

## COMING HOME

by *Lara Zielinsky*

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### Prologue

Margaret tucked the blankets around her father's shoulders, and sat on the edge of his bed watching over him as he fell into a fitful sleep. For the first time in fifty-eight years, James Rory O'Halloran lay down to sleep alone.

A week ago Margaret's mother, Fiona Mary Margaret Douglass O' Halloran had passed from this world to the next. Death was the only thing that could have separated the childhood sweethearts whom had raised a boisterous Irish-American clan in this big house. The whole family, which included Margaret, three brothers, their wives and children, and Mary, Margaret's older artist-commune living sister, had come together.

He had not wanted to come in here, to his bedroom shared with Fiona. Mary in fact found him sleeping on the living room couch after coming in from her own walk through the old neighborhood. It had been the same for the last several nights. Her father was recalcitrant, but Mary was stubborn. Something attributed to the richly reddened locks adorning her head, a genetic gift from her mother.

Momma. Margaret choked back on tears, stepping away from her father's bed.

Following a funeral mass they had laid Mother to her rest in the cemetery of St. Brigitte's Catholic Church, where Douglass and O'Halloran kin and dozens of other Irish-American immigrant families had been buried for almost two hundred years.

In the last few days gradually the family returned to their lives. Most of the O'Halloran siblings had already left for their homes. Only Mary and Margaret remained, and Margaret had a train ticket for home to DC in just two more days.

Michael the middle son, who lived in Braintree with his elementary-age boy and girl and a content homemaker wife Vivian, had promised to keep up with Dad.

But as she watched her father sleeping, Margaret wondered if he required more than they, even at that close distance, could give him. He needed companionship and should have had a handyman, even before Momma's death, to maintain much of the multi-story home. Earlier that day she had caught her father shakily changing a ceiling fixture's light bulb on the third-floor landing. Margaret shook her head. She needed to see that the family did not lose him to some home accident, especially now, right after their mother's passing.

When her father's breathing evened, Margaret quietly slipped out to the second-floor hall and crossed over to her room. She stepped out onto the balcony where she had spent many nights as a young woman determining the direction of her life.

The view was a breathtaking one, or at least it had always seemed so. Row houses and skyline guarded

the way down to the Boston wharves. She leaned on her elbows on the wrought-iron railing and smiled.

It had been one of the best places she could have imagined to grow up. Boston Harbor was something of a gateway to the rest of the world, home of the Revolution, and birthplace to a much younger Margaret's dreams. She had learned to sail on the Charles River, had crossed into Cambridge as a teenager for concerts on the green lawns of Boston's arts elite. She chuckled, spying the wide open green space alongside the river's west bank. When she was twelve she had her first kiss on the Esplanade during a Boston Pops Fourth of July celebration.

"So here you are."

Margaret turned to see her elder sister Mary standing in the bedroom doorway. Long hair almost to Mary's waist was tied back with a cotton cloth. It should have been far too long for a woman of fifty years. Margaret, herself 43, had cut her auburn locks to a more mature shoulder length. But she could not deny that Mary looked "right" however she chose to wear her hair. In true younger-sister-admiring-elder fashion, Margaret thought Mary one of the most exotically attractive women she had ever seen.

Mary moved into the room, her skirt swishing lightly around her ankles. The floor-length flower-print black skirt complemented a beige hand-stitched Indian caftan, actually from India, obtained on one of Mary's many trips abroad.

Margaret stifled the envy and nodded quietly. "So here I am." Mary's long-fingered hands cradled a steaming mug. Margaret did not doubt that the contents were an herbal tea blend. It seemed that was all her sister, in her New Age California wisdom, ever drank, hot or cold. Cleansing for the constitution, Mary would say. Margaret preferred her coffee.

Mary's voice was smooth, as opposed to her question, which was filled with the rocky treachery of a dare. "So... When are you heading back to D.C.?"

"Two more days. Maybe. Well..." Margaret shook her head as she remembered assuring herself their father had taken all his medications. "Maybe I should stay around. Line up a few services for Dad. School's not back in session for five weeks yet." She shrugged. "I could be here for him."

Mary absorbed her ramble and Margaret knew the moment her sister got a bone of an idea. The dark emerald eyes caught a gleam. "Why not just stay here," her elder sibling said finally. "Permanently. Move back to Boston, Mags."

"I am not a newspaper," she protested her sister's nickname for her – a contention they had since childhood together.

Mary smiled. "You're avoiding the issue."

"I can't just move here."

"Why not? You come back the most regularly of any of us anyway. Every summer. Every Thanksgiving. Christmas. Easter?" Mary ticked off the holidays as Margaret rolled her eyes.

"What about my friends?"

" You have friends here."

" What about my job?"

" They need teachers everywhere. You're one of the best. Didn't you just finish that master teacher program?"

" You mean the national boards?" Margaret clarified. With a sigh, she finished, " I forgot I told you about that."

Mary patted her shoulder. " Go interview at a few schools. Who says you can't save the world from your own backyard?"

Margaret covered her face briefly. Exasperated she pointed out, " I haven't wanted to save the world since I was in my twenties, Mary."

" Agreed. So maybe you just save yourself."

Mary stepped forward, almost onto the balcony, but held back, a concession to the fact that they were grown women now and Mary was not being sought by her younger sister to solve a childhood woe. But she offered her advice anyway.

" You know this. Why not at least be happy in a place you enjoy? You've always loved Boston."

Leaning back against the railing, Margaret earnestly threw a wrench into the discussion. " I'd have to find a place. That won't be easy. The housing market here is terrible."

" So, stay here with Dad for a while. He does need someone. This place is perfectly located. You'd have quick access to nearly all the schools."

Margaret gave her sister a chagrined look. Mary merely smiled like a cat with the proverbial canary. " You have an argument for everything, don't you?"

" Except one." Margaret did not cover her surprise. Mary stepped past and rested her own arms on the railing and looking around at the sights before looking over her shoulder and pinning Maggie with a significant look. " If you suddenly said you have a fiancé or a boyfriend to go back to, I would have to pass out from the shock."

Margaret covered her face at that well-place jab and leaned tiredly against the house, crossing her arms over her chest. Looking out again at the view down to the river, she focused on the lights flickering on the steamers, cruisers and tankers at anchor in the harbor. She inhaled as she caught sight of the Constitution masts, sails furled and glowing slightly in the moonlight. " I'll think about it."

To her credit, Mary kindly did not gloat. " It's late," she said instead after a minute of silence between them. " I think I'll go to bed."

" Good night," Margaret replied softly.

" Sleep well," Mary wished her.

Yeah. Right. Margaret dropped her gaze to her feet and hugged herself while her sister walked out quietly.

## Chapter 1

The school district office had taken Margaret's paperwork to begin the process of requesting a copy of her personnel file from her current district in Virginia. The next step was to visit schools in person. Principals much preferred to hire from personal meetings than from a simple pool of resumes. So she headed for the Cambridge neighborhoods, likely the most similar to her current school district where more than seventy percent were international students, children of the diplomats and other Foreign Service staff at the embassies from forty-two countries. The group was diverse enough to speak more than sixty-two languages natively and the carefully accented English they utilized had created quite a unique character.

Margaret had found that she particularly enjoyed it, so if she was going to change jobs, she might as well come to someplace similar.

She had just come from speaking with the principal of Brooking High, which had an International Baccalaureate program like the one Margaret would be leaving. However they had declined to accept her immediately. Joining the IB faculty would only happen after a year teaching the honors English classes.

"Our students and faculty in the program are particularly close," the school's principal Arthur Brooking III had said.

Yes, she thought. It would feel like Roosevelt High School, right down to the cliques. With an unsettled frown, Margaret settled into her father's Cutlass sedan for the drive home. A check of the time however diverted her to looking into possibilities for lunch. It was early for most people to be considering that meal, only 11:30, but she was used to eating at the same time as students.

Where she finally settled was an unassuming storefront tavern, the booths set behind a bustling bar. The server took her drink order and left her to scan the menu. A table of four nearby drew her attention when a discussion became boisterous.

"Oh, hell, Harry. It isn't the kids that give us hassles. It's all the damn paperwork, just ask Ronnie here." Margaret turned slightly to observe them, seeing a big blond male patting the shoulder of a rather depressed looking blonde woman seated next to him.

The young woman in turn, pushed her long hair from her face and straightened up, putting down the pencil in her right hand. "This is more impossible than the bar," she grouched. "What use am I ever going to have for algebraic derivations?"

"Well, if you don't pass the math part of your cert," prodded a brunet male across the table. "Steven is going to have to send you back to the courtroom."

"Thanks. Just cheer me up why don't you?" Ronnie covered her face. Harry popped a fried bite-size appetizer into his mouth and smiled.

The fourth in the group, a tiny round-faced blonde seated next to Harry but for some reason Margaret got the impression that she was trying not to sit too close, shook her head. "Why aren't you planning your certification in Literature anyway?"

"You know as well as I do that Winslow doesn't have any English openings." Ronnie shrugged. "So I have to cert in ex ed or I'll be teaching out of subject next year."

"You could find another school, if you really still wanted to teach?"

"Lauren, I don't want anywhere else. I like Winslow. I like the kids. I'm certainly doing more than I could in a courtroom."

"She just doesn't want to leave me," the blond male next to Ronnie concluded with a smile, again patting her on the shoulder.

Ronnie didn't smile at that.

Margaret considered the name. Winslow must be a pretty special place to have attracted a lawyer to teach exceptional education. No English department openings though. Still, she thought, maybe she could see the school. Teachers all over gave last minute notice. Maybe an opening would come up.

Shortly afterward, the foursome finished their meal and paid their bill. None went to the rear to pick up a vehicle, instead walking west down the street. Margaret finished her meal in silence, pondering still what a school must be like to attract such a collection of individuals to keep teaching.

Out in the car later, Margaret hesitated when she saw the name of the principal on the list provided by the district office. She grasped the steering wheel. Well, if I'm coming home, might as well go all the way.

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"Ms. O'Halloran?"

"Yes?" Margaret stood up from the lobby chair to greet the man approaching from behind the school's front counter. He was approximately her age and just a little taller, making him somewhat short for a man. His dark hair was meticulously arranged and his expression, though smiling, felt somewhat pugnacious. She held out her hand, which he took as he spoke.

"Principal Harper is still out to lunch. I am the Assistant Principal. Scott Guber. I noticed you're interested in a position on our faculty?"

"I am relocating to the area for family reasons," she offered a minimal explanation.

He looked at the paper in his hand, her resume she realized. "From the Consolidated School District of Condas County, Virginia," he read.

"Yes. I'm currently with their International Baccalaureate program. English."

His eyes, an intelligent gleaming brown, met hers. "We don't currently have any openings in that department."

She hid her knowledge of that fact. That he was bringing it up so quickly, so casually, suggested to Margaret that he had no intention of even interviewing her. "I see." She started to reach for her resume, to take it and leave.

"Certainly the district office gave you a list of the current openings," he asked.

"I didn't look at Winslow in particular," she admitted. "I was..."

"You're coming unprepared and asking for an interview?" Margaret would have responded to it, but Scott had returned his attention to her resume. "Master teacher?"

"Yes, last year," she confirmed.

Scott took another look at her. Margaret felt the scrutiny in his pursed lips and raking gaze. "Are you capable of certifying in another field?"

She exhaled. "It's all right. Just... old times. Never mind. I wanted to change locations, not change fields."

"I see. Well, Ms. O'Halloran," he held his hand out. "I wish you luck on your search."

Margaret stepped out of the office a few seconds later, standing aside as she considered her feelings. Looking around the corridor to get reoriented, she saw the bulletin board on the opposite wall, next to a door labeled 'Teachers Only'. Amid the posts of available apartments, used cars for sale, and the summer school schedule, were flyers remaining from the previous year's school events. Guber conducted a school concert? She looked over her shoulder back at the now-closed office door. The announcement of last fall's school play "It's Our Town Too" with the positive school paper review tacked to it raised her eyebrow in surprise. That sort of thing wouldn't have flown when she was in school, or in the district where she currently taught. Steven certainly runs an interesting place, she thought with admiration.

"Hello," a voice sounded behind Margaret and she turned to find one of the women from the bar earlier. Margaret seemed to remember her name was Ronnie and inhaled, trying to find words to respond.

She had thought the woman startlingly attractive across the distance in the bar, but up close, she was not as thin as first thought, and the anxieties expressed through her words to her friends no longer seemed to plague her expression, which was open and inviting. The blonde had her head cocked to the side a little inquisitively and a collection of books was wrapped up safely in her arms. A small smile quirked the full lips while Margaret became caught in clear blue eyes. She felt crowded and quickly took a step backward.

"Hello," she managed finally.

"Were you looking for the office to register a student?" The voice was smooth. Margaret felt her stomach quiver and straightened her back, pushing away the reaction. But doing so made her own thoughts come together only slowly.

"I... was dropping off my resume."

"Oh." Ronnie smiled widely. "Hey." She shifted her load and held out a hand. "I'm Ronnie Cooke. I'm a

teacher here."

"I know," Margaret started automatically reaching to take Ronnie's extended right. Long fingers, warm and slender wrapped around the back of her hand, and the grip tightened briefly. She felt a surge during contact and looked up to see Ronnie's bemused look. "I mean. Well, you look like a teacher," she covered.

That caused a chuckle to bubble from the blonde that skittered over Margaret's skin like a live thing. She shivered as Ronnie commented, "Really? On my first day here I had a student ask me if I was a 'real' teacher."

"Oh no," Margaret commiserated. "What did you say?"

"I asked him if he was a real student." Amusing herself with the memory, Ronnie offered a smirk.

Margaret chuckled. "I bet that went over well."

"Actually I think it helped. So, did Scott give you the tour?"

"No. I..!" Margaret shook her head, pulling her gaze away to the floor. "I won't be taking a position here."

Ronnie frowned. "Winslow is a great school. You should at least take a look around before you decide."

"There's no..I wasn't..!" Margaret clamped her jaw shut. Why the hell couldn't she complete a sentence?

It must be the hand working its way across my shoulder, she startled, realizing Ronnie was already directing her to move. The woman was not going to take no. She focused quickly on what the blonde was saying. Mostly to escape the sensations that now had her groin quivering.

"I'm no expert, but I can show you the big spots. Just hang on while I get my mail before we start."

So commandeered, Margaret found herself relieving Ronnie of several books and following her into the mailroom. All the while she continued to protest taking the blonde's time. "Surely you have your own work to do."

"Nonsense. Everyone else has gone home. I prefer going down to the dungeon with company anyway."

Margaret startled. "The dungeon?"

"A classroom in the basement. Same floor as the gym, but the locker rooms and the gym floor are accessed from another staircase. Gets real quiet down there."

"Just one classroom?"

"It probably was a storage room for equipment until the school expanded so much that it needed to be converted to a classroom," Ronnie shrugged off. "Harry used to teach that class until they moved him upstairs."

"What subject do you teach?"

"English and Social Studies. Another teacher covers their Science and Math."

"That's unusual."

"It's for at-risk kids," Ronnie explained.

"And you like it?"

"Yeah, I do. Otherwise I wouldn't be putting myself through this stuff." She nudged the books in Margaret's hands, making Margaret take note of the top title.

"I just took the National Board exam," Margaret mentioned, then wondered why she was saying anything. It's not like I'll ever see this woman again. Though she imagined the experience would be quite pleasant.

But Ronnie sighed at Margaret's words. Paused on the stairs down where she had started to lead Margaret, Ronnie sounded awed. "National Board? Less than five percent of teachers get that. You must be good." Margaret dropped a hand on her shoulder as they were headed downstairs.

Margaret said nothing to that. What could she say? Most of the test had been video her kids had helped her shoot of classroom lessons, accompanied by a journal she had kept of her thoughts about her own approach to teaching. Her master's degree from American University's Graduate School had been more useful to her subject, but the Master Teacher distinction had almost added ten thousand dollars to her salary.

Quickly she squeezed the shoulder under her palm, finding it impossible not to offer a gesture of assurance after Ronnie had done the same to her earlier. "Well, come on. Show me this dungeon." She bestowed a smile on the younger woman as she glanced up.

"All right." Ronnie nodded. Margaret found herself fancifully wishing this was her official tour, that she would come back. To remain connected to this woman somehow seemed imperative. She realized where her thoughts were leading and stifled them. When they entered the room, she took a look around.

It was like most classrooms anywhere though Margaret noticed a boarded over window. "Does that happen often?"

"Kids on the street at night. Like anywhere else I guess."

Margaret was suddenly concerned. "Were you here when it happened?"

Ronnie shook her head. "No." Margaret felt a sharp jolt of relief at that knowledge. Ronnie cleared her throat. "Well, what do you want to see first? What's your discipline?"

"English."

Ronnie settled on her desk, half-seated on the corner and reached around to the bookshelf. "Here's the eleventh grade text. Bronson. I find it pretty good."

"Jeffrey Bronson?" After checking the inside bookplate, Ronnie nodded. "Bronson's a windbag," Margaret commented. "I've met him."

"You've met him?"

"Yes. I was fortunate, or unfortunate, I suppose, to be on the district's committee for textbook adoption. I went to a fair in St. Louis and he was there."

"You don't think the book is good?"

"The textbook's fine since someone else probably edited for him, but I would use him more as a supplement. I prefer to read and encourage discussion."

"Well, I..!" Ronnie shuffled the book back onto her desk. "Um. Anyway.. I can take you up to one of the English classrooms if you like?"

"One classroom is like another. It's all right. Mr. Guber told me there aren't any openings so I really can't take up any more of your time." Margaret straightened. Realizing she had inadvertently bothered Ronnie with her opinion, she wanted to end the meeting positively. "You have a good year. And don't worry about your tests. You'll do fine." Unable to help herself, Margaret reached across the space and patted the other woman's shoulder, guiltily noticing how rounded it had become, and how very fragile it felt.

"I..!" Easing from the touch, Ronnie covered the move away by picking up the book. "Thanks." She looked up again. "Good luck on your job hunt. Where..where are you from?"

"I've lived just outside D.C. for the last several years," Margaret said. "But I grew up here."

"So did I."

With a surprised nod, Margaret named her parents' street.

Ronnie smiled. "That's just a few blocks from my old neighborhood. Harry – you'll meet him if you come to work here – grew up there too. When I wanted out of law, coming here was the only thing I considered. There's just something about this place..!"

Margaret nodded and smiled at the faraway look, captivated by Ronnie's idealism shining from sapphire eyes. She blinked and shook her head. It was the same expression she wore every night as a girl looking across the city to the harbor. "Yes, I know the feeling."

"Well, I.. it was nice to meet you." Ronnie paused. "I never asked your name. I'm sorry. I'm Ronnie Cooke..!"

"You said that already," Margaret smiled, holding out her hand. "It was very nice to meet you, Ronnie. I'm Margaret O'Halloran."

Ronnie's stomach gave a little twitch as she put her hand in Margaret's, feeling the small bones, surprised at how much casual strength there was in the tiny grip. "Maybe I'll see you around? Even if you're not at Winslow in the fall."

Lifting her chin, Margaret quirked a smile. "Maybe you will."

## Chapter 2

"Scott, what's going on?"

Margaret turned as the AP's face went pale. "Steven, enjoy your lunch?"

"Steven?" The big muscular black man regarded her with moderate interest. She could not help but stare. In his face, every bit of the same 43 years she bore, had filled out the gawky black teen she had befriended during Boston's desegregation. She held out her hand, watching as he regarded her strangely. She supplied the answer he silently sought, "Margaret. Margaret O'Halloran."

Recognition and joy stole over his face so completely, so comically, Margaret almost bit through her lip to keep from laughing. His huge hand slipped around hers and the squeeze gradually strengthened with his own pleasure at their meeting. "My God, Maggie! What the hell are you doing here?"

"You know her?" Scott asked. To Margaret's ears he sounded slightly disappointed.

"Steven and I were in the inaugural integrated class of South Boston High."

"Son of a bitch, what a descent into hell that was, wasn't it?"

Though his voice was light, his eyes had darkened with memory, same as her own. They had survived it though, even created a friendship against the odds. That bore a kind of joy. She smiled and suggested, "Lunch?"

"Was delicious," he grinned at her. Scott stared.

Margaret took her hand from Steven's and pointed over his shoulder. "Drinks then?"

Steven asked his AP, "Scott?"

Still bearing a puzzled frown, Scott blinked from one to the other then nodded, paused again and shrugged. "Yes, I suppose."

Slipping his arm around Margaret's slight shoulders, Steven Harper threw a thumbs-up sign guiding her around past his AP and to the school's front entrance. "Thanks, Scott."

In Scott's murmured response, Margaret thought she heard her father's stunned tone of 25 years ago when Steven had come by to escort her to the Senior Prom. "You're... welcome?"

And damn if Steven didn't wear the exact same pleased-with-the-world smile then as his meaty face bore now.

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"Don't mind Scott." Steven's words were the first said between them after leaving the school grounds.

Absently, in accord, they had begun walking east, toward the riverfront.

Margaret looked up and spied the corner street signs. She stopped, suddenly flashing on a smell of smoke, screams and taunts. She shivered. Steven's hand grasped her shoulder. She shook off the unease. "Do you walk this way often?"

Steven shook his head. "But it's good to remind myself."

"Where you come from?" she asked.

"Nah. What the violence could really be like." He tossed a thumb back over his shoulder. "Most of 'em are too young. Think today's gangs are horrible. Or kid-on-kid violence is the worst it's ever been." She grasped his hand, remembering along with him. "They don't remember when parents condoned it – even participated."

"Even then though there were people who thought it was wrong," Margaret pointed out.

He smiled at her then. "Yeah. I know."

"And you," she reminded him. "We never really thought the people in charge had a clue. So we banded together. Few in number.."

He chuckled, rubbing her shoulder. "Loud of voice. Yeah." He shook himself. "So where've you been for eighteen years? Did you ever go abroad like you wanted?"

"No, my sister did that for me. I went through college after leaving all this behind." She exhaled and shrugged. "I moved into teaching in D.C."

"You? A teacher?"

"Never imagined it, hmm? Journalist right? I had.. a change of heart. In fact I just completed National Boards. What about you? I never pictured you as a principal."

"Certainly had enough run-ins with them growing up, eh?" He grinned broadly. "All the kids and their trouble.. my personal penance, I figure."

They turned into a small café, separating as Steven stepped forward to ask for a table. "What brought you home?" he asked as they were led to a cozy booth.

Margaret trapped her hands around her water glass to give herself a measure of steadiness. "Momma. She passed away two weeks ago."

Steven's expression sobered instantly. "I'm.. sorry. Damn, that doesn't seem like enough. Your mother was one of the finest women I knew." He reached out for Margaret's hand, his larger fingers lacing with hers in a light squeeze.

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As he approached the three-story cleanly washed granite building, all Steven could think was how much he wanted this to work. Swinging his belt-strapped books over his shoulder, he started across the street,

eyes only for a third floor window with a light already on behind it.

He moved into the open from the alleyway he had used to walk over from Miter Street. The cacophony of car horns drew his attention to the front of the school. At the curb, a line of cars blocked the ability of the bus carrying his other classmates from Roxbury High's junior class, from coming up. The situation was easy to interpret. The largely Irish working-class neighborhood was against Judge Garrity's order of desegregation. They were showing their anger with their feet, just like Roxbury's senior class had whispered among itself to boycott this first day of school, and every day, until the ruling was overturned.

Blacks might've earned the right to vote since the Civil War, but mingling with whites was as much a foreign notion to them as it was to the whites. But Steven wanted an education, and it just wasn't happening at Roxbury, where the neighborhood was falling in on itself. They had derelict buildings and older books than the whites here, just a fifteen-minute walk across town.

Indecisively, Steven paused in the street, looking at the mob scene, where they had started to get out of their cars, when it looked like the bus had stopped up the block and would let the students out to walk the rest of the way. He glanced away, to the front doors of the school, an open maw beckoning safety. A white man in a three-piece suit stood in the doorway, staidly grasping his black coat's lapels as he surveyed the scene, eyes panning the street.

His gaze drifted across Steven and paused. Steven checked his shirt tail, tucking it in quickly as he felt himself being judged. Nervously he checked his tie. A car horn distracted him from that curious gaze, and he turned in the street to find a car bearing down on him.

"Get out of my world, fuckin' nigger!" the driver shouted as Steven rolled against another parked car.

Recovering from the verbal blow, he stumbled over the curb of the sidewalk, and was righting himself when he ended up against the wrought-iron railing of a set of stone steps. Off-balance, he felt his knee twist as he went down. "Son of a bitch," he cursed then winced and offered up a silent apology to his mother. He hauled himself to his feet and was painfully bending down to recover his fallen books when the door at the top of the stairs opened up.

Scared now, he looked up and felt his mouth go dry as a large white woman, red hair rolled up against the back of her neck, started down the steps. "What are you..?"

"No!" Wildly afraid she might have a weapon as he caught her arms moving, Steven reared back, falling hard on his rear end. "Please, ma'am, I ain't. . I'm just tryin' to get to the school!"

"Well, you aren't going there with torn pants. Your mother would be shamed."

Steven was absolutely flat-footed by the response. "What?"

"You've ripped your pants. No respectable boy goes to school with torn pants."

"Ma'am, I..!" He looked down almost dumbly, as his hand, rubbing at his sore knee, found the long rip the Irishwoman had noticed.

She smiled then. "Call me Mrs. O'Halloran, young man." She stepped back as he pushed himself

cautiously to his feet. Green eyes searched him critically head to foot. "I think you're about the same size as my Michael. You come on in and get cleaned up. I'll find you something. Then you can walk with Margaret to school."

That strangely disconnected from reality feeling lasted Steven all the way through being shushed into the bathroom on the house's main floor, a pair of dark pants thrust into his hands, and into the inspection afterward whereby Mrs. O'Halloran deemed him 'suitable', and stepped back, showing him to Margaret for the first time.

"What's your name?" Mrs. O'Halloran asked him.

"Steven Harper, ma'am," he answered promptly though his eyes could not move away from the redhead girl, books tucked against her white dressfront. She was petite, pale white, with a disconcertingly direct gaze. He felt ungainly big.

Margaret introduced herself. "I'm Margaret Mary."

He nodded. Mrs. O'Halloran held the door and Margaret walked out. He followed. That day it was almost empty at Charlestown High. Half the Townies had withdrawn their students. And half the blacks from Roxbury had gone home.

But Margaret, and Steven, stayed.

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"Has it really been twenty-five years since we first met?" Steven asked, lifting his beer as Margaret hoisted her own and the rims clinked together. "Feels like yesterday."

"God, I hope not. I've appreciated the distance," she said wryly. "It was rough."

"But importantly we survived it."

"Yeah, how'd we manage that?" she grinned, taking a long draught on the beer.

"Working together?" He shrugged. "We could do it again. If you're staying in the area like you think you are, why not come work with me at Winslow?"

"Scott said there aren't any positions open."

"There's always someone who makes a last minute decision. Or with enrollment maybe I'll need to create another opening."

Margaret held Steven's gaze as she considered the offer. She did need a job, and working with Steven certainly would be a comfort. He smiled as he saw her mind working. Damn. She nodded.

All right," she agreed and clinked her glass again to his in the silence.

*Next Story: Story 2: Last Night Out*