

When Irish Eyes Are Smiling

Chapter 1

Application for the Students Across the Seven Seas Study Abroad Program

Name: Delk Sinclair
Age: 17
High School: Junior at Overton Preparatory
Hometown: Nashville, Tennessee
Preferred Study Abroad Destination: Connemara, Ireland

Why are you interested in traveling abroad next year?

Answer: I feel it is important for me to discover the world so that I can become a self-assured, self-aware young woman, and Ireland is so rich in culture and tradition and natural beauty. To me, there is no better environment in which to discover my true self and embrace the simple things in life.

(Truth: I want to get away from my father's child bride — she is only ten years older than *me*. Besides that, she and my father are having a baby. Connemara, take me away. Please, please, *please* accept me, S.A.S.S. Powers That Be!)



How will traveling abroad further develop your talents and interests?

The new insights I gain while studying in Ireland will help prepare me for college life and the adult world. Traveling abroad will open my eyes to new opportunities and shed light on what I might chose for a future profession.

(Truth: Ireland seems like such a happy place. Maybe a little of that happiness will rub off on me.)

Describe your extracurricular activities.

Overton Preparatory Tennis Team
Overton Preparatory Junior Class Activities and Events Cochair
Overton Preparatory Sophomore Class Activities and Events Cochair
Overton Preparatory Freshman Class Activities and Events Cochair
West Nashville Country Club Junior Social Committee Member
Booth Coordinator for *Find It Now* (an annual fund-raiser for kidney disease research)

(Truth: As much as I look down on shallow people, I am one. Mostly, all I do is plan events and try to look hot.)

Is there anything else you feel we should know about you?

I lost my mother two years ago, and my goal is to live my life in a manner which would make her proud and honor her memory.

(Truth: I miss my mother, and I don't think I will ever get over losing her.)

Chapter One

"Hi, I'm Delk." She smiled, extending her hand to a broad-shouldered girl who was seated on a bench under an Aer Lingus sign at the Dublin Airport. "Delk Sinclair. You're with S.A.S.S., right?"

"How'd you guess?" The girl smirked and looked down at the "Students Across the Seven Seas" logo imprinted on her wrinkled T-shirt. Delk had a top just like it, except she hadn't worn hers yet. It'd come with the official S.A.S.S. acceptance letter.

"That was kinda obvious, I guess." Delk laughed uncomfortably and waited for the girl to introduce herself. "So what's your name?" she asked finally.

"Iris," she said, and smiled broadly, which was when Delk noticed Iris was missing a cuspid. Plain as day there just wasn't a tooth where a tooth would normally go. "Yep, name's Iris. Suits me, don't you think?" she said, sticking her tongue through the space as if to draw attention to the flaw.

Delk couldn't help but stare. "What happened to your tooth?" she asked. The rude question shocked Delk herself, and she wondered if it was the jet lag that made her forget her manners.

"Congenital defect," said Iris.

Delk stared at the girl in horror. "*Genital* defect?" she whispered.

"*Con*-genital. As in *from birth*," she explained.

"Oh, right," said Delk, embarrassed.

"I have an appliance I can wear — *when* I want to impress people. I rarely want to impress people, though," Iris added. "So where you from, Delk? No, wait, let me guess! Alabama? Kentucky?"

"Nashville," Delk answered.

"Yep, I could tell by your accent it had to be somewhere down there. It's ironic, I guess," said Iris.

"What's ironic?" Delk asked, searching through her purse for rewetting drops. Her contact lenses felt like sandpaper. She was tempted to remove them and put on her glasses, but they were thick as Coke bottles, and unlike Iris, she *did* want to impress people, at least at first.

"Well, it just seems to me that *you* should be the one missing teeth," Iris quipped. Delk felt herself bristle. She hated degrading jokes about the South, and she could tell Iris was about to make one.

"We have excellent dental care in Nashville!" said Delk curtly. "And, I don't go 'round barefoot and playing a banjo either."

"I was only kidding," said Iris. "I'm a Jersey girl. I know every word to every Bon Jovi song ever written. I'm a Turnpike Rat. Proud of it, too."

"Turnpike Rat?" asked Delk.

"A Turnpike Rat is your basic redneck, only from the North." Iris took a small blue case out of her duffel bag and inserted a contraption resembling a retainer into her mouth. She flashed a now-perfect smile.

"Wow! You can't even tell with that thing in," said Delk, impressed.

Iris laughed and popped the appliance out. "I'm also freakishly muscular, thanks to my sports addiction." She flexed her biceps.

"Good Lord!" cried Delk. "What have you been lifting? Small cars? Guys named Guido?" she threw in, a retort to the Tennessee jab. "So what sport do you play?"

"That's sports," Iris corrected her, "and I play everything." She snapped the appliance back in its case and stuffed it into her *one* duffel bag.

"You're not gonna wear your appliance?" Delk asked. She preferred to meet the S.A.S.S. director with a companion who had *all* her teeth.

"Oh, I never meet anyone for the first time with it in," said Iris, as if this were the most obvious of choices.

"Why not?" asked Delk.

"Hell, you can tell a lot more about a person with it out," Iris explained. "It's like my own personal Myers-Briggs. I get to see if you're a shallow ass or a decent person, you know, someone with depth who won't judge me based on a congenital defect."

"All this you can tell by revealing a missing tooth?"

Iris nodded and let out a noisy yawn. "You're all right, though, Delk. You passed with flying colors. As long as you like Bon Jovi, we'll get along just fine."

Delk thought how different Iris was from her friends back home, the *West Nashville Grand Ballroom Gowns*, a term Jimmy Buffett used in a song to describe girls of wealth and privilege. They'd sooner die than be caught with less than perfect teeth, or less than perfect anything, for that matter. Delk loved her friends, and she would miss them, but she also needed to get away from them for a while — *completely away*.

At the very last minute, Julie and Rebecca, Delk's two best friends, had stopped by the house to say one last good-bye. "We promise to e-mail with all the Forest Hills dirt," said Rebecca. "Yep," Julie chimed in, "we'll make you feel like you're being presented right along with us!" They had the best intentions, Delk knew, but the Forest Hills Country Club presentation was precisely the reason Delk *wanted* to go to Ireland.

Every year the club held a lavish ceremony for girls Delk's age. The presentation candidates wore white dresses and attended a formal ceremony in which they were *presented*. For several weeks afterward, the girls and their families threw parties to celebrate their introduction into Nashville society. Before leaving town, Delk had politely declined twenty-two party invitations. There'd be tents the size of Dallas in backyards all across West Nashville, trees glittering with thousands of white lights, bands playing in the warm Southern night air. More than likely, the combined cost of all these soirees could feed a small country for a year.

Too superficial was the excuse Delk had given her father when he asked if she wanted to participate, but the real truth was Delk avoided monumental, Kodak-type occasions altogether; such events made her miss her mother too much. Delk felt guilty, but she'd lied to Julie and Rebecca, told them she wouldn't have Internet access while in Ireland. By the time she returned, presentation season would be over, and Delk could go on with life.

"Left some hottie back home, right?" asked Iris. She was staring at Delk quizzically.

"Huh?" Delk replied, shoving the depressing thoughts out of her mind.

"You had this emo look, you know, like you were missing some dude or something."

"Oh, I don't even have a boyfriend," Delk replied. "I'm just . . . um . . . tired."

"Ditto on both accounts," said Iris, yawning again. "Hey, think he's looking for us?" she asked, nodding toward the airport courtesy desk.

Delk spotted an older man wearing a S.A.S.S. T-shirt identical to Iris's (except neater). The customer service rep was pointing in their direction. Delk stood up and smoothed out her linen skirt, which was wrinkled beyond any hope. She rubbed her dry eyes and blinked a few times to clear the cloudy lenses. She glanced over at Iris, who still sat sprawled on the vinyl bench.

"Good morning to ya." The man smiled, his Irish lilt thick and songlike. "I'm Keegin Keneally," he said, taking Delk's hand, "and let me be the first to welcome you ladies to the Emerald Isle." He was a rather compact, robust man with a sharply upturned nose and bright blue eyes.

"I'm Delk Sinclair from Nashville, Tennessee." Delk smiled back at him. "It's very nice to meet you. Are you the director?"

Mr. Keneally laughed. "Now tha-twould be something. No, I'm just the local farmer, airport shuttle man, and unofficial tour guide. There was a bit of a coal crisis back at the dorms, so Mrs. Connolly couldn't meet you in person. Who's yer friend there?" he asked, glancing toward Iris.

"Oh, we just met," said Delk. "This is Iris." Delk realized she didn't know Iris's last name. "I think she could definitely use some coffee. She's too tired to get up." Iris took Delk's not-so-subtle hint and stood. Mr. Keneally and Delk gaped up at her. Iris was, without a doubt, the tallest girl Delk had ever seen – over six feet for sure.

"Nice to meet you." Iris grinned down at Mr. Keneally.

"Same to you." Mr. Keneally mused. "What in God's name do they feed you in America?"

"Small children and live farm animals mostly," Iris replied drily. Clearly, she'd heard all the tall jokes before. Mr. Keneally laughed broadly with his mouth wide open and a hand on his round belly.

"May I get you ladies some coffee or tea for the trip? The two of you look like you could use it, and we have a few hours' drive ahead of us."

Delk and Iris followed Mr. Keneally to the coffee stand. Secretly, Delk was dying for a Diet Coke, her morning caffeine preference, but she settled for tea with cream, which wasn't all that bad. Lugging their bags, they made their way to the airport parking lot, and Delk was rather startled to see a *very* cute boy sitting in the van's passenger seat.

"That's my son there," said Mr. Keneally as he hoisted the bags into the back of the van and slammed the door.

“Mornin’,” Cute Boy said politely, and tipped his cap. His fair face was spattered with freckles, and he had a shock of strawberry-blond hair hanging over his vivid green eyes. His eyebrows were thick and blond and seemed to have a will of their own, as if they were actually patches of hay glued to his forehead. Somehow, here in Ireland, this had a sexy effect, although Delk knew her Nashville crowd would insist he undergo a thorough waxing.

“Hi, I’m Delk,” she said. Thank God she had resisted the temptation to put on her glasses.

“I’m Pather Keneally,” said the boy. He looked to be about Delk’s age, but she couldn’t be sure.

“Nice to meet you,” said Delk. “This is Iris,” she explained, understanding by this point that Iris would not introduce herself.

“Hey there,” said Iris gruffly.

They climbed into the van and settled against the cold vinyl seats. The drive to Connemara was a quiet one. Delk felt herself dozing off, and when she wasn’t dozing off (or staring at the back of Pather Keneally’s gorgeous head), she was thinking about home — *not a good thing*.

She pictured her dad with his new (and very pregnant) wife, Paige. Knowing Paige, she was probably home rearranging furniture right this very minute. Already she’d had the kitchen wallpaper Delk’s mother painstakingly hung a few years ago ripped down, *and* she’d cleared out boxes of trinkets that “simply weren’t her style” without even asking if Delk might want them. They’d had a huge fight over that one. Actually, they’d had a lot of huge fights.

Right before Delk’s dad married Paige, he said, “Delk, honey, I guess I’m just young at heart” (he was referring to the twenty-five year age difference, of course). Old and stupid was more like it, but Delk never said so. Her father had been devastated when her mother died; there was no point in torturing him further. Besides, like Delk, he was stubborn, and she knew there was no talking him out of it.

The biggest shock of all was when Paige announced The Pregnancy. Pregnant! Delk’s fifty-two-year-old father was having a baby. By the time the kid graduated high school, her father would be hunched over a walker, and Delk would probably be the one changing his Depends. Certainly, young chicky wife would’ve found some Ashton Kutcher-type hunk by then. No, Delk hadn’t anticipated a sibling. *Half sibling*, she corrected herself. *Only half*.

“Are you asleep back there?” Mr. Keneally asked.

"No, sir," replied Delk, glancing over at Iris, who appeared to be in the REM stage. Her eyes were shut tight, but her mouth gaped open widely.

"So what do you think of her?" asked Mr. Keneally.

"Who, Iris?" replied Delk.

"No! The mother country!" Mr. Keneally corrected. "She's lovely, isn't she?"

Delk gazed out the window and actually *saw* Ireland for the first time—lush green fields, vast blue sky, low-lying stone walls, sheep, and more sheep. It was beautiful. Magnificent. *Green*. Greener than Tennessee even. Emerald, in fact. The van bumped along the rural road, and Delk realized she had actually done it—crossed the Atlantic Ocean and arrived in a foreign country for three whole months, a thought that both thrilled and frightened her. "She *is* lovely," she said softly, realizing how inadequate her response probably sounded.

She closed her eyes and made a mental to-do list: (1) Take out contacts; (2) Nap; (3) Write a safe-arrival e-mail—to her father only, of course; (4) Snoop for Pather Keneally details. Later, she would go for a long walk and get her bearings. Obviously, Connemara was vastly different from Nashville, and it would take her a while to get used to living in the country.

According to the brochure, her S.A.S.S. campus was "five miles from the nearest village." The thought made her stomach sink a little. After all, she was used to Nashville, a large and stylish *city*. She'd lived there her whole life, in fact, and it had all the amenities a girl could hope for—fancy salons, massive malls, trendy boutiques, gourmet coffee shops, quaint places to lunch, not to mention Diet Coke. What would she do if she hated it here? Admittedly, this was not a question she'd allowed herself to consider until now.

"We're here!" Mr. Keneally trilled. Delk's eyes popped open, and she was shocked to see rain-spattered glass. The now-gray sky had been blue when she closed her eyes just a few minutes earlier! "There's your home for the next three months," said Mr. Keneally proudly as he pulled the parking break.

"He always stops here on the main road so students can appreciate the panoramic view," Pather explained.

Delk wiped the window with her sleeve and pressed her face against the cold, foggy glass. "Oh!" she cried when she saw it. "Oh, it's . . . *it's* . . ." She shut her mouth again.

"It's really something, isn't it?" said Pather. Delk glanced at him. He was smiling at her, and for a second, their eyes met.

Iris stirred next to her. “Look!” said Delk, nudging her awake. “We’re here! Just look at this place!”

Iris stretched and rubbed her eyes. “Jeez Louise!” she cried when she saw it. “That’s not *Tremain*?” she asked, incredulous.

“’Tis Tremain Castle,” said Mr. Keneally. “Your new home for a while at least. What do you think?”

“I think we’re not in Kansas anymore!” said Iris. “I mean my parents were delirious when we got a house with a two-car garage. They’ll pop a vessel when they see pictures of this.”

“Well, let’s hope they don’t get *that* excited.” Mr. Keneally laughed.

Iris was right to be thrilled, so was Delk. Tremain Castle was enormous, straight from the storybooks—an austere gray stone structure with mysterious Gothic details—towers and turrets—the stuff of fairy tales. It sat at the foot of a craggy mountain, and just in front of the castle was a large and shimmering lake, or *lough*, as the Irish called it (Delk had learned this from a guidebook). To the right of Tremain was a mile-long ribbon of gravel that meandered toward the castle, but then disappeared in a clump of trees. Delk strained her eyes, but from the road, she couldn’t see where the driveway actually ended. Although the early March trees were still stark and bare, the grass was surprisingly lush. A sign of spring? Or perhaps the grass in Ireland was always this way? Delk would have to look it up.

She thought of all the months of preparation leading up to this moment: she’d read guidebooks, filled out forms, and endured a physical. She’d purchased new clothes—warm things from places like L.L. Bean and Patagonia—a far cry from her usual Diesel and Juicy.

Delk drew in a ragged breath and let it out again. She felt shaky inside, jittery, the way she did the night before a test. She *hoped* she’d made the right decision in coming here. At the very least, she was far away from Paige and her unborn sibling and all those Forest Hills girls with their oh-so-helpful mothers and their lavish presentation parties. *Yes, she’s a long way from a West Nashville grand ballroom gown*, Jimmy Buffett sang in her head.

The four of them got out of the van and stretched. A light rain fell, but Delk didn’t mind, at least it helped wake her up a little. Mr. Keneally hoisted their bags out of the back and set them on the pavement.

“I got mine,” said Iris, and before Pather or Mr. Keneally could object, she grabbed the lime green duffel and slung it over her shoulder. Delk gladly accepted Pather’s

help, however. She had one giant suitcase on wheels, a slightly smaller but very overpacked duffel, and an extra-large carry-on that was filled with random items she'd decided to take at the very last minute – a pair of strappy high heels and an evening bag, an extra hair dryer in case the first one broke, a stuffed bear (better known as Wooby), a framed photograph of her family that was taken when Delk was twelve and had decided to cut her own bangs, a pocket-size dictionary and thesaurus, and a pack of playing cards she'd found in the kitchen junk drawer.

Mr. Keneally led the way across a parking pad to the front of the castle and pushed open the heavy wooden door. He held it back until they were all inside a dimly lit foyer. "The dining hall is straight back there," he said, pointing down a wide corridor.

The walls were a warm and welcoming shade of mustard yellow, and ornate bronze sconces with crystal teardrops hung on either side of the arched doorway. Hanging just to the left was a portrait of a woman and a young girl, obviously from a couple of centuries ago, and to the right was an elegant needlepoint sign in a gold frame, which read *Dining Hall This Way* with an arrow underneath.

On either side of the foyer were two sweeping stone staircases with intricately carved wooden banisters and railings. Delk could only imagine the elegant people who had ascended and descended them. Mr. Keneally snapped on a light, and the sconces cast a delicate glow across the stone floor.

"There! Now we can see at least," he said. "Don't let this place put you off, ladies. It's a tad overwhelming at first, but you'll get used to it. 'Tis quite cozy in the sleeping quarters. Follow me," he instructed. Delk glanced over at Iris, and Iris gave her a wide-eyed "Can you believe this?" look. Delk smiled, and they followed Mr. Keneally toward their rooms.

At the top of the stairs, a balcony overlooked an elegant sitting room and the adjoining dining hall. Its wood floors were honey-colored and gleaming; floor-to-ceiling draperies trimmed with fat tassels accentuated the enormous windows, which from this distance, appeared to look out over a still-dormant garden. Thick wooden tables and a collection of fashionably mismatched chairs had been carefully arranged around the room, and there was a stone fireplace, although it was unlit at the moment.

"Where are all the other students?" asked Delk. She was imagining the meals she would eat in the wonderful dining hall, the new friends she would make there.

"Oh, they'll be arriving throughout the day," Mr. Keneally explained. "You girls are the first. I'm driving to the train station in Galway later. A few more get to the Dublin

Airport early in the morning. Tomorrow, you'll have formal introductions. Today is mostly getting settled and learning your way around."

"My mom says I can't find my socks in my sock drawer," said Iris.

Mr. Keneally and Pather laughed. "Well, you'd better learn your way 'round quickly," said Pather. "Mrs. Connolly's a stickler for bein' on time."

"Oh, is she strict?" asked Delk. Her teachers at Overton Prep always seemed strict at the beginning of a semester, but after a while they loosened up. She hoped Mrs. Connolly was the same way.

Pather opened his mouth to speak. "I think it's best to let the girls form their own opinions," Mr. Keneally interrupted him.

"I'm guessing she's strict," said Delk. Pather grinned and shrugged.

Mr. Keneally stopped at a cheerful red door and pulled an official looking sheet from his coat pocket. "Room assignments," he explained, and examined the list carefully. Delk noticed each of the doors in the hallway had been painted a different color. She hoped the red one was hers. "Looks like this is it," Mr. Keneally confirmed, and unlocked the door. "Iris, it says here you're right next door to Delk—in the *eggplant* room."

Delk's room was modest in size, with dark paneled walls and a slate floor that was partially covered by a threadbare Oriental rug. The high ceiling had been painted the same color as the door. The bed was slightly larger than a twin but smaller than a full, and there was a fireplace and big windows draped with red velvet curtains. In the far right corner sat a tiny dressing table, and just opposite the bed was a wardrobe. There was no closet, Delk noticed, but the overstuffed chair and ottoman would be a perfect place for reading.

"There are boxed meals." Mr. Keneally pointed toward a small picnic basket on her nightstand. "Enough for lunch *and* dinner. Tomorrow morning will be the first official meal in the dining hall. Feel free to look around and make yourselves comfortable. You're on your own until tomorrow, although Mrs. Connolly has asked that no one leave the grounds."

"Are you kidding? I don't think I could *find* the front door!" said Iris.

"It was nice meeting you both," said Pather. He had thoughtfully placed Delk's heaviest bag on the chest at the foot of her bed so she wouldn't have to lift it.

"Thanks for everything," said Delk. She shook Mr. Keneally's rough hand, then Pather's warm, smooth one, and the Keneally men left.

“Jeez! We just got here, and you two are practically engaged,” said Iris as soon as they’d shut the door behind them.

“Oh, *please!* Pather probably *has* a girlfriend.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to be *her* with *you* around,” said Iris, glancing around Delk’s room. “This is a bit on the dreary side, if you ask me. I might have an extra Bon Jovi poster if you want.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” said Delk.

“Suit yourself. I’m going next door to my purple slice of heaven.”

“*Eggplant,*” Delk corrected, following her into the hall. “Hey, Iris?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you believe we’re actually *here*? I mean, we’re, like, living in a castle,” said Delk.

“I know. I feel like a freakin’ fairy princess!”

Delk laughed and shut the door behind her. She examined her new room again. Iris was right, it was a little on the gloomy side, but nothing some sunshine and music (thank God for iPod) wouldn’t fix. Delk opened her carry-on bag and took out a few of the miscellaneous items. Wooby was propped up on the bed pillows—he was too flimsy and worn-out now to sit up on his own. The family picture (pre-kidney disease and pre-Paige) was placed on her bedside table.

She flopped down on the soft bed and gazed at the picture on her nightstand. If her mother were still alive, Delk would call her this second to describe every detail of her trip so far. No, Delk realized. If her mother were still alive, they’d be picking out presentation dresses and bands and tents, like all her other friends back home.

Delk rolled onto her back and stared at the red ceiling. No one *here* knew about her life back *there*. In Ireland, she didn’t have to feel left out for not being presented or weird about her too-young stepmom or embarrassed that her old father was having a new baby. She didn’t have to watch while Paige slowly stripped away her mother’s touches with her redecorating efforts. Except for whoever read the S.A.S.S. application (Mrs. Connolly probably), no one knew she was the sad girl with the dead mother, and Delk intended to keep it that way.