

The cover art features a woman in a black corset and yellow skirt standing next to a large mushroom in a grassy field. The entire scene is framed by a border of green shamrocks. At the top, there is a purple starburst graphic.

Midnight Showcase

Erotic-aah Digest ISSN 1555-5496 Vol. 37-01EDR

Irish Intimacies & Ironies-2

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MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE
Erotic-aah Digest
Vol. 37-01EDR

IRISH INTIMACIES
AND IRONIES 2

MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE
www.midnightshowcase.com

Published by
MIDNIGHT SHOWCASE
P.O. Box 300491
Houston, TX 77230

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ISSN 1555-5496 Vol. 37-01EDR

Credits

Editors: Marguerite Turnley & Jane Carver
Copy Editors: Jewel Adams & Mae Powers
Cover Layout Artist: Mae Powers

Printed in the United States of America

IRISH INTIMACIES AND IRONIES

Everyone loves St. Patrick's Day, luck of the Irish, fairies and Celtic allures. Yet, what would happen if that Irish luck rubbed your desires the wrong way, or those fairies didn't give you wishes of happiness, or the allure of the Celtic mystery was not what it seemed to be? How would you right an enchanted misdemeanor?

***Kissing the Barney Stone* by Megan Hussey**

Margaret's guardian fairy accidentally conjures handsome Irishman Barney Stone. Can love be borne from a misbegotten spell?

***The Cunning Thief* by Tysche Dwai**

Clever Jack loves the squire's daughter – but can a poor man gain her hand? With luck, libido, and larceny, Jack proves love prevails...given enough wit.

***The Mists of Connemara* by Isabelle Kane and Audrey Tremaine**

Briana has seemingly lost all. Will Briana dare to follow her heart and her true love to *Tir na nOg*, beyond the mists of Connemara?

***An Irish Bedtime Tale* by Mae Powers**

King Lachlan wants a bride who can tell him a special kind of story. Finding the right one amongst so many princesses is the problem.

Kissing the Barney Stone

by Megan Hussey

Margaret's guardian fairy is powerful, beneficent, and—well—hard of hearing. So when the homesick Irishwoman wishes to kiss the Blarney Stone, her fairy instead brings her Barney Stone; a handsome Irishman ready to romance her. As their relationship progresses, what begins as a misbegotten spell becomes true love.

<http://goldenmuse.tripod.com/id1.html>

Kissing The Barney Stone

By

Megan Hussey

Chapter One

Margaret O'Connor's dreams of the Emerald Isle were radiant and unchanging. Night after night, her mind carried her over crystalline waterfalls and through vast, rich meadows, across gardens embroidered with gold and lavender floras, laced with lush greenery, and over cliffs that stood nobly above the bountiful Atlantic.

She never tired of these nocturnal images, she only wished she could run barefoot through the green grass of Beaufort, or pick a floral keepsake from the Rowallane Garden.

Most importantly, she wanted to kiss the cheek of the hearty, smiling Irish grandma who raised her in this enchanted land.

Instead, Margaret woke each morning in a cramped apartment, then left for an equally stifling office where the only nod to Irish culture was an annual St. Patrick's Day celebration. This questionable festivity usually involved the telling of lame jokes and the mass consumption of turf-colored beer.

"Which makes it basically no different than any other office party at that place," Margaret sniffed as she uttered sarcastically. "Except, of course, for the rather eerie hue of the beer. And when the priest, rabbi and giraffe walk into the hypothetical bar, they're accompanied by a leprechaun."

What was worse, on the rare occasion she was able to speak with her grandmother *no, the fact those blasted phone bills were greenish in color didn't help a blimey bit*, the news wasn't all good. Like this morning when she was awakened from Irish dreams by the shrill ring of her telephone, she knew something was amiss. And she knew that "a miss" was at the center of it all; more specifically, an Irish miss about the size and character of Margaret's bank account, which right now felt miniscule and chronically troublesome.

"Good morning, Granny," she said into the phone, bracing herself

for the inevitable.

“Margaret,” Clara O’Connor’s voice took the form of a sharp, clipped Irish brogue, a tone quite charming when she wasn’t royally peeved. “Call off your fairy!”

The request, which would sound totally preposterous to most people, was almost commonplace to Margaret. That was just the kind of life Margaret led.

Frightening, really, reflected the 28-year-old, then said aloud, “Granny, let me talk to Mairead.”

Soon her ears were filled with yet another Irish brogue – this one shrill and clear.

“Margaret, I did as she asked – truly I did. She...”

“She made my car disappear, Margaret.” Although Clara no longer occupied the phone line, her voice resounded loudly from the background.

Never any problem hearin’ Granny, thought Margaret.

Or Mairead, for that matter, who now wailed plaintively into a defenseless telephone receiver. “She told me she wanted her Cadillac to disappear,” she said. “She did! She did indeed!”

Margaret only rolled her eyes, and awaited the unfortunate punch-line.

“Granny?” she asked with a heavy sigh. “What did you really ask of Mairead?”

“Margaret,” Clara said. “I asked the fairy to make my cataract disappear.”

Shutting her eyes tight, Margaret exhaled sharply before answering.

“Mairead, you are a great and magical fairy, a Celtic deity and descendant of the Tuatha De Danaan. You are a woman of the sidhe, a bearer of incredible mystical powers.” She paused, taking a deep breath. “All of which makes you really old!” she finished bluntly. “You need a friggin’ hearing aid.”

“How dare you, you impertinent girl!” Mairead roared, more accurately, yelped as boldly as her falsetto tones would allow. “You will not speak to a daughter of Brigid, highest of the fairy queens, in that manner.”

Margaret chuckled in spite of herself as she heard an indelicate snort pass the maternal lips of her grandmum.

“Mairead, I know Brigid,” grandmum told the fuming fairy. “Brigid is a friend of mine. And you, my dear, are no...”

“That joke gets no funnier each time you tell it,” Mairead snapped.

“Ok! Ok!” Margaret interrupted, herself wishing to conjure a referee’s whist and a good set of earplugs. “It’s time for you two to hug and make up. That is, Mairead, after you produce Granny’s Cadillac. Come on, Celtic Chicksta, cough it up.”

“Not this time, Margaret.” Both Margaret and Mairead fell silent as Clara issued this sharply spoken declaration.

“Margaret,” Clara continued, tone sharp and measured. “Mairead is your fairy, she was given to you as a good luck charm on your fifth birthday.”

“I know, Grandmum,” Margaret replied, adding silently, *Darn that Aunt Marian; a lovely woman, but why couldn’t she give me something more quiet and stereotypically Irish, like a shamrock? Or an easy listening tape with the sounds of a Celtic harp playing subtly in the background?*

She listened closely as Clara continued. “I’ve housed and cared for Mairead since you moved to Florida,” she reminded her. “And now I shall send her to you.”

Margaret jumped as her ears filled with a loud, shrill wail of assent from the fairy in question.

“Indeed!” Mairead exclaimed. “I will live in the States with my Margaret, the woman for whom I was named. The woman whose wishes I was born to grant, the sister of my soul!”

Margaret sighed, and she smiled softly in spite of herself. Mairead’s words were true enough. The fairy’s name was a classic Irish variation of her own moniker; and gentle Aunt Marian intended the fairy as her lifetime guardian and friend.

“Grandmum,” she said finally. “Send my fairy to me.”

Chapter Two

Barnabas Stone's dreams were anything but pure. Inside his mind, he visited a place unlike those normally visited by quiet Irish herdsmen. His wayward, subconscious thoughts led him to a forbidden city where people danced, drank fine spirits, and pursued sweet, sinful pleasures of the flesh. In sharp contrast to the misty skies that oversaw his native Dunquin, this place held eternal sunshine in the setting of clear azure skies. Though nothing compared to the noble cliffs and emerald waters of his beloved Eire, he still coveted the place of his dreams, a land of swaying palms and sheer, unadulterated heat.

In his dreams Barnabas came often to this place, exchanging his heavy woolen work-clothes for a sleek white satin Speedo. He saw himself walking slowly onto a luxurious beach, basking in the heat of the noonday sun and cherishing the freedom of endless summer.

Yet despite the soaring gulls overhead and the bronzed sands before him, he still lacked the final element needed to make his fantasy complete. The beauty he saw in several of his dreams before. Would she join him this time?

Ah, but here she comes. The woman's skin was a pure Irish ivory; her eyes as blue as his own. Her strides were long and graceful as she walked, and her imposing height proved a compelling counterpoint to the delicacy of her hands and feet.

Neither slender nor obese, her luscious form fell beautifully in between, and she carried her rubenesque stature as if she were an Irish goddess. Her thick cherry red lips and charmingly uneven teeth, only emphasized the wondrous seductive smile she bestowed upon him. Unlike many of her sister beachcombers, whose skimpy bikinis left nothing to the imagination, she walked the beach today in a loose fitting ivory caftan that fell gracefully to her feet.

Feet that now strode languidly through golden sands, cutting a defined path in his direction.

Drawing in a sharp breath, Barnabas breathed in the sight of this

mystery woman, one who, in a matter of moments, would be a mystery no more. She glided into his open embrace. He gathered her lovingly into his arms, taking her into an intimate, all-encompassing loving hold. He thrilled as she ran her delicate hands across his muscled, well-oiled chest, and sighed as she rested her head on his shoulder.

Barnabas slid his hand down into the low backline of her caftan to stroke her back, rubbing and kneading her sensitive skin. He joined his lips to hers, kissing her with intense passion and plundering her delicate mouth with his tongue.

Deepening his kisses, he lowered with her slowly to the warm golden sands beneath them, and covered her body partially with his. The sands were not hot in their world, but like a golden cushion of comfort that only added to the sensations of their heated touches.

Wanting her with a desperate hunger, he teased her with feather light stroking motions. His touch became both firm and nurturing, molding her luscious body against his own. He reveled in her sighs as she gave herself over to his tender attentions.

"Relax," he whispered, stimulated even further by the way she looked at him through passion-narrowed eyes. "Let me take care of you."

He then covered her body with his, thrilling at the way their bodies meet and meld, joining in a full-body caress; a caress that deepens further as they embraced and bask in the warmth of a passing sea breeze.

"Make love to me," she whispered, and his body immediately responded, his cock straining rebelliously against the confines of the cool white satin.

"I will, my love," he tells her. "Right after we get a...full weather report on this balmy Irish morning, brought to you by our friends at O'Leary Insurance. Take it away, Bette!"

Barnabas bolted upright in his bed, a thick sheen of sweat lining his masculine brow.

The vast tropical beach he found transformed into a four-room cottage in the soul of Dunquin, Ireland – a land of rich emerald meadows lined with flocks of healthy, hearty sheep.

Some of these sheep belonged to Barnabas, others were tended by his parents, who lived just up the cobblestone road.

Rising to his feet, Barnabas shut off the intrusive clock radio and approached a window that marked the corner of his neat, modest

bedroom. Parting its royal blue curtains, he stared admiringly at the dew-glistened grasses that lay just beneath the sill.

The sight always brought succor to Barnabas' soul; the view of his homeland, lovingly cultivated by his own hand. Even on days when he didn't farm or tend his flock, he loved running barefoot under misty Irish skies – especially when they were broken by the prism of a Celtic rainbow.

He loved his family, his home and his land, to be sure.

Why, then, did these dreams of a foreign land continue to torment him?

Perhaps tease was a better word. The dreams themselves were most pleasurable, in fact, he poked accidental holes in the threads of four consecutive bedsheets. And not with his fingers.

When he woke his body raged with desire, a fire of intimate torment consumed every inch of him, tickling and agitating every nerve ending in his entire being. Yet, while the dream visited night after night, why it haunted his mind and heart remained strangely illusive.

Barnabas always thought himself a practical man who shunned big city life. On the rare occasion that he did yearn for an evening of dance and entertainment, the lights of Dublin shone just as brightly as any American metropolis. And should he ever yearn for a day at the beach, the scenic sanctity of Doulos Bay was never far from home.

Why, then, did he have this incredible hunger for a foreign place?

Ah, but maybe it wasn't the place at all. Maybe it was the woman who inhabited this foreign land, the one who haunted his dreams every night.

She was an Irishwoman, to be sure, though he never met her, he missed her.

He needed to find her, Barnabas decided, as he stepped into the soothing streams of yet another cold shower. He wanted to claim his mystical Irish rose, even if she grew in American soil.

Chapter Three

The cherry-wood box was intricately carved with the sign of the Celtic cross. The cross, was inlaid with a precisely crafted pattern of azure diamonds and rich red rubies. This coveted treasure box, freshly polished to reveal its golden accents, never failed to capture Margaret's imagination.

And its contents never failed to capture her cautious curiosity.

"Am I there yet?"

The tiny voice rang clearly from within the treasure box. In response, Margaret lifted the lid and braced herself for the natural phenomenon known as Mairead.

Yet instead of emerging like a fairy fireball from the depths of her box, Mairead lounged easily on the pink satin pincushion that often served as her bed; the sole furnishing in a homestead lined with exquisite ivory silk.

Beside her on the bed was a recent issue of "Vanity Fairy" magazine *She keeps her 'Playgirls' under the cushion*, Margaret recalled, *and she'd better share them and a half-eaten Hershey's Very Miniature.*

And in the center of the cushion presided the princess, a petite pixie with cropped blonde hair and luminous blue eyes, wearing a tiny seashell pink gown that resembled a ballerina's tutu.

Margaret couldn't help but smile as she beheld Mairead, her sister of the soul, a living symbol of Irish culture. . .

...who also had the unique propensity to be a royal pain in the butt.

"Am I there yet?" she repeated, then, blinking as her box was invaded by a steady stream of light. "Indeed, I see I am. Hello, Margaret."

Beaming softly, Margaret took the fairy into the palm of her delicate hand and blew a kiss across her head.

You can't really give a fairy a proper hug, she mused. Unless you want to be scoopin' her up with a fly swatter afterward.

Mairead, however, clearly caught the meaning of Margaret's gesture. Curling up in her mistress' hand, she planted a warm kiss at the center of her palm.

"I am home," she announced, then, cocking her head, "Do you have cable and central air?"

Margaret nodded, chuckling. "Yes, Mairead," she assured her.

The fairy squealed, snapping her tiny fingers. "Rock'n'roll!" she exclaimed. "We're in business. Welcome home, Mairead."

* * * *

Several weeks passed, and in a manner, that Margaret was pleased to discover felt almost peaceful. Mairead even found a favorite lounging spot in her new home, on the edge of Margaret's coffee table next to her overstuffed recliner.

"You have quite a place here, Margaret," she praised her hostess one day. "So when do we go sightseeing?"

Chuckling, Margaret, with the tip of her finger, softly patted Mairead's head.

"Never fear, Mairead. I'll show you all the tourist sites," she assured the fairy, then more seriously, "First, however, we have to address your hearing problem."

Mairead sat upright, snorting indignantly.

"Leering problem?" she exclaimed indignantly. "I have no leering problem," she paused, reddening. "Ok, I admit I do like to catch a long gaze at the occasional hottie stud. But I wouldn't go so far as to call it 'leering,' per say. . ."

"I said you have a hearing problem," Margaret corrected, unamused. "You misinterpreted five of Granny's commands, and the results were borderline disastrous. We know you mean well, Mairead," she assured the tiny pixie. "And regardless of your age, your wisdom and blonde beauty remain timeless."

Mairead nodded, apparently agreeing. "I have been called 'a foxy fairy' more than once in my time."

"Mairead, focus. We need to get your hearing tested."

Sighing, Mairead thought a moment before answering. "Before you test me, give me one final chance to fulfill a wish."

"Mayhaps, I shouldn't," Margaret didn't like Mairead's stubborn glance.

Leaning forward, the imp fixed Margaret with an almost plaintive

gaze. "Tell me your most fervent wish, Margaret," she implored. "I swear I will realize it in its purest, most perfect form. And you will know that I still understand the way of your heart."

Margaret shook her head, then froze as her entire body was overtaken by a wave of unexpected, unadulterated heat. Leaning forward, Margaret grasped her head in her hands as her mind became assailed with erotic images, the most prominent of which was a man, naked and writhing in passion in the midst of sweat-soaked sheets. Then he calmed down and his handsome face and long muscular body took on a seductive, serene glow that drew her to him.

He looked much like an angel in a state of blissful respite in his sleep. His long, silken black hair spread like ebony wings across his white cotton pillowcase. His bronzed, sculpted face looked calm and placid, yet, still bespoke the strength of a Celtic archangel. Those thick, dark eyelashes fanned delicately in contrast with his masculine face, and his body was an immaculate study of work-hardened muscle and sleek, toned lines, bronzed by evident days in the sun.

She imagined herself on a beach with him, making wild tempestuous love with him, then she started fading away from him and he began thrashing about in the bed again. His long dark hair flailed wildly in the air as the entire length of his finely toned body bucked upward from the bed, his taut muscles illuminated in the rays of faint moonlight afforded by a nearby window. His toned, taut hips gyrated wildly, and his face seemed contracted in an expression of agony.

Or was it ecstasy?

Must be some dream, Margaret thought.

Yet was it his dream – or hers?

Was it really a dream at all?

"Margaret! Margaret!"

The voice that summoned Margaret from this intense daydream was not deep and manly, but sounded roughly like the 'time and temperature' lady after a hearty dose of helium.

Looking up sharply, she met the concerned gaze of the fairy Mairead.

"You kosher?" Mairead asked, tiny head cocked.

Chuckling, Margaret nodded.

"I'm kosher," she reassured her, though a telltale trickle of sweat ran from the base of her neck to the depths of her most private area.

"Where do you pick up on these trendy phrases, Mairead?"

The fairy shrugged.

“Granny has one of those miniature satellite dishes in the back yard,” she said, adding, “At first I thought it was a hard-surfaced, rather impractical body pillow for Mairead. But it shows me programs that enlighten and entertain—for one low monthly price.”

Margaret nodded.

“So I take it you had a long conversation with the satellite dish salesman,” she said.

Again Mairead cocked her head.

“How do you know this?” she asked.

“Lucky guess,” Margaret replied, adding, “And speaking of the luck of the Irish...I am willing to make a wish for you to grant, but only to test your hearing.”

“No, no!” Mairead objected. “Make it something good that you’ll enjoy. Like a triple chocolate, hot mocha fudge diet-buster sundae. I’ll make the calories disappear! Or I’ll score you a date with one of those hunky male strippers.”

“Thank you, Mairead,” she said, stroking her chin thoughtfully, “you know, what I really do miss is home.”

Mairead nodded vigorously. “So, do you wish for a trip to Ireland?”

“I wish I could go,” Margaret agreed. “But I used up all my vacation time on the trip six months ago.” She paused. “All I really need is a reminder of Ireland; a memento that I can touch, that will take me home, if only for a moment.”

Mairead clapped her tiny hands excitedly. “Name it! Name your favorite Irish landmark and Mairead will bring it to you.”

“I would be happy to hold any part of Ireland. Do you remember our visits to Blarney Castle?”

Mairead grinned, and the two locked glances as they shared their sweetest memory of the Emerald Isle.

They pictured themselves as little girls, Mairead was chronologically far older than Margaret but she always would qualify as “little,” walking a path lined with stately oak and beautiful ornamental pear trees, making their way toward a garden bed of azaleas—a picturesque spot where they could observe the graceful walk of nearby fallow deer.

Indeed, the natural landscape of Blarney Castle equaled the stateliness of the landmark itself, a onetime stronghold for the Irish lords of Muskerry. And, once one toured the halls, gardens and tall

turrets of this landmark, they could practice the time-honored tradition of kissing the Blarney Stone.

Due to its unique placement in the wall of a castle battlement, visitors literally needed to bend over backward to kiss the coveted stone.

“Or in the case of some unfortunate folk, fly upside down and then bend backward,” Mairead recalled, scoffing. “Ack! My achin’ back!”

On the day of their visit, the fairy cloaked herself in an invisibility spell to avoid unwanted attention. Yet, she grasped Margaret’s hand as Granny lifted the proud girl to kiss the Blarney Stone. Margaret warmed at the memory; even at that tender age, she knew she claimed a piece of Irish history.

And she wanted another.

“Mairead?” she said, tone soft. “Bring me the Blarney Stone.”

Chapter Four

Margaret soon retired to another night of Irish dreams; yet this time they were particularly vivid. The waters shone a more vibrant emerald, the beaches a greater gold. Somehow she knew that her beloved Eire was no longer so far away, that she would soon touch a genuine symbol of Irish culture.

It was just too bad she was so darned picky as to which symbol that was.

Margaret was awakened at midnight by a firm, resounding slap, delivered squarely across her face. Bolting upright, she turned to find that the slap came courtesy of a sleeping man who—in an unintentional move—carelessly threw his arm across the bed.

He must be accustomed to sleeping alone, Margaret thought, shaking her sleepy head to clear its confused fog. *I know the feeling.*

Then why were they in bed together?

Or, more to the point, why was this unidentified man sleeping in her bed?

Margaret's eyes flew open and she started screaming. *Loudly.*

Her cries awoke the stranger, whose gorgeous azure-blue eyes were so much like the man she'd day dreamed about before. He too started screaming. *Loudly.*

His horror intensified when she noticed his glance fell on tiny Mairead, with her wings spread, and her hands flailing wildly. Then Mairead started pushing on his shoulder and Margaret bolted upright in bed.

"What the hell are you doing in my bed?"

* * * *

Barney Stone awoke to what he was starting to realize might not be another of his lavish dreams. The woman from his haunting nights sat up in bed next to him, and was trying to push him out onto the floor. It didn't take him long to know it wasn't his bed either. Even

worse, some Irish pixie or fairy of some kind was hovering nearby, watching the whole proceeding with wide, seemingly panic-stricken eyes.

The sprite herself was not horrific, indeed, she seemed to be a miniature version of the woman beside him.

Yet how could a human being be so tiny—and fly to boot? At least the woman beside him didn't fly.

Yikes, I shouldn't have ate that horseradish and cornbeef sandwich 'afore I went to bed last night, he thought. Mum always told me I was a bit on the strange side anyway for enjoying horseradish and cornbeef sandwiches. And now one has given me a freakish dream.

Finally the fairy just started buzzing around his and the woman's heads. However the strange woman reached out and poked him hard, probably to see if he was as real to her as she might me to him.

"What do you think you're doin', Lassie?" he objected, glaring at the beauty beside him, and edging away from her hand.

His irate hostess answered his query with a very hearty "Harrumph!"

"What am I doing?" she repeated, stroking her chin in mock thoughtfulness, "I awake in my bed to find a strange, although admittedly very hot man beside me. What should I be doing? A, Offer you a cup of coffee and a gander at the daily paper. B, Tell you that your charming Irish brogue and long, coal black hair remind me of a mythical Celtic god."

"Really?" Barnabas asked, grinning.

"Or C.," she continued. "Royally kicking your cute, tight..."

Flying between the embittered couple, the fairy extended a frantic hand in each direction. "You shouldn't be fighting him, Margaret. He is what you wished for."

The woman Margaret narrowed her eyes in the pixie's direction, looking at the fairy as though she just lost her sanity. "No I wished for a piece of the Blarney Stone, Mairead. See your hearing really is bad. Now look what you've done."

"Don't you remember, Margaret? You said you wanted to kiss Barney Stone." Gesturing toward the still stunned Irishman, the fairy announced, "Here he is, Margaret. Straight from Ireland, Mr. Barnabas Stone."

"Me, you wished for me?" Barnabas couldn't believe what he was hearing, and if he hadn't been stalwart of heart, he just might have.

But hey, if he was dreaming, at least he'd woke up in the right bed for a change.

* * * *

Falling silent, Margaret gaped as she faced an unsettling realization about her *intruder*.

In all likelihood, he was the most gorgeous man she ever had seen—damn him.

His hair looked like a long mass of silken ebony that fell gracefully past his broad muscular shoulders. The man's face was a handsome study of finely carved cheekbones, full lips, and skin the hue of honey bronze.

In spite of her best efforts, her gaze fell next to his bare chest, which was tanned, toned and massive. Then it fell still lower to reveal—Mairead, who unceremoniously parked herself right on Barnabas' lap.

"Yes, he is real," she said, grinning girlishly, "I can tell why you wished for him."

Closing her eyes, Margaret exhaled sharply.

"Mairead," she said, "last night, I told you specifically that I wanted to kiss the Blarney Stone. We even shared memories of our visit to this historic monument. How could you have misunderstood my wish?"

Mairead scratched her blonde head thoughtfully, then replied, "Indeed, I do recall our conversation about the Blarney Stone. Yet when you made your wish, I was sure you said 'Barney Stone'."

With this she cast a flirtatious glance in Barnabas' direction. "And when I found Barney Stone, I understood thoroughly why you changed your mind."

Grinning, Barnabas patted the fairy's head. "So, you see, I'm not an intruder, but an Irish sheepherder with a home and farm in Dunquin."

"Dunquin," Margaret repeated softly, picturing the emerald meadows and misty skies of the place he named. "I've visited there often."

Returning his infectious smile, she continued, "I was born in County Cork. I have lived in the states for most of my adult life."

"I still can hear the lilt of Eire in your voice," agreed Barnabas, studying her with intent, thoughtful eyes.

His gaze shifted to a nearby window, where the light of a full moon shone in graceful silhouette above the leaves of a towering

palm tree.

“And just where in the states have I landed?” he asked.

Margaret shrugged, grinning sheepishly.

“Tampa, Florida,” she replied, covering his hand with hers, “I’m so sorry this happened, sir.” Pausing, she added, “What can I say? My fairy needs a hearing aid.”

Margaret bit her lip, waiting for the laughter that surely would meet this ridiculous statement.

Instead, the stranger clutched the delicate hand she offered and brought it to his full, moist lips. Staring deeply into her eyes, he penetrated her skin with a probing kiss.

“Your fairy is to be commended,” he said, tone soft and intimate. “She has made my dreams come true.”

Margaret drew back, shaking her head. “Sir, there exists a very fine line between understanding a delicate situation,” she said. “And being completely and totally delusional about it. What in the bloody hell are you talking about?”

Barnabas only chuckled, his lips spreading in a slow, sexy beam of recognition. Cupping her ivory-skinned face in his hands, he leaned forward to grace her cheek with a whisper soft kiss.

“Yes, yes,” he murmured, fingers massaging her face. “Your skin holds the tint of ivory—the tint of Irish. And your hair is gold, like the sun of your Florida.”

A single electric chill brought color to Margaret’s cheeks before traveling thrillingly downward. She shivered before finally pulling away.

“So I’m the palest woman in Florida,” she said, fighting to keep a steady tone. “Now let’s get dressed and take you to a motel. You can hop a plane to Dublin tomorrow.”

Yet the stranger didn’t move from the bed. Instead, he reclined leisurely in the soft cotton sheets, allowing the top sheet to fall dangerously low around his trim, sexy waist.

Margaret’s eyes grew wide as she noted his bronzed, rippled abs—and the hint of toned hip that appeared temptingly above its pure cotton covering.

His gaze followed hers. “How does the lady like her fairy’s gift?” he asked, playfully chucking her chin. “I’m all yours to command. I’m at your beck and call, sweet lady.”

Sniffing, Margaret averted her gaze. “My gift was supposed to be the Blarney Stone,” she insisted.

Barnabas nodded, then leaned forward to plant an affectionate peck on her forehead.

"That's a fine Irish landmark," he agreed, lowering his voice as his hot breath fanned her cheek, "Yet as much as you can kiss the Blarney Stone, it can't return your affection."

With this he seared her with a hot, seductive gaze.

"I can," he continued. "In any number of wonderful ways, Lass."

"Ahem!"

The couple jumped as Mairead, who managed a miraculous five minutes of silence, could bear it no longer.

"I'm guessing you two would like to be left alone?"

Nodding, Barnabas wiggled his eyebrows in the fairy's direction.

Margaret, however, jumped from the bed and grabbed a nearby robe. Wrapping it around her in a swift, protective move, she tilted her chin proudly upward.

"My fairy's mishap entitles you to an apology," she told Barnabas. "Nothing else."

She smiled slightly as she withdrew from the room.

"You're welcome to sleep in my bed, it's the least I can do. And the most I will do!" she added quickly, then with a nod toward Mairead, "Come on, Dearie. We'll sleep in the living room."

Shooting Barnabas an apologetic smile, Mairead fluttered obediently after the retreating Margaret. Pausing at the doorway, Margaret turned to bid her unexpected visitor a formal, polite good night.

Ah, but there was nothing formal or polite about the intense hunger that burned in his azure eyes, or the smooth, sexy smile that sent chills racing down her spine.

"Good night," she breathed. "I'm going to sleep now."

Chuckling softly, Barnabas pursed his succulent lips and blew her a fairy's kiss.

"Then we'll meet tonight in your dreams, Lass," he said, his words released in a low, sexy growl.

Turning quickly, Margaret closed the door firmly behind her and walked purposefully into her living room. "I will admit he's quite the handsome Irish charmer," she told Mairead, nudging her playfully, "Grandmum would be proud of me for resisting such temptation."

Nodding, Mairead flew into her fairy's box and nestled softly in the center of her pink satin cushion. "Indeed, Granny would be proud of Margaret," she said. "Mairead, for her part, thinks Margaret is a

nut. If I were you, I'd be all over that hot and studly example of Celtic manhood..."

"OK, that's it," Margaret interrupted, blowing a good night kiss across the fairy's head. "I'm definitely talking to Granny about changing her satellite provider."

Chapter Five

Much to Margaret's chagrin, Barnabas kept his promise to meet her in her dreams.

Throughout the night, his beautiful image plagued her nocturnal visions. She pictured his lean, muscular form wrapped deliciously in satin sheets, then felt him writhing beneath her—a mass of slick golden muscle primed for her pleasure.

And it wasn't only his physical charm that intrigued her. She heard his Irish brogue, both strong and lilting, and felt his firm but tender touch. She felt herself happily lost in his embrace, experiencing a rapture found only in dreams.

Or was it? When Margaret opened her eyes the next morning, her first sight was the perfect, smiling face of the man who visited her dreams.

Impulsively she grabbed his bronzed cheeks, still grazed by morning stubble, and joined her lips to his. Swallowing his surprised gasp she boldly plundered his mouth, sliding her hungry tongue between his full, luscious lips.

Leaning forward, he wrapped his arms around her satin-clad shoulders and pulled her deeper into their kiss. Deliberately slowing their pace, his lips smacked sumptuously against hers as he engaged her tongue in a long, leisurely tango.

Margaret sighed deeply as she braced her delicate hands against his hard, bare chest.

Seconds later, she used these same hands to push him away.

"I—I'm so sorry," she whispered, "and here I was chastising you for being too forward last night. I don't know what came over me."

Barnabas only smiled, and wiggled his dark eyebrows.

"Whatever it is, Lass," he said. "I hope it comes over you more often, and at least several more times before I leave."

With this, he took a seat at the edge of Margaret's couch and ran a gentle hand through her long, soft blonde hair.

“You feel it too, don’t ya’ Lass?” his tone soft and sexy. “You know your fairy made no mistake. You know this was meant to happen.”

Margaret said nothing, but silently savored his nurturing touch.

Finally, Barnabas retreated, and stood with arms folded beside the couch.

“I came in here to apologize for being so forward last night,” he said, the hint of an ironic smile playing around his masculine lips.

Snorting, Margaret too arose from the couch.

“Well now we’re even,” she assured him as she walked toward the kitchen, “Now I’ll make you a good American breakfast before I take you to the airport.”

Yet her mouth fell open as she saw that breakfast already served and laid out decoratively on the white lace cloth that covered her dining room table.

Before her was an Irish feast that featured many of her favorite dishes, from a hearty serving of soda bread to a luscious plate of strawberry scones. Bacon and egg pie completed the mix, as did a helping of Brigid’s bread.

“Maired’s favorite,” Margaret observed, then turning to Barnabas, “The fairy will conjure up an occasional Irish dish for me, if I agree in writing to relinquish the remote control for the evening and sing two verses of her favorite disco song.”

Pausing, she narrowed her eyes suspiciously in the Irishman’s direction.

“I don’t want to know what you did to earn a full Irish meal,” she said.

Chuckling, Barnabas offered his arm to the skeptical Margaret and escorted her to the table.

“Maired didn’t make your breakfast,” he said. “I did, Lass, but she was kind enough to conjure up some fresh clothing for me, and left them beside the bed for me to find when I woke up.”

Margaret started, then nodded approvingly, liking the way the jeans and polo hugged his body.

“Thank you,” she said, tightening her robe around her. “It’s been so long since I’ve had a proper Irish breakfast, and that’s very kind...”

She took in her breath as his hand captured hers in a strong, warm grasp.

“Kindness has nothing to do it with Margaret,” he spoke in a low

and sexy tone. “And just so you know, this is not a farewell meal.”

He drew closer to her until their faces nearly touched.

“I know I was too forward last night,” he admitted. “I simply could not believe that my dream came to fruition, that the woman who rules my nights was here before me.”

“I apologize for my boldness,” he continued, running a tender thumb across her delicate palm. “That doesn’t mean I’m giving up on you. Or our dreams.”

Leaning back, he picked up a buttered strawberry scone and slipped it slowly and sensuously between his lips.

“I will court you like an Irish gentleman,” he said.

Margaret shook her head.

“How can you be so accepting of all this?” she asked. “My fairy takes you from your home and unceremoniously deposits you in my bed. Then you tell me I’m the woman of your dreams. Hey, I’ve been told I’m not so bad to look at but beauty queens won’t sit up nights fearing my competition.”

“Margaret,” Barnabas interrupted, waving a dismissive hand, “You’ve been away from Ireland too long. You forget that our country is the land of magic. The emerald isle of dreams.”

Yet his hostess only chuckled, and shook her blonde head.

“OK, who really sent you? The Irish Tourist Board?” she asked, adding, “If you believe so strongly in Celtic magic, why were you shocked at the sight of my fairy?”

Shrugging, Barnabas fed Margaret a slice of classic Irish soda bread before answering. She shivered as a soft thrill of ecstasy raced over her body when his fingers lingered ever so softly against her lips.

“Being a man and a herdsman, I guess I never had much use for ‘fairy’ tales,” he told her. “Yet being of Irish descent, I have heard stories of the Tuatha De Danaan, and never particularly questioned them. Why should I, when everything about our land is magical?”

Margaret nodded.

“My Aunt Marian was an Irish sage and tale spinner—a true woman of magic,” she said. “She gave me Mairead as a gift, speaking of which, where is my fairy this morning?”

As if on cue, a loud snore erupted from the wooden box that occupied Margaret’s end table.

“I let her sleep in,” Barnabas said, grinning.

Margaret nodded, charmed by her visitor’s gentle nature.

“So, Barnabas,” she said. “Tell me about some of your favorite

Irish haunts.”Leaning forward, she addressed him with a charming, full-toothed smile. “Remind me of home.”

A full moment passed before he answered—when he did, his voice held a quaint boyish tremor that brought a faint blush to Margaret’s cheeks.

She felt warmed further by the words that followed, a personal travelogue that showed her the natural made wonders of the Inchiquin Waterfall and the soothing, sparkling waters of Beara Way; the mighty Cliffs of Moher and the inspirational shrine on the shores of Slea Head.

She could have read these accounts in a book or recalled them from her own memory. Yet the musical rhythm of his Celtic brogue enhanced the telling of the tale – and ensnared Margaret’s heart.

Overcome with a feeling of bittersweet memories, she felt her eyes mist with the hint of tears. The simple emotional expression, must have been noted by him, for Barnabas propelled from his chair and immediately came to her side.

“Now, now Lass,” he cooed, gathering her hands into his and kissing them fiercely. “I won’t see you cry—I won’t. What’s wrong?”

Shaking her head, Margaret didn’t object as Barnabas lifted her from her chair and gathered her sweetly into his arms.

Cradling her in his embrace, he rocked her back and forth and pressed his warm, full lips tenderly against her cheek.

After a time of companionable silence, Margaret revealed in a soft, low voice, “You haven’t made me unhappy, Barnabas. You take me home.”

Drawing back, she cupped her visitor’s face in her hands and kissed his lips fiercely.

“You take me back to the places I remember, the places I love,” she whispered. “I thank you, my kind Irish gentleman.”

A warm surge of emotion overtook them both, driving them deeply into one another’s arms. Clinging to this newfound intimacy, they kissed with a desperate passion that lit a fire in their souls.

She shivered with need as he pressed her closer to him. Barnabas then swept his tongue deeply into her mouth, his hands imprinting themselves in the satin sheen that covered her back. His firm, agile fingers made to undo the laces of her nightgown.

Margaret took in her breath, allowing herself to stroke Barnabas’ muscular shoulders and playfully claw his smooth, wind-roughened back.

It was a momentary indulgence.

"We can't," she gasped, pulling painfully and reluctantly away from him.

"At least not in front of the fairy." These words, powerful but shrilly spoken, did not come from Margaret. Mairead, apparently, had 'slept in' quite enough. She now sat upright on her pink satin cushion, regarding the couple with amused eyes.

"I could go out and buy that cottage cheese we need," she told Margaret.

Shaking her head at this nonsensical statement, Margaret wondered if she herself needed a hearing aid.

"Cottage cheese," she repeated blankly.

Barnabas sighed, rolling his azure eyes.

"She's giving us an easy out," he told Margaret. "Let her get the blasted cottage cheese."

Yet, his hostess shook her head, and cleared her throat loudly as she rose to her feet and straightened her satin nightgown.

"I have a better idea," she said. "Barnabas, this morning you gave me a fine Irish meal and some fine Irish stories."

Mairead smirked. "And he almost gave you a fine Irish..."

Margaret interrupted her, "In return," shooting her fairy a murderous glare. "I would like to show you our most beautiful Tampa Bay beach."

"Let's go," he told her, his eyes smoldering with a sensual challenge that nearly stole her breath. "I'm ready."

Chapter Six

Margaret threw her head back, savoring the radiant feeling of a warm ocean breeze; an airy gift that swept like nature's caress through her long blonde hair. As much as she missed her native Eire, she also savored the elegant beauty of a Florida morning, especially one enjoyed at the beach, where she could witness the soaring of sea gulls through crystalline skies and the subtle swaying of sable palms.

One could watch a child turn a formless sand pile into a whimsical golden castle—then see one's own fairy lounging on the balcony of this makeshift formation, whistling lasciviously at passing male lifeguards.

It's a good thing she cloaks herself in an invisibility spell when we go out, so only I can see her, thought Margaret, rolling her eyes. *Or else I'd probably have a not so whimsical, less than magical harassment suit on my hands.*

Margaret herself enjoyed an occasional glimpse at the hard-bodied hunks of Tampa Bay beaches; yet, even they couldn't compare to her current house guest.

Shortly after their arrival at the beach, after purchasing some other clothing for him, the adorable Barnabas walked into a changing room wearing a white short-sleeved T-shirt, a ponytail and a pair of blue jeans. Moments later, he emerged a stunning tempter in a white satin Speedo, his black hair flowing beautifully down his back. And all the more beautiful once it captured the glint of the Florida sun.

His body looked sleek, toned and muscular. He stood tall on the beach like a monument to the sun. His shoulders were broad, his legs long, and his entire form gleamed bronze and sculpted.

Margaret blushed under his scrutinizing glance and the complimentary words that came from his seductive mouth. "You remind me of an ivory angel, with your fair skin, and that luscious body of yours cloaked in that cotton caftan. I even like that charming

sunhat."

With him, she stood several feet apart on a busy stretch of beach. Yet, she had the feeling that he too, in his mind, felt as if they were alone—the rest of the world miles away as they sank in a cocoon of intimacy.

Margaret reddened as she basked in the attention of Barnabas' passion-narrowed gaze focused only on her. He totally ignoring the waifish, silicone-stricken beach bunnies who passed in an endless line before them.

She opened her lips to speak, but even this simple motion brought an intimate, almost sinful smile to his own luscious mouth. She made what possibly qualified, at least in her mind, as the least sensual statement ever made by a human being in all of history, Irish or American.

"We'd better eat before the coleslaw curdles in the sun," she blurted out, moving a few paces away from him to pick up the picnic basket she'd dropped earlier when they embraced.

"I'll stay for the picnic lunch you brought with you, but then I'm leaving the two of you alone." Mairead slapped the palm of her hand against her tiny forehead, as if suddenly realizing she cramped Margaret's and Barnabas' alone time.

Shrugging, Margaret approached a palm tree and unrolled their soft, seashell pink picnic blanket across the length of its shaded shadow. "A Saturday morning is no time to find privacy on a Tampa Bay beach," she reasoned. "You might as well stick around and enjoy a pleasant day with us, Dearie."

Mairead only smiled, and pursed her lips coyly.

Bloody hate it when she does that, thought Margaret, gritting her teeth as Barnabas began to unpack their picnic basket.

Margaret's observations regarding beachfront privacy were proven moments later, when a lime green fuzzy football landed squarely in a canister of her prized tuna salad. Yet Barnabas only laughed and fished it out, then played an impromptu game of catch with the ball's 6-year-old owner.

Margaret beamed softly as she saw the towering Adonis run and play like a child, all the while careful never to throw over the head of his giggling young 'opponent'.

"You're a mighty strong lad," he observed at one point, after intentionally missing the boy's lightly thrown pass.

Mairead, watching from the sidelines, snorted loudly. "Barnabas

sure does stink at playing football.”

Laughing, Margaret replied, “He’s letting the boy win, Mairead.”

The fairy’s mouth dropped open, and she looked with wide eyes at the grinning Irishman—who now screamed in mock agony as he was tackled by a pint-sized linebacker.

“I think you’re right!” the fairy agreed, then, nudging a grinning Margaret. “He’s both a total babe and a complete sweetheart. I say we keep him.”

Margaret’s smile disappeared and she shook her head sadly.

“We can’t, Mairead,” she told the fairy. “I agree that Barnabas is wonderful, and I’m glad you brought him to me.” She paused, shaking an accusing finger in Mairead’s direction. “I do have to say, however, that ‘Barney Stone’ is tall, dark and hunky proof that you need a hearing aid. And we have to remember that he has a home and a job in Ireland.”

Mairead smiled and gestured toward Barnabas, who laughed and played like a sprightly lad. “Don’t you get it yet, Margaret? That’s the whole point. You have your whole life to travel to Ireland and kiss the Blarney Stone. Yet you may only have today to kiss this Barney Stone.”

Chapter Seven

Mairead's words echoed through Margaret's mind later that afternoon, as she enjoyed a picnic lunch with the fairy and their guest.

She herself giggled girlishly as Barnabas fed her heaping spoonfuls of her own lunch—then smacked his lips sexily as she did the same for him.

"The man even makes coleslaw erotic," she mused. "Damn him."

Following lunch, she stretched her arms high above her head and basked in the breeze of an incoming wind.

Barnabas smile was as warm as the day and showed her how much he enjoyed the show.

"You look like a Celtic fairy queen when you do that, Lass," he said quietly, his blue eyes alight with passionate intensity.

Margaret rolled her eyes.

"Men," she scoffed. "You lads could perceive a hiccup as an exotic gesture of sublime seduction. I was stretching, Barnabas. I sometimes enjoy a light nap this time of day."

Never taking his gaze from her face, Barnabas leaned slowly back onto the picnic blanket. Then, with his toned, muscular body laid out fully and deliciously before her, he extended his masculine hands and wiggled his fingers invitingly.

"So come relax with me," his voice barely above a whisper.

Biting her lip, Margaret peered sheepishly in Mairead's direction. Yet the fairy only looked away, and set about whistling the theme to "Green Acres."

As per Granny's satellite dish. Margaret relaxed into the cushioning softness of her picnic blanket. She purred involuntarily as Barnabas gathered her, fully and affectionately, into his masculine embrace.

"We used to meet in my dreams," he whispered, blowing a soft 'fairy's kiss' across her earlobe. "Now we will dream together."

* * * *

Irish dreams once again invaded Margaret's psyche as she lay at Barnabas' side. This time, however, they intermingled with the unsettling intoxication of his nearness, an illusion created by his musky scent, his warm skin, and the secure feel of his strong, muscular arm around her waist.

Even in the depths of slumber, his hold on her proved sure and secure, and their bodies seemed to mold perfectly in a tender cocoon. Turning her head, Margaret planted a sweet kiss on Barney's nose before nestling her forehead against his. Then she fell asleep, basking in a sweet, comfortable feeling of being cuddled and cared for, drawing from a veritable 'stone' of quiet, almost ethereal repose.

Moments later, she awoke in a state of intense, undeniable horniness.

Barnabas' strong, firm hands were working their way surely into her shoulders, rubbing and kneading until a soft moan of contentment passed her lips.

It wasn't just the sheer strength of his grasp that pleased her, or its infinite tenderness. Barnabas, it seemed, covered his hands in a silky, smooth coating of coconut cream—one that sent a pleasant tingle from her delicate shoulders to the small of her back. His hands soon followed, reaching underneath her caftan to caress the sensitive area between her shoulder blades – pampering her muscles with an intense, probing touch.

She gaped at the intensity of this pleasurable sensation, and grinned girlishly moments later when he switched his position on the picnic blanket and began rubbing her feet. Her lower legs were the next to receive his intimate attentions, and she giggled in spite of herself as his firm fingertips made teasing, tickling movements across her calves.

Her laughter ceased, however, as she felt her caftan move slowly but surely up her legs. "Barnabas, this is a public beach," she said, her eyes flying open.

They opened wider still when she saw that their previously busy stretch of beach had become an isolated oasis; one accented by endless, empty stretches of sun kissed sands and swaying sable palms, and the sounds of distant wind chimes.

"Mairead did this," said Margaret, adding dryly, "I just hope she remembers where she put all those people she made disappear."

Chuckling, Barnabas leaned over Margaret's body and blew softly into her ear before tenderly nestling her neck.

“I think she put us in our own little dimension,” he assured her. “Then she disappeared herself.”

Turning her head swiftly, Margaret captured Barnabas’ lips in a hard, demanding kiss. Their mouths locked in a hungry embrace, and Barnabas wrapped a strong arm around her shoulders.

“I’ve been waiting and wanting to get you alone,” he breathed, nibbling her earlobe.

Lifting a delicate hand, Margaret grazed Barnabas’ massive big chest with a bold but sweet caress.

“And why would that be?” she asked.

Barnabas’ azure eyes narrowed with the bare heat of suppressed desire.

“So I can shower you with my affections and pleasure you thoroughly,” he replied. “So I can blow your mind.”

With this, he again leaned forward and licked her lips before engaging her in a full, passionate kiss. His hand, meanwhile, grasped and caressed her waist, much to her delight.

Laying down on the blanket so their bodies faced, he raised her skirts until they gathered in a soft, cottony pool above her waist. He rubbed her full hip as their mouths joined. Suddenly he drew back to look deeply into her eyes.

A question lay in his sultry gaze; one she quickly answered by lowering her hand to the bulging manhood that strained rebelliously against his satin bikini brief.

Boldly grasping his erect shaft, she rubbed and coddled him until his masculine moans filled the salty air around them.

In the midst of his own pleasure, he never forgot hers, and his own nimble fingers caressed her feminine folds through the soft, wet shield of her white cotton underwear, before slipping his hand underneath her panties.

Drawing closer to her, his fingers probed deeper before finally grasping her throbbing clit. Then, closing their eyes, the couple created a mutual wave of electric friction that threatened to overcome them.

Abruptly, Barnabas broke away.

“Not this way,” he told her, then, taking her into his arms, “I want to hold all of you, to experience you fully.”

As if to prove his point, he grasped her womanly hips and buried his head in her neck. As his long, wet tongue lapped and laved at her delicate skin, his hands drew her body up against his until they locked

in a cocoon of intimacy.

Burying her own hands in Barnabas' long, silky black hair, Margaret rested her head against his muscular shoulder and lost herself in his touch.

The pair joined hands as their legs too entangled, and Barnabas gently rolled Margaret onto her back before laying his strong, muscular body atop hers.

Margaret opened her arms wide, grasping hungrily at the sheer physical perfection that was Barnabas. She took in her breath as his agile hands parted her knees and caressed her full thighs.

His shaft was now fuller, more erect and prodded gently at her abdomen. Taking her hands from his hair, she ran her hungry fingers down his chest until they reached his waist—where she pulled insistently at the rim of his white satin Speedo.

"Make love to me," she coaxed, her voice released in a sultry whisper.

Drawing back, Barnabas regarded her with a dazzling smile.

"I will, Love," he promised.

Returning his smile, Margaret once again opened her arms wide to welcome his passionate embrace.

What she grasped, however, was empty air!

Barnabas disappeared into the atmosphere surrounding them and not a single hint nor hair of him remained.

"No!" Margaret cried aloud. "Barnabas!"

Only silence met her summons; and only the sight of a barren beach met her distressed gaze.

Margaret's arms flailed almost desperately in the air as they reached for a man who was no longer there, who disappeared just as surely as he appeared.

"Mairead, what's going on here?" she shouted.

Within seconds, the fairy was at her side, her own tiny brow furrowed with concern.

"Something must have gone awry with my spell," she surmised.

"Ya' think?" Margaret snapped. "Bring him back to me, Mairead!"

The fairy only shrugged and hung her blonde head. "I don't know where he went, and I have no earthly idea what went wrong with my spell. I don't know how to bring him back, Margaret. I'm so sorry."

Margaret buried her head in her delicate hands and wept.

Chapter Eight

Two weeks passed since Barnabas' disappearance, and Margaret's tears still fell freely and often, at least in the confines of her home.

To her friends and co-workers, she still appeared the smiling, good-humored woman they came to know, and she would never tell them differently.

How could she explain her sublime, deep-seated sorrow without also explaining its inspiration? A man who magically appeared and disappeared in a two-day period, left a bleeding heart in his wake?

I don't think even Granny could navigate this one, she thought one morning, sighing as she shifted restlessly in her bed.

Her troubled musings were disrupted by the sudden entrance of her fairy, who flew through her bedroom doorway with tiny hands planted firmly on her hips.

"Ok, I've had it," she exclaimed, hovering imposingly over Margaret's bed, or as imposingly as her three-inch-tall stature would permit. "Cut out the crockpot tears!" "Crockpot tears?" Margaret repeated, eyes narrowed in confusion. "Mairead, do you mean crocodile tears?"

"What I mean is get your rear out of bed and can the drama!" Mairead clarified, helpfully. "You're beginning to make my crazy cousins, the woodland nymphs of Eire, appear stable and serene. Stop now."

Margaret blinked, shaking her head.

"Believe me, Mairead," she assured her. "If I could make this pain disappear, I would."

Yet the fairy only snorted, and waved a tiny hand dismissively in the air.

"And you're going to accomplish this by lying in bed all day and moping?"

Margaret shrugged.

“Only on the weekends,” she reasoned. “During the week I go to work all day moping.”

“Enough!” Mairead exclaimed. “Stand up.”

Sighing deeply, Margaret stood from her bed and extended her hands in supplication.

“Does that satisfy you?” she asked.

Stroking her chin thoughtfully, Mairead did a head-to-toe evaluation of Margaret, taking in, Margaret was sure by the frown on the fairy's face, Margaret's ragged ponytail, tear-stained face and mustard-stained nightshirt.

“No,” she replied, finally and bluntly. “Not by a long-shot.”

With this, the fairy spread her arms high above her head, shutting her eyes as if to concentrate on an important spell.

Those same eyes opened wide and she lowered her arms to her sides in a broad, sweeping gesture. In that moment, Margaret felt a wave of misery escape her body, leaving in its place a calm, relaxing sensation of inner peace.

Margaret's mood was not the only facet of her being that changed radically. Looking down with wide eyes, she saw that her nightshirt had been replaced by a flowing gown of pure, sheer ivory silk that fell to her feet and was accented by shards of embroidered lace and rich lines of emerald teal ribbon. The dress had a v-neck collar set off perfectly by a pearl choker that lined her ivory throat, and by a delicate pair of white satin slippers that now adorned her feet. Her blonde hair had been gathered in a glorious upsweep atop her head, the arrangement accented by delicate pearl earrings that now adorned her ears.

“I know you wanted me up and dressed,” said Margaret, gesturing to her elaborate gown, “yet, isn't this a little much for our Saturday trip to the mall?”

At the mention of her favorite shopping spot, Mairead lowered her head reverently.

“For this Saturday's excursion, I have found a destination even more sacred and exalted than the mall,” she informed her mistress. “I have found an Imbolc Festival for us to attend.”

Margaret started, immediately recognizing the name of the Celtic festival for light and purification, a Druid tradition held in honor of Brigid, Mairead's beloved fairy queen.

“You found a feast for Brigid in Florida?” she asked the fairy.

Mairead only smiled, slyly and secretly.

“Have I mentioned I hate it when you does that?” Margaret whispered.

It was her last coherent thought before her entire body became enveloped in a thick lavender mist, an impenetrable haze that suddenly flooded her bedroom. Instead of choking or overwhelming her, the light airy fog gave her the curious gift of flight, lifting her up in the air and thrusting her into a lavender funnel. She opened her mouth to ask Mairead where she was going, yet, before the words could pass her lips she reached her destination.

And it was a sight to behold.

Night had fallen on the place she landed, and a full golden moon shone on the hearty grasses of a rich emerald meadow. Peering down at the ground beneath her, she saw Irish wildflowers of fuchsia and royal blue as well as a bed of vibrantly blooming shamrocks.

“I’m in the Emerald Isle.”

Her notion was confirmed a moment later, when she raised her head to spot a sparkling, cascading waterfall just a few feet away in the meadow.

Beneath this waterfall stood an Irish angel.

His silken black hair fell well past his shoulders, and was plastered to his back by a steady downpour of wet Celtic mist. His chiseled profile was graced with an expression of profound ecstasy. He apparently pleased in his shower, and Margaret enjoyed seeing his bare, golden skin gleam sensuously in the moonlight. The streams of the descending waterfall served to perfectly outline his rounded derriere and sculpted, bronzed legs.

When the Irish angel turned to her, she saw by his gleaming azure eyes and devilish full-toothed smile that he was really no angel at all.

It’s my Barnabas, she thought, moving quickly forward with an elated smile.

Her beam disappeared a moment later, when, after casting a wolfish smile in her direction, Barnabas promptly disappeared through the waterfall.

Approaching cautiously, Margaret saw that just beyond the cascading mist stood a vast cavern that resembled a nature made hideaway. Most caverns were bare and dark, this one was illuminated from within by walls of gleaming emeralds; gems that held the tint of pure Irish green.

“I assume this is where the Imbolc Festival will take place,” she

said aloud.

As if on cue, Mairead appeared before her in the meadow.

“Indeed,” she agreed. “And I’ll transport you through the waterfall, so you don’t mess up your dress.”

“Thank you,” Margaret blew a tender kiss across the fairy’s head, “For everything, Mairead.”

“I have to say though,” she continued, cocking her head curiously, “Barnabas didn’t exactly look dressed for the occasion—more to the point, he just didn’t look dressed.”

Mairead winked, and smiled slyly. “This is a Celtic festival for two,” she explained.

Chapter Nine

Before Margaret could question the fairy's intentions, she again found herself enveloped in the lavender fog that brought her to the land of her birth. A moment later, she stood on the other side of the waterfall, in a cavern lined with endless walls of radiant, refined emeralds. Before her, was a bed covered in white satin, and surrounded by rows of illuminated candles.

"Imbolc is the festival of light and purification," Margaret spoke in awe. "The waterfall purifies, the candles give light."

She paused, drawing closer to inspect the bed that stood at the center of the cavern. She took in her breath as the tall, bronzed form of a nude man suddenly materialized atop its sheets.

Barnabas' hair remained wet from his shower, and hung in beautiful waves down his bare, bronzed back. His perfect lips were carved upward in a soft, sensual smile, and his azure eyes came alight with passion as they regarded a stunned Margaret.

"Imbolc is also the feast of Brigid," he reminded her, his deep voice raw with desire. "And by the Celtic gods, Margaret, you liken the fairy queen in that gown. You are beyond radiant."

As she drew closer, Margaret saw that Barnabas too was a vision to behold in the light of the festive candles. His bronzed, muscular chest and legs took on a golden glow in the candlelight, and his finely formed face was almost godlike in its illuminated perfection. Margaret allowed herself to behold the long, thick manhood that stood in a seeming salute to her slow, deliberate approach.

Barnabas was as richly endowed, as she remembered. She felt equally entranced by the loving, inviting hands that now extended themselves in her direction.

"Come feast upon me, my fairy queen," he invited.

Releasing a relieved sigh, Margaret fell forward into Barnabas' waiting embrace, sinking happily in his arms. Their bodies pressed

closely together in a self-made nest of intimacy, and their lips locked in a deeply felt soul kiss of passion.

Margaret moved slowly downward over Barnabas' body, kissing his neck, licking his nipples and rippled abdomen, and fixing her ruby mouth around his long, erect shaft. She fully and finally consumed her masculine feast, listening as his moans of pleasure filled the air around them. Her teeth nipped his golden skin and her tongue laved him lovingly, until finally he screamed his release.

With a passionate growl, Barnabas rose up on his knees and Margaret felt overwhelmed by his seductive gesture before he pulled her onto his lap. Cradling and kissing his Celtic lover, he slowly unzipped her ceremonial gown and peeled it from her body, laving with his tongue the small, delicate breasts that finally were revealed to him.

Lightly nipping and kissing Margaret's nipples, he massaged her stomach and waist before cupping her femininity in his agile grasp. Rubbing and teasing her to a state of full arousal, he seared her lips with an insistent kiss before laying her reverently across the bed. Staring into her eyes, he ran his hands through the golden hair that shone even more brightly in candlelight.

"I dreamed you before I met you," he whispered, covering her body with his. "And after I came home, I barely slept at all. Thoughts of you beset my mind day and night."

He leaned downward to kiss the cheek he missed and buried his head in her soft ivory neck. He savored her murmur of tender assent as he covered her with kisses, then knelt worshipfully between her parted knees. Margaret moaned loudly as Barnabas' full, lips teased her feminine folds, lighting a fire that intensified when he feasted on her wet, throbbing channel. Their hands clasped tightly as he used his teeth and tongue to work her into a frenzy before finally driving her to a full and ecstatic climax.

Opening her arms to Barnabas, Margaret smiled warmly as his body covered hers once more. Deeply they kissed, their tongues entangling as their bodies merged into one passionate being.

Drawing her still closer to him, Barnabas plunged his hard member into Margaret's wet femininity, and their hips swayed in a steady rhythm that grew more heated with each passing second. Their kisses intensified and Barnabas stroked and caressed Margaret's breasts before bracing his hands on her full, soft hips.

"I never want to let you go," he whispered, plunging as deep as

possible into her. "I want to lay beside you every night. I want my children to come forth from your body. I want to share, not only my bed with you, but my life."

Margaret's eyes flew open, and she braced her hands on Barnabas' muscular shoulders. Wrapping her long legs around his trim, sleek waist, she enveloped him in a full-bodied embrace and rode him to a pulsating, satiating mutual climax.

Moments later, they collapsed in sweat-soaked satin sheets, their bare bodies gleaming softly in the candlelight.

Tenderly they kissed, and Margaret cupped Barnabas' sculpted face in two loving hands.

"Now what was that you were saying about sharing my life and making me preggers?" she asked. "Sorry I wasn't focusing. I got a little distracted."

Chuckling, Barnabas wrapped his arms around Margaret's tender shoulders and playfully nipped her nose.

"Let's just put it this way," he told her. "You know that beautiful white dress you wore to our festival this evening? Well, I'd like you to wear it once more next month, for a trip to Blarney Castle."

Feeling a strange sense of déjà vu, Margaret asked, "Don't you think that gown is a tad too fancy for a tourist expedition?"

Leaning forward, Barnabas planted a firm, affirming kiss on her lips. "I'm not booking a tour of the castle gardens, or even a visit to your beloved stone," he said. "I'm booking the wedding chapel at Blarney Castle."

Chapter Ten

On the day of her granddaughter's wedding, Clara O'Connor wore her silver hair in a glorious upsweep and her mother's prized diamond necklace.

A skimpy leather bustier, lined with rainbow-colored rhinestones, completed the maternal picture.

"Mairead!"

Clara stood in a dressing room that adjoined the wedding chapel of Blarney Castle. It was here, on this day, that she would watch her blessed granddaughter Margaret marry Barnabas Stone, a young man she came to love as her own kin.

She also loved the mischievous fairy who had brought the lovers together. Really, she swore she did.

"Mairead!" she again called, then fairly sneered at the smirking sprite who answered her call.

Mairead looked resplendent in a dress of teal-green satin; she looked, in fact, much like a living shamrock. That didn't prevent her from being very, very annoying.

"Mairead," Clara repeated. "I told you I wanted to look like an Irish Madonna on the day of my granddaughter's wedding."

Pausing, she stared with wide eyes at the sleek leather bustier that adorned her matronly form, harrumphing as she twisted first one way and then the other in front of the dressing room mirror.

"You made me look like the American version," she told her.

Smirking, Mairead planted her hands on her hips and flew dangerously close to the fuming Clara.

"Granny Clara, I know Madonna," she said. "Madonna is a friend of mine. And you."

"Hush up and change my dress!" Clara ordered.

Moments later, her curious costume had been replaced by a knee-length dress of cream silk. Smiling approvingly, Clara blew a kiss across Mairead's cheek and patted the fairy's head.

“Tell the truth, Mairead,” she encouraged, her tone gentle. “You didn’t misunderstand Margaret’s wish to kiss the Blarney Stone. And Barney’s disappearance was no accident. You meant to bring our baby home. And bring her to her man.”

Mairead shrugged. “Either way, we get a free trip to Blarney Castle,” she reminded Clara, adding with a wink, “And I always know the way of Margaret’s heart.”

The End

The Cunning Thief
by Tysche Dwai

Clever Jack loves the squire's daughter – but how can a poor man's son gain her hand? Win his fortune and then trick her father into his consent. Aided and abetted by the object of his affection, Jack proves that love will overcome all obstacles given enough wit.

<http://www.tyschedwai.com>

The Cunning Thief

by

Tysche Dwai

In a simpler world, where carts carried a man's family and not cars, there lived a strapping lad named Jack. Sure and he was the youngest of three sons sharing bed and board in his father's house, and times were hard in the Irish hills. Their farm grew more stones than potatoes.

One morning, their Da called the three boys together. There was a sorrow about him as they had never seen. "Lads, I can no longer support you as things stand. You must go forth and make your own way in the world. But know you all, there is a home here if you need it."

Sean, the eldest of the sons, laid a hand on his father's shoulder and said, "We will make you proud, Da. I'll leave in the morning, and go East."

Paddy, the middle brother, shook his father's hand and said, "Aye. We are men grown. We will be fine. I will go West at daybreak."

Jack hugged his father and murmured, "Sure and we understand, Da. I'll follow the wind in the morning."

But there were other things to settle that night.

Jack was a handsome fellow, new turned twenty, and he had caught the eye of many a lass, including the squire's daughter, Katherine. So, as soon as his father dismissed them, he hurried across the hill to the big house up the lane.

Scooping up a handful of pebbles from the drive, he lobbed them one at a time with practiced ease against a certain leaded casement. On the third, it swung open. "Hist, Jack!" whispered Katherine, leaning out her window, "what are you playing at? Father is not yet gone to bed. If he catches you..."

"Come down, Katie. I must talk to you."

"I'm in my nightdress!"

Jack grinned up at her. "Sure and I've never seen that afore."

"You are a saucy lad, Jack Gallagher! I should sic the dogs on you."

"But you won't, my pretty lass, will you now?"

Katherine shook her red-gold head. "Nay. But I *should*. Be right down."

Scarce had Jack stepped into the shadows around the kitchen door when it flew open and Katherine ran into his arms, her little white feet bare beneath her linen nightdress. He swung her up into his embrace, planting a smacking kiss on her eager lips.

"Katherine Callaghan, you are the light of my heart. But I must leave you in the morning."

"Leave?"

"Aye. It's duty to me father that sends me from your door."

She laid her head against his shoulder, her curls bright against the rough serge even in the twilight's gloaming. "Must you, Jack?"

"Aye, lass. I must. But I will be back for you, and we will be wed as I promised."

Katherine sighed. "Father will never allow it, Jack."

"Sure and if I come back with riches enough to buy the hall, he won't be able to say no, now will he?" He kissed the tip of her upturned nose. "Don't you fret, Katie me girl."

She shifted in his arms. "You can put me down now, Jack. I'm sure I must be heavy."

Jack shook his dark head. "Never, me love. You are a feather in me arms. But I have a thought..." He moved away from the shadows of the great stone hall.

"Where are you taking me, you fiend?" Katherine laughed softly, the sound a tinkling music in the darkness.

"Can't you guess, me darlin'?"

"Yes, I can. And I've told you before that it smells in there," she protested.

"Mebbe so, but it is warm and comfortable, ain't it?" Jack pushed open the stable door with his foot. "And dry from the dew that will be soaking the heather before I let you go, me love."

"What if Mother comes to check on me?"

"Sure and she still checks up on a great girl of nineteen? All the more reason I must make an honest woman of you as soon as I may."

Katherine giggled. "I set the bolster under the blanket as you told

me, Jack. She'll not venture inside, even if she does open the door...but it is a risk we take."

"Spice to the sauce, ain't it?" He tossed her onto a pile of hay and turned to light the lantern hanging on a nearby hook. His hand stopped in mid air as he caught sight of the moonlight streaming through the open hay doors above them. Its silver light outlined Katherine's slender figure, making her glow like the angel he knew her to be.

"What is it, Jack?" she asked anxiously, propping herself up on her elbows.

"Nothing but the moon, love—sure and it makes you more beautiful than ever. Leaving you will tear the heart from me breast."

"It will never do." She patted the hay beside her. "Leave the lantern be. The moon is full tonight. Plenty of light to see by."

He stretched out beside her on the prickly hay. "'Tis no fine, goose-feather bed, me darlin', but someday it will be. I promise you that."

Reaching up to touch his cheek, Katherine murmured, "As long as I bed with you, Jack Gallagher, I would sleep in the coal pit."

"And ruin that fine white gown?"

"If it is my gown you worry on..." With a twinkle that even the wayward moonlight couldn't hide, she sat up and pulled the linen nightdress over her head.

Her body was sculptured marble in the pearly light, and he felt himself harden at the mere sight of her. The moon dampened the fire at crown and mound, but did not extinguish it. Bright as it was, he could even see a hint of the emerald in her eyes.

"You are a true vision, Katie, me own."

"And you are seeing all of me while I see none of you, Jack Gallagher. Is that fair?" She pouted and crossed her arms over those lovely breasts that made him want to suckle like a babe.

It wasn't their first trip to the stables, but the moonlight cast a whole new feel upon the occasion, and he felt a solemnity to the moment that their romps had never drawn from him. He plucked a handful of hay from the rick, and braided it into a circlet.

Kneeling before her on the bed of straw, he reached out and took her hand, slipping the twist of hay about her wrist.

"'Tisn't a band of gold, Katie, but it is from me heart I ask you—officially and before God in His Heaven—will you do me the honor of being me wife?"

Katherine tilted her head. "But I've told you before, Jack, when you asked me at the Martinmas dance. There is no one else in the world that I will wed."

"I know, me love, but that was flirting, and I didn't know if you took me serious. Now I am vowing that I will come back to you with a mound of gold and replace this straw with the finest jewels. I will become a man your father will accept as son, and we will be wed in the church before God and His host."

She lay back in the straw and reached up to him. "Come and love me, Jack, and I will wait for you till Judgment if I must."

Jack was not opposed to the idea, and—in fact—parts of him were already eager for the joining. Quick as he might, he slipped out of his rough-spun clothes and laid him down beside her.

Taking her in his arms, he kissed her long and deep, and then let his lips trail lower to the nubbin on her breast that had caught his eye before. He took it into his mouth, and sucked it until she gasped with pleasure.

"Oh, Jack," she moaned, "take me proper."

Moving up to nuzzle her neck, he covered her body with his, and let his cock slide home where it wanted to rest. She was tight around his shaft, and they moved together in a practiced harmony. Tonight, they went slow at first, savoring their last meeting till the bells of Fortune rang. But the fire between them was not content with the tameness of the hearth, and soon became a raging inferno that burned away all thought and sense.

Jack cried out his release in a voice fit to wake the dead.

They froze in horror. All their plans would be for naught if the squire caught them in the stable in their present state of dress.

He dropped a kiss on her nose and snatched up his trousers. "I must be leaving you now, Katie, me love. We start out at first light."

"We?"

"Aye. Da is sending the three of us packing at once. Crops this season he can harvest with one hand, and having three sturdy lads to feed squeezes each bean till it squeals." He jerked on his trousers and shook out his shirt to remove the hay. "Sean and Paddy will head for a city and try to find some laborer's berth—"

"You sound like that is a bad thing, Jack." Katherine sat up in the straw, her arms hugging her knees.

"Put your clothes on, girl. You'll catch your death—and you are distracting the life out of me."

She stuck her tongue out at him, and pulled her nightdress over her. She began to comb out her curls with her fingers, the hay twist bangle riding up and down on her wrist. "Where will you go if you don't go to the city, Jack?"

"I will make my way through the forest. I think there is treasure to be found there," he replied, sitting to put on his brogues. "A clever man can find fortune anywhere."

"But the forest is full of wild animals and wilder men, Jack. There are tales of a gang of thieves operating from its heart."

"Where better to gain me wealth then? From thieves who've robbed the innocent. I will be righting a wrong while winning your father's support."

"Just come home to me, Jack. That is all that matters."

"By that blessed moon peeking down on us, I swear, Katherine Callaghan. I will return for your hand. Watch for me by the time it rises full again."

"Oh, Jack." She laughed. "Not even you can win a fortune in less than a month."

"Watch for me and see. Got to go, me darlin'. Let's get you back to the house."

Hand in hand they crept back to the kitchen door, and he kissed her hard in parting. "One month. It's all I can stand apart from you, me beauty."

Slipping like a shadow over the crest of the hill to the family farm, Jack thought about his promise. It wasn't an idle one. If he could not make his fortune in a month, he would not be worthy of Katherine's hand. He would return rich in a month or not at all.

* * * *

Morning found Jack dull after a night of tossing and turning. He could not get beyond "the forest" in his plans for the future. Shrugging as he wrapped his spare set of clothing in a kerchief, he told himself, *Sure and I'll find a way to glory. Katie deserves nothing less.*

His tearful mother pressed a packet of food on each brother, and the three set out together from the farm. Their paths lay together for a ways to the crossroads, and they fell to boasting as brothers do.

"I'll be the finest bricklayer in Dublin town," said Sean with a smirk. "It is steady work and an honest trade. Someday I'll have enough to build a brick house all me own. Then Da can sell the farm and he and Ma can live in comfort."

"With you?" scoffed Paddy, scooping a pebble from the road and bouncing it in his hand. "You think that will be comfort? You and the parents in a brick box in Dublin?"

"You'll do better?" asked Sean angrily.

"Aye. I'll learn a *real* trade, like smithing, or carpentry and become a credit to the parents, but I'll no try to bring them to live with me. I'll buy them a cottage where they will have a proper home at last, without wind swirling through the rafters, or trying to grow a crop on stone." Paddy lobbed the rock at a nearby tree.

"You're awful quiet for yourself, Jack," commented Sean. "What will you do now that you are on your own?"

"I shan't be for long," Jack answered absently. "I'll be home and married soon."

Paddy hooted with derisive laughter. "*You* married? What girl would be fool enough to accept *you*?"

Jack flushed. He was used to being the butt of his brothers' jokes—but he would not drag Katherine into it.

"Don't tease him, Pad...he's dreaming again," said Sean with a grin. He shoved Jack's shoulder. "Someday maybe you'll find you a pretty colleen, Jack, but I would grow some hair on my chest before I worried about it."

Katherine thinks me chest has all the hair it needs, Jack thought to himself, but still he remained silent.

They had come to the crossroads. The road they met led off one way in the general direction of Dublin, while it headed off toward Galway Bay in the opposite direction. The road they were following continued on toward the distant trees of the forest. Sean set his face to Dublin, and with a parting wave, headed off along the road. Paddy pointed toward Galway. "I'm for this way, Jack. Which will you be joining, Sean or me?"

Jack nodded toward the forest. "I'm thinking I'll try me luck ahead there."

Paddy shook his head and sighed heavily. "You are a caution, Jack. There is nothing that way but the forest. What life can you find there? Wood-cutter? 'Tis no way for riches."

"Never you mind. I'll find me own way."

"Suit yourself." Paddy shrugged. "I'm off."

"May the wind be ever at your back," murmured Jack, shaking his brother's hand.

He watched Paddy out of sight then set his face for the forest,

and started forward with a song on his lips and a light heart.

The smudge of trees proved farther than it looked in the light of early morning, however, and by midday—when he stopped to wolf down the packet of bread and cheese his mother had given him that dawning—he was footsore and weary of the adventuring life. *Come now, Jack me lad*, he chided himself, *this is no way for a man of your talents to behave. How can you turn this to your advantage?*

He sat awhile on a milestone, his chin propped on his hands and thought about his future. Despite his lofty promises to Katherine, and his heated words to Paddy and Sean, he really wasn't terribly clear on what he should do next to further his ambitions.

A growl of thunder broke his reverie, and he looked up to see that clouds were rapidly filling the bowl of the sky—angry, gray storm clouds from the look of them. Packing up the thin crescent of crust that remained of his nooning, he began to jog toward the trees in the distance. He was still a half-league from the wood when the skies opened and the rain soaked him to the skin. Wet, miserable, and a great deal less confident than he had set out from home that morning, Jack trudged toward the distant trees, hoping that there would at least be a hollow trunk to sleep in.

By the time he reached the forest, his drenched clothing clung to Jack like an importuning lover, and its clammy touch made him shiver. He reached the dubious shelter of the trees shaking like a storm-tossed leaf. Teeth chattering, he slogged up the path with a heavy heart. Why had he come this way? If he had followed one of his brothers, he would be sitting in a warm, dry inn at the moment. Even if his pockets were more empty than not, he could have cadged a pint or two by the fireside while the storm raged rather than tramping through it...

Through the trees before him, he saw a beckoning light, and he staggered toward it, struggling against the rising wind. He soon came to a little thatched house with ill-fitting shutters that allowed the flickering light to escape into the darkness. Raising a fist, he pounded on the door, praying to be heard over the howling of the wind.

The door opened a crack and he glimpsed a cocked eyebrow over an eye narrowed in suspicion. "What do ye want?" growled a gruff voice.

"I seek shelter from the storm. Please, may I come inside and rest a spell?"

"You best move on."

"It is raining to drown a dragon out here," Jack protested, using his most persuasive tone. "Mayn't I come in and share your fire for the night?"

"No rest for you here."

"Why ever not?" asked Jack in surprise. Hospitality was a hallmark of his clan, and he could not understand any who did else.

"The owners of this house be not to home, and they do not like visitors unannounced. Six stalwart men they be, quick of temper and short of wit. 'Tis worth my hide to let you in."

"When might you expect them back?"

"Not till the wee hours. Most like be three or four of the morning ere they return."

Jack stepped closer to the door, and whispered low to the lady inside—for so he had determined his reluctant host to be from her conversation—"I can be long gone by the time they return...but should you be suffered to stay alone when you could have some jolly company?"

He heard a sharp intake of breath.

"What are you for saying?" she answered, her voice quavering a mite.

"Open the door and you shall see," said he.

The pause stretched until he thought he must be turned down...and then the door creaked open, and a flood of light and warmth washed over him. Jack stepped inside the hut gratefully.

Jack took in his new lodgings with a single swift survey. The hut was built of tight-fitting peat blocks, but the door hung askew, as did the shutters, and the wind sent prying fingers through the room, making the fire dance. An iron pot hung above the flames, and a savory aroma perfumed the air. The furniture was spare, but looked strong, and the room was neat, if worn.

His hostess was a lady past her first youth by many a year. She appeared more his mother's contemporary than his own. Heavy chestnut hair streaked with silver was drawn back into a severe bun, and her dark eyes were weary in her lined face. But she was tall and slender, and her faded dress failed to hide a lush figure.

"What be you staring at?" she questioned sharply.

Jack ducked his head and snatched the cap from his dark curls. "Pardon, me lady. I was struck by the sight of you, 'tis all."

A flood of color rose up her neck to stain her cheeks. "Go on with you. Sure and the devil talks with your mouth."

"I speak true, lady. 'Tis a vision you are to a boy like me."

"You've kissed the blarney you have, but you're a good lad. Come sit by the fire and have a bit of supper."

Jack accepted the offer gratefully. He took the bowl she offered him in hands that trembled from anticipation. The sparse noon meal had worn away, and his stomach rumbled at the scent of the thick stew.

The woman laughed at the sound. "Go on and eat it, boy. When you've the first edge off, you can tell me what brings the like of you into the wood with naught but the clothes on your back."

"'Tis a sad tale to be sure," Jack sighed. Sopping up the stew with a hunk of fresh bread, he crammed it into his mouth. He felt nigh starving. Walking was hard work.

When the first edge of the hunger was assuaged, he wiped his sleeve across his mouth and set the bowl on the hearth beside him. Jack cocked his head and studied the figure before him. She was still an attractive woman, despite the years she had on him, and there was kindness beneath her bluster. He owed her his story. "Now for your tale, my lady—" He paused, not knowing her name.

"Bridget will do for you," she replied, with a raised eyebrow.

"And 'tis Jack Gallagher you find before you, Lady Bridget. Me story ain't a long one. Me father's farm is failing. It could no longer support meself or me brothers, so Da sent us out to find our own way."

"And what made you think this wood held your answers?"

Jack contemplated the question with his head cocked as if listening for the answer. "I dunno. Something here calls to me." He shrugged. "Silly, I know, but 'tis the truth."

He shivered, and moved closer to the fire. He could almost see steam rising from the clothing spilling puddles to the hearthstones.

"Here now, get you out of those wet clothes! No use you dying of the chill on me."

Jack felt a heat rising in his face that had nothing to do with the fire. He was not an overly modest man, but stripping to the bare in front of an unknown female was not his normal course either.

"Don't be modest, boy. I keep house for six men here. You think you have anything I haven't seen?" scoffed Bridget. She threw him a towel. "Cover yourself with that if you fear for your virtue."

Irritated by the twinkle in her eye, Jack stripped out of the wet garments, and rubbed briskly at his clammy skin with the towel.

Without the layer of damp cloth between him and the flames, the fire soon warmed him through. Glancing up as he towed his hair, he caught Bridget watching him with her lower lip caught between her teeth. There was a wistfulness to her expression that tore at his heart.

He bound the damp towel about his waist. She looked away, color rising in her cheeks, and busied herself with hanging his wet clothes where the fire would dry them.

“‘Tis a lonely thing you are, ain’t it?” he murmured softly.

She cleared her throat before speaking. “Lonely? Me? Nay. Sure and how could I be with six stout mouths to feed and clean for?”

“Six who see you only as a maid-of-all-work. Am I wrong?”

She shook her head. “You speak true enough. But it doesn’t make no matter.” She darted a glance at him. “I had a husband once. He led this lot. His brothers and cousins they are. Got on the wrong side of a hangman’s noose he did. The others saw themselves as doing right charity to keep me on as slavey.”

Jack felt a well of pity in his heart for this woman who had known love and now must go without in a house of men. He was true to his Katherine, and could not bring himself to berth his ship in a strange harbor...but there might be something he could do for her at that.

He moved toward Bridget. She stared at him with a mixture of fear and longing that made him near weep. “Rest easy, Bridget, me love. I think it is time someone did for *you* a bit. Sit you down here.”

He took her hand and led her to the only comfortable chair in the room. It would have been her husband’s chair, and no doubt his “successor” held court from it now. Tonight, he would show her pleasures that would make her feel like a queen herself.

She allowed him to position her in the chair then gasped when he knelt between her legs. “What are you doing, Jack?”

“Shh, love. Let me work me magic here.” He lifted her heavy skirts and bared the treasures they hid.

She moaned. “Jack, whatever are you for doing?”

“Watch and see. I’ll wager you a pound you’ll be pleased with the results.”

He lowered his dark head and kissed the soft skin of her inner thigh. He felt her shudder at the touch. “It’s been too long for you, lovey,” he murmured against her flesh. “I cannot give you all that you deserve, for I have a sweetheart, and must stay true...but I’ve been told I have a clever tongue.” He glanced up at her with a little smirk.

“Let’s see if the tales be right.”

Dipping his head, he brushed the tip of his tongue across the shy pink folds of her nether mouth. He felt her tremble beneath him. *Good practice, this*, Jack thought to himself, picturing Katie’s face flushed in pleasure. *I’ll teach that girl of mine a few new tricks when next we meet.*

He slowly trailed his tongue up her slit, nipping lightly at the pink folds with his teeth. She moaned, and shifted slightly, opening herself up further for him.

Jack continued to lick slowly at her pleasure center, sucking the kernel of her clit into his mouth and laving it with his tongue. Bridget writhed beneath his attentions, her fingers tangling in his curls. She thrust against his tongue as if it were truly a tiny cock invading her.

He sensed the tension in her mounting. Her hips moved faster and faster, her moans more urgent. Finally, she cried out, and he tasted a flood of salty sweetness as her juices flowed.

She lifted his head through the expedient of tugging on his curls, and he winced. One sight of her tear-stained face made his own discomfort fade away.

“What is it, lass?” he asked anxiously, rising to hug her to his chest.

“That was so beautiful,” she sobbed.

Jack dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “‘Twas the least I could do. ‘Tis saving me life you are, giving me food and shelter like this.”

She pushed away with a little laugh, swiping at the tears on her cheeks. “Go on with you. A strong man like you would not miss a meal and a bed. But I have missed sore what you just gave me.”

“I wish it could be more, and that’s the truth, lady, but—”

“Aye, and so it should be,” she broke in. “Stay your true course, Jack Gallagher.” A twinkle lit her eye. “Though I could give as good as I got, I’ll be bound.”

“Could you now?” The thought intrigued him. This was somewhere that Katie had declined to go...

Pushing him back from the chair, she stood with a rustle of skirts. “Come with me.”

Jack followed her to an alcove screened on one side by the chimney. In the warm, cozy nook was just room for a neatly spread bed.

“You’ll sleep here tonight, Jack. I doubt I will sleep much

anyway.”

“I can’t take your bed!”

“I insist. Now, lie you down upon it, and let me show you a trick or two of me own.”

Jack obeyed. He adjusted the bit of towel self-consciously.

“Oh, you won’t be needing that any more,” Bridget said with a grin, snatching it from around his waist. “You are a healthy lad, aren’t you?”

He felt the fire rush into his cheeks—and other less public places. His cock twitched of its own accord as she stood looking down at him, hands on hips.

“Let’s see if we can get his attention,” she teased, kneeling above him on the bed, her skirts brushing his lower legs. She ran a finger from the base of his cock to the tip, and he bucked. With a mischievous grin, she circled his member with thumb and forefinger and began slowly stroking her way up its length.

Jack gasped. No one had ever handled his cock in that way before—save himself, of course, he *was* a healthy lad, and well acquainted with the practice—and it gave a new potency to the sensation coursing through him. He stiffened quickly beneath her hand.

She bent forward and kissed the tip of his erection. Her breath was warm on his straining cock. Then she took the head of it into the moist cavern of her mouth, and he thought he should go mad.

It was an experience like no other as she began to stroke up and down its length with her warm lips, rolling her tongue against the shaft as she played about his balls with her strong fingers.

“Saints above, woman, what are you doing to me?” he gasped, feeling an inevitable explosion building beneath her ministrations.

She merely peeked up at him through her lashes, eyes twinkling like stars.

“Oh, God in Heaven!” Jack felt his straining cock shoot its seed deep into the well of Bridget’s throat.

She swallowed as he spent, and then sat back on her haunches, a cat-like smile upon her face. “That’s done you proper, Jack me boy. You won’t forget me soon. Not even when you are back with your fine lady.”

“I’ll never forget you, but she is the holder of my heart.”

“I understand, lad. That is the way of the world. Now get some rest. Those wastrels will be home betide, and you will want to be on

your way before they arrive.”

He yawned. “I am a bit tired.” Drawing the worn quilt to his chin, he was asleep before his eyes fully closed.

* * * *

Jack woke feeling utterly refreshed. The room was filled with the golden light of morning—and six brawny brutes glaring down at him. Feeling a bit under-dressed for the occasion, Jack propped himself up on one elbow and returned their scowls with a haughty contempt of his own.

“Who are you, and what be you doing here?” growled the biggest of the six.

Jack sniffed. “I am the Master Thief, and I am looking for apprentices. If I deem you to be any good, I will make rich men of you.”

The leader leered at him. “It’s rich we are already, laddie, but we’ll test your meddle.”

Jack dressed, and Bridget fed the menfolk. He ignored her as if her presence were nothing more than that of a footstool or a trencher, not wishing to cause her any trouble with her men.

After breakfast, the whole pack of them went into the wood. The leader looked Jack up and down. “’Tis a scrawny thing you are. How you can be a fit thief I’d like to see.”

Jack looked down the road and saw a man approaching with a fine goat at the end of a tether. “You see yon farmer?” he asked his companions.

“Aye,” the leader replied.

“Who among you can steal that goat away without a drop of blood or bit of violence?”

The leader hefted the stout cudgel in his hand. “I’d do it with Skullcracker here meself.”

Jack sniffed. “That is the way of a lackwit. Let me show you the finer way.”

He shooed the thieves off into the wood to conceal themselves, and then pulled off his heavy brogues. They were sturdy shoes, and had cost his Da dear at the last harvest fair.

With a shrug, Jack laid one of the shoes in the middle of the dusty road, and then ran a ways along until the road curved and lay the second in the middle of the path. Doubling back to the first shoe, he saw the farmer stop and bend over it.

“Look a’ that,” exclaimed the fellow—a decent man, if rather

slow—who was an acquaintance of his father's. "Who would have thought? 'Tis a shame has not a fellow, for it is a fine piece of craft." The man continued on his way, humming to his goat.

Jack picked up the shoe and followed along behind them.

When the farmer reached the second shoe, he clapped his hand to his forehead. "Look there. 'Tis the mate to the first as sure as I am Tom O'Malley. I was to buy a new pair of brogues at market. With the money saved, I'll buy Joan a warm shawl against the winter." He glanced around. There was no one in sight, for Jack had ducked among the bushes.

He tied the goat to a nearby sapling. "Wait you here. I will go back for the other before I change to the pair."

As soon as O'Malley was out of sight around the bend, Jack dashed to the goat, untied it and, scooping up his other shoe, led it to where the ruffians waited for him. "Easy as anything," he told the leader of the thieves with a shrug as he handed over the halter.

The thief nodded grudgingly. "Not bad."

"But you still need more proof? Fine, if I know O'Malley – and sure if he ain't me Godfather – he'll be wanting to appease his wife for the loss of the goat. Hide you here a mite longer and see what is what."

Sure and enough, a few minutes later, here came O'Malley again, and leading a fine sheep.

"Watch you now, lads, and I will steal you that sheep."

Jack shortened the rope on the goat, and took the spare length to a tree beside the road. He made a swift loop in the rope and slipped it under his arms then threw it over a branch and pulled himself off the ground so he was suspended from the tree. When O'Malley came even with Jack's tree, he saw what looked to be a corpse hanging from its branches.

"Saints preserve us!" breathed the farmer, crossing himself to ward away the ill omen. He hurried away from the awful thing as fast as his legs would go.

As soon as O'Malley was out of sight, Jack let himself down from the tree and, swift as a hare, got ahead of the old farmer to string himself up a second time.

And so it was that a quarter mile down the road, O'Malley saw another hung corpse, and the sight near choked him with fright. He prodded the sheep along faster, hurrying past the dead man.

Again Jack hurried on before him, and again he hung himself in

the tree.

Jack had barely gotten this third rope fastened when O'Malley came around the bend. At the sight of the third "corpse", the farmer cried aloud and stopped dead in his tracks.

"By all that's holy, I must be mad!" O'Malley muttered. "Three hung men in the space of a mile? What has happened to occasion this? I must see if they be real or me mind playing tricks upon me." So saying, he tied the sheep to the nearest tree and trotted back the way he had come.

It was the work of a moment for Jack to free himself from the tree, untie the sheep and lead it away toward the thieves. As he pushed through the brush, his shirt wound round the creature's muzzle to muffle its bleats, he heard O'Malley come back to the spot where he had left the animal.

Guilt washed through him as he heard the man exclaim, "What will Joan say now? The goat and sheep lost, and nothing to show for it. I must sell something for the shawl I promised. Ah well, the bull is in the near field. She won't see me take it, and it will have to do for now." Jack well knew that bull. It was a prizewinner, and a monster of an animal. A worthy treasure that would prove...

Pushing his way through to the clearing where the thieves clustered waiting for him, he presented the sheep to the leader with a flourish. At this further sign of his skills, the gang was most impressed, but still the leader hesitated. After all, he liked his fine life as chief of the clan.

"Still not satisfied, are you?" Jack scoffed. "I tell you plain, I am the best thief amongst you, but I will prove it once and for all. O'Malley has the finest bull in the county, and a shrew of a wife who will want something to show for the loss of the goat and the sheep. I wager he'll be along shortly driving that bull to market. If I steal you that bull with no bloodshed, will you acknowledge I am chief among you?"

The leader of the thieves looked him up and down. "If you can do as you say, then you shall lead in my stead. You have the word of Shamus Finn on that." He stuck out a meaty paw, and Jack solemnly shook it.

"Hide once again, and I will bring you that bull," Jack promised.

As the thieves faded into the trees, Jack's heart pounded in his chest. *What if O'Malley decides to take his losses and not risk the bull after all? Sure and Joan is a fine woman and not the shrew I named*

her. She will not hold the lost animals against Tom. Lord, let him come, and I will make it up to him in time...

Just when Jack could stand it no longer, and was about to admit defeat to his fellows, he heard the jingle of harness coming along the road. Ducking into the brush, he saw O'Malley leading the bull along the track. Jack cupped his hands around his mouth and bleated like a goat.

O'Malley stopped dead in his tracks, his head coming up to listen.

Jack bleated again.

"Lord above! Sure and that sounds like my own that was lost," O'Malley cried. "Perhaps it but slipped the lead, and wanders in the wood."

Slipping along the road a little way, Jack baaed like a sheep.

"And there is the sheep! Heaven be praised, I mayn't have lost them after all!" O'Malley tied the bull to a tree. "Wait you here while I round up your fellows," he told the animal.

Jack led the man a merry chase between bleating and baaing, till he was well away from the road, then silently circled back and untied the strapping bull. He led it to Shamus Finn and slapped the rope into the thief's hand.

"My end of the bargain."

"Aye. You have proved yourself the best among us, and you have the lead. Let us take these fine animals to the glade where we have our stash, and I will show you the secrets of our treasures."

Jack hid his triumph. All was according to plan, and sooner than he expected. He would be home to Katie with his riches well before the month was out!

The band of thieves led him to a large clearing near the cottage. A crag rose up on one side of the clearing, pocketed with small caves. One of these had a cunning door crafted from a boulder that had been bolted to the entrance with sturdy iron hinges. It took all of Finn's massive strength to shift the rock, but behind it were treasures beyond Jack's imaginings. Chests heaped with coins attested to the reign of terror the gang had been perpetrating in the area. Silken cloaks, velvet coats, furs and lace were piled in casual disarray. There was a pungent aroma to the musty air from bags of spices scattered amidst the chests. Everything was disorganized and haphazard, which made Jack's heart glad.

I could cart away half the lot and they would never be the wiser,

he thought to himself. *There are riches enough here to impress even the squire with the worth of my suit. I shall marry Katie before the harvest is ended!*

Finn heaved shut the door again and led Jack to another pocket in the cliff where fine clothing was piled on heavy carved furniture. There were also various bits of specialized wear – here a butcher’s apron, there a nun’s habit – and bundles of rags.

“Our costumes of the trade,” said Finn proudly, lifting a crimson silk gown. “Alex there do make a lovely lady when we need us one.”

The youngest of the thieves blushed as crimson as the dress, ducking his head in protest, but not denying the accolade. Jack could easily see where his delicate features and slim frame would pass for that of a boyish young lady.

Finn clapped Jack on the back. “Come now. Let us go back to the cabin and drink to our new chief!”

A roar of approval went up from the band of ruffians. The rest of the night was spent in drinking and revelry, but even as Jack lifted his mug, Katie’s face was in his thoughts.

* * * *

For the next week, Jack managed through trickery and guile to avoid any compliance in the activities of his thieves. They continued to add to the coffers hidden in the cave, but Jack himself stayed at the cabin with Bridget. They became fast friends in the days spent alone, though there was no repetition of the pastimes of that first night.

On the Saturday next, Finn asked Jack as they sat at breakfast, “Would you mind if the lads and I go to the fair today? We haven’t had a bit of fun for ever so long, and it would be your turn next.”

“By all means,” said Jack. “Go on with you. I’ll be content enough to stay and watch the homestead.”

In faith, he had been chafing to be off home, and this would be a fine time to make his escape. He winked at Bridget, who was in on his game, and she smiled back at him.

As soon as the men had gone, he turned to Bridget. “Well, my lovely. We have the day to ourselves. Have you ever seen the treasure caves?”

She snorted. “Me? Do you think Finn and his lot would take me to see their precious horde? I am kept in this house like a lackey. I don’t even know where they lie.”

“Grab anything you want to take away from here, and let us be off. We’ll not be coming back.”

Bridget looked around the cabin that had been her bridal bower. She picked up a worn testament and a faded photograph. "Me wedding," she shrugged. "Nothing else I want here."

"I'll take you where you can set yourself up as a fine lady," Jack promised. "Grab the stew pot." He picked up the water bucket. "We'll haul one last load from here."

Bridget shook her head in bemusement, but swept up the pot as instructed.

Jack led the way to the clearing with the caves. "It will take the both of us to shift this rock," he told her as they stood before the treasure trove. "Then you will be glad of the pot."

He set his shoulder to the rock, and with Bridget's help, the door grated slowly back until they could slip behind it. The morning sunlight filled the cavern with a dim glow, sparking here and there off coin and gem.

Bridget gasped behind him.

Jack chuckled. "Finn and the boys have been right busy fellows, Bridget. It is fair you get your piece of it."

She threw her arms around him and kissed him soundly. "If you weren't taken, Jack Gallagher, I'd marry you myself! You are a wonder to be sure."

Jack kissed her back. "And you are deserving of more than you've gotten, Bridget Finn. Load your pot with pretties, and put on one of those fine dresses. I'm taking you away from all this."

Like children in a candy store, the two of them picked through the treasure hoard, taking only the best of the jewelry and as much gold as they could carry. Throwing modesty to the winds, they stripped bare and dressed again from the skin out in fine silks and linen. Bridget threw a heavy velvet cloak across her shoulders and stood petting the soft fabric.

"I'd never have guessed there were such riches so close to home as stingy about the household as that Shamus Finn has been! Makes my blood fair boil that he told me there was naught to fix the shutters and had this treasure to hand."

"Some people are funny with riches, Bridget. They hoard against tomorrow with no thought of today's needs. But 'tis good for us, no?" He picked up a small purse from among the litter of oddities and filled it with gold coin. "I've all I can carry," he said, hefting his bucket, "but there is one more stop I would make."

He led the way to the costume cave, and spent a few minutes

picking through the assembled garb. As he filled a knapsack with various articles of clothing, he explained, "I may still have a bit of convincing to do on the other end of the marrying proposition. My bride is willing, but her father less likely to be so."

"If anyone can persuade an unwilling father, 'tis you, Jack. You can charm the birds from their trees."

"Tell that to Squire Callaghan. But I will marry that girl. One way or another."

They made sure that the rock was back in place, and there was no sign of their presence. Let the thieves think what they would about the disappearance of their new leader and Bridget. Jack planned to turn the pack of them in to the squire before the end of it all.

He helped Bridget up on the back of O'Malley's bull, and took the leads of all three animals in hand. It wasn't far to the O'Malley farm, and he had felt badly about the animals since the day he'd stolen them.

Arriving at the neat little farmhouse, he helped Bridget down and knocked on the door. Tom O'Malley answered himself.

"Excuse me, sir," said Jack, roughening his voice, "I was wondering if you could help me?"

"Sure and I'll try," answered O'Malley. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"I found these beasts wandering loose, and I wondered if you might know where they belonged?" Jack gestured to the animals behind him.

"Praise be to Heaven! They are my very own stock what were lost in the wood."

"Then I see I have come to the right place." He bowed. "I return them to you."

He took Bridget's arm and turned to go.

"Wait!" called O'Malley, who had been examining his beasts. "You've left something behind." He indicated a small purse tied to the goat's halter.

"'Tis none of mine," shrugged Jack. "You are welcome to whatever it holds."

He led Bridget away from the house.

"Why did you do that?" she asked curiously.

"What?"

"I saw you fill that purse. Why did you gift him with the gold?"

Jack kicked at a stone. "I felt badly for worrying him by stealing

the animals in the first place. They represented most of the wealth in the house. Just paying a rental fee on them.” He smiled crookedly.

Bridget leaned over and kissed his cheek. “You are a fine man, Jack Gallagher.”

He ducked his head. “Not so special. At least according to the squire.”

“You’ll prove him wrong, lad. Don’t you fear.”

They walked along in companionable silence until they reached his father’s farm. At the gate, Jack hesitated.

“What’s wrong?”

“Is it enough, Bridget? Did I bring enough to satisfy the squire and save my father’s farm both? Or must I choose?”

“If it comes to that, you’ll do what’s right, Jack,” she replied softly, “but it won’t. For a roof over my head and work for my hands your father is welcome to my share of the treasure. That is all the wealth I need.”

“Bridget, I—”

“Hush, now, and introduce me to your parents. This should be interesting.” She favored him with an impish grin.

Pulling his fine hat down to shade his eyes, Jack grinned back, and knocked upon the door.

His mother opened it, looking worn and fragile. “Yes?”

“God bless all within the house. Can a man find bed and board within?”

“This is a poor house, sir. ‘Tis little we can offer, but what there is you are welcome to share.”

“What if I bring my own gold?” he shouted, picking her up and spinning her around.

“Sir!” she protested. “You forget yourself.”

“Don’t you know your own son, Ma?” Jack pushed back his hat.

“Jack! Oh, Saints be praised!”

“And I wasn’t lying about the gold, Ma. Look!” He dumped the bucket of treasure on the kitchen table.

“Oh, Jack! What have you gone and done?”

“Nothing wicked, I assure you,” said Bridget from the doorway. She stepped into the warmth of the kitchen and added the contents of the stew pot to the pile. “Rescued a lady in distress and divested a band of thieves of a little ill-gotten wealth.”

“Jack...?” His mother frowned.

“The Lord’s truth, Ma. I’ll tell you all about it when Da gets in

from the fields. Might two hungry travelers find a bit of bread and a bit of ale?"

"Sure and I am forgetting my manners. Do sit you down. My lady..."

"Bridget will do. I am grateful for the shelter, Mistress Gallagher."

"Anne."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Anne." Bridget nodded as regally as a fine-born lady.

Jack hid a smile. He wasn't the only one good at pretending to be something he was not.

It had been a long day, and by the time their adventures were told, all were ready for a good night's sleep. But before his father retired, Jack took his arm and led him aside. "I need you to do me a favor, Da."

"And what is that, lad?" asked Fergus.

"Go you to the squire tomorrow and tell him I would wed his daughter Katherine."

"What?"

"I wish to wed the landlord's daughter. It is proper that you should tell him so, is it not?"

"Lord, Jack, and it is a fool's errand you send me on. I will be lucky if he doesn't set the dogs on me. If he asks why he should grant you her hand, what should I say?"

"Tell him I am a Master Thief, and worth a thousand pounds to hand with more to be had. Tell him I stole it from the biggest band of cutthroats as yet unhanged, and that I will gladly give them up as part of the bridal bargain."

"A droll message indeed. I see this ending badly."

"Just tell him, Da. And make sure that Kati – Miss Katherine – is nearby when you do."

"Sounds as if you and the lady are not strangers."

"We are...a bit acquainted."

"You'll come to no good end, Jack, and that's a fact. But you are my boy, and I love you, so I will do as you ask."

* * * *

The next morning, in a fever of impatience, Jack saw his father off to the hill, and paced the kitchen until he returned. "Well?"

The old man shook his head and chuckled. "You are a caution, Jack. I don't know what you've done, but the squire wasn't as

surprised by the request as I would have expected. I gave your message while the lass stood by. The lord laughed, and said to tell you 'if he steals the goose off the spit on Sunday next, I'll consider it.' And the young lady met me outside as I was leaving to say, 'tell Jack I'm glad he's home.'"

Jack's heart leapt up just to hear that Katie was thinking of him. Tonight, he'd be at the casement with his pebbles...and perhaps a roll in the hay? He grinned.

"Wipe that foolish smile from your face, me lad," chided Fergus. "If you are home, then there are chores. The farm won't run itself despite your gold."

At least the work made the time pass quickly. His father kept him busy about hearth and field until the sun sank low then relented. "Get you down to the stream for a bath, lad. You stink of work. It would not do to meet your lady thus."

Jack started to protest the implication, but the truth of the statement hit him full in the nostrils, and he nodded instead. "Aye, Da. You are right about the need for a bath. I'll be to the house for dinner."

Jack strolled to the stream running through the farm, his mind on Katie. Anticipation of seeing her again stiffened his rod against the chafe of his trousers. By the time he reached the stream, it was an uncomfortable pressure that he gratefully released by doffing his clothes.

The water of the stream was cold against his bare flesh, but even its icy touch could not fully douse his ardor. He closed his eyes and pictured Katie's creamy flesh, gloving his staff in his hand. Pretending it was her sheath enclosing his cock, he stroked it slowly to a hardness he ached to relieve.

"Now that is a sight for sore eyes," purred a beloved voice behind him.

Jack froze, his rod heavy in his hand. He glanced over his shoulder. "I was just thinking of you, love."

"I can see that," Katie replied with a grin. "At least I *hope* it is me you think on."

She sat upon the grassy bank. "Do go on with what you were doing."

"I would rather not."

She propped her chin upon her hands. "Please. I have never seen a man do that. I am curious to see the finish."

Jack lowered his eyes to his cock. It had shrunk self-consciously at the sound of her voice. "Easier said than done, Katie me love."

"Oh, I am sure you can revive it." Her grin took on a saucy edge. "Tell you what. You go on with what you were doing, and I'll do this." She hiked her skirt up to reveal her fiery mound, and ran a finger along her slit.

Jack groaned. "Katie, darlin'—"

Her eyes fell to slits as she continued to play about her hidden delights. She toyed with the little nubbin of flesh guarding her channel, biting her lip as she inserted a long finger into her cunt.

The rod grew stiff beneath his hand once more. The sight of Katie fingering herself made him long to plunge into those depths himself, but she had made her desires plain. He pretended that the cup of his hand was her warm sheath, and soon felt the pressure that spoke of release building within him.

"Lord, 'tis now!" he croaked out.

Katie's eyes flew open and her pleasuring strokes grew faster as she fixed her gaze on his cock.

With a little cry of release, Jack shot his seed into the stream.

"Oh, Jack!" Katie moaned, her lovely face reflecting her own climax. She shucked off her light dress and slid into the water beside him. "Oh! It's cold!"

"I'll warm you up, me darlin'," he promised, taking her in his arms.

She kissed him soundly. "Thank you, Jack. That was most enlightening." The impish grin on her face set his heart a-fluttering.

"Always glad to be of service."

"Speaking of service," she said, her voice now solemn, "I've been to your house looking for you."

Unease raised its head in his breast. "Aye?"

"I spoke to your new lodger, Mrs. Finn."

"Did ya indeed?"

"Yes. She is a handsome woman." Katie pulled away from him and swam a few strokes down the stream.

"Is she now? I hadn't noticed."

"Jack, she told me all about what you did for her...and she for you. I-I don't mind. Honestly I don't. She also told me what you wouldn't do, and why. *That* I love you for."

"She told you all, did she?" Jack levered himself up on the bank of the stream.

“Yes...and I would like to try that.”

His heart near stood still. “Try what?”

She swam up to him, planting herself between his knees. “This.” Reaching out and taking hold of his cock, she bent down and placed the tip of it in her mouth.

The warmth of her mouth after the chill mountain stream sent a shiver right through him, and Jack felt his rod twitch.

Tentatively, Katie slid the flaccid member further into her mouth, teasing it with her tongue.

Jack groaned, leaning back on his elbows to give her better access. “Do you know what you are doing to me, girl?”

Katie didn’t answer, but her eyes sparkled wickedly as she sucked and teased his cock. After a few minutes of her ministrations, the rod had regained its former glory.

“Unless you want to be learning everything at once, you best let me out of your mouth,” Jack said tersely, “for I am about to explode.”

Katie took him at his word, letting him slip from her mouth, but continuing to stroke his cock. Once more, he shot his seed into the flowing stream.

Katie grinned. “Did I do well, Jack?”

Jack leaned forward and took the sides of her face in his hands. “You did marvelous, Katie girl. Do you hold against me my time with Bridget?”

“Nay, Jack. She explained it all, and I think you are a fine man to aid her loneliness thus. But now she is away from that house, and you are home to me...so I expect she can find her own company from now on.” The stern expression on Katie’s dear face made him laugh aloud.

“Sure, and I promise.”

“Good. Now, get dressed so we can plan this affair of the goose.”

They dressed with more haste than care, for the air was beginning to chill now that the sun was mostly hidden. Hand in hand, they started for the farmhouse.

“How can I steal the goose off the spit when you are all to luncheon, Katie? If it were while you were to Mass, mayhaps, but while the family is to home? ‘Tis a difficult proposition indeed.”

“You must divert their attention away, Jack. I know you will think of something wonderful.”

“Your faith is heartening,” he answered wryly.

“Keep your thought on the prize, my love. If you succeed, it will

go a long way toward persuading Father that you are clever enough to deserve my hand. He has sworn not to marry me to a dullard.” She batted her lashes at him.

He chuckled. “Then I must doubly prove myself. And I must think tonight instead of play as I planned.” He kissed her forehead.

She made a little face. “You could do both.”

“The wait will sweeten the joining, Katie girl. It is time to plan for an eternity together instead of dally in the moment.”

“You are right, as usual,” she sighed. “Thank Heaven that tomorrow is Saturday. I’ll expect you on Sunday.”

“Expect not me, my love. I will be in disguise,” he said with a wink.

“Then I will expect some stranger more brash than bright.” She squeezed his hand. “I’ll go on home from here.”

“Will you be alright? The dark has fallen.”

“It isn’t far, and there is moonlight. A kiss for luck, Jack.” She planted it on his lips. “And I’ll see you Sunday morn.”

* * * *

Sunday dawned bright and clear, and by the time Squire Callaghan and his family had returned from Mass, Jack was ready for the goose. As the lord and his lady sat in the cozy kitchen on Sunday pursuits, waiting for the dinner to be ready, and the young lady of the house pretended to read, there was a knock at the back door.

The servant who opened it found a decrepit old man leaning on a stick.

“G’day to you, mistress,” said the beggar in a quavering tone. “Might the house have a bite to spare a poor man this Sabbath?”

“I’m sure we can find something,” called the squire from his chair, “but we are a bit crowded at the moment, so it will have to wait for dinner to be done. Sit you there on the step till after, and we’ll make you a plate.” He was taking no chances on Jack getting into the kitchen for the goose.

Jack—for, of course, the beggar was he—nodded amiably and sat upon the step with a groan befitting his apparent age. Surreptitiously, he slipped the haversack from his shoulders, and released a fat, brown hare into the garden.

One of the servants, on glancing out the open window, saw the rabbit and cried out, “My Lord, there is a big hare trampling the garden. Should we go and catch it for tomorrow’s pie?”

“Catch a hare?” scoffed the Squire, his voice ringing through the

open window. "You've better chance of flying. Leave it be."

Eventually, the hare found a hole in the garden wall and escaped, but clever Jack released a second in the same place, so it appeared it had remained.

The servant looked out the window again, and his voice was filled with amazement. "My Lord, it is still there after all this time. Can't we have a go at it? The hall door is locked, and Master Jack could not get in. Can we not chase the hare? A rabbit pie is tasty."

"Sit still and silent. There will be other rabbits to be had."

Jack grinned beneath the beard of his disguise. He knew the Squire's fondness for rabbit pie, and that—with patience—he would pique the master's interest as surely as he had the man's.

A little later, as the second hare made its eventual escape, Jack released a third. It scampered about under the kitchen window as if taunting those within.

"Master! He still is in the garden, and he is trampling the new growth...can we not have a go?"

At this, the Squire relented. "After him boys!"

As the household pelted out of the kitchen, men and boys to chase the rabbit, womenfolk to watch, the beggar plucked the squire's sleeve. "Should I turn the spit for ye, sir? 'Twould not do to spoil the goose."

"Do," answered the squire distractedly, "and don't let a single soul in while you watch it."

"Sure and I won't."

Jack closed the kitchen door behind them, eased the goose from the spit, and was out the hall before the rabbit made its escape. He ran home over the hill, and bade his father send a message back to the squire to come for dinner.

As he pushed away his plate of goose bones some time later, the Squire shook his head. "You are too clever by half, Jack Gallagher. But that was too easy a trick to win the hand of my only heir. You steal away the six horses from under the six men watching them tonight in my stables, and she shall be your bride."

Inwardly, Jack seethed at the duplicity. He had been promised his Katie, and Callaghan was being less than honorable. But he was the landlord before all, so he must be appeased. Jack could not risk his father's farm on the squire's displeasure. Outwardly, he smiled and nodded. "'Tis good as done, my lord."

Katie took his hand as they were leaving and leaned in close.

“Meet me at the stream at sunset. I have a plan. And bring Bridget with you.” She kissed him on the cheek and hurried after her parents.

Mystified, Jack nodded absently. *What is the girl cooking up now?*

The time before their meeting passed slowly as Jack wracked his brains for a solution to the squire’s new test—and a clue as to Katie’s “plan.”

At the appointed time, Jack and Bridget walked down to the stream.

“She’s a fine girl, your Katherine.”

“Aye.”

“With her on your side, you will win over the squire, never fear.”

Jack sighed. “It is just a mite frustrating to have the rules changing from under me. He promised me her hand. Am I to think it is a lie?”

“She’s his only darling, Jack. It is difficult for him to realize she wants another man and a home and family of her own.” Bridget shrugged her shoulders.

“Jack!” Katie called, grabbing him and hugging him tight. “I have a marvelous idea for how you can beat my father at his own game. And Bridget—you are the key. Sit.”

They sat upon the grassy bank. Katie shook out a ragged shift and skirt and placed them on the ground beside her. Then she pulled a pair of bottles from a bag and held them up with a grin.

“We get them drunk?” asked Jack, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

“Not just drunk, silly. I have laced this second bottle with some of Mother’s laudanum. They will sleep the night away.”

“How do we get them to obligingly drink themselves to distraction?”

“That’s where Bridget comes in. Her face is not familiar about the village. And with a bit of a disguise, she will be able to handle things quite nicely. Then you and I will gather the horses and lead them away. Now, get out of that dress, Bridget.”

“Excuse me?”

“You are too fine a lady for the men to accept as a stable crawler. That’s what these are for.” She pointed to the rags. “We must disguise you a bit.”

Bridget shook her head, a half-smile brushing her lips, but reached for the buttons on her dress. By the time Bridget was dressed in the rags with her hair in a sloppy bun at the nape of her neck, Jack

could almost believe the plan would work. Silly as it seemed.

"Now, Bridget," Katie said earnestly, "these are good men, so fear not any misdeeds, but be careful with the drug. Don't let any one fellow over-indulge. Sharing around the other bottle first will ease that worry." She pointed to a mark upon the cork of the drugged bottle. "This is the laced wine. Make sure the other is drunk first."

"Don't worry, my lady. I will see it done." Bridget stowed the bottles in the bag that Katie had brought and tied it at her waist.

"We will wait for the wee hours to take them off their guard. I must go back to the house for a bit to allay suspicions, but I will slip out at midnight to help with the horses," Katie promised.

"Come along with you, girl. I'll walk you back to the house."

"You don't have to do that, Jack—"

"I know. But I want to." He took her firmly by the hand and tugged her to his chest. "I want to walk with the woman I love? Is that a crime?"

Katie's laugh rang in the twilight. "Sure and it's not." She snuggled closer to him, her head resting on his shoulder. "You are the man for me, Jack Gallagher. I am sorry for Father's duplicity, but if he fools us again, I will run away with you if you but say the word."

Jack dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "No you won't, my lass. I intend to marry you proper in a church on a Sunday with the blessing of your house. No matter what hoops he makes us leap through."

Katie tilted up her face for a proper kiss. "I love you, Jack Gallagher."

"And I love you, Katherine Maura Callaghan. Now and forever. But let's get you home before your father has me hide." He swatted her behind, and Katie squealed.

"Do that again, and I may rethink my position," she sniffed.

Jack grinned in the darkness. It was going to be an interesting night.

* * * *

When the clock on the mantel struck midnight, Jack eased out his bedroom window and ran across the hill to the squire's estate. Long practice made the way easy even though the night was cloudy and little moonlight struck the ground.

He tossed a pebble at Katie's window, and it opened. She stuck her head out and nodded wordlessly, then the casement was shut again. In a fever of impatience, Jack waited what seemed a lifetime

for the girl to open the kitchen door and join him.

Katie wore her darkest dress; a deep green gown meant more for dancing than skullduggery. The neck was cut so low that he could see the tops of her creamy breasts reflecting what little light there was.

"You sure the men will be sleepin'?" he scowled. "If not, they'll get an eyeful sure with that getup."

Katie sniffed. "You liked it well enough at the Martinmas dance, now didn't you? 'Tis all I have that is dark enough for the purpose."

Jack trailed the back of his hand across the top of one full breast. "And 'tis lovely on you, lass. 'Tis jealous o' what they might see I am."

"No need to be," she purred, arching into the touch of his hand. "What you see is all for you."

"And I'd love to be seeing more o' it," he replied with a chuckle, "but Bridget should be about her bit by now."

Stealthily as alley cats, they crept to the stable and peered in through the door, which stood slightly ajar.

A lantern at each end lighted the stable. The squire was taking no chances on Jack slipping up on the watchers unawares. Six of the stoutest of the men in his employ sat upon the horses, and all had a cudgel to hand.

Bridget stood in the center of the barn, stooped as if forty years had added in a day, and spoke to the largest of the men in a quavering voice in no way like her own. "Aw, sur, 't be sure I thankee fer tha warm spot 't rest me bones. 'Tis perishin' cold out fer a lady o' me years. But I am no' empty handed. I can pay fer tha horspitality wit' a bottle o' tha best." She slipped a bottle out of the bag at her side and took a long pull on it. Smacking her lips, she offered it to the big man. "Would ye like some?"

The man hesitated only an instant. "Kindly of you, mistress." He took a swallow and made to hand it back.

"Pass it along," Bridget ordered, waving it off. "Yer men look as if a drop would not be amiss. I'll take mine at tha end."

The bottle went around the stable, and Jack couldn't help but notice that it changed direction at the end and made the journey back through the line before finding its way into Bridget's hands once more. *Neatly done*, he thought.

When the bottle was back at Bridget, she upended it, and then wiped her mouth on her sleeve. "That hit where 'twas hurtin' right enough."

“Aye.” The leader of the men nodded his agreement. “Thankee, kindly. ‘Tis the best brew ever to pass my tongue, for sure.”

“Would ye care for a mite more?” Bridget asked, pulling the drugged bottle from her bag. “There’s enough left for meself in tha first, and I would be honored t’ share this one with me new friends.”

She handed up the bottle and it made its way around the circle as she pretended to drink the rest of her own. By the time the last man was taking his turn, the first was nodding in his saddle, and soon all six were snoring like babes.

Jack and Katie eased open the stable door and stepped into the warmth of the building. Jack gave Bridget a brief hug.

“Let’s get them off the horses,” he whispered.

Working together, they lifted the men off the horses and laid them in the straw of the stalls. Katie produced some sacking, and they muffled the hooves of the horses. Then the three of them led the horses down the hill to the Gallagher farm.

Once the animals were safely secured in an outbuilding, Jack let out a crow of triumph. “We did it!”

Katie threw her arms around his neck. “That we did, my clever Jack!”

“Clever? Me?” he snorted. “‘Twas your plan first to last, me girl. ‘Tis you who are the clever one.”

“Take me home, Jack. It is late.”

And so he did.

As they walked in the still night, holding hands, Katie ventured to speak. “Jack...”

“Yes, love?”

“Horses are so...endowed. How do they manage the mating?”

“Have you never seen a horse to stud, and you a squire’s daughter?” he asked in amazement.

“No. Father doesn’t like me around the barns.”

Jack felt his face grow hot at the thought of explaining such a thing, but he cleared his throat and tried. “Well, lass, the stallion stands behind the mare, and takes her that way.”

“I see.”

They reached the low wall outlining the garden of the estate and Katie stopped. She turned to Jack in the gloom. He could see her eyes glinting in the dim light.

“Show me.”

“Excuse me?” It was the second time this evening that Katie had

stunned her listener to stammered apology.

“Show me how the horses do it from behind.”

“Well, I ain’t no horse for one thing, and neither are you, for another.”

“Does that mean you can’t?”

Jack felt himself hardening at the thought of such a mating. Of *any* mating with Katie to be honest, but the sauciness of the idea added spice to the notion.

“Stand against the wall there,” he ordered, “back to me. Lean over and rest your elbows atop it.”

Katie did as she was asked, and Jack took his place behind her. He flipped up the heavy skirts to find himself faced with the perfect moon of Katie’s bare ass.

“Katherine Callaghan, where are your drawers?”

Her reply was choked with laughter. “I thought we might have occasion to dally on the way home, and I didn’t want to waste any time.”

He gave her backside a little slap. “Don’t you be going bare beneath your clothing for anyone but me, girl!”

“I promise, Jack,” she replied, with a simper.

Jack unbuttoned his trousers and freed his rod. The sight of her bent over the wall had hardened it like iron. He stepped up close behind her and reached his hand down to caress the silken skin of her inner thigh.

Katie trembled beneath his touch, and spread her legs a little wider.

He traced a finger across her slit, feeling a slick of moisture ready for him. He guided the head of his cock to its favorite resting place, and slid into her. The angle was not what he was used to, and the sensation entirely different from their earlier sport.

Katie moaned and arched her back. “Ah, Jack. That feels...indescribable.”

“Aye,” he murmured, playing with her breasts beneath the gown.

Impatiently, Katie pulled them free of their restraints. “Touch them proper, Jack.”

He teased the hardened nipples as he stroked into her from behind. The height of the wall was perfect for the adventure, allowing him to plunge deeper than he had yet had occasion to go.

The novelty of the enterprise worked against him in one way—he had barely begun before he felt the gathering tide within him. “Ah,

God in Heaven, Katie me love, I am perishing for sure!”

She reached behind her and clutched him closer. “Not on your life, Jack Gallagher. You promised me a church wedding.”

With one more powerful thrust, he shot his seed into her well, collapsing on top of her. “Aye, darlin’,” he whispered against her hair. “That I did, and that I will.”

He hugged her tightly, and then withdrew. “Straighten yourself up, love. You must get home to bed before you are caught out.”

As Katie fussed about her dress, Jack straightened his own clothing. By the time she was ready, he had regained control of himself.

“Let’s get you home.”

They walked to the house in companionable silence, and he kissed the tip of her nose as they stood at the kitchen door. “I’ll bring the horses round first thing in the morning. Then your father will have to keep his bargain. We’ll be married this time next week.”

Katie hugged him close. “That sounds like heaven, Jack.”

“Now, go on with you. Morning comes soon enough.”

He watched her steal into the house, and knew that she had already stolen his heart. A proper wife for the Master Thief.

He grinned in the darkness as he made his way home.

* * * *

The next morning, Jack put on his best clothes and rode the finest of the horses to the squire’s gate, leading the others behind him. He slid off the horse before Squire Callaghan, who stood waiting, Katie at his side.

“I believe these belong to you, sir.” He handed over the reins with a bow.

The squire accepted with a bow of his own and a shake of his head. “Faith, you are a clever rascal, Jack. But I think we both have been less than true in our dealings. I don’t believe for an instant that you pulled this off alone.

“I’ll tell you what,” he continued. “One more test of your mettle and, if you prevail, I will give you my daughter before God on Sunday next.”

Inwardly, Jack seethed, but he grit his teeth and nodded. “Name your test.”

“Steal the sheet from beneath my wife and myself as we lie abed this evening, and the girl shall be yours.”

Katie opened her mouth to protest, but her father’s raised hand

stopped her.

“And, so you know, Miss Katherine here shall be locked inside her room tonight—for her own safety, you understand.”

With a glance over his shoulder at Katie, Jack strode away from the estate, struggling to keep hold of his temper. His walk down the hill did nothing to assuage his temper, however, and by the time he reached his own door, he was fit to be tied.

In a foul mood, he slammed into the kitchen and threw his hat to the floor.

“Good morning to you too, Jack,” said Bridget dryly, glancing up at him through her lashes.

“Damn him to the fires of Hell!” he spat, grateful that his father was about the farm and nowhere near to hear him.

“I take it things did not go well with the squire?”

“He set another task, and ‘tis close enough to impossible not to matter.”

“What is it, Jack?”

Jack paced the kitchen, kicking his hat. “He has tasked me t’ steal the very sheet from his bed, after he and the wife have retired for the evening.”

“A tricky test indeed.”

“And Katie to be locked in her room like a criminal because of me. ‘Tain’t fair!”

“It never is, lad.” Bridget shook her head in commiseration. “But let’s think on the problem rather than curse Fate.”

Jack threw himself into a chair at the table, propping his chin in his hands. “I don’t much see a way to beat this one, Bridget.”

Bridget put down the sampler she was stitching and crossed her arms on the table. “You must outsmart him, Jack. You and Katie are a match for sure, and you’ll neither be happy unless you are together, but you are as stubborn as you are in love, and will not be satisfied unless you win.”

Jack sighed. “You are right there. Katie would elope with me in a heartbeat if I but said the word, but I am determined she’ll get her proper Church wedding.”

Bridget leaned closer. “Then put your mind to it. Where do they sleep?”

“In a room at the back of the house. Katie’s pointed out both door and window. The room overlooks the garden.”

“Ground or top?”

“Top.”

Bridget sat a moment in thought then a wicked smile slowly bloomed across her face. “I have an idea.”

* * * *

When the moon rose that evening, Jack and Bridget crept up the hill to the squire’s estate, burdened with various odds and ends. Together, they stole into the garden, and Jack pointed upward to a window lit by the glow of a single candle.

“’Tis there,” he whispered.

“All right then,” she replied in kind. “Get you to your place.”

“You are sure that you will be all right for your part?”

“Don’t you worry for me, Jack.”

“At least let me help with this bit.” He helped her assemble a figure of straw dressed in some of his meanest work clothes. They jammed a pole up its back, and soon had as fine a scarecrow as ever graced an Irish field.

Jack pulled the cap from his own head and stuck it atop the straw-filled one. Together they levered the figure upright.

“You sure you can manage?” Jack grunted. “’Tis heavier than I expected.”

“Hurry on to the kitchen door. Let’s win you your bride.”

With a grin, Jack did as he was bid. He had no doubt the squire would be on watch for a trick. This one should be a little more than he bargained for.

Jack slid into the shadows beside the kitchen door, waiting for the reaction he expected to Bridget’s plan. He positioned himself behind the arc of the door, and held his breath.

Suddenly, the squire’s voice rang out in the night – “I see you, you scoundrel! Here’s a lesson for you!” There was the crack of a pistol, and Jack froze at the sound.

What if Bridget is hurt? It should never have come to guns...

Even as the thought petrified him, she came pelting around the corner of the house and hid herself in the shadows beside him. “He’ll be down shortly,” she panted.

“What happened?”

“Shh...be ready.”

They heard shouts and pounding feet within the house, even through the stout oak door. It flew open, almost splitting Jack’s skull, and the squire rushed out past them, not even glancing toward the shadows where they crouched.

“Go and tell the mistress poor Jack’s been killed,” ordered Bridget in a laughing whisper, pushing him toward the house.

Jack ducked around the door and raced up the stair to the bedchamber door. He took a deep breath and called gruffly, “Wife, wife—throw me the sheet off the bed. The lad’s been hurt, and there is blood needs staunching.”

He heard the mistress’s voice within, full of sympathy and fright. “I thought ‘twas merely powder in the gun, you said.”

“I-indeed. He ain-hasn’t been shot. He took fright and fell. Hurry. He’s bleeding awful.”

The door opened, and the sheet was thrust out into the dark hallway. “Take it, Jack,” she murmured. “You’ve naught to prove to me. Katie loves you, and that’s enough.”

Startled, he hesitated.

“Hurry, lad. Whatever trick you’ve pulled below, he’ll be back up the stair in a moment. Get you gone—and you treat my Katie well.”

“I promise.” He took the sheet from her hand, and planted a grateful kiss on her cheek before dashing back down the stair and out the front.

As he cleared the kitchen, he heard the squire come in from the garden, and the man’s bellow of rage when he learned the sheet was gone fair shook the casements of the house. But clever Jack was out the front door and away, laughing merrily all the way home.

* * * *

There was nothing for it with all the womenfolk on Jack’s side but that the squire must this time live up to his bargain.

The next Sunday, dressed in her mother’s wedding gown, Katie Callaghan married Jack Gallagher before God and all. And they lived happily ever after—as all well-matched couples do—the squire’s daughter and the cunning thief.

The End

The Mists of Connemara
by
Isabelle Kane and Audrey Tremaine

Landscape artist Briana Dwyre has seemingly lost everything. Now blind, Briana withdraws to a remote cottage on the coast of Connemara. There, her solitude is shattered by a handsome Connemara stallion in the day and a splendid fairy lover by night. Uistean, a Sidhe, inspires her to draw with her mind's eye. At his side, she experiences sensations and situations beyond mortal ken. But will Briana dare to follow her heart and her true love to *Tir na nOg*, beyond the mists of Connemara?

<http://www.isabellekane.com/>

The Mists of Connemara
by
Isabelle Kane and Audrey Tremaine

As a young child, Brianna Dwyre believed in fairies. In fact, she'd seen them, drawn them, spoken with them, even befriended them. One in particular, Uistean the Fair of the Tuatha de Danaan, had been a special friend and companion to her throughout her childhood. By the time she was ten, she'd learned it wasn't wise to speak of Uistean and the other fairies to her schoolmates, parents, and teachers. She'd overheard her mother whisper to an aunt: "We're hoping she'll outgrow this imaginary friend stage soon. It's cute, but rather embarrassing. It's almost like she prefers these fantasies of hers to real people. Perhaps I should bring it up with the pediatrician."

She'd learned to keep the fairies and Uistean to herself. The only person with whom she discussed them with after that was her older sister, Moira. Moira listened to her babbling about her fairies and never made a comment. Brianna felt she could confide in her. But then one evening as fifteen-year-old Moira was applying mascara in her vanity mirror, getting ready to go to a school dance, she'd expressed her true feelings to her sister.

"Don't you think it's time to let the whole fairy thing go, Bri? Enough's enough. You don't really believe in fairies still, do you?" Her voice dripped with sarcasm as she met her sister's glance in the mirror. "You do realize they're about as real as Santa Claus, don't you?"

Brianna never answered.

Moira turned her head from side to side as she admired the affect of the blue mascara on her lashes. "Honestly, Bri, you are just so weird sometimes. Such a baby."

Brianna didn't cry then...not until she was alone in her own room. Then, she sobbed, muffling the sounds in her pillow. It was a

terrible dilemma for a girl of her age. Like any young teen, she wanted to be “normal,” accepted by her peers, and deep down inside, she recognized that Moira voiced the opinion that others would share. Brianna’s visits to the Rath, the ancient Celtic earthen fortress outlined with rocks, diminished. The number of fairies awaiting her diminished as well, until only Uistean remained.

He was always delighted to see her, and they passed their time together in the usual pleasant ways; he sang to her stories of Ireland’s past and she drew him. They wandered along the edge of the surf, or they galloped madly through it with him in the form of a Connemara stallion and her astride him. She knew he sensed her withdrawal, she witnessed the pain in his dark sea eyes.

Then, when she reached sixteen and worried for her own sanity, Brianna sent him away. It hadn’t been easy, in truth, it nearly broke her heart, but it needed to be done.

“I can’t see you anymore,” she stared at the ground as she’d said the words, unable to meet his glance. She’d gripped the Claddagh ring he’d given her.

Uistean didn’t object or protest. He’d simply asked her: “Why?”

She looked up at his elegant features, at the shoulder length, blond-brown hair that hung straight down his back. He was beautiful with his lean, angular cheeks, the way his blue eyes seemed to turn up at the corners when he smiled, and his arching eyebrows that called to mind a hawk or an eagle. To her immense discomfort, she’d been physically more aware of him lately. She noticed his long-fingered, callused, warrior’s hands that were so gentle when they brushed a strand of her hair out of her eyes. She observed how his shoulders were broadening and thickening, and that there was now a dusting of blond hair on the chest which he sometimes bared. The thick muscles on his thighs and the heat that radiated from him when he lay beside her in the grass also became difficult to disregard. He was so different from the boys at her school.

“Why is it that you’re always my age or just a few years older?”

“Because I choose to appear in a form you are comfortable with, Mo Ghrá *My Love*. We are meant to be together.”

“I can’t ever be your love, Uistean! Nor you mine. Can’t you see this...this thing between us is impossible?” She’d turned from him, and then felt his fingers gently encircle her arm. “No!” She’d thrust him away. “I can’t do this anymore. Sometimes I think I’m going crazy. Uistean, there’s no future in this, in us! I’ll keep coming here,

just getting older, and you never will, not really. My family will say I'm 'eccentric' and I won't ever marry. I'll just have a hoard of dogs that'll come with me when I visit you. That's not a life for either of us. It's a half life!" Then, she ran away, and he didn't come after her. He, too, must have known she was right.

And her life, though admittedly less magical, progressed along the lines she intended. She came to fit in better with her peers, graduated from secondary school, and studied art in Paris. But the story of her life thus far was not without irony. The truth is that she made her living for many years drawing and painting fairies.

Daydreaming during a studio session in which she was supposed to be sketching a rather uninspiring specimen of a middle-aged man, she'd found her thoughts drifting to Uistean. Before she became aware of what she was doing, she drew his face and upper torso. Her instructor had been impressed with the study and encouraged Brianna to continue with such work.

Though she'd cut herself off from Uistean, her nights remained filled with dreams of him, her days, with making endless portraits of him that graced calendars, book covers, and posters.

People commented on Uistean. One woman, who was looking at a room full of portraits of him at a show that Brianna had done at a small but well reputed studio, asked, "Who is he? Your husband? Your lover? He is simply delicious."

Brianna smiled, albeit somewhat sadly. "He's only real in my mind."

"Oh, he's married then, is he. Don't worry, dear. I'll keep your secret."

The worst part of it was, she remained very much alone. She had her friends and her family, and there were more than a few very attractive men who were interested in her over the years, but she could never quite fall in love. For, she'd already given her heart long ago, when she'd stood with a fairy in a circle of stones.

To make matters worse, suddenly, when she was twenty-eight years old, and for no conceivable biological reason, she went blind. She went through every possible medical test to find the reason. Finally, the doctors sent her to the psychiatrists, as there was no physical explanation for her blindness. By the time a year passed, she resigned herself to her present state.

Needing time alone to think, to try and understand what happened and why, she returned home to her cottage and studio on the

coast in Connemara. And there, though her days were full of unrelenting blackness, her nights were filled with incredibly vivid and colorful dreams of Uistean and the other fairies.

Just last night, he'd been a Connemara stallion again, a shape he often favored in their time together, and she ridden him along the shoreline at a wild, full gallop.

With her hands gripping the coarse white and gray mane, and her legs wrapped around his barrel, she clung to him. She urged him on, over the sound of the wind and the gray-green waves breaking on the shore, and the cries of the gulls. "Run, Uistean, run!" And he obliged her wishes. Leaning closer to his neck, she felt as if she were flying. Inhaling the warm, salty horse smell of him, her eyes teared up and she laughed aloud with the joy of the experience.

Then, he turned from the shore, and galloped over the craggy and desolate land to the Rath, which had once been their usual meeting place. There, he materialized before her in the form of a tall, golden, warrior, but his familiar, deep blue eyes had been filled with sorrow and longing.

"Come to me, Brianna. Come to me here and now. Do not delay much longer, or it will be too late for both of us."

This time, Brianna awoke abruptly. She was sweating and breathing hard. After a year of being blind, she should be accustomed to the complete darkness that invariably greeted her. Still, it took her a few moments, just after she awoke, to adjust to her present state.

She lay quiet, tasting the fresh, cool sea air with its tangy, salty bite. She didn't look forward to putting her feet on the cold, wooden floor. The fire in the hearth died down hours ago. That was one thing about being unable to see, you became more attune to the other senses. She could smell, taste, and feel more acutely than ever before in her life.

There was a knock at her door, and she debated ignoring it.

"Bri...Brianna, I know you can hear me. Let me in. It's a beautiful day, and you're wasting it in bed."

"If I could see it, Moira, I wouldn't be in bed, now would I?"

The silence remained for only a moment. "Bri, moping is no good for you. Come to the door this instant. I won't go away, no matter how long you leave me standing out here. You know I promised Mother I'd check on you."

Because she knew just how determined her sister could be, she threw her goose-down comforter back. The moment it was off of her,

she felt the chilly air all over her body. Every hair on her skin felt as if it were standing at attention. She groped her way over to the armchair by her bed and grasped her woolen shawl. Tossing this about her shoulders, stepping into a pair of sheepskin lined slippers, and then grasping her walking stick from its spot by her bed, she began to make her way to the door. Despite the fact she searched the ground ahead of her with her stick, she still managed to catch her baby toe on the edge of the bedroom door. Pain shot through her.

“Brianna Dwyre, if you don’t come to the door this instant, I’ll be off and fetch Ian. He’ll break it down for me.”

“I’m coming. I’m coming, Moira.”

She felt her way slowly and cautiously across her sitting room, and drew back the bolt on the door.

Her sister thrust it open. “I knew it!” She announced, making her way in. “You were still in bed. Mother would never have left if she knew that you would regress like this.”

Brianna stood in the doorway. The air was cold, but the sun felt warm on her face. Closing her eyes, she savored it, that and the rich smell of the dark, moist earth breathing up from the turf before her. She imagined the view, which she could no longer see. *A golden, endlessly long beach with the morning light still soft upon it. If she turned in the other direction, she knew the Twelve Bens loomed in the distance, crowning a rocky and untamed landscape.* She’d bought this cottage for the light, she’d told herself, refusing to acknowledge that its proximity to the Rath of her childhood had anything to do with the decision.

“I’ll make us some tea then. You look like you could use a spot. I just dropped Denis at school, so I have some time.”

“You could have called first,” Brianna responded ungraciously, shutting the door.

“And would you have answered?”

Brianna heard the teapot being set on the stove, the crinkle of paper.

“I brought some rolls fresh from the baker as well. They’re still warm.”

Brianna could smell the warm wholesomeness of fresh bread as she made her cautious way over to her chair. A little food was probably a good idea. “So what else do you have planned for today?” She might as well make the effort to be pleasant. Moira was just trying to be kind. “How are Ian and Denis?”

“They’re both well. I have to do some shopping, and I thought you might want to come along.”

“Don’t you work today?”

“I am not. I’m sure I’ve told you I’m only working three days a week now. I needed the time for my men. Father Murphy was accommodating once I told him he would have to find another school counselor if he didn’t let me switch to part time.”

“Oh yes, I remember now.”

“Here’s a roll. I already buttered it for you, and, I remembered, no marmalade. It’s chilly in here. I should start a fire.” Her chair scraped back as she rose to her feet.

“Moirra, sit down. I’m not an invalid. I’m blind. Some things are not easy for me, but I have to learn to manage. You aren’t helping me by babying me. If you’re here because you came to spend time with your sister, you’re welcome. But if you came to manage me, then you’re not.”

“Bri, you can be so difficult sometimes.”

“So, there is a specific reason for this visit. Out with it now. Just get it over with.”

“Well, of course I wanted to see you, but there is one thing... I ran into Dr. Jamie O’Sullivan yesterday at the market. He is an amiable man, and he asked after you. He’s quite taken with you, you know.”

The teapot shot out a shriek, both women jumped, then Moira bustled about making tea.

“I’m doing fine on my own right now.” Dr. O’Sullivan was a psychiatrist whom Brianna’s Dublin mother connected to continue her therapy. But Brianna held no wish to do so. So many months of therapy and tests, both physical and mental that didn’t give her any answers. She had no wish to be treated with any medications or treatments, which could affect her mind. She wasn’t depressed, or anxious, or even crazy. There was nothing about her that could be considered odd in the least, except for the fact that she once saw fairies and now she couldn’t see at all.

“Bri, he’d so like to get to know you. And you already know so much about him. Why you even know what he looks like.”

In her mind’s eye, she pictured the slender, red-haired, aristocratic features of Jamie the psychiatrist. He was pleasant enough, and as interesting as buttermilk. Brianna knew she was an attractive woman with her fall of red blond hair, hazel eyes, freckles,

and slender build, but in this case, she doubted it was herself Dr. O'Sullivan wanted.

"I'm not interested, Moira. He just thinks I'm an interesting case. He probably hopes to get written up in one of his medical journals if he can get me sorted out."

"Would that be such a bad thing? Please, Bri, for my sake and for Ian's, couldn't you just meet with him once. I'd do your hair for you."

"And pick my clothes, and probably even do my makeup. Somehow, I think he'd prefer it if I came in with my hair wild and naked as the day I was born."

"Brianna, that's not how he is. He's very nice actually. And interested in you. Not just as a patient. We could meet for lunch or dinner. It'd be such fun. Here's your tea, no sugar or milk."

"Thank you... Can't you understand, Moira? I've had enough of all that. I just want to get on with my life."

Moira exhaled slowly. She reached out and patted her sister's hand. "I can, but you can't keep living so cut off like this."

"I see you almost every day."

"You should move into town."

"I know my way around this house."

"It's not safe out here for you."

"I've nothing to steal. Let it be, Moira... Tell me how Denis is doing."

For the rest of their time together, the two sisters spoke on non-controversial subjects, like Moira's child and husband, and the time passed companionably. When it was time for Moira to leave, Brianna walked her outside. It was then that she heard the rhythmical thump of hoof beats. She could hear them and feel them, they seemed to pass through her body.

"Moira, do you see it?"

"See what?" Moira was looking in her purse for her car keys.

"The Connemara! The Connemara stallion." She didn't dare call Uistean by name. Then, her sister would be absolutely convinced she was mad.

"What? Oh yes, there!" Moira's voice rose with excitement. "It is a Connemara, and a lovely one. He's big, with a great arching neck. He's a gray with dark points and a great wave of a mane. Lovely face on him... He's just standing there, watching us... How peculiar." A paranoid thought dawned on her, and she glanced between her sister and the stallion. It wasn't possible. It couldn't be. "Tell me you

haven't gone to the Rath, Brianna." She remembered that long ago her sister had spoken of her fairy lover appearing to her in the form of a Connemara stallion. Of course, Moira dismissed it all as foolish fantasies, but...

"Oh Uistean, why won't you leave me be. Can't you see, there's no place in my world for you." Brianna didn't speak the words, but she sent them out to him with her heart.

The stallion whinnied in response, but Brianna heard Uistean's voice, far deeper and more masculine than she remembered it: *"The Rath. Meet me there. There's not much time."*

"Leave me alone, Uistean!" She responded soundlessly.

"I cannot, Brianna," his voice caressed her name. *"We already pledged our hearts to each other."*

"Brianna," Moira's voice was shrill. "Have you been to the Rath? Tell me you haven't."

Brianna recovered herself. She needed to ease her sister's worries. Without it being said directly, she knew what her sister feared, and she'd no wish to be carted off to some asylum, even if she were truly mad. "The Rath? No, it's too far a walk for me... The stallion must be part of that herd they're trying to reintroduce to the moors. I'd heard talk about it. Imagine a wild herd of Connemaras. But this one's pretty far from his home. I'll call into town about him."

"Oh," Moira answered tightly. "All right then. Bye, Bri."

"Goodbye, Moira, and thanks for breakfast."

She heard the car door slam shut then the roar of the engine, but neither drowned out the thunder of hoof beats galloping away. Despite all of her intentions, her thoughts went with them.

* * * *

After returning to the house and failing miserably to distract herself, she gave up and went to her jewelry chest. Never one to have much jewelry, her fingers soon found what they sought: a Claddagh ring made of fairy gold, the ring with which she and Uistean once pledged their love to each other not long before she'd sent him away. She'd spoken the vows fiercely, desperately, already very aware of the impossibility of "them," a fairy and a mortal.

The smooth metal felt warm to her touch. She envisioned the design as her fingers traced the crowned heart held by a pair of hands. There were many stories of the origin of this well-known Irish symbol of friendship, love, and loyalty, but Uistean told her the true story when he'd given her the ring on her sixteenth birthday.

"I have something for you," he'd teased her, his eyes, laughing.
"In honor of it being ten years since we first met."

"Oh, Uistean, I've nothing for you." And even worse, she came to tell him goodbye.

"Give me your hand."

After a moment, she'd held it out.

"Close your eyes."

"Uistean," she began to protest.

"Please."

She followed his instruction. Her eyes flew open when she'd felt the warm, soft caress of his lips on the back of her hand, and she stared into his eyes, and saw needs and desires she wasn't yet ready to recognize in herself. It was another reason that she needed to stop seeing him. Gently, he drew her fingers open, and placed a golden ring on her palm.

"Oh, it's lovely."

"It was made by leprechauns of leprechaun gold."

Despite herself, she'd smiled. "That's a bit of blarney, Uistean, and you know it. The claddach was designed by Richard Joyce, a goldsmith who was held a slave by the Turks. I know because our class visited a shop in Galway and heard the story."

"Joyce wasn't enslaved by Turkish pirates, but held captive by the wee folk. That's how he came to his skill. He proved so talented that in the end Queen Medb let him go."

Sometimes she couldn't tell if he was teasing or being honest, and it was only when he brought up other fairies that she was reminded of his otherness.

After that, she ended things between them and ran from the Rath. In her haste, she forgot about the ring. Later, to her astonishment, she'd found it on her bedside table. She put it away, so her mother or Moira wouldn't ask questions. But whenever she felt out of sorts or a little low, she put it on. It had a way of making her feel better, cherished, even loved. Wearing it gave her a feeling of having Uistean about her. It was only in the deep hours of the night that she acknowledged her true feelings, she still loved Uistean with her entire being. But it was a love she knew that could never be.

So why now? Why was he calling to her now? There was only one way to find out. It was time to go to the Rath.

She put on a light coat, and then moving slowly and carefully with her walking stick in her hand, she headed towards the Rath. As

she walked, the salty sea air cleared her mind and she envisioned the purple moor grass she knew covered the ground dotted with occasional orchids and milkwort. A bird cried somewhere overhead, and she waved towards the sound, recognizing it as that of the peregrine falcon who lived nearby.

Moirá wanted her to move to town, but here, there was so much more to feel, smell, and taste. And what she couldn't see, her memory filled in, except in even brighter, more brilliant colors.

It wasn't far to the Rath, but it took her a while to reach it. She needed to cross several of those low stone fences, which bisect the countryside of Connemara. But she knew the way, she trod it endlessly in her dreams.

The farmer who owned this land, who grazed his sheep on it, left the stone circle alone. The superstitious claimed that whoever disturbed a Rath called the ire of a troop of *sidhe* or fairies upon themselves.

She knew she almost reached her destination when the earth gave just a little bit more under her feet. As a child she'd always been sensitive to the magic of her surroundings, and in this most sacred of Celtic places these feelings were amplified. To her amazement and despite her blindness, she perceived the Rath as emanating a constant bright light. Brianna came to a stop before the largest of the stones, and it was here she heard the drumming of hoof beats drawing closer. She felt more than a little nervous. It would be the first time in a dozen years since she let herself interact with fairies, especially with the one to whom she pledged herself.

The Connemara stallion came to a halt a few feet from her, and she knew instinctively that it was Uistean. Her skin tingled as she felt the cool breeze, which accompanies fairies changing from animal form back to human form. Her fingers clenched as they ached to touch the skin of her beloved.

"Do not be afraid, Brianna. It is I, Uistean."

"Please Uistean, I knew it was you when I heard the hoof beats. I could sense your nearness. You always think you are being so mysterious."

Uistean couldn't help but laugh. "Brianna, you always were the most aware mortal I've ever met." He drew in a deep breath, dreading her possible answer to his next question. "Have you missed me?"

"You know I have, Uistean."

Then, he took a step closer until he was standing just in front of her. He softly grasped her face and kissed her once on the forehead, once on each cheek, and then once lingeringly on her lips.

She was too surprised to react, and so she just stood there. Brianna recognized that he was bestowing upon her the fairy betrothal kiss, a custom she observed and he explained to her when she was a child. It was the first time Uistean ever shared it with her, and it immediately changed the dynamic between them. The kiss was a silent declaration by him that there were still deep feelings between them, and that, this time, he wouldn't let her forget that truth. In addition, his hands and lips upon her awakened all of the feelings Brianna promised herself she'd long since buried. It was as if her body became instantaneously electrified. He held her for a long moment, and when he finally drew away she missed his warmth and his earthy, natural scent. No mortal man could ever move her this way. A tear rolled down Brianna's face.

He kissed the tear away as it trailed down her fair cheek. She turned her face away from him, ashamed by how once she carelessly threw his love away. Back then, she hadn't realized how rare and special it was.

"Don't cry, my love. This is a joyous time for me. I have missed you. It has been nearly impossible staying away from you these years, even though I knew one day you would come back to me... Now tell me, how do you fare?"

"I've seen better days, well...that's actually completely true." Brianna self-mockingly laughed as she nervously twisted her hands together. She didn't want Uistean's pity.

He watched those expressive, artist's hands, and observed that she'd worn the Claddagh ring he gifted to her. His heart soared.

"I'm blind, Uistean, though you probably already knew that." He always knew details of her life before she shared them with him when she was a child. "No doctors can explain why or how this happened. I've been through countless medical tests and endless months of psychotherapy. Everyone's conclusion seems to be that somehow this is all self-induced, that I'm psychologically blocking my sight... Incredible, isn't it? They tell me there's no physical reason for my blindness, not that it matters, I still can't see... Nor can I draw." These last words were spoken softly. Only Uistean could understand what being unable to express herself through her art meant to her.

He could feel her pain, was very aware of the mixture of shame, confusion, and despair that filled her. Grasping her cold hands in his own, he drew her against him. He sought to offer her comfort, but the way in which her soft curves fit so perfectly against his body instantly aroused him, and sent heat and desire coursing through him. His senses consumed him each time she was within arms' reach. If anything, her affect upon him grew worse now that she was a mature woman, but he had to control himself long enough to explain the situation to her.

Finding his touch both soothing and stimulating, Brianna collected herself and asked, "Why did you contact me, Uistean? I felt a terrible urgency to the dreams you sent me."

He hesitated. "It must have been very difficult for you for this last year, Brianna. Why didn't you come sooner? You've ignored my summons for months now."

How could she explain it? She wasn't sure she understood her behavior or thoughts on this matter, herself. "They already thought my sanity questionable, I..."

His hands dropped from her, and he stepped back. "You still care what 'they' think?"

"If I did, I wouldn't be here now, would I? Apparently, this blindness is clear evidence that I'm not well... But if being well means giving up my memories of you, my awareness of you, then I'd never want to be so."

"Do you understand what you're saying?"

"I've had years to think about it, Uistean."

He inhaled sharply, as if focusing himself. "My sweet Brianna, you know you can be very stubborn when you want to be. I came to you in your dreams because I needed to explain..." He was interrupted by her sudden laughter.

"I can be stubborn! *That* coming from *you*, Uistean, is utterly ridiculous." She loved the way he made her laugh, but then she replayed that last sentence in her mind, *explain what?*

Uistean knew this moment was going to be a difficult one, and was dreading Brianna's Irish temper when he described his involvement in the events that resulted in her blindness. Their bond was now re-emerging, and Uistean didn't want to threaten the reconciliation they just achieved. She'd admitted she still cared for him, but was it enough? By fairy law, he couldn't explain to her the full nature of the Lianhan Shee's curse. He couldn't tell her his own

fate was in her hands, that if she chose against him, he would be doomed to possession by the heartless Edana, the Lianhan Shee. And he didn't want her to choose to be with him out of pity. He wanted her love, and gambled his life on it.

He began rather haltingly. "Brianna, I must tell you something, but please let me finish the entire story before you make any interjections... You've always been hot tempered." He stroked the end of her upturned nose. "This time, please don't interrupt me."

Something bad was coming. Something, Brianna guessed, she didn't want to hear.

"Do you agree?" He waited for her nod, and gently caressed the side of her face.

She leaned into his palm, aching to be closer to him. "Yes, I agree."

He led her to a flat rock on which she could sit comfortably while he told his tale.

"When you were a child, Brianna, you always wanted me to tell you stories about the other fairies. Do you remember we spoke of the Merrows, the Banshee, the Leprechauns, the Grogoch, and the Sidhe?"

"There were others, too. I remember them all. I've painted them."

"You have a real talent for capturing their natures with a bit of paint." He swallowed. "Do you remember what I told you about the Lianhan Shee?"

The name sent a shiver through her. "The Lianhan Shee... She's the love fairy, and incredibly beautiful."

"And she's also one of the most dreaded of us all. She holds great power over the minds and hearts of mortal men. Men fall desperately in love with her, and when that happens, that mortal becomes her slave for eternity. However, if a being rejects her, she can be incredibly spiteful. There is no love to her. She is interested only in power, power over males, both fairy and human, and with such power she consumes and destroys them."

"I remember what you told me of this being. She sounds like a right shrew. I honestly thought you were making her up to amuse me."

"I can assure you she is as real as you or I. In fact, her name is Edana, and she is a total wench. While you were still allowing me to see you," Uistean said with a hint of playfulness, "Edana came upon us in the forest, and realized the truth behind our relationship... She

realized there was more than friendship between us. It angered and frustrated her because for years she sought my attention, and I had been immune to her lures... Not that I can blame her, I am rather irresistible.” His and Brianna’s relationship always included humor and good-natured teasing.

She couldn’t help but smile back. “I was able to resist you for almost twelve years.”

“Ah yes, but that’s only because I let you, you minx,” replied Uistean. “Had I pursued you, do you honestly believe you could have sent me away or would even have wanted to? But you needed this time to grow up, to determine what you wanted and desired.”

The deep timber of his voice shook her to her core. The answer to his question came to her almost instantly; she would never have been able to send him away for a second time, to resist him. She’d only done so the first time because she realized how impossible things were between them.

“After she saw us together, she swore vengeance on both of us. As you well know, it is forbidden for a fairy and a human to be together, and this is the punishment she placed upon us...you lost your sight.”

Brianna jumped to her feet in outrage. “WHAT! She blinded me out of jealousy for a childhood infatuation of a dozen years ago! That’s beyond petty! I’m *blind* because she’s jealous! The nerve! What a bitch!” She was practically shaking with rage.

“Please Brianna, calm down. This is why I called to you in your dreams, not just to annoy you or to see you naked,” he was trying to get her to relax. “You and I know it was, is, more than a childhood infatuation between us. Edana recognizes that truth, which is why we have to fight this curse together.”

“I can’t believe this! All this time I thought I was going crazy, but I’m blind because of some spiteful fairy! I can just imagine telling Dr. Mackenzie. Oh, don’t worry about me. I’ve just been cursed by a pissed off fairy! This is just too much!” She was seething.

Uistean smiled. His girl had never been one to back down from a challenge. Perhaps Edana’s intrusion in their lives would help to rekindle their love. There was no question that desire already existed between them. “Brianna, will you help me to put an end to Edana’s reign of terror over us?”

She could feel his warm breath against her cheeks. Even in her rage, she was aware of him, of the fact that he was standing far too

close to her for her to think straight. "I will, and I'm doing it to show that fairy that she just can't go messing about with humans."

"And not at all because you want to spend more time with me?" He was practically purring in her ear.

"Maybe to catch up a little." Brianna smiled. In the years that passed, she'd learned she could play the game too.

"Well then, my lovely, meet me tomorrow at sundown." He moved within an inch of her lips. "I have something to show you." He stole a quick kiss and backed away, "Until then, mi'lady!" With that, he changed back into the Connemara stallion and galloped away.

She slowly made her way back to her cottage. Uistean could be so infuriating at times, but then that was one of the reasons she fell in love with him.

* * * *

The next day, Brianna was just sitting down to lunch when she heard a car coming up her drive. It wasn't Moira's Opal. No, this one had a bigger, more powerful engine, and the smooth, rich purr of an expensive car.

She waited for a moment, heard a door slam, and got to her feet. Walking carefully there, she opened the top portion of the dutch door and was struck with a chilling blast of air. It was strange; she'd been outside several times that morning and found the weather pleasant and comfortable.

"Hello, Brianna Dwyre."

She nearly groaned aloud. Dr. Jamie O'Sullivan. She'd no wish to speak with him now, especially when her thoughts were on Uistean and their meeting, which was just a few hours away. Without hesitation, she stepped out and closed the door behind her; she most definitely didn't want O'Sullivan to think he was welcome.

"Dr. O'Sullivan, what brings you out this lonely way?"

"So are you finding it lonely out here, then? You know everyone who cares about you would feel much more comfortable if you lived closer in to town, and not alone as well." His statement was heavy with suggestion.

"Yes, but I enjoy the peace and privacy living here allows me. I am very familiar with the area. Moira and I grew up in a house not far from here. No, this is my home, and here I will remain."

She could hear the gravel crunching under his feet as he moved closer. Why did he have to come now? Couldn't the man take a hint?

Why wouldn't he just leave? She didn't have time for one of his endless discussions on the state of her, in his opinion, unstable mind.

"Dear Brianna, I spoke with Dr. Mackenzie yesterday. He was very concerned about you."

Dr. Mackenzie had been her psychiatrist in Dublin. She'd been in therapy with him for six months, and he hadn't been able to come up with any explanation for her blindness. "I was under the impression that matters between a doctor and a patient are confidential."

O'Sullivan barked with laughter, but there was an audible edge to it. "Of course, we didn't discuss you or your case directly. I just explained I am a friend of your family's, and yours, as well, I hope, and that I share the profession of psychiatry with him."

This was probably more than enough to get Dr. Mack to express his thoughts and concerns on Brianna, but without directly violating any confidentiality rules.

"Dr. Mackenzie believes, as I do, you should be continuing therapy. Please know you need only call me."

He droned on, but Brianna was oblivious to him. Something odd was happening. She felt heat rush through her, and then concentrate in her eyes. They began to sting, as if exposed to a noxious chemical. She rubbed at them with her fingertips, and then with a handkerchief she had in her pocket.

"Brianna, are you alright? Are your eyes bothering you?" Asked Dr. O'Sullivan.

"I'm...fine. I must have gotten...some dust in them."

Fairy dust was her immediate thought, but she didn't want to alert Dr. O'Sullivan to what was going on. For a moment, she'd thought she heard Uistean's voice, whispering. Then, to her complete and utter amazement, the gray mist she'd been seeing instead of her normal vision began to slowly resolve itself into colors and shapes.

Like water settling after a pebble has been thrown in, her sight began to focus and clarify. Not daring to speak for fear of breaking the spell, she stared out at the scene before her. She was actually seeing the purple moss grass covering the rocky, sloping hills. Then, she turned and faced the white sands of the beach. It was all as lovely as she remembered it.

Hearing a stallion's call, she glanced up on the rise beyond the cottage. Uistean was there. He had something to do with this! He must have somehow broken the Lianhan Shee's spell!

“Brianna? Brianna, are you listening to me?” O’Sullivan stepped up to her until he blocked Uistean from her sight. Now that she could see O’Sullivan, she realized that man didn’t look well at all. He was paler than even a red head should be, and there were dark circles under his washed out blue eyes, which glowed with the light of a zealot. Worry lines carved themselves into the sides of his mouth, and he was thin to the point of gauntness. His expensive London suit hung on him. But there was more to the sense of “wrongness” he emitted. While his cologne was light, fresh, and pleasant, beneath it there lurked the sickly odor of decay.

He smiled at her with perfect teeth that somehow looked so predatory she involuntarily took a step back. To her great relief, he didn’t realized she could now see, and something about him made her decide not to tell him. She backed up until she felt the hard plane of her door at her back. Again, she felt a chill pass over her.

“Brianna, dear girl. You are so lost right now. I know I can help you. We could work through this together. There is something you are hiding or repressing. I can feel it.”

If only he knew.

Reaching out, he grasped her arm. His touch was soft and cold, so cold. “Come with me. At my clinic, I’ve achieved great success with delusional people just like you.”

“I’m not delusional, and please remove your paw, uh, I mean, hand from my arm,” she snapped drawing her hand back. Just over O’Sullivan’s shoulder, she saw Uistean, in horse form, galloping down the hill.

“Moira told me how even as a child you spoke with fairies.” His voice was a sibilant hiss.

Moira! Dammit! How dare she betray a sister’s confidence!

“You’re sister’s worried about you,” O’ Sullivan soothed. “Are you seeing fairies again?”

There was no way she was going to answer that question. She couldn’t risk Moira and this fool having her locked away. And this time, she had no intention of allowing reality to step in and drive a wedge between herself and Uistean. She’d lost him once, and then her vision because she’d refused to trust her heart. She wouldn’t make that same mistake again.

“We’ve enjoyed great success with shock therapy... I would take a personal interest in your case, Brianna. You are a very attractive woman, and this blindness of yours is intriguing and unprecedented.

I'm sure the psychiatric journals would be so pleased to publish articles on you. We could work through this together. Then, perhaps..."

Uistean, still in the form of the Connemara stallion, was now just by O'Sullivan's Mercedes sedan. What was he doing? He was clearly upset, shaking his head and snorting. He uttered a ringing and challenging cry, then reared high.

"Uistean, No!" Brianna shrieked just as his hooves plunged onto the glistening hood of the car.

At the sound of the crash, O'Sullivan spun and stared in horror. "What the hell is that horse doing?"

Uistean reared and smashed his hooves into the car again. Then, he turned and kicked at the passenger door, his unshod hooves leaving large, round dents.

O'Sullivan ran at his car and the maddened horse, waving his arms. "Get away! Shoo! Get away!"

But now Uistean charged at him. O'Sullivan shrieked and ran, his long, bony knees and elbows thrusting. The gray stallion chased and herded him away, down the road, towards town.

Brianna couldn't help but laugh at the sight of her, would be shrink, being harassed by a crazed horse. *Uistean, what is happening? Why can I suddenly see?* Her world was turning upside down, and the answers to all of her questions could be found only at the Rath.

She rushed inside to grab a shawl, pausing only momentarily by the door to stare at her own face, which she hadn't seen in a year. Her features were still delicate and pale, dusted with freckles. Her eyes remained the green of forest moss; even her lips were still softly pink. Her face was the same, but now everything else was different. Once, she'd been afraid to seize what Uistean offered her. Now she thought, reality be damned. The only person she'd miss was Moira, but her sister had her husband and child.

* * * *

She ran all the way to the Rath, her soul feasting on the visual beauty of the world around her. She'd barely stepped into the stone circle when warm, muscled arms grasped her, and she was pulled up against a hard, chiseled chest. Inhaling the heady, musky scent of him, of Uistean, her lips brushed against the sensitive flesh at the base of his neck. His hands were in her hair, and he drew her head back, and then he was kissing her, as they'd never dared before. She welcomed the soft firmness of his lips, then the insistence of his tongue in her

mouth. She kissed him back, passionately, stroking down his muscled back and over his buttocks with her hands, very aware of the thrust of his manhood just above the juncture of her thighs, for he was a few inches taller than she. He tasted so good, so alive, and so very hungry, for her.

Then, abruptly, he drew back from her and held her at arms' length. "Promise me you'll never speak to that man again." Those dark blue eyes she'd dreamed of so many nights were bright with anger and fear. "Promise me!"

"What?"

"O'Sullivan has been tainted by Edana, the Lianhan Shee. That's what she does; she seduces weak men, and then makes them do her evil bidding. He's enslaved to her now. She's using him to get to you."

"But her magic is failing already. I can see, Uistean! I can see!"

"Yes, and no. You can see now because of a spell I've placed on you. But it's only temporary. Your vision will only last for a day and a night...unless we can truly break Edana's spell."

"But why didn't you do this before?"

"I can only do it once. You know our magic weakens in the world of mortals."

"But why doesn't hers?"

"Because she's drawing her power from a mortal, O'Sullivan."

"I felt something odd, a coldness about him."

"That's her touch."

"I'm afraid he and my sister want to have me put away. They think I'm insane."

He drew her close again, and she was aware of a suspicious brightness to his eyes. They'd never touched so freely before, when she'd been young. He'd been far more reserved. Now, his fingertips lingered on the silken curve of her cheek, and pressed her soft form boldly against his maleness. "Would it matter if they thought you were insane if it meant you could be with me?"

She didn't answer. Instead, closing her eyes, she kissed him with all of the hunger and passion no mortal man ever evoked in her. Their bodies fit together as if made for each other, as if they were two parts of one whole. His large body shielded and protected her, and she'd never felt so cherished.

"Come with me, my enchantress." His voice held a husky whisper and a seductive grin lifted his incredible lips.

“Where are you taking me?”

“To a place where I can fulfill all your desires. To *Tir na nOg*.”

She hesitated, and he sensed her withdrawing from him. It wouldn't be fair to seduce her into going with him. She must choose him and the world of fairies over the human world. He loved her too much to trick or coerce her.

“If I go with you now, will I ever be able to return?”

His heart ached at her question. Tenderly, he cupped her cheek, even though her question wounded him. It seemed likely that Edana would win, that Brianna's feelings for him weren't strong enough to save him. But he wouldn't allow himself to dwell on it. If he had only this night with Brianna, his soul's mate, then he intended to make the most of it.

“Have faith in me. I promise I won't bite...hard. All teasing aside, Brianna, tonight is Beltane, the barriers between your world and ours are down. Come with me. You can return, if you so choose.”

“Take me with you then and do your worst!” She smiled saucily up at his handsome face.

Uistean reached down and scooped up her legs, cradling her against his chest. Ensnared safely in the cradle of his arms, she inhaled deeply, drawing in the scent of him, his maleness, the freshness of the out-of-doors, the breath of the sea, and the wild grass of the moor. She felt and heard the steady thump of his fairy heart beneath her cheek. Then, the gray haze of the twilight, the circle of stones, and the craggy landscape around them dissolved into a swirling myriad of colors and light. It seemed as if they were falling or floating, and she clung closer to Uistean. Fearfully, she closed her eyes for a moment, and then heard a lilting, airy bit of flute music and a trill of laughter.

Uistean set her on her feet, though he continued to hold her close.

“We're in *Tir na nOg*?” She asked, observing that they were standing in a lush, green alcove lit by bright golden torches.

“Yes, we are,” he nuzzled into her hair.

“Why didn't you ever bring me here when I was a child?”

His night sea eyes stared seriously into hers. “Because this place isn't exactly safe. I believe mortals should have the choice of staying or leaving. Children are too easily beguiled.”

Feeling daring and more than a little wanton, she took his hand in hers, and staring at him all the while, placed her lips over one of his

fingers and delicately took it into her mouth, sliding down to the base of his finger and up.

He inhaled sharply. "You've become more forward since we were last together. I find the woman Brianna very enticing. But beware unless it's your goal to seduce me here on this spot... I know you've dreamed of me naked." He winked at her, and she couldn't help laughing at his sheer audacity.

"But where are the other fairies?"

"Outside, in the glen. I brought you here first, so we could be alone."

"We were alone at the Rath, too," she pointed out teasingly as she drew his hands to the bare flesh where her sweater met her jeans. His hands felt so hot and large on her skin. Wanting more, she moved closer. "I feel as if I've waited my entire life for tonight, as if all of the rest of everything was just leading up to this."

"I feel the same." His voice deepened with desire and now his hands no longer needed coaxing. They were roaming hungrily all over her, learning her and encouraging her. "I've waited for so many years for you. Why not the Rath, you ask? There I couldn't do this."

The forest glen around them sort of rippled, transforming into a silken tent. He pressed her back and down, just releasing her so that she fell into a mound of silken pillows.

"You would choose a seduction setting out of the *Arabian Nights*. There isn't a subtle bone in your body."

"Does my enthusiasm not please you," he practically growled as he nuzzled her belly.

"Just the opposite as a matter of fact. But wouldn't moss or grass be more your style. I always fantasized about making love to you under the moonlight, but you already know that, don't you?" She gently massaged his head, savoring the feel of his long, silky hair through her fingers.

Suddenly, the tent roof vanished and she was staring up at a multitude of stars.

"The night sky is a nice touch, but moss is rough on the knees when you're tumbling a wench."

"A wench, am I?" She began to mock wrestle with him. He allowed her to push him about and roll him over until she sat astride him.

"So, what are you waiting for? Aren't you going to make my clothes suddenly disappear from my body?"

“Stripping you of your clothes piece by piece is infinitely more erotic.”

When they were finally nude, he took charge, and she reveled in his mastery. Holding her hands over her head, he worshipped her body with his lips and his mouth. They came together that first time wildly, impetuously, unable to contain the desire they’d bottled up for so many years. The second time they made love was more leisurely, more gentle as they began to learn each other’s bodies, each other’s tastes. It was undeniably magical, sensually overwhelming, and physically rapturous. For the first time since those stolen hours with him when they were children, she felt as if she were home.

Brianna eventually fell asleep at Uistean’s side, and he stared down at her face and her figure, taking it all in. She was as beautiful and as passionate as he’d always known she would be. But more than that, he felt a deep tenderness for her. For, it was her artist’s soul which he’d loved first. As a Sidhe, of course, he had very healthy sensual appetites as well, which now demanded to be satiated once again upon this lovely creature lying beside him. If he were to be enslaved at dawn, at least it would be after having happily worshiped at the altar of Brianna all night. Reaching out, he drew her soft, slumbering form against his own.

* * * *

“What time is it, Uistean?” Brianna felt delicious as she stretched her long limbs. “Do all fairies have your...rather impressive endowments and stamina?”

“Mo Ghrá, I am one in a million, and I only managed to achieve such prowess because of my inspiration.” He slid his hand up the back of her thigh to gently grip and massage her butt.

She smacked him lightly. “I am ravenous, you really worked up my appetite with this night’s activities. But after we finish eating, I intend to explore your rather exciting claims of sexual prowess.”

Laughing and teasing as new lovers do, they dressed slowly.

“I’m hungry as well, though I wish we could simply stay here alone, just the two of us.” He’d never been this happy before in his entire existence.

“Can’t you magically make some food appear? Like, zap it here or something?”

“I can, but I thought you’d like to see some of *Tir na nOg* before this night was through.” He much would have preferred to stay in their sanctuary, but he needed to show her the good and the bad of his

world, so that she could make her choice, even though he felt ill at the thought of bringing his beloved face-to-face with the heartless Lianhan Shee. “We’d do well to disguise you first. You’d cause too much of a stir in your present style of dress.”

With that, the faded jeans and cable knit sweater she was wearing vanished, and she found herself garbed in soft, gossamer greens and golds. She raised her arms, watching in wonder as the fabric flowed around the long, pale column of her arm. “Magic really is quite delightful, isn’t it?”

Uistean inhaled sharply. He now had that hungry look in his eyes, which she was coming to recognize. Playfully, she put her hand on his chest and pushed him back as he began to reach for her. “I have to eat in order to keep up with you. Besides, I’ve dreamed of your world, thought about it, and painted it for so many years. I can’t resist the chance to see it.”

The expression on the angular lines of his face shifted from lustful and joking to serious.

“What’s the matter?”

He merely shook his head. “Come with me.”

“I can tell something is bothering you.”

But he leaned closer to her and distracted her with a sweet and loving kiss. Then, taking her hand, he led her out of the tent.

This time, she gasped. For, there before her was a bacchanalia the likes of which even her imagination would have fallen short of portraying. They were in a meadow surrounded by ancient rowan trees. It was as bright as day outside, though Brianna knew it must be night, and there before her were the most exquisite beings. Some were tall and well hewn like Uistean, but there were also some rather hideous little men. Leprechauns, she guessed. There were women, too, so beautiful that she glanced at Uistean more than once for reassurance. But despite the perfect beauty of the fairies around them, he had eyes only for her.

There were tables overflowing with food set about the clearing, and the great trees filtered the light, giving the entire scene a verdant lushness. The air smelled of rich, dark earth, wildflowers, and sweet wines. Pipers played a spirited jig to which dancers kicked up their heels. The air fairly sizzled with energy.

Her soul felt free and light. Even before the blindness, she always felt so bottled down and restricted in her day-to-day life. Only in her

paintings, when she'd allowed her mind to roam with Uistean and the fairies, did she ever feel as she did now.

Watching the dancers and admiring the light swiftness of their steps, she wished she knew how to move as they did. "Do you dance, Uistean?"

"Of course. May I attempt to sweep you off your feet?" He was already leading her out.

She held back.

"You'll never plough a field by turning it over in your mind. I remember seeing you dancing with other children at the local fairs when you were a child. You cannot have possibly forgotten how?"

Brianna fanned at herself. "No, I have not forgotten how, I just haven't had a chance to in quite a while. But I don't want to now. I just want to take it all in, so when I get home I'll be able to paint it."

The fact that she was already thinking about leaving, hurt him deeply, but he didn't show it. "Remember, I told you this gift of sight was only for this night." It killed him to watch the joy and life drain from her face.

But then her jaw firmed with resolution. "Then, I must make the most of it. I refuse to waste your gift of this Beltane by feeling sorry for myself. I want to see and experience all that I can... And I want to figure out how to break the Lianhan Shee's spell."

That's my girl, he wanted to crow. Instead, he squeezed her hand. She was ready. It was time for the test. He didn't want to leave her, but he must allow her the choice.

"I have to leave you for a moment. I'll be back shortly. I've some business with the queen."

"You can't leave me here alone." There was panic in her voice.

"Medb is not a patient woman. Don't be afraid, love. You're far braver than you know. I'll be only a short while. And you can help yourself to some food while I'm gone. Here now." He knelt down and then stood up. Reaching out, he handed her something small and green.

"It's a four leaf clover. I can never find them! How do you... It's magic, of course, isn't it?" she said.

"One of the pleasant benefits of being a fairy." He tucked it into her hair, then turned and walked away. She watched him move through the dancers towards a raised dais. *That must be the Queen and King!* She was glad he didn't ask her to meet them. That would

have been completely overwhelming, and she had no idea what one says to a fairy queen.

She debated this when she heard a voice at her elbow. It was deep, throaty, and seductive. "He is a handsome devil, isn't he?"

Brianna turned and stared into the face of the most beautiful being she'd ever seen. A fairy woman, tall but lushly built with deep red hair which cascaded down her back, and green eyes with a nearly oriental slant to them. Decadently full lips curved over tiny and perfect white teeth. The lines of her face were elegant and spare, like that of a warrior goddess. Her figure was equally remarkable.

"I am Edana, and you are Uistean's little mortal plaything. How precious he thought to have you join us on Beltane. When you return to your world, this will all come back to you as the most incredible of dreams."

"Yes, I suppose. Are you friend of Uistean's?"

The creature threw back her head and laughed. Her laughter sent chills up Brianna's back. What was Edana's relationship to Uistean? She didn't even want to think about only encountering Uistean in dreams after this night.

"He will return shortly. Why don't you walk with me?" Edana's touch on her arm was repellant, but Brianna didn't pull away. The name, Edana, was strangely familiar. "Don't worry. He won't let me keep you for long."

When Uistean saw the Lianhan Shee move to Brianna's side, his body tensed and he turned to go back to her.

Queen Medb said, "Your mortal must choose you. If she truly loves you, Edana will not sway her. And if she doesn't, then," her voice trailed off.

"Then, no one can save me." Grimly, he watched as Brianna allowed Edana to pull her through the revelry.

The two women walked until they stood by a magnificent banquet table beneath a rowan tree. Before Brianna was an amazing spread of lush, ripe fruit, breads, cheeses, meats of all sorts, and deserts. There were wine glasses and bottles scattered throughout.

Edana poured two glasses of a rich, golden wine. She handed one to Brianna.

"This wine is special." She spoke just as Brianna began to sip. "We give it to mortals so they lose all sense of themselves or of their true homes, so we can keep them forever with us."

Brianna gagged and began to spit it out. She threw the wine to the moss covered ground.

"Not you, my dear," Edana instructed, then took a long swallow. As she did so, she closed her eyes, as if savoring the flavor. "You are different. You have chosen to come here at an invitation from the Prince. Our games and little spells are of no use on you."

"You mean, Uistean? He's a prince?" Her voice was little more than a croak.

"Didn't he tell you? He's Queen Medb's son."

"No, he never mentioned it." Brianna couldn't believe what she was hearing. How could he not have told her?

"There's a great deal you do not know." She slid her fingertip along the rim of her glass. "He and I were lovers once, and will be again."

Brianna felt ill and dizzy when Edana's words registered. How could she ever hope to compete with this glorious being? It was all an incredible, impossible dream. And now, she knew she would have to say goodbye to Uistean one last time. Before she'd thought that they were too different, that being of two worlds was far too great a barrier for their love. Now, she couldn't live in his world if it meant sharing him with others. Her love for him was too great to endure that kind of torture.

"I thought you were hungry. These grapes are superb." Sensually, Edana drew one into her mouth. When she'd swallowed, she spoke again: "Uistean used to tell us of how amusing you were as a child. You were quite the hobby to him. It's not unusual for a fairy to become enamored of a human. But such entanglements are invariably short lived."

Brianna clenched her fingers, and became aware of the gold band on her right ring finger. Edana was wrong; Uistean did love her. He'd waited for her as she grew, even after she'd sent him away. He'd come after her to warn her about the Lianhan Shee's curse...the Lianhan Shee! It all made sense now!

"It was you! You are the Lianhan Shee! I can't believe you have the audacity to come and speak to me after all you've done."

If anything, Edana's smile grew more self-satisfied, revealing rather sharply pointed canines.

"You blinded me, you cow!"

"You mortals are so crass. Yes, it was I who blinded you, with the help of that other pathetic mortal, what was his name? Oh yes,

Jamie O'Sullivan. I thought I had you taken care of. You should be rotting away in some mental hospital, but I underestimated Uistean's attachment to you. But in all seriousness, how could he possibly choose someone as pathetic as you over, well, me? Anyway, know that when you return to your world, you will remain blind forever and I shall be with Uistean for eternity." Edana let out a snarling laugh, and Brianna instinctively took a step back.

"But why? I've done nothing to you."

"It's really quite simple. You stole Uistean from me, and I will not rest until he is mine again."

"News flash, he doesn't love you. He loves me." She gripped the ring, staring into the face of her adversary. She would never let this harpy have her beloved. Then, she felt a warm arm embrace her from behind. She inhaled deeply of Uistean's familiar scent and leaned back against him.

"Edana, she is correct. All of your pitiable scheming has brought you nothing but grief. It's over now. You never could hold a candle to Brianna. I never had the slightest interest in you. For me, it has always been Brianna, and it will always be Brianna."

The smile slipped from the Lianhan Shee's face like a mask, revealing a furious and vicious visage. "It's not over yet, Uistean. I will destroy her. You know I can."

"You can't take a mortal life, Edana."

The Lianhan Shee arched one elegant eyebrow. "I've taken many mortal lives. They've all died, wasted away with wanting me."

"Edana, admit it, you have been defeated. And you don't really love Uistean," Brianna fumed. "Why not leave him, us, alone?"

"Love," the word came out as a mocking bark from those sensual lips. "This never had anything to do with love. It's about power, my power. And Uistean has not yet won. Tell me, mortal, do you plan to return to your life, to your world? When you wake up in your bed, will you remember this as a fantasy?"

"Stop it, Edana!" Uistean demanded. "You've said enough. It's over. Release her."

"Are you willing to pay my price, Uistean?"

Uistean gazed down at Brianna. In his eyes, she saw absolute love, devotion, and despair.

She gripped his arm: "What are you doing? What does she want?"

"Only him, as my slave for eternity."

Before Brianna's eyes, as Edana raised her arms, the scene in the glen shimmered and then began to soften and dissolve.

She couldn't lose him, not again. "No! I will never let that happen! I would rather die than let him fall into your clutches! I love you, Uistean."

Just before everything melted into darkness, Brianna heard a new voice, a powerful woman's voice, booming over the Lianhan Shee's: "Do you love him enough to give up your own life? To stay with him beyond the mists, in *Tir na nOg*?"

This time, Brianna didn't hesitate. "Yes, a million times, yes!"

* * * *

It was late on a misty afternoon as Moira drove to her sister's cottage. She was driving faster than was usual for her, but she had so much news to share. Foremost on her agenda was to tell Brianna she'd been right about Jamie O'Sullivan. Why the man went stark, raving mad, babbling about beautiful, merciless women, and was now a patient in his own facility. Why it was all the news in town. With eager anticipation, she made the final turn to her sister's house. Moira kept her high beams on and as she pulled up, she observed her sister's front door was blowing open.

Bri's so absent minded. I really need to get her to move to town. It's no good her living out here by herself. I wonder if she's day dreaming about fairies again.

Moira shook her head. Brianna's fascination with fairies had been all well and good when she'd been making a good living off of them. Now she had to get on with her life.

Stepping out of the car, she noticed there were no lights on inside. Still, Brianna was blind, so she had no need for lights.

She walked in. "Bri? Brianna where are you?"

Inside, the cottage had a vacant, bereft feeling to it. Moira shivered, there was no fire in the hearth, and it was cold inside. It didn't feel right. After turning some lights on, she walked into the kitchen. There were some clean dishes on the drying rack in the sink, but no evidence of lunch or dinner having been eaten. She felt a surge of panic. Was Brianna okay? Could someone have taken her, or could she have fallen somewhere and hurt herself?

Moira rushed into her sister's bedroom. It, too, held that abandoned feel, as if no one had been in it for days. Again, she turned on lights, and then, beginning to panic, she grabbed the phone off the

nightstand. She started dialing when she glimpsed a bright splash of green against the white of the bedspread. Was it grass?

Hanging up the phone, she reached into the soft, cool pile and held a bit of it up to view. It was clover. In fact, as she looked closer, she realized she'd pulled up a four-leaf clover. And there was another one, and another! It was impossible, but true. The entire pile was made up of four leaf clovers! Moira took a deep, shaky breath. It was then that she heard a horse call, a deep neigh from outside the window.

With her heart in her throat, she walked through the house and out the door. On the rise to the right of the cottage, she saw two horses. One was the proud Connemara stallion she'd seen that morning with Brianna. With him now was a mare with tiny red freckles all over her body. She was lovely and delicate with an elegant face, and she seemed to be staring directly at Moira with her fine, dark eyes.

They were Brianna's eyes, and they were looking straight at her.

The mare whinnied again. Then, the stallion reared up, striking at the air. With that, they spun, galloping away until even the sound of their hoof beats vanished, disappearing into the mists of Connemara.

The End

An Irish Bedtime Tale
by Mae Powers

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An Irish Bedtime Tale
by
Mae Powers

Chapter One

In the Irish Isles lived a royal man called King Lachlan De Tuath. Most considered him a great and fair king. He was good to his subjects when they were good to his whims. He ruled just and firm, but when he went to his private chambers early every evening, he liked being told stories in order to relax from his day's burdens.

He'd had many storytellers in his employ, but none were able to tell him stories that he was more inclined to hear. But then most were from older men who told light-hearted daring tales. Most were good stories, Lachlan had to admit, but still he missed something more personal in those stories.

He figured that his own problem of late, had to be part of the reason. It was time for him to take a bride. Though he knew he should make a powerful alliance, he felt distraught about taking a strange woman into his home who might think that his story listening, before he slept, was a childish thing.

He wanted a woman who could share his enjoyment. He felt sure women liked to listen to daring tales of young noblemen and heroes, but the kind of stories he liked, or would like to listen to more, were not considered fit for a lady's ears. Well, at least standard politeness said so.

Lachlan wondered if a woman could tell a tale, sensual enough to arouse him and keep him interested in her, both in heart and body, and of course, her mind too.

For it was the mind that sent him on a quest for more. He wanted to be scintillated physically, mentally and emotionally. Was that too much to ask for a mere king? As he sat upon his throne, one day, listening to his councilors and those that daily reminded him of his kingly tasks, it dawned on him that perhaps this should be his requirement for finding the right bride.

So, as his main councilor brought up the fact that he'd learn of several other kings of the land looking for husbands for their daughters, Lachlan held up his hand and stopped the older man.

"Delis, , I apologize for interrupting you, kind Councilor, but hear me out. I have certain requirements for a bride now." When he felt his main councilor was mollified enough, he resumed his speech. "We will give a week long feast and invite several eligible princesses and other royal dames to our celebration in their honor. From them I will choose a queen who can best keep the court's interest."

Now quite a few of his councilors knew how the king loved his evening stories, so Delis, being the wise man he was, decided that in the marriage proclamation and search, he would make sure that the damsels knew how to secure the King's interest.

"I will take care of your request, Sire," Delis replied to the king.

Lachlan had long been use to Delis' wiseness, for the man served his father, King Elrod, before Lachlan took the throne. The royal councilor knew about Lachlan's desire to know other tales too for Delis was his friend and confident also. Lachlan could trust the man to know what to look for in a bride.

So, the proclamation and invitations to King Lachlan's court was sent out all over the Emerald Isles, that the young king looked for a bride and would entertain several candidates. The whole country was temporarily at peace, so it was a good thing Lachlan made his invitation then. Of course, there were those royals that knew a tie with such a powerful king as Lachlan would be good for their kingdoms; so many nobles from kings to dukes decided to send their daughters with their escorts to the feast Lachlan declared in their honor.

There happened to be one monarch in a small kingdom near the southern tip of Erin with a very comely daughter. It was a quiet kingdom, hardly ever ransacked by any villainous peoples, so the kingdom fairly prospered and knew peace most of the time.

King Raoth McCallah loved his kingdom and subjects and children with all his heart. His one constant bane was his eldest daughter. Princess Kyra stood tall like an oak, and her eyes were as green as any green in all of Erin. She had a lovely shape, or so he'd been told by her admirers, and a nice enough disposition. So though not as beautiful as her red-haired sisters, the raven-haired beauty never wanted for princes courting her, despite her unseemly behavior at times.

King Raoth had even sent his harridan of a daughter across the seas to neighboring countries, so she could learn more decorum. Sometimes he sent her just to get her sometimes annoying presence out of the royal court. Still, Kyra would be Kyra. And even though she made Raoth sigh with woe at times, he still loved his precocious eldest child.

When he heard about the invitation from King Lachlan, something told him that perhaps this might be the answer to his slight problem with his daughter. So he declared she would go, and he set his foot down about it. To his trembling amazement, she meekly obeyed his command. Kyra, it seemed, had no desire to upset her father.

Raoth took to his bed early that night, wondering what his daughter was up to now. Fathers often had sleepless nights over what their children might be about. Kings were no different. So, when he awoke early the next morning, it was to still find a very obedient daughter at his morning meal.

When he asked her about the trip to the northern coast, she answered she desired to go. She wished to make her father proud of her. Not really knowing what to say, he smiled wanly, believing his eldest child had finally learned to be a very good princess.

Many preparations were made for her journey. Within a week, she and her entourage headed to the kingdom of King Lachlan. When she arrived at the large castle, the king's emissary met her and escorted her to her. She noted many fine princesses and other royals from neighboring kingdoms and other far off lands had come for the week's festivities.

Kyra did not see King Lachlan until later at evening meal, when everyone gathered in the great hall for the first of the festivities. Being a princess from a smaller kingdom, she was placed at a side table away from the king's table, where he had other royal ladies and people from larger monarchy's sitting on either side of him. This did not bother her one bit.

For when she saw King Lachlan's handsome personage, she knew then and there that this was the man for her. Having been to other lands, she knew that men of the ruling class sometimes liked a woman that intrigued them in different ways. So, she determined that she would find out what it would take to keep Lachlan's interest for years to come.

After all, she wanted a man that would keep her mind, body, and heart occupied too. And her heart told her that Lachlan could. While she pretended to listen avidly to those on either side of her, she viewed his tall, sturdy body and handsome face intently. While he made merry, she saw evidence he was genuinely interested in what went on around him. Lachlan's small goatee and bushy brows might have made some maiden princess fearful. He looked like a demon in disguise. Yet for her, she found his manners and hearty laugh very appealing, as she did his long yellow-brown hair and muscular build.

She would love a man like this in her bed. Not that she'd had that many men there, mind you, but she learned enough in her travels about how to please a man in different ways. Now, she felt determined to learn what pleased a man of intelligence like Lachlan. Being a person that studied others, Kyra saw that beneath his lively facade, he looked wistful when he glanced over the faces of the beauties that had come to vie for being his bride. This then, she thought, was a man with a secret desire for something, something that he found lacking in women before.

She resolved to find out what he yearned for. The voice of the man on her right filtered to her ears, and she turned to see an elderly blonde gent talking to a noble woman, perhaps his wife, since they were so animatedly close. She listened carefully to their conversation while trying not to appear too unseemly inquisitive.

The older woman addressed the man's previous comment evidently. "I tell you, my dear Delis, there are naught but pretty faces here. Some seem clever but more placid than pretty in the noggin to be sure."

"Now, Erina, me dear, as his main councilor, I must see to it that each of these lovelies has a chance to win our dear Lachlan's heart. Surely, one of them knows how to tell a tale that would interest our young Lach and keep his heart and mind enchanted. What say you to helping me find just the right one?"

The elder smiled prettily for the councilor, and Kyra did her best not to chuckle at the sweet interplay between the older couple. Here, then, she realized, were two of the king's closest friends. For they would not have spoke so personally of him were they not close indeed.

"For certain I will help you, dear to my heart. But what could I possibly do to help our Lachlan find the perfect mate?"

“As a noble lady of his court, you will be walking amongst the young candidates during the morning time ladies have set aside for entertainment. Perhaps you can discover who amongst them is book read. Or even likes to tell amusing stories. Then put it about that the king likes to be told verses of keen words.”

“They will all vie to try and tell the best story,” she smiled up at her husband affectionately, Kyra noted. “And I believe half of them are daft in their education.”

“Not all kingdoms encourage their women to have an education,” Delis said, patting his wife’s hand, “but Lachlan and his forefathers always encouraged that and more. Now pass me some of that mead, wench of my heart.”

Kyra turned her face back to the main table, having new respect for King Lachlan. She was determined more than anything now to get and keep the king’s interest. So, she quietly listened to more of what was said around her and began to form a plan. She went to bed that night thinking about what she had learned. Tomorrow she would put her plan into action: her goal—to win Lachlan’s heart, body and mind.

Chapter Two

On the second day of the festivities, Kyra got up bright and early. She walked with the other ladies in the grand courtyard but closely trailed the woman from last night's feast. The older women soon sat upon some stone benches in a smaller courtyard. And as Kyra felt they would, the princesses and ladies who hoped to be Lachlan's future queen began bombarding Erina and other women of King Lachlan's court.

More than a dozen women vied for the honor of being queen, some more brazen than even herself, Kyra believed. Although a few ladies were quietly decorous, most chatted amicably with those around them.

Kyra noticed details about many of them, their clothing, how they deported themselves. Others gave away their degrees of niceness or haughtiness, or their disposition by the way they talked or gestured.

She'd never had problem sizing up a person, no matter their station in life. People interested her on all levels, and her education grew from the things she noticed in life about nature and people. While sitting with the ladies, she noticed a younger woman who looked quite uncomfortable. A small elf of a girl with long blonde braids, so tiny in contrast to all the other ladies there. When most the other princesses and royal ladies strove to get a seat near Erina and other women of the court so that they might learn more about Lachlan, Kyra went over to sit next to the young girl.

While the other women were being gay and partaking of refreshments served them by the servants, Kyra stayed quiet like the girl did. She sat for a few moments in silence and then turned to the younger woman to speak to her. At that same moment, the other woman glanced up at her and smiled wanly.

"Good day to you. I am Kyra from King Roath's land. Might I know your name?"

She blushed prettily, but her smile widened with a natural sweetness. "I am, Maiven McLeary, the middle daughter of Duke Tiamon McLeary from a lower estate in King Roath's kingdom not far from this castle."

"You do not seem willing to be here, Maiven. Do not fret, I will tell no one."

The girl appeared to panic for a moment, but when Kyra spoke, she relaxed. "I am most appreciative, Princess Kyra. I was hoping to find someone whom I could be at ease with. Both my sisters are promised to others, and my father Duke Tiamon pressed me to come here."

"Then your heart is elsewhere?" Kyra sympathized with the other Irish lass.

Maiven's large blue eyes glanced up, and she sighed. "I am beside myself with what to do. I could never disobey my father." She glanced slightly behind her to a woman who stood nearby. Her heart shown in her eyes.

Kyra saw a lovely, young, gold-haired girl around Maiven's height and age. That must be Maiven's lady-in-waiting, since she was better dressed than a pheasant. Was this where Maiven's heart lay? It wasn't the norm, of course, but Kyra once caught a foreign princess' interest, so she understood to some degree what Maiven was going through. Maiven preferred women and must keep her affair quiet, for fear of retribution.

She patted Maiven's hand. "Do not worry, your secret is safe with me."

The duke's daughter beamed brightly. "Thank you, Kyra. I noticed you were quiet too. And you watch people. I wish I had more of your stamina. I know it is unseemly, but I do hope that King Lachlan does not choose me. I cannot tell stories well. Just this morning as we walked out here, one of the other princesses said the Lady Erina mentioned that the king likes...um, bed-time stories. I don't think I could tell a good one. But I feel as if I should at least come up with one that would entertain him. He's always been kind to my family."

"You were seated at his left last night. I take it your father and he are friends."

She nodded. "Yes, but I think that I bored him last night, for he talked mostly to Princess Isola. That's the pretty lady with all the others hanging on her words."

Kyra noticed a woman near her age sitting amongst several of the others, who indeed paid attention to her lively words. Kyra took an instant dislike to the blonde creamy-skinned princess in her overdone finery. Something didn't set well with her about the boisterous blonde.

"Do not let her bother you, Maiven. Do you sit at the king's table tonight?"

Maiven nodded. "I do. I did not think he would have me there, but Lady Erina says I will sit there again for tonight at least. I wish I could please him and make my father proud, but I have no stories to tell him except fairy tales my mother told me as a child."

"Then perhaps I could help you. Let me tell you a story I overheard during my travels. Of course, it is a bit spicier than what you may have heard before," Kyra turned slightly to face the girl more fully and leaned her head closer. "It is very risqué."

The girl blushed prettily. "I am not without some knowledge," she took a peek at the lady-in-waiting again before turning back to Kyra. "However, I would like to know of your travels or a story if you would please."

Kyra nodded then smiled. "Very well. Let me tell you the story of Queen Sunshine and Princess Moonbeam. I think you will find it very fascinating."

"May not my lady-in-waiting Finnia hear also?"

Kyra could not resist the entreaty. And being a royal, she could command the other girl to join them. When Finnia shyly sat on Kyra's other side, she waited a few minutes before she started her story.

She began slowly and with avid breath, to keep the younger women's interests. As she pulled them into her story, they appeared genuinely interested and enthralled about what she said. She loved to tell stories, the tales she learned from faraway places. Especially if they delighted others. Perhaps she and Lachlan would have something in common. For though his countenance pleased her and she felt strong unmaiden-like desire for him, she still wanted a man whose mind was as sharp as her own and truly treated her as his equal.

That was the kind of man who would own her fiery Irish heart.

"Although Moonbeam and Sunshine were kin," Kyra began, "Sunbeam was jealous of her daughter's beauty. They lived nicely together for many years while Moonbeam grew into a beautiful maiden. Now, in their land, customs differed from our own. A king

could deny his wife nothing should she request it if she'd born him an heir and several more in case another was needed..."

By now others amongst the ladies and the few male servants had heard that Kyra was starting a story. One by one, they came closer to listen to her lively tale. Kyra noticed that Princess Isola wasn't too happy about not being the center of attention any longer. She shrugged off the mean look the haughty princess gave her and took up her story again, but with more eloquence and a bit louder, so that all could hear this time.

"If you are faint of heart, you may not wish to hear my tale," Kyra began, "for part of it is very deep, and most would only hear some of it at night. It isn't a tale your mother would tell you as a child, at least not the version I am bold enough to tell you."

"Perhaps you should not speak of something unseemly then, Princess Kyra," Princess Isola said, hoping to blight the competition in the other's eyes. As several there could tell, the two had taken an instant dislike to each other.

Now Lady Erina, being a fair-minded and highly respected woman of the court, knew what was at play between the two. She had already talked with most of the women both the night before and that morning as they walked. None seemed able to tell a grand story, or at least one she and her husband knew Lachlan would prefer. She believed most here were not so faint of heart or mind that they could not be entertained by a more mature version of a fairy tale. So, she spoke up in Kyra's defense.

"I for one would love to hear your version of that story, Princess Kyra," Lady Erina addressed her and other princesses by name since she had made the list herself and greeted most of them upon their arrival. "Please continue your story while we gather here before you and listen to words we hope will entertain us. You there, bring us stools and blankets to sit upon so we may be more comfortable while Princess Kyra entertains us."

Kyra smiled softly, stopping her tale long enough for servants to obey Lady Erina's commands. Then, once all were comfortably settled, Erina motioned for Kyra to continue on with the tale. They all looked at her in anticipation. Well, most did. Some were reserved, but Kyra was now determined that all should enjoy her version of Queen Sunshine and Princess Moonbeam. Without further interruptions, she began her tale again.

Chapter Three

(The Story of Queen Sunshine and Princess Moonbeam, as told by Princess Kyra)

Long ago in a land stranger than our own dear Erie, there lived a king and queen who were quite smitten with each other. The king, so in love with his wife, could deny her nothing. She bore him several fine sons and one pretty daughter whom they named Moonbeam, since she was as fair as a silvery beam of moonlight. For a while, Sunshine doted on her children, especially her daughter, for many said how much alike she was to her mother. Sunshine took this as a great compliment to her own beauty.

None in the land dared tell her or the king otherwise that she was not the most beautiful woman in the entire kingdom. Slowly over the passing years, Moonbeam grew into a beauty in her own right. Many men vied for her attentions, and young admirers (and lovers that her dear husband did not know about) began ignoring Queen Sunshine.

One day, the queen could stand it no longer and ordered her daughter's lovely moon-colored hair torn from her head or else be put to death for usurping her own beauty. The young woman was heart-broken that her mother would be so cruel and went to her father. Sadly, the king knew he couldn't stop his wife from being getting her way, but loving his child as he did, he helped her come up with a plan that would stop the queen's order from being carried out.

One young king, who lived abroad, had asked for Moonbeam's hand in marriage. Seeing what a fine and sweet-natured being the man was, Moonbeam agreed. With her father's blessings, the young couple secretly married right away and then left for the young man's faraway kingdom.

When Queen Sunshine heard of this, she became furious. However, as the child was out of her life, she tried to let it be. Still it irked her that Moonbeam's beauty would still be spoken of in other

kingdoms. She wanted Moonbeam dead. She'd often denied her husband her bed when she didn't get her way, and knowing how addictive he was to her wiles, she could still demand that he fetch their daughter and put her to death.

But Sunshine had more cunning and devilish ways to have her bidding done. Most did not know that she was a witchling, half witch and part human. Her cauldron always told her which women in the land were prettier than she, and Sunshine had them 'taken care of' always. Now she used her magic cauldron in a room built just for her, a room no one dared entered.

She would use finesse in this ordeal concerning Moonbeam. In the smoke of her boiling cauldron, Sunbeam saw how happy Moonbeam was with her young king. When the dastardly queen set eyes upon the handsome husband Norden, she desired him for herself. Determined to have him in her bed and add him to her list of admiring lovers, she pretended that she had changed her mind about Moonbeam. This delighted the king, and at her behest, he sent word to their daughter that Sunshine missed her and was sorry. Sunshine wished permission to visit her daughter.

Sunshine made up several special potions to take with her on the trip. She decorated them as wines to give as gifts to her daughter. They were politely received by Moonbeam, so wanting to believe her mother was being honest. h. During the festivities, Moonbeam drank the wine and became ill. Sunshine immediately pretended to be the caring, stricken mother. She fooled them all. Moonbeam died.

Young king Norden, still so in love with his wife, would not hear of her being buried. He ordered a special coffin made for her, where he could see her preserved beauty for the rest of his life. He kept this clear coffin in a room that only he held the key to. Being thwarted partly, Sunshine cast a slight spell upon the young king, making him start to forget Moonbeam.

Sunshine and her husband stayed only a few weeks to grieve their daughter then they left for their kingdom. The queen was quite satisfied, as she knew that Norden would forget Moonbeam, and soon the spell would wear off the enchanted coffin. Then Moonbeam's beauty would no longer compare to her own. And so, she believed this for long months.

Slowly Queen Moonbeam was forgotten. King Norden found another lovely princess to marry. The new wife Ailil cared for her new husband dearly, but she was starved for close companionship

when the young king took to his daily hunting. One day she decided to explore his huge castle. In one high tower, she found a locked room. Getting all the keys from the king's chamber, she found keys hidden in a place she was sure Norden had forgotten about.

One of the keys fit the locked room. She discovered only one item there, a glass coffin. She went towards the coffin and saw within it a lovely woman with silvery moon-colored hair. Mesmerized by the woman's beauty, she curiously opened the coffin lid. So delectable was the unknown woman's beauty that Ailil wanted to kiss the sweet pink lips of the sleeping beauty.

She bent down and softly brushed her lips against the other woman's. She pulled her head back and saw the beauty still asleep. "Would that I could awake you from your long sleep."

For surely, Ailil thought, this lovely lass must have been here death-sleeping for a while since the door was locked and the room seemingly forgotten and abandoned. Was this woman under a spell or truly in the sweet slumber of death? Ailil had to make sure. This time, she pressed her lips more firmly and passionately to the beauty's.

A gasp came from beneath her mouth. Ailil drew back suddenly as the woman's eyes flittered open. Such beautiful blue-green eyes, as lovely as any majestic sea. Ailil yearned for the woman then and was glad that she awakened the once-sleeping lass. The woman looked up at her, bewilderment in her sweet face.

"I have been dreaming, for a long time," she said. "I am Queen Moonbeam. Who are you, lovely one who has awakened me?"

Ailil gasped at the other's words. "I am King Norden's new bride, Ailil. It was rumored he had a wife who died. Are you she?"

Moonbeam sat up slowly. "Aye, I am. I think my wicked mother put a spell on me and poisoned me so that I would sleep and slowly die because she was jealous of my comeliness."

Her heart stricken by Moonbeam's woes, Ailil reached out to comfort the young queen. "I feel your sorrow and would bow down so that you could have dear Norden back."

"Why did you kiss me?" Moonbeam asked. "For I have heard that only true love can bring one back from such a harsh spell as was put upon me." Moonbeam stood up slowly with Ailil's help.

"I could not help myself," Ailil said. "I fell instantly in love with you. Your beauty is so sweet and wondrous, my heart said you would be as lovely inside as you are on the outside."

Moonbeam reached out and caressed the lovely new queen. "I am beholden to you, Ailil, for I do find your presence very heartening and lovely to be sure. I give you my love then freely, for bringing me back to life and more."

With that said, Moonbeam leaned over and kissed the other queen quite passionately on her trembling lips. When Ailil responded in kind, Moonbeam stood fully against the other woman and embraced her fervently. Their arms entwined around each other, and soon they knelt on the floor. They slowly and lovingly undressed each other. The two explored each other's sweet bodies and panted with the passion they arose in the other.

While they loved each other, King Norden came home, expecting his new wife to greet him. He searched the castle, worried that something ill had befallen his new bride, as she was used to meeting him at the castle door when he returned from his trips. He was near his chambers when he saw two women walking towards him. To his surprise, he recognized his first wife, Moonbeam. Shame engulfed him, and he fell at their feet.

"Oh sweet, Moonbeam, forgive me for forgetting you. Until I saw you just now, my mind did not remember you or our love. Can you ever forgive me lovely, Ailil, for not telling you she was still here, hidden away?"

Both women took an arm on each side and pulled him to his feet. Ailil smiled at Moonbeam and saw that she too could not be angry with such a man who begged their forgiveness. Moonbeam suspected that her mother's wickedness made Norden forget about her. She could only forgive him then, justly so. She and Ailil hugged him fiercely.

"It is not your fault, dear husband," Ailil said first. "I will bow down to Queen Moonbeam if she is so inclined, and I will go away."

"Oh, that can not be," Moonbeam felt both compassioned and worried by Ailil's words. "Can she not stay with us as your wife also, dear Norden, and be a sweet love to both of us? For it was her kiss that awakened me from that dreadful spell."

Norden took their hands in his. "Ah, wondrous, Ailil. I have no objections to you staying and would be honored to share my throne and my love with both of you. Would that all kings could be so lucky to have such beautiful and caring wives. Will you both stay with me?"

His entreaty was so heartfelt and genuine, both women nodded. That day, he held a huge feast in their honor, and that night he took both to bed. Lovingly they pleased his body, as he in turn pleased theirs. For the rest of their lives, they were happy with each other.

When Queen Sunshine boiled a seeing spell in her cauldron the day Moonbeam awakened, she flew into a fit of rage to learn that her daughter lived once more, more loved than ever by another beauty and King Norden. She stumbled in anger and fell into the cauldron. No one ever heard of Sunshine again, and her husband eventually married someone more worthy, a lovely lady who did not mind that he had children he loved so well.

Chapter Four

When Princess Kyra finished her tale, she looked up to see that others from the castle had joined them and were listening to her story in awe. Amongst them was King Lachlan. She briefly smiled and rose to bow to him. The others around her did likewise. She then excused herself, saying she needed to rest before the afternoon festivities.

Many applauded her as she left, and the king stood quite puzzled and pleased that he'd found a woman who could tell a passionate story. Lachlan was sure the woman left some details out due to mixed company. But, if she could tell another story just as eloquently and mesmerizingly as she did this one but with more physical details in it, perhaps he had found a candidate for a wife.

Still there might be others around who could tell such a wondrously, passion-filled story as the raven-haired beauty. He clapped with delight at her words and pleasant manner, being too polite to detain her from her rest. He declared that others should take a small respite before the next meal and round of entertainments.

Lady Erina felt satisfied that one of the princesses had completely captivated the king. She could see in his demeanor that he tried to compose his interest in the princess. Oh, to be sure, she would tell her husband about the king's captivation with Kyra's story. She would talk to the princess herself and a few others who really vied for Lachlan's hand in marriage. It would do the king good to be jostled a bit, make sure he knew his mind and heart and not just his body reacting to such a lively, passionate story that Kyra just told.

Taking her leave from the king, she bade the princesses, other royal women and their entourages to follow her back into the palace to rest and ready for the afternoon events. She noticed that the king stayed in the gardens alone. She hoped the man had much to think about. For one thing, he didn't even know the beauty's name. He would find out soon, Lady Erina believed.

Lachlan stood, watching them leave. He pulled away from his own followers, with just Delis in tow. They walked into the furthest parts of the court gardens, both men silent and deep in thought. Stopping near a well-cared-for garden with a wishing well within its center, Lachlan looked over the beauty of the area.

Would that his bride would love his lands as much as he did. Surely one amongst them would be a good queen to his people and a loving wife in his bed. Did his passions hide what he must truly seek in a wife? To be sure, he could marry none but one who loved his people as he did. Though he truly desired a woman who could tell him such a story of passion that it would make him hard with desire for her again and again, he needed a queen who ruled justly with him.

He turned to Delis, who politely stood beside him waiting for the king to speak first. "My old friend, what say you to what we just heard? Her voice was as soft and enticing as her beauty and the passionate story she told. Do you know of her?"

Delis nodded. "Aye, sire, I do. She is the eldest daughter of King Raoth in the southern realms. It is said that she never married because of her boldness. Though I'm told she is generous of heart. And very learned, Sire. She has even been abroad many times, from what her father said to me in his letter of introduction. Does she interest you, Lachlan?"

Not many could call the king by his first name, but Delis and Erina had nurtured him as a young lad when his parents fell ill some years back. He trusted the couple implicitly. They had never steered him wrong in their council or in their true friendship. He loved them and respected them dearly. If what he saw on Lady Erina's thin sweet face was true then indeed he might have found a queen. For Lady Erina would naught but give him a piece of her mind when she chose to do so.

He chuckled. "Thy wife is taken with the raven-haired wench already. What is her name?"

"Princess Kyra. Shall I have her sit at your table this afternoon or tonight, Sire?"

Lachlan grinned but shook his head. "Not just yet, old friend. I would know more about her first. There are still a few other beauties who have merit, and it is only fair that I give them all a chance. Of course, should it be known that the one who could tell me a scintillating tale to arouse me into passionately asking for her hand in marriage would be queen, I would not object to such a thing. Make a

list of those whom you think could do so, Delis, amongst their other qualities, which I would require in a queen.”

“Tonight then, Sire, we shall narrow down the choices.” Delis chuckled with the king. He knew the man well, and right now, Princess Kyra was in the forefront of those beauties he had an eye upon. With the right luck, Delis believed Lachlan might find his heart’s true desire, if one of the lasses could tell a really fantastic Irish bedtime story that would capture his heart and have more stories for times to come.

Meanwhile up in her chambers, Princess Kyra’s new friends, Finnia and Maiven, came to visit. They beseeched her to tell them the story in more depth. Knowing their preferences, and liking the two quite well, she was inclined to not only tell them but instead show them if they wished. Finnia and Maiven heartedly agreed to this venture. Kyra smiled and loosened her gown. The other two women did likewise.

“Do tell us what transpired in more detail, “Maiven asked breathlessly.

“If we may be so bold to ask. Perhaps we could be shown some too?” Finnia added.

Kyra grinned affectionately at the two young women. “By all means, I shall. Tell me though, have you two really, um, been totally intimate. For what I skimmed in the telling of the story, due to mixed company, I can show you as well as tell you.”

Their eyes brightened with sensual interest. Maiven glanced adoringly into Finnia’s eyes, as the golden-haired girl did to her mistress. Kyra could see that they truly cared for each other, and her worldly knowledge told her that they had not carried it too far.

“How long have you two been close?” she asked.

Maiven blushed prettily. “Finnia and I just recently started caring for each other as more than friends, right Finnia?”

Finnia seemed the bolder of the two. The lady-in-waiting nodded. “Oh true, Princess Kyra. I was in love with a young squire who promised me the world and showed me a night of passion. He jilted me and left soon afterwards. Maiven was my beacon, and she comforted me. She taught me to love again. We’ve shared touches and kisses. I would gladly show her more of my affection.”

“As would I to you, dear to my heart.” Maiven loosened her own gown, untying the strings at the front of her bosom. She patted the

space next to her on the bed, and Finnia immediately went to sit next to the duke's daughter.

"Well," Kyra began speaking sweetly to her curious students, "I think you both will like the more sensual details of the story, and you may participate in the doing of it if you are so inclined."

Both nodded eagerly, and then Kyra began to tell them how Queen Sunbeam and Queen Ailil fell instantly in love with each other right away after first laying eyes upon each other, how the two wanted to consummate their love. The flaring passions in their hearts and bodies soon took over, and the two queens needed the final physical commitment to each other.

So telling, Kyra showed them with her own body how Finnia and Maiven could pleasure themselves. Following her example, the younger women began to fondle and caress each other slowly. Finnia slipped a hand into Maiven's opened bodice, gently massaging her beloved's left breast. Kyra reached over and undid their laces, so both could have easier access to the other's chest.

Kyra admired their quick learning. Soon both were undressing the other. The two glanced over at Kyra and smiled soft wicked grins. Then they surprised her by taking her hands and pulling her suddenly down on the bed. For a moment, she was startled, but then Kyra began to relax as the others undressed her, kissing her body in various places as they took did so. Kyra hadn't expected this, but she delighted in their enjoyment of exploring her and each other.

"You have such a beautiful cunny," Maiven remarked, lying on one side of Kyra while Finnia stretched out on her other side.

"You remind me of a goddess in full glory," Finnia exclaimed. "Is this wonderful feeling how Ailil and Moonbeam felt, do you think?"

Kyra nodded in between soft kisses. "Oh yes, and more. Let me show you."

She bade them lie down. Once both complied, Kyra reached out and began to massage their breasts. They groaned at the sensations. Kyra leaned over Maiven first to suckle one small, rose-tipped breast then the other. She did likewise to Finnia. She concentrated on kissing slowly down the length of Maiven's body while her right hand caressed and fondled Finnia more intimately. Both began breathing hard under her ministrations.

Kyra softly licked and suckled on Maiven's clit and thrust a finger inside the younger woman with her left hand. She toyed slowly

with Finnia's thicker clit, making her squirm with pleasure. She leaned towards the lady-in-waiting and suckled her tight cunny while slipping two fingers inside the creamy crevice. Both of her partners opened their thighs wider.

In turn, she licked and suckled each while thrusting her fingers rhythmically in both tight channels. Each one began to move her hips up and down while Kyra took a breather and sat back to watch them ride her long fingers. Each grabbed hold of her wrist and thrust quickly up and down. They soon cried out their releases and then let go of her hands.

Then they rolled toward each other and began kissing. They embraced and pulled apart. Once more, they reached out for Kyra's wrist, pulling her down between them. Oh, she would like this for sure if she read the passion in their faces correctly.

"Your turn, dear Kyra," both said together and then proceeded to give Kyra the pleasures she had given them.

Chapter Five

Lachlan also decided to retire to his rooms before the late noon feast. He had much to think over. He took off his royal clothing and put on a simple afternoon robe for relaxing. He started toward his bed, when he heard soft giggles coming from near the balcony. It was slightly ajar, being a warm spring day. The Irish king moved toward the balcony and opened the door wider. He stepped out onto the stone veranda as the voices became louder.

Looking to his left, he realized that the balcony door that led to another's chambers was partially open as well. He had forgotten that Lady Erina gave his mother's old chambers to one of the princesses, but until now, he'd forgotten which one. Princess Kyra stayed in the chambers next to his. He wondered if she perhaps entertained some of her acquaintances with another story. He would love to hear another.

He heard a melodious voice, deeper than the other two, drift outwards. It compelled him to move softly forward to the slightly opened door. Just a few inches open, he could see inside without being seen, or at least he hoped so. His curiosity heightened as he heard moans of delight coming from within the room.

For a moment he stopped, not wanting to encroach on another's privacy, until he heard the next words uttered by that beautiful voice, "...and Queen Moonbeam, and her new love, as well as King Norden, found a unique kind of love. He adored the queens and treated each with great love and respect. He also showed them passionate physical love..."

He peered in and almost gasped as he saw three women upon the bed, all fondling each other. Soon they were naked and making love to each other. The raven-haired, taller one had her backside to him and began kissing and caressing the two lighter-haired women. Oh, the younger ones were small and sweet to look upon, but the rounded cheeks of the taller female drew his attention. As she bent over, he

could see the dark crevice between her thighs. The sight made him ache. His shaft grew larger with sudden desire.

Absently, as he watched the women making love, he opened his robe and began rubbing his aching rod. The two smaller women rode high on the raven-haired woman's hands and climaxed soon. They kissed and then pulled the taller woman down to them. That's when he realized it was the tiny princesses from the courtyard. And the dark-haired beauty was none other than Princess Kyra. Oh, she looked so luscious, lying there between the blonde and golden-haired lasses. The other two were pretty, but it was Kyra who made his whole body ache with need.

His eyes widened more as the two women kissed and fondled Kyra's body, just as she had done to theirs. His hand thrust faster and harder over his shaft. He moved his hips faster as he saw the two females thrust their fingers, in turn, in and out of Kyra's lush cunny. Oh, if only he could shove his shaft down into that dark piece of beauty, he'd be in heaven!

The moment Kyra cried out in release so did Lachlan. He stood frozen as the three women looked up and caught sight of him. His face reddened, and he dropped his hand from his spent rod and mumbled an apology. He turned quickly and rushed to his room, forgetting to close the door behind him.

Kyra had seen him, and the girls thought for sure they were in trouble, for neither was sure what to do when they saw the king ejaculate his spent desire. Kyra soothed the women and told them to stay there while she went to talk to the king. She threw on a wrap and went out on to the balcony. Turning to her right, she saw only one other opened door adjoining the balcony. It had to be Lachlan's. Squaring her shoulders, she entered the chamber, closing the door behind her with a quick snap.

Lachlan looked up from where he sat on the bed, his face down in his hands. His robe lay opened around his hips, and Kyra could see that even slightly soft, his shaft was big. She licked her lips. Oh, that he would put that masterpiece of manhood inside her cunny, she would be in total heaven. She took a few tentative steps toward him, not caring that her own wrap fell open. His eyes widened, and this pleased her. She became bolder and moved in front of him.

"Once, in the land of Erin, a king chanced to come across an unusual threesome. Three beauties were making passionate love to each other. Two were bright as day while the other beauty looked like

the seduction of the night. T'was her that the king found the most appealing, and it was she that left her group to come in search of him when he hid himself away. The dark lady told him he should not be fearful of what he saw, for with him being there, she had seen her heart's true desire. The others had been but a sweet pastime while longing for him. Would that he knew what was in her heart and body, it would then flame his mind to say what he too desired. So she waited patiently for the king to make the next move..."

Kyra ended her tale, hoping he would indeed make the next move. He tilted his head back, and for long seconds, they gazed into each other's eyes. His amber ones glittered with desire and wonder. She stood tall and proud, letting him view her fully. She truly ached for him, despite her bout of pleasure with Finnia and Maiven. Would he take her into his bed, his heart and love her with both? She offered that and her mind too, hoping he would know she did.

"I did not mean to eavesdrop on your...time with the others. Your lovely voice and the cries of pleasure drew me there at first. When I saw you amongst them in all your glory, I could not help myself." Then he stood and smiled, and his next words truly surprised her. "When the king saw the unusual beauty, his heart and mind were captivated, and his body quivered with sudden desire. If he did not believe in love and lust at first sight before, he did then. He hoped the lady would willingly become his. He waited breathlessly for her answer to his heart's question..."

Kyra tossed back her long black hair and grinned up at him wickedly. "When he asked his question, she stood and smiled at him, her lips moistened, ready for his kiss..."

He grinned and took a step towards her, closing the distance between them. "I could take you now, but first, Kyra, promise your heart to only me. For in those moments I heard you tell your story to others, I listened, but not just with my ears. With your words, I felt such passion for you but did not want to rush either of us. Would you tell me a bedtime tale for the rest of our lives? But for me alone, with the details you just told and showed to the others?"

"I have many more to entice you with, Sire, if that is truly what your mind, heart and body want."

"It is what my soul wishes, lovely one. Will you become my queen then? For I truly believe I could love none other in every way but you." He held out his hand. "Let me love you forever with all of me."

She licked her bottom lip, watching as his shaft began to harden again. “Then love me all ways, dear Lachlan.” She reached out and touched his cheek. He kissed her palm and then lowered his face to hers.

His lips were soft at first and then firm as she opened to him. He put his hands on her waist and drew her closer. Kyra wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing her hips against his. They soon pulled off their robes and moved toward the bed as they kissed and caressed. Lachlan took her heavy breast in his hands and suckled the pink-tipped mounds. He groaned when he felt her responses. His hand slid down to test her wetness. She was cream and ready. Kyra pulled him nearer and stroked his shaft as his fingers slid into her silken crevice.

Then he moved between her legs and positioned his rod at her entrance. She opened her legs wider, and he didn’t hesitate but thrust quickly into her willing body. He moved hard and firm against her. She wrapped her legs around his backside and met his movements with her own wild ones. Passions as intense as the hottest fire in all Ireland rampaged through them. His mouth came down over hers in an intense kiss as they reached their zenith. Then they collapsed in each other’s arms.

Lachlan held her tight as they panted from the exertion. “...And so the king found his loving queen-to-be, and from that time forward, they lived to experience many more such tales ...”

“And never a finer Irish tale of love was ever told, as passionate as theirs. Forever more.” Kyra finished for him, snuggling into the depths of his arms and his love.

The End