re still holding my hand.”

“I know.” A shiver rolled through him, and he tightened his hold on my hand. “Sorry. It’s just...holding your hand makes me feel better.”

“It does?”

“Yeah.” He watched me cautiously. “Is that okay?”

“Yep.” I beamed at him. “You can hold my hand forever.”

“You promise?”

“Uh-huh.” I yawned, feeling sleepy. “I promise.”

