

PART I

FROM IRELAND TO AMERICA



Chapter 1

Taking Charge of My Life



In some ways, I was at the end of a journey. In others, it was just a beginning. As the jet turned to land at JFK International airport in New York, I looked out the window and caught a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty. There she was, standing majestically as if watching over this great land.

I had long dreamed of coming to America to discover my destiny. Although my return ticket was dated almost exactly one year from today, I knew in my heart that this was to be more than just a year. It was going to be the beginning of my new life and my future. As scared and alone as I felt, I also had feelings of exhilaration and anticipation. I was coming to America to discover my American dream.

The day I arrived in America, I was eighteen years old, had only \$20 in my pocket, and a dream in my heart. I had accepted a position as a nanny and I was to be paid the generous sum of \$20 per week, plus the use of the family car. While that might not seem like much to most people, to me it was a lot. I had grown up in Cork City, Ireland, under emotionally and financially challenging circumstances, so this opportunity seemed like the chance of a lifetime.

Grand Beginnings

When I came into the world, I was born into what some might call an Irish fairy tale. My mother had been swept off her feet by her suitor, William L. Hennessy, and they had been married with celebration and joy. My mother had coal black hair, green eyes, and an enchanting personality to match her beauty. My father was a handsome, vivacious man who came from an impressive Irish family. It seemed to be a match made in heaven.

Their wedding was one of regal splendor. They were married at the local Catholic Church. The townspeople lined the streets after the ceremony to applaud the new bride and groom as they rode in their Bentley to their reception. Yes, it was almost like a fairy tale.

My mother and father had some wonderful times in those early years. Although my father sometimes drank too much, they seemed to be getting along well and his business was successful. Shortly after they were married,

they discovered that my mother was expecting her first child. They were both delighted to be starting their family. During childbirth, my mother experienced complications and had a stroke. The baby was healthy and strong, but the doctors advised that my mother would never be able to live a normal life again. As a result of the stroke, she would be partially paralyzed for life.

My father adored his daughter, but could not deny that he had always hoped he would one day have a son. Although her doctors were emphatic that my mother have no more children, my mother and father decided that they would try to have another in hopes of having a son.

When my mother became pregnant, the doctors refused to care for her since she had disregarded their advice. My parents traveled to England so that she could have specialized medical care. Their second child, my sister Jackie, was born, and both mother and baby got through the delivery without incident. The birth of Jackie was soon followed by the birth of three more girls, Me, Toni, and Donna. William, the only boy was born after Toni. At last, my father had his son.

By the time I was born, my father's drinking had become a serious problem. He began drinking more frequently, becoming more outwardly aggressive toward his family, and going out more often. Mae Barry, the nanny my father had hired when I was born, provided much of the needed stability and encouragement that my mother as well as her children needed. She was often the only stabilizing force in the household.

By the time my brother was born, my father's drinking had become extremely detrimental to the family. He began to be abusive to my mother. But being Irish Catholic, divorce was not an option for my mother and father.

As I grew older, I dreaded the nights when my father would come home in drunken rages. It seemed that each episode became more and more extreme. But Mae was always there to encourage us and to take care of my mother. Through it all, Mae was there to give our lives stability and love. In many ways, she was our "silent defender." She always made sure that we were cared for and that we knew that we were loved. Mae had a powerful impact on my mother as well. My mother, in spite of her disability, was a very strong woman.

Throughout my life, Mae had been there to be my mentor and my encourager. She was there for me from the time I was born. She influenced my life in a powerful way. When I was 8 years old, Mae became very ill. She was diagnosed with cancer. Her condition quickly deteriorated to the point that she was no longer able to care for us, and she was hospitalized.

Not long after, my mother took me to the hospital to visit Mae. As I walked into the room, I saw Mae, a mere shell of what she had been only a few weeks earlier. Mae asked my mother if she could talk to me alone. After my mother left the room, Mae took my hand in hers and said: "Gillian, you must take care of your mother for me and be my eyes for her when I cannot be there." I promised Mae that I would care for my mother. Mae died a few

weeks later. I was devastated. My mother's helper and our mentor was gone.

Later in my life, I realized what Mae had given me. During my childhood, she had always encouraged me to "reach for the stars." She said I was never to finish second; she always wanted me to do my best.

Peace in Adversity

To this day, I do not understand how my mother was able to endure not only the unbelievable tragedy of having a major stroke as a young woman, but further having to live with the abuse and alcoholism of my father. Through it all, she held her head high as if there was no pain or humiliation. It was my mother who taught me my first lesson about persevering in life. My own life experience and my mother's words taught me that there are two choices in life: You can be a victim or you can be a victor. I am fortunate that my mother taught me how to be a victor even during life's most difficult times.

I have never forgotten what my mother told me on the day I started the first grade: "You've got to be number one." That was the way my mother was. Even though she was disabled, she inspired her children to be exceptional in everything that they did.

After many years of abuse by my father, my mother could take it no longer and filed a criminal complaint against my father. My father was furious and moved out

of the house. Although he continued to support the family financially, we saw little of him during those years.

When I was 12 years old, my father contracted pneumonia. A few days after we learned he was ill, my mother came in to my room and sadly told me: "Gillian, your father passed on to be with God."

A Nightmare Begins

The funeral was a trying time for my mother and our family. After attending the graveside service, we all returned to our house where I overheard some relatives talking about what a pity it was about my father's business. After everyone left, my uncle stayed to talk with my mother. My father had changed his will and left my mother out of it. But there was more. My father's business was insolvent. In addition to all of her other difficulties, my mother had to take care of liquidating my father's business. It felt like we were still living with my father's alcoholism and its consequences.

My mother was left with only the house that she and my father had been given at their marriage. She was disabled and left alone to care for six children, her only income a widow's pension of \$85 a week. We also discovered that a number of our friends no longer wanted to associate with us. In the eyes of the community, we had been disgraced. I often overheard children at school talking about how my father had left us penniless.

Never Give Up

During this time, our lives radically changed. Living on a widow's pension with a family of seven is just about as close to poverty as you can get. Despite our circumstances, my mother was never discouraged. When we could not pay to heat the house, she bought a coal stove for the living room and we would spend cold winter evenings in front of the stove playing games and having fun.

My mom also became an exceptionally creative cook (although we ate bread, potatoes, and beans a lot, she prepared them in many different ways so we hardly ever realized the monotony of dinnertime). At times, my mother would tease us and make all the sacrifices and all her hard work seem effortless. In spite of all the losses in our lives, we were blessed as a family. My mother was a champion. In spite of our limited resources, Mother also saved a few pennies along the way so that occasionally we could go into town and buy some candy or ice cream.

During this time, my teacher, Mrs. Nolan, became a tremendous influence in my life. The events of my childhood had left me feeling discouraged and hopeless, but Mrs. Nolan took an interest in me and became my encourager. She convinced me to become involved in musicals and school plays. That led to an opportunity to join the Monfort Singers and Dancers. While I was a performer with the group, they were invited to go to America to perform. Although my mother did not have the money

to send me, she asked my uncle Val if he could help buy my ticket. He agreed! I was going to go to America.

My trip seemed like a dream. The group was divided and stayed with volunteer host families while we performed, and we got to tour America. It was an inspirational time in my life. This was the first time I saw the Statue of Liberty. Little did I realize at the time that the trip was an overture to my future.

The Call

One wintry evening after I had returned home to Ireland, our telephone rang. One of the host families from my visit abroad had recommended me to an American couple. They wanted to know if I would consider coming to America for a year to work as a nanny for their three-year-old daughter.

I had just turned 18, so for most girls it would have been a time to leave home. But I had promised Mae that I would care for my mother. One evening I heard my mother slowly making her way up the stairs to my room. “Gillian,” she said, “I think the opportunity to go to America is one that you must accept.” I knew it broke my mother’s heart, but it was clear that she thought it was best for me.

Time became a blur as Herb and Charlotte Watchinski, my new employers, came to Ireland with their daughter to pick me up. I immediately fell in love with little Karin. My sister Mary gave me her new dress so I would

have something to wear. The evening before my departure, my mother came into my room and tearfully said goodbye. She pressed a 20-pound bill into my hand. I knew that was a lot of money to my Mom. I tried to return it, but she insisted I take it.

America, the Beautiful

When I arrived in America, I was homesick, frightened, and excited all at the same time. My new home was to be in Kansas City, Missouri. I arrived and got settled in, and things began to go fairly well. Each day, Karin would cry when her parents left for work. I decided that my job was to make her as happy as possible. I spent my days taking Karin to different places and keeping her happy and entertained while her parents were away.

One day Karin and I were alone at home and I was trying to figure out how to operate the drain in a sink. The plumbing in Ireland is quite different from that in the United States. I had reached a point of total frustration, when the doorbell rang. It was our neighbor, Jackie. I was so relieved that I had someone to help me figure out how to operate that drain. Of course, it only took Jackie about a second to explain how to operate it.

Jackie and I struck up an immediate friendship. She told me that her husband was a police officer and suggested that we go and meet one of his single friends during their dinner break one day at a local restaurant. I

agreed, but I was a bit anxious. I had not really dated much before.

The day for our dinner came, and Jackie and I drove up to the restaurant where we were to meet Jackie's husband and his friend. It turned out that the friend had been dispatched on a call, so the dinner would probably be off. At that moment, another squad car pulled up and as the window rolled down, I saw the most handsome man I had ever seen in my life. Under my breath I said, "My goodness, it's Ponch!" Growing up in Ireland, I had watched the show *Chips* and Erik Estrada (Ponch) was one of my favorites. I would dream of finding a man like him to spend the rest of my life with. There I was, 18 years old, and the moment I saw him I told myself he was the man I would marry.

Vince Ortega spent his dinner hour talking with me. He was the most respectful man I had ever met. We began dating a few months later. Since I had to care for Karin, Vince decided it was best to make Karin a part of our dates. They became so fond of each other that even on my days off, Vince would plan dates that Karin could be a part of.

A few months after we started dating, Vince asked me to meet his parents, John and Anita. I was anxious about meeting them, but once in their home, I discovered a loving family, just like mine. Vince has five brothers and sisters just like I do. I adored Vince's mother the moment I met her. Vince's father, John, and I also immediately developed a close relationship. John is a man of deep con-

victions and integrity. In many ways, John has become the father I never had.

At the end of my year in America, one afternoon Vince asked if we could call my mother. He asked her if she would give her consent for me to marry him. Vince suggested that he buy an airline ticket for my mother to come to America to visit us. She agreed.

The day came that my mother was to arrive and I was anxious to say the least. We met her at the airport and immediately went to Vince's parents' house for dinner. There was really no need for me to be anxious; my mother and Vince's parents immediately liked each other. Most importantly, my mother loved Vince. When she met him, she called him "her Godsend."

A Journey Complete

A year later, Vince and I were married. I finished my fourth semester in college and landed a job in the technology department of a local company. We had a son, Vince Jr., who became the other light in my life. After Vince was born, I wanted to spend more time being a mom and less time working or commuting. While discussing this with a friend in the ladies' room at a restaurant, a woman interrupted us, saying, "I have the solution." I was offended at first to have a stranger listen to my conversation, but I decided to hear her out.

The woman was a Mary Kay Independent Beauty Consultant. I was interested, but we did not have the

extra money to invest at the time. I asked Vince his opinion and he was wary of the situation. One day the woman called and asked if she could stop by. I told her to come after Vince left for work. Once I heard the details of the opportunity, it did not take long for me to decide what to do. I had hidden one of Vince's credit cards for the occasion, and I placed my first order that day.

That evening when Vince got home around 11:00 P.M., I was nervous. I cooked him a wonderful dinner and told him I had something to tell him. I explained what I had done and, much to my surprise, when he saw my excitement, Vince encouraged me to go for it. What I didn't know was that Vince (now a police detective) had done a background investigation on Mary Kay Inc. He ran the company through the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Internal Revenue Service, and Better Business Bureau records and finally he talked to his financial advisor who told him, "Mary Kay is the most progressive company in America today and your wife would be crazy if she at least didn't try it." I didn't have much choice but to be successful. I wanted to be sure I could pay off Vince's credit card before the payment was due.

I set myself a goal of working my business for six months while still working a 60-hour work week. After a month, I was earning the same take-home pay in nine hours selling Mary Kay products as I was working 40 to 60 hours for someone else. Exactly six months after making the commitment, I left my full-time position and began selling Mary Kay products full time.

During a short visit to Ireland, I told my sister Donna about what I was doing. Donna looked at me and said, “How many people have you told about this wonderful opportunity?” Up to that point I was content selling the products and I had not thought about recruiting others to sell it, even though I understood that is how you advance in your business. That was a turning point for me. I made the decision to begin working my business like I should have been all along. I returned to Kansas City with a new dream in my heart.

My business took off like a rocket. I began earning incentives like the use of a career car and vacations. The most satisfying moment was when I took my mother to Hawaii. I had earned the trip for Vince and myself as a reward for my sales production, but had been doing well enough financially to buy Mom a ticket to go with us. We rented a condo right on the beach for my mother. One day I walked into my mother’s room and found her out on the balcony room painting. She told me she didn’t want to forget all the beautiful things she was seeing. Although she had never painted in her life, it had been one of her life-long dreams.

As I walked out on the patio, there my mother stood, with tears in her eyes. In front of her was a breathtaking painting of the Hawaiian coastline. She looked at me and said, “Gillian, thanks to you and Mary Kay I have had the opportunity to live an unbelievable dream. God knew what He was doing so many years ago when the doctors didn’t want me to have any more children, yet I went

against their counsel. Where would I have been without you in my life?”

At that moment, I felt that God had led me to America so that I could achieve my American dream and achieve dreams for my mother. Today, I operate my own business that generates income not only for me, but also for all the people that have counseled me. My mother no longer has to depend on her widow’s pension for her livelihood. She has her own bank account that my sisters and I contribute to. We call those her fun accounts. She now spends four to six months each year with Vince and me.

As an Independent National Sales Director, I am often asked to travel and speak to women around the world. I am one of the most blessed people around. I have the opportunity to live my American dream—and to share that dream with others.

Sell Your Way to the Top!

This book is about selling, but more than that, it is about life. I have been blessed in my sales career. I have my own business, I work when I want to work, and I am one of those fortunate people who has time for her family.

I believe that God wants the very best for you. If sales is your chosen career, I hope you will discover that mediocre is not an acceptable goal. I hope you realize that when you are “average” you are as close to the top as you are to the bottom. So, why not go for the top? It is my dream that you strive for the exceptional. It is not all about money—it’s all about life!