

Place to Belong

The Flanagan Sisters #4

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DEDICATION

*To the LGBTQI community of Australia.
Because it's about damn time same-sex marriage is legal here – love is love.*

Chapter 1

Sean Flanagan's stomach rolled as the plane descended.

He shouldn't have come. He shouldn't have given in to the urge, the desperate desire to meet the family he had never known. He should have been happy with his life as it was. Being a bartender in a small Irish town wasn't bad. It was a steady job and he had his own apartment. He shouldn't want more. Besides, chances were high that his half-sisters weren't really as nice as they seemed online — they couldn't possibly be.

He breathed deeply and shifted in his seat, his foot tapping on the floor.

He'd disembark and find the next flight back home. If he was lucky, his sisters would give up waiting for him and go home and he'd never have to see them. Maybe they hadn't even come to the airport to pick him up like they'd promised.

The plane touched down and the roar of the wheels on the tarmac filled the plane as it slowed. Sean closed his eyes, his heart beating rapidly, his skin hot. Around him, people unclicked their seatbelts and stood. He stayed where he was as overhead lockers were opened, carry-on bags were lifted down and the aisles filled with people eager to be off the plane.

He couldn't move.

Would the cabin crew notice if he stayed here?

He could stay where he was and take the plane to wherever its next destination was.

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“Excuse me, sir. You need to leave.” The gentle female voice was above him.

He opened his eyes to the concerned expression on the flight attendant’s face. The plane was empty. “Sorry.” He reached for his backpack under the seat in front of him, and then stood, his legs a little shaky.

“Are you all right? You’re a little pale.”

He forced a smile to his face. “Just my Irish pallor, love.”

The woman blushed and he walked past her, off the plane and followed the signs to customs.

He had to get a grip, otherwise he’d attract the attention of customs officials. He really didn’t need that. He got his iPod out of his backpack and chose his favorite playlist, taking a moment to listen to the first verse of an upbeat song. He breathed out as some of his anxiety receded. He wasn’t walking to face a firing squad, he was meeting three sisters he hadn’t known existed until five months ago. It had staggered him to receive the social media message out of the blue from Zita, who had been looking for information about their father. But when it had finally sunk in that he had three sisters, he’d been cautiously hopeful. Perhaps this was his chance to have a family.

Arriving at customs, Sean shuffled forward with the rest of the people. Several planes had landed at the same time, and he was more than happy to wait.

Carly, Bridget, and Zita had seemed pleased to meet him. He’d had some fun Skype sessions with them over the last few months, getting to know them, but people weren’t necessarily honest online. He hadn’t been. He hadn’t dared tell them the whole truth.

The situation was so much more difficult because he was here for his sisters’ weddings. He didn’t know how to behave at family events. He’d never had any practice.

He should have refused. He should have said he couldn’t get time off work, or couldn’t afford the flight. Not that the last one would have worked. Carly, the oldest of his three sisters, was a billionaire and had offered to pay for the flight and his accommodation. Not wanting to owe her anything, he’d paid for his own flight, but had agreed to stay with his sisters during his time there. He hoped he wouldn’t regret the decision.

And then there was Carmen, his sisters' mother. How was she going to react to the illegitimate son of her dead husband? He'd only spoken to her once online and she'd been distant. He couldn't blame her. It had to have come as a shock to discover her beloved husband had another child.

Finally, he reached the front of the line and was fingerprinted, photographed and his passport was scanned. Americans sure were paranoid. He moved on to the luggage carousel where the crowds had already thinned. His backpack was there so he grabbed it and went through the final checks before he was allowed out to where people were waiting for passengers.

He took his time attaching his smaller backpack to the larger one and shrugged it on, adjusting the straps. Then there was nothing else he could do to delay the inevitable. It was time to meet his sisters in person.

He steeled himself and walked into the public area.

He spotted his sisters immediately. It was hard to miss them. They were holding a huge welcome sign with colorful helium balloons coming off it. He had no time to prepare himself as Zita, his youngest sister and the one who looked the most like him with her strawberry-blonde hair, dropped the sign and flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around him and squeezing him tightly. "Welcome! It's so good to see you."

Sean's heart lodged in his throat as he hugged her back.

"Move over, Z, let me have a turn." Bridget nudged her sister out of the way and grinned at him. "I thought you were never going to get here." She wrapped her arms around him. She was about his height, with the same blue eyes, but her curly brown hair and darker skin came from her Salvadoran heritage.

He had no words, wouldn't have been able to get them through the lump in his throat even if he had.

Bridget stepped back to allow Carly to greet him. She was every bit of her Salvadoran heritage with dark eyes, dark hair, and so short he had to bend over to hug her.

"How was your flight?" Carly asked.

He swallowed and forced out the words. "Fine. Long."

"We're going straight to my place," she said. "We thought you'd like to stay in the city for the first few days at least, so you

can explore.”

He honestly hadn't considered sightseeing in Houston while he was here. Hadn't thought much past the fact he was meeting his family. Still, he nodded. “Thanks.”

He followed them out of the airport where the humidity smothered him. He stopped to adjust — it was unlike anything he'd ever known.

“You'll get used to the heat,” Zita said, taking his arm. “It's always humid in July.”

This wasn't humid, this was like syrup. His skin flushed and sweat sprang to the surface, adding to the already overripe feeling of his clothes after being on the go for over twelve hours. He'd kill for a shower.

They reached a brand new white station wagon and he put his backpack in the trunk. It wasn't the Aston Martin he'd pictured for a billionaire, but Carly's fiancé was an artist, so perhaps it was his car.

Zita joined him on the backseat. “What time did you leave Dublin?”

“Nine a.m.,” he replied, holding his hand up to the air conditioning that was blaring through the outlets.

“That's pretty reasonable,” Bridget said. “Hopefully you won't be too jet-lagged.”

“I'm fine. Where are the guys?” He was kind of glad his sisters' fiancés weren't here.

“They're at my place cooking dinner,” Carly said. “We didn't want to swamp you at the airport.” She glanced in the rearview mirror, met his eyes and smiled.

Zita squeezed his hand. “If it's too much, or if you're tired, just say the word. We won't be offended. It must be kind of hard for you when you don't know us that well.”

He smiled at her. His sisters were already trying to take care of him. The hope that they may actually become part of his family for real stirred and he gently pushed it back down. He knew not to get his hopes up. “It'll be great to meet them properly.” He'd seen a little bit of Evan, Jack and David online when he'd spoken with his sisters, but they generally left after saying hello. Each of his sisters had met their partners within the last twelve months, and from the way they spoke, they were

already one big happy family. Something he'd never had.

Was he going to mess it all up?

He ignored the fear as he made small talk with his sisters and took in his surroundings. They drove on the opposite side of the road than he was used to, and a couple of times he had to stop himself from calling out to Carly to change lanes.

By the time they arrived at Carly's penthouse apartment, he was starting to flag. It was about midnight in Ireland even though it was only six in Houston. He followed them into the open plan living area with floor to ceiling windows looking out over the city. There was a meaty smell in the air, perhaps a roast cooking. Three men sat on the antique-looking sofas drinking beer and wine. They stood up when his sisters walked in.

Sean scanned the faces as each woman greeted her partner with a kiss. His sisters really knew how to pick them. Evan, the painter, had black hair that was slightly past his collarbone; Jack, Bridget's partner, was tall and fit with short brown hair; and David, Zita's man, was the typical blond-haired, blue-eyed all-American. Introductions were made and he shook each man's hand, looking for judgment. He couldn't find any. They appeared to be genuinely pleased to meet him.

"Something smells fantastic," Bridget said.

"We cooked a roast," Jack replied. "Thought it might be homey for Sean." He smiled.

Sean nodded his thanks. No one had ever cooked a roast for him. If they'd wanted to remind him of his childhood, a can of baked beans would have done the trick.

"Why don't you dish up and I'll show Sean his room?" Carly said.

He followed Carly down a short hallway to a bedroom. He stared. It was the most luxurious room he'd ever seen. The queen-sized bed was covered in pillows and a thick quilt that made it ever so enticing. There was a window giving him a bird's-eye view over the city and a walk-in closet for his clothes.

"Make yourself at home," Carly said. "The bathroom is through there." She pointed. "You'll have it to yourself as Evan and I use the one in my bedroom. Did you want a shower first? I can delay dinner."

His desire to shower warred with his fear of being a

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nuisance. “No...it’s fine. I’ll have one later.”

“Why don’t you freshen up and then come out?” She reached out and squeezed his hand. “I know this might be a little overwhelming for you, but we’re so glad you came.” She left and he stood there, staring after her.

She had no clue how overwhelmed he was. He wanted to lock himself in his room and cry for sheer relief that they had even been at the airport to pick him up. Instead, he went into the bathroom, splashed some cold water on his face, sniffed his armpits and then dug out his spray deodorant. Finally, with a deep breath to fortify himself, he went to have dinner with his sisters.

It was midday by the time Sean woke the next morning. He lay in bed and listened for sounds that anyone was home. It was silent. Carly had mentioned it was her last day of work before the wedding, but Evan hadn’t mentioned his plans. He got up and took his time in the shower, washing away the last of his fatigue. After he dressed, he wandered down the hallway to the living area. Evan was painting by the windows.

McClane, Evan’s Australian bulldog, jumped down from the couch and trotted over to greet him.

Sean smiled and patted the dog. “Morning,” he called.

There was no response.

Sean frowned. Was this how it was going to be? Polite while Carly was around and ignore him when she was gone? Perhaps Evan wasn’t as genuine as he’d seemed the night before. He took a couple of steps closer, moving so he was in Evan’s field of vision. “Mind if I make a cup of tea?”

Still nothing.

He hesitated, running a hand through his mid-length hair. This was awkward. Should he try again or just help himself? He stepped closer and said, “Evan?” He waved a hand to get his attention.

Evan jumped, swore and turned to him with his paintbrush raised. When he saw Sean, his breath released with a whoosh. “Damn.”

“Didn’t mean to startle you.”

“No, my fault entirely. I tend to get caught up when I’m painting.”

No kidding. “Sorry for interrupting.”

Evan put his paintbrush in a jar of liquid and scrubbed his hands on his shirt. “It’s fine. I was only planning to paint until you got up.” He smiled and walked toward the kitchen. “Want a cup of coffee?”

“Tea if you’ve got it.” Sean followed him, not certain whether the man was telling the truth. Was it possible to be so involved with your work that you didn’t hear someone speak?

Evan filled the kettle and asked, “How did you sleep?”

“Like a log.”

“Carly doesn’t skimp on things. If your bed’s anything like ours, it’s like lying on a cloud.”

Sean smiled. “Exactly.”

Evan made the drinks and then dug around the fridge. “You want a sandwich?”

“Sure.”

Sean sipped his tea while Evan pulled out ingredients. “If you’re feeling up to it, Carly said she’d show you around her company, Comunidad, this afternoon.”

“I’d like that.”

“Great.” Evan pushed a sandwich over to Sean and then handed him a SIM card and a piece of paper. “Carly wasn’t sure whether you’d have international roaming on your phone, so she got you a US SIM card. The paper has all our numbers on it.”

Sean looked at the card. His finances were limited. “How much is it?”

“It’s nothing.”

There was no way he was taking more from his sisters. They were already letting him stay with them. The more he took, the more he would owe them. “It’s fine. I’ve got my own phone.” He tucked the list of numbers into his pocket.

Evan looked at him for a long moment. “We barely know each other, but let me say something,” he said. “Carly and her sisters are the real deal. They give everything they have generously, without wanting anything in return.” He took a sip of his coffee. “They’re all so excited to have an older brother

and to make up for lost time. Part of that is going to be taking you places and buying you things. Don't reject it because you're too proud to accept gifts, or you feel like you will owe them. It comes with no strings attached."

Sean was silent. How could Evan know what he was thinking?

"Unless you decide to make hour-long phone calls to a girlfriend in Ireland, the phone costs are going to be negligible."

Sean forced out a laugh. "There's no girlfriend."

"Then I'd recommend you take the SIM." Evan took a bite of his sandwich.

Sean hesitated. He'd been planning to get a SIM card when he arrived at the airport but had forgotten. "All right. Thanks."

"I'll give Carly a call and check when she's free," Evan said.

Sean ate his lunch while Evan called Carly. The way his face lit up while he was talking with her was kind of sweet.

"Great. We'll see you then." Evan hung up. "She's got a few things to tie up, but she'll be ready at three. Did you want to check out downtown Houston?"

He glanced over to the window. "I don't want to interrupt if you've got work." He wanted a little more time to adjust to where he was.

Evan chuckled. "I can always paint."

"To be honest, I don't think I've got the energy yet," Sean admitted. "I'm happy to read until it's time to visit Carly."

"If you're sure," Evan said.

He nodded. He was three-quarters of the way through a crime novel and wanted finish it.

"Then let me set an alarm." Evan grabbed his phone and entered something. "If this goes off at half past two and I don't stop painting, give me a shake or something."

"Sure."

"Oh, and help yourself to anything."

"Thanks." Sean wandered back to his room to get his book, and by the time he'd returned, Evan was painting again. It was kind of nice that he wasn't treating him like anything special. It made him more comfortable, more at home than if he'd been hovering.

Sean settled onto the couch to read.

“Evan, it’s time to stop painting.” The slightly annoyed timbre of Carly’s voice made Sean look up. He hadn’t heard her return.

“Evan, it’s time to stop painting.”

The voice came from over near the window. Sean grinned as Evan stepped back and reached for his phone. “Nice alarm.”

Evan’s smile was slightly bashful. “Carly’s voice is the only thing that really breaks through.” He washed his brush. “Give me ten minutes to clean up and we’ll head off.”

Sean got to his feet and returned his book to his room.

When Evan came out, he said, “I almost forgot to give you this.” He handed Sean a key. “That way you can come and go as you please.”

Sean’s breath caught. It was such a show of trust. “Thanks.”

“No problem.”

Sean tucked the key into his pocket and followed Evan downstairs. After introducing him to the doorman, they went outside. The heat was even worse than it had been yesterday. Instantly his skin was covered in a film of sweat. “*Fuck*. How do you stand the heat?”

Evan laughed. “You get used to it. If you want we can drive instead of walk.”

“How far is it?”

“About ten minutes down the road.”

He could handle that. He’d be damned if he’d let a little bit of humidity stop him. “Lead the way.”

They walked down the shaded side of the sidewalk, not that it did anything against the thick humidity. By the time they arrived at the Comunidad building Sean felt like a wilted weed. Stepping into the air-conditioned lobby was a huge relief.

“Welcome to Comunidad,” Evan said.

He wiped his brow. “Does Carly own this whole building?”

Evan nodded. “She rents out a couple of floors.”

It was one thing knowing his sister was rich, but another seeing the proof.

“I’ll take you up to her office.”

The elevator bank had a dozen elevators and it wasn’t long before they were whisked to the top floor.

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Evan stepped out of the elevator first and led Sean down a corridor. “Hey, Hayden, is Carly ready?”

“She’s just arrived back.” The man’s voice was like triple-distilled whiskey — smooth and smoky. “Let me call her.”

Sean stepped to the side to see who was talking and froze. He was an African-American Adonis. His hair was curly and cropped short, and his body fit the navy blue suit he was wearing to perfection. Sean snapped his mouth closed as Hayden met his eyes. The man looked him up and down with a smile as he picked up the phone.

Sean’s body stirred and his head screamed NO. *Fuck*. There was no way he could be attracted to someone over here. No way he could let his sisters know about his sexuality. Quickly, he glanced away as if fascinated by the artwork on the wall.

“Carly, Evan’s here.” There was a pause. “I’ll send them right in.” Hayden hung up and said, “Go right through.”

“Hayden, this is Carly’s brother, Sean.” Evan turned to Sean. “Hayden is Carly’s executive manager.”

Hayden stood and held out a hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” With no real choice, he gripped the man’s hand. It was warm and firm and the spark that shot through Sean was definitely unwanted. He quickly let go and followed Evan into Carly’s office, not daring to look back.

He did *not* need a complication like this.

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