

BRIANNA'S MAGIC

Delia Carnell



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Dedication

To J&J, my dearest friends -- sorry about the peanut butter.

Chapter One

Brianna O'Shea walked out the back door of her great-grandmother's cottage toward the ruins of Castle Torin. The moon was almost full, casting an ethereal glow over the damp, heather-strewn field. The rain had stopped about an hour ago, but tiny drops still glistened in the cracks and crevices of the stone wall.

Now not a single cloud marred the night sky. Stars pricked the blackness like handfuls of sequins scattered across a velvet cloth. Black and silver. Everywhere she looked, Brianna saw the gleaming contrast of sparkle against darkness. Surely tonight, if ever, faeries danced in the moonlight.

She picked her way across the field, her booted feet long since grown accustomed to the stone. The ruffled hem of her nightgown skimmed the moist ground. Night smells were pungent, damp earth mingled with salty spray from the ocean. Feeling the chill of a brisk wind, she clasped the ends of her heavy woolen shawl more tightly around her shoulders.

Reaching the outer rim of a mounded ring in the grass, she paused and listened. Was that the tinkle of music coming from the faerie fort? Or only the everyday rustle of wind through the gorse bushes? She closed her eyes, as if to listen more intently. Everyone knew the faeries lived in this sacred circle. They must be out on a night as magical as this, so close to the start of spring. How could they resist the dance? Brianna opened her eyes very

carefully, straining to catch a snippet of what might have been music. Molly had taught her how to listen.

But not tonight. She could detect no sound beyond the wind across the rocky hill and the waves crashing against the jagged coast. No twinkling faerie lanterns shone inside the grassy circle. No little people danced tonight. Carefully, avoiding stepping on sacred faerie ground, she opened her hand and sprinkled a mixture of crushed leaves and powders while chanting some words in the ancient language.

The spell cast, Brianna moved up the hill to the lingering sections of an ancient castle. She walked across an open space and took a seat in her favorite spot, the base of a crumbling stone stairway that once had led to the fortress tower.

She sat there, as she often did, imagining the lives of the people who had built this structure — the men who had conquered, the women who had warmed the hearth. Here they had found their shelter while they practiced the ancient arts. So many of the details were lost in the ocean of time, but Brianna did her best to preserve what they knew. She worked in a pub in the village most nights, but she spent her days bent over her laptop, recording everything her family had learned, passed on mother to daughter, father to son, for hundreds of years.

Her college education had been a part of her yearning to study history. Since returning to the village from Dublin, she was able to recognize the patterns, unlock the mysterious weave of folklore with fact. She had made it her personal mission to preserve everything for her family and for the generations to come in a world where it became increasingly more difficult to practice the old magic.

She leaned her head back against the cool stone and closed her eyes, listening to the rhythm of nature, knowing the ear that listens with the heart will hear the voices of the souls who lived and died here.

Michael Gallagher stared across the open field, not believing what he saw. An angel or a ghost, some figure draped in white floated toward the ruins, lurked in the shadows for a while, then hovered, it appeared, several inches above the ground inside the structure.

Filled with curiosity, he moved silently toward the stone projections. It wasn't that he believed his grandfather's ridiculous stories. He was too grounded in reality for that. It was more that this figure moved across Gallagher land. It was his right, his duty to protect his investment.

He climbed a small hill near the ruins and noted the uneven ground of a ridged circle at the top. Thinking it the leftovers of some child's construction, he crossed the middle of the mound toward the castle. The second his right foot stepped inside the circle, a sharp pain shot up his leg. It took him by surprise but didn't deter him from hastily limping on toward the castle. When he crossed the space and started down the other side of the slight mound, the pain ceased.

Michael paused for a moment, frowned, and looked back. He lifted his foot, shook it, set it back down. The pain was gone as rapidly as it had occurred. He turned toward the castle and walked on. Perhaps it hadn't really hurt at all.

Reaching the edge of the ruin, he slowed his pace and walked quietly inside. The figure was indeed there. He saw now it wasn't floating but resting near the bottom of some crumbling stairs.

Not a ghost, it was more nearly an angel. A girl, long curly hair pulled by the wind, leaned against the ruin with her eyes closed. Even as he watched her, she stiffened, a furrow in her brow. Her eyes flew open and she leaped to her feet.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Michael Gallagher. Who are you?"

She inched back ever so slightly, her palms flat against the ruins and shook her head. "I know Michael Gallagher. He's round and balding and nearly sixty. You aren't him at all."

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Michael gave a short laugh and stepped closer, wanting a better look at this real-life apparition. "No, I'm not that Michael Gallagher. I'm the one who's tall, has all his hair and just passed thirty-two."

She stood up straighter, not a smidgen of fear showing on her proud Irish face. She must have realized she wore only her nightgown as she talked to a stranger because she pulled her shawl tight across her chest and held it there with steady hands. "I'm afraid I've not made your acquaintance, Mr. Gallagher. Or even heard of you from your kin in the village."

Brianna looked him over from his lush brown hair, which was definitely not thinning as it danced in the wind, to the bottoms of his long legs. No, he didn't belong to the Gallaghers in Torin. He was taller than most of them by a foot.

And handsomer by far, if the moonlight didn't play tricks. His eyes were intense, a dark color, perhaps blue, but with a lightness of heart showing through. She bet he could be hard-edged when he had to be, but he knew how to smile. Lord, yes, he had the devil's own smile.

Somehow he'd managed to walk right up to her. How could that be? With a protective instinct, she touched the disk that hung around her neck on a long silver chain, its markings worn smooth from the touch of countless hands over countless years.

It wasn't sound that had alerted her to his presence. It was scent. By all the saints in heaven, she'd never smelled so tantalizing a man. He smelled of the ocean and the sun. It must have been the doings of some expensive American cologne, for surely this man was from America. It showed in every twinkle of his eyes, every confident gesture of his posture, every sharp crease in his tailored clothing. No, this was not a Gallagher from the village of Torin.

"What brings you out here on this fine night, Mr. Gallagher?"

"Oh, I was just walking when I saw what I thought was a ghost. I came over to see what types of spirits inhabit my land."

She chuckled and stepped down to ground level. The movement brought her out of the shadows and into the full shaft of moonlight. Michael all but gasped when he got a good look at her. This was no girl, as he had first thought. This was a woman, lush and lovely. Her hair -- he knew instinctively it was red -- cascaded almost to her waist in tight curls. The high neck of her white gown hid any hint of cleavage, but the immodest wind molded the fabric to her curves.

Her skin was ivory and her eyes bright jewels in the flawless face. It must be a trick of the moonlight, he thought. No woman could be so lovely and yet so fresh and innocent looking.

"You must be lost, then, Mr. Gallagher. This land belongs to my Uncle Joseph."

Michael nodded. "That would be Joseph O'Shea. And you must be his niece Brianna. He told me about you, though when I suspected him of matchmaking, I didn't realize he meant to fix me up with such a beauty."

Brianna bristled. She was sick to death of the aunts and uncles trying to marry her off. It bothered her that this Michael Gallagher looked at her as if he were imagining how she looked beneath her nightgown. It bothered her worse that just that thought made her ache for the touch of a man in her most intimate places. She pulled the shawl more tightly around her bosom and lifted her chin. "Then sure you must know that this land belongs to Joseph."

He put one foot on the bottom step, bringing his body closer to her. "*Did* belong to Joseph."

"Did?" Brianna echoed, a tiny trill of fear starting to unwind inside her.

"I bought it."

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"You bought it?"

Michael nodded and leaned forward, resting his arms across his knee. "Today."

* * * *

Brianna slammed a pint of stout on the table with a thud loud enough to wake the dead.

"Here, girl!" Her uncle Joseph grabbed her wrist. "Don't be spilling this fine drink."

She glared at him for a moment, then wrenched her hand from his grasp. The fury coursing through her now almost made her tremble, but that Joseph only grinned made her even angrier.

"Brianna ..."

He said her name in a condescending tone that he might use on his youngest grandchild. She planted one fist at her waist and gripped her serving tray with the other, holding it so tightly her knuckles turned white. "I cannot believe you, Uncle Joseph. How can you sell our land, our connection to our past?"

Peripherally, she noticed that much of the conversation in the pub ceased as she and Joseph became the evening's entertainment. Only a trio at the dartboard carried on, oblivious to the O'Shea family argument. As if Joseph noted this, his voice dropped to a lower level. "How long did you think this family could go on pretending to make a living from that wretched piece of land? We need the money."

His face was grim, all traces of his earlier amusement vanished. Brianna knew that Joseph O'Shea revered his family. She was treading on dangerous ground by confronting her uncle here in the pub. A patient woman would have chosen more private circumstances for this discussion. Brianna had never been accused of having too much patience.

Joseph tightened one hand around the pint of stout as his blue eyes narrowed. "Sit down, Brianna."

Reluctantly she pulled out the wooden chair across from her uncle at the small table. The murmur of voices told her most of the patrons had gone back to their own concerns. The nearby fireplace crackled as it warmed the cozy interior of the pub. From the bar came the clink of glasses. The smell of whiskey slinked beneath the savory scents of stew and fresh bread.

Joseph waited until she settled, glancing around to be sure no one was paying attention to their conversation. "It's my past too, Brianna. My history. My family. I'm not indifferent to the emotional ties here. But we have to face reality. We no longer live in a time when we can spin flax into gold to pay for our bowl of stew. You know that."

"But --"

He raised a hand to stop her instinctive defense. "Is that not why you carry these heavy trays in this pub? You with your university education?"

Brianna recognized the validity of his point. Magic was one thing, making a living quite another. Joseph had finished rearing his family. Only one daughter remained here, a nurse in the nearby clinic. Though he was not yet sixty, Joseph had raised five children -- four of his own plus Brianna -- and managed to educate every one of them, all of this while trying to blend in with the rest of the village. "What does Aunt Libby say?"

The mention of his wife's name made him smile. With the twinkle returning to his eyes, he leaned back in his chair and crossed his hands over his lean stomach. "Libby understands. She wants the children to be secure."

Brianna nodded. Aunt Libby would be concerned about the future, about protecting them all. She was a nurturing woman. But they were not the only ones to consider. "What about Molly?"

"Molly will be fine. She'll stay in our house like she has for the last six years."

"You kept your house, then?"

"Yes, and Molly's cottage."

That helped to still the tremble in Brianna's hands. Since returning from college, she had lived in the cottage Molly had vacated. At least neither she nor Molly would have to look for a place to live. "But the land behind the cottage ... up toward the ruins?"

He leaned across the table. "Managed wisely, it's enough money to take care of your children and your children's children, Brianna."

She had to admit there was a great deal of comfort in that level of financial security. "What do you suppose this Gallagher is going to do with the land?"

Looking past her shoulder, Joseph raised his glass in salute. "Ask him."

Slowly Brianna turned to find Michael Gallagher standing just inside the doorway. He spotted her at almost exactly the same time. Their gazes meshed and he smiled, giving her a good look at him in the warm and welcoming light of the pub. It hadn't been just a trick of the moonlight. He was a gorgeous man, standing so tall he had to dip a bit to fit his wide shoulders through the doorway. His hair was a rich mahogany and his eyes were indeed deep blue, like the sea on a cold restless day.

There was that tug again, that hunger that had flared inside her last night and kept her awake until dawn pushed over the hills. Doing her best to ignore it, she stood up and faced her uncle. "I have work to do," she said. As she headed toward the kitchen, she heard Joseph's low chuckle follow her.

Michael stood inside the doorway and watched Brianna's retreating figure. It hadn't been a surprise to find her here because he'd asked casually about her earlier in the day. It also hadn't been coincidence that he'd chosen this particular pub for his evening meal. He wanted to see her again if only to convince himself she was real.

With his gaze riveted on the sway of her loose black skirt, he had no doubt of her reality. His body responded with a very real tightening. He watched her until she

disappeared behind a swinging door. When he spotted Joseph at a table in the back, he headed that way. "Good evening."

At Joseph's nod he pulled out a chair and sat down. "I hear this is the best place in town to get a hot meal."

"Second best."

"Second?"

Joseph drained his glass and set it on the table. "Best place is my own home, which is where I'll be heading now before my Elizabeth throws my dinner to the pigs." He dug some euros from his pocket and dropped them on the table. "Brianna will see that you have a fine meal, though. She's a wee bit upset so I wouldn't rile her too much if I were you."

Michael smiled. "I'll keep that in mind."

He leaned back in the chair and took in the atmosphere of the pub. After three weeks in Ireland, he'd grown to enjoy the friendly atmosphere and down-to-earth food. A glass of Guinness was welcome, too. Except at this particular pub, he couldn't seem to get a glass of Guinness. Brianna ignored him every time she walked nearby.

Even that didn't bother him at first. He sat by himself in the corner, observing her interaction with the other customers. She'd run away from him so abruptly last night that he'd wondered if perhaps he hadn't imagined her there among the ruins. Something about being in this romantic country had done strange things to his head. Like buying that land. He never made his business decisions that impulsively, but the moment he'd seen that stretch of green above the sea, he'd wanted it. It was his job to find choice land parcels and turn them into moneymakers for his family's business. This time would be no exception.

Brianna served bowls of soup to the three men at the table beside him. She laughed with them over some shared joke which caused Michael an uncommon twinge of jealousy. He wanted to be included in the joviality in this welcoming place. More, he wanted

Brianna's smiled turned in his direction. When she started past him toward the bar, he called her name.

"Just a minute," she called over her shoulder and went on.

He waited again, less patiently now, until she served another table nearby. This time he stood up and blocked her path. "Is there some law against serving Americans in this establishment?"

"Of course not." She tried to squeeze past him but saw that was fruitless, so she turned her gaze up to his face. Yes, up close his eyes were as blue as she'd thought in the moonlight. Deep, deep blue. "It's just a busy night. What can I get you?"

"A Guinness to start with." He didn't move. She couldn't move. "And maybe we better have a talk."

"Sorry. I don't have time."

"When will you be finished here?"

"Midnight."

"I'll wait."

Chapter Two

The wait wasn't long enough to suit Brianna. She didn't want to talk with the tall good-looking American. She didn't have anything worthwhile to say to the man who bought her family land. And she especially didn't want to spend time with the man who had mesmerized her in the moonlight.

She served him his drink and his supper, hoping he'd grow tired and leave. But he endeared himself to the regulars by buying a round of whiskey and letting them trounce him at darts. She was sure he'd thrown the match.

When the last glass was cleared from the last table and she'd helped old Jimmy Williams into his coat and pointed him toward home, Michael Gallagher still waited for her in the pub. There was nothing to do but talk with him.

She took her dark wool jacket from the hook near the door and called goodnight to Brian Donohue, the pub's proprietor. Finally, she turned toward Michael. "Come on, then. Let's have this talk."

While she watched him, he rose and sauntered toward her, every bit as leisurely as she was impatient. He grabbed his brown leather coat from the hook and followed her out into the cold night.

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Pulling gloves from her pockets, Brianna looked up at him. "Where are you staying?" "The Briar, but I'd rather see you home if you don't mind."

Of course. The Briar, a bed and breakfast at the end of this street, was the only place in Torin for a person to stay. Most of the time, it sat empty, but Maeve Barlow didn't care. She was happy for the company when she had it, and just as happy for the quiet when she didn't. If Brianna followed Michael there tonight, they would be the talk of the village tomorrow. Better to have him in her cottage, where at least she'd be on her own turf when he talked to her about his plans for her land.

She usually walked anywhere she went in the village, but Michael wouldn't hear of it. He insisted on driving her in his rental car, even though it took less than five minutes to get there and she had to remind him twice to stay on the left side of the road. Just like an American to think his way was the only way to do things.

She hurried inside while he was still silencing the little car. She always left a single lamp burning, but it didn't seem very welcoming tonight. She scooped up books and papers from the kitchen table and tossed them into the bedroom. Giving a swift glance to the rest of the cottage, she deemed it hospitable if not spotless.

She'd left the door ajar. He considered that his invitation to follow her inside. When he closed it, the hinges screeched. As he stepped further inside, he admired the quaintness of the small cottage. An old plump sofa sat beside a wooden rocker and faced the fireplace. To the right a cozy table hugged the wall against a wide window. The kitchen made up the back half, complete with modern appliances. On the left side he saw a closed door that must have led to the bedroom.

"I'm putting the kettle on for tea," she called from the kitchen, "but I can make coffee too if you'd prefer."

"Tea's fine." He stood near the table, towering over her small feminine things, and watched her while she bustled about the compact kitchen. She'd shed her jacket, allowing him the chance to admire again the lacy white blouse and swirling black skirt she'd worn in the pub. And there was that tightening again, that sensation of everything inside him growing taut, the tension that could only be described as sexual. He'd tried not to think of her that way. This was business, after all. But he couldn't deny it. He wanted her. Never in his life had a woman had this profound an effect on him so quickly. He turned toward the hearth. "Shall I stir the fire?"

"If you please," she answered just as the kettle whistled.

He took off his jacket and poked the turf until the embers came to life, glad to have something to do for the moment. When he turned around, he saw her arranging the tea service on a tray. The pale light cast from the fire and the small lamps made her red hair shine like spun gold. For a moment he understood why these Irish believed in magic.

Recovering, he went toward the kitchen to take the tray from her. When his fingers skimmed across her hands, she looked up at him. Holy Mother, her eyes were as green as the Emerald Isle itself. He'd never seen so startling a color of eyes. With effort he turned away to set the tray on the small table near the fire. Then he sat on the flower-printed sofa while she poured the tea, willing himself to relax, to stop thinking about stretching out on the rug before the fire and watching the golden firelight play across her ivory skin.

Brianna poured the tea, acutely aware of his gaze riveted on her. It made her uncommonly nervous, evident in the clinking of the delicate Belleek teapot against the cups. She wanted to scream at him, to order him away, back to the America where he belonged. He was as out of place here as she would be in New York City. What did he know of this land? What made him think he could improve upon it?

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Ingrained politeness and natural hospitality had her instead pouring tea and offering the cup with a hint of a smile. It was the best she could do because despite the land and how hurt she was to lose it, this man had also rocked her world in a different way. Even looking at her just now as he took the cup and saucer from her, dwarfing it in his huge tanned hands, he made her feel as if every drop of blood inside her had heated to boiling.

She wasn't used to this and she didn't much like it, this feeling that her skin didn't quite fit her any more. Every nerve ending stood on alert, telling her in no uncertain terms that this was a man who could touch her in ways that would make her scream, make her shatter. The very notion was at odds with her safe, quiet life. She squirmed a bit, taking her seat on the sofa, afraid to raise the tea to her lips for fear the chinking china would betray her reaction to him.

He seemed at ease, as natural as if he leaned a casual elbow on Donohue's bar. He cradled the teacup with a gentleness that showed he realized its delicacy and respected it. She watched him drink then stretch out his legs closer to the fire. He turned to her and smiled. "Thank you for allowing me to speak with you in your home."

She nodded, unable to find her voice just yet.

"Perhaps if you know more about my plans, about who I am, you'll feel better about my choice of this land."

She doubted that, but she was willing to let him talk. The more she knew about him, the easier to devise her plan of attack to get rid of him. She would play along. For now. "Please," she said, nodding.

"The Gallaghers came from Ireland in the middle 1800s," he began. "We settled in Boston, like many immigrants. I suppose it was hard scratching out a living in a foreign land, but we survived. My great-grandfather started in business in the twenties. I'm led to believe there were some illegal transactions."

At this he paused and produced that rakish grin he wore so well. Damn the magic spell he wove, causing her to smile back. But smile she did, despite her hurt and her anger.

"It was after the war, I guess, that Gallagher Industries was born, operating completely within the law. In that time of prosperity, it was easy enough to make a profit legally. As far as I know, we've been upstanding members of the community ever since." He grinned again and leaned closer, almost conspiratorially. "I have a dozen plaques on my wall to prove it."

He bent close enough now that she could see the fine stubble of whiskers across his jaw line. She breathed in the scent of him, so different from the smells she found comforting and homey, the burning turf, the flavored tea. This man from America brought a multitude of different sensations with him. She savored every one.

Better to remember that he was the enemy than to be lured into the web he so skillfully cast about her. "I appreciate your Irish roots, Mr. Gallagher. And that your family is seen to be pillars of the community. That doesn't make me any happier that you have stolen my land from under me."

He placed his teacup on the small table and stretched a long arm along the back of the sofa, his fingers tantalizingly close to her shoulder. "I wish you would call me Michael. When you say Mr. Gallagher, I'm inclined to look around the room for my father."

A turf brick in the fire split in two, sending sparks spiraling up the chimney like frantic fireflies. She stared at it, unwilling to meet his eyes, which were far too close for comfort.

"I came to Ireland because we had some investments that needed attention," he continued. "I was so struck by the beauty that I decided to explore a bit. That's when I saw the land by the cliffs. I fell in love with it immediately. I envisioned an elegant hotel jutting out toward the sea. Tourists will pay dearly for a view like that. I was delighted when I learned it was for sale."

"Odd that I didn't know that. Exactly what did you offer to get my uncle to sell?"

He studied her for a moment, the firelight reflecting in her eyes, defiance in the tilt of her chin, but hurt in the light tremble of her fingers against the teacup. "It isn't personal, Brianna. It's business."

"It's personal to me."

"Why?"

She looked at him, her eyes large and luminous. "Why?" she repeated.

"Yes. Tell me why it means so much to you. Help me understand."

She almost snorted. As if he could understand! If he respected the old ways, the folklore and the legends, he wouldn't be here right now. If he knew about the tradition of magic ... "I'm not sure that's possible."

He turned up the wattage on the smile. "Try me."

She was helpless. He seemed so earnest that even though she knew instinctively she ought not to trust him, she found herself wanting to anyway. "Well, I suppose we have to go back many centuries to get started."

Rearranging his legs, he moved into a more comfortable position, as if settling in for the story. She let her teacup rest in her lap, her fingers playing lightly against the fine china. If it was a story he wanted, she would not disappoint him. "The ruins where you saw me last night are the remnants of a castle belonging to a man named Torin. He was the chieftain here."

"And that's the reason for the name of the village."

She nodded. "My family is descended from Torin. We've had this land longer than there are records." Rising, she went to the window and pulled the curtain aside. "From here all the way to the cliffs. Only the ocean stops what was ours. Blood has been shed over this land. Families broken apart then rebuilt. The Viking invaders tried to take it by force, then by marriage." She turned around and faced him. "It's who we are, who I am. If you change it, build on it, allow strangers to trample across the sacred grounds, it's lost forever."

"Sacred?"

She returned to the sofa, settling on the opposite end, smoothing the lines of her skirt as she sat. "Do you believe in magic?"

"Of course not!"

Of course not. She smiled a bit. A sad smile, almost a pitying look. "Then there is no way for you to understand."

She studied him for a moment, his expensive clothing, his well-bred manners, his skillful use of the charming smile. Was he mentally laughing at her? "The legends, the folklore. I've heard these things my entire life. It's why I went to university. To learn more of our rich history, our heritage. Who can see a rainbow stretching across Ireland's green wealth and not believe in magic?"

The possibility of magic began to drift into Michael's conscious thoughts. There must be something to it because it enticed him as he sat in this cozy cottage, mesmerized by the woman next to him. The expression in her eyes when she spoke of the things she loved, the Irish lilt of her sweet voice, the glow that surrounded her from the firelight. He may not believe it, but he wanted to. "Take me to the ruins. Show me."

Her brows arched, as if in disbelief. "For what purpose? To make fun of me?"

"No, Brianna. Not that." He leaned forward, his fingers just brushing the sleeve of her blouse. "Never that."

He was so close. She could see the firelight reflected in his eyes. The very tips of his fingers moved slightly against the fabric of her blouse. She felt it ripple across her skin, radiating outward like the rings in a brook from the drop of a pebble. Every move he made, no matter how slight, sent waves of heat through her, building in intensity the longer he stared into her eyes. She had to force herself to draw a calm breath.

"I want to kiss you," he said.

She so enjoyed the rumble of his voice that the words registered a second later. Before she had time to form a response -- protest or assent, she would never know -- he moved closer, his head dipping to meet her. His lips covered hers, lightly first, softly. His fingers tightened on her sleeve, tugging gently, drawing her to him. She could not resist. The heat that had been simmering just beneath her surface all day reached the boiling point. Sensing that fire, he increased the pressure, kissing her with more intensity as her body responded.

Completely fluid. Her blood changed to liquid fire. It spread through her, from his lips to hers, to the tips of her breasts, to the moisture in her crease, even to the ends of her toes. It flitted across her mind that this was a stranger, a dangerous one. She didn't care. She put her hands behind his head and drew him more tightly against her, seeking relief for the ache that built in her breasts, her nipples. She wanted all of him next to all of her.

His tongue parted her lips and slipped into her mouth, seeking, stroking, as if he found there the sweetest honey. She melted against him, and his hands went behind her, exploring the curve of her spine, trailing along its length in a caressing motion.

His lips left hers to travel along the slope of her neck, his breath whispering against her ear. Sensations flooded her, hot and thick. Her fingers curled tightly in the hair at the base of his neck. Her back arched as her swollen nipples sought contact with his chest. She found herself wriggling against the small corner of the sofa, seeking ease for the nerve endings tautly strung. Moisture pooled against the silky fabric of her panties, and still he caressed her neck with lips and tongue.

"Brianna," he whispered on a ragged breath.

Hearing her name in passion's voice was her undoing. She ran her hands along the breadth of his shoulders, pulling him toward her little corner. He was too wide, too muscular, too much man for the feminine furniture. His body shifted, knocking the little table. The teacup tumbled to the floor and shattered.

It may as well have been a gunshot. The clatter of broken china returned her to reality. Her eyes opened wide, and there was Michael Gallagher against her body, his hair fallen forward from her wandering fingers, his eyes heavy-lidded with passion, his breath hot against her skin. She pushed him away.

"Brianna?"

He retreated to his corner, watching her, the question in his eyes. She'd never felt so humiliated in her life. What in the world had possessed her to behave that wantonly? In another moment she'd have been naked on the rug before the fire with Michael Gallagher hovering over her, his cock plump and ready to enter her.

What was she thinking!

Not thinking at all, apparently. She smoothed her skirt, then her blouse, her fingers unable to find a spot to lie comfortably. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Gallagher." She rose and went to gather the pieces of broken china from the hardwood floor. "You must think me the village strumpet for that performance."

Michael knelt beside her and captured her hands to still them. "I think you are the most amazing woman I have ever known. And if I moved too quickly for you, then I can be patient when I have to."

He rose, pulling her up beside him. "But don't make me have to for very long."

She looked up at him, at his deep blue eyes, at the grin becoming all too familiar now. This man was trouble. She was way out of her league and she knew it. But what could she do about it? The heart knows what it wants as well as the body. He bent to kiss her lightly, then he released her hands and grabbed his jacket. When he opened the door, a blast of chill air swept into the cottage. Brianna shivered.

"We'll go to the ruins tomorrow," he said. "How's noon?"

She stared at him, mesmerized, thinking of an excuse or a reason to tell him no. But she nodded. "Noon is fine."

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His smile broadened. And then he left.

Chapter Three

Noon came slowly. Brianna paced around the house, restless and out of sorts while she waited for the time to pass. The morning glowed with uncommon warmth even with spring little more than a week away. She sat at the table with a cup of tea and her laptop, trying to work on the stories that she was sorting by county and area. Nothing made sense today. All she could think about was Michael Gallagher's lips on hers, his hands almost large enough to span her waist, and how wantonly she'd behaved.

Lord, she'd all but dragged him to the floor and taken his pants off! Sure, she hadn't had sex in a while, how long she hated to think. Certainly not since she'd returned home from Dublin, and that was more than two years ago!

Not that she didn't enjoy sex. She picked up her tea and walked to the window, moving the curtain aside to look out on the beautiful sunny day. It was just that the boys in the village ... *men*, she corrected herself. And that was part of the problem. She thought of them as boys. She'd grown up with them, and even if she didn't see them as the young lads they'd been, they were almost like family to her. It was a small village, only thirty or so in her class at school. She knew them all too well.

She let the curtain fall into place and paced back to the table, taking a seat in front of the laptop. There had been affairs at university; one in particular she'd thought might be something that lasted. But for reasons she never understood, it didn't work out. So she'd moved back home, pouring all her energy into family and work.

Until now.

Now Michael Gallagher stirred the fires that had been banked all this time. Why him? Why after all this time would she be attracted to the man who was taking away one of the most important things in her life? Why did it have to be Michael Gallagher who heated her blood, and not Liam or Daniel or one of the dozen others who flirted with her in the pub every night? Why couldn't it be someone safe?

She slapped the laptop closed with a little more force than was necessary and got up from the table, heading to the bedroom to get dressed. She wished she had come up with some excuse when he'd said he'd be there at noon. But with the imprint of his lips still on her skin, she'd been helpless. It was as if he'd cast some spell that rendered her spineless.

And there was the heart of the thing. There was something magical happening here. She didn't know how, but she sensed the magic in Michael. Why would he deny it, try to hide it from her? Was he ashamed of it, this practical American? Had he been taught to ignore it?

She shrugged into well-worn jeans and threw a white cable knit sweater over a thin turtleneck. Standing before the small mirror over her dresser, she tried to tame her thick red curls with a barrette at the nape of her neck, but long spirals escaped around her temple no matter how hard she worked.

Hell with it! She shoved her feet into boots and bent to tie the laces. She was not going to waste any time or effort trying to look beautiful for Michael Gallagher!

Good thing she'd made that decision, she thought as she heard his car pull up near the door. She made herself stand in the bedroom and wait for him to knock on the door, wiping her nervous palms on her jeans. Her belly tightened, squeezed by some unseen fist as she

listened. The slam of the door, the crunch of his shoes on the narrow path, the sharp rap on the wood.

She took a deep breath and started across the room, summoning a welcoming smile.

But when she opened the door, she forgot how to breathe.

There he stood, as gorgeous in the sunlight as he'd been by the fire. Denim jeans, light blue sweater that made his eyes absolutely sparkle, his hair falling recklessly across his forehead as if he'd not bothered with the businessman's image of careful grooming today. And in one large fist, the most beautiful bunch of bright yellow daffodils she'd ever seen.

She opened the door wider, feeling the smile spread across her face as she did. And all the worry of the morning seemed to melt when she looked up at him. "Come in, then."

"From Mrs. Barlow's garden," he said as he offered the bouquet to her. "It's possible that she'll throw me out once she sees her flowers are missing."

"Not likely." She took the daffodils and headed for the kitchen. "By now she's gone to town and told everyone she sees that you raided her garden to bring me flowers. She'll have a great time with that today."

When he followed her inside, the cottage that was perfect for her seemed to shrink. She busied herself with the vase and the water, but his presence was so commanding she couldn't help being aware of his every move. He propped a shoulder on the doorway to the kitchen and watched her arrange the flowers. She centered the vase on the little table and took a step back to survey the effect, then looked at him. "Thank you. I don't know when I've had fresh flowers."

"My pleasure," he said, that lazy grin sliding into place.

The silence stretched out, the two of them staring at each other, him with the grin, her with the butterflies swarming in her stomach. She had to get outside. "Shall we go to the ruins, then?"

"Sure." He unfolded from the doorframe and started out.

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Brianna followed him, heading for the foot-worn lane that led around the cottage to the meadow behind. But Michael veered off and opened the door of his rental car. Before she had time to question him, he pulled out a canvas bag and slung it over his shoulder. He grinned at her and said, "In case we get hungry."

She nodded, trying not to think about the romantic aspect of spreading a blanket on the grass in the warm sunshine and sharing a meal with him. Dangerous. Better to keep herself in lecture mode while she tried to convey to him the meaning of this land.

At the back of the cottage, she headed across a path worn by time toward the ruins. To the left were green fields, to the right stood a grouping of trees that thinned as the land approached the rocky cliffs of the sea. Straight ahead, the ruins rose from the grassy plain before that piece of land also ran out at the water. In all directions, as far as one could see, this was O'Shea land. Gallagher land now, she thought bitterly.

The walk became more strenuous as the land sloped upward. The castle had been well placed on high ground, easy enough for travel on horseback, a little more difficult on foot. There wasn't much to say as they picked their way along rocky terrain toward the grassy clearing that led to what remained of the castle entrance.

At last they reached the outer edge of the main castle grounds where the grass grew in a mound that housed the faerie ring. Here she stopped and looked up at Michael. "You see this circle?" she asked, gesturing around the edge with one hand. "This is a faerie ring."

"Leprechauns?"

"No." The wind blew a tendril of hair into her face. She shook it away. "Leprechauns are a type of faerie. They are traditionally the shoemakers. But there are many different kinds. The legends go back thousands of years."

"So they live here?"

Michael started forward. She grabbed him by the arm and jerked him back. "No! Don't step inside the ring!"

He looked at her, frowning. "Why?"

"Because it's their ground. They wouldn't like you walking across it. What if you step on one of them?"

"Brianna, you don't really --"

Something caused him to stop his protest mid-sentence. The look on his face was of a dawning comprehension. She could almost think he might start to believe. But perhaps he was only humoring her. Either way, he stepped away from the circle, walking around the outer edge of it.

"Leprechauns, cluricans, little people, wee folk," she continued. "There are many names for them."

"Have you seen them?"

She looked up at him, at the sun picking out red-gold highlights in his mahogany hair, at the too blue of his eyes. "No, I haven't. I can't see the wind, either, but I know it's there."

She led him to the interior of the ruins where pieces of rock walls rose like jagged sentinels of what little was left. "Here would be the entrance," she told him as they walked beyond the first stand. She pointed to her right. "Over there, the great hall. Rooms all around for receiving guests, a sewing room, a counting room."

"How do you know this?"

She looked up at him and smiled. "I have my degree in Irish history."

"Then I'll take your word for it."

"Thank you." She continued across the castle ground, pointing out what little remained as she went. Just past the stairs where she'd been sitting two nights ago, the opening led to a small strip of grass before the land fell to the sea. "A thousand years ago there was probably more here. Erosion and time have shortened the grounds. It's possible a large chunk fell off into the water. That has happened in some places."

"Looks like the perfect spot for lunch." He opened the canvas bag and shook out a small blanket, spreading it on the grass, then sat down on one corner of it. "Come. Sit," he told her, patting the blanket next to him.

The butterflies that had been in her stomach all morning beat their wings rapidly. She'd managed to somehow tamp down the sexual pull while she talked to him about the country and the castle. Now there was nothing to keep her mind otherwise occupied. First the flowers, now a picnic in the ruins. How did he know exactly what would get to her? She sat down on the opposite corner of the blanket.

Michael rummaged in the bag and brought out a round of crusty bread, a hunk of light cheese and some apples. He ripped a corner of the bread and passed it to her, then took out his pocketknife to slice the cheese and apples. Last, he produced a bottle of dark ale and two paper cups.

It was just too perfect, sitting in the warm sun, munching on the simple meal. When Michael pulled his sweater off over his head, she did the same. The light shirts were all they needed on such a cloudless day. He stretched his long legs out before him and propped on one elbow, watching her as he ate. She was drawn to his eyes, even as she tried to look away. They were so blue, so deep, and so full of life. She'd never known a man who seemed to be so alive, so completely involved in every moment. When he'd asked her questions, he'd made her feel as if he genuinely cared about the answers, not that he was asking just to make conversation.

He threw back his head to drain the last of the ale from his cup. She stared at his angular jaw, the long line of his neck, the way his hair curled slightly at the back, his long tanned fingers curled around the cup. She didn't know when she'd ever been so hypnotized by a man. Never. Of course not. She'd always been in control. Then why did she feel so skittish now?

Tossing down the cup, he looked up at her, saw her studying him. And there came that lazy grin, dazzling in impact. As fluidly as a cat stretching in the sun, he reached across the

narrow blanket and ran his forefinger down the length of her cheek. The result was immediate and intense. She didn't realize until he stroked her how her skin had hungered for his touch all morning. Everything inside her heated.

He slid his fingers behind her neck and tugged gently, bringing her face close to his. She put out a hand to brace herself on the blanket and let him pull her into the kiss. It was a simple kiss, tender with its gentle touch of lips against lips. He didn't press or force her to passion she couldn't control. He just kissed her, light and sweet.

As he pulled back, his hand still resting on her neck, his thumb traced the ridge of her cheekbone. "That didn't break any china, did it?"

"Not yet."

With just the light pressure of his fingers behind her neck, he brought her back to him for another kiss. This time he used his tongue to delight her, slipping it in between her lips as smoothly as honey sliding off a spoon. As her mouth opened for him, her entire body seemed to unfold, to ready itself to receive him. The hand she used to steady herself inched slowly along the blanket until she stretched out beside him, and still he kissed her gently, thoroughly.

This time when he pulled away, he hovered above her, his eyes on hers, searching. Lifting her hands to his shoulders, she answered the unspoken question when she drew him back down to her mouth again. Now the fire caught, now the passion uncurled from mouth to mouth, lips to lips, tongue to tongue, as if he'd been waiting for her permission, her approval.

She could taste the ale on him, dark and mysterious as she explored his mouth. Still kissing her, he turned, resting on his side and pulling her closer so that their bodies aligned on the blanket beneath the sun. The hand that caressed her cheek glided down her arm, met her ribs, and came to rest on her hip. His knee bent slightly, parting her thighs just a hint,

just enough for no more than a shadow to pass between. But her body responded, recognizing the nearness of his sex to hers.

Now he broke the kiss and propped his head on his upturned palm, looking at her, smiling lazily. She couldn't help but smile back. He watched her eyes as his hand found the bottom edge of her shirt and inched beneath, meeting skin. The slide of his fingers against her ribs made her tingle, made her suck in her breath, made her want him to touch her more and in different places. He knew it, too. She could see in his eyes, in his lazy smile. Watching her, he moved his hand up to find the lace of her bra. Hadn't she wanted just this when she'd picked the prettiest one she owned this morning? Hadn't she hoped he would see it, touch it, remove it?

She offered herself to him by the way she turned and moved on the blanket. His knee crept further between her thighs and she felt it to her core. Everything inside her contracted, anticipating, wanting. And then he cupped her breast in his palm, still watching, surrounding that soft flesh with his strong hand, his palm larger than hers, stronger than hers. She absorbed the warmth of him, the strength, watching his eyes darken. Then he flicked his thumb across her nipple. Even through the lace, the pleasure was so exquisite she thought she might scream. She closed her eyes.

"Look at me, Brianna."

His words whispered across her face, lighter and warmer than the breeze. She opened her eyes.

"I'm going to make love to you. Right here. Right now."

She shook her head, just a trifle. Shook it because it didn't seem proper to make love to him, to anyone, out here on the edge of the cliff with nothing to cover her but the sunshine, nothing to protect her from discovery but a crumbling piece of castle.

And perhaps it was the castle that enticed her. That there was magic here was something she'd always known. That it could affect her this deeply was new. But so was this

man. So different from her, and yet so like the conquering invaders for centuries and beyond. He was the Norseman coming for her land. Like the women before her, as far back as Torin's daughter, Kella, she was captivated. His eyes still held her, seeking. To answer, she moved her hand from his shoulder to the waistband of his jeans and pulled at the snap.

With a low whisper, she chanted the words that would keep them safe, undiscovered on this open piece of land. "What was that?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Kiss me again."

A slow smile spread across his face before he lowered his mouth to take her again in a kiss that swept through her from head to toe. He moved his hand from her breast to pull her shirt up and over her head in a motion more fluid than she would have imagined. Then he found the hook of her bra and set her free.

"Lovely," he whispered as he lowered his lips to one turgid nipple. His mouth was like warm velvet on her screaming nerve endings. She felt the moisture drench her panties and squirmed beneath his touch. She tugged at his shirt, wanting to feel the hard planes of his chest against her skin. As if he knew it, he shrugged out of the garment, leaving her breasts aching for more when he rose up to push the sleeves down his arms. Then he came back to her, wrapping his arms around her and bringing her across his chest, her nipples scraping across the wealth of hair.

Now his hands roamed her back, following the curves, the dips. He slid one hand inside her jeans and kneaded her cheek. Then he gripped her thigh and pulled her leg across him, the hardened ridge of his cock seeking the hot moisture of her pussy. The layers of rough denim caused tremors to spread throughout her body, but she wanted more. She wanted him inside her. She wanted him now.

Emboldened by the passion, by the sun and the breeze, by the magic that lived in the grassy plains, she sat up and pulled off her boots and shimmied out of her jeans, then her panties. He watched her, his eyes feasting on her while he kicked off his shoes and slid out of

his jeans and briefs. They sat face-to-face, naked in the beauty of Ireland, knowing something amazing was about to happen.

Michael moved first, reaching for her. He pulled her to him and lay back down on the blanket, cradling her in his arms. He kissed her again. This time it was the kiss of a man who knows his woman, who understands her. Brianna couldn't say how she knew this difference had changed them, only that it felt exactly right. She had never been more sure of anything than that this union would be good.

She reached for him, her fingers circling his cock, measuring the hard length of him in her small hand. He was long and thick, pulsing with need. She rubbed a finger across the tip and felt the liquid there, then skimmed down the length of him to take his balls in her palm. She felt him shudder against her, heard his low moan and reveled in the pleasure she could give him. Not to be outdone, he slid a hand between her thighs, found her seam, parted her folds with one finger, then two.

"So wet," he whispered against her ear. His fingers found her clit, circled it, rolled it in her own juices, driving her wild. She felt the sensation from her pussy all the way to her swollen nipples. She wanted him inside her, stroking her cleft, rubbing her clit, owning her, possessing her, conquering her body. But more than that, she wanted him in her mouth. She eased away from his hands and the magic they worked and slid down the length of his long hard belly to his cock.

Holding his shaft with one hand, she lowered her head to take the tip into her mouth, just the tip. His low groan washed over her like fine music. She loved that she could do this, make him feel this good. She took him farther into her mouth, circling the hardness with her tongue, bathing him with her softness. He dug his hands into her hair, pulled out the barrette and tossed it aside, letting her curls fall all around her while she sucked him. She moved her head from side to side, her hair trailing across the sensitive skin of his upper thighs.

"God, Brianna," he said on a strangled whisper. "I'll come in your mouth in a minute. I'd rather come inside you."

Still sucking his tip, she looked up at him, saw him straining to watch her laving his cock. He put his hands on her shoulders and tugged. Reluctantly she let his cock slide out of her mouth. She wanted him in her pussy as desperately as he wanted to be there. But when he sought to lay her on her back to enter her the traditional way, she put up a hand. Made brazen by the atmosphere, the passion, she was not backing down now. Brianna O'Shea did not surrender. She conquered.

Shrugging out of his hands, she threw a leg across his abdomen, and sat up, her breasts swaying as she shifted to find his cock. Grasping it with her hand, she guided him to her slit, slowly and carefully, wanting to prolong the time it took him to fill her. His eyes widened as he watched her rise up on her knees and take only the very tip of him into her crease, rubbing him back and forth on her clit before she finally sheathed him with her warmth and wetness. She eased down onto him, letting her body adjust to his length and thickness. Then when she had him as far inside her as he could possibly get, she began to slowly undulate on top of him, rubbing her seam against his body as she stroked his shaft with her up and down motions.

Michael put his hands on her hips, helping her to set the pace. Then he raised them to her breasts, caressing them and rubbing his thumbs across her nipples. As if he couldn't decide what to do with his hands, he next ran his fingers into her hair, fanning out the curls and letting them fall like a curtain against her body.

With his shaft caressing her walls and his body rising to meet her clit, she felt the orgasm building within her all too soon. She knew his release was near as well by the way he pumped into her. Not content to let her ride him, he wanted to drive his cock into her, pushing farther and farther. His eyes never left her. She liked that he watched her, that he watched them as they made love for the first time in the fresh air with the sound of the sea nearby.

She couldn't hold it back a second longer. Brianna came with a ferocious tremble that shook her to her very soul. She cried out and rode the crest, clinging desperately to make it last as long as possible. Before she finished the ride, she knew that Michael came too. She felt the warmth of his seed inside her, felt the throbbing of his cock as he found release.

She collapsed on his chest, panting. He put his arms around her and held her there against him until both their heart rates calmed. He moved his fingers through her hair, stroking lightly, tucking it away from her cheek. With the heat of passion waning, she shivered from the breeze. Michael picked up the edge of the blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders as best he could.

Brianna didn't know when she'd ever felt more content. Lying on Michael's chest with his heartbeat strong against her ear, she felt perfect peace. She smiled, thinking how completely at ease she was. For now at least. There may be retribution later, battles to fight, decisions to make. Like the generations of Irish women before her, she languished in the arms of an amazing man. Her lover. Her enemy.

Chapter Four

"You're spilling the tea, dear."

"Hmmm?" Brianna looked at her great-grandmother and wondered why she wore such an amused look. And what had she just said? "Oh!" Tea ran over the rim of the cup, flooded the saucer and puddled on the polished oak tabletop. "I'm sorry, Molly. I wasn't paying attention."

"Indeed."

She caught the glimmer of mirth in Molly's voice and wondered what conversation she had missed while her mind had been elsewhere. Perhaps back on the grounds of an ancient castle? Mopping up the tea with a kitchen towel, she tried to think of some excuse, but she'd never been good at fooling Molly, so why try?

"There we go." The spill all cleaned up, she bent over to sip the liquid so she'd be able to manage the cup. And burned the tip of her tongue. "Ouch!"

"Brianna, you just poured it from the boiling kettle. Did you not think 'twould be hot?" She shook her head. "I didn't think at all."

"You were thinking instead about the handsome stranger in town?"

Blood heated the surface of her cheeks which glowed, she was quite sure, like the flames in the fireplace. Of course she'd been thinking of him. She'd thought of nothing else since leaving him -- she glanced at the clock on the mantel -- two hours ago. "No, Molly. Why would I think about him?"

The old woman gave a little chuckle as she rocked in her favorite chair while her fingers worked colorful yarns with a crochet needle. "I just thought you might be upset."

"Upset?" Either Molly was deliberately trying to confuse her or her mind had lost most of its ability to process the world around her, she wasn't sure which. True, she hadn't been paying attention before, but she was now. "Why would I be upset?"

"Isn't this Gallagher man planning to tear down your ruins?"

Leaning over, she blew on the tea. She wouldn't be burned twice. "Not if I stop him." She sipped enough tea so that she could lift the cup. "I'll find a way."

Wrinkles etched during the last ninety years rippled across Molly's cheeks when she smiled. She glanced up at Brianna, then back at the yarn in her lap. "He will listen to you?"

"Probably not. That's why I have to try something else."

Now her hands stilled as she shot Brianna a stern look. "Something else like what?"

That austere expression had always made Brianna squirm. She fussed with the teacup, as if it required an enormous amount of attention to balance it in her hands. "I don't know. Some spell or something."

"Brianna!"

"Well, why not?" She murmured a short chant. The teacup rose from her hands and hovered in midair, motionless and quite safe from tipping over. "What's the point of having magic if you can't use it when you need to?"

With only a look, Molly caused the teacup to float gently to the little table, never spilling a drop. "You learned when you were only a small child. From the time you can chant

your first simple charm, we teach you. Do no harm. This man has offered many, many dollars. You would destroy his investment?"

"He's destroying my castle!"

"Not yet, he hasn't. And besides, what is it but crumbling stones? The memory and the love is not something outside. It is here." She touched a hand over her heart. "And here." She raised the hand to her head. "Those things can never be destroyed."

"Don't you care about our past, our heritage?"

"Of course I care." Molly ran the yarn through her fingers. "But I don't need the castle to remember the souls who came before us."

Brianna looked out the window of Joseph's house toward the green hills leading to the sea and the stone structures rising from the ground there. "They seem so real to me when I'm there, so strong. It's as if all the people who lived there are waiting for me."

"Waiting for what?"

"I don't know." She looked back at Molly, shaking her head. "I just feel them around me when I'm there."

"Yes, child." Her small foot set the chair to rocking. "You have always felt more, seen more than the rest of us. The magic is stronger in you than in any of our family for generations. Even more reason for you to be careful with it."

"I am always careful." As she said the words, she thought again of the blanket on the grass, the unseasonably warm wind, her attraction to the man. No, she hadn't been very careful earlier today when she'd let a virtual stranger know the intimacy of her body, driving her to a climax more powerful than any other she'd known. Was that the magic?

"Have you spoken much with this Gallagher?"

"No!" She surprised herself with how quickly and loudly she answered Molly. Why did she want to deny her relationship with him? If relationship could even be used to describe one afternoon of sex. "I mean, I saw him in the pub last night. And he stopped by earlier today."

Molly smiled. "He stopped by? Perhaps bringing a fistful of daffodils that went missing from Maeve's garden?"

"That woman talks too much!"

"And you too little."

Her cheeks were flaming hot now. She couldn't bring herself to look at Molly for fear a large red "A" had been painted across her own face. But wait! It wasn't adultery if she weren't married, was it? To give herself something to do, she picked up the teacup and busied herself with blowing on it even though it had cooled enough to safely drink.

"I saw him earlier," Molly said.

"You did?"

"Yes, Libby took me to the store for yarn. We saw him on the street. I believe he said he'd had a picnic lunch."

She choked on a mouthful of tea and had to set the cup down.

Molly laughed. "Relax. He's the one."

Regaining her breath, she looked at her great-grandmother whose blue eyes twinkled with delight. "The one?"

"The one I saw in the crystals." She picked up her yarn and let her fingers go back to work. "Last winter solstice, I set out the crystals for you. I saw the face of the man you will marry."

"And it was Michael Gallagher?"

"Unless he has a twin."

"That's ridiculous!" She got up and stomped to the window, feeling suddenly as though she were suffocating. "How could I marry an American?" She struggled with the stubborn window, then gave in to the use of magic to open it. A cool sweet breeze drifted in, seeming to wrap around her, bringing relief to the blush in her cheeks, the fever on her brow. "I will never leave Ireland. And even if I did --" She spun around to face Molly. "-- I would certainly not marry a man who would destroy those things I hold sacred."

* * * * *

Brianna plotted while she polished the solid mahogany bar at Donohue's later that afternoon. If she couldn't use magic to dissuade Michael, she'd think of something else. One by one the regulars arrived. Old Jimmy Williams, not to be confused with his son, Young Jimmy Williams. Daniel and Liam, the two she'd known since primary school. And an assortment of others who came in for a hot meal, a drink, or just an excuse to get away from the missus and the babies for a bit.

Lining up the clean glasses near the taps, she watched the fellows slide into the easy camaraderie that grows from living in a small town. The drinking began, then the joking, and the plan formed neatly in her mind.

The dinner crowd was in full swing when she saw Michael come in. Her body's reaction to his presence was so swift and so powerful, she almost dropped the heavy tray she carried above her head. He wore casual black slacks and a white dress shirt open at the collar. He hung his bomber jacket on the rack near the door and smiled at her. Her stomach flipflopped at the sparkling sight. She managed a smile and a nod, then went on to deliver the plates and mugs to the table waiting for her.

As she headed back to the bar, she saw he stood near the doorway, still watching her. She turned on her own natural charm and approached him. "I was hoping you'd stop in tonight," she said as she slid her arm through his and steered him toward an empty stool in the precise middle of the bar. Old Jimmy held court on one side of him; Daniel and Liam on the other. Perfect. She had easy access to all of them from behind the bar. Now to get to work.

Just before she released her hold on him, he dipped his head to speak near her ear. "Is it all right to kiss you in here?"

She looked up, steeling herself against the magnetic pull of his eyes. "Only if you're prepared to fight a duel in my honor. These lads have known me since birth; you're a stranger in town."

"Understood." He propped a hip on the barstool. "I can wait."

Her stomach quivered at the promise, but she fought to ignore it. Not now. Now she had work to do. Behind the bar she started to pour a Guinness for him. When Daniel glanced her way, she grabbed her opening. "Danny boy, you've met our Michael Gallagher here?" She nodded toward him.

"Of course." Daniel clapped Michael on the shoulder. "Trounced him soundly at darts last night."

"I certainly hope his buildin' skill's better'n his darts, then." She slipped into the more informal brogue, tightening her kinship with the men. "He's plannin' on some fancy hotel up by the ruins."

"The ruins?" Daniel cocked an eyebrow.

Brianna slid the glass of stout across the bar to Michael. "That's if the leprechauns will let him. You know there's faerie rings up there."

Now Old Jimmy joined in from Michael's other side. "Aye, the faerie rings. Wouldn't do to cross them."

Michael kept the grin on his face, but Brianna could see the slight frown furrow his brow. "And what if I do?" he asked.

Wiping at a spot of foam on the bar with a damp towel, Brianna shrugged. "I don't think you're wantin' to find that out, are you?"

His smile widened as he looked from one group of men to the other, then back at Brianna. "I'm thinkin' I do."

Oh, this man is good, she thought, noticing how he'd picked up a hint of the brogue himself to increase his acceptance in the group and receive the benefit of their familiarity.

"Tis never a good idea to mess with the faeries," Old Jimmy said. "They can be mean."

Michael took a long drink of his Guinness. "What if I don't believe these faeries exist?"

"Oh, they exist, all right." Seamus leaned in from beside Old Jimmy. "Brianna's seen the little people, haven't you?"

She placed a fingertip against her chin, as if in deep thought. "Well, I thought I'd seen a tiny one once." She looked at Seamus. "But 'twas only that you'd come back from the gents without zippin' your fly."

Both groups of men exploded in raucous laughter at the expense of Seamus's manhood. He didn't seem to mind, despite the redness that bloomed in his cheeks as he laughed with the rest of them. Old Jimmy picked up the thread, exactly as Brianna had hoped. The storytelling had just begun. The night would be filled with stories of faeries, hauntings, legends, all sprung from the land by the ruins. There were dozens of them, maybe enough to change Michael's mind once he'd heard some of them.

With her mission underway, Brianna was free to attend to the other patrons in the pub, but she came back by from time to time, steering the stories back on course when they drifted away. If Michael noticed her manipulation, he didn't show it. When she set a plate of shepherd's pie in front of him, he ate with gusto, never missing a word of the current story.

As the evening progressed, the stories became more embellished with each pint of Guinness poured. Brianna tended to her duties but kept a watchful eye on the group which had grown to include almost everyone in the small pub. Michael occupied the exact center of the crowd as man after man tried to impress the newcomer with his best story. She saw him laughing heartily with the others and taking his turn at buying a round.

Finally, she approached the bar for last call. A few more pints of Guinness, a few more shots of Jameson, but most of the group were ready to head for home. Old Jimmy held the group spellbound when she finally had the chance to listen.

"No one knows," he said, his accent thick with drink. "No one saw it happen. But the lovers wound up at the bottom of the cliff. Did they jump? Did one push the other? Did they fall, unable to see the edge in the darkness?"

A chill swept over Brianna at the familiar story. Still, she settled back to listen. "All anyone knew for sure was that she ran away. Why? Only the angels have that answer. The angels and her lover, I suppose. And now on a moonless night when the mists swirl above the ground and the wind whines in the branches, you can see him walking near the cliffs. You can hear him calling her name."

Brianna shivered. An eerie silence met the end of the tale. Then Old Jimmy looked up. "Oh, Brianna! I'm sorry, girl."

She shook her head and forced a slight smile. "Don't be. 'Tis a good story."

Michael glanced at Old Jimmy. He'd seen Brianna's face pale at the telling of that last story. Why? Did she know those ill-fated lovers? Did they mean something to her? The old man gave nothing away by the expression on his face. Neither did Brianna. She'd turned away and started picking up the empty glasses. Men started gathering their coats and scarves. Some were still laughing, still talking, but they all headed for the door and home.

Brianna came back and set a mug of steaming coffee before him. "Wait for me?"

He captured her hand on the bar before she pulled away. It was freezing cold. "Of course," he said, letting her go.

When she disappeared into the kitchen, he went to the rack near the door and took both their coats down, thinking about the stories he'd heard tonight. There had been a familiarity to them, almost a feeling of déjà vu. He remembered times he'd spent with his grandfather, hearing stories about their Irish relatives. So many of them were like the ones he'd heard tonight. He had not thought of them in a long time. He'd been a small boy and had half-believed Granddad made them up for his entertainment.

Something to think about. Perhaps his Irish heritage was more a part of him than he'd ever realized. Maybe it was nostalgia that made him feel pulled so hard to this area, this land. That would explain why he'd bought it so quickly. He never made his business decisions impulsively. Why had he this time? It had to be the childhood memories.

She came out of the kitchen then, heading toward him. The feeling that swept him when she smiled at him was overwhelming. Sure, it had been the greatest sex of his life on the cliff by the ruins this afternoon. But why was he trembling now just watching her walk toward him? Was it the sway of her hips that reminded him of how she'd ridden him? Was it the swell of her breasts against the fabric of her blouse?

He gave himself a mental shake and held out her jacket for her. "May I walk you home?"

She smiled up at him, sliding her arms into the sleeves, then pulling her hair out of the collar. "You didn't drive?"

"You seem to walk everywhere. I thought I'd give it a try." He put on his jacket and held the door for her. The night was far cooler than their afternoon in the sun had been, but he didn't mind. The air was clean and crisp. He needed that freshness to help clear the cobwebs from his mind. Despite the sexy woman who tucked her gloved hand into the crook of his elbow, he couldn't stop thinking about his grandfather and the stories of his youth.

They were at her cottage door in only minutes. He'd intended to see her home, kiss her goodnight and be on his way. But the moment he stepped inside, he knew he was staying. She shed her jacket and held out a hand for his. He gave it to her, then went to the fireplace to build some warmth for the room.

She knelt beside him at the hearth and held out her hands to welcome the flames as they grew. She'd been cold, he knew. This would warm her. Once the turf was going, he turned to see the firelight shining on her hair, in her eyes. She looked at him and smiled. He placed his hand beneath her chin and tilted her face toward him. "It didn't work, you know."

"What didn't work?"

"The stories. You didn't scare me off with the spooky stories. The tourists will love it. I might even use it in the ads. Haunted Hotel, we could call it."

Brianna sighed and let her hands fall to rest on her knees. "It was worth a try."

He nodded. "And quite a fun try, it was. I haven't heard stories like that since I was small enough to sit on my granddad's knee." He sat on the tapestry rug before the hearth, arranging his long legs in the small space.

Brianna sat comfortably, too, her hands warmed now from the fire. She supposed it had been foolish to think something so simple would scare off a man as successful as Michael. A conjured ghost in the path of a successful executive was really not much obstacle. There *was* magic in the land and by the cliffs, it was true. But nothing that would hurt Michael or his project.

She looked at him beside the fire, the light shining on his hair, darkening his eyes to sapphires. She thought of what Molly had said to her. *He's the one* ... Molly was never wrong about these things, but Brianna didn't see how it was possible. She wasn't even in love with him, how could she consider marriage?

She shook her head, as if to emphasize to herself the denial. No. She did not love this man. She barely knew him.

At that moment, he reached for her, and she went fluidly into his arms. Maybe she didn't love him, but she definitely wanted him. He pulled her across his lap and lowered his head to kiss her. It was as if her lips had been waiting all day for the return of his. She felt

the slow glide across her mouth and felt herself opening as if a rose, reaching its petals toward the summer sun.

Her pulse quickened, her breathing slowed, her mouth responded to the deepening of the kiss. He moved his hands across her back, cradling her in his lap. She felt as if her blood had thickened, taking longer to move through her bloodstream. Every part of her body felt thick, hot, slow. The magic was here, too. Not just on the cliff. So it wasn't the castle after all. It was the man.

Chapter Five

Michael felt her body give in his arms. As sure as he'd been earlier that he would walk away, he was more certain now that he could not. It was almost as if some force compelled him to stay with her, to hold her close, to worship her body. Maybe it was the spell of the old stories, the magic and the mystery. It didn't matter. Brianna was all the magic he needed.

Her mouth was soft and yielding, allowing him to taste her. He traced his tongue across her lips and she let him into the cavern as soft and wet as her pussy had been earlier. His balls tightened at the memory. His cock hardened, straining against the confining space in his trousers, nudging her sweetly rounded bottom in his lap. His instinct was to remove both sets of clothing and take her swiftly, powerfully, but he summoned patience, wanting to prolong this pleasure.

It had been only hours since his climax had exploded inside her, a more intense release than he'd ever known, and already he needed more. His cock throbbed, so engorged it was almost painful. He laid a hand against the smoothness of her cheek and broke the kiss, resting his forehead on hers as he struggled to draw a calming breath. "God, Brianna. I don't know what it is you do to me, but please don't stop doing it."

She pulled his shirttails out of his pants and slid her hands beneath, seeking flesh. "I won't if you won't."

He gasped when her fingers trailed across his chest and found the flattened nipples there, teasing him with the tips of her nails. His fingers went to the buttons on her blouse and began to slowly open one after the other. The fabric parted, he bent his head to taste the flesh in the valley between her breasts. Her bra was a lacy scrap that he easily pulled away to reveal the firm round flesh of her magnificent tits. With one heavy orb in his palm, he took the nipple into his mouth and suckled.

She uttered a soft moan and arched her back as she struggled to unbutton his shirt in turn. Once the fabric was out of the way, he lifted his head and pulled her against him, rubbing her tight nipples against the hair on his chest.

He wanted more, needed more. His lips returned to hers, kissing her as if staking a claim. He rested one hand on her leg and stroked the length of it, up to the hem of her skirt and underneath, skimming across silky thigh. When she adjusted her position to give him space, he moved his fingers to her mound, finding her panties, feeling the moisture that soaked them. She was wet. She was ready.

But not yet. As desperate as his cock was to fuck her, he still forced himself to go slowly, to make it last. With his index finger, he traced the edge of her panties, then slid beneath to the hot soft flesh. He sank his finger into her crease. She was drenched in juices designed to lubricate the way for his cock. For now, he was content to stroke his finger back and forth in the sweet dewy folds.

She squirmed on his lap, offering her pussy to his hand. He reached to the top of her panties and jerked them away, down the length of her legs. She kicked the silky swatch off and he returned to the hot mound that was so eager for his touch. Now he slid two fingers into her crease and stroked, spreading her juices from the opening of her cavern back up to the swollen clit. She cried out when he touched the hard nub. He pressed his thumb against it and let his other fingers stroke the crease.

Bracing her hands on his shoulders, she ground her pussy against his hand, seeking the touch that would send her over the edge. He followed her rhythm, stroking with her movement, listening to the change in her breathing pattern.

But not yet. He would not have her come yet. He still had other ways to worship her. She groaned in protest when he removed his hands. "Not yet," he whispered. "Trust me."

With slow and deliberate moves, he eased her blouse off her shoulders, down her arms. Reaching behind her, he found the clasp of her bra and freed her breasts. That garment too he slid off of her creamy white shoulders. All that remained was her short black skirt. He would make quick work of removing it, but first, he could not stop himself from skimming his hands over her taut belly up to caress her perfectly round breasts and down the sides of her ribs to the waist of her skirt. He found the clasp there and slid the zipper down while she stared at him with her eyes glossy from desire.

He pulled the skirt down the length of her legs and discarded it in the pile of other garments. After kissing her last night, he'd gone home and dreamed of laying her down before the fire, watching the light flicker across her ivory skin and gleam in her emerald eyes. Now his fantasy had come true. He took a moment just to savor the sight.

But not a long moment. Her impatient hands came to him, tugging his shirt off and seeking the zipper on his pants. In seconds he was as naked as she, stretched out beside her on the tapestry rug before the hearth. He propped his head on an upturned palm and stroked the other one down the very middle of her chest, watching the light and shadows flicker across her skin. She shivered when he circled one breast and flicked his thumb across her nipple. Dipping his head, he took the swollen tip into his mouth, circling it with his tongue.

She moved her legs, seeking his cock, trying to bring them together, but he still wasn't finished yet. He had one more trick before he allowed the natural union to take place. His cock wanted her pussy with an ache equal to hers, but not yet.

Releasing her breast, he skimmed his lips along her skin, over her rib cage, dipping his tongue into her bellybutton. Her chest rose and fell with sharp breaths at the sensation he created across her skin. Still he continued, down to her mound. She opened her legs for him. Her dewy moisture caught in her soft curls glistened in the firelight. He dipped his head, touched his tongue to the droplet and felt her shiver.

It took all the energy he possessed to remain gentle when he wanted to ravish her. Situating himself between her sleek thighs, he blew gently on her mound and saw her tremble in response. Slowly he spread her lips with both hands, exposing the wet pink flesh and the tight bud concealed there. He lowered his head and touched his tongue to the slick crease. She cried out, arched her back and tilted her pussy up to him.

Like a man sampling the finest delicacy, he stroked her seam with his tongue. When he reached her clit, he kissed it, then circled it with his tongue, rolling the swollen nub in her own juices, bathing it with his. She lifted first one thigh, then the other and settled them over his shoulders. Her heels dug into his back as he continued to lave her pussy with his tongue.

Her breaths were coming more quickly now, panting out of her with soft little murmurs of ecstasy. She would come soon, he knew. He wanted that, wanted to make her lose control, to fall apart at his touch. Only his touch. He wanted to be the only man who witnessed this, who could make this happen for her. That he wanted to possess her surprised him, but he shoved the thought away. Something to be examined later. For now, it was *his* mouth that suckled her to release, *his* hands that would hold her when she shattered.

She moved against his mouth, seeking his tongue against her clit. He stroked her with his hand and slid a finger into her channel. She gasped and arched. He let her body adjust to his intrusion, then slipped another inside her. Now she moved against him with the fury of passion as his tongue and fingers pushed her to the edge of climax.

He felt it gather in her. Her heels clamped down on him as her back arched and she threw her pussy against his mouth for one final time. The shudder began deep within her where his fingers stroked, then spread outward. Her soft moans became sharp cries until she screamed, convulsing around him.

Slowly he drew his fingers out; slowly he moved his mouth away from her pussy. He ran his hands down the length of her thighs as the spasms of release still quivered under her skin. On his knees, he hovered above her, his cock thick and pulsing, eager to sink into her soft flesh. He bent his head to kiss her, let her taste her own juices on his lips.

Her face relaxed into an expression of contentment. She smiled up at him and sighed, stretching her arms above her head like a cat waking from a nap. It was almost more than he could stand to watch her, sated and happy, almost purring. He pushed her legs apart and prepared to enter her.

But Brianna reached for him. It took both her hands to wrap around the length of his cock. She stroked him, rubbing a finger across the tip, spreading the glistening drop of his seed over the tiny slit, making him shudder. She sat up, still holding his cock. "No." He put his hands over hers to still them. His voice was ragged with his need for her. "I want to be inside you now. I need to be inside you."

He watched her eyes, luminous in the golden glow of the fireplace, as she silently nodded. With his hands cradling her back, he eased her down on the rug. Bracing his hands on either side of her head, he bent to kiss her neck, nuzzle her ear, his cock bobbing against her abdomen. His need to feel her around him was so great he didn't think he could be gentle. But when he probed the wet folds of her pussy, he found his need to pleasure her again was greater than his own quest for release.

Slowly he sank into her velvet depths, let his cock fill her, gave her time to stretch to take him in. She was tight and small, he was long and thick. The last thing he ever wanted was to hurt her, but he had to stroke her, had to bury himself balls-deep in her sweet, wet walls. She moved beneath him, finding the angle to take him all the way in. The thick short curls that nested his cock tangled with the hair at her mound. Skin to skin, he slid across her,

raking his chest over her nipples as he settled his weight along the length of her, keeping as much as he could on his arms so as not to crush her.

Then equally slowly, he drew his shaft out of her sheath, all the way to the very tip, keeping only that last little bit inside her to keep from breaking the connection. As if feeling the loss, she thrust her hips toward him, enticing him back inside. He complied, sliding easily along the path now, finding his home. He meant to set a quiet rhythm, a gentle rocking that would bring them both to a slow but vivid climax.

Not to be. He could not be quiet, could not be gentle. She set his blood aflame with her whispered sighs and sexy moans. She made his dick throb as she moved her pussy to take him further inside. Almost against his will, his hips pumped at a rapid pace. She matched him, urging him deeper, harder, faster. Then the climax took over and he had no control at all.

He felt the orgasm building in his balls, racing the length of his shaft to spurt into her, spilling his seed in warm bursts. His entire body convulsed as he slammed against her mound a final time. She ground her hips against him, then cried out with her own release. Her pussy walls clamped tightly onto his shaft, pulsing around him, milking the last drop of come from him.

Spent, he rolled to his side, panting, trying to regain some control. Incredibly, this orgasm was even more powerful than the one at the ruins. Brianna snuggled against him, her arm draped across his side, her leg across his hip. "You'll stay the night," she whispered.

"Yes." Already sleep was a drug in his veins, taking him into the darkness where he did not have to examine new feelings. Shivering from the cool air, he reached toward the fire, too near sleep to properly direct his hand. He meant to put another brick of turf in the flames. He thought it moved there just by the force of his reaching for it. Crazy, he thought to himself. It was just the narcotic of sleep pulling at him. Of course he'd picked it up.

Didn't matter. In another few seconds, he was asleep.

* * * * *

Brianna woke to the clattering sounds that accompany cooking. It puzzled her only a second before she remembered Michael spending the night with her. Fully awake now, she opened her eyes and sat up. Sometime during the night, he'd covered her in the afghan from the chair in the corner. She drew it around her now and went to the kitchen. "You're making breakfast?"

He looked up when she spoke and smiled. Lord, that smile was dangerous. He'd half dressed, pulling on his pants and shirt, but the top was unbuttoned, showing her a wide patch of that superbly muscled chest which had been her pillow most of the night. She remembered now how cozy she'd felt wrapped in his arms and warmed by the fire. It had been wonderful.

"Trying to make breakfast," he answered her. "You didn't leave me many options."

"I'm not much of a cook."

"That's obvious. Where do you keep your spices?"

She stepped past him, wearing the afghan like a soft yarn toga, and opened a cabinet in the corner. "Umm ..." Her hand settled on the only jar on the shelf. "This?"

Stirring eggs in the skillet, he gave her a look of disbelief. "That's peanut butter."

She examined the label, then looked up at him. "That's not a spice?"

He just shook his head and went back to the eggs. "Eggs, toast, and tea. It's the best I can do without a trip to the grocer's. You have about two minutes."

She hurried off to wash her face and exchange the afghan for jeans and T-shirt. When she returned, he was setting plates on the small table next to the window. She slid into a chair opposite him and reached for the tea. "Maeve Barlow will be missing you at breakfast."

"Have I sullied your reputation by not slinking back into the B&B in the dark?"

She sipped tea, then shook tight red curls away from her face before answering. "No, I imagine you did that with the daffodils yesterday. Even my great-grandmother knew about that."

He nodded. "Molly O'Shea. I met her in town."

"She told me."

He's the one. Brianna set her cup down slowly and stared at him. Was that why the sex was so good, the morning after so easy? Was it remotely possible that Molly was right?

He looked up from eating his eggs. "What is it?"

She stared another moment, then shook her head. "Nothing. It's nothing." She smiled. "So what have you planned for today?"

"I have to go to Dublin for a few days."

Disappointment was swift, filling every corner of her. She'd wanted to spend the day with him, walk over the fields, pick flowers, make love ...

"Some business matters," he explained. "But I'll be back. Maybe by the end of the week."

Brianna picked up her fork and moved the eggs around on her plate, unprepared to show him her level of involvement. She needn't have bothered. He reached across the table and covered her hand with his. "Will you miss me?"

That grin of his was infectious. Of course she would miss him. She'd only known him for two days, but he filled an emptiness in her life she hadn't even noticed before. She returned the grin. "We'll have to wait until you've gone to find out, won't we?"

Chapter Six

In the large bathroom of his hotel suite in Dublin, Michael looked in the mirror and adjusted his tie. He'd had a long telephone conference with his brother, two of their lawyers and the company's CFO. Soon he was meeting in person with a local architect recommended by a firm in Boston. But first he was expecting Joseph O'Shea.

Brianna's uncle.

It had been a surprise when Joseph called and asked if he could stop by. He said he'd been in Dublin to speak with attorneys about the title on the property, and that could be true. But Michael was a little bit apprehensive. He was, after all, sleeping with the man's niece.

Not that either one of them had gotten much sleep.

Every nerve ending in his body sprang to life at the memory. Barely more than forty-eight hours had passed since he'd left her cottage. Barely more than forty-eight seconds had passed without her on his mind. Even in the middle of the trans-Atlantic telephone conference he'd found his mind wandering to the way the firelight cast golden shadows in the deep valley between her breasts. His brother, Sean, had even asked him what was wrong.

Nothing was wrong; everything was right. Except she was in Torin and he was in Dublin. But he should be able to fix that tomorrow. Or the next day at the latest. If his body didn't explode from wanting her by then.

A knock on the suite door had him swiftly stuffing those thoughts to the back corner of his mind. It wouldn't do to entertain Brianna's uncle while his cock grew rigid from thinking of her. He checked his tie in the mirror one last time and hurried to answer the door.

Joseph stepped in, a commanding presence with his broad shoulders and height just about equal to Michael's. Over six feet for sure. The gray sprinkled through his hair added character rather than age. And his light blue eyes were kind. Michael held out his hand. "I've ordered us up some snacks. It's out here."

Smiling, Joseph followed Michael to the terrace where room service had provided a table complete with white tablecloth and silver candlesticks. They sat on opposite sides of the table and relaxed while Michael poured coffee for both of them. They were several stories high over busy Grafton Street. The bustling sounds of the city drifted to them. The late morning sun was warm enough to make it pleasant.

Joseph shook his head at the offered tray of sandwiches and drank deeply from the coffee before pinning his gaze on Michael. "I've done some research on your family's business."

Trying not to become defensive, Michael smiled. "I hope you like what you learned."

He nodded. "I do. If I believe what I read, you've made a name for yourself developing land. Not to mention a bit of a fortune as well."

Michael shrugged. "We do all right. I've had a good bit of luck on my side so far. And a great team of engineers and architects to help."

"You're sure, then, that our little village needs a fancy hotel on the cliffs?"

"Are you changing your mind about selling the land to me?"

"Didn't say that."

Michael picked up his coffee and leaned back in the chair, one leg crossed over the other, ankle to knee, a posture he hoped appeared both casual and confident. "What exactly is it that you're trying to say, Mr. O'Shea?"

"Well, to start with, you can call me Joseph." With his arms resting on the chair, he steepled his fingertips together, equally casual, equally confident. "And I guess what I really want to say is that I'd like you to be careful with Brianna."

"I thought you might."

Both men were silent for a moment, each sizing up the other. Although Michael was not entirely surprised by this, he still felt a bit like the boy being sent to the principal's office.

"I raised her, you know," Joseph said finally. "Me and my Libby."

"No. I didn't know that. What happened to her parents?"

Joseph finished his coffee and set the cup down, sighing. "My baby brother Connor. His was a restless soul. After school, he came here. To Dublin. Without so much as a phone call or a letter for two years until one day he just turns up. Shows up at the house. This was when our parents were still living, though our mother died not too long after this. Broke her heart, I think."

He blinked, as if the memory were somewhere in front of him. "Anyway, here comes Connor out of the blue with his girlfriend. Glynis was her name. Just about as pregnant as a girl can get. Brianna was born a few days later. And a few days after that ..." Joseph turned his hands palms up, a helpless gesture. "... Glynis ran off. Poor girl. She just couldn't accept all that she'd learned. Connor went looking for her, of course. But neither came back." Now he ran his hands through his hair. "Until a fisherman found them at the bottom of the cliffs."

An eerie chill swept over Michael. It was the story from the pub. No wonder Brianna had turned pale when she heard it that night. It was the stuff of Irish legends, but it was her own parents. "So you and your wife took Brianna."

Joseph nodded. "We had four children. What's one more 'round an Irish supper table?"

Brianna's Magic

55

"That's very kind of you."

"It's what you do with family."

Michael thought of his own brother, his parents and his grandfather in Boston. Yes, they were that close too. He'd take in any children of Sean's if he needed to. Without question. "So this check of my family you did. That wasn't altogether for business purposes, was it?"

Joseph had the good grace to appear slightly embarrassed. "Not entirely."

"You could have just talked to me."

"And I'm here."

Michael grinned. "That you are. What can I say to put you at ease? I haven't really spent much time with Brianna, but she seems a woman who knows her own mind."

Shaking his head, Joseph reached for the carafe and refilled his coffee. "There's nothing you can say. Everything I've learned is good, but the measure of a man is in his actions. Time will tell."

"Are you this thorough with all of Brianna's ..." He cast about in his mind for an appropriate term. "... acquaintances?"

"You're the only one who's mattered."

Puzzled, Michael felt as if some kind of warning were being issued. "What do you mean by that?"

But Joseph only shook his head. "You'll be spending a good bit of time in Torin while this project is going on, I suppose."

Michael nodded.

"You'll see."

With those cryptic words, Joseph turned the conversation to the plans for the hotel, the architects, and the construction crews. "In all of Ireland, you've chosen our little bit of land when it wasn't even up for sale. Why do you think that is?"

A question he'd asked himself numerous times. "I can't explain it. My business in Dublin was complete. I just decided to explore a bit. The car led me south."

"Your family is from our area?"

"No, we're from Galway. I visited there too. And it's lovely. But not like Torin. When I walked along the coast, saw the ocean below crashing against the rocks, felt the strength of the wind coming over the water ..." He shook his head. "... it just pulled me. Somehow like a force I couldn't ignore."

Joseph nodded and smiled as if he liked Michael's answer and understood the feeling. They talked at length about Michael's plans for the land until finally Joseph excused himself for a consultation with his lawyers. Michael had his own meeting to attend. As he shoved notes and drawings into a battered leather case, he puzzled over parts of the conversation. He had the feeling that Joseph had been deliberately vague at times. Like when talking about Brianna's mother. She couldn't accept what she'd learned? What had she learned?

It was as mysterious as what Joseph said about delving into Michael's background. He was the only one that mattered? What did that mean?

Questions for another time. He grabbed his jacket and headed out the door.

* * * * *

Brianna wandered across the grassy field behind Molly's cottage. The morning had promised sun but deteriorated rapidly into a light Irish rain. She just turned up the collar of her coat and walked on. Instead of taking her usual path to the ruins, today she turned left and headed for the cemetery.

If anyone thought it eerie that she enjoyed wandering among the tombstones, she never let it bother her. She felt a kinship to her family here. The ones who had come before were alive in her. She could feel the spirits more strongly when she walked here. Today she had pulled a spray of buds off the wild rose bush that grew by the back door. She visited first the graves of her mother and father, side by side in the green grass, and laid the flowers at her mother's head.

It had never occurred to Brianna to feel the loss of these people. She hadn't known them. Libby and Joseph had cared for her as if she were their own child. And she'd had the special nurturing of Molly. Perhaps her great-grandmother had taken extra care with her because of the tragic circumstances surrounding her birth.

She felt an odd sense of peace here in the quiet. The soft rain made a murmuring sound in the leaves of the trees that bordered the rows of stones. Brianna didn't come here often, but when she did, she stopped at every marker, paid silent homage to each soul. Today, however, her mind wandered relentlessly to the tall American with the infectious grin. She couldn't push him out of her thoughts, no matter how hard she tried.

It had been four days since he'd left for Dublin. Four days of her wondering whether he was real or some image she'd conjured from her active imagination. It was easy enough to see how she could have made him up. He was almost perfect in all the important ways. There was that pesky circumstance of his living an ocean away from her corner of the world. And the possibility that he would allow her precious ruins to be torn down. She refused to think of it as a given. In her mind, there was always hope.

Wandering the rows, she delved deeper into her past. From her parents and grandparents to Molly's husband and then his parents. If she followed the logical sequence of the stones, she should wind up at a marker for Torin and his wife and daughter. But time had ravaged them beyond identification.

A century and a half into the past, she stopped at the end of a row and sat on the low stone wall that formed one edge of the plot. It hadn't been her intention to sit and ponder Michael, but she couldn't seem to push him away. All afternoon, she'd felt him creeping into her mind, as if his physical presence were growing closer to her and to the memories of his making love to her before the fire.

Her body warmed at the memory despite the chill that swirled around her in the graveyard. With the rain almost stopped now, a blanket of mist began to settle among the headstones. For a moment, the clouds in the sky were so thick that it was almost as dark as night. Michael's presence seemed to be all around her now, and when she breathed in the pungent aroma of wet rich earth, she could have sworn she also detected the woodsy scent of his cologne.

Then the clouds parted. A bit of sun peeked through, making the swirling mist transparent. And when she looked across the plot, past the marked remains of her ancestors, there was Michael, walking toward her.

Her heart pounded, startled for a moment. At first she thought it was an apparition, born of the longing in her body and her soul. But as he came closer, she knew. He had come for her. Her instinct was to run madly toward him, to fling herself into his arms. But she forced herself to sit still, to wait.

As he drew nearer, she saw an intensity in his eyes that had not been there before. Perhaps he, too, had spent a restless four days examining the magic that had happened between them. He stopped inches in front of her, not speaking, just looking at her with that brilliant blue gaze. He panted, as if he'd hurried across the field, eager to get to her. "Well," she said, looking up at him, unable to tear her gaze away from his. "We know the answer to that now, don't we?"

He cocked his head in question, frowning.

"As to whether I would miss you."

The grin, the handsome grin that she had dreamed about each night, started slowly in one corner of his mouth and spread across his face, easing the intensity a bit. He put a hand

Brianna's Magic

behind her neck and gently tugged, bringing her against him, rain-drenched coat to rain-drenched coat. She tipped her chin up to receive his kiss.

And a mighty kiss it was, all but knocking her off her feet with the emotion he packed into it, as if all four days had been a time bomb steadily ticking off the seconds to explode against her. The hand that cupped her neck brought her closer, while his other hand cradled her cheek, stroking the line of her jaw.

At last he broke the kiss and drew her to him. Pulling the sides of his coat apart, she snuggled inside the shelter that was his arms, secure against his beating heart. There was heat at every contact point of his body to hers. And she felt the hardening ridge of his cock, pressing against her abdomen. Her body answered with a quiver and a flood of juices. She wanted him. But not here. Not in this rainy, windy shrine to her past. Michael was her present. And maybe -- she was startled to find herself hoping -- maybe her future.

She looked up at him, as if he might disappear unless she held him in her sight. "Did you finish all your work, then?"

"Enough for now. What are you doing walking around in the rain? And in a graveyard at that? It isn't Halloween, is it?"

Laughing, she pulled out of his embrace and led him by the hand to the first headstone. "These are my family, the ones who came before. I visit to thank them every now and then."

He looked from one marker to the next. "And do they answer?"

"Sometimes."

He followed along with her, reading the names as they passed. Halfway through the second row, she felt a tug on her hand. Turning around, she saw him staring at a tombstone, frowning. "What is it?"

He tilted his head, as if thinking. "I'm not sure, but something ..."

"What?"

"The dates."

Brianna looked at the stones nearby. They were in the mid-1800s. "What about the dates?"

Now he turned and faced her. "I visited the cemetery in Galway where my family is buried. Something I noticed there that I don't see here." He looked around, paced back and forth to the rows on either side, then shook his head. "In Galway I saw stone after stone from 1846, 1847, 1848."

"The famine," she said.

"Yes. Why do I not see that here?"

A tiny spiral of fear sprouted in her belly, unfurling and growing with each second that passed. What should she tell him? She wasn't sure. "We were lucky here," she said.

"Lucky?"

She looked at him, nodding, watching the movement of his eyes, knowing he was piecing things together in his mind.

"Luck or something else?" he asked at last.

Brianna thought about her mother, the young girl too afraid of what she'd been told to stay in Torin and love her, love her father. Would Michael run away as well? Better to find out now than later. She squared her shoulders and drew a breath. "Not luck," she said, barely more than a whisper. "The crops on this land did not suffer from the disease. My family had a ..." She hesitated, but only for a second. "... a spell to protect them."

Michael released her hand. The coldness that replaced his warm touch was far deeper than the wind or the rain. It was a frigid sweep that came from within, from the fierce knowledge that he would now turn away from her.

But he didn't turn. He stood rooted to the spot and looked at her, his eyes moving, moving. Then he settled his gaze on her. "You're a witch?"

She didn't recognize his voice, laden with the huskiness of emotion. "I don't like to use that word -- witch. It has too many evil connotations. We have magic in us, yes. I'm not ashamed of that."

Michael felt as if his world had stopped spinning. Brianna, this beautiful woman with whom moments ago he had envisioned his future, had just announced to him that she was a witch. No, not a witch. We have magic in us.

Not possible. As he stood staring at her, the rain increased. He felt it against his face, watched it lighting on her cheek in crystal droplets, then gathering into tiny pools before sliding down the smooth slope of her skin. Mindless of the weather, she kept looking at him, her thick lashes blinking away the raindrops as her emerald eyes watched, waiting for his next word, his next move. "I don't understand."

"Surely, you do, Michael."

Was it his imagination, or had her brogue thickened, as it did the night in the pub when she wanted to scare him with the local stories? And then the chill wind swept him again. The stories. He remembered the ghostly tale of the couple dead at the bottom of the cliffs and what Joseph had told him about Brianna's mother. She just couldn't accept all that she'd learned. Had she learned that the family into which she'd just borne a child practiced magic?

As ridiculous as the notion seemed to his practical side, he couldn't help a welling sympathy for the motherless child Brianna had always been. He reached out and touched the path of a raindrop on her cheek. "It's why your mother left, isn't it?"

He saw her catch her breath, but she nodded.

"And you think it will chase me away as well?"

She stood very still, her eyes never leaving his. For a long moment they stood in the rain, his hand on her cheek, their gazes locked. Michael had almost forgotten the question when at last she spoke. "You are not afraid of the magic, Michael."

"Not afraid of a thing I don't believe."

"You believe it."

He let his hand fall to his side, the rain dripping off of him, its chill seeping into his bones. "I'm sorry, Brianna. I don't."

She murmured some words in a soft voice, words he could not understand, whether because she spoke them so quietly or because he did not recognize the language, he wasn't sure. Just as he was about to ask her what she'd said, he felt a warmth pass over him. Although he could still see the rain pattering into little puddles on the ground and hear it hitting the leaves in the trees beside the cemetery, he no longer felt wet or cold. The drops were not hitting him. He looked up, expecting to see a large umbrella overhead, but there was nothing. Only the gray clouds in the darkening sky.

"What did you do?"

"Not much, really. Just a simple spell to keep us dry and warm."

He turned all the way around, looking in every direction, almost hoping he would see something to explain what he'd just experienced. But there was nothing. He still stood with Brianna in an open field next to rows of grave markers. It still rained all around them. He still felt warm and dry. If it was an illusion, it was a damn good one.

He settled his gaze on hers again and found her still calmly looking at him, as if waiting for him to concede. Despite what he was seeing -- or *thought* he was seeing -- he wasn't ready yet to follow her into the woods and stand beside a bubbling cauldron. "I don't understand."

"Yes, you do, Michael. Let yourself accept it."

"How are you so sure I can accept it?"

She smiled, a slow and sweet expression not meant to mock him. With a mumbled phrase she raised one hand and let it flutter over him for a moment. Immediately the rain returned, and with it, the chilling wind. He shivered. And yet she remained as warm and dry as if she stood inside the cottage looking out at him.

Raising one hand, he touched her arm and felt as if he'd slid his fingers beneath a soft blanket. He moved the hand back to his side and felt the rain again. Then he touched her cheek and gained warmth. She had wrapped some spell around her like a cocoon, leaving him out in the cold. He wanted to be inside it with her, not because of the rain and the chill wind, but because he didn't like anything separating her from him.

As if she read his mind, she moved her hand again, waving it in an arc over his head. The blanket of protection she'd conjured enveloped him.

"You see?" She smiled again, as if she had plucked a flower to show him the simplicity of its petals. "You understand, Michael. I am sure of it."

"How?"

"Because the magic is in you as well."

Shaking his head, he almost took a step backward before he stopped himself. "No, I don't have any magic."

"You do. Remember the first night you saw me at the ruins?"

Of course he remembered that. He would remember it for the rest of his life. She'd looked as if she floated across the grounds in her flowing nightgown. He nodded.

"I like my privacy. I had cast a spell to keep any wandering townsfolk from knowing I was there. But you saw me and walked into my protection. Only someone who has the magic could have gotten through."

Now he did take a step back. The spell moved with him, keeping him dry. "This is not possible."

She came forward, laying a hand against his sleeve. "Of course it is possible, Michael. You see it happening before you right now. Are you mad? Am I? This is real."

Michael frowned, so full of turbulence now he could barely think. But it didn't matter. The thoughts filled his mind whether he wanted them there or not. Perhaps it was true. He *had* seen her at the ruins that night. If she had cast a protective spell --

"This is ridiculous!" He turned and stomped away, but when the envelope of warmth followed him, he turned back, swiping at the spell as if it were a curtain he could part. "Take it off! I don't want your magic on me!"

With a patience he could not begin to comprehend, she smiled sweetly at him. "As you wish."

His eyes followed her elegant hand as it moved through the air between them with great flourish. More flourish than was needed, he was sure. She was making fun of him. Somehow, that irritated him more than the spell. At once the cold rain beat into his collar, sliding down beneath the layers of shirt, sweater, and jacket to his skin, chilling him to the bone. It didn't matter. He wanted the discomfort of the weather. Something about it was reassuring.

He stood with the rain hitting him, landing in his hair, dripping down from his forehead, running alongside his nose. He did not care. Emotions were welling inside him, and something else -- something turbulent was roiling inside, gathering energy and swirling all through him. As he tried to understand the feelings, he looked at Brianna, serenely beautiful with her red-gold hair cascading around her like a cape, her eyes as green as any emerald.

It was too much. She should not be so calm when he was embroiled in so much conflict. Magic! Just the very thought of it was ludicrous to his business-schooled mind. And yet there stood the evidence before him. That it was present in her, he could begin to accept.

She did, after all, live in this magical spot where legend told of the many mysteries of this enchanted land.

But not him! There was no magic in him!

Or so he would have thought before this. The strange feelings within him now, churning as if out of control, threatened to take over, to change forever who he was, how he lived. It didn't frighten him. There was even something familiar about the sensations, as if he'd known them some long time ago. And maybe he had. Little flashes of memory came and went, things that happened when he was a child. Pictures of his grandfather and the sweet face of his grandmother loomed in his mind.

He tilted his head, as if listening to voices in his past. The churning slowed, settled to a comfortable hum of energy throughout him. He looked at Brianna. "Have you done this to me?"

"Done what?"

"Cast some spell! Made me feel this ... this ..."

She took a step toward him. "What is it that you feel, Michael?"

He lifted his right hand, held it before him, looked at it as if it were some new item to be examined. He turned it, palm toward him, then rotated it back around toward Brianna. All of the energy seemed to focus on his hand. With a shaky movement, he used his fingers to trace an arc in the small space between the two of them. Brianna's protection disappeared. The rain began to fall on her, landing in her hair, on her shoulders, against her face.

"This can't be happening," he said in a low whisper.

Brianna laid a steady hand on his arm, smiling sweetly. "It is. And it's fine. Don't be afraid of it."

"I'm not afraid. I'm just --" He couldn't say what it was he felt. The energy that had stilled began to bubble again, to churn and swell within him, as if once freed now could never be contained again. Like trying to hold the waves away from the rocks.

66 Delia Carnell

"I need to go," he said to her. "I have to think."

She nodded slowly, rain dripping off her head as she moved. "Go in peace, Michael. I will be waiting for you when you're ready."

Chapter Seven

Brianna sat at the little table in the cottage, pretending to be sorting stories on the laptop. In truth, she could not stop thinking about Michael and the personal demons she knew he would be fighting right now. The magic was part of him. She'd known that from the beginning. But it would be hard for a practical man to understand all that it implied.

He would be all right. She had no doubt of that. She just wished he didn't have to go through so much turmoil to get to the peace he would eventually find. But didn't everyone have turmoil at some point or other?

A sharp knock on her front door made her jump. It was too soon to be Michael. Only an hour or so had passed since he left her in the cemetery. He'd barely had time to change out of his wet clothing, let alone do any sort of thinking. Still, she ran her hands over the stray tendrils of damp hair as she hurried to open the door.

"Aunt Libby!" Her joy was genuine. This woman had been as much mother to her as anyone could be. It was comforting to see her. And probably not a coincidence, either, she knew. Libby had always been tuned in to Brianna's moods. That had been quite helpful all her growing up years.

The older woman stomped in, shaking rain off her boots and jacket as she did so. She leaned forward and gave Brianna a kiss on the cheek. "I made so much apple bread, Joseph threatened to feed it to the pigs." She held out a small basket. "I know it's your favorite."

Warmth rushed through Brianna, forcing out some of the cold that had lingered after her walk in the rain. It was so good to have a loving family. "I just made tea."

She fussed with the kettle and the cups while Libby hung her jacket on the peg by the door and took a seat at the small table. "You're working on the stories today?"

"For a bit. I'm going to the pub in a little while."

Libby nodded and watched Brianna slice the bread and arrange it on a plate. "You've seen Michael since he returned from Dublin?"

Smiling, Brianna sat down opposite her aunt at the table. "I'm thinking you already know the answer to that. If you came here to fish, just go ahead and ask me outright."

A hint of blush filled Libby's cheeks. "Okay, I went by the post office earlier and Bonnie O'Hurley couldn't wait to tell me she'd just seen *the American* coming from the direction of your cottage. She said he seemed to be upset about something."

"He was. He just found out about the magic."

Libby paused with her teacup midway to her lips. "Yours?"

"And his."

"Well, now." She set the cup down as if she'd completely forgotten the tea. "That makes things a bit more interestin', doesn't it?"

Interesting was hardly the word Brianna would use to describe it. But interesting it was. "You know that Molly says she saw him in the crystals," Brianna said.

"No, I didn't know that, but it explains a lot."

"Explains what?"

"Why you're so involved with a man you don't know very well."

Brianna wasn't sure which part of that she liked least -- that she was deeply involved or that she didn't know him well. For some reason, she was certain she knew him extremely well. And perhaps that was why the other part was true. "I know him."

Libby's eyebrows shot up into the dark bangs that fell across her forehead. "When you say you *know* him ..."

"Oh, stop it, Aunt Libby. This isn't the Dark Ages. I've slept with him, if that's what you're asking me."

"Well, I wasn't going to ask ..."

"Good, don't ask." She slammed her teacup down a little more forcefully than was good for her or the cup. "Sorry," she murmured sheepishly.

Libby leaned forward across the table. "If he's the one in the crystals and you *know* him, why are you so upset right now?"

"I don't know." Yes, she did. Why pretend? This wasn't some stranger on a public bus or even a busybody in town. This was her aunt Libby who loved her as much as her own children. "All right, it's this. If he's *the one* ..." She made air quotes with her fingers. "... how can he continue with this horrible plan to tear down my ruins and ravage the land?"

"His family's pretty good at this development stuff. There's a real good chance we'll all be happy with what he does to the land."

Brianna rolled her eyes.

Libby pressed. "You know Joseph wouldn't have sold it otherwise. So, what's really bothering you?"

The thing she hadn't wanted to talk about, the thing she spent most of her time trying not to think about. "Sooner or later, he'll go back to Boston."

* * * * *

Michael walked out the back door of Maeve Barlow's bed and breakfast, searching for a place to escape both the rain and Mrs. Barlow's ears. Following a trail between the flowerbeds, he ducked inside a small shed she used for gardening supplies. The pungent smell of wet earth almost overwhelmed him, but he headed to the back corner anyway. His conversation with his grandfather so far had been nothing the people in this village needed to hear.

It had been brief but telling. Yes, there was magic in the family. Yes, he knew Michael had it in him. Why no one had bothered to explain it before this was a question unanswered as yet. Both men had needed to find a more private place to talk. Which was why Michael was hiding in the garden shed waiting for his cell phone to ring.

He couldn't stop thinking about Brianna and the calmness she displayed when telling him about the magic. Unbelievable. Yesterday the big news had been that he thought he'd fallen in love with a woman he barely knew. Could it have gotten more bizarre? Yes, it could. Not only was she a witch, apparently he was one too. No, not witch -- warlock. Was that it? Damn, how could he be this thing when he didn't even know the lingo?

Even though he was waiting for it, the shrill ring of the cell phone startled him. He flipped it open and pushed the button. "What!"

There was a brief pause, then, "I'm still your granddad, Mikey. Let's not forget that."

Only slightly chagrined, he adjusted his tone. "Sorry. It just seems a pretty big thing not to tell a person. Why is that?"

He heard his grandfather's sigh across the Atlantic. "Many reasons. None of them good, probably. For one thing, your parents don't have the magic."

"Why not?"

"Again, many reasons. It skips a generation sometimes. And since we emigrated to America, it's become diluted."

"You mean we married others?"

"That, and there's another thing. I should have thought of this before you went over there. You're closer to the source now. That makes it stronger in you."

Michael closed his eyes and wished he could feel as calm as the people who spoke with him about this bizarre circumstance. Brianna wasn't fazed, and that was not such a surprise. But Granddad ... He shook his head, as if that would help clear it. "The source?"

"Surely you know there's magic all over the island. It pulls you toward it. That may be why you ended up in the southern part. Maybe even why you wanted that piece of land."

And why Brianna didn't want to let it go? And even why the sex was so intense on the blanket by the ruins. Blood rushed to his groin at that memory, but he forced his body to cool. He had other things to think about right now. "So I might not have ever known it if I'd not come here?"

"Possibly."

"So what do I do with it? Can I control it?"

"Of course. A lot of it is instinctive. But your lady friend should be able to help you with that."

His lady friend. Now she would become his tutor in the ways of magic. A role he wasn't sure he wanted her to play for him. Through the small window in the shed, he saw Mrs. Barlow come out the back door of the house and look around. Probably wondering where he had gone. "Okay, Granddad, I think I need to go. I'll speak with you again in a day or two."

His mind was already on some excuse to give Mrs. Barlow when he heard his granddad's voice. "I love you, Michael."

Emotion welled in him at those words. "You too."

He flipped the phone closed with a snap and looked for a back way out of the shed.

* * * * *

Brianna wandered aimlessly down the main street in town. She didn't have a clue what she was doing there or where she intended to go. It was just imperative that she get out of the cottage this morning and stop expecting Michael to knock on her door at every moment.

Disappointment had bloomed large inside her when he didn't show up yesterday or even last evening at the pub. All night long she'd glanced to the door each time she felt the brisk wind that accompanied its opening. And never had his tall broad figure darkened the doorframe. The regular patrons had even noticed she seemed to be in a somber mood. That had prompted her to paste on a smile and get through it without revealing how she really felt. Like a woman dumped.

Dumped because he couldn't deal with the magic, either hers or his. Didn't matter. He'd gotten the double whammy yesterday. Perhaps she should have been more careful with him, more subtle. It just wasn't in her to be anything but direct. Besides, she'd lived with the magic all her life and knew it wouldn't hurt him. It made sense that he would need time to feel as comfortable with it as she did.

But how much time?

She walked slowly, staring into windows, not seeing anything. At the bookstore she paused. Maybe she needed a bit of fiction to occupy her mind, to take her away from her own life, to keep her from thinking about the obvious. She pushed on the door and went inside.

Mary Royce looked up at the jingling of the bells over the front door. Brianna smiled a hello at the proprietress and headed for the first display she saw, a collection of volumes of Irish history for St. Patrick's Day, just a week away. She picked up *Irish Legends and Folklore* and was soon lost in the pages.

On the edge of her consciousness she was aware of the bells jingling again, but she didn't glance that way. The book had captured her, and for that she was grateful. A moment later, a shadow fell across the page and a large hand took the book from her grasp.

"Irish Legend and Folklore?" Michael held the book in his palm, thumbing through the pages with his other hand. "You mean there's something you don't already know?"

The effect of his voice on Brianna was as soothing as a taste of Irish whiskey. She felt as if sunlight flooded into her soul, chasing away all the dark shadows she'd allowed to grow there in his absence. How could he appear so calm when her insides were churning? "There are plenty of things I don't know."

She'd meant for her response to be saucy, but her voice betrayed her with an uncommon breathiness instead. Heat was rising in her cheeks and her hands were trembling. What was this all about? She had never been shy, for goodness' sakes!

Michael saved her from her own silliness. "I've been looking all over town for you. Can we go somewhere to talk?"

She glanced toward Mary and saw her watching the exchange with interest. The moment Brianna looked at her, the woman found something intensely interesting in the newspaper on her desk. "Sure."

She headed out the door, the bells jangling once again, and started down the sidewalk, Michael beside her. He slipped his hand through the crook of her arm. "How about your place? I'm not eager to have this conversation with all the good listeners around here."

Brianna let him lead her to his car, not even bothering to protest this time. She preferred walking, but his intent was so urgent right now. She sat in the car, silent, using deep breaths to calm herself. It was all right. He was finally with her and he wasn't angry.

They arrived at the little cottage in minutes. Brianna led him inside and poked the fire to bring the flames up. When she straightened and turned, he was staring at her, still wearing his jacket, his hands shoved deep in the pockets of his jeans. She gestured to the little sofa that faced the fire. "Would you like to sit?"

Shrugging out of his jacket, he nodded. "I should have come yesterday, but I had too much to think about."

"It's all right. I understand."

And she truly did. But none of it mattered now. He was here, sitting beside her, the firelight reflecting in the dark blue of his eyes. It was all she could do not to throw herself into his arms and kiss him senseless. No, she had to wait. There were many things to say.

"I called my grandfather," he began. "He confirmed what you told me in the graveyard.

There is magic in my family."

"And how did that make you feel?"

"Well, I guess I was angry at first. Why would they keep this from me? But Granddad explained some of that. It would have been hard for my parents, I guess. The magic skipped them."

"It can do that. Uncle Joseph doesn't have it, but my father did. Their father had it but their mother didn't. I guess it changes, like blue eyes or brown."

Michael nodded. "And it's stronger here than at home. That's why I feel it now."

Brianna had never been further from home than Dublin, but she could understand how the wide Atlantic could make the difference to him. She knew for certain it was stronger in the ruins. Just another reason she didn't want some tacky tourist hotel on top of them. Sacred grounds.

Michael stood up and paced in front of the fire, as if the cottage were too small to hold all the emotions in him. He stopped and leaned an elbow on the mantel. Turning slightly, he looked at her. She could see the debate happening within him by the movement of his eyes. He wanted to say something, ask her something, but he was afraid. As softly as she could, she tried to encourage him with her voice. "What is it, Michael?"

"Could you help me understand it?"

"Of course." Didn't he know she was helpless to deny him anything he asked? If these past few days without him had shown her anything, it was that her life was changed for having known him, even this short time. Maybe he would tear down her ruins. Maybe he

would go back to Boston and never see her again. If that were the case, so be it. She would take whatever he gave her now because not even her magic could hold him here. He had the power to overcome any spell she might cast.

Chapter Eight

If Michael had ever seen anything more beautiful than Brianna in the firelight, he didn't know what it was. How could she always appear so serene when his insides churned just looking at her? Must be some spell she cast to make herself look calm. There were so many things to say to her, he didn't know where to begin. "I'm not saying I believe all this mumbo jumbo yet."

The smile spread easily across her face. "It's all right, Michael. The mumbo jumbo has been there your whole life. It doesn't need you to believe in it."

"That's your standard answer."

"No, I don't have a standard answer. This is the only time I've had to convince someone who has it that it's really there." She patted the seat next to her on the sofa. "Come sit down, Michael. You look as if you're afraid to touch me."

That was almost true. Since the magic was in both of them, a union of the two would most likely increase the power of it. He wasn't sure he was prepared to witness that just now. He sat down anyway. "It isn't that I'm afraid ... it's more that I'm wary of any more surprises."

"There shouldn't be any more surprises. The magic is something you control. Not the other way 'round."

He didn't know what to say. He didn't know what he wanted. The only thing he did know for sure was that this woman had touched him in places that had never felt a touch of any kind. He eased closer to her, ran his hand along the back of the sofa toward her shoulder. "Have you cast some spell on me?"

Her eyes widened. Her hand went to the silver disk on the long chain around her neck. "I have never done magic on you."

He leaned closer, his fingers toying with the fabric of her sleeve. "Yes, you have."

Slowly she shook her head, watching his lips as he came closer.

"Yes," he repeated. Any further protest she might have tried was lost as he pressed his lips to hers. She was pliant beneath his touch, sighing into his mouth as if she too were waiting for days for this kiss to happen again. Perhaps he was not the only one who'd spent restless days and nights since he'd left her for Dublin.

He kissed her softly, not wanting to rush, not sure what would happen next. He drew back and looked at her, at her luminous eyes, at her parted lips as her sweet breath sighed softly from her. With one hand he touched the velvet skin beneath her ear, trailing a light finger down the column of her neck. "This is not magic?"

A shiver ran over her skin. "A different kind."

"And when we made love -- before the fire and at the ruins -- that was a different kind of magic too?"

"Sexual energy is very powerful. Almost the most powerful there is. All magic is influenced by emotion."

He slid his hand behind her neck, beneath the red-gold curls that fell around her shoulders. "So I did not dream it? The sex we had was ..." He dipped his head to kiss her lightly just beside her ear. "... extraordinary?"

She closed her eyes and raised her head, offering him the silken slope of her neck. He moved his lips along the path she provided and stopped at the juncture of her shoulder. "Was it?" he urged.

Her voice whispered on a ragged breath. "Yes."

"Was it the magic or the emotions?"

She never opened her eyes. "It was both."

He moved his lips across her throat, feeling the pulse that leapt in her veins. His own blood heated and rushed to his groin, thickening his cock. Just the thought of taking her beneath him made him almost giddy with desire. He needed her skin against his, her hot wet depths around his shaft. He wanted to make her his for now and forever. He didn't know or care what consequences that would bring. He knew only that *this* woman must be his.

Pulling away from her, he struggled to find some little bit of control to stop him from ripping her clothes away and taking her right there. But somehow he knew this time would be important. This time he knew who and what he was. Whether he liked it or accepted it, the truth lay before them. He could no longer pretend. This time had the potential to seal a fate he'd never expected but could no longer deny.

She opened her eyes and looked up at him, the question in her eyes. He held out his hands to her. "Come. This time, I want to make love to you in a bed."

Without speaking, she stood and slipped her hand into his. He let her lead him into the bedroom that was off to the side of the kitchen. Once away from the fireplace, he felt the chill that seeped into the room from outside. She turned and gave a small motion with her hand, as if beckoning someone to follow her. At once the heat from the fireplace floated into the bedroom and wrapped around them, banishing the chill.

A week ago such an action would have astounded him. Now it seemed perfectly natural. He took a moment to look around the room where she slept. It neither surprised nor disappointed. The bed frame was brass curling intricately into a lovely design. Her coverlet

was white with piles of ruffles and lace, matching the curtains on the two windows. The dresser was white with gold accents. The attached mirror was an oval shape and had accents of brass the same as the bed.

Sunlight streamed through the two windows, casting a golden glow over the entire room. She sat down on the edge of the bed and started to loosen her boots.

"Wait."

She looked up at him, frowning at his command. "Wait?"

"Let me." Kneeling before her, he took one booted foot in his hand and found the zipper that held it on. Slowly he slid the zipper down and pulled the boot off. She wore socks in a thin lacy pattern. He peeled the fabric off and caressed her foot from ankle to arch to peach-painted toes. Then he lifted her other foot and did the same.

That done, he turned his attention to her clothing. She wore a pullover sweater, as soft as cashmere. He lifted the hem and drew it slowly over her head, revealing a lacy bra in a blushing pink color, so pale it almost matched her creamy Irish skin. Then finally, he moved his hands to her jeans. They were low-slung, exposing an edge of flat belly, almost down to her hip bones. He popped the snap and pulled the zipper down. She had to help, wiggling and shifting to get them off her and down her legs.

And then she sat on the edge of the bed wearing only bra and panties, sexy in their simple sweetness. She looked up at him, her hands on either side of her with her fingers running back and forth over the lacy edge of the cover, back and forth, as if she must wait for his next instruction. He liked the leisurely pace of this. The other two times had been urgent. This time, he would explore every corner of her, worship every inch.

He sat beside her on the bed and placed one hand against her cheek. She turned her face into his palm and kissed him there. The delicate touch made him tremble with desire for her. His cock hardened, pressing against his jeans. He took her hand and moved it to the ridge. "Feel what you do to me."

Her hand pressed against his shaft, and then she moved her fingers up the length of it until she found the waistband of his jeans. Slipping her hand inside, she stroked his skin. His blood pounded in his veins, so thick and hot he was surprised they both couldn't hear it. He sucked in a breath and waited while she pulled the button free and slid the zipper down. If she touched his cock, he would come in an instant, so he slid out from under her hands and stood up to remove his jeans and sweater, toeing off his shoes in the process.

Brianna had never seen anything more beautiful than Michael's body. He stood over her completely naked now, looking down as if he wanted nothing more than to sink his throbbing shaft into her and leave it there for the rest of time. She would not complain. She wanted it too, wanted to feel him inside her, stroking her, rubbing his hardness against all the softest parts of her.

She raised a hand and laid it against the hard planes of his chest. His hair was lightly furred, enough softness to lure her fingers there. She stroked him lightly, knowing that she could do nothing but touch him for the rest of her life and be quite happy. He reached a hand down and took her chin in his grasp, tilting her head up to look at him. She saw desire in the dark sapphire of his eyes and wanted to give him all that he needed, all the wildest fantasies that he'd ever imagined. She wanted to be the only woman who ever touched him just this way.

Leaning forward, she pressed her lips against his belly, her hands sliding around to pull him closer to her. Her fingers ran over his muscles, tracing ridges and curves, caressing his skin. She heard him suck in a breath at the tingling sensations. She lowered her head and took the tip of his cock into her mouth, bathing it with her tongue. He put his hands on her shoulders, as if to steady himself.

Winding his fingers into her hair, he uttered a low moan as she slid her lips up and down his swollen shaft. Not without experience, Brianna had never really thought of herself as an expert at oral lovemaking, but with Michael it was so easy. His soft sighs and low moans told her he liked what she did. The tension in his hands guided her. It was as instinctive as drawing a breath. She sucked him, tasting the drops that oozed from the head of his shaft. She loved the fluid, loved knowing she could make that happen to him, loved the feeling that she could pleasure him this way.

Rocking gently on the bed, she increased her rhythm, bringing one hand up to circle the very base of him. As she slid him in and out of her mouth, she gripped his cock, rubbing it at the same pace. His hands dug into her hair, his fingers curling with the unreleased tension. She thrilled at the knowledge that she affected him this deeply. She raised her other hand to fondle his sac, measuring the weight of the heavy orbs in her palm. He ground out an oath and jerked himself away from her.

"Brianna!"

Slowly she let him slide out of her mouth. She looked up and saw that he'd thrown back his head, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. Running her hands up his chest, she sighed. "Not yet?"

"God, Brianna." Trembling with emotion, he sat down next to her on the bed. "I can't believe how intense the feelings are with you. It's as if you've given me some drug that enhances everything."

Turning, she settled herself across his lap, nestling her head against his chest. "It's the magic."

His hands ran over her skin, stroking. "Is it?"

"Of course it is. I have done nothing to you. I've given you no elixir."

He tightened his arms around her. "Don't say you've done nothing. You've set me on fire."

Moving his hands, he found the hook on her bra and released it. The soft lace came easily away from her body. He murmured a soft moan when her breasts were revealed to him. He brought both hands up to caress the mounds. The sensation tugged from her nipples

to her belly and down to her pussy. She clenched to keep from squirming in his lap. His cock rubbed against her hip, long and hard, still dripping moisture from the tip.

She wanted him inside her, pounding her to orgasm, but like him, she wanted it to last. With both hands he massaged her breasts gently in an almost soothing motion. The sensation was pleasant, nearly peaceful. But when he moved his fingers to her nipples, she shivered from the pleasure. Her tips grew hard at his touch. The longer he toyed with her, the more intense the feelings became.

With one hand gripping his bicep, she braced the other behind her on the bed and threw back her head, arching into him. He lowered his head and took one turgid nipple into his mouth. Crying out from the exquisite sensations, she felt the juices flood her pussy. Her walls throbbed from wanting him inside her. She clenched and squirmed, trying to ease the ache within her, and still he teased her to more and more pleasure with his tongue.

"Michael!" Desire wrenched his name from her on a harsh breath. "It's too much!"

Raising his head, he looked at her, his blue eyes dark with desire. "Too much for you?" He shook his head. "Not possible. You're the one who cast this spell."

He wrapped both arms around her and pulled her against his chest. With only a finger, he found the edge of her panties and pulled them from her, all but ripping them away from her body with a powerful stroke. Before she even had time to react, he lifted her from his lap and turned her. Instinctively, she straddled him with her legs, sitting face to face with him in his lap on the edge of her bed.

"Now," he said. "Now I have you naked. Now we'll see how much is too much."

The sensitive skin of her bottom sat on the coarse hair of his thighs. It was an unusual sensation, but she found as she moved ever so slightly back and forth, it was very sexy. She rocked there, feeling his thigh muscles flex beneath her cheeks. Clasping her hands behind his neck, she smiled. Since the first woman lured the first man between her legs, a seductive

smile such as this had held power. Brianna felt it now, coursing through her. Generation to generation, this was a magic that every woman knew, witch or no witch.

With his eyes on her, admiring the curves and dips of her body, she felt more powerful than any spell could ever make her. She leaned forward, letting her breasts brush against the hair on his chest and kissed him. She'd meant to make it light, to show him she was in control of her feelings, but immediately his tongue swept into her mouth, tasting her, teasing her. His hands slipped beneath her hair and traced the curve of her spine down to her bottom.

With a gentle motion he urged her hips forward just a bit, just enough to let her feel the roughness against her ass and the tip of his dick against her pussy. She met his tongue with her own, tasting him, responding to the sensations that assaulted her from every contact point. She inched forward, pushing her wet curls closer to his shaft.

The entry would be slow and sensuous, she promised herself. Every inch of his pulsing cock would go in on an exquisite slow motion slide. Her pussy throbbed in anticipation. She dragged her lips away from his to better gain position. As she shifted, she looked down at him, at the swollen purple head of his shaft. It twitched as she watched, eager to find the walls she offered.

"Yes, baby, now," he murmured, gripping her tightly, pulling her hips closer to his groin, seeking the entrance to her body.

Flexing her knees, she rose up a bit, just enough to let him find her pussy. She felt the tip of his dick on her slick outer folds. She adjusted, letting her pussy slide over him from tip to base. He shuddered in response. She was so wet that her juices leaked from within her tight curls and lubricated his dick. All the better to make the sheathing of him a sleek motion.

The movement put her breasts at his face. He gripped her ass and moved his legs slightly, bringing them closer. They swayed a bit, the nipples directly even with his mouth.

It was a simple movement to take one turgid bud between his lips, sucking her, teasing her with a gentle nip. She felt his teeth scrape her nipple and electricity shot through her from tits to pussy. Her clit tingled, seeking pressure, seeking motion, anything to soothe the raw nerve endings that screamed for attention.

Rolling her head from side to side, she all but writhed in his lap. When he lifted his head, abandoning her breast, she looked into the deep, deep blue of his eyes, so serious most of the time, so dark with passion now. She stared, feeling his cock against her lips. Still staring, she moved as his hands on her hips adjusted her position, pushing her forward to take him in. She still stared as the tip of his cock probed the softness between her legs.

In his eyes, she saw her future. Overcome with emotion, she let her head fall, resting against his broad shoulder. But then he began to move, and emotion gave way to sexual pleasure. She threw back her head and rode him.

Michael felt the slick and silken skin of Brianna's pussy enfold his cock. She was hot and wet, grasping him with her walls as soon as he entered. His fingers dug into her flesh, moving her, lifting her, finding the position to plunge all the way into her channel. Using the strength in his thighs, he lifted her, moved her. Every muscle in his body clenched as he began to thrust into her, planting his feet firmly against the floor to gain leverage.

She rocked against him as he stroked her, rubbing her clit against him. With his rhythm established, he moved his hands up her spine to her back and around to her tits, massaging the perfect mounds as he filled her. She made it easy for him, lifting her ass and letting it fall in time to his thrusts.

Drawing in impassioned breaths, he turned his head and caught their reflection in the mirror above her dresser. He could see the curve of her breasts swaying as he pounded her, the red-gold fall of hair swinging side to side with the motion. And he could watch as she rode his strokes.

"Brianna," he said in a roughened voice. "Look at us."

She lowered her head, looking at him. He gestured with his head toward the mirror. He watched her eyes widen as she gazed at their reflection in the mirror.

His eyes met hers in the mirror. He watched his hands on her tits, moving his thumbs across her pebble-hard tips. When she gasped in response, he saw her eyes lower to look at his hands on her body then move back to look at his hands in the mirror. Back and forth their gazes moved from real to reflection.

The rhythm increased. As badly as he wanted to make it last, he could not hold back. His balls were hot and heavy, tight with the need to spill his seed. He felt it come up from his sac, spurt along the sides of his throbbing dick and spew into her pussy. Waves of orgasm shuddered through him as he pulsed inside her.

Brianna gasped and tensed against him, then moved frantically, banging her swollen clit against him. Her orgasm began with a low moan then rose as the intensity washed through her until at last she screamed while her pussy walls clenched and throbbed around him.

Spent, she collapsed against his chest. He put his arms around her and held her against him, against the hard pounding of his heart.

Chapter Nine

Brianna put a glass of ale down on a table with a plop that startled both her and the man who had ordered it. "Oh, sorry!"

Smiling, she backed away from the table to thread her way through the crowd to the bar. Her mind had not been on her job all night. From the moment she'd left Michael in her bed to come to work she'd wanted to be back there with his eager hands on her body, his seeking lips on her skin, his hardened cock inside her, thrusting and thrusting --

"Brianna!"

"Oh!" Turning around, she saw that she'd forced Liam and his chair to skitter out of her way as she backed up without thinking. "Sorry," she apologized for the second time in a minute.

"Where's your brain tonight, girl?"

There was no disguising the blush in her cheeks. Before she had time to think of any retort, the pub door opened and the star of her imagination walked in. Liam had only to follow her line of sight to have the answer to her question. She tore her gaze from Michael to see Liam grinning at her. This further deepened the red in her cheeks. What did it matter? If

one person in town knew Michael had been at her cottage all day, then every person in town knew it. No use pretending.

She gave him a little wave and continued to the bar to pour a Guinness for him. There was a fair crowd in the pub, so she had little time to spend with him, which was just as well. No need to embarrass herself further by drooling over him at the little table in the back corner of the pub when she could have him back in her bed after closing time. That thought made her pulse hum. She stopped looking at him and paid attention to the glass of stout.

Michael exchanged greetings with the regulars he was coming to know, but his eyes never left Brianna. As on other visits to the pub, he enjoyed watching her move about the room, taking care of everyone. She kept them happy and also kept them in line. Roving hands had no chance to reach her, but she teased and flirted like a schoolgirl with every male patron age eighteen to eighty. And they all loved it.

This evening she wore a black skirt that swirled around her legs mid-calf, showing a length of high-heeled boot beneath. Her white sweater had a touch of beading around the neckline that caught the lighting as she moved. She'd used a pearly clip to hold her thick red curls away from her face while she worked.

She was too beautiful for a place like this. He could take her back to Boston with him and introduce her to the higher social standing his family had earned over the generations. She would glide into that transition as perfectly as if she'd been born to it. He thought about that for a while as he drank his stout with the raucous sounds of men telling tales and throwing darts for background music.

He'd never wanted a wife, never even thought about it. He tested the concept in his mind, moving about an imaginary Boston with Brianna on his arm. The symphony, the museum, the Red Sox and the Old North Church. He would delight in showing her all these

things. But as he watched her drape an arm around an older man's shoulder and lean close to whisper something in his ear that made his smile beam, he knew she wouldn't leave Torin.

She was happy here with her family, her stories and her magic. But maybe ...

He tapped the tabletop with his fingers, thinking. He'd gone back to Mrs. Barlow's after seeing Brianna to the pub. There had been many business details still requiring his attention. The time difference to America made his work days even longer. But there had been a call from his associates in Dublin that could concern Brianna.

When she finally stopped by his table after delivering bowls of stew nearby, he gave her his empty glass for a refill. "What are you doing on St. Patrick's Day?"

She tilted her head, as if deep in thought. "It's a Saturday this year. I'll be ... let's see ... hmm ..." She showed him a teasing grin. " ...right here. Trying my best to keep the glasses full."

He took her wrist. "What if you ask for the night off? Or maybe even a few nights off?" "And why would I do that?"

"To go to Dublin. With me." He rubbed his thumb against her pulse. "I'm invited to the parade and the Lord Mayor's Ball."

Her eyebrows shot up as her smile widened. "And you're going?"

"Of course! It's my first St. Patrick's Day in Ireland. I want to enjoy all the authentic Irish celebrations."

She giggled as her eyes flashed with the laughter. She took her hand from his grasp and patted him gently on the cheek. "Then you'll want to be right here."

Confusion had his eyes narrowing, but he was no stranger to confusion since meeting Brianna. She seemed to thrive on keeping him off balance. And she did a fine job of it. "I'm sure it will be fun here, but this is the Lord Mayor of Dublin. There will be a formal dinner and an orchestra." He turned up the wattage on his smile. "I'm even getting a tux."

"Oh ..." She drew the word out. "A tux. Well, we'll be dressed just like this." She gathered her skirt in her fist. "And we'll be serving stew. We'll have the pipes, the dancing, and the McKinnon Brothers."

Michael couldn't understand. This was a great pub, and he was sure it would be fun, but she had the chance to go with him to the really elite functions in her country's capital. "You don't want to go with me?"

"Take a look around you, Michael." With one arm she swept a grand gesture to embrace the entire pub. "*This* is authentic Ireland."

"I understand, but ..." He watched the smile slowly fading from her face and shook his head. "... you really don't want to go."

"And neither do you. You will see nothing but rich Americans pretending to be Irish. If you want a real St. Patrick's Day celebration, stay here. With us."

Part of him truly did want to stay in Torin to spend the evening at Donohue's. It was fun every night. St. Patrick's Day should be a grand time. But he had other obligations. "I'm sorry; I can't."

A tiny twist in her belly, a swift flash of apprehension, a quick shiver across her skin gave Brianna warning. Something was about to happen that would change things. His eyes were too dark, his grin was gone. She set the tray carefully on the table and pulled out a chair next to him. "Why can't you?"

"I have to go to Dublin. I do business with the people who invited me. It would be rude to turn them down."

"And it wouldn't be rude to turn down the village that has embraced you, shown you your true Irish self?"

His hand on the tabletop curled into a fist. "It's business, Brianna. I need these people. They will help me with my project."

It was good the chair was there for her to fall into because her legs didn't want to hold her now. Somehow she managed to calm the fear that clutched her stomach. She spoke very quietly. "And what project is that, Michael?"

"The hotel. On the land I bought from your uncle."

"You're still going ahead with that?"

"Of course."

She didn't know why this surprised her. It really shouldn't. Deep in the heart of her, she'd thought he would change his mind. Learning about the magic should have made a difference. If he truly were the man she'd thought him to be, it would. She tried to make sense of it. Leaning forward, she placed a hand on his arm. "Does it mean nothing to you?"

He covered her hand with his, stroking it gently, but she could see the conflict in his eyes. "Of course it means something to me, Brianna. I've learned things here with you that I never imagined about myself. But it doesn't change my plans."

She had to look away from him because she didn't want him to see how deeply he affected her. Foolishly, she'd thought she meant something to him, something more than great sex. But she knew the problem didn't lie within her. It was him. Despite the things he'd learned about himself, the things she'd helped him to see along with his grandfather, he still didn't get it. Far from understanding the magic, he didn't even accept that it was part of him. What was left for her to do? She could only lead him so far before he had to take the final leap himself.

It was with great disappointment that she turned back to him. "Go to Dublin, Michael. It's where you should be. I belong here. I draw my strength from this place, and it's here I'll be. On St. Patrick's Day and on every other day."

She got up to return to her work, but at the last second before walking away from him, she bent to kiss him on the cheek. "Go in peace, Michael," she whispered near his ear.

Brianna's Magic

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Go in peace. He felt as if her words were a dismissal. She wanted him gone from her, probably gone from her village too because he didn't belong, didn't fit in, didn't understand what was so almighty sacred about a pile of crumbling rocks.

For a few minutes longer he watched her move about the pub, attending to the patrons. The longer he sat there, the more it saddened him. Finally he got up, took his jacket from the hook near the door and slipped out into the night.

* * * * *

Brianna held Molly's arm as she walked with her great-grandmother in the meadow behind the house where she lived with Joseph. The days were warming and Molly was ready to start thinking about her spring garden.

"The vegetables, of course," Molly said. "And some herbs. What about a new rose bush this year? We don't have a delicate pink one."

"Mmm hmm," Brianna answered automatically, not even sure what Molly had said. Her thoughts were far from this patch of green.

"Brianna!"

Startled, she gripped Molly's arm tightly. "What? Did you trip?"

The older woman looked up at her, her blue eyes bright in the morning sun. "No, darlin', but it seems you did." Molly walked again, pulling Brianna along toward a smooth section of stone fence. "Let's sit and contemplate."

The sun had heated the stones to a comfortable warmth. Molly pulled her cloak around her and used it as a cushion. Brianna sat beside her, looking back across the grass toward the back of the house. "Where's your American this morning?" Molly asked.

"Dublin."

"What's he doing there?"

"Business."

Molly reached for Brianna's chin and turned her face toward hers. "Have words suddenly become dear for you? Can you not give me more than one at a time?"

Brianna felt the blood rush into her cheeks. Since Michael walked out the door of Donohue's last night, she'd felt as if she were in the bottom of a well, not really caring whether someone threw her a rope. "I'm sorry, Molly. I'm just trying to work something out in my mind. Michael is ..." She cast about in her mind for words to describe how she felt but came up lacking. "I guess I thought he would change his mind about the land, but he hasn't. I thought it would matter to him when he understood the magic."

Molly patted Brianna's cheek, then let her hands rest on the folds of her cloak. "So he knows now that he possesses the gift, but it matters not to him. Or is he afraid?"

"I wouldn't think much frightens him, but he did take off for Dublin pretty quickly."

"Didn't you say he had business there?"

"That's what he said."

"And you don't believe him?"

Her emotions were in such turmoil, she didn't know what she believed any more. "Maybe he's running away from the magic." She did not even realize she'd thought that until she'd said it in soft, whispering tones.

She looked at Molly, who sat silently, her eyes moving over the green swatch by the house, beyond that to the hills that led up to the small cottage where Brianna lived, and on to the ruins. Finally, she met Brianna's eyes. "You were born on a warm summer day. The sun was golden all across the meadow." She swept her arm in a broad stroke. "Flowers all around. Connor was so proud of you. And Glynis ... she sat in a spot very near this and held you, looking at you, just looking at you. How tiny you were. How lovely."

She turned and touched a red-gold curl on Brianna's shoulder. "Your hair was just this fiery even on the day you were born. We all marveled over it."

In the silence that spun out after Molly's words, Brianna waited, wrapped in a spell cast only by memories. "Connor was my favorite, you know," Molly said at last. "I know you're not supposed to favor one grandchild over the other, but he was my heart. He came to me a day or so after your birth and asked my guidance. He had never told Glynis about the magic, but the chances were good that you'd have it. He asked me to sit with him while he told her, to help her understand."

Brianna swallowed past the lump in her throat. Tears stung her eyes. In all her life, these details had never been given to her. She'd never asked for them because it had not been important to her. Now it was. "She was afraid of the magic, and she ran away," Brianna said. "She didn't want to be the mother to a witch."

Molly let the tendril of Brianna's hair fall against her jacket. She looked back toward the hills again, toward the ruins that shielded the cliffs from view. "That we will never know. One thing that's certain is she left, Connor went for her, and they both fell to the edge of the sea."

She turned back, locking her gaze on that of her great-granddaughter. "And one other thing we know for certain is that she loved you. She sat and sang to you and cuddled you as close to her heart as she could get you. Even after Connor told her."

Molly rose and started walking back toward the house. "These old bones need the fireplace, I'm afraid."

More confused than before, Brianna walked alongside her great-grandmother across the grass and to the house. "Maybe she just wanted to get away for a bit to think about it."

At the door, Molly turned, raised her eyes to Brianna's. "Maybe he did."

Maybe he did. It didn't take a huge leap of logic to know that Molly told her the story so she could apply it to Michael. She helped the older lady into the back door, but stayed outside herself. She needed the sun, the near-spring breeze. She needed the ruins around her. And she needed the cliffs.

Chapter Ten

Michael sat at the small café and waited for his engineer to show up. The man had called early that morning and said it was important they meet as soon as possible. Michael had juggled the architects and the lawyers to make room for this meeting. Now he sipped a cup of tepid coffee and waited, something he did neither happily nor well.

He looked out the window to Grafton Street and idly watched the people going by. Every woman with red hair startled him, as if he expected to see Brianna there. Attempting to shake her from his thoughts, he flipped open his cell phone. He scrolled through the names looking for his brother, but he was interrupted by the arrival of the engineer.

Douglas Quinn was not tall, but his presence was commanding. He was widely known for the excellence of his work. As soon as he sat down at the table with Michael, he asked the waiter for coffee and a bowl of soup. Then he unrolled a large site map on the table.

"Here and here ..." Douglas set the salt and pepper shakers on the map to anchor the curling ends. "... the erosion is too great. You can't build this close to the edge."

Michael bent his head over the map and studied the lines Douglas drew lightly with a pencil. "Show me where we can put the hotel, then."

Douglas shook his head. "Not on this piece of land."

"What do you mean?"

"There isn't a parcel large enough for what you want. It's too close to the coast."

"But I want it close to the coast. I want the rooms to overlook the sea."

"I understand, but you don't want them falling into it, which they will if we build that much on that strip of land."

Michael looked up into the steady gaze of his associate. "You're saying I can't build on this land?"

Douglas shook his head again. "Not saying you can't build. Just saying you can't build a large hotel. Here or here ..." He sketched quickly with the pencil, farther back from the coastline. "You could build a nice structure, but not the size you indicated when we talked. A home for yourself maybe. You'd be able to see the ocean from the second floor, you just wouldn't be right on the edge of it."

Michael's fingers curled around the edge of the paper. "I've never been this wrong before. My instincts are always right on the mark."

"Well, you're still on the mark. It's a beautiful piece of land. Just not suited for a large hotel."

"But that's why I bought it."

The waiter arrived with Douglas's meal. He rolled up the map and slid it back into its carrying tube. "Then build a house on it, like I said. It's a great piece of land for that, and you'd have a place to stay when you come back. You are coming back often, aren't you?"

Why? If he couldn't have the project he'd envisioned, would he ever come back? Brianna had all but dismissed him. Would she want him, even once she learned he wasn't tearing down her precious ruins? And if that were the only reason she wanted him, would he want her? Too many things to work out. He finished the meal with Douglas, but only part of his mind was on business. Most of it was in Torin.

He let it eat on him all that day. Late at night, he stood on the balcony of his hotel suite, watching the people moving up and down Grafton Street into the pubs, the coffee shops and the stores. Music drifted up to him. And laughter.

How had his instincts been so wrong? The feeling that had swept him when he'd first spied that land had been overwhelming. If it weren't suited for his plan, what was it he'd seen? He should just forget about it. He could forfeit the deposit and back out of the deal. It wasn't so much money that it would break him. It was a nice little windfall for Joseph for doing absolutely nothing. He could go back to Boston, find some other deal to make up the loss and never look back.

Except he couldn't do that.

He had unfinished business in Torin. The land and the lady.

Too miserable to enjoy the sights and sounds of the night, he abandoned the balcony and went back into the suite, stomping restlessly around the fine furniture. He hated feeling so out of control. This never happened to him. He always knew what he wanted and how to get it. Now to face the fact that he'd made a wrong choice and couldn't have the building he planned grated on every nerve. The festive sounds of the people below further agitated him, almost as if they were mocking him.

Pausing in his relentless pacing, he glared in the direction of the balcony. The gaiety of the music, the squeals of delight, and the raucous laughter of people having fun were more than he could stand. It reminded him of Donohue's pub and the fun everyone enjoyed there. It reminded him of Brianna. His hands curled into fists as he muttered a curse beneath his breath.

The balcony door slammed shut.

Startled, Michael stared at the door, frozen to the spot where he stood in the sudden silence. How did that happen? There had been no strong wind tonight, only a gentle breeze that barely ruffled his hair when he stood looking down at the street. *How did that happen?*

But he knew. As sure as he knew that Irish blood pumped within him, he knew what had slammed that door.

The magic.

In defiance, he rushed to the door, pushed it open, stormed out onto the balcony. The sounds assaulted him again, loud and cheerful sounds from people having a good time. But there was no wind.

He stood that way for a long time, his hands gripping the balcony rail, the sounds from below swirling around him. An odd yet familiar sense of energy roiled within him, hummed beneath his skin and gathered into one spot. He lifted one hand, palm up. Even though he could see that his hand was empty, he felt as if he held an object. About the size of a golf ball, perhaps, the object vibrated with life. He drew back his hand and flung the invisible orb from him. There was a minor explosion and shower of sparks against the wall of the adjacent building, as if fireworks had gone off in that very spot.

He could deny it with words for the rest of his life. He could tell Brianna over and over that he didn't believe it. The truth was in him.

It was the magic that had drawn him to the land. The same magic that he'd worked to deny his entire life. Here in the place where it lived and grew, the magic would not be held back. Did he even have control of his own life now?

Of course he did! The magic may be luring him to Torin, but he was staying right here in Dublin, just like he'd planned. He was going to the parade tomorrow morning. He'd sit in the review stand with the local politicians and business associates who wanted his American dollars invested in their country. And he'd find a way to salvage his investment in the piece of land that would not stand up to his project.

But by the next afternoon, doubt was creeping in. He stood in the suite putting the pieces of his tuxedo together for the cocktail party preceding the Lord Mayor's Ball. Brianna

had been absolutely right about the parade. There were more Americans marching down the streets of Dublin than there were Irishmen. And while he'd had the chance to spend time with his business associates, nothing transpired in the reviewing stand that wouldn't have been just as effective by e-mail or cell phone.

The Irish coffee had warmed him against the morning chill. The VIPs had been friendly. The engineer's report had not changed. Picking up his watch, he saw that it was after five. The party had already started. He had to stop sulking and get going.

When he arrived at the ballroom in a grand hotel downtown, he looked about for people he recognized. There were many. In addition to the locals he'd met since he'd been in Ireland, there were a few people he knew from Boston. Oddly, he didn't want to talk to any of them. He accepted a glass of Jameson from the bartender and stood in a corner, watching the crowd. A small band played an Irish tune, largely ignored by the group. Michael took a sip of the whiskey. It was smooth, and he enjoyed it, but he'd rather have a pint of stout. He thought about Donohue's. The regulars would be gathering now. Brianna would be there already, flitting about from table to table, keeping them all happy.

If he closed his eyes, he could picture the tiny place, aglow with light and warm from the fireplace. He could hear the sounds of laughter, clinking glasses, the solid thunk of darts hitting the board.

Opening his eyes, he looked around. People stood in small groups speaking quietly. Every now and then, a burst of polite laughter would rise above the chatter, but that was all. In the time it took him to drain the whiskey and set the glass on the bar, he made his decision. With any luck, he could make the last train to Killarney tonight.

Time slipped by too quickly as he sat in the back of the cab, urging the driver to go faster. He kept glancing at his watch, but there was no way to make time stand still. If only something would delay the train, he thought. Some minor mechanical problem that would keep it from leaving on time but be fixed quickly enough to get him to Killarney where he'd left his car.

He leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes. He thought about Brianna, about how desperately he wanted to see her, to make things right with her. He needed to get there tonight, to share St. Patrick's Day with her and the people she loved in her own village where everything that mattered to her was nearby, including her ruins and the magic of her past.

When they approached the train station, he pulled euros from his pocket and all but flung them at the driver as he hopped out of the cab and ran to the ticket booth. For the first time in what seemed like ages, he had good news. The train was late. If he hurried, he could make it.

Finally, he sank into a seat next to a window and breathed a deep sigh. Only seconds passed before he felt the slow rumbling as the train started to roll away from the station. Gradually the speed increased until the lights of Dublin sped past his window and gave way to countryside. With one hand he tugged at the knot in his tie, loosening it until the ends hung against his shirt. Slowly, not even certain what would happen next, he smiled.

This was a three-hour trip at best. He pulled a small notepad and a pen from his breast pocket and started sketching. By the time he got to Killarney, he knew what he would do.

His rental car sat waiting for him at the car park. He still had about an hour's drive from the station to Torin over narrow roads to the edge of the cliffs. If he could make the little car fly, he'd happily climb into the sky with it. Anything to get closer to Brianna. The mist rose in heavy patches along the route, making visibility almost impossible at some points, but he pressed on, straining to see the gravel-edged pavement.

Finally, he rounded the last turn into the forest that formed the northern edge of Torin. He shot through the dense trees, his moonlight guide lost now. The car's headlights picked out the path in the misty darkness. At last, he emerged from the woods and into the town. The coast was directly ahead with the ruins of Torin's castle rising from the earth like ancient sentinels, guarding the past. He turned away from the ruins and onto Torin's main street, following the road until he came to the end of the block and Donohue's Pub.

At the door, he paused for a moment, drawing a breath, intoning some words of thanks, to whom or what, he did not know. Chants and spells came to him now as if he'd known them his entire life, and he supposed he had. Brianna could explain it to him. Later. Now, he wanted nothing more than to sweep her into his arms and hold her as if time stood still for them.

The moment he opened the door, a warm sense of homecoming washed over him. The gaiety that he'd pictured earlier was indeed in full bloom. The pub was more crowded tonight than he'd ever seen it. There stood Liam at the bar, bawdy laughter rolling from him. Daniel crouched on a table top, bent low in the telling of some tale that had a dozen or more gathered round him. A group stood by the dartboards, engaged in some rowdy argument over scores.

He smelled sausages and stew and the scent of daffodils that were scattered in bunches here and there about the room. At the far end, a makeshift stage had been set up out of wooden crates and planks. Instruments stood at the ready. Even as he looked about, the band took the stage, picking up guitar and fiddle. These must be the McKinnon Brothers Brianna had mentioned before he went to Dublin.

There were no empty seats to be had in the pub. Michael wove a path through the crowd to a corner away from the bar. Propping himself against the wall, he glanced back and forth, his gaze seeking the only one he wanted to see tonight. But she wasn't there. The music began, a jig that he vaguely recognized. Two of the local young women, laughing as they went, mounted the stage and began the Irish step dance with the music.

The door behind the bar opened, and Brianna burst through, a huge tray held over her head. She wore a black skirt that he recognized and a curve-hugging sweater in an emerald hue. The dancing girls on the stage called to her, but she shook her head. Liam and Daniel approached her. Liam took the tray out of her hands while Daniel pushed her toward the stage. One of the girls reached a hand down and pulled her up.

Laughing, she threw back her head, her red curls swinging side to side, and joined in the step with them. Michael watched her, mesmerized, as her feet moved light and quick to the music. Now the three of them moved as one, heels clicking, hands joined above them, skirts bouncing around their legs. The joy they displayed in the dance was infectious, making him smile. Some of the people in the crowd clapped in time to the music. Michael knew he'd made the right choice. Not one person at the Lord Mayor's Ball was having this much fun.

Chapter Eleven

Brianna turned left then right, touching the hands of the other two women as they kicked their feet the way they'd learned when they were children. The music was lively, the crowd festive as they clapped. The fiddler increased the rhythm, but the women kept up, growing breathless and laughing each time one of them took a wrong step.

Faster and faster they clicked their heels. Brianna had always loved the dance, but tonight there was a vein of sorrow trembling beneath her joy, a sorrow borne of missing Michael and the unknown ending to their story. Twirling in synch with the other two women, she let her gaze sweep the room with each spin. Suddenly, her heartbeat skipped as a fist of adrenaline squeezed her stomach. She managed not to trip off the stage, but she twisted her head for a better look at the far corner.

There he was.

Now her feet went through the steps automatically as she savored the sight. He stood in the most distant corner of the pub, leaning against the wall as casually as if he belonged there. He wore a tuxedo. Holy saints above, she'd never seen a more beautiful man. He'd pulled the black tie loose, the ends dangling against the stark white shirt. The top button was undone, showing her the strong column of his neck. His arms were folded across his chest, one ankle crossed over the other.

He knew the second that she spotted him. That devilish grin she'd grown so to love broke slowly across his face. He nodded briefly, just briefly, toward her. Brianna had no earthly idea how she managed to finish the dance. Her insides were jelly. It was a miracle she could remain upright, let alone execute the complicated steps without tripping over Maggie and Brigid beside her. But suddenly the music ended. The rowdy crowd cheered and clapped. Then hands were reaching up for her. Liam or Daniel -- she couldn't tell who in the excitement and bustle of the festive crowd -- handed her down from the stage along with the other two women.

It was all she could do not to run toward him. Everyone wanted to touch her, chat with her, shake her hand, congratulate her on the dance. She made her way through the throng, trying to get to that far corner where she'd seen him. In the mob now, she lost sight of him, but she knew he was still over there. She could feel his presence.

It took longer than she wanted it to take. Threading her way between chairs and tables, she stopped too many times to receive a kiss or a hug from both men and women, all of whom she'd known since she was a baby. It was, after all, St. Patrick's Day. She couldn't be rude, no matter how desperately she wanted Michael's arms around her, Michael's lips on hers, Michael's heart beating against her ear.

Then finally, she found herself at the last table, beside the last chair, receiving the last hug. And there he was. Still standing precisely where she'd spotted him from the stage. Her skirt caught on a chair; she tugged it free, never taking her eyes from him. And in his expression, she saw the truth. He had come for her. Now.

She stepped up to him, lifted her head to look into his eyes, so close she could feel his breath against her cheek. The McKinnon Brothers started up another tune, as lively as the last. Before she'd had time to speak a word or touch a finger to his cheek, arms came around her waist and pulled her into a jig.

Glancing up, she saw it was her uncle Joseph who had lured her to the music this time. There was nothing to do but go along with it. She danced along beside him, but she turned back to see Michael watching her, clapping to the music, smiling. The rhythm sped up. She managed to steer Uncle Joseph in the general direction of Aunt Libby, leaving her right hand free to snag Michael as they passed him.

"Come on, Gallagher!" Joseph called. "Show us you haven't forgotten your Irish blood!"

Michael had no choice. The smaller piece of the crowd in the back corner was watching, laughing, clapping in time to the music. Brianna did her best to lead him. At first he stumbled with the unfamiliar steps, but he kept the grin on his face and kept trying. After a moment, though, he led Brianna away from the dance floor, seeking an out of the way place near the door.

Capturing her against the wall, he leaned over to whisper in her ear. "Let's get out of here. I need to be alone with you."

His words were an electric current running over her skin. She wanted to be alone with him just as badly. It was all she'd thought about since the last moment she'd seen him. But not now. She nodded. "As soon as the party's over."

He put one hand at her waist, the other above her head on the wall, trapping her. "Now, Brianna."

"Michael, I can't. I'm working. It's very busy tonight and --"

With a flick of his wrist, her cape sailed from its hook near the door to his hand. "Now," he repeated.

Her eyes grew wide and round. Quickly she looked around to see whether anyone had noticed the cape flying to Michael with his magic. No one even glanced in their direction. They were all having too much fun of their own.

Already he'd learned that much about the magic? He could control it enough to summon objects? Brianna had taken months to master that small feat. This was exciting news. And very important. She could not refuse him.

Glancing at her watch, she saw that the midnight hour was approaching. Very soon the pace would be winding down as Donohue signaled last call. St. Pat's or not, the pub would close on time. She could ask Aunt Libby to step in and help finish her shift. She looked back up at him, at the deep blue eyes, so serious now. He waited patiently, quietly. Of course he did. He knew what her answer would be.

After wrapping her cape around her shoulders, he led her from the pub, stopping only long enough for her to whisper in Aunt Libby's ear. She nodded her agreement and hugged Brianna tightly, then sent them out into the night.

Tucked into his car, she finally turned to him and spoke. "Where are we going?"

"I can't decide," he said, glancing behind them to back the car out of the spot. "Your cottage or the ruins."

"Why would we go to the ruins?"

"Because it seems the proper place to say what I have to say to you. But I'm afraid we might be too cold."

The ruins. Brianna didn't know what he had on his mind, but the fact that he wanted to go to the ruins was a very good sign. She could allay his worries. "Go to the ruins," she told him. "I can take care of the cold."

He could, too, but he might not know that yet. "How did you learn to use the magic?"

Steering the little car through the night, he glanced over at her very briefly. "I don't know that I did. I think the magic just kind of took over."

"Because you let it."

He nodded. "I guess there was a moment when I realized I couldn't fight it. The magic is there whether I understand it or not. Might as well use it."

"Or it uses you."

He steered the car over the bumpy ground approaching the ruins. When he had driven as far as he thought it safe, he stopped the car. "I think I'm going to need a lot of guidance."

Brianna smiled. "I think I can help."

They got out and walked up the hilly path to the ruins. The earlier mist had cleared, leaving a crisp night. The stars overhead were brilliant, but the moon was in its waning phase. Only a tiny sliver of crescent remained. Walking beside Michael to the grounds she held sacred, Brianna murmured a chant that would keep them safe from intruders, the same chant she had used the night Michael had walked through to find her on the crumbling stairs.

He didn't speak, and she didn't push him. She knew that much had gone on within him these past few weeks. If he needed silence now, she could easily give that to him. When he reached for her hand, she slid into his grasp, content with the tactile connection. Once inside the remaining walls, she led him to the left, away from the staircase where she usually sat. Instead, she approached the stones that had been the hearth in the great hall.

With a flick of her wrist and a whispered charm, flames leapt into the ancient fireplace. Enough of the chimney remained to contain the fire and shelter the heat they needed on this night that was not yet spring. Brianna knelt before the hearth and pulled Michael to sit beside her. Now she could see him better with the light from the fire illuminating his face. He looked tired, as if he'd just finished a long journey.

And she knew he had. The distance from Dublin to Torin was nothing compared to the distance a man covered when he came to terms with his life. She spread her cloak on the hearthstone and sat, waiting for him to tell her what he had worked out in his mind.

He stared into the fire for a few minutes, then he turned to face her. "I was trying to think of the best way to say this, but I think I'll just show you." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a small notebook. He opened it, smoothing down the page he wanted to see, then handed it to her.

Brianna tipped the page toward the fire to better see the drawing. She wasn't sure what she looked at. A building, perhaps. But not his hotel. It didn't seem large enough. She looked up at him, the question ready on her lips.

He bent over the page and used his finger to point out the details. "Here along the edge is the coastline. The ruins are here and here." He indicated the deteriorating walls, even the one that was in front of them right now.

She looked from the paper to the stones and back to the paper. "What's this?" She indicated a large rectangle he'd sketched away from the edge of the cliffs.

"That's the house."

A tiny flicker of hope sprang to life within her. She dared not speak her thoughts aloud just yet. She sat back, letting the little flame grow. "The house?" she asked, urging him.

"Yes, the house I'm going to build for you."

The notebook fluttered to the hearth. "Michael ..."

"Wait." He put his finger to her lips. "First let me be completely honest. The engineer told me the land here wouldn't hold a structure the size of a hotel. And I was really angry at first, but then I knew ..." He put his hands on her arms, holding her, looking at her while he talked. "For the first time in my life, I knew that things were going to unfold as they were meant to be."

The crystals. *He's the one*. The fire inside her grew to a comforting warmth, touching all the empty corners within her soul. "I knew it," she said on a whisper. "I knew the fates wouldn't give me a man who would tear down my ruins, even if it took practical logic to show you."

His fingers moved lightly on the sleeves of her sweater, sending little tremors across her skin. "Once I finally acknowledged the magic," he said, "Everything else fell into place. The land, the ruins, you."

"Me?"

"Especially you." He let his hands slide down the length of her arms to capture her fingers in both his hands. "It was the magic that pulled me here, that wanted me to be here, but not for the land. It was for you."

"The crystals are never wrong."

"Okay, I don't know what that means, but you can tell me later. Now ..." He bent low, his lips just barely brushing hers. "Now I have to ask you to please do me the honor of being my wife."

"Michael ..." She was barely capable of speech. Her heart was so full it threatened to overtake her body. Placing her hands on either side of his face, she looked into his eyes, so dark and serious now. "You don't have to ask me. It was decided for us generations ago. We were only waiting for you to find me."

He picked up the notebook and turned the page. "Let me show you the rest. I've drawn gardens for Molly, a wing for you to do your work on the old stories --"

"Later." With a quick flick of her wrist, the notebook hit the stone hearth. "You can show that to me later."

Wrapping her hands around the lapels of the tuxedo jacket, she pulled him to her, pulled him into a kiss that captured all the emotion swirling through both of them. In seconds, they were stretched out before the fire on the stone hearth, sealing the promise of their hearts with their bodies.

The remaining wispy tendrils of all the souls who had lived and died in that castle, generation after generation, offered them protection and peace on the dark night of that St. Patrick's Day. And every day after for the rest of their lives.



Delia Carnell

Delia Carnell has been making up stories since she was old enough to hold a Barbie in one hand and a Ken in the other. While on the journey to novelist, her employers have included a community college, a computer leasing agent, an upscale department store, a meat packing plant, a CPA firm and a food distributor. Her positions ranged from entry level customer service agent to CEO.

An avid reader, she first began writing when she didn't like the ending of a book she read and set out to create one she thought better suited the story. She believes the first step in writing a book is to choose the music that underscores the setting and theme. It could be anything from Mozart to Aerosmith to Celtic Harp, as long as it fits the mood.

Delia lives in Florida in the middle position of a three-generation household. Having never outgrown fairy tales and magic, she holds a well-worn Annual Pass to a nearby castle and its surrounding worlds. Her interests include cross stitch, movies, travel and football.