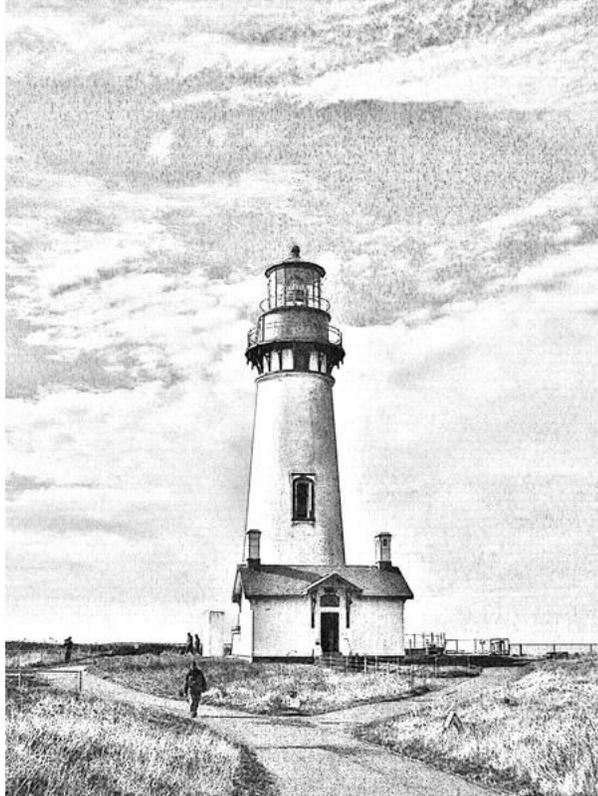


O'Connor's Honor  
A novel  
by  
Janet Kay Jensen



Chapter 1

"Ah, Miss Hoover. Good evening." The proprietor was a balding, bespectacled gentleman whose distinct, unfamiliar accent turned Angela's last name into a word that sounded like "Hoo-vah." He extended his hand to Ian. "And this must be your fiancé."

"Yes, Mr. Cooper, this is..."

"Ian O'Connor." He shook the innkeeper's hand heartily. "Happy to meet you."

"John Cooper. A pleasure. The Missus and I have known Miss Hoover, that is, Doctor Hoover, for years, but we've never met her intended." Smiling at Angela he added, "You didn't tell me he was from Ireland."

"I didn't know. I mean," she said, "I didn't know that you didn't know."

Ian grinned. "I'm afraid my origins are obvious as soon as I open my mouth." He slipped his arm around Angela and pulled her close. "I guess you could say I fell for Miss Hoover the moment I saw her," he confided to the innkeeper, and gave Angela a gentle squeeze. "Swept me off my feet, she did." He looked down at her and winked.

Angela flushed and gave him not-so-gentle nudge with her elbow.

"I'm not surprised, Mr. O'Connor; your intended is a lovely lady," said Mr. Cooper. "By the way, my grandmother was Irish. Your speech is music to my ears." He showed them to a table near the massive stone fireplace. "Grandmother used to say, "If you're lucky enough to be Irish, you're lucky enough.""

"We can't be disagreeing with your grandmother now, can we?"

"No, indeed. You look a bit chilled, Dr. Hoover. Here's a nice table, close to the fire. The usual hot chocolate for you?"

Angela nodded.

"And you, sir?"

"I don't suppose you have any good Irish whisky?" Ian asked wistfully.

"As my grandmother would say, I've a liking for a wee nip of it myself now and then. A glass of Paddy's for the gentleman." Mr. Cooper turned and headed toward the bar.

Angela's eyes traveled over the other diners.

"Angela, that is Dr. Hoover...?"

She blinked. "I'm sorry. I was...distracted."

"Would you mind telling me, if it isn't too forward of me to ask, why you're needing a fiancé? It would appear," he looked pointedly at the sparkling diamond ring on her slender left hand, "that you've got one already. Or do you have a hobby of collecting 'em? Ah, now, wait a moment—perhaps you've simply misplaced him. Really, Dr. Hoover, isn't that a bit careless on your part? Now, just tell me what the poor chap looks like and I'll help you find him. He can't have gone too far on a cold, snowy evening like this."

"I know this must seem very odd," she said.

Ian leaned forward. "You'll find I'm an excellent listener," he said quietly. "That is, if you can get me to quit talking."

She gave him a trace of a smile. "I hardly know where to start."

"Well," he said, sensing her reluctance to talk about what truly worried her, "why don't you start by telling me about the 'Doctor' part of your name?"

"I graduated from medical school two years ago."

"A medical doctor, are you, now?"

"I'm starting a new residency in three months. I've taken some time off until then. With the wedding in just a few weeks..."

He nodded. "Ah. Weddings can get complicated, I'm told. And where is this absent fiancé?"

"He's in Europe with his family."

"Why didn't you go—I'm sorry, that's none of my business."

"He was supposed to be home by now, but they've been delayed. We'd planned to meet here and celebrate New Year's together. Then I'm going to spend a week by myself at my family's cabin in New Hampshire, just a few hours' drive away. It's a tradition for me; I like to begin the new year there."

"A cabin in New Hampshire? Wouldn't that be rather cold this time of year?"

“Oh, no. The cabin’s well-built; it has electricity and inside plumbing. It’s surrounded by a forest, and it borders a lake. It sits on more than twenty thousand acres.” Her face glowed. “The cabin at Diana’s Lake is a very special place. We New Englanders are hardy people. If you’re prepared for the cold,” she slipped out of Ian’s coat and draped it over the back of her chair, “it’s all right.” She looked up. “Oh, thank you.”

Mr. Cooper placed a large mug of fragrant hot chocolate topped with a dollop of cream in front of her and handed a small glass of whisky to Ian, who nodded his thanks and eyed the Paddy’s with pleasure and then offered a gallant toast:

*May God grant you many years to live  
For sure he must be knowin’;  
The earth has angels all too few  
And Heaven is overflowin.’*

Angela’s sudden smile was radiant; he felt amply rewarded. “Here’s to tradition,” he said.

“To tradition.” The glass and mug met with a soft clink.

Ian savored his Paddy’s and studied the woman who sat quietly across from him, the thick mug cupped in her hands and a faraway expression on her face. She wore faded jeans, a plaid flannel short over a turtleneck, and lightweight hiking boots. Her hair hung down her back in a long, heavy honey-colored braid, and a few wavy wisps framed her slender face. She had a small, straight, aristocratic nose, candid blue eyes, and a smile that was surely designed to break an Irishman’s heart. Her complexion was fair; she did not appear to wear makeup, except perhaps a little lipstick. She was lovely.

Her eyes met his in a level gaze. “Now it’s my turn. Tell me about Mr. O’Connor, the Irish gentleman with good timing.”

“The one who catches fallen angels with little dabs of whipped cream on their noses?”

Angela laughed and dabbed at her nose with her napkin. “By the way, I truly am sorry about the tumble.”

“Please don’t be. I’ve never had a friendlier, more...spontaneous welcome in my life. And just think, on my first day in America, too. Now, that’s something to write home about.” He paused, as if reconsidering. “Perhaps, though, it’s simply a local custom?”

Angela flushed and then met his teasing challenge. “All right. First question, Mr. O’Connor: Are you always this charming?”

“I’m Irish,” he shrugged. “It’s been said the Irish become more Irish the farther we are from Ireland. What can I say?”

There was no ready response to his rhetorical question, though an intriguing dimple played in her cheek for a moment.

“It’s still snowing,” Ian marveled, looking out the window where the glowing carriage lights illuminated the swirling flakes.

“There’s a major storm front passing through; we’ll get more by morning.”

"I see. Well, what else would you want to be knowing about your knight in shining armor?" Ian asked. "I'm afraid my armor is rather tarnished and rusty, though, with a few dents to boot."

"Well, so far I know you're Irish, and you're obviously full of blarney. 'I guess you could say I fell for Miss Hoover the moment I saw her...swept me off my feet, she did,'" Angela imitated his accent as she repeated the remark he'd made to Mr. Cooper. "You're certainly quick on the uptake."

"You're very perceptive about the blarney, Dr. Hoover." His irrepressible grin revealed even, white teeth as he repeated the old rhyme:

*There is a stone that whoever kisses  
Oh, he never misses to grow eloquent,  
'Tis he may clamber to a lady's chamber,  
Or become a Member of Parliament;  
A clever spouter he'll soon turn out, or  
An out-and-outer to be let alone;  
Don't hope to hinder him, or to bewilder him,  
Sure he's a pilgrim from the Blarney stone.*

"And you can just come up with poems like that?" she asked, "for any occasion?"

"One of my many faults, Angela."

"Angie," she said. "My friends call me Angie."

He considered this. "Angela," he said. "Do you mind? It fits you so. 'Angie' sounds like a name for a little girl, not a grown woman."

"No one ever calls me 'Angela,' but you know, I rather like it."

"Good. That's settled, then. Well, I'm from County Galway. Born and raised there in a little village about twenty-four kilometers from the city."

"In horse country?"

"Home of one of the largest stud farms in Ireland," Ian confirmed with a mischievous wink. "You must know a bit about horses."

"A bit. I've ridden since I was a little girl."

"And where did that little girl live?"

"Boston. Now it's my turn to propose a toast." Angela raised her mug, tilted her nose upward and crooked her little finger.

*Here's to good old Boston,  
The home of the bean and the cod,  
Where the Lowells talk only to Cabots,  
She lifted an eyebrow,  
And the Cabots talk only to God.*

Ian chuckled and the glass and mug met again. Angela was a thoroughbred, a blue blood, he was willing to wager. Though her attire was casual, there was a look of breeding about her. It was evident in the way she spoke and carried herself, with confidence and composure. His whole village would fit on her family's property in New

Hampshire, and he had never seen a more stunning ring than the one she wore on her left hand.

“But now we’re talking about me again,” Angela said, “and I want to know about you. Do you work with horses? Your face lit up when I asked about them.” Besides, he had a strong, muscular build; he was tall and broad shouldered and he moved with the self-assured easy grace of an athlete. She could picture him as a natural with animals, relying on his own instincts to work with theirs, earning their trust and affection in return.

“I’m very fond of horses, but that’s not my profession. My da, my father, that is, he’s head trainer at the McCann stables in County Galway, and I’ve worked with him since I was a little lad in knee pants. I’ve learned a lot about people, just seeing how animals respond to a soft voice and a gentle touch. Da won’t allow force of any kind with them. It’s the way we were raised, too. Though I’m sure there were times he was tempted to take a switch to one of us, Da never did. The fire in his eyes was enough to make us reconsider whatever mischief we’d planned, or to own up to our misdeeds.”

“He sounds like a wonderful person.”

Ian nodded. “None finer. Speaking of horses, the Irish horse is a lucky animal, did you know? It has the ability to see ghosts.”

“Really?” The elusive dimple made another appearance.

“Ah, yes indeed. It’s believed that horses could talk before the great flood, and can still understand speech today. That’s why a person with the gift can gentle the wildest horse by whispering certain words in its ear.”

“And your father has that gift?”

“He does. It’s a marvelous sight to behold.”

“Now I’m very curious. What is your profession, then?” Angela asked.

“I teach. And I write a bit.”

“You teach? What’s your field?”

“Literature.”

A born teacher, she suspected, an articulate man with a passion for words and respect for their power. “Where do you teach?”

He paused, slowly swirling the Paddy’s left in the bottom of his glass. He did not look up and his voice was quiet. “I teach—that is, I taught—at National University of Ireland, Galway College.”

\*

Angela sipped her hot chocolate. She had not missed Ian’s use of the past tense. Angela glanced at her borrowed fiancé. Ian O’Connor was certainly very attractive in a nontraditional way, with dark brown eyes, wavy brown hair that fell nearly to his shoulders from a widow’s peak, a broad forehead and a nose she suspected had once been broken, noting a characteristic flattened area on the bridge. A few small scars on his face suggested a rough-and-tumble boyhood, or perhaps mishaps on the playing field. He had a prominent Adam’s apple and a deep dimple in his squared chin. His was a face one could study at length, she suspected, always coming away with a new or deepened sense of the person behind it.

“And what do you write?” she asked.

“Short stories and poetry, mostly. I’ve a play in progress, I’m growing a novel in my head, and there’s some scholarly research I’ve pursued since my dissertation.”

“What have you published, Dr. O’Connor?”

He shifted in his chair. “Oh, I’ve just got a bit in print here and there.”

“And what would that bit include?”

He leaned back in his chair and stretched, lacing his fingers behind his head.

“Well, a couple of my papers have been accepted by academic journals, several short stories are in anthologies, and a little poetry’s been published in the past two years.”

“You’ve also had experience on the stage.”

“Now, why would you be thinking that?”

“Well, you played a convincing fiancé when you met Mr. Cooper. And your voice, it’s powerful and expressive. There’s something about the way you move, as if you’ve had training in movement...I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Well,” he said with a sigh, “I do have to play the brooding poet occasionally, you know, just to fit my image.”

Under heavy, dark straight brows and long thick lashes, his brown eyes seemed to regard the world with a mixture of intensity, curiosity, humor and tenderness; yet she also sensed a certain guardedness in their depths. Then he smiled, revealing straight white teeth. “And yes, I’ve done a bit on the stage, mostly college and community productions.”

“I knew it. What are your favorite plays?”

“Well, last year our repertory company did *Harvey* and *The Foreigner*—”

“Don’t tell me. You played Charlie in the *Foreigner*.”

“You know the play?”

“Oh, yes. It’s hilarious.”

“I was indeed Charlie. It’s a great role; he gets to react to all the outrageous things the other characters confide in him because they think he doesn’t understand English. So most of the play is a joke the audience shares with Charlie.”

She nodded. “It’s brilliant. What other plays have you done?”

“Well, there’s *I Hate Hamlet*.”

“You played the American soap star who’s petrified to do Shakespeare in Central Park?”

“I did. That play’s a romp. I even managed a half-decent American accent. One day I want to play Barrymore’s ghost.”

“The secret to Hamlet,” she began...

“Tights,” they said in unison, and laughed.

“My favorite line in the whole play,” he said. “Always gets a good laugh.”

“My grandmother’s mink stole appeared in that play,” she said.

“Excuse me?”

“After my grandmother died we went through her trunks and donated some of her clothes to the Hancock Theater Society in Boston. They were delighted to have

them. Soon after that I saw them perform *I Hate Hamlet*, and when the flamboyant agent made her first entrance, there she was in Grandma's stole."

"I'm sure it 'stole' the show. Sorry, bad pun. Why didn't you keep it, though?"

"I'd never wear it. Tell me what other roles you've played. You've probably guessed I love the theater."

He nodded in approval. "Let's see...other roles, well, I've been in a few of Will Shakespeare's plays."

"Let me guess." She clasped her hands over her heart and looked upward with a dreamy sigh. "Romeo."

He gave her a guilty smile. "In my youth," he admitted.

"Aha! I was right. Hamlet, Macbeth, Oberon?"

"Yes, yes, and no. I played Bottom, actually, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He's the bumbling character who makes an ass of himself, so to speak, if you'll pardon my language."

"Pardoned. Let's see...Petruccio?"

"Who tamed the beautiful Katharina. *The Taming of the Shrew*. You know your Shakespeare, Dr. Hoover."

"Not well enough. But I have a bone to pick with your Mr. Shakespeare."

"And what might that be? You're stepping on dangerous ground, Miss, when you criticize the Bard."

She met his challenge. "Some of his plays are filled with blatant male chauvinism."

"Ah," he nodded, "true enough. But in some of his plays the women are smarter than the men, you know. They just have to go behind the men's backs to accomplish what they want, and keep them in the dark, which isn't all that difficult in the first place."

"There you go, defending him."

'Tis a shame he wasn't Irish; we'd dearly love to claim him. Though he had his faults, nobody could tell a story better. And no one could use the English language the way he did."

"Agreed." No doubt many coeds developed a sudden interest in Shakespeare after seeing Dr. O'Connor on campus.

"Have you played many villains?"

"Would Iago do?"

"Oh. Yes, he'll do. What was it like to play someone so evil?"

"Well, it touched something very dark within me, and it was exhausting. Iago's such a complex mixture of evil, brilliance, passion and jealousy...sometimes when you play that kind of a strong, destructive character, you need reassurance from the rest of the company that you're still on good terms when the play's over. On opening night, I even sent flowers to the actresses who played Desdemona and Emilia. And a bottle of whisky to Othello."

"And then you went onstage and betrayed all of them. How could you?"

“Well, I suppose it was consistent with Iago’s personality, to flatter and then betray,” Ian said.

“You’re defending him?”

“Oh, no. He’s a sleazy character indeed. My English professor who introduced me to the play said it should have been named *Iago*; it’s truly his story.”

“Well, I’m sure your friends loved the flowers and the whisky. What other villains have you played?”

He paused. “Well, in *The Glass Menagerie* I was the Gentleman Caller, who breaks the fragile young woman’s heart. He’s not a villain, but he innocently causes a lot of grief and pain just the same. He’s so charming, just so full of his wee little self, and then he dashes all the girl’s dreams and leaves her with no illusions, without even knowing what he’s done. The actress who played Laura could just break my heart; she played her with such naiveté and vulnerability. She made Laura every bit as delicate as her collection of glass figurines. Sometimes it’s easier to play the nice guy.”

“Nice guys. Let me think. Elwood P. Dowd.”

Ian grinned. “Bless his soul. Truth be told, I actually found myself talking to Harvey a time or two at home. He’s awfully good company, you know, and it’s a privilege to have a Pooka in the house.”

“It’s one of my favorite plays. So gentle and innocent...wonderful comedy.”

“Oh, yes, it’s a charming play. I had to cut my hair for that role, though.” He ran his hand through his tousled hair.

It would be a shame to cut hair like that, Angela thought. She tilted her head and studied him for a moment. “It’s hard to picture you with short hair.”

“Even harder to picture Elwood P. Dowd with long hair, though, don’t you think? Or an earring, for that matter.” He touched the small gold hoop in his left earlobe. “The worst part was everybody doing double-takes, passing me in the hall without saying hello because they didn’t recognize me, and then apologizing profusely. Rumors were even going around about my girlfriend stepping out with another man, but the other man was me. We got a good laugh out of that. Playing Mr. Dowd was worth it.”

“Let me hear your American accent.”

Ian rested his elbows on his knees and his chin in his cupped hands. Then he closed his eyes, deep in thought. After a few moments he looked up with an earnest expression on his face, straightening an imaginary necktie. “Allow me to introduce myself,” he said eagerly, politely, without a trace of his native brogue. With an engaging smile he extended his hand. As they shook hands he said, “Dowd’s the name, Elwood P. Dowd. Let me give you my card.” He reached in his shirt pocket and handed her the stub of a boarding pass. “See,” he pointed to the card as she held it, bemused, “this is my phone number. Now, don’t call the other one, that’s the old number. Are you free for dinner tomorrow night? I’m inviting a few friends over, nothing formal, and I’d be honored if you could come.”

She smiled approvingly. “Very good. I’m impressed, Mr. Dowd.”

Ian acknowledged her praise with a graceful bow of his head.

"If you had the chance," she regarded him curiously, "what other roles would you like to play, besides Barrymore's ghost?"

He winced. "Please, I'm not quite old—er, mature enough for that one yet. Give me a few years. Well, I'd like to take a stab at Ross Poldark."

"Another bad pun." She counted them on her fingers. "That's two, Ian. No, three."

"More where those came from, I'm afraid. You've read the *Poldark* books?"

"And I watched the BBC series. It was wonderful, with all that swashbuckling and adventure and romance. Cornwall is a beautiful place, and the characters seem so real. I could definitely see you as Ross Poldark."

"I was born in the wrong century," he sighed.

She smiled. "I'm beginning to see that. What's your next play going to be?"

"*Brilliant Traces.*"

"I've never heard of it."

"It's an intriguing, very intimate play. Just two characters, a man and a woman stranded in a little cabin during a snowstorm in Alaska. I brought it along with me, to start studying my part. That is, if I decide to do it. I suspect every performance will have a different texture; some nights there'll be tears, others not, depending on how it develops between the two of us. That's the magic of being on the stage, never quite knowing what will happen, and being willing to take the risk."

"I'd like to see it someday." I'd like to see you in it.

"I think you'd enjoy it. Very moving. Beautifully written."

"Do you sing?"

"Would you believe I was a choir boy?" The twinkle in his eyes gave him away.

She tried to imagine him as a solemn, innocent, earnest young boy in immaculate choir robes, looking and singing like an angel. "No."

He shook his head with a rueful smile. "My Mum would have loved it, but I had to choose between choir practice and football practice. Football won out. I think I broke her heart."

"And your nose."

"Very observant." He rubbed the bridge of his nose with his index finger.

"I'm a doctor," she reminded him. "It's my job to be observant."

"They tell me it adds character to my face."

"It does."

"Well, in answer to your question, I did some singing in school groups, though, so I think Mum forgave me. My da, now, he's got a glorious voice and my brother and brother-in-law sings very well. The four of us are thinking of competing as a quartet in the annual village music festival. I'm just along for the ride, mostly."

"I'm sure you can hold your own. Is every one in your family musical?"

"Oh, yes. Mum sings and plays, and Maggie, my big sister, she has the voice of an angel. Branwen's the baby of the family, and she's accomplished on the fiddle and flute as well."

"Family parties must be full of music at your house."

“Bloody noisy, too,” he said with a smile.

Angela took an inventory, counting on her fingers. “So you’re a teacher, a writer, an actor, a sometime singer, an athlete...” There was something else in the depths of his dark eyes, a flicker of pain or grief that belied his charming, bantering manner. “Who else are you, Ian O’Connor?”

He gave a sudden yawn. “Exhausted. Sorry, that just snuck up on me. I’ve spent a lot of time in planes and airports today. After a while, you know, your body feels like a pretzel, all twisted in a knot. I think jet lag must be setting in.”

“You flew all the way from Ireland today?” She read the stub of his boarding pass, and noted that it was coach. “You must be worn out.”

“I am.” He paused. “Bloody hell!”

“What’s the matter?”

“Excuse the language; I just remembered I don’t have a place to stay tonight.”

“Aren’t you staying here?”

“No; as the Bible says, ‘there was no room at the inn.’ Mr. Cooper thinks I’m your intended, and therefore staying with you, I guess, but the clerk at the desk told me every room was booked. I was walking back to my car when the heavens opened an angel from Boston fell into my arms. Until this very moment I completely forgot about my dilemma.”

“I’ll ask Mr. Cooper to call another inn, there are several nearby, and locate a room for you. I’ll explain everything to him, I mean, about asking you to pose as my fiancé tonight. And I insist you stay for dinner, as my guest.”

“Dinner sounds very appealing,” he admitted, “especially after what the airlines try to pass off as food. But I will pay my own way.”

“Please, won’t you let me? You’ve done me an enormous favor, just being here with me. I—well, I just didn’t want to appear to be alone tonight, and I’ve enjoyed your company, too. At least I can send you on your way with a full stomach.”

Ian shook his head, placed his hand over his heart. “We of the Blarney Brotherhood of the Knights in Tarnished Armor are a bit old fashioned.”

Angela rolled her eyes. “You were definitely born in the wrong century.”

Ian nodded. “It’s that bloody medieval mentality. I’m not used to a lady paying for my dinner.”

“And I’m not used to being turned down,” she retorted. “If you were the chivalrous gentleman you claim to be, you’d let me do this, as a lady’s favor to her knight.”

Evidently the knight knew when to retreat gracefully. “You win. I’m too tired to argue with a lady tonight. And too hungry. Just one question, though. Are you always this straightforward?”

“I am.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “And are you always this stubborn?”

“I am.”

He grinned. “I like that in a woman.”

