

COURAGE TO DREAM
BOOK I

IRISH MEADOWS

SUSAN ANNE MASON



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Susan Anne Mason, *Irish Meadows*
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*To my Grade 6 teacher, Mr. Guistini,
the first person to encourage me to write a book.
Thank you for planting the seed that eventually took root.
Almost forty years later, I finally did it!*

1



MAY 1911
LONG ISLAND, NEW YORK

LATE-AFTERNOON SHADOWS chased Gilbert Whelan up the long drive to the O’Leary mansion. The fanciful images seemed to bolster him from behind, giving him the courage to push forward. Even so, his steps slowed as he approached the flagstone path leading up to the house. A wave of homesickness tightened his throat, his suitcase weighing heavy in his hand.

Had it really been the better part of three years since he’d crossed the threshold? Gil swallowed the bitter taste of guilt that plagued him and continued to the foot of the wide, welcoming staircase. He set his battered bag on the ground and took in the familiar view—the wraparound porch, the double front door. He’d come here as a child with his widowed mother, who’d hired on as the O’Learys’ housekeeper. Gil still found it difficult

to think of the tragic illness that had claimed his mother's life and led to him being taken in as part of the O'Leary family.

Belonging . . . yet not belonging.

Gil ran a hand over the large white column to his left, his touch hesitant, nearly reverent. The red bricks of Irish Meadows had changed little since he'd been gone. If only the same could be said of its inhabitants.

Gil let his hand fall away with a sigh. If he'd had his way, he wouldn't have come back at all—for a multitude of complicated reasons. But he owed the O'Learys too much to avoid them any longer. So, he would stay long enough to repay his debt to his guardians, and then he'd move on to start a life of his own.

Lord, I could really use Your guidance here. Give me the strength to do what needs to be done without hurting anyone in the process.

Behind the ornate doors, Gil knew the family would be waiting to greet him like a long-lost son returning home. Reluctant to face their exuberant welcomes just yet, Gil turned down the stone path and made his way to the one place he felt most at home—the O'Leary stables. When he rounded the corner of the house and spied the enormous barn, a thrill of anticipation shot through him. How blessed he'd been to work on such a top-notch farm, raising and training the best racehorses on the eastern seaboard. At James O'Leary's feet, Gil had learned everything he needed to branch out on his own one day soon.

As he entered the building, Gil breathed in the familiar scent of hay, horse, and manure. He'd missed working with the animals almost as much as he'd missed the O'Learys. Manhattan was an exhilarating city, but Gil far preferred the fresh air, wide skies, and open meadows of Long Island. Especially in the spring when all of nature bloomed anew.

His gaze skimmed the immaculate mahogany stalls with their engraved brass nameplates for each thoroughbred. His ears tuned to the horses' quiet nickering, a sound more beautiful than a

symphony. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, Gil made his way to the one stall he'd be able to find blindfolded. When he raised the latch, Midnight Royalty gave a loud whinny in greeting. In an instant, Gil had his arms around the great black neck, murmuring words of affection for his friend. The horse tossed his head, flicking his nose to send Gil's cap sailing into the straw.

Gil laughed out loud. "I've missed you too, boy. But I'm home now." *For a while anyway.* He stroked his hand along Midnight's sleek flank. "Looks like they've been taking good care of you while I was gone. Your coat's as shiny as I've ever seen it."

"I brushed him every day for you."

Gil's hand froze on Midnight's back, every vertebrae of his spine stiffening.

Brianna. The one person he'd been trying not to think about, trying not to imagine seeing again for the first time in three years. He swallowed hard, and then turned to find her standing in the open doorway of the stall. His lungs seized, trapping his air, while his heart beat an unsteady rhythm in his chest.

The sprite of a girl he'd left behind had matured into a beautiful young woman. Clad in a dress of soft green that showed off her slim figure, Brianna stood quietly, hands clasped against her skirts. She wore her reddish-gold curls swept atop her head, leaving a few strands clinging to her slender neck. Wide green eyes watched him as though trying to gauge his reaction.

"Brianna. It's good to see you. You look . . . wonderful." He wiped his hands on his wool pants and moved forward to kiss her cheek. Her delicate scent, a cross between green apples and roses, met his nose.

A smile lit her features. "Thank you. You look well yourself."

He glanced down at his brown tweed vest and linen shirt. "I feel in need of a bath after the dust from the train and the walk here from the station."

A slight frown knit her brows together. "You should have called. Daddy would have sent Sam to get you."

He gave a sheepish shrug. “I wanted to walk. It felt good to breathe the fresh air after the grime of the city.”

She stepped into the stall. “I’m glad you’re home, Gil. I . . . we’ve missed you.”

The already tight space seemed to shrink. Gil managed a brief smile. “I’ve missed all of you, too.” *More than you know.* “And look at you. You’ve gone and grown up while I was away.” He hoped his voice conveyed a levity he didn’t feel. This mature young woman left him sorely out of his element. Where was the tomboy he’d felt so comfortable with? “Tell me, who’s the lucky man courting you now?”

“Who says anyone is courting me?”

He stuffed his hands in his pants pockets. “You’re almost eighteen. About to graduate. I assumed—”

“Well, you assumed wrong.”

The pinched lines around her mouth told him the subject was not open for further discussion.

She turned away to pick up a piece of hay and shred it between her slim fingers. “So how does it feel to be finished with your college courses?” she asked brightly.

He studied her profile for a moment and decided he’d let her get away with changing the subject. He’d learn all the family news soon enough. “It feels like I’m finally starting my life. Doing something that matters.” He bent to retrieve his hat from the floor and brushed the dirt from the brim.

She tilted her head. “Getting your degree didn’t matter?”

“It’s a means to an end, that’s all.”

“I think going to college would be the most thrilling thing ever. Living in the city surrounded by all the people and excitement.” Her eyes glowed brighter than the stars he’d missed since leaving Irish Meadows.

He shook his head, chuckling. “Same old, Bree. Always dreaming of adventure. Glad to see some things haven’t changed.”

A slight flush colored her cheeks. Very attractive cheeks in a very attractive face.

He turned to run his hands down Midnight's haunches. "Looks like Sam's been exercising him regularly." The head groom, Sam Turnbull, had taught Gil everything he knew about training horses.

"Of course. Sam always keeps his word." She stepped closer, trapping Gil between Midnight and the wall, and laid a warm hand on his sleeve.

Gil went completely still. If he moved his head, his nose would brush tendrils of her hair. His throat became as dry as the dust that coated the floor, the tight enclosure suddenly too much to bear. He slipped around her and pushed the stall door wider. "We'd best be going. I'm sure your mother's waiting."

"All right." The disappointment in her voice matched the regret that stole the sparkle from her eyes.

Gil had hoped by now her childhood crush on him would have faded. That had been the main reason he'd stayed away, to give her time to mature and find a more suitable male to become interested in. And he'd vowed that when he returned to Irish Meadows, he would do nothing to encourage her. After all, they were practically family.

With a last rub of Midnight's nose, he latched the door behind him. They'd taken a few steps when the sound of a motorcar pulling up to the house echoed through the open stable doors. Brianna stopped dead in the middle of the corridor. She whirled around, eyes huge. "That's Daddy. I have to go."

Instead of heading toward the main doors, she set off at a fast pace toward the back of the barn, the swish of her skirts kicking up a cloud of dust.

"Wait." Gil fell into step beside her, eyeing her dress that was anything but suitable for the barn. "What are you doing down here anyway?"

She paused to raise slightly vulnerable eyes to his. "I knew

you'd come here first. And I wanted to be the one to welcome you home." A car door slammed, and she jumped. "Please don't tell Daddy I was here."



Brianna O'Leary slipped through the back door of her family's home and down a small corridor to the kitchen. It was the only way to reach the back staircase without running the risk of bumping into either of her parents. Leaning against the doorframe to get her bearings, she closed her eyes and released a frustrated breath.

For weeks she'd daydreamed about Gil's homecoming—imagined what it would be like to see him again, to have her best friend back. Yet the reality of their reunion had not lived up to her expectations. Their connection—once so strong and unbreakable—now seemed as fleeting as the afternoon sun that filtered through the barn. Gil had acted awkward and halting around her, as though he felt uncomfortable with her nearness. How would they ever return to their former closeness if he kept an invisible wall around him?

Brianna squared her shoulders in firm resolve. What she needed was a different approach, a new plan to gain Gil's confidence, as well as his help in changing Daddy's mind about her future.

But first she had to reach the shelter of her room. Daddy wouldn't like it if he found out she'd waylaid Gil in the barn. Her father had made it plain he would no longer tolerate her hanging around the stables, and now she only rode her beloved Sophie when he wasn't around to scold her.

Brianna peered around the corner into the busy kitchen. Mrs. Harrison barked orders to the scullery maids, who scurried to do her bidding. Steam whistled from the large pots on the stove. The enticing aroma of freshly baked bread made Brianna's stomach grumble. With dinner preparations in full swing, she hoped she'd be able to slip by the cook unnoticed.

When Mrs. Harrison turned to stir a pot on the stove, Brianna lifted her skirts and tiptoed across the tiled floor.

“Is there something I can help you with, Miss Brianna?” The woman threw an amused glance over her shoulder.

Brianna froze in the middle of the room, then forced an innocent smile. “Mama was wondering how long until dinner.”

The plump cook wiped a bead of sweat from beneath her white cap, then fisted a hand on her hip. “You don’t fool me for a minute, missy. You’ve been down to the barn to see Master Gilbert, and now you’re sneaking back in.”

“How did you—”

“I’ve known you since you were a babe. You never could hide anything from me.”

Brianna’s cheeks heated. “I had to see Gil”—*before Colleen gets her claws into him*—“before everyone starts fussing over him.”

Mrs. Harrison chuckled. “I’ve missed that boy almost as much as you have.” She winked at her. “Go on and freshen up. Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes.”

“Thank you.” Brianna let out a relieved breath and dashed from the kitchen to the back staircase.

Once safely in her room, Brianna locked the door and plopped down on her quilted bed, the iron frame squeaking under her. She reached beneath the mattress and pulled out her journal to read the words she’d penned that very morning.

Goal for the summer: Enlist Gil’s help in persuading Daddy to let me go to college in the fall.

She sighed and snapped the book shut. Not off to a promising start. She supposed she couldn’t expect her relationship with Gil to remain the same as it had been before he went away. In fact, she didn’t want it to. Her silly schoolgirl crush was a thing of the past, the passing fancy of an immature fifteen-year-old. Her focus now was on getting an education and seeing more of the world outside Irish Meadows. Romance could play no part in her life for the foreseeable future.

The only thing she wanted from Gil was his assistance with her father. To that end, she would make renewing her friendship with Gil her top priority.

After checking her appearance in the mirror, Brianna descended the grand central staircase to the entry hall below. Her hand slid over the polished mahogany rail as she moved, her ear attuned to the sounds of her family below. She paused for a moment before entering the formal parlor, relishing her siblings' giggles and the snatches of conversation drifting into the hall. She could picture her father sitting in his usual armchair, nose in his newspaper, her mother perched on the edge of the brocade settee. Adam would be standing at the French doors, looking out over the back gardens, and Colleen would be seated beside Mama, trying to ignore the antics of the two youngest O'Learys, Connor and Deirdre.

Taking a deep breath, Brianna entered the elegant room. Her eyes automatically scanned the room for Gil. Ignoring the dip of her heart when she didn't see him, she bolstered her flagging smile and continued forward.

Her mother glanced up from her book. "There you are, Bree. We thought you'd fallen asleep in your room."

"Has Gil not arrived yet?" she asked in what she hoped was a casual tone as she moved toward the marble fireplace.

"Mrs. Johnston said he got here earlier, but of course he went to see the horses first." Mama laughed and shook her head. "I swear that boy loves those animals more than his family."

"He is *not* family." Adam's voice seethed with bitterness.

Brianna gave an inward sigh. She'd hoped her older brother would have gotten over his resentment of Gil by now, but apparently it had as strong a hold on him as ever.

Daddy snapped the paper closed. "Gilbert has been raised in this house as one of us. I will not tolerate any animosity toward him."

“Of course you won’t.” Scowling, Adam turned back toward the window.

Seconds later, the clatter of footsteps broke the tense silence in the room. Gil burst through the parlor door, straightening the sleeves of his jacket, which he’d apparently donned in a hurry before dashing down the stairs.

He broke into a wide grin. “Hello, everyone.”

Brianna stood off to the side as the whole O’Leary clan fawned over him, welcoming him home. Mama hugged and kissed him, then dabbed a handkerchief to her eyes. Daddy shook his hand and clapped him hard on the back, beaming, while Deirdre and Connor clamored for Gil’s attention.

Brianna remained in the background, content to drink in the sight of him. His black hair still waved over his forehead in unruly curls despite his attempt to tame them. His eyes, under the dark sweep of his brow, were still the same intense blue that used to jolt her heart like a bolt of electricity. The only change was the breadth of his shoulders and chest, visible beneath the tweed suit jacket. He’d filled out while he was away, looking more man than boy now.

Her pulse quickened. Had he noticed similar changes in her appearance? That she was no longer the tomboy who’d followed him around the barn and the horse track every day? She frowned and pushed away the errant thought. What did that matter since she was only interested in Gil’s friendship?

He stepped toward her, and Brianna froze. Would he give away the fact that she’d been in the stables?

“Bree, it’s good to see you again.” He bent to kiss her cheek as if he hadn’t already greeted her earlier.

His amused wink allowed her to relax, confident he wouldn’t reveal her secret. She smiled and played along. “And you, as well.”

Gil looked past her, his smile freezing in place. “Hello, Adam.”

Adam came forward with obvious reluctance to give Gil a quick handshake before stepping back. Brianna stiffened as

Colleen sashayed over, the swish of her silk skirts drawing every eye. Glorious auburn hair accentuated her older sister's flawless skin and vivid blue-violet eyes. Beside her, Brianna's freckled skin, nondescript red-gold hair, and slim silhouette always went unnoticed.

Colleen leaned in to give Gil a lingering hug. "Welcome home, Gilbert," she purred, her cheek pressed to his.

A fierce stab of jealousy ripped through Brianna's midsection. Colleen had worn a low-cut gown that highlighted her assets. With half the county's eligible men vying for her attention, did she have to capture Gil's, too?

As the family moved down the hall into the dining room, Brianna squeezed her hands into fists at her side, determined to keep her feelings in check. Yet an underlying fear rose up to choke her. She'd worried that when Gil came back, he'd become enamored of her sister and totally forget Brianna existed. Gil was *her* friend. They'd shared a bond that had excluded everyone else, even her beautiful sister. Secretly, Brianna had reveled in the knowledge that Gil had never shown any interest in Colleen. But would all that change now that Colleen had blossomed into a voluptuous woman?

Her jealousy, Brianna told herself, had nothing to do with wanting Gil for herself. She was only looking out for Gil's best interest. The fact that Colleen could beguile any man quicker than a spider could snare a fly made Brianna all the more uneasy. She'd have to do something before Gil became the next unsuspecting victim of one of her sister's cold-hearted schemes.

"Gilbert, my boy, it's great to have you home." Her father helped Mama into her seat, and then motioned Gil to take the chair next to his at the head of the table.

Gil smiled. "It's good to be back, sir. I can't wait to get out and work with the horses tomorrow."

Her father frowned. "I thought you'd start on the books first. I'm eager to put that business degree of yours to good use."

The lines around Gil's mouth tightened.

Mama clucked her tongue. "James, let the boy have a few days to rest before you besiege him with bookwork." Her gentle chiding brought a rush of color to Daddy's face. "I'm sure Gil longs to give Midnight a good workout. Besides, he deserves a bit of a holiday. He's worked every summer and never had any sort of vacation." With a flick of her wrist, Mama opened her napkin and laid it across her lap.

Gil shot her a grateful look. "I could use a few days to unwind."

His gaze swung the length of the table, catching Brianna's stare. Those vivid blue eyes she'd missed for so long seemed to look right through her. It used to be that Gil could tell her every thought, every feeling, without her having to say a word.

The servants' door opened, breaking their connection, and the kitchen maids filed in with the covered dishes, placing them on the sideboard with a flourish.

"We're having your favorite tonight, Gil," Deirdre said in a loud whisper across the table. "Mama said we could have my favorite tomorrow." Her seven-year-old cheeks glowed with the good health of outdoors and innocence.

"Thank you, Dee-Dee. I'll admit I've been looking forward to Mrs. Harrison's roast pork for weeks now. My mouth watered at the very thought of it." Gil gave the girl a bold wink, making her giggle.

"And we're having chocolate cake for dessert."

"Only if you eat all your main course, young lady." Mama's attempt at sternness fell short with her light laugh. "And that goes for you, too, Connor O'Leary. No scraping the peas into your pocket to dispose of later."

Eleven-year-old Connor gave their mother an impish grin. "For chocolate cake, I'll even eat extra peas."

Idle chitchat flowed easily while her family ate the scrumptious meal Mrs. Harrison had prepared especially for Gil. Once

the chocolate cake had been sliced and served, along with more glasses of milk, tea, and coffee, Brianna started to relax. So far things had fallen back into a familiar rhythm—almost as though Gil had never left.

“Before I forget, I have some news to share.” Her mother stirred her tea, the silver spoon tinkling in the dainty china cup. “I received a letter today from my cousin Beatrice in Ireland. You remember her, James. The one whose son is in the seminary.”

Her father patted his mustache with a linen napkin. “Yes, of course. Studying in Boston, isn’t he?”

“Yes. But he’s coming here to Long Island as part of his internship. He’ll be assisting at St. Rita’s.”

“Well, well. What a small world. We’ll have to have him over for dinner.”

Mama laid down her spoon and cleared her throat. “Actually, that’s why Beatrice is writing. She wondered if we could put him up for a while. The rectory is undergoing renovations at the moment, and they have no place for him.”

Daddy’s eyebrows drew together. “I don’t know, Kathleen. I’m not sure I’d be comfortable with a priest under our roof. Bad enough on Sunday morning.”

Brianna tensed at her father’s disapproving tone.

“He’s not a priest yet. And we could put him up on the third floor so Gil won’t feel so isolated.”

Silence hung in the air, broken only by the scrape of forks against plates as Connor and Deirdre polished off every last crumb of cake.

“He’s family, James. And we have plenty of space.” Mama’s tone became pleading.

Brianna hid a smile behind her napkin, knowing her father could never refuse her mother when she used that tone.

“The connection is distant at best. Isn’t Beatrice your third cousin or some such thing?”

“Family is still family.”

He gave Mama a look that would have withered most of his business associates, but Mama only smiled serenely, waiting.

At last, Daddy shook his head in apparent defeat. “Fine—as long as he doesn’t expect me to attend daily church services.”

Her mother clasped her hands together and beamed. “I’ll send a telegram tomorrow and let him know.”

Across the table, Brianna caught Colleen rolling her eyes. Her sister had little tolerance for anything religious. Only the wrath of their mother made her comply with their weekly church attendance.

Basking in her small victory, Mama leaned back against the plush dining chair, her teacup in hand. “So, Gilbert, tell us about your young lady. How is the grand romance progressing?”

The air tangled in Brianna’s lungs. She knew Gil had been seeing a girl in Manhattan, but she had assumed since she hadn’t heard anything lately, they had parted ways.

Gil cleared his throat. “I’m afraid my . . . association with Miss Haskell has come to an end.”

Mama’s cup clattered to the saucer. “Oh, Gil. I’m sorry. I’d hoped that we might expect a wedding announcement in the near future.”

Gil’s attention shifted to his plate, color staining his neck.

“Isn’t her father the professor you worked for at Columbia? The one you spent every holiday with?”

Brianna stopped stirring her tea at the hurt in her mother’s voice. How many times had Mama railed against the man who had hired Gil as his assistant, keeping Gil too busy to come home, even for holidays? And Brianna had agreed wholeheartedly. Other than the first Christmas after he left, Gil had not been back once to Irish Meadows.

Lines bracketed Gil’s mouth. “One and the same. However, I fear Professor Haskell holds a grudge because of the termination of my relationship with Laura. He, too, hoped for a betrothal.”

A minute of silence passed while everyone appeared to digest this latest news.

Then her father clapped Gil on the shoulder, looking decidedly relieved. “Not to worry, my boy. There are plenty of available young ladies in the area. As a matter of fact, I have one in mind for you myself.”

The tension in Brianna’s shoulders cinched the nerve at the base of her neck. “Really, Daddy. I’m sure Gil doesn’t need you to find women for him.” The words erupted from her mouth before the thought had fully formed in her head. A streak of fire heated her neck and cheeks.

Her father scowled at her. “That is no concern of yours, missy.” He turned to Gil, pushing his chair back as he spoke. “Let’s adjourn to the study. I have several important matters to discuss with you.”

Gil’s soft look of sympathy as he passed Brianna’s chair did nothing to lessen the sting of her father’s words. With Daddy’s usual dismissive attitude, she was once again relegated to the background of her father’s existence.