



'Warm,  
wise and full  
of humour'

*Cathy  
Kelly*

# *Esther Champion*

## The House of Second Chances

BY THE AUTHOR OF *LEAVING OCEAN ROAD*

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Campion*

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# Prologue

**M**idnight was no time to be taking a swim in the Atlantic. The sea was freezing despite the balmy air temperature that had made this sound like a good idea. Aidan had never skinny-dipped in his life. He wouldn't even have thought of it if it hadn't been for Isabella, who was already mostly submerged, having run past him over the smooth stones, moonlight playing on her blonde hair and her skin, golden apart from that semi-circle of white at her bottom.

'Get down quick,' she stage-whispered.

Aidan was in up to his knees, trying to smile as he covered his manly bits and willed himself out deeper into the icy water. He was supposed to be on a stag weekend in West Cork with his mates. Technically he was; he'd just taken a detour. Wasn't it what any single twenty-six-year-old man would do if he met a young, captivating French woman who said she could listen to his accent all day and would love to be shown around by a local? He could get used to this. In

fact, the moment he'd laid eyes on her in the pub two nights before, he'd known he'd happily spend the rest of his life getting used to Isabella.

'It's Baltic!' He was up to his hips now, and any physical trace of his masculinity had all but disappeared.

*Splash!* He dived under, registering the shock to his head and neck, then came up quickly, shaking his hair off his face, gasping for air.

'You're mad,' he said, stroking toward the woman who had made the past forty-eight hours the most exciting of his life so far.

She made to backstroke away, her long legs kicking at the surface, toes pointed like a ballerina. He grabbed her ankles and drew her past him in a circle. Bending her knees, she reached for his shoulder, laughing as she stalled her momentum and pulled herself onto him, wrapping her legs tight around him. The warmth of her slender frame was like a switch, turning the feeling back on in his body.

In the half-lit hush, water droplets traced the curve of her chin. Her eyes danced as she stared at him until he could stand it no longer. Taking her face in his hands, he kissed her and for the first time in his life, he made love in the pure, salty, rippling sea.

# Chapter One

Aidan didn't recognise the number when he prised his mobile from the pocket of the jeans he'd only just managed to squeeze into that morning.

'Aidan O'Shea speaking.' His voice bellowed above the strong south-westerly that threatened to stymie his attempts to finish the roof repairs.

'Hello, Aidan . . .'

'Sorry, can you say again? I'm up on a roof in West Cork.'

'Colette,' came the voice louder and clearer. 'Colette Barry.'

'Ah, Colette, what can I do for you?'

'Can you give me a ring when you're down off that roof? Ellen sent me an email. She wants me to help with the house.'

'Oh, right. Will do.'

He looked at the phone. Colette had already hung up. *What the?* Why couldn't Ellen have warned him? Colette was a nice enough girl, a long-time loyal friend of his sister, but what was Ellen thinking, bringing her in on the project? Interior design; what the heck did they need that for? For

all he knew, Colette could be a total head case when it came to her work, with way-out ideas like a female Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen. Holy God! Sure wouldn't a few fancy cushions in the parlour and a few bits of decent bed linen do the job? He pushed his slate ripper in place again and began to hammer with a vengeance. Okay, maybe it wouldn't hurt to call her back, just to be polite, but not before reminding his sister to consult him before foisting her pals onto one of his jobs again.

He'd only taken on the project to please Ellen, having managed to avoid this house like the plague for most of the past twenty years. But he'd have done anything for his sister. Taking a few deep breaths of the sea air now, he could picture the pair of them running carefree around his grandmother's beloved garden below and through the foot-worn path between the bright yellow of thorny gorse bushes down to the sandy beach beside the house. Those were the days of their childhood summers, playing with country friends and cousins, when their biggest concerns were whether the tide would be out or in for a swim or if they'd be lucky enough to catch a few mackerel off the rocks for tea. Ellen had always looked up to him, made him the strong big brother, the dependable cousin everyone thought him to be. When she'd left at twenty-one, he'd had no idea how much he would come to miss having her in his everyday life.

Her own life had certainly been a rollercoaster of late, what with losing her husband last year and then Gerry Clancy showing up on her doorstep in Australia, prompting her recent trip home and their romantic few days in West Cork. If it

wasn't for those two and their rekindling of old flames, he'd never have started this renovating carry-on. Oh, Ellen would have been there for him too, if only he'd told her his troubles. But that was all water under the bridge. Or at least it would have been if he hadn't put them all first and agreed to this job he'd begun to begrudge. Forty-five years of age, and he still hadn't learned to say no.

The phone pinged in his pocket. He stopped his hammering again and pulled it out. A text from Jane asking if he could have Millie over one Saturday. He texted back, *No problem*. Of course he did.

'Polite,' he huffed. 'Too polite for your own good!'



By the time Colette arrived, The Stables was calming down after the lunchtime rush. She hadn't had a break since 8 a.m. when she'd met her first client of the day at her office on the North Mall.

'Ah, Colette. How's it going?' Gerry strode toward her with that broad smile and air of contentment she envied.

'I've been running around like a headless chicken.' She unbuttoned her suit jacket to let some air through the starched white shirt that was better suited to the world of corporate finance than a power walk through lunchtime Cork City. 'Haven't stopped since the dawn.' The aroma of restaurant food sent her stomach to her backbone.

'You'll be ready for a drop of my legendary carrot soup, then,' he said with a wink that took the edge off her mood if not her hunger. 'Sit down there and I'll be right with you.'

As he left her at a freshly cleaned table in a cosy booth, Colette hoped things would work out for him and Ellen. Relationships were tricky enough without being in one with someone on the other side of the world. Gerry could have moved to Australia months ago to be with Ellen if it hadn't been for his brother Donal's fondness for a flutter on the horses that had seen him narrowly avoid jail and Gerry having to work his behind off to keep this place afloat. True to form, Gerry had put his concerns for his parents' financial security, tied up in this business, before his own happiness, and saved his brother's undeserving ass into the bargain. It was the same old story; good people got walked on every day of the week, and they were the ones left to pick up the pieces. It had been the same with her ex-husband. Tadhg wasn't a gambler, but he'd managed to steal from her in other ways. She'd read somewhere, in *The Kite Runner*, she thought, that all crime was stealing in one form or another. She hated stealing. There was Donal Clancy now, serving customers at another table as if he were Waiter of the Year. Unable to bear the sight of him, she took out her phone and flicked through her emails.

'Hi, Colette. Sorry I'm a bit late.'

She looked up to see Aidan O'Shea's formidable frame standing beside her in a tight zipped-up rain jacket, a shock of strawberry-blond hair falling over his forehead and a worn-looking folder under one arm.

'That's okay,' she said. 'I only got here myself.' There was an awkward pause as he stood looking at a loss as to what to do next. 'Have a seat,' she said, gesturing for him to sit opposite her.

Without a word, he sat down and unzipped the under-sized jacket before stuffing it behind him and rolling up the already rolled-up sleeves of a plaster-spattered check shirt. The large freckles on his forearms made him look almost tanned. His hands, though clean, were covered in a chalky residue she could almost taste.

‘How are things with you?’ he said eventually.

She’d forgotten he was so quiet, but then apart from bumping into him and his sister when Ellen had been home earlier in the year, Colette hadn’t seen much of Aidan since they were teenagers. In fact, she hadn’t seen much of him then either. Three years older, he’d moved in different circles. Her memories of him from visits to the O’Sheas’ house mostly involved loud music coming from behind a closed bedroom door. Ellen always said he was a rock. But back then, Colette and Ellen didn’t spend much time talking about her older brother. They’d been too busy dissecting the goings-on in Madden’s Secondary School and planning elaborate futures for themselves that involved hunks with whom they’d save the planet before each of them would go on to have three children with beautiful names like Phoebe and Chandler. Life was easy back then. It had been such a lovely surprise to bump into Ellen on what was only her second trip home since she’d emigrated over twenty years before. They may as well have been seeing each other every week such was the ease between them. Big chunks of each other’s lives may have been missed out on, but they were still friends. Why couldn’t Ellen be sitting opposite her now, making this project an adventure

instead of a test of her patience with the older brother? Gerry arrived with the soup not a moment too soon.

‘Would you like a drop, Aidan, or will I get you a pint?’

‘Just a coffee, thanks Gerry.’

Colette didn’t realise she was shovelling the delicious soup into her until she caught Aidan staring. Straightening up, she swallowed a mouthful and dabbed at her lips with a serviette.

‘Sorry. I didn’t have time to stop for lunch.’

His face broke into an embarrassed smile. ‘That’s all right,’ he said. ‘It’s just, you’re eating like a builder.’

She squeezed on the serviette. ‘And how exactly do you think an interior designer might eat?’

He put a hand up in defence. ‘I’m only messing.’

A raised eyebrow was enough to make him keep any further comments to himself.

She was grateful when his phone rang and she could eat the remainder of her lunch in peace instead of in the awkward silence that had fallen between them.

Gerry returned with a tray of welcome coffees.

‘Great soup, Ger.’

Colette set the bowl on the tray before turning to search in the work bag that had cost her nearly a week’s wages. She pulled out three copies of an email from Ellen and placed them in the middle of the table.



Aidan couldn’t help but notice the crispness of the paper as Colette slid the sheets out of a plastic sleeve. He gingerly took

out his own coffee-stained, dog-eared print-out and looked to Gerry for sympathy.

‘Well, I have no email to contribute,’ Gerry told them. ‘If I had my way, I wouldn’t even be at this meeting.’

Colette rolled her eyes. ‘Easy, tiger, you’ll get your visa and you’ll be over there before you know it. Anyway, it says here,’ she quoted from Ellen’s email, “‘You can liaise with Aidan and Gerry, but let me know what you’ve *all* decided before going ahead with any major changes.” So, let’s get on with it.’

Aidan squirmed in his seat. Not only was Colette going to be a part of this project, she was going to try to be the boss.

‘You might take us through the plans then, Aidan,’ she said.

Aidan tried to recall the cheery, fun-loving Colette Barry who used to call to the house when they were teenagers, but it wasn’t working. From the top of her head of glossy dark hair to the tips of those heels he’d spotted as he’d stood at the table feeling decidedly under-dressed, she was in business mode and may as well have been a different person. He took the sketches from the battered manila folder and began to talk them through his proposed renovations to his grandmother’s house. There was a plan for an extension with the kitchen leading into a south-facing conservatory that could serve as a dining or communal area if they eventually turned the place into a B&B. Another sketch outlined the addition of several bedrooms to the upper floor. When he looked up, those soft brown eyes he remembered were fixed on him in a hardened stare.

‘I thought to make the plans as broad-ranging as possible to give us options as to what to do with the place,’ he explained. ‘Not just for us, but for future generations.’ There was no budging her serious expression and Gerry’s calm wasn’t helping. ‘Like Louise,’ he added, ‘if she ever wanted to come home with her family.’ The idea of his twenty-year-old Australian niece having children might be hard to imagine, but as the only grandchild, Louise was the last hope for continuing the O’Shea bloodline, his own contribution having been nil.

‘A word of caution, if you don’t mind, Aidan.’ A set of scary ridges had formed on Colette’s forehead. ‘How is the budget looking on this all-singing-all-dancing dream home of yours?’

He sucked in his frustration and scanned the email for dollar or euro signs. His sister hadn’t included Colette in the finances. In the O’Shea household, money was something discussed on rare occasions and only ever with family. Whatever about Gerry, Colette was certainly not family.

‘I don’t think you have to worry about that, Colette,’ said Gerry, finally helping him out. ‘Ellen and Aidan will discuss all that with their dad. Let’s put the possibilities on the table and see if we can narrow it down to two or three options. Then the O’Sheas can decide how much they want to spend.’

She rolled her eyes. ‘I never start a project without knowing the client’s budget.’ There was silence. ‘But I suppose, in this case, I can make an exception.’ She tapped her pen on the table cueing Aidan to continue.

‘The parlour can be left more or less as is,’ he went on, ‘but I thought that’s where you could come in, Colette. Smarten the place up a bit, modernise it, you know.’

‘Surely you want me to work on more than the parlour?’ She looked at him as if she’d been mortally wounded.

He counted to ten and cursed Ellen for not giving him full rein. He could have the whole thing finished in a few months and be shot of it. ‘Of course. The parlour is just for starters,’ he amended.

‘I’ll have to see it, of course,’ she said, regaining her enthusiasm. ‘We can make a date for a trip down once you’ve taken us through the rest of your proposal.’

‘Have you started work on it yet?’ Gerry asked.

‘The roof repairs are in hand and I’ve done some costings,’ said Aidan. ‘Other than that, I’ve had a couple of fellas in to survey the plumbing and wiring. We’ll have to install a few en-suites, but the extension is the biggest job. I’ll get the boys started on it once we get a few contracts out of the way.’

‘I’d love to give you a hand on my days off,’ said Gerry.

Aidan almost envied him his enthusiasm. There was no doubt that the house held something special for Gerry. Its association with Ellen? A way to support Louise? When Ellen had told Aidan that Gerry was Louise’s biological father, Aidan had been more than a little shocked. Not half as shocked as Louise by all accounts, finding out at nineteen, and the beautiful man she had known all her life as her father hardly cold in his grave. For Aidan and Gerry at least, this project was about more than bricks, mortar and fancy interiors. It was a thought he would need to keep in focus if he wasn’t to let some of his own associations with the house get the better of him.

Forcing himself to shut down memories of Isabella, he listened as Colette went on about coordinating bathrooms and bedrooms. By the end of their meeting, he was left in no doubt that he wouldn't have this project all his own way. Gerry, to be fair, was in agreement with him on most of the improvements, but Colette was a challenge. He hoped their trip to West Cork wouldn't be a disaster. If he had to go down on his knees and beg Gerry to take the day off and join them, that's what he'd do. There was no way he was going to be left on his own with Little Miss Changing Rooms.



On a cold Anzac Day in South Australia, Ellen Constantinopoulos dug her hands into the pockets of the woollen coat she'd taken to Ireland in February, and wished she'd worn gloves. Port Lincoln had basked in sunshine over Easter, but today it already felt like mid-winter. She stamped her boots in the grass that turned a blackish green as the sun began its rise out to sea where lights of waiting grain ships twinkled in the half-light. This was Tracey's idea. It had seemed like a good one at the time, but Ellen had to admit the main thing that drove her out of bed at five-thirty on this longed-for day off was the lure of breakfast at the hotel after the ceremony.

Tracey's breath hung in the air beside her as they watched local school captains lay wreaths at the foot of the cenotaph. Nick had thought about going into the army – but that was before he'd been captivated by Ellen, as he used to tell her. Being married to a fisherman, with his long stints away from

home in unpredictable weather conditions, had been enough of a worry. She glanced round at the crowd. How many of these souls who'd braved the early-morning drizzle had lost loved ones to war? At least that was a noble kind of death, she mused, not like Nick's; felled by a kangaroo that had innocently bounded onto his road home. Either way, they were all cheated. Short-changed by death, the slippery customer that always won in the end, no matter which way you went. It didn't make living without them any easier. The flash of white as the doves were released brought her back to the moment.

'You hungry?' Tracey whispered.

'Famished.'

They stood in silence for the 'Last Post'. She blinked away a trickle at the corners of her eyes as she inhaled the pungent smell of burning gum leaves; the smell that had reminded the men in Gallipoli of their Australian home, to which so many would never return. As the band launched into 'Advance Australia Fair', with the local ageing sopranos hitting those notes that shot right to the core of the soul, her thoughts turned to Ireland, to Gerry Clancy and how lucky she was to have been given a second chance.



'Any news from the old country?' Tracey asked as they sat at a table in the hotel.

Ellen sighed. They both knew Tracey would be the first to know if there'd been any developments on that front. She peeled off her coat as the warm air thawed her hands and feet.

‘Will we share the pancakes?’ Tracey didn’t wait for an answer, but was up and back from the bar in a flash, her auburn curls springing as she went. ‘I ordered cream,’ she said, plonking back down opposite Ellen. ‘You’re wasting away.’

‘I am not,’ Ellen huffed, yanking the scarf from her neck. ‘I’m getting on with my life. Working away . . .’

‘Has he sorted out that visa yet?’

Tracey was the most caring, loyal friend anyone could wish for, but patience wasn’t her greatest attribute and certainly not where the machinations of the Australian immigration system were involved. When Ellen didn’t answer, the subject was changed.

‘How is it going with the house in West Cork? Will they keep the range in the kitchen?’

It was uncanny how her friend, who’d hardly left the state, had a way of making you believe she’d been over there. Ellen’s grandmother’s house had been the bolthole to which she had retreated only a few short months ago, when she’d thought her chances of finding love again had been shattered. Finding Gerry Clancy outside The Stables in Cork with another woman had been a hard lesson in not arriving unannounced and expecting someone you loved to know you were ready for a relationship with them, just because you knew it yourself. Thankfully, Colette had been there to support her and had wasted no time in letting Gerry know what they’d witnessed. And Aidan, God love him, had even offered his services as stand-in barman to let Gerry make a beeline to West Cork to explain himself and make good on what she’d

thought was a futile trip. He'd be here now if their plans hadn't been scuppered by Donal's shenanigans.

As far as she knew, the renovations were underway. It was exactly what her grandmother's house deserved. Lizzie O'Shea had died when Ellen was still in her twenties, and the bachelor uncle who'd lived with her had been gone seven years. If it wasn't for her cousin, Eamon, and his wife Orla who lived next door on the old farm, the place would never even get an airing.

In her mind's eye, she could see the traditional stone façade, the white sash windows and solid oak door; a place where you'd always be welcome, the narrow hallway leading to the kitchen where the range warmed the room to match the atmosphere. She stopped herself at the wooden staircase and the bedrooms that lay beyond. Today had already been filled with enough emotion without letting memories of loving Gerry Clancy into the mix.

'They're getting on with it,' she told Tracey. 'I don't know about the range, but the place is in good hands. Aidan's a dab hand at anything to do with plumbing, electrics, you name it . . .' She rubbed her thumb over where she used to wear her wedding band. 'My pal Colette's an interior designer. She's on board as well.'

'And what about the man himself?' Tracey wasn't letting it go. 'Has he been voted off the project?'

'It's not an episode of *The Block*, you know.'

'Well, at least I brought a smile to your face.' Tracey nodded toward the windows. 'You've been about as much fun as that weather out there since you picked me up.'

‘Ooh, excuse me, Miss Reality TV, but my life, I’m sorry to disappoint you, is far from anything you watch. And God knows that’s a lot of television.’

‘You arrived just in time,’ Tracey told the waitress who was placing the steaming pancakes in the middle of the table. ‘I was just about to punch her lights out.’

The young girl hesitated before setting down their mugs of cappuccino. Ellen wanted to explain, but was struck by a fit of giggles and had to hold her sides to contain a convulsion of laughter.

‘Just two old farts having a laugh, love,’ said Tracey as the girl took a couple of backward steps and left them to it. ‘As my mother used to tell me,’ she said, turning back to Ellen, ‘if we can have a laugh, we know we’re alive.’

Since Gerry Clancy had come back into her life, Ellen had certainly felt more alive. The only problem now was getting his paperwork sorted out so they could actually live in the same place. The house in Ireland was like an insurance policy, keeping their options open. For now, her daughter was her priority, which was why he was moving out here, but who knew what might happen if she and Gerry wished to live in Ireland on a more permanent basis sometime in that uncharted water that was their future?



Esther Champion is from Cork, Ireland and currently lives in north-west Tasmania. She attended North Presentation Secondary School in Cork and has degrees from University College Cork and the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. Esther and her Orcadian husband have lived together in Ireland, Scotland, Norway and South Australia. They have two grown-up children in Adelaide and the youngest at home in Tassie. Esther loves sharing her life on a small property with an over-indulged chocolate Labrador, a smoochy cat and a couple of ageing mares, all of whom she firmly believes are living proof that dreams really can come true. *The House of Second Chances* is Esther's second novel, following *Leaving Ocean Road*.

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# The House of Second Chances

*Esther  
Campion*

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