



The Nexus

a novel of magik and romance

Robin Stears

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CHAPTER 1

Maggie O'Hara inhaled deeply, and her nostrils were assailed by the unique scent of Ireland: diesel fumes, salty ocean air and flowers. Every garden they passed boasted an assortment of the most beautiful flowers she had ever seen. It was mid-June, and every blooming plant in Dublin was on display to celebrate summer. She felt immediately as though she had come home, captivated by the picturesque city. She smiled, just happy to be here. She had heard about Ireland all her life from her grandparents, their lilting brogues a reminder their hearts had remained where they could not.

The streets were lined with little shops, reminding Maggie of a toy village. The storefronts boasted names like "Tobin's Greengrocer" and "O'Banion's Fine Meats." They passed a pub called "The Cat and Cage" then turned into a side street lined with townhouses, each sporting an

impressive array of brilliant blossoms. They stopped behind a bus, an enormous green double-decker, and patiently waited while a crowd of people climbed on and an equally large crowd disembarked. She made a mental note to try riding in the top level of a double-decker before she returned to Ohio.

"Well, now, what do you think so far?" her companion asked. Maggie turned to smile at the young woman who was deftly maneuvering through the suburban traffic. It felt a little disconcerting to be on the "wrong" side of the car and the road, but Maggie tried to ignore it and concentrate on the scenery.

"It's beautiful," she answered with a broad smile. "I love the flowers. I've never seen such gorgeous colors or such spectacular arrangements."

"All Irishmen consider themselves to be master gardeners, you see," the young woman boasted. "Because, of course, we all are," she added with a sly grin.

Maggie chuckled and returned her attention to the passing view.

"I never thought I'd actually get here," she murmured. All her life, she had felt an inexplicable pull toward the Emerald Isle, but her grandparents had forbidden any travel there during their lifetimes. She had known she would visit Ireland someday after her grandparents' deaths but had never made specific plans.

Then, she received an email from one Christie O'Hara of Dublin expressing interest in a particular brooch Maggie had advertised on her website. She had responded by emailing a photograph of herself wearing the brooch in question. That evening, she received a phone call from Christie. Christie had been astonished at the resemblance between the picture of her aunt Grania in her mother's hallway and the girl wearing

the Tara brooch, she'd told Maggie. She had shown the photo to her mother, and Deirdre had nearly fainted. All at once, Maggie had a reason to visit Ireland. She sighed contentedly as she settled more comfortably into her seat.

"And once my Mam gets her hands on you, you'll probably not be allowed to leave," Christie chuckled.

"I can't wait to meet Aunt Deidre," Maggie smiled. "And Uncle Dermot, and all the rest."

"Sure, they're the terror of Santry, they are." Christie smiled. "Da's looking forward to giving you a tour of Dublin, and Mam's been doing her nut, cooking and cleaning, baking and shopping. She's even made two dozen meringues—with kiwi, if you can believe that. She's been driving us all mad, so you'd better be impressed when you walk in the door."

"Oh, I will," Maggie promised. She didn't care if she had to sleep on the floor and eat crusts of bread. Growing up with only her grandparents for company, her entire life had been an exercise in loneliness. She'd had few friends because her grandparents were very protective of her; and although she'd had two boyfriends, neither of them had become a lover. Their promises of devotion had turned out to be worthless.

"Be prepared to be assaulted by a mob of relatives as well. I wouldn't let them come to the airport, even though they all wanted to. I was afraid you'd jump back on the plane and leave again if you saw the whole herd at once," Christie said. Her smile belied her words, revealing her true affection for her family.

Maggie was anxious to meeting the O'Haras of Ireland. It was a continuing source of amusement to her that not only had her Aunt Deirdre been born an O'Hara, she had also married an O'Hara—no relation—thus remaining an O'Hara.

"They're all waiting for you at home, and by now the tea and scones are all gone, I'll wager," Christie complained good-naturedly.

"Who-all will be there?" Maggie asked with a little trepidation. She had a slight fear of crowds. And, of course, this was no ordinary crowd—it was the family she'd never known. She wanted very much for everyone to like her, and she hoped they were the kind of people she could like, too.

"Well, Mam and Da, of course." Christie paused at a red light and began counting her relatives on her fingers. "And Liam and Martina will be there with the twins, David and Alan. Watch out for those two. They're grown men—my age, even—but they're bold bullies, they are, always pulling pranks on people. And then there's Raymond and Marie and little Brigid—she's nine and the sweetest little copper-top, like yourself, love. I don't know if Cormac will be there or not. He can be a pill, but still he's a cousin, so Mam puts up with him. He teaches ancient Irish history at Trinity College, so he's a great know-it-all, you see."

"I'm really nervous about meeting everyone," Maggie confessed. "I mean, even though we're family, we're virtually strangers."

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, love." Christie grinned. "A stranger is only a friend you haven't met yet, sure he is."

Christie easily swung her little Sköda around a corner and came to a stop in front of a lovely white townhouse with the requisite flower garden. "Well, we're here," she announced. "Ready to meet the horde?"

Maggie smiled and reached for the door handle. "I've been ready for this my whole life."

She got out of the car and closed the door, taking in the attractive townhouse, separated from the one on its left by a six-foot stone wall that circled the entire garden. Pretty blue flowers grew on vines up the

side of the house, and pots of geraniums lined the stone walk. Maggie decided the house looked like the Seven Dwarves' cottage where Snow White lived and was secretly tickled at the thought of stepping into a fairy tale. *So, where's my handsome prince?* she thought wryly. *I want my happily ever after!*

Christie opened the hood of the car, which was actually the trunk, and retrieved Maggie's suitcases. Suddenly, a mass of people poured out of the front door, all shouting and laughing, arms outstretched as if they could all hug Maggie at once.

"Back, you demons!" Christie shouted at them. "Don't all come at her at once. There's plenty of her to go around."

Maggie blushed at the innocent remark. She was five feet, three and a half inches tall and tended toward being a little overweight, mostly from eating fast food—she lived alone and hated to cook. She didn't consider herself fat, but she was certainly well rounded, so to speak, and believed she might even be thought of as voluptuous, in the right light.

"There you are! I'm your Aunt Deirdre!" a woman sang out, and enveloped Maggie in a tight embrace. She let go long enough to grab Maggie by the shoulders and hold her at arm's length, scrutinizing her carefully. Maggie smiled, recognizing Aunt Deirdre from the photographs Christie had e-mailed.

Deirdre stroked Maggie's cheek lightly with the back of her hand. "Ah," she sighed, "you've Grania's eyes, love. And her lovely auburn hair, and those sweet apple cheeks." She turned her caress into an affectionate tweak.

"That's what Granddad always used to say," Maggie replied, her voice breaking a little.

"Get away, Dee." A stocky man with a great shock of white hair

elbowed Deirdre out of the way and took Maggie in an embrace. "Ah, sweet Maggie," he sighed, patting her back. "You look just like your mother, colleen." He stepped back, and wiped his eyes. "I knew her when she was younger, when Deirdre and I were courting. She used to come with us to the dances and keep us out of trouble. She used to cod me out of a fish and chips every time."

Maggie took a deep breath, and the tears that had threatened finally spilled over her cheeks.

"Ah, now, Dermot, what did you say to her?" Deirdre smacked him on the shoulder then put her arm around Maggie's waist and led her toward the house. "Get back, everyone," she ordered. "We'll get a cup of tea into her this minute. That's all she needs, is a good, hot cup of scald. Real Irish tea," she confided to Maggie, "not that weak-as-water rubbish you Americans call tea."

She led Maggie into the house, followed by the mob of laughing, chattering O'Haras, and seated her in an overstuffed chair near the fireplace. The rest of the family seated themselves automatically, as if they all had assigned seats.

"Christie!" Deirdre called. "Put the kettle on!"

"Right, Mam," Christie answered with a casual wave, already on her way to the kitchen.

Maggie had always thought her grandparents a little odd for drinking tea when most of the adults she'd been around drank coffee. Christie's emails had set her straight, though. There were very few occasions in Ireland that didn't call for a cup of tea. It was impossible to enjoy a good chat without one. A shopping expedition was incomplete without the obligatory stop for a cup of tea. A cup of tea first thing in the morning got one's day off, and a cup of tea before bed was vital for

ensuring a good night's sleep. "Will you have a cup of tea, ah, you will," and the reply, "Ah, sure, I'm parching with the thirst," was heard all over Ireland thousands of times a day.

Maggie stood in the middle of the parlor and let her gaze roam, admiring the fireplace, with a roaring fire despite the fact that it was June. This time of year was still a bit chilly in the mornings in Ireland, even though it usually warmed up during the day. Maggie rubbed her hands together in front of the fire, soaking up the warmth and feeling it soothe her nerves. She was a little surprised to find her emotions so raw, but then again, she had been flying all night, arriving at eight o'clock in the morning. She hadn't slept much on the plane. She had spent the entire six-hour flight staring out at the Atlantic Ocean, drumming her fingers idly on her tray table, her crossword puzzle all but ignored. She was tired, but keyed up from nervous energy.

She took a few deep breaths to calm herself. She admired the display of family pictures on the wall and hoped she would be asked to pose in one before she had to return to Ohio. If she decided to return to Ohio. *Slow down, girl, she told herself. You just got here. Give it some time.*

"Maybe you'd like something a little stronger than tea for your libations," Uncle Dermot suggested. He held up a bottle of Jameson's in one hand and a glass in the other.

"Not just yet," Maggie demurred with a slight smile. "It's a bit early for me."

"It's a bit early for you, too," Deirdre told him with a scowl. However, if there were few occasions that didn't call for a cup of tea, there were even fewer that didn't call for a drink, even at that hour of the morning.

"Ah, come now," Dermot cajoled. "It's a special occasion. Sure, the lads wouldn't say no to a little drink, right, lads?"

He looked around the room for confirmation, while the men looked toward their respective wives for permission. A few started to nod, and Dermot grinned.

"That's the spirit, lads. It's not every day we get a visitor from America, and one of our own, at that." He scooted behind a bar that was built into a corner, with glasses arranged on a shelf above a counter filled with bottles of various liquors and mixers, and began mixing drinks.

"Now, don't tell me." He waved away the drink orders being shouted at him. "I know what everyone wants, just hold on, it won't take a moment." He expertly filled glasses with whiskey, vodka, and mineral spirits, opening bottles of Guinness, distributing the room-temperature drinks as deftly as any bartender could.

Christie appeared from the kitchen holding a tray. "Tea's on," she announced, making her way toward the center of the parlor and depositing her tray on a low table that sat squarely in the middle of the room. She began to pour deftly, handing around cups and saucers, with Maggie getting the first. Maggie tried to sip the scalding liquid, then settled for holding it and blowing gently across the surface.

"Bickie?" Christie asked, holding out the package of biscuits toward her.

"Bickie? They look like cookies to me," Maggie observed as she took one—just one, to be polite.

Christie laughed. "It's short for 'biscuit,' which is what we call a cookie. Don't worry, you'll get the hang of it in no time at all. Contrary to what you've been told, the Irish speak English, and you Yanks speak American. It isn't at all the same language."

Maggie noticed a little red-haired girl sitting on the floor near her feet, watching her intently with big green eyes. Her heart melted at the sober expression on the girl's face. "What's your name?" she asked softly.

"I'm Brigid," the little girl answered solemnly. "You're Maggie the American Cousin, aren't you?"

Maggie nodded, fighting to suppress a grin. *Maggie the American Cousin, the European Tour*, she thought wildly. She fought down hysterical giggles. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Brigid. I like your hair."

It was the same bright auburn as her own, not at all the tangle of curls most red hair seemed to be but with a soft wave.

"I wish I had blonde hair, like Cindy," Brigid whispered. "She's beautiful."

"Who's Cindy?" Maggie asked. She looked around the room with an anxious frown but failed to see any blondes in the room.

"Oh, Cindy," Christie explained. "She's the Irish equivalent of Barbie. All the little girls love Cindy dolls. Brigid has about a dozen, but there's always one more she just has to have."

Maggie nodded in understanding, bestowing a smile on Brigid. She'd loved her Barbies as a child and remembered fondly brushing their hair and wishing her own auburn tresses were the same pale gold. Her grandparents hadn't permitted her to have many friends, and she'd loved imagining all sorts of adventures for Barbie, living vicariously through her beloved doll.

She took an instant liking to Brigid, and reached down to stroke her hair. "I used to wish I had blonde hair, too," she confessed. "But now I like the hair I have."

"It's lovely," Brigid agreed, smiling at her. She squirmed a little closer and took a bickie, accepting a cup of half-milk, half-tea with lots of

sugar from Christie.

"Right, then." A stout, dark, brooding young fellow with a little pot-belly stood and stuck his hand out. "I'm Cormac—"

"That's my brother's son," Dermot interrupted. "Teaches at Trinity College, he does, indeed. He's the youngest professor there, absolutely tops in his field, isn't that right, Cormac?"

Cormac scowled a little at the interruption, but his face softened under Dermot's praise.

"Well, if we're doing introductions, then I'm next," said a tall, broad-shouldered man. "I'm Liam, Dee's little brother, and this is my lovely wife, Martina." A forty-something woman with dark hair and twinkling eyes waved and grinned at Maggie. "These are the boys, David and Alan," he continued, as identically handsome young men lifted their bottles of Guinness in unison to salute her.

"You've met our Brigid," smiled a tall red-haired man. "I'm your Uncle Raymond and this is my missus, Marie." Marie, a round-faced woman with a toothy grin, waved with a giggle.

"Sure, it's a grand girl you are," she assured Maggie.

"I'm the eldest and Raymond is the youngest," said Deirdre, sipping her tea. "Your mother was just between me and Liam, although we treated her like a baby and spoiled her terribly because she was so lovely. Liam and Raymond used to take her around when they played football and make funny faces at her when she cried. No one could stand to see Grania cry, she was such a pretty girl."

Raymond and Liam nodded, remembering their sister with fond smiles.

"Do you remember the time she wanted that doll's pram?" Liam asked Raymond, who grinned and nodded in response. Liam turned to

Maggie and said, "Little Maureen Connolly down the road got a doll's pram for her birthday, and Grania decided she had to have one as well. She sobbed for three days straight, I'm telling you. She wouldn't eat, wouldn't do her lessons for school, wouldn't talk to anyone, just took to her bed and sobbed. Remember that, Deirdre?"

"Oh, don't I just." Deirdre chuckled. "Mam and Da finally gave in and got a secondhand pram, and Liam and Raymond fixed it up like new," she told Maggie, holding her hand. "The moment your mother set eyes on the thing, she stopped crying, like throwing a switch. She could always do that."

"Yeah," Raymond agreed, shaking his head. "She could always get what she wanted, just by turning on the waterworks."

"The trick is..." Liam winked at Maggie. "...she wouldn't just turn them on. She'd leave the bloody faucet on full blast!"

Maggie joined the family in their laughter, wanting to hear more. She was desperate for details about her mother, and she couldn't seem to take it all in fast enough. Her grandparents had rarely spoken of Grania. She had never even seen a photograph of her mother until the reading of her grandfather's will. In fact, they had rarely spoken about any member of the family. Maggie flushed, suddenly angry with them. *They stole my family*, she thought, *and if it hadn't been for a lucky coincidence, I might never have even known.*

CHAPTER 2

Marie stood up and took Maggie's hand. "Maggie, love, you're looking a little overwhelmed by all this. Why don't we go for a short walk? There's a mall not far from here—the Omni Center. Brigid's been dying to see the newest Cindy at the toyshop. It's a lovely day, and it'll give you a chance to catch your breath after all this."

"That's a brilliant idea," Raymond O'Hara, Brigid's father agreed. "I'll go with you. Just to keep an eye on my money, you know." He winked at Maggie.

Maggie glanced at Deirdre. "Well, I could use a little fresh air. I was cooped up on that plane forever. If you don't mind, I think I would like to stretch my legs a little."

More than that, she wanted some time to recoup. She just wasn't used to being in a room with close to a dozen people at once.

"Not at all. Take your time. We'll have an early dinner when you get back," Deirdre promised. She stood, took her niece's hands and hauled her to her feet. "I've made corned beef and cabbage. We don't eat it

much here, but I hear you Americans love the stuff."

"Sounds great," Maggie said on her way out the door, holding Brigid's hand. Raymond and Marie automatically blessed themselves with holy water from the shrine next to the front door. Maggie felt a slight chill as she watched them then shrugged it off as the uncommonly bright Irish sun warmed her.

She followed them down the street, turned the corner and took a deep breath. She supposed she would have to get used to being around so many people all at once, but for now the serenity of the little side street was comforting.

"They're a bit much, aren't they?" Marie asked with a knowing smile. "I remember the first time I met them—the whole lot of them at once. Raymond announced our engagement, and they all pounced on me like a load of cats on a poor mouse. I almost ran out of the place screaming like a Bean Sidhe." She hooked her arm through Raymond's affectionately.

"A ban shee? I've heard of that. Isn't it some kind of ghost or something?" Maggie asked conversationally.

"Not at all. The Bean Sidhe is one of the Daoine Sidhe."

"Deenее shee?"

"That's right, the Daoine Sidhe, the fairy people. The Bean Sidhe appears, wailing and combing her hair, when someone dies. If you hear the wail of the Bean Sidhe, it's told, then the Death Coach has come for you," Marie told her. "At least that's what the old folks say. Not many modern Irishmen believe in that load of rubbish anymore. It's just in the country that they still tell the old stories, you know, about the fairies and their magic. Probably more people in America believe that sort of thing these days."

"You're probably right about that. People in America tend to go a little nuts on St. Patrick's Day. My grandfather used to say that in Ireland people go to church, light candles and pray; and in America all the Irish are so homesick, they have to go to the pub and drown their troubles."

Raymond laughed. "I've been in America for St. Patrick's Day. I know just what he means. I was in New York on business about three years ago, and you wouldn't believe the parades, the music, people dressing up like leprechauns. It was like being in an Irish madhouse. Da used to hate all that fuss." His smile faltered a little with the memories of his father.

"I remember the photographs you took," Marie smiled. "We have a parade here in Dublin, but generally people just wear a bit of shamrock in their lapels. You don't see many people dressing up like leprechauns."

"What did you think of America?" Maggie asked. "How long were you there?"

"Well, now, I was only in New York City for a week, and I'm told that New York City is actually another country altogether from America. But I found it extremely fast-paced. Everyone talked very fast, ate very fast, drank very fast and walked very fast."

"Where I'm from isn't a city," Maggie said. "Life is slower in Dublin Township, Ohio. I know almost everyone in town. We still show kids' movies in the park on Wednesday nights in the summer. We have a homecoming festival every year, with a parade. I can't believe I'm talking this much." She laughed a little, wondering at her sudden willingness to open up to these virtual strangers.

Her Uncle Raymond wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close for a moment. "Don't mind it, love. It's just the O'Hara in you coming out. We're a talkative lot. Just enjoy yourself and relax. You're a

grand girl, and we're all very glad to have you here."

Marie nodded in agreement.

Maggie grinned at Brigid, her new friend and a blatant reminder of her own "advanced" age. She longed to have children, yearned for a large family to fill an enormous house, and her own Prince Charming to fill her days with laughter and love and her nights with the mysteries of passion. She was determined to have an honest, sexy, hard-working, loyal man with integrity, a sense of humor and an ability to work and play well with others. She would settle for nothing less than the man of her dreams.

They walked along the sidewalk, chatting amiably, until they arrived at the mall. Raymond held the door for Maggie and Brigid, who refused to relinquish her hold on Maggie's hand.

"Looks like you've made a friend for life, there, Maggie," Raymond observed. "Our Brigid is usually shy with people she doesn't know. You must have the magic touch."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Maggie laughed. "I don't think there's any such thing as magic."

Brigid stopped dead in her tracks, her eyes trained on the display window of a toy store. It held an array of Cindy dolls, and Maggie knew immediately which one Brigid coveted. Fairy Princess Cindy was the centerpiece of the exhibit, resplendent in a rainbow-colored diaphanous gown with tiny wings. Maggie felt an irrational tug of desire for the doll herself. She shrugged, deciding the deep-rooted love for Barbie dolls and the fantasy life they represented never waned.

"Oh, Mammy, look, isn't she gorgeous?" Brigid breathed wistfully. "Oh, I wish she was mine."

Suddenly, Maggie felt the air ripple around her, and her hand tingled slightly where Brigid's nestled. She frowned and looked at it. *That*

was weird, she thought. It felt like a static electricity shock, but the floor of the Omni was tile, not carpeting. Neither of them was wearing wool, either. She scanned Brigid's face, but the child seemed unaware of anything but the doll, so mentally shrugged and put it down to Irish weather. Maybe the atmosphere around Ireland was highly charged with static electricity because of all the rain, who knew?

"Now, Brigid," Marie admonished. "Your birthday is next month, and I'm not buying you a doll today. You can just wait until then. We're here to show Maggie around a bit, not shop for you."

"But, Mam," Brigid coaxed. "Couldn't we just look at her? I promise we won't stay long, I just want to see her up close."

"I'm not going to argue," Marie stuck her hands on her hips. "We'll come back another day."

"That's okay," Maggie said. She turned to Brigid and grinned. "Let's go in and have a better look, okay? I wouldn't mind seeing her myself."

Brigid nodded enthusiastically. Raymond shrugged, looking amusedly at Maggie. Marie sighed and said, "Oh, all right, but I'm not buying the thing, and that's my final answer."

Maggie squeezed Brigid's hand and let the little girl lead her into the toy store. As they crossed the threshold, a siren began to shriek and loud music poured from the store's speakers. Balloons fell from the ceiling, and people rushed to throw confetti at them, singing along with the music "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." Maggie, confused at the sudden commotion, pulled Brigid a little closer. The uproar scared her, and she wondered if she had set off an alarm of some kind. But that was impossible—they weren't shoplifting; and anyway, they were going into the store, not coming out of it.

"We have a winner!" A jocular little man in a blue suit hurried

toward them. He patted Maggie on the back, then tried to shake Brigid's hand. The little girl crept behind Maggie, gaping at the man and clutching Maggie's legs. Eventually, he settled for leading the store staff in a round of applause.

"Congratulations, young lady," he told Brigid. "You are Toy World's one-millionth customer and that entitles you to anything in the store you desire. Just pick your prize, colleen, and you can take it home with you."

Brigid's eyebrows furrowed in concentration. "What? Did I win something?"

"Did she win something?" the man, who was evidently the store's manager, asked Maggie with a grin then turned back to Brigid. He squatted down so as to be at eye-level with her. "You've won your heart's desire, love. This is your lucky day. You can have whatever toy you like, anything in the store. So, what'll it be? A bicycle? A Nintendo? You tell me, and I'll get it for you. I'll just have a couple of forms for you to sign, if you don't mind," he added, giving Marie a confident smile.

Brigid looked at her mother uncertainly. Marie nodded.

"I guess it's your lucky day, love," she said. "Tell the fellow what you want."

Brigid grinned. "Fairy Princess Cindy," she stated, as if there could be any doubt. "The one in the window, please."

"A magnificent choice," the manager said, straightening up and sending one of his staff to fetch the doll with an imperious wave.

Maggie giggled with delight as Brigid accepted her prize. She couldn't have been more pleased if she had won the doll herself.

Raymond and Marie followed the manager to his office to sign a release form, and Maggie waited at the store entrance with Brigid. "Well, now, aren't you a lucky girl!" she said.

Brigid held the doll at arm's length, gazing raptly at the painted face.

"No, you're my lucky charm," she proclaimed. "I made a wish, and you made it come true. You must be magic. That's what my Daddy said. You're magic." She took Maggie's hand again, clutching her precious Cindy doll against her chest.

Maggie gave Brigid an affectionate squeeze. "No, I'm not. I'm just a regular person. You, on the other hand, must be magic. You were the one-millionth customer, remember, and you won the doll. If I was magic, I'd be holding that doll right now instead of you."

Raymond and Marie made their way back to the entrance, escorted by the store manager. He refused to let them leave until they posed for a few photographs. Maggie had no trouble keeping a smile on her face. She was having the time of her life.

Marie and Raymond treated Brigid and Maggie to a "Ninety-Nine," which turned out to be an ice cream cone with a Cadbury's Flake candy bar stuck in it. As Maggie devoured her treat, she marveled at her good fortune. *I may not be a lucky charm, she thought. But I'm sure a lucky woman. Now, about that Prince Charming and my happily ever after...*

They strolled back to Deirdre's house, enjoying the exceptionally warm early-afternoon weather. Brigid forged ahead, amiably chatting with Cindy. As the townhouse came into view, she ran inside, leaving the front door open behind her, shouting, "Christie! Christie! Look what I've got! Maggie's got magical powers! She won me a Cindy doll! And we had a Ninety-Nine! Isn't she gorgeous?"

Before Maggie could find a seat at the enormous table where the entire O'Hara clan had gathered for their afternoon meal, the story had made its way throughout the dining room. She humbly refused to claim

credit for Brigid's win, instead opting to laugh off the whole episode and stuff herself with corned beef and cabbage and boiled potatoes and carrots. It was rare, indeed, for her to eat a home-cooked meal; and she intended to enjoy every bite, even as the O'Haras insisted she had the luck of the Irish.

Between bites, she answered their myriad questions about the States. Everything from the television shows she watched to her descriptions of the Native American burial mounds not far from her hometown fascinated the O'Haras. They were curious about her work, her hobbies, her home. Even her love life was not a taboo topic of conversation. The third degree continued throughout the meal, dessert, and well into the after-dinner tea, served in the parlor, and Maggie was sure the NSA could learn something from her Aunt Deirdre's interrogation techniques.

"Okay, stop," she finally said, holding out her hands in surrender, laughing. "I give up. I'm all out of answers. You'll have to wait and ask me questions tomorrow. I'm completely dry, folks."

Deirdre chuckled and sat down on the sofa next to Maggie, sipping from her cup. Maggie had declined, too full even for the refreshing, dark tea. "We can be a bit overwhelming, as Marie says." She winked at her sister-in-law. "We just want to get to know you."

"Well, how about if I ask you guys some questions instead?" Maggie suggested. She settled back into the sofa and burped softly, belatedly covering her mouth with her hand.

"Oh, well, now you've done it," Dermot warned her, smiling with delight. "You've gone and asked an Irishman to talk about himself. You may as well get comfortable, love. There's no stopping us now. Ear mechanics we are—we'll drill in your ears all night."

"So, what happened to everyone after my grandparents left Ireland?" Maggie asked. "I mean, you guys were still teenagers, right?" She indicated Liam and Raymond with a wave of her hand.

"That's right," Deirdre answered for them. "And Dermot and myself were only just newlyweds. We all moved into this house here, and we raised each other."

"Don't you be telling lies," Liam shook his finger at Deirdre. "She kept our family together, sure, she did. If it wasn't for Dee, I wouldn't have bothered to go to college. Then, I wouldn't have met Martina." He smiled at his wife, and Maggie's heart ached to be on the receiving end of a similar smile.

"True enough," Raymond agreed. "Marie and I met in college, as well, and Dee practically raised Brigid those first two years while we got the travel agency going."

"Your aunt Deirdre is the glue that binds this family together," Dermot added with the utmost seriousness.

"Not at all," Deirdre scoffed. "More like I'm the ringmaster that keeps you wild animals from tearing each other apart."

Maggie basked in the love that warmed the room as much as the blazing fire did. Her grandparents had loved her, she knew that, but the ache that tore her heart was for something deeper, more profound. She loved her home in Dublin Township, but she longed for a family connection. She studied her aunts and uncles, their unconscious gestures of love—the gentle touches, playful slaps and stolen kisses. She wanted this most of all: a family, a home and her own Prince Charming. In the meantime, there was still a mystery to solve. She could feel jet lag starting to set in, but she wanted to finish this conversation.

"Why did they leave in the first place?" she asked.

"Oh, love, did they never tell you?" Deirdre covered Maggie's hands with her own.

"Well, they never said much about it, really. Granny told me my mother had gotten pregnant. 'In a family way,' she said. I got the impression that was the reason they left Ireland, because she was going to have a baby out of wedlock. Me," she sighed. "Anyway, she died having me, but Granny and Granddad wanted me to live in America, so they stayed there to raise me."

"Ah, well, that's the truth of it—about your mother, I mean," Dermot agreed, nodding. "She was a grand girl, but she did get herself into trouble—"

"She didn't get herself into anything," Deirdre snapped. "It takes two to tango, as I'm sure you know yourself."

"I stand corrected." Dermot bowed a little in his wife's direction. "As the fellow said when he walked out of the chiropractor's office," he added, winking at Maggie.

"Shut up, you, I'll tell it," Deirdre waved him off, rolling her eyes and sighing heavily. "We knew the reason they left, but we never knew why they stayed away. I thought they meant to give the baby up for adoption then come back home. But they never did."

"I still can't believe my grandparents never contacted you in all this time," Maggie wondered aloud.

"Oh, they sent us money, all right," Deirdre sniffed. "Every month we'd get an envelope with a bank draft in it. Right up until young Raymond's eighteenth birthday. That was the last we heard from them."

"Sure, you're depressing poor Maggie with all this talk." Christie stood up and put her hands on her hips. "Right, let's go for a jar."

"A jar of what?" Maggie asked.

Dermot guffawed and slapped his knee. "A jar of what, by God, that's brilliant."

David and Alan hooted, and Martina gave one of them a gentle slap on the back of his head, which he promptly passed on to his brother.

"Just stop," Deirdre admonished, trying to hide her own smile. "It means a drink, love, from the old days when people used to take their own jars to the pub."

"Cheerio, then," Marie stood up and blew Deirdre a kiss. "We've got to get this little one home to bed." Brigid nodded sleepily, still clutching her Fairy Princess Cindy doll.

Choruses of "Not tonight," and "Have to get myself home," followed by a tidal wave of hugs and kisses, nearly destroyed Maggie's already fragile composure. She'd experienced a lifetime of emotions in only a few short hours, and even though she wasn't normally a drinker, she decided a drink was exactly what she needed.

CHAPTER 3

Arm-in-arm, Maggie and Christie followed Dermot and Deirdre two blocks down the street to the Cauldron.

"I'll get you a pint of Guinness," Dermot called over his shoulder. "It's like mother's milk to an Irishman. You'll love it," he assured her.

"You'll hate it," Christie whispered in Maggie's ear with a giggle.

"You'll love the pub, anyway," Deirdre told her. "And you'll get to meet the whole neighborhood all at once. Sure, they'll all be there, won't they."

The local pub was more than just a drinking establishment. It was the center of all social activity, where friends and neighbors gathered to converse and argue, to watch a football match or a darts tournament on the telly or to sing. Most pubs had a large open lounge and a separate men-only bar area. Maggie stepped through the door of the Cauldron and stepped into "The Quiet Man." Frothy pint glasses of Guinness in various stages of completion sat on every table, as did a few glasses of hearty Irish ale, and half-poured pints of the porter lined the bar. The perimeter

of the room was lined with comfortable sofas in brilliant jewel-tones, short four-legged stools and low tables. A few small tables and stools were scattered around, and a thin cloud of smoke fogged the room.

"Maggie'll come and collect the drinks with me," Dermot announced, taking her elbow in a curiously old-fashioned gesture she found charming. Deirdre waved at him absently as she and Christie made their way toward an empty sofa. Dermot stepped up to the bar and ordered two pints of Guinness and two pints of ale, then began to narrate while Maggie watched the bartender pull pints.

"You see, Maggie, there's a technique to pouring a pint of Guinness." He paused long enough to wink at the bartender, who returned it with a smile and a warning look that said he might just have to interrupt Dermot and put him straight if necessary. "You must start out with a twenty-ounce pint glass, very clean but not chilled. That's very important. Then, you hold the glass at a forty-five-degree angle close to the spout to prevent large bubbles from forming in the head. You pull the tap fully open and fill the glass about three-quarters full. Now, this is extremely important, Maggie. You must allow the stout to settle completely before filling the rest of the glass. You can't rush a pint."

The bartender nodded approvingly as he selected a pre-poured pint from the top of the bar and held it under the tap. Dermot continued his narration.

"To top it off, you push the tap forward slightly until the head rises just a bit over the rim. You never allow the stout to overflow or run down the glass."

He held out his hand, accepted the pint of Guinness from the bartender and held it up for her to examine. "Look at this beauty, love," he crooned, slowly turning the glass from side to side in admiration.

"Now, I'll show you how to drink it. You never sip a pint of Guinness. It ruins the nature of the stout. You take a large mouthful."

He demonstrated by gulping about one-fourth of the pint. Maggie was impressed, not only by Dermot's fascination with the perfect pint but also by his capacity for quantity.

The bartender smiled at her. "A good bartender," he told her, leaning casually on the bar, "can even draw a shamrock in the foam or write the customer's initials in it, but that's usually just for the tourists. The regulars just want a pint—nothing fancy, just keep them coming."

"What causes the creamy head? It looks so delicious," Maggie said.

"It's the gas we mix it with," the bartender answered. "It's a mix of seventy-five percent nitrogen and twenty-five percent carbon dioxide. It's actually the nitrogen that causes the creaminess."

"Is everybody in Ireland an expert on Guinness?" she laughed.

"It's a social phenomenon," agreed the bartender.

"It's almost a national religion," Dermot added with a smile. He held up his glass, struck a pose and quoted: "'We believe in one drink, Guinness, the almighty, makers of cans and bottles—of all that is drunk and un-drunk.'" Smiling, he lifted the pint toward the bartender in salute.

"Not bad," the bartender replied. "Do you know the whole thing?"

"What am I missing?" Maggie asked.

"I used to know it all, but I've lost a few brain cells," Dermot chuckled. "It's called 'Arthur's Creed,' kind of a parody of the 'Apostle's Creed.' But don't let Deirdre hear you say it. She'll curse you for a blasphemer."

He held the pint out toward Maggie, and she gulped it as he had done. Then, she choked and swallowed, feeling the bitter brew burn her throat on the way toward her stomach. She handed it back with a

grimace.

"Maybe I'll just have a glass of ale," she said, shaking her head.

Dermot and the bartender laughed good-naturedly.

"It's an acquired taste," the bartender said. "But it's good for you, you know. Very high in iron, like."

* * *

Brian was tuning his guitar when Maggie O'Hara entered the Cauldron, followed closely by Deirdre, Dermot and Christie. *Now there's a bonnie little colleen*, he thought, admiring the slight sway of her hips as she followed Dermot to the bar and received her first lesson on the "Perfect Pint." He watched as she gracefully lowered herself onto a stool while the rest of the family sat on the plush sofa against the pub wall. Dermot distributed the drinks, and after taking huge gulps he and Deirdre scanned the pub for friends.

Brian watched Maggie openly, willing her to turn around and look at him. Her physical being was relatively unimpressive considering who she was, but she had already performed some small magic, albeit unintentionally. He had to move quickly, with only a week left until Midsummer Eve. *At least she's fit to be seen*, he thought with satisfaction.

* * *

Maggie sipped her ale, watching Dermot finish off another quarter of his pint in one swallow. "I don't think I'll ever develop a taste for Guinness," she apologized.

"It's terrible stuff," Christie agreed. "I never drink it myself, but as you can see, my Da thinks it's mother's milk."

"That it is," Dermot said with a wink at Maggie. He turned suddenly to look toward the bar, and she followed his gaze. Sitting atop it,

strumming his guitar and singing, was the most incredible-looking man Maggie had ever seen.

She realized her mouth was hanging open and closed it before she began to drool. He was singing "The Black Velvet Band," a poignant ballad about love and betrayal. His clean tenor lilted throughout the bar, and patrons ended their conversations in mid-sentence—some in mid-word—to listen to the sweet music. They swayed in time to the song, joining in the refrain. He looked as though he was enjoying the attention, and he glanced toward her more than once.

"What's all this?" Deirdre softly asked no one in particular. "Since when does Tommy MacNamara have a singer? We've been coming to this pub since the day it opened, and he's never had a singer here before. What do you think he's up to?"

"Ah, he's probably going to raise the price of a pint again," Dermot grumbled, polishing off another gulp of Guinness. He grinned at Maggie. "As long as they don't stop making the stuff!"

He laughed at his own joke, then joined in the chorus of the song with his hearty baritone. Maggie was enchanted by the crowd of Irish people, their voices uplifted in song, united in their love of music. She was equally enchanted with the singer.

She sipped some more ale, unconsciously swaying a little in time to the music. The song ended, and the pub's patrons applauded enthusiastically, cheering and stomping their feet. The singer began another song, "Finnegan's Wake," a decidedly more upbeat number, and Maggie joined in the clapping and stomping in time to the tune. She was enjoying herself immensely and found herself strangely drawn to the singer. She was sure it was only her imagination, but she thought he looked her way quite often, sending her sizzling looks and playful winks.

She fanned herself with her coaster and gulped her ale. *Is it me*, she wondered, *or is it really hot in here?*

When the song ended, he played a fanfare then shouted to the pub in general, "Are there any Americans here tonight?"

"Here!" Dermot and Deirdre shouted back, pointing at Maggie. Everyone shifted to get a look at her and she blushed, embarrassed at being the center of attention. The adorable singer sent another dazzling smile accompanied by a slow, sensuous wink.

"And a lovely Yank she is," he said, never taking his gaze from her face. "Tell us, ginger, are you one of our own, by any chance?"

"That she is," Dermot replied loudly, as he nodded and finished his pint. "She's our American niece, come home at last."

He signaled to the serving lad and ordered another round as the pub erupted with shouts of "Welcome Home" and applause. Maggie downed her ale quickly, relieved to have some activity to do. All this attention was making her distinctly uncomfortable, although she tried to maintain a smile and even attempted to wave a bit. She leaned forward and, never taking her eyes from the singer, whispered to Christie, "Why did he call me 'ginger?'"

"That's your red hair," Christie smiled at her. "It's all right, it's not an insult or anything. All the copper tops are called 'ginger' over here."

Look who's calling whom ginger, Maggie thought, admiring his flame-red hair.

"Well, our lovely American cousin, here's a tune for you and you alone." The singer blew her a kiss as he strummed his guitar again. He started to sing "The Whistling Gypsy," a song about forbidden love. As he reached the verse where the hero and heroine come together, Maggie watched him, completely mesmerized by his singing. She felt a hot stone

in her chest, then in the pit of her stomach, then lower. Her thighs ached and she unconsciously tightened her buttocks. She nearly groaned as he finished the verse, returning to the chorus. She didn't even notice the serving lad set another pint of ale in front of her and take her empty glass.

Maggie gulped her second pint of ale, watching the singer carefully. His twinkling eyes were an odd shade of silver-green, she noticed, and though his arms and shoulders were muscular, his long, slender fingers strummed the guitar as though they were part of the instrument. Idly, she wondered what those fingers would feel like caressing her body the way they caressed the strings. She had a sudden notion to grab him by those extraordinary shoulders and kiss him, hard.

She was startled at the thought. She'd been in love twice, so she'd thought, though she had never given herself to either man. She always knew she would have to trust a man completely before she could sleep with him, and neither of her former boyfriends had proven worthy of that trust. Neither of them had sent her senses reeling the way the pub singer did, either. She took another sip of ale, hoping it would cool her off.

The singer finished the ballad, put his guitar on the bar and shouted over the applause, "I want to thank everyone for coming here tonight. If you liked my singing, my name's Brian, and if you didn't, it's Seamus." He paused as the crowd laughed and applauded, shouting his name. "I'll be back later, I've got to wet my whistle. Don't go away, now."

He hopped off the bar, accepted a pint of Guinness from the bartender and strode directly toward Maggie and her family. She watched as patrons shook his hand and slapped him on the back but although he accepted the accolades with good cheer, his gaze was fixed on her.

Maggie lowered her eyes and inspected her glass of ale. She took another sip, watching the foam slide down the inside of the glass, watching some of it cling. It was positively fascinating. It was much better than stupidly staring at the most gorgeous man she'd ever laid eyes on and making a complete fool of herself in a foreign country in front of the people she desperately wanted to impress. *Get a grip, girlfriend*, she told herself.

"How're ya?" Brian greeted the family with a nod, which Deirdre, Dermot and Christie returned, and lowered himself onto a stool next to Maggie. "I hope I didn't embarrass you, love," he said.

"No, not at all," she replied with a smile. "Well, maybe a little. But I'll live."

Brian smiled in return, and his silver-green eyes reflected the light green of his shirt and tie. He was quite beautiful up close, and Maggie's stomach flip-flopped. She gulped some more ale. His nearness was oppressive. She could feel his body heat, and his thigh was touching hers—just slightly, but enough to send her pulse into overdrive. Her fingers itched to stroke his hair, and her lips ached to kiss him. She quickly suppressed an urge to groan, swallowing it with another gulp of ale.

"You've a lovely voice," Deirdre complimented Brian, and Maggie didn't miss the speculative gleam in her eye. She knew from her correspondence with Christie that Deirdre wanted nothing more than to be surrounded by her family, and it was her not-so-secret desire to convince Maggie to make her vacation in Ireland a permanent arrangement.

As soon as Christie arrived home with the news of her extraordinary find Deirdre had begun to hope of reuniting her family. A few times in the

last months, Christie and Maggie had sent instant messages to one another; but while they could type their conversations very quickly, Deirdre claimed she preferred to have a face-to-face conversation with her niece. She had joined their chat sessions on occasion but insisted it wasn't the same to her. They had talked on the telephone a few times as well, and according to her aunt even that wasn't as good as being in the room, looking into a person's eyes.

"Cheers, thanks very much." Brian accepted the compliment with a quick smile and a tilt of his head. "Might I be so bold as to buy you a drink?" he asked Maggie. "And your family, of course," he added, smiling at Dermot and winning yet another conquest. "What's everyone having?" He quickly took their orders and started toward the bar.

"Hang on, there, young fellow, I'll accompany you." Dermot threw Deirdre a wink and followed with a spring in his step.

"Cheers." Christie smiled and waved at Brian's retreating form then turned to Maggie with a look of astonishment. "Holy Mary, Mother of God," she said.

Maggie gave a little start and rubbed her arms. *One minute, it's roasting in here, the next it's freezing,* she thought. *Fickle Irish weather, indeed.*

Christie lifted one eyebrow, and Maggie returned her questioning glance with one of her own.

"What?" she asked, genuinely confused.

"You really don't get it, do you?"

Maggie shrugged and shook her head.

"Maggie, love, in my experience, a lad only buys a girl a drink if he's expecting to get something in return, if you know what I'm talking about. That's why I buy my own drinks."

"Do you think Brian expects..." Maggie trailed off, horrified by the idea, then immediately even more horrified by the idea that he meant to include Christie, Deirdre and Dermot in some kind of bizarre Irish orgy.

"Not at all! That's what I'm getting at!" Christie snapped her fingers.

Deirdre interrupted. "Maggie, love, when a young fellow buys a round for the family, he means to court you."

"Court me?" She nearly choked on the words. "You must be joking. Does that mean the same thing here as it does in America?"

"If it means he's making wedding plans, ah, sure it does." Deirdre grinned.

* * *

Dermot followed Brian to the bar like a little puppy trailing after his young master. Brian smiled a satisfied grin. *This is almost too easy*, he thought. *I'll have the whole family charmed in no time, and Maggie, too.*

"Three ales and two pints of porter," he called to the bartender, who nodded and began pouring.

"So, you're a singer, are you?" Dermot said conversationally as they leaned against the bar, waiting for their drinks.

"And you're a master of the obvious, are you?" Brian replied with a grin.

Dermot laughed and slapped his hand on the bar.

"I like a man with a sense of humor," he said. "Dermot O'Hara's the name." He offered his hand. Brian shook it and nodded. "That's my wife Deirdre, my daughter Christie, and you've met our Maggie, of course."

Brian looked over at Maggie and smiled. "I have indeed."

"Ah, she's a grand girl, she is," Dermot said, accepting two pints of Guinness from the bartender. "There's the ales, lad." He nodded toward

the three pints of ale, and Brian dutifully picked them up.

"She's a grand girl, altogether," Dermot repeated.

Brian smiled inwardly as he followed Dermot back to the table. *This is going to be entirely too easy*, he thought again. He placed pints of ale in front of Deirdre, Maggie and then Christie and spotted the nod of approval Deirdre gave. Courtesy demanded a particular order in which drinks were served, and he'd done it exactly right. He seated himself next to Maggie again and took a long gulp of porter, and noticed Dermot's nod of approval as well. He sighed, wiped his lip and focused on Maggie.

Time to turn on the glamour, he decided.

* * *

"Are you planning to be here long?"

Maggie almost didn't hear Brian's question. She was still reeling from Deirdre's announcement. She wished her aunt and uncle didn't look so smugly satisfied.

"Well, I'm a little jet-lagged, so I thought I'd go to bed early tonight." The effects of the ale, combined with the heat of Brian's presence, were making her light-headed. She fanned herself with her coaster. *There goes the temperature again. Maybe I'm coming down with something.*

"No, no," Brian laughed and took her hand. She shuddered, feeling the heat of his touch radiate throughout her entire body. "I meant, are you planning to be in Ireland long?"

She grinned at her own mistake, blushing a little. "Not long," she replied. "I'm only staying until the end of the month, then I have to get back to Ohio. I have a business to run, and I can't stay away forever, much as I'd like to. Ireland is really beautiful. I've only been here one day, and it already feels like home."

"What kind of business do you have in America?"

"I make replicas of ancient Irish jewelry—you know, pins and brooches, bracelets and necklaces. I've always loved the mathematical precision of ancient Irish jewelers. Their work seems so plain, and yet it's so elegant."

"Now, that sounds downright fascinating. And you make it all yourself, do you? I have a fondness for ancient Ireland myself. Tell me about some of the things you've made."

* * *

As Maggie discussed her work, Brian watched Deirdre elbow Dermot, drawing the man's attention to them. Using the silent communication that develops after years of togetherness, they discussed the possibilities of him and Maggie as a couple, with nods, winks, speculative looks and waggling eyebrows. He barely heard Maggie chattering inanely about the difficulty of working with gold for sneaking glances at Christie. He inferred from the satisfied smirk on her cousin's face it wouldn't bother her one bit if her long-lost relative decided to settle in Ireland.

He was pleased at the effect he was having on Maggie, relishing his own arousal, knowing the delights that awaited both of them. It was inevitable. He would seduce Maggie, and she would enjoy it immensely and so would he, even though he was, literally, flirting with disaster.

* * *

Brian downed the last of his Guinness and stood.

"Well, sorry to leave you, but I've got to get back to work," he said with a smile for Maggie alone. He bowed slightly to her and whispered in her ear, "Don't go home too early. I've only got one more set, and I'd love to talk some more."

Maggie flushed, feeling his breath on her throat. *And I'd love to do more than talk*, she thought, surprised at herself yet again. At twenty-seven, she still hadn't found true love, and still hadn't lost her virginity. Sometimes, she thought she should just "do it" and get it over with; but she always reconsidered. She'd waited this long, after all, how much longer could it be?

Not much, she speculated, openly admiring Brian's bum as he made his way back toward the bar and his guitar. She gulped more ale and warned herself physical attraction was a far cry from true love. *Get over it*, she told herself, even as she tingled with anticipation of Brian's return. He had seemed genuinely interested in her, and that was a rare experience. The men she had known were self-absorbed, self-centered and selfish in general. As much as she yearned for a husband and a family, she resolved to be wary. A vacation fling might be enough for some people, but it would never be enough for Maggie O'Hara.

Besides, a guy as good-looking and talented as Brian must surely attract a lot of women, and she had no intention of trying to compete with a bunch of Irish groupies. Still, she rarely took her eyes off of him as he performed his second set, a situation that didn't escape the eagle-eyed observations of her family.

"He's a fine specimen of an Irishman, isn't he?" Deirdre teased. "With all that bushy red hair and those lovely green eyes, he's a regular Daoine Sidhe prince."

"Daoine Sidhe?" Maggie asked, furrowing her eyebrows. "Oh, that's right, the fairies. Marie told me about the Bean Sidhe. Pretty scary stuff."

"Oh, it's not all scary, though some of it is." Deirdre waved away an explanation. "You'll have to ask Cormac about it. That's his specialty. He's a fairy expert."

"A fairy expert?" Maggie giggled. "Is there such a thing?"

"He's an expert on Irish mythology, actually. And he'll talk your ear off about it," Christie said, shaking her finger in warning. "When he starts talking about the Daoine Sidhe, you'd think he was in a lecture hall. I don't think he'd go so far as to give you a quiz," she added with a slight smile, "though he might."

"Fairy people," Maggie said. "You mean like leprechauns?"

"Well, the way Cormac tells it, leprechauns are Daoine Sidhe, but there are other types of fairy people as well. You'll have to ask him," Deirdre said, closing the subject.

Dermot called for another round, and Maggie felt her head begin to float an inch or two off her shoulders from the effects of the ale. She wasn't used to drinking, and between the jet lag and the never-ending pints of ale heading her way all night she was definitely buzzed. She relaxed and enjoyed the music, clapping along and even joining in the singing when she knew the words. Her grandparents had taught her a number of Irish songs, and she was delighted to hear Brian sing them. *He really does have a lovely voice*, she thought.

Her mind wandered, taking her to a fairy-tale cottage where she and Brian would raise a few little ginger children of their own, always with beautiful music playing in the background. She laughed at her fanciful thoughts, and Brian grinned at her.

* * *

She's lovely, but when she smiles she positively glows! he thought, watching her while he sang. The sight of her ample bosom bouncing merrily as she clapped along with his songs sent darts of desire straight to his groin. He actually sang three fast songs in a row—torturing himself—before he broke out into a feverish sweat. He wiped his face and

hands with a towel the bartender tossed him while the crowd cheered and applauded. Then, he tossed the towel back and turned to the audience.

"I'd like to end the evening with a love song, now," he said. "It's undeniably the most beautiful Irish love song there is, and I only hope my own humble voice will do it justice." He lowered his head and watched his fingers strum the opening bars of "When You Were Sweet Sixteen," a poignant ballad of eternal love. As he crooned the first verse, he saw Deirdre and Dermot exchange a look of pure adoration and devotion, remembering no doubt when they'd first fallen in love, how they'd pledged to love one another forever. His stomach clenched with a sudden desire for that level of intimacy. *Not for the likes of me*, he admonished himself. He closed his eyes and gave himself over to the music.

* * *

Maggie was actually jealous of her own aunt and uncle. She watched Dermot take Deirdre's hand and serenade her with genuine affection. She blinked a few times, realizing she was more than a little drunk. The entire pub was singing along with the refrain, and as her gaze raked the pub, it seemed everyone had someone to look at except her. Her eyes grew bright with unshed tears; and she glanced at Christie, astonished to find a mirror of her own expression on her cousin's face. Christie seemed to be as surprised as she was; and they both started to laugh at the pathetic irony, wiping the tears that now fell, not from misery alone but misery shared, which made it all seem so funny somehow.

Deirdre and Dermot shot them both a stern look, one which clearly said, "Now, this is a song to be taken seriously, so you two knock it off," so Christie and Maggie knocked it off and got their laughter under control, but not their twin grins.

When Brian had finished his second set, he immediately headed for the O'Haras again, carrying a pint of Guinness. He resumed his seat at Maggie's side and leaned over to whisper, "Miss me?" She giggled. She was definitely buzzed, no doubt about it, and still a little hysterical from her recent laughing fit.

"Well, that's it for me," Dermot announced with a sigh. He stood up and stretched then extended his hand toward Brian. "Very good to have met you, Brian. I'm sure we'll see you again. Safe home, lad. Now, I'm for bed—who's with me?"

"I'm with you, Da," Christie said. She stood up too, a little wobbly. "It's been a long day. Good to have met you, Brian. Don't be a stranger."

"A very long day," Deirdre agreed, standing up. She made her way around the table, took the arm Dermot offered and said, "It's been a pleasure meeting you, Brian. Hopefully, we'll see you again."

"Yes." Brian got up, holding out his hand to Maggie. She took it, and he lifted her to her feet, casually putting his other hand on her waist. "I wish you would come back again, and again," he said, and Maggie felt the air ripple around her, and her hand tingled where Brian gently squeezed it.

That's so weird, she thought. There must be a lot of static electricity in Ireland. And I really think I want to see Brian again. And again.

"I will," she said with a promising smile.

* * *

She followed Dermot and Deirdre out of the pub, arm-in-arm with Christie. Brian watched until she disappeared from his sight. He heard Dermot say, "Let's stop at the chipper, Dee. My stomach thinks my throat's been cut," as the door closed behind them. Then, he slipped out

behind them and followed them home. Time to reconnoiter, see what he could find out about Maggie. Something personal he could use against her. And of course, he wanted to watch her sleep, and maybe even do more than watch.

CHAPTER 4

Maggie's head throbbed as she stood beneath the shower spray. *I can't believe I drank all that ale*, she thought with a grimace. Her stomach was doing a gymnastics routine, and her bowels rumbled threateningly. She had already brushed her teeth twice, but she could still taste the spicy curry sauce Dermot had convinced her to try on her fries. *No, not fries*, she corrected herself. *Chips, as in fish and chips*.

Dermot was right, though, she conceded. She'd loved the spicy condiment, dipping not only her chips but her piece of fish in it as well. The aftertaste left a little to be desired, however.

She finished her shower and brushed her teeth again. Then, she slowly descended to the first floor, holding her head with one hand and her stomach with the other.

"Ah, there she is," Dermot called as Maggie entered the kitchen—a little loudly, she thought. Deirdre was busily stirring eggs in a pan, while Christie poured the tea.

"Will you have a bit of breakfast, Maggie? Ah, you will," Deirdre

asked, then answered for her in typical Irish fashion.

"Maybe just some tea," she allowed. She didn't think food would set very well with her upset stomach just yet.

"And a bit of toast," Deirdre insisted gently. "You're not used to Irish drink, and you need to eat on a morning after. You'll make yourself sick if you don't. Here, I'll make you a Dispirin and you'll be good as new." She dissolved the water-soluble aspirin in a small glass of water and handed it to Maggie, indicating that she was to drink up. Maggie drank up.

She handed the glass back to Deirdre with a small burp. "Thanks. I think I feel better already," she said, smiling weakly.

She watched her cousin make another pot of tea and marveled at the intricate dance. Christie filled the electric kettle with tap water and plugged it in. Then, she opened the tea tin and removed a handful of tea bags, not bothering to count them. She pulled out the cups and saucers, the teapot and spoons, setting everything on a tray with milk and sugar—working as swiftly and efficiently as an automaton. The kettle whistled, and she pulled out the plug. She poured a small bit of the boiling water into the teapot, covered it and swirled the hot water around a few times before pouring it into the sink. Then, she added the teabags and filled the teapot with boiling water. She replaced the lid and set the teapot on the tray.

"There now," she muttered absently, as she turned to rummage through the refrigerator for jam.

Deirdre hummed softly while she popped bread into the toaster then tapped her fingernail idly on the counter while she waited for it. Maggie watched the two women move around the kitchen as though choreographed and wished once again she were more than just a visiting

cousin. The aspirin was making her head feel better, and her stomach seemed to be settling a little as well.

She accepted a cup of tea from Christie and a toasted piece of sliced pan bread, liberally smeared with butter, from Deirdre. She alternated sips of the strong tea and small nibbles of toast until she had finished her meager breakfast. It didn't escape her grateful attention that no one spoke until she'd finished.

"There, now, are you right?" Deirdre asked with a motherly smile. "I shouldn't have let you drink all that ale, you not being used to the strong Irish drink. I'll keep a close eye on you from now on, sure I will."

Maggie nodded agreement. She certainly felt as though she needed a keeper. She was better but still not up to the scrambled eggs Dermot was shoveling into his mouth. She did accept a second cup of tea, however, and sipped it leisurely.

"Are you feeling up to a tour of Dublin this morning?" Dermot asked between bites. "If you're not, that's just fine, we can do it another day. You might want to rest up a bit today, love. You look a bit rough around the edges. Did you not sleep well?"

"Oh, I slept just fine," Maggie lied. Her sleep had been peppered with erotic dreams of Brian the pub singer, interspersed with visions of Cindy dolls eating chips and curry sauce and leprechauns darting around granting wishes. The images had shifted furiously, and she was as exhausted by her dreams as she was by her hangover. "It's probably just jet lag—I'm sure I'll be fine in a day or so."

"Ah, you will," Deirdre agreed. "For today, why don't we do a bit of shopping at the Omni. I need to pick up a few things for the dinner, anyway. We can have a nice, long chat. Get to know each other."

Maggie nodded again, not trusting herself to speak. She was

probably feeling a little too emotional from being so incredibly hung over, but a leisurely day at the mall sounded like just the tonic she needed.

"Right," Christie said, standing up and heading for the door. "I'm off. See you later, Mam. Maggie, if you need anything you can ring me at the office. I've got a presentation to get together for tomorrow—there's a great chance I'll sell the game I've been working on. Maybe you'd like to come into town with me tomorrow? I'd love for you to see the game, tell me what you think of it."

Maggie nodded a third time, thrilled beyond words to be so in demand.

Christie planted kisses on her parents' cheeks and hurried out.

"Ready, Maggie?" Deirdre asked, hanging her purse and a sweater on her arm and turning for the front door. Maggie finished her tea, rinsed her cup in the sink and followed.

"Are you coming, Uncle Dermot?" she asked her uncle on her way out.

"No, I think I'll get over to the turf accountant. There's a horse by the name of 'Maggie's Pride' I'd like to put a couple of quid on. It's a lucky omen, I think," Dermot answered absently, peering at the racing sheet over his tea.

Maggie leaned down to kiss him on the cheek, placing her hands on his shoulders to give him a little hug. "I hope you win," she said.

"Ah, I wish I would," Dermot agreed, and she again felt an odd ripple in the air and tingling in her hands. She rubbed her palms together wonderingly as she followed Deirdre outside. *There sure is a lot of static electricity in Ireland*, she thought. *It's a wonder everyone doesn't glow in the dark.*

"What's a turf accountant?" she asked. "Sounds like a bookie."

"Sure, it is," Deirdre replied matter-of-factly.

Maggie shook her head wonderingly. "I never figured Uncle Dermot for illegal gambling."

"Illegal, is it?" Deirdre chuckled. "It wasn't when I got up this morning, love. Not to worry, there's a bookie on every corner in Dublin, with a chipper on the one side and a pub on the other."

They spent more than two hours shopping at the Omni Center, looking in windows and admiring the wares on display. Maggie insisted on visiting the jewelry shop, where she studied some impressive antique recreations. She chatted with the owner and another jeweler, exchanging tricks of the trade, while Deirdre smiled, clearly proud at how knowledgeable her niece was in her own element.

* * *

Brian followed them just a few steps behind. He had tried to enter Maggie's dreams the night before, but she had been too affected by the ale. He tried to compete with the disjointed images then gave up and spent the entire night sitting in a chair watching her sleep. He didn't need to sleep usually and found the simple rise and fall of her breasts too engaging to even consider leaving.

He trailed them from the grocery store, where Deirdre purchased the few items she needed for her dinner preparations, to the health food store, where Maggie bought some vitamins and oatmeal soap. He followed them to Bewley's Cafe, where they enjoyed a leisurely lunch, then to the ice cream kiosk in the center of the mall for a Ninety-Nine. Maggie picked it apart, scooping up mouthfuls of ice cream with the pieces of chocolate bar and delicately placing them on her tongue. The sight of her tasting her ice cream, sucking on the bits of candy bar, licking the sweet bits left on her fingers entranced Brian.

By the Wind and the Moon, he thought. *She's not just a fair bit to look at, she's incredible!* He wondered what it would feel like to have those lips, that tongue, licking, kissing, caressing him.

He was mildly surprised at his reaction to the girl, his sudden arousal. He had been attracted to hundreds, if not thousands, of mortal women in his lifetime. He had acted on that attraction more than a hundred times, more than he could even remember. His response to Maggie O'Hara made his past experiences seem like cordial fondness. He was physically attracted, but there was more—already he loved her smile, her humor, her expertise in jewelry making and her spirit. He'd almost laughed in delight as she haggled with a vendor over the price of a brooch, which the man had insisted was a genuine emerald and which she pointed out was clearly nothing more than synthetic corundum. She had paid five pounds for the brooch, and the vendor had looked after her admiringly when she walked away, grinning smugly at her aunt.

Maggie and her aunt took a seat on one of the plentiful benches in the mall. He stood behind them, needing to be close to her. He resisted the urge to stroke her hair, clenching his fists as he breathed in her scent. This level of fascination was extreme, even for him.

Brian forced himself to pay attention to the conversation. *Listen closely, boyo*, he reminded himself sternly. *You might learn something.*

"Aunt Deirdre," Maggie began a little nervously as she polished off her cone. She had wanted to broach the subject of her mother more than once but wasn't sure how her aunt would react.

"Now, none of that 'aunt' business, love. Just call me Deirdre, or Dee, if you prefer. We don't stand on titles very much here. Sounds a bit too English for our tastes."

"Okay, then, Deirdre," Maggie said. "I wonder if you would mind telling me about my mother. I don't remember her, you know. I've seen pictures of her, of course, with my grandfather's will and at your house, and my grandparents told me a little about her, but..." Her voice trailed off uncertainly.

"Ah, she was a grand girl," Deirdre said with a sigh. "You could always count on Grania for a good laugh. Even when she wasn't trying," she added with a chuckle.

Maggie looked up at her questioningly, willing her to go on. Deirdre, in true O'Hara fashion, obliged.

"Well, now" she went on, "when Grania was eleven and I was thirteen, we lived on the south side of the city, in the Liberties. We used to play in the street, and there was this huge iron fence that we liked to bang a stick against. Anyway, to make a long story short, this boy that lived up the street, Brendan Cooper, dared Grania to stick her head through the fence. She never could resist a dare, that one. In fact, the easiest way to get her to do something was to tell her she wasn't allowed. Well, she got her head stuck; and no matter how she pulled and screamed and kicked, we couldn't get her head out of the fence. We had to call the fire brigade, and they cut the wrought iron bars to get her free."

She was chuckling madly, trying to get the story out without dissolving into gales of laughter. It was too late for Maggie, who laughed uproariously, garnering curious smiles from passersby. Deirdre took her elbow and guided her toward the exit, imitating how Grania's face had looked, stuck there in the wrought iron fence, and Maggie laughed even harder. Deirdre pushed open the door, and they fell out into the Irish sunshine.

"Will we stop for a quick jar? Ah, we will," Deirdre said, heading for the Cauldron. "There's still plenty of time until I have to put the dinner on. We'll probably meet Dermot. He's usually in the Cauldron at this time. We often meet in the afternoons, now that we're both retired."

"Man, oh, man," Maggie said, trying to keep up with her aunt as she strode briskly down the sidewalk toward the pub. "You Irish sure drink a lot."

"Ah, no, colleen, it's not the drink," Deirdre protested. "It's the socialization. You see, the word 'pub' comes from 'public house,' or so Dermot tells me—he's a regular fount of useless information, sure, he is. Years ago, before there were pubs, people used to gather at a house where the drink and the food and the craic was brilliant; and before you know it they were called public houses, because the public was all there, you see."

"What's 'crack?'" Maggie asked, already suspecting the definition was completely different from the ones she knew in America. She felt sure that medieval Irish people didn't smoke rock cocaine, and somehow, she couldn't picture dozens of Irish men and women gathering at someone's house to gaze admiringly at a refrigerator repairman's butt.

"Why, that's just a good time, colleen," Deirdre told her. She held open the door to the Cauldron, allowing Maggie to precede her into the pub. "Here, if you've had a grand time, they say, 'the craic was ninety.'"

"Well," Maggie said, settling on a nearby stool, "I'd say the craic is ninety-nine point nine. I'm really enjoying myself, Deirdre. I can't thank you enough for letting me stay with you."

"Not at all, and aren't we your family?" Deirdre waved off the compliment. "Let's get a couple of pints of ale, will we? Or do you fancy something different?"

"I think I'll stick with ale."

"Ah, sure you will," Deirdre said. She signaled the server, order two pints of ale and sank back onto the sofa. "I'm so glad you've come home, Maggie. You're the image of my own dear sister, and it's grand to have you. I hope you'll stay as long as you like. You've a home here, colleen, for as long as you want it. Dermot and I are retired now, and we've always had loads of room in our house. We wanted more than one child, but Our Lord only saw fit to bless us with Christie, grand girl that she is. We'd love to have you make our home your own home, love. You could be a sister to Christie, and haven't I noticed how you two are getting along like two ducks in a pond."

"Deirdre, you're the best, really," Maggie placed her hand over her aunt's and leaned forward. "If you were craic, you'd be ninety."

Deirdre threw back her head and howled with laughter. "Ah, Jesus, Mary and Joseph," she said as she wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Maggie felt a slight chill and idly wondered if they were sitting near a draft. The server arrived with their drink order, and Deirdre opened her purse. "No, no, you're my guest, now put your money away, it's no good here." She paid the server, and sipped her pint of ale. "Ah, that's grand stuff," she sighed contentedly.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph! There you are!" Dermot burst through the door of the Cauldron and ran toward their table. He nearly tripped over a stool, then spun around a fellow who was on his way to the gents' room. He collapsed on the sofa next to Deirdre, panting and signaling frantically for a pint. His eyes were wide beneath his bushy eyebrows, and his face was red and covered in a sheen of sweat.

"Well, where else would we be?" Deirdre asked. "What's the matter with you? You look like you've heard the Bean Sidhe!"

"You'll never believe it! I can barely believe it myself. It's all Maggie's doing, I tell you," Dermot shouted excitedly. "I won three hundred pounds on 'Maggie's Pride!'"

"What?" Deirdre set her glass down and hugged Dermot. "You must be joking! You're joking!"

"Not a bit! I put ten quid on 'Maggie's Pride' and, bejesus, the horse dashed across the finish line like he was being chased by the Prince of Darkness himself!" Dermot sat back heavily. His pint arrived, and he took a long swallow, then put his arm around Maggie, hugging her tightly. "Colleen, Brigid was right. You are a lucky charm. Pure magic."

"Oh, don't be silly," Maggie demurred. She was feeling increasingly uncomfortable with all this talk about magic and luck. Her grandparents had strictly forbidden anything having to do with magic, witches, fairies or Irish folklore. It was almost an obsession with them. They were fervent Catholics, though Maggie had never attended church. Long before "sick building syndrome" was publicized, she was aware of the phenomenon. She'd become physically ill every time she went near St. Rose's Church. Her grandparents had never forced her to attend services; they simply went without her.

"It was just a coincidence," she insisted. "I just don't see me doing magic."

"I don't know about that," Deirdre commented. "There's magic in Ireland—that's why people come here, you know. Ireland is the birthplace of magic."

"Well, according to the commercials I've seen," Maggie said, "Ireland is the ancient birthplace of good times. I never heard a thing about magic."

"Then you never heard the whole story," Dermot insisted. He

settled on the sofa, took a deep swallow from his pint and began. "In the ancient days of Ireland, the Tuatha de Danaan, the good people, came from all over the world and offered to split the whole country with the Firbolgs who lived here then. Well, didn't they refuse the bargain; and consequently, the Firbolgs were defeated and exiled to Connacht while the Danaans ruled the rest of Ireland. The Milesians conquered them, and the Tuatha De Danaan went to live in palaces in an underground world. The fairies are descendants of the Tuatha De Danaan."

"Ah, that's enough of a history lesson." Deirdre waved her hand. "Besides, if she's really interested, she can just ask Cormac. Isn't he the expert? Anyway, it's grand to have our own lucky charm in the family." She smiled fondly at Maggie.

"Isn't he the one who teaches at Trinity College?"

"That's him," Dermot agreed. "He knows more about the fairies than any man alive, I'd wager."

"You'd wager on anything," Deirdre teased.

"Ah, but today it was a grand wager," Dermot grinned. "It's a weakness the Irish share, I'm afraid," he informed Maggie. "We love a good song, a good pint or a good wager."

"Well, I'm not all that interested in fairies," she said, sipping her pint of ale and wondering how to broach the delicate subject that did interest her. More than anything, she wanted to know why her grandparents had denied her this companionship, the closeness of her own family, the feeling of belonging she had been enjoying since she arrived in Ireland. Maggie had given a great deal of thought to the questions plaguing her and finally decided to take the plunge and damn the consequences.

"Deirdre, why did my grandparents really take my mother to

America? I mean, even close to thirty years ago there must have been some provisions made for unwed mothers. They didn't really have to leave, did they? Couldn't they have just stayed here and given me up for adoption?"

She was surprised how forlorn she felt at the thought of being raised by strangers—no matter that she would never have known they weren't her true family. Somehow, she knew, she would have missed being an O'Hara.

"Ah, that's the family's troubles, to be sure." Deirdre scowled. She took a deep breath. "You need to know the whole story, I suppose, and better to hear it from family than a stranger's lips. Grania was always a bit adventurous, you see, and she found herself in a family way. But that's only the start of it. The night Grania told me I took Liam and Raymond out to a pantomime so she could talk to Mam and Da. When I got home, I sent the boys up to bed, and that's when they told me they were taking Grania to America and they didn't know when they'd be back. Dermot and I were just married then, and Liam and Raymond came to live with us."

"I still don't get it."

"Ah, now, just let me finish, love. In those days, girls didn't have babies unless they were married; and if they did they went off to live with an aunt or a granny, or so they said, and they gave the baby up for adoption and no one ever talked about it. Grania refused to tell them the identity of the father, and then she refused to give you up. She kept saying you were a supernatural child, poor thing. The thoughts that plagued her." Deirdre gave a sad shake of her head. "Mam and Da wanted to save Grania from all the wagging tongues. People were calling her names, thinking her crazy; and with her being pregnant, well, let's

just say there was quite a bit of talk and none of it was any good."

"I guess not," Maggie agreed. "They never told me who my father was. I always assumed it was because they didn't approve of him. Now I see—they didn't know who he was, did they?"

"Well, Grania had a grand imagination, and she kept insisting she'd been seduced by a fairy prince," Deirdre said. "That was the worst of it, you see. No one believed her, of course, such a fantastic tale. But obviously it worried Mam and Da enough to take her away from the rest of the family."

"That explains why Maggie is a lucky charm, Dee," Dermot interrupted with a chuckle. "She's half-fairy!"

"Now, stop that, you." Deirdre lightly slapped him on the arm. "We're not country farmers, are we, who go around believing in fairies."

"What's this about fairies? You wouldn't be talking about the Daoine Sidhe without the benefit of my expertise, now would you?"

The deep voice came from behind her, and Maggie turned to see her cousin Cormac standing behind her.

"I've just been to your house, then I thought I might find you here," he went on. "How're ya?"

"Cormac, join us, won't you? We're celebrating, and the drinks are on me. I've had a bit of luck at the bookie, won three hundred pounds on a horse called 'Maggie's Pride,' of all things," Dermot said with a smile directed at Maggie.

Cormac took a seat on the stool next to her.

"Well, now, that's cause for celebration, indeed, taking a few bob off a bookie. It seems the O'Hara clan is in the midst of a lucky streak, what with Brigid winning her doll and now you winning some money. Could it be our own Maggie is a lucky charm?" he said with a smile.

Maggie shuddered a little. Cormac seemed perfectly nice, but there was some strange darkness about him. The day before, when she'd shaken his hand, and now, with him standing so near to her, she felt an unreasonable foreboding deep within her—something ancient and terrible. It was almost as though an internal alarm, dormant until the moment she touched his outstretched hand, had suddenly begun to shriek for her attention. Oh, well, there was always one in every family, and she figured she could put up with Cormac if it meant having the family she'd always dreamed of. She'd gladly accept the minor trade-off. After all, no family was perfect, and an imperfect family was far preferable to no family at all.

She was surprised to find herself thinking of staying in Ireland indefinitely, wondering why she'd placed so much emphasis on her business, a business she could easily run from here, perhaps even better than she had in the States. Wondering who she trusted enough back home to put her house up for sale, pack her things and ship them all to Dublin. Wondering if her future in Ireland included a certain pub singer. Wondering if maybe things weren't moving just a little too fast.

"That's what I've been saying," Dermot agreed, signaling the server for another round. "She seems to have the power to grant wishes."

"In that case..." Maggie smiled. "...I wish I had a hundred pounds." She closed her eyes and held out her hands expectantly. After a few moments, she opened them, looked at her outstretched hands and said, "There, see? No hundred pounds. No magic powers."

Suddenly, a scruffy young man snatched her purse from under her stool and dashed out of the pub.

"Hey!" Maggie shouted, and Dermot quickly rushed to the door to give chase. Cormac stood for a moment, as if he were going to follow,

then apparently decided he wasn't exactly built for running and sat again. Maggie stood up, too, only to realize she had no clue what to do and sit back down.

"That's the knackers for you," Cormac grimaced. At Maggie's questioning look, he elaborated. "Tinkers, the traveling people. Probably call them gypsies in America. They're thieves and con men, the lot of them."

"Now, Cormac," Deirdre warned. "You shouldn't speak ill of them. It's only the way they were raised, they can't help it. Besides, if they hear you, they'll put a curse on you that'll have you begging for the Bean Sidhe to come for you."

"I can't believe this," Maggie grumbled. "I just cashed some traveler's checks, but at least I left my passport and plane ticket in my suitcase."

Dermot returned, a little out of breath. "He got away, the little gobshite. There was a motorbike waiting for him at the end of the road."

"Ah, there now," Deirdre cooed. "Will we call the garde for you, colleen? It won't do any good, most likely, but it'll make you feel a bit better. Who knows? 'Dublin's Finest' might even catch the little devil, but if they are knackers you might as well kiss your money good-bye."

Dermot flopped down onto the sofa next to Deirdre and took a long drink of his pint. He wiped the foam from his lips with the back of his hand and said, "I hope this doesn't ruin your holiday, love."

"No, that's all right," Maggie sighed. "At least he didn't get anything but my cash. Unfortunately, I had about a hundred pounds." She shot an ironic look at Dermot. "So much for my magic powers, eh? I wished for a hundred pounds, but instead I lost that very amount."

"It's desperate altogether, the crime in this city," Deirdre

complained. "You're not even safe in your own local, glory be to God."

Maggie shivered a little.

"Ah, look now, you're after catching a chill. No wonder, with all the excitement," Deirdre exclaimed. She grasped her niece's hand and rubbed it between her own to warm it. Maggie was deeply touched at her aunt's display of concern.

"Look at the time," Dermot glanced at his watch. "No wonder at all, Maggie, love. It's the adrenaline rush—gives you a great chill afterwards. You need a good hot cup of scald and a little nap, sure you do."

"I guess I do feel a little tired," Maggie admitted.

"Sure you do, and still a bit sick from the drink, I'll wager, too," Dermot pointed out.

"Well, let's finish up here, I've got to get home and start the dinner. Cormac, will you come for dinner, ah, you will," Deirdre invited, standing and gathering her parcels. Dermot downed the last of his pint and stood as well. He took Deirdre's parcels from her, and she smiled her thanks at him.

* * *

Brian's invisible grin had disappeared the moment he saw Cormac O'Hara. He didn't like the way the stout Irishman was eyeing Maggie, as if she were a buffet and he was starving. There was something about him Brian didn't like—some curious darkness that Brian couldn't identify, yet couldn't ignore. And he hadn't missed the speculative look Cormac shot Maggie before they'd left. Cormac O'Hara was someone he needed to watch closely, he decided. He couldn't afford for anything to interfere with his plans for Maggie. *There's always one in every family*, he thought. *The rest of them love me, though.*

He was a little surprised to find himself liking the O'Haras. He had

been absolutely charmed when Dermot began talking about the Tuatha De Danaan. To most people, it was mythology, but to Brian it was history. He was extremely encouraged that there were still a few in the mortal realm who knew the history of his people and who believed it. The numbers of Daoine Sidhe had dwindled alarmingly in the past few centuries, all because mortals refused to believe in them. The existence of the Daoine Sidhe, much as they hated to admit it, depended upon the belief of mortals—it always had. Now that fewer mortals worshipped the old ways, fewer immortals existed to be worshipped. Mortals had been much easier to deal with before they had discovered science and technology.

But, then, the deities that had existed in Brian's youth no longer existed at all. Mananan, Lord of the Sea, Protector of Erin, also the master of tricks and illusions, owned all kinds of magical possessions which Brian had never been allowed to play with. He'd admired the boat named Ocean-sweeper, which obeyed the thought of those who sailed in it and went without oar or sail; the steed Aonbarr, which could travel alike on sea or land; and the sword named The Answerer, which no armor could resist. Brian missed fighting alongside The Morrigan, the extraordinarily powerful goddess who delighted in setting men at war, frequently fighting among them herself and often hovering above fighting armies in the aspect of a crow.

Gone as well were the Brigits, who were much like the Muses of Ancient Greece, presiding over poetry, metalwork and healing, as was the greatest of them all, the one for whom Brian's ancestors, the Tuatha de Danaan, had been named—Danaan, Mother Goddess of Erin. Oh, the schools still taught the old stories; but nowadays, Cuchulainn was considered a mortal warrior, possibly the model for Sir Gawain in the

legend of King Arthur—of all things, an Englishman. Brian almost spat at the thought of it as he followed the O'Haras down the street at a careful distance. Certainly, they both wore magical belts that protected them, but Cuchulainn had been a god once and now, to the mortification of his people, had been relegated to being the subject of many a term paper in Irish history class.

Brian's people had been in danger of fading away altogether for hundreds of years, but nothing threatened the existence of his race like Maggie. He had to make her fall in love with him—it was a life or death situation.

CHAPTER 5

"The Tuatha de Danaan, or simply the Danaans, came to Ireland from four great cities: Falias, Gorias, Finias and Murias. Here they learned science and craftsmanship from great sages one of whom was enthroned in each city, and from each they brought with them a magical treasure."

Maggie forced herself to pay attention, even though the drone of Cormac's voice made her pity his students, especially those who had his class immediately following lunch. The rhythm of his voice was strangely mesmerizing.

"From Falias came the stone called the Lia Fail—or the Stone of Destiny—on which the Ard Ri or High Kings of Ireland stood when they were crowned. It was supposed to confirm the election of a rightful monarch by roaring under him as he took his place on it. An ancient prophecy told that wherever this stone was, a king of the Scotie race should reign, that is, Irish-Milesian. This is the famous Stone of Scone, which never returned to Ireland but was removed to England by Edward I in 1297 and is now the Coronation Stone in Westminster Abbey.

"Nor has the legend been proven false, since through the Stuarts and Fergus mac Erc, the descent of the British royal family can be traced from the historic kings of Milesian Ireland."

He stopped talking long enough to take a long swallow of his pint. Dermot and Deirdre looked as bored as Maggie was, but neither of them tried to stop him from lecturing. Maggie wasn't sure if they were actually enthralled by the highly informative, if extremely tedious discourse; or if they were simply in a hypnotic trance and unable to summon the power to shut him up.

"The second treasure of the Danaans was the invincible sword of Lugh of the Long Arm, and this sword came from the city of Gorias," he continued. "From Finias came a magic spear, and from Murias the Cauldron of the Dagda, a vessel which had the property of being able to feed a host of men without ever being emptied."

"That's really fascinating," Maggie said, sounding not the least bit fascinated, wondering how to turn him off. She sipped her ale, a lot more slowly than she had the previous evening, not wanting to repeat the hangover she was just now getting over. Deirdre and Dermot rolled their eyes at her, and she was heartened to realize she wasn't the only one falling asleep.

Cormac had not only stayed for dinner, he had remained for after-dinner conversation and then accompanied Deirdre, Dermot and Maggie back to the Cauldron for a quick round or two and a few songs. She was a little curious about his behavior since, according to Christie, he normally didn't have much to do with the O'Haras except at holidays and special occasions.

Both Deirdre and Dermot kept looking from the front door to the bar, and neither one seemed to be paying much attention to Cormac.

Maggie mentally shrugged and decided to endure until Christie, who had phoned her mother earlier and said she would be working late at her office, showed up.

"Sure, I worry about that girl, she works so hard," Deirdre told Maggie after she hung up. "Poor thing, thinking she can get her own tea, at all, and the girl barely able to boil water. I'll just make her a plate and she can pop it in the nuke. Here, I'll write her a note and tell her to meet us for a jar later." Deirdre had sighed then, "Holy Mary, Mother of God, this family would come to a screeching halt without me."

Maggie had shivered at the thought of the O'Hara family without Deirdre.

"Tell her about the fairies," Dermot suggested, breaking Maggie's trance. He gulped his pint of porter and glanced at the door. Maggie winced. Her grandparents had forbidden this subject at home, and she was distinctly uncomfortable with the conversation, as though it somehow tainted their memory. She shook off the feeling, her curiosity overriding her reluctance.

"The Daoine Sidhe," Cormac corrected a bit condescendingly, "are for the most part radiantly beautiful. They are immortal—with limitations—and they wield mysterious powers of sorcery and enchantment. They do not die naturally, but they can be slain both by each other and by mortals. Naturally, they can change form.

"Some fairies have an animal form or can assume one, and others have a form combining human and animal features," he explained. "Although fairies may have one form that is their characteristic one, they are capable of changing their shape. Moreover, fairies have the power of making themselves invisible."

"Now, that's a talent I'll bet we'd all like to have."

Maggie turned around at the sound of a familiar voice and smiled happily at Brian. She was immensely relieved at the interruption and didn't even try to hide her pleasure at seeing him again.

He declined Dermot's offer of a seat, saying, "Sorry, I'm singing for my supper again, and I'd better get up there before Mr. MacNamara comes looking for me." He squeezed Maggie's shoulder lightly, and shivers of delight traveled from the point of contact throughout her entire body. "See you later?" he asked.

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak without squeaking.

"As I was saying," Cormac said, sounding a little perturbed at the interruption.

"That's enough, now, lad, shut your gob." Deirdre patted Cormac on the hand. "I'm sure you're boring Maggie to tears with all this lecturing. Besides, you must hear this young man sing. You'd think he was a Daoine Sidhe himself." She settled herself back into the sofa and crossed her arms, shooting Maggie a wink, obviously pleased with the way she had rescued her niece.

Maggie shot her a grateful smile, then turned her attention to Brian. He looked even more handsome than he had the previous evening, wearing green corduroy trousers that hugged his well-shaped thighs and a matching shirt and tie. His long red hair was tied up with a leather thong into a ponytail that made him look slightly devilish. He winked at her and picked up his guitar.

He swung himself up onto the bar and greeted the pub jovially. "Good evening, all. Is it going down well?" The crowd erupted with cheers and raised glasses. "Good enough! I'd like to start with a song I'm sure you all know." He strummed his guitar and began to sing "The Wild Rover," accompanied by the clapping and stomping of the pub's patrons.

Maggie clapped and cheered enthusiastically, never taking her eyes off him. Cormac sulked a little at first at being ignored, then began to enjoy the music, singing along slightly off-key.

When the song was finished, Brian announced, "Now, I'd like to do one that was made famous by our own Paddy Reilly." He softly began to sing "The Flight of Earls," a touching ballad about the emigration of young Irish men and women. Heads bobbed in time to the tune, and more than a few eyes dripped tears. It seemed nearly everyone knew someone who had emigrated to America, Australia or England to find the work they couldn't in their native land. Ireland had lost many sons and daughters to emigration and was only now beginning to realize she had lost her greatest resource: her well-educated and highly skilled youth, and with it, her future. More young people were remaining at home in Ireland these days but only because of the booming computer industry. However, much to the delight of Irish families all over, many people were moving back home, as Deirdre continually reminded Maggie.

Maggie applauded when the song was over and wiped a tear from her own eye. Brian smiled at her as he launched into "The Whistling Gypsy" again, followed by "The Lonesome Boatman," an instrumental number he credited to the Fury Brothers. Then, without introduction, he launched into "When You Were Sweet Sixteen," a song Maggie remembered from last night. She sighed, wondering when she would find her own true love, speculating on Brian's chances for filling that position, among others. She flushed at her own lascivious thoughts and deliberately looked away from him, though she could see him just as clearly in her mind's eye.

As the crowd clapped and roared their approval, Brian hopped off the bar and headed for the O'Haras, waving, shaking hands and accepting

congratulations all the way. He grabbed a stool and set it next to Maggie, insinuating himself between her and Cormac, much to the obvious amusement of her aunt and uncle and forcing Cormac to move over. He accepted the pint of porter Dermot had ordered for him with a smile and said, "Cheers."

"How're ya tonight, love?" he asked Maggie. He pressed a quick kiss to her cheek and sipped his pint, pointedly ignoring Cormac, who was shooting him a resentful glare. He waggled his eyebrows at Deirdre and winked at Dermot, who both smiled at his audacity.

"I'm fine," Maggie replied with a smile even as she felt her cheek warming where his lips had touched. "I really enjoyed your music. How long have you been singing? Professionally, I mean."

"It seems like forever," he answered with a slightly secretive smile. "Are you enjoying your stay in Dublin?"

"For the most part."

"Now, then, what's happened to spoil your holiday?"

Maggie told him about the theft of her purse then shrugged it off. "I suppose it's my own fault. I should've kept a closer eye on my things."

"Nonsense," he assured her. "He probably overheard your American accent and decided you'd be a perfect mark."

* * *

Brian was worried. This was the fourth time Maggie's powers had manifested, and someone was bound to put two and two together before long now. If anyone did, he'd put gold coins on Cormac, the mythology professor. He had the greatest foundation of knowledge, and he'd already shown considerable interest in Maggie. His dislike of Cormac was growing exponentially. He resolved to keep a closer watch on the man. Nothing must come between him and Maggie.

He laid his hand on her arm. She stiffened at his touch, and he removed it, contenting himself to brushing her thigh with his own. She seemed tolerant of that gesture, but Brian was positive he could have her writhing beneath him soon, begging him to touch her. He sighed heavily and drank a large gulp of porter.

"So, Brian, tell me this, what is your surname? Where is your family?" Deirdre asked. Naturally, as Maggie's aunt, she would feel it was her duty to see her niece happily married. Brian had offered himself to her as a likely candidate—a handsome and strong man and a talented singer. It was only natural she should interview him to determine if he was acceptable as a suitor. Just because he seemed to be employed for the moment was no guarantee he'd be a good husband for Maggie. He needed Deirdre on his side, but he liked her too much to lie to her.

"O'Shea, and my family is from all over Erin. I'm just visiting Dublin myself, and hopefully, I'll be going home soon." He looked at Maggie and was pleased to see that she viewed this announcement with a little distress.

"Any requests?" he asked, looking expectantly at Deirdre and Dermot.

"Ah, I'd love to hear 'The Fields of Athenry,' if you know it," Deirdre said with a smile. Dermot nodded in agreement.

"I do, indeed. What about you, Maggie, love? Any requests?"

* * *

Brian's gaze made Maggie feel like squirming. As much as she enjoyed his singing, his attention was making her extremely uncomfortable. She really didn't want to get involved with him, knowing she'd be leaving soon. For that matter, so would he. The ache he had awakened within her was growing stronger, and she wasn't sure how

much longer she could resist touching him. Even now she was suppressing an urge to pull out the thong holding his hair and run her fingers through the silky strands. Oh, she had a request, all right, but it didn't have anything to do with music.

Maggie tried to ignore the heat surging through her. *Watch it, lady,* she thought. *Don't get involved. Besides, he's probably not really interested in you. Maybe he just wants to get a green card or something.*

"Well, I only know a few Irish songs, just what my grandparents taught me. Do you know 'When Irish Eyes Are Smiling?'"

"That's not an Irish song," Cormac muttered. "It's an American song by Ernest P. Ball, an American."

"Not at all," Brian said. "And I do know it. It's a lovely little ditty."

"Next you'll be doing 'Who Threw the Overalls in Mrs. Murphy's Chowder,'" Cormac grumbled. It was clear, even to Dermot and Deirdre, that he didn't like Brian.

"Well, I'd better get back," Brian said, finishing his pint and standing up. "Will you stay until I'm finished?"

He leaned over to ask her. She could feel his breath on her neck, and she gasped. *Slow down!* she told herself.

"Sure, I guess," she said, looking to her aunt and uncle for confirmation. They smiled at her, nodding. Cormac sulked. Brian ignored him.

"Then, I'll see you again." He strode off toward the bar, swung himself onto it easily and began his second set. Maggie enjoyed herself immensely, though Brian's gaze settled on her more than once. *On one hand, vacation romances never work out,* she thought. *On the other hand, I could move here and pursue a more permanent romance. On the other hand, Brian said he's not from around here. I wonder how far away*

he lives. She smiled, then, suddenly realizing she didn't have enough hands, and Brian returned her grin. *It's not that big an island,* she thought.

"He's a fine, strapping lad," Dermot observed. "Has a voice like an angel, as well."

"Ah, that he has," Deirdre agreed.

At the completion of his set, Brian returned to the O'Haras' table and resumed his seat. Dermot had another pint of Guinness waiting for him. Cormac sulked even more, muttering, "Don't remember you ever buying me two pints in an evening." He glared at Brian, who continued to ignore him. Deirdre was clearly enjoying the show the two roosters were providing for her and tipped her glass in their direction in an unconscious salute. Brian returned the gesture.

* * *

"So, Brian, tell us, where do you call home?" Dermot asked conversationally. *Ah,* Brian thought, *the third degree begins again.*

"Ah, here and there. I travel quite a bit."

"Well, that's the life of an entertainer," Deirdre commiserated. "I imagine it's a lonely life, that."

"Yes, it is," Brian agreed, sliding his finger idly up and down Maggie's thigh.

"I wonder, lad, have you never felt the desire to set down roots? To settle down and raise a proper family?" Deirdre pursued.

"I think I could be persuaded to settle down," he said, staring at Maggie. He almost believed what he was saying, that he could settle down and live a mortal life with her, or perhaps even live an immortal life. He had a sudden image of them—playing with their child, smiling at one another. He was beginning to lose his focus; he couldn't let such

impossible notions distract him from his mission.

He ignored her obvious discomfort with his attentions. She was squirming in her seat. His intention was to seduce her, and he was intent on accomplishing his goal. He stroked her thigh slowly, softly, watching the faint pink blush creep up her face. He could see a thin sheen of sweat on her brow, hear her respiration quicken. His slight touch was having the desired effect. At any moment, she would leap at him, kissing him with abandon, thrusting her lush body at him. He grew more aroused by the moment, imagining their lovemaking.

He laid his hand on her arm, leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Wouldn't you like me to stay, Maggie, love? Maybe even forever?"

"No," Maggie said firmly. "In fact," she went on, "I wish you would go back to wherever you came from."

* * *

Maggie felt an electric tingle suffuse her entire body and imagined she saw sparkling lights in her peripheral vision. *Oh, great, now I have a migraine coming on*, she thought. She rubbed her forehead absently.

Brian snatched his hand away as though he'd burned it and began to rub it unconsciously. "Ah, now, I wish you hadn't said that."

CHAPTER 6

Brian roamed the streets for an hour, wondering how he was going to untangle the mess he'd gotten into.

"Well, now what am I going to do?" he muttered. The very fact that he was talking to himself did not bode well for his state of mind. "She's gone and wished me back home, which means that now I can't go home. I'm stuck here in the mortal realm until she wishes me here forever, which she is unlikely to do. How am I going to get her to wish that wish?"

Suddenly, he stopped walking. He grinned and snapped his fingers. "Nothing else for it," he said. "Back to Plan A. Seduce her, make her fall in love with me and get her to do my bidding. I'll just try again to visit her dreams. She didn't have as much to drink tonight, and she's susceptible to me now."

He quickly looked around to see if anyone had overheard. He really needed to stop talking to himself. Maggie had given him a new bad habit, it seemed.

Satisfied he had solved his dilemma, he made his way to Deirdre's

house, slipped up the stairs and made himself comfortable on the chair in Maggie's room. He smiled at the picture she made lying on the bed, the sheets tangled, her auburn hair spread out all over the pillow. He wanted her, but he needed her to love him or at least to lust for him enough to cooperate with him.

Standing back up, Brian crossed the room, lay down next to Maggie on the bed and closed his eyes.

* * *

Maggie shifted restlessly in her sleep. She was dreaming about Brian. He was holding her hand, stroking her arm, planting butterfly kisses on her cheek. They were standing in an arbor facing each other, the gentle breeze caressing their skin. The hum of the insects and the chirping of birds provided background music. She recognized the setting as her grandparents' backyard. Strange, though, that the house was missing from the scene. The meadow seemed to go on forever.

"Maggie, my love," he whispered.

She jerked her hand away. "I'm not your love."

"Ah, but you are."

"No, I'm not. I'm going home in a couple of weeks, and you're staying here. I can't get involved with you." Maggie felt perfectly safe in revealing her fears, knowing this was just a dream.

"I could go with you."

"Oh, yeah, I've heard about guys like you."

"Have you, now? And what kind of guys would those be, I wonder."

"Guys that seduce poor American girls just to get green cards, then dump them."

"I'd never dump you, love."

"I don't believe you."

"Tell me your dreams, Maggie," he whispered into her neck, trailing kisses from her ear to her collarbone.

"All I ever wanted was a happy family," Maggie whispered back. "I've never had a real family. Just my grandparents, and they're dead." His kisses were setting her on fire. She pulled him closer, planting small reciprocal ones on his chest.

"I could give you a family, love. I'd give you lots and lots of babies. As many as you wanted."

"I'll just bet," Maggie snorted. She stepped back, pushing out of Brian's reach. "Forget it, Romeo. I'm not easy or free."

"Yes, I know, love. Don't worry, I'll never hurt you." He hesitated, then whispered, "I know you're a virgin."

"How do you know that?"

Brian stepped closer, placing his hands on her shoulders. "Maggie, I know everything about you. Let me love you. I'll show you passion. I'll teach you all about love."

"Go away," she whimpered, closing her eyes. "Please."

He kissed her again, brushing his lips gently across hers, feathering lightly over the corners of her mouth. Maggie tried to resist for a split second, and then her resolve crumbled and she kissed him back. Powerful waves of desire coursed through her. She threw her arms around his neck, pulling him closer. *It's just a dream*, she thought.

That's right, love, just a dream. She heard Brian's voice in her mind. Their tongues parried, and he tasted of honey and wine.

Suddenly, she could feel heat radiating from his naked body and realized she was naked, too. Her breasts were flattened against his hard muscled chest, and he grasped her buttocks firmly, grinding his powerful erection against her. He stroked his manhood against the sensitive nub of

her desire; and she trembled, shook, then threw her head back and exploded.

She awoke with a gasp. The sheets were tangled around her legs, and for a moment she forgot where she was. She could feel the throbbing dampness between her legs, remnants of the incredible orgasm that had sent her reeling.

"Man, that was some dream," she whispered. She could still taste the honey and wine of Brian's kiss, could still feel the passion of his embrace. She closed her eyes, but sleep eluded her for the rest of the night. She spent the hours silently praying for daylight.

* * *

Brian lay next to her until the sun came up, watching her and suffering as his arousal continued throughout the night unrelenting and unrelieved. He still wanted her, but he couldn't very well just appear next to her on the bed so he waited in vain for her to fall back to sleep.

* * *

"Maggie! You're up early!" Christie greeted her with a smile. She was toasting sliced pan and offered Maggie a cup of tea. The strong Irish brew was just what she needed, Maggie decided, to ward off the effects of her very disturbing dream. "Mam and Da are still sleeping. I've got to get to the office. Have you any plans for the day? Is Da taking you around Dublin?"

"We haven't really talked about it, so I guess not."

"Well, maybe you'd like to come in with me? I'd love to show you something I've been working on, and then we could have lunch on St. Stephen's Green."

"Okay, sounds great."

Christie left a note for her parents telling them she had kidnapped

Maggie for the day, then drove to the south side of the city. Maggie listened with half an ear to her cousin's running commentary about Dublin City.

"There, on the left, that's a statue of James Joyce. I had to read *Finnegan's Wake* in school. It's completely incomprehensible, I tell you. And that fellow with the outstretched arms, that's Big Jim Larkin, a union organizer. He started the Labor Party. You're finding all this fascinating, aren't you? Anyway, that imposing figure is Daniel O'Connell, and the bridge we're crossing now is named after him, as well as the street we were just driving along. He used to be the Lord Mayor of Dublin, back in the nineteenth century, like, and he was one of the leaders of the Home Rule initiative. Are you enjoying your history lesson, now?

"See, there on your left is a little pub, Davy Byrne's. You wouldn't know to look at it, but it's got an interesting history. James Joyce used to drink there—he even mentioned it in his book *Ulysses*—and the IRB used to have their meetings in the upstairs room. Michael Collins used to drink there all the time."

"Mm-hmm," Maggie replied abstractly. "I saw that movie." She was staring out the window, but she wasn't admiring the sights of beautiful, historic Dublin.

"Very historic, that place. My fairy godmother told me Pope John Paul himself used to drink in that place," Christie said.

"Yeah, pretty historic, all right," she agreed.

"All right, you, snap out of it. What's on your mind?" Christie demanded with a smirk. "Some lad, I'll wager. It's always a lad that puts that look on a girl's face. So, who is he?"

Maggie grimaced. Was she really that transparent? "I'm sorry, really. I had a very strange dream last night, about that pub singer,

Brian. Remember him?"

"Who could forget? I'd never want to wake if I dreamed about him."

Maggie blushed, remembering the content of her dream and what had woken her. "Well, he's cute, but I really don't want to get involved with someone I'm not going to see again after this vacation. I mean, I'm not going to be in Ireland forever, you know."

"So, what's the problem? A little holiday affair will give you something to tell the folks back home, right?"

"Not my style."

"Ah, looking for true love, are you?"

"What's wrong with that?"

"Well, nothing, I suppose. But have you considered this? While you're spending all your time looking for Mr. Right, you're overlooking Mr. Right Now. Besides, you could always marry Brian the pub singer and move to Ireland and live here forever, like. It would please my Mam altogether. As a matter of fact, I think the whole family would love it."

Maggie laughed. "You're incorrigible. Let's drop it, okay?"

"As you like," Christie said, looking around for a parking space. "We're here, anyhow. Are you right?"

"What's that mean, anyway? Your mom said that to me, too."

"It's sort of 'are you all right' and 'are you ready' all at once, I suppose."

"Well, then I'm right."

"Cheers, then, off we go."

Christie led the way toward her office building, an imposing edifice located near the Bank of Ireland. Her office was on the first floor, which in typical Irish fashion was called the ground floor, the first floor being what Maggie would have called the second floor.

"I'm meeting with a client this morning, and he's very difficult to please. He's already rejected two other games I designed. I was able to sell them elsewhere, but this particular man pays a fantastic amount for computer games, and I'd love to sell him just one of mine. I'd be set for the next two years, and then I could concentrate on the next project without any pressure."

Christie unlocked her office door, switched on the lights and went straight to her computer. "I've written this video game that's based on Irish folklore. I couldn't have done it without Cormac's help. He knows everything there is to know about fairies and leprechauns."

"So I heard."

"Ah, don't tell me he's been drilling in your ear already."

"Last night at the pub. I know more about the Daoine Sidhe than I ever wanted to know. He's really quite knowledgeable."

"That's a nice way of saying he bored you to death, right?"

Maggie grinned. She already felt so comfortable with her cousin, so sure of their rapport. Once again she wondered why she didn't just sell her house, move herself and her business to Ireland and enjoy the company of her family.

"Well, now, here's the start-up. Tell me what you think." Christie moved back and offered Maggie the chair behind her desk.

"I don't know much about computer games. I mostly use my computer for business. I mean, I play FreeCell or Spider Solitaire when I'm bored, but I've never played any of those adventure games."

"That's all right. You'll be an unbiased critic, then. I need a fresh perspective. Here, have a look."

Maggie sat in Christie's chair and watched as the video game played in demo mode, scrolling instructions as the game progressed. "I love the

graphics," she said.

A tall, thin handsome young fellow dressed in blindingly white clothes battled a short pot-bellied man wearing red and plaid and sporting a scraggly beard. Their swords clashed, and the computer's speakers issued realistic sounds.

"That looks like Brian and Cormac, doesn't it?" Maggie joked.

"That's supposed to be Nuada of the Silver Hand, one of the Tuatha de Danaan; and he's battling King Mac Erc, the leader of the Firbolgs. The Tuatha de Danaan have loads of grand weapons at their disposal."

"I remember Cormac telling me about them. There's a spear, and a sword and a magic vessel that never runs empty of food, right?" Maggie thought the game looked like fun, action-packed without being graphically violent.

"Ah, so you were listening! You see, the Firbolgs didn't stand a chance against them, but it's possible for them to win in this game. It just takes a bit of skill and luck."

"It sounds like fun," Maggie stood up, holding the chair for Christie. Her hand brushed the other woman's shoulder.

"I wish my client liked it as much as you seem to," Christie said.

Maggie's hand tingled, and the air rippled around her. Maggie grimaced.

"Christie, what do you know about static electricity? I mean, there seems to be quite a lot of it here. Compared to America, I mean."

Christie just stared at her in confusion.

"Never mind," Maggie waved her hand. "It really is a fun game. I'm sure your client will like it."

* * *

In fact, the client adored the game and offered a contract on the

spot, with a huge bonus. Christie managed to restrain her glee until she and Maggie were alone.

"Ha! Brigid was right about you, Maggie. You really are a lucky charm. It's too bad you have to go back to America. The O'Haras could use a bit of luck."

"That's what your dad thinks, too. He won a bundle on a horse yesterday."

"So I heard. Was that your doing, as well?"

"Not guilty," Maggie said. "I think it was just a coincidence. And, anyway, my purse was stolen, so that shoots your good luck theory right in the head."

"Whatever you say, love. How about an early lunch?"

"That sounds great. I only had a cup of tea for breakfast, and I'm afraid it wasn't very filling."

"There's a lovely place I usually go in the St. Stephen's Green Mall. They do a fantastic chicken curry."

"Now you're talking," Maggie said with a smile. "That curry sauce was great with the fish and chips the other night."

"And since I'm making piles of money now, I'm buying the feast. I won't hear another word."

Maggie pretended to zip her lips shut, lock them and toss away the key. Christie laughed, locked up her office and led the way toward the mall. The chicken curry, served over a huge pile of white rice, was every bit as good as she had promised, and Maggie finished every bite.

"I'm thinking of taking the rest of the day off, since I'm rolling in it all of a sudden. Is there anything you'd like to see while we're in town?" Christie asked as she sipped her tea.

"Well, your dad promised to give me a tour of Dublin," Maggie said.

"Ah, well, he'll give you a grand tour of the pubs of Dublin, and that's my Da."

"In that case, why don't you show me everything else?"

"Let's start with Stephen's Green, then, all right? We can walk through the green. My car is parked on the other side, anyway. Then, we'll go back to the north side of the city and do a bit of shopping on Henry Street. The shops on this side of the river are a little more expensive. Henry Street has barrows and pound shops and loads of touristy shops with the kind of jewelry you make—I think you'll like it. And it's next to the GPO, the General Post Office, where the great rebellion took place. You can see real bullet holes in the building and all. It's brilliant."

"Sounds good to me."

The two girls left the mall and walked over to the green. Maggie exclaimed over the various types of people she saw, from seniors sitting on benches and people-watching to young people playing soccer and even a few teen-agers with spiky purple hair. Everyone, it seemed, was enjoying the remarkable weather. Maggie had heard about the infamous rain of Ireland, but so far, it hadn't materialized.

Christie drove her Sköda back across the O'Connell Street Bridge and found a parking space in a nearby garage almost immediately.

"See? You are lucky. Do you know how long I usually have to drive around searching for a parking space?" she joked.

"Oh, just stop it." Maggie smiled. "Let's find a jewelry shop. I want to see if I get any ideas for when I get home."

"I'll be sorry to see you leave, love," Christie said. "It's been grand having someone my own age to talk to. My work keeps me pretty busy, so I don't have much time to socialize outside the family."

"I know what you mean." Maggie sighed. "I've been very lonely since my grandparents died. In fact, it seems like I've been lonely my whole life. Not that I'm complaining, mind you. I have a few friends, but there's nobody special, if you know what I mean."

"Sure, you must have had a love affair back in the States?"

"No one serious. I've only had two love affairs my whole life, and both of them were disastrous."

"Disastrous, were they?" Christie chuckled wryly. "I know what that's like. What happened?"

"Well, the first one had a sick mother, and he expected me to marry him and take care of her. The second one only wanted to marry me so he could make partner in his law firm. Apparently, lawyers who aren't married don't get to be partners."

"Jesus, that sounds pretty awful. Not much of a choice, there. Either you get to be a nursemaid or an ornament."

"Exactly," Maggie agreed. "But the worst part is neither of them made me feel anything. You know what I mean? The knock-your-socks-off kind of passion that makes you want to tear each others' clothes off? Am I asking for too much? I don't care. I won't settle for Mr. Right Now, no matter how cute he is. Now, quick, find me a jewelry store before I get really maudlin."

Christie smiled. "There's one just around the corner on Henry Street. I think you'll find what you're looking for there."

The girls strolled down Henry Street, stopping in the first jewelry store they came to, just around the corner from Capel Street. Maggie admired the Tara Brooch replica delightedly, much to the amusement of the store manager. She introduced herself, saying, "I make jewelry myself, so I can appreciate the craftsmanship. Are the gemstones real?"

"That they are, colleen. You'll find only the finest jewelry in this shop. Even the quality of our costume jewelry is of the highest standard," he replied, puffing himself up a little as he spoke. His pride was evident in his stance and the enormous grin he wore. He removed the brooch from its case and handed it to. She turned it over, inspecting the clasp, nodded approvingly, then turned it over again, scrutinizing the jewels embedded in the front. Christie leaned in, casually resting her hand on Maggie's shoulder, to inspect the brooch. It was a gold circle embedded with brightly-colored gemstones with a sliver of a gold pin in the back, meant to be worn on the shoulder to fasten one's cloak. It was designed to resemble the Tara Brooch, the legendary wedding gift from King Brian Boru to his bride.

"How much is it?" Maggie asked, her expertise telling her the price would most likely be much more than she could afford. The manager confirmed her suspicions, quoting a price that was easily twice what she had in her purse. She sighed regretfully as she handed the exquisite piece back.

"Sorry, love," Christie said, patting Maggie's shoulder. "That's too bad, it looks like it was made for you. I wish you could afford it."

Maggie felt the now-familiar mild shock, and the air rippled around her. *What the heck is going on?* she wondered. *What am I, some kind of lightning rod or something?*

"As a matter of fact," the manager was saying, "this particular brooch is on sale today for only half-price; and since you're a jeweler yourself, I can give you another half off that price as a professional courtesy."

He seemed a little surprised at what he had just said, but Maggie was even more surprised.

"I'll take it," she heard herself say, opening her purse before he could change his mind.

As she and Christie left the store, hugging one another happily, Maggie could have sworn she heard Brian's voice saying, "Damn! That's five."

CHAPTER 7

Maggie decided to wear the golden brooch she had purchased at Donovan's Fine Jewelry that evening. She and Christie were enjoying pints of ale at the Cauldron, her aunt and uncle having decided to stay at home at watch a film on the telly. Brian finished his first set, and as soon as he ended his song, he made straight for their table. Maggie gulped her ale, remembering the strange dream she'd had the night before. The sight of him sitting on the bar singing when she had first walked in brought the whole episode back in full Technicolor; and she had blushed furiously when he smiled welcomingly at her, winking at her almost as if he knew about her dream.

"A grand good evening to you both," he said, taking a seat and signaling for a pint.

"Hello, yourself," Christie replied with a smile. Maggie felt a twinge of jealousy then reminded herself she had no right. She would be leaving in a few weeks, and Christie was welcome to Brian.

He, on the other hand, seemed to have a few ideas of his own on

the subject. He smiled at Christie then turned to Maggie, giving her his undivided attention

"Are you enjoying yourself, then?" he asked as he stroked her arm lightly with his fingertips.

"Yes, thank you." She desperately wanted him to stop touching her, and yet she yearned for it. "I did some shopping today." She pointed to the brooch, which was pinned to the left side of her Aran sweater. Brian glanced at it then consumed her breasts with his sizzling gaze.

"Lovely," he whispered.

Maggie blushed, and Christie quickly hid a grin behind her pint glass. She stood up, saying, "Well, if you'll excuse me, there's a lad I need to see over at the bar. I'll be seeing you soon enough."

She strode toward the bar, leaving Maggie and Brian alone. Maggie was not the least bit fooled by her cousin's behavior. Christie knew all about her dream and how she was attracted to Brian. *She did that deliberately*, she thought, watching her saunter toward the bar. She sent her cousin a telepathic message: *I'm going to get you for that, cousin.*

Christie either didn't receive it or ignored it as she greeted a tall blonde man who appeared to be her own age.

"I wonder if you'd let me take you on a day trip tomorrow," Brian said, still stroking her arm. "The Phoenix Park is lovely, and we could stop and visit the zoo, if you've a mind. Lots of Americans on holiday visit the zoological gardens. It's quite lovely."

"No, thanks," Maggie said firmly. "I don't see the point. I'm going to be leaving here soon, and, really, you'd be much better off finding some little Irish girl to work your charm on."

Brian leaned closer and breathed in her ear. "I wish you'd change your mind."

Maggie felt an odd tingle on her arm where Brian's hand rested; and suddenly, she did change her mind. *Why not?* she thought. *I mean, after all, what could happen at the zoo? It's not like he could ravish me in the monkey house or anything. Okay, I'll go.*

"All right," she heard herself say. "As long as you understand I have no intention of getting involved with you. I'm not sure exactly what your agenda is, but I want no part of it."

"Agenda, is it?" Brian grinned. "And what makes you think I have an agenda?"

"All men have an agenda."

"And what do you think my agenda is?"

"Well, you could be thinking all American girls are easy to get into the sack. Let me assure you, that is not the case with me."

"I didn't think it was."

"Well, maybe you'd like to emigrate to the States, and you want me to facilitate that for you. You know, help you get a green card."

"Ah, no, that's not it. I'm happy enough here in my own beloved Erin."

Maggie noted with surprise that she was disappointed to hear him say that. It wasn't that she was in love with him or anything; but still, if he really cared about her he'd be willing to go to America with her, wouldn't he? Not that it mattered, because she absolutely wasn't going to get involved with him.

"Well, whatever it is, I'm not interested." She suddenly hated herself for being so prim and proper, but she absolutely refused to compromise her standards, and a quick vacation romance was definitely beneath her. She'd waited too long and sacrificed too much to waste her precious virginity on a holiday quickie.

"I can see that. I won't be forcing my attentions on you, then." He finished his pint, stood up and leaned over to whisper in her ear, "I'll meet you here tomorrow at noon, and we'll go to the zoo. And tonight I'll see you in your dreams. Cheerio."

He casually walked toward the bar, and Maggie watched him with astonishment. What in the world had he meant by that? How could he know what she'd been dreaming about? And why did he have to look so darned sexy in those jeans? His pale green shirt was open at the collar tonight, and he had forgone his usual tie for a more casual look.

Christie picked that moment to return and resumed her seat across from Maggie. "That lad of yours is quite the charmer, isn't he?" she sighed.

"He's not my lad," Maggie retorted.

"So, are you going on a pub crawl with Da tomorrow?"

"No, actually, Brian is taking me to the zoo in Phoenix Park," Maggie tried and failed to sound nonchalant. Christie grinned knowingly.

"Your lad's taking you to the zoo, is he? Well..." she chuckled. "...isn't that something?"

"No, it's nothing. And he's not 'my' lad."

"As you like."

"I mean it."

"Naturally. I'm not saying a word."

"Good."

"Mother of God, he looks downright wicked tonight, doesn't he?" Christie sighed, deliberately looking at Brian then back at Maggie to gauge her reaction. Maggie glanced over at the bar where Brian was beginning his second set and shivered a little. She quickly looked back at her cousin, finished the last of her ale and stood up.

"Look, can we go now? I think I've had enough for tonight."

"Sure," Christie said. "I've got an early day tomorrow, anyway. And besides," she added with a knowing wink, "you probably can't wait to get into bed and start dreaming about him."

Maggie snorted and tucked her purse under her arm. "Not likely."

When they got back to Deirdre and Dermot's, Maggie claimed to have a headache and a strong desire to go to bed early. Ignoring Christie's knowing smile, she accepted the Dispirin Deirdre insisted she drink. She climbed the steps to the second floor, closed her door behind her and changed into her pajamas, her body occupied with the business of getting ready for bed while her mind was occupied with thoughts of Brian. As much as she hated to admit it to Christie, she couldn't wait to see him the next day. She enjoyed his company, his wit, his singing, even his caresses. How ironic, to finally meet the man who could inflame her with a wink and not be able to explore those passions. She didn't trust men, especially men whose touch could inflame her. She certainly didn't trust a man she barely knew.

She wondered about his parting remark: "I'll see you in your dreams." What had he meant by that? Surely, he couldn't know about her dream—unless, of course, Christie had told him. Would her cousin betray her like that? *Oh, yeah, Maggie thought. She would. She's the matchmaking type. She'd probably like nothing more than to see me and Brian get married and live happily ever after here in Dublin.*

Maggie found herself speculating on the idea. *Would that be so bad? Puh-lease, I've only known the guy three days. I've only ever seen him in the pub for a few hours, not counting The Dream. Maybe I should get to know him better before I start making life-altering decisions here. A day at the zoo could be just what the doctor ordered.*

She stared at the ceiling, alternately wanting to sleep so she could dream about Brian again—and she was sure she would, somehow—and wanting to stay awake so she could avoid him until she had a chance to sort out her feelings. Would it really be so awful to have a little holiday fling with the handsome singer? Something to remember her vacation by, some pleasant memories to warm her on those long winter evenings? Or maybe she actually could move her life and her business to Ireland.

But, then, Brian had said he'd be going home soon, and who knew where he lived? Not that anywhere in Ireland was very far from anywhere else in Ireland, and she'd still get to see her family all the time. It would be a wish come true.

Eventually, her body's needs overcame her mind's desires and she drifted off to sleep.

* * *

"Ah, Maggie, m'darling, you've come to me at last." Brian took her in his arms, holding close her to his broad, muscular chest. His mortal body, such as it was, lay in his own bed; but his immortal spirit had joined Maggie in her dream. He stroked her hair, wrapping the curls around his fingers, and kissed her forehead.

They were standing in a room unfamiliar to Brian. A queen-size bed with a bookcase headboard ornately carved with cherubs dominated the room, with glass-topped tables on either side sporting hurricane lamps. A matching armoire stood in the corner of the room, with a bureau near the door. He casually glanced around and realized this must be Maggie's bedroom at her home in America. *Ah, she's making this too easy for me altogether.*

He'd left the Cauldron immediately after his second set and headed straight for his bed and breakfast two blocks away. Since it seemed he

was going to be spending some time in the mortal realm whether he liked it or not, he'd decided to make himself comfortable. Besides, in the business of seduction one never knew when a bed might come in handy, and he was sure the O'Haras wouldn't be thrilled to come home and find him in Maggie's.

He'd been delighted to discover she was already asleep when he arrived.

* * *

"No, Brian, don't do this," Maggie whispered. She reveled in the warmth of his body and unconsciously shifted to be nearer to him. She needed to be nearer to him. "I can't get involved with you."

"Because of my agenda?" he whispered back, still kissing her forehead, her hair.

"Yes, and because I'm leaving soon."

"So you keep saying. But you're here now. Why can't we just enjoy ourselves for the moment?"

"It isn't right," she said, shaking her head. "I've saved myself for the man I intend to marry, and you aren't him."

"How do you know that, Maggie?"

"Because there's something about you, I can tell. There's something you're hiding from me. I don't know what it is, but men lie to get what they want and I know you're lying to me."

"I haven't lied to you."

"Maybe not, but you haven't told me the whole truth, either. I can't trust you." *But it's only a dream*, Maggie thought, stroking his chest with one hand while the other found its way to his hip.

* * *

Brian continued to stroke her hair with one hand and with the other

caressed her back, making slow, lazy circles, traveling lower and lower until he gripped her buttocks and pulled her closer to him. Maggie arched toward him in response.

She was right, he hadn't told her the whole truth. How could he? From her conversations in the pub, it was obvious Maggie was as pragmatic as she was lovely. She didn't believe in fairies, and she had very little room in her life for the unexplained. It was also clear from the way she refused to believe the lucky streak surrounding her was anything more than coincidence.

Suddenly, he wanted to tell her the truth, and that thought shocked him so much he pulled away from her. Fairies hardly ever told the truth—not to mortals, anyway. It was impossible to lie to a fairy, since they were all connected by magic and aware of what was going on with one another at all times. Sometimes, a fairy in the mortal realm lost contact with Tir na nOg, as he had when Maggie inadvertently trapped him here; but fairies had no qualms whatsoever about lying to mortals. Some things they were better off not knowing, anyway. That he wanted to come clean with Maggie was another indication he was changing somehow. Not that it mattered. He still had a job to do.

"What's the matter?" Maggie asked.

"Nothing," he snapped. He bent and kissed her fiercely. She responded with pure white-hot fire, and his breath caught. "Ah, Maggie, what are you doing to me?"

He continued to kiss her, trailing kisses down her throat, wondering why this mortal woman was so different from the hundreds he had known over his lifetime. He considered her half-fairy heritage, and then discarded that notion. He had never lacked for company, even among his own people; but none of his Daoine Sidhe lovers had ever sparked these

emotions in him. Maggie stirred a new feeling in him, one he had never experienced before.

Fairies were notorious for their lack of morality, and Brian was no exception. He had seduced hundreds, perhaps thousands of mortal women; and until he met Maggie believed lassies were creatures to be enjoyed, trifled with and then discarded. He definitely wanted to enjoy Maggie, to make love to her again and again. He cupped her breast in one hand, teasing her nipple to hardness, and with his other hand he pulled her even closer. He continued to kiss her neck, heard her gasp as he found the sensitive hollow beneath her ear and redoubled his efforts. He ignored his confusion. Instead, he concentrated on awakening the passion he knew Maggie was capable of feeling. He wanted her, without a doubt, but more than that he wanted to protect her, to keep her safe, to love her.

Brian gasped as this realization hit him full force. He broke their embrace, held her at arm's length and stared into her eyes. When had this happened? At what moment had he fallen in love with this mortal? It was unprecedented! Fairies just didn't do that sort of thing. By the Wind and the Moon, he was here to do a job. He was actually beginning to forget that, and the thought alarmed him. He mustn't be distracted. Nothing must get in the way of the mission he'd been sent here to complete. He absolutely must not fail. The fate of the entire world rested on his shoulders.

"What?" Maggie whined. Her voice told him his rejection confused and hurt her. "Why are you looking at me that way?"

"I have to go," he said. "I'm sorry, you were right, this is a bad idea. I have to go." He needed to get away from her, needed to think about this. He left her dream and awoke, sweating and panting.

"By the Rain and the Sun, what's happening to me?" he murmured.

"That's a good question." He heard Orla's voice in his left ear, and he turned to see her sitting next to him on his bed.

"What are you doing here?" he groaned.

"Queen Maeve sent me. She wants to know what progress you've made with the Nexus. For some reason, we haven't been able to sense you, and you haven't seen fit to come to Tir na nOg."

"Ah, progress. Well, I've made a bit of progress."

"Don't lie to me, Brian. I can see right through you. Why haven't you come back to give a progress report yourself?"

"I can't. Maggie wished I'd go back to where I came from, which means now I'm stuck here in the mortal realm," he told her miserably.

"Ah, that is a problem." She nodded. "Well, you've done it now, indeed you have. And what have you been doing besides getting yourself stuck in the mortal realm?"

"Well, I thought I'd seduce her and get her to wish I'd stay with her forever. Then, I'll return to Tir na nOg, and she'll be forced to go back to America."

Orla nodded again. "Sure, and that would do it. You're very good at it, anyway."

"This one is different."

"Is that so? In what way?"

"I don't know. One minute she can't keep her hands off me, the next minute she can't get far enough away from me."

"Finally, a mortal with some sense," Orla said with a teasing smile. "So, what's the next step in your plan?"

"I don't know," Brian admitted. He sat up, finally deciding he did know. "I wonder..."

"What?"

"Orla, what if I tell her the truth?"

"What?" Orla shot to her feet. "You can't do that, Brian. Not that she'd believe you, but if she knew the true extent of her powers she might do something drastic, like wishing us all into oblivion. Or worse, wishing we'd all live forever."

"Maggie wouldn't do that."

"You don't know what she'd do. Mortals are not to be trusted. And this one is half-fairy, which makes her even more dangerous."

"I think we can trust her. Besides, she's convinced I have a hidden agenda, which, of course, I do. I think if I tell her the truth, she'd be more likely to trust me and see the wisdom of leaving Erin forever."

Brian's heart ached at the thought of never seeing Maggie again, but he knew he would do what was best for his people. Unbelievably, in only three days, this mortal woman had captured his heart, his soul. He wanted nothing more than to live with her forever, have as many babies as possible and make furious love to her every night. He wanted to dry her tears, make her laugh and share every moment of every day with her.

"It's too dangerous," Orla said, shaking her finger at him. "I know Queen Maeve would agree with me. I think you'd best keep trying to get the colleen to fall in love with you." With that, she disappeared.

"There's only one problem with that, Orla," Brian said to the empty room. "I think I'm the one who's falling in love."

CHAPTER 8

Maggie entered the Cauldron precisely at noon and found Brian gazing morosely into his pint of Guinness. She shuddered, remembering her dream of the previous night, how he had kissed her, then pushed her away suddenly. She shook her head. *It was only a dream*, she thought.

She started toward his table, and he turned to watch her. Maggie saw pain in his eyes for a moment, and then he quickly covered it with a welcoming smile.

"How're ya, Maggie, darling, you're right on time. Would you care for a bit of refreshment before we set off? A drink? Perhaps a bite to eat?"

"No, thanks," she said. "The sooner we get started, the sooner this day will be over."

"You don't sound very enthusiastic, colleen. You're playing havoc with my ego."

"I'm not very enthusiastic, and I don't care a whole lot about your ego. In fact, I have no idea why I agreed to this date at all."

"I have an idea, myself, but I'll wait to tell you later." He left his

unfinished pint on the table and took her elbow, steering her out the door.

They took the bus to Phoenix Park, and it deposited them at the entrance to the zoo. Maggie was a little uncomfortable at Brian's reticence but didn't bother to break the silence. Her mind raced from one notion to the next. Finally, she decided to stop thinking for the day and just enjoy the zoo. She turned to him as they stood in line at the entrance.

"Have you been here before, Brian?"

"Yes," he answered absently as he paid for their tickets. "But that was decades ago."

"But you're not much older than I am. How can that be?" she wondered aloud. "Oh, I get it, you were here as a child." She smiled, satisfied she had worked out the answer for herself.

"Not quite," Brian said. He steered her through the entrance, refusing to elaborate.

They wandered around the zoo aimlessly for a while, chatting about everything and nothing. Maggie spotted what appeared to be a small stone throne with the words "The Wishing Chair" painted above it.

"What's that?" she asked. She pointed to the little throne, where a toddler was trying to climb up. He struggled for a moment, then his father picked him up under his arms and plopped him onto the seat.

"Now, make a wish, Tony," the father told his young son.

"Well, it's a Wishing Chair, of course," Brian said. "But it's not the real thing, naturally, it's not. It's just another of the zoo attractions. Something for the kiddies and the tourists. Let's walk a bit, Maggie. I've something to tell you. A true fairy tale."

Brian had lain awake the rest of the previous night, debating whether to tell Maggie the truth about his mission, and had finally concluded he had no choice. He couldn't bring himself to continue his seduction plans, not after admitting his true feelings for her. He didn't want to hurt Maggie, but he was determined to somehow complete his mission. The only way to make that happen was to tell her the truth.

Now he took her arm and led her around the zoo, barely even glancing at the animals as he spoke.

"Maggie, darling, do you remember when Cormac O'Hara was telling you about the Daoine Sidhe? The fairy folk?" He took a deep breath and plunged in. "Well, the truth is they do actually exist, and I'm one of them. And you're one of them, as well."

"Very funny. Are you a leprechaun or a Bean Sidhe?" Maggie punched his arm playfully.

"I'm not joking, Maggie. I'm a fairy and you're a half-fairy. And besides, the Bean Sidhe is a woman. Well, they all sort of take turns at it, actually. The women, I mean."

"You're nuts," she told him. "I knew this was a bad idea." She slipped her arm out of his and started to walk away. He grabbed her and turned her around to face him.

"No, I'm not, and you're going to listen to me because this is important. You are a threat to my people, and you don't even know it."

"Me? How can I be a threat to the immortal Daoine Sidhe?"

"Well, we're not exactly immortal. It's true we have a long lifespan because we don't usually get sick, but we can be killed, that's the truth of it. Now, don't try to distract me. Let's just keep walking, and I'll tell you the whole story. You still believe I have an agenda, do you?"

She nodded slowly. He saw the skepticism in her eyes and was

determined to convince her.

"Well, I do have an agenda, and you're it. You see, Maggie, love, you're what we call a Nexus, a conduit that connects the mortal realm and the fairy world. You make wishes come true. Anyone who makes a wish while touching a Nexus will get their wish."

"That's absurd," Maggie shook her head. "It's coincidence, nothing more. There's no such thing as magic. It's just a coincidence."

"No, it isn't, and I'll prove it." Brian looked around for a likely victim. He wanted to prove his point, but he didn't really want to hurt anyone. He sighed, knowing that before he met Maggie he hadn't worried about that sort of thing. He'd done whatever he wanted to do, and pity the poor mortals who got in his way.

He spotted a little boy holding his mother's hand and gazing longingly at another child's ice cream.

"There, see that lad? The one who's standing there by the giraffe? Watch this." He grasped Maggie's hand firmly. "I wish that child had an ice cream."

* * *

Maggie felt a tingle in her hand and the air rippled around her.

"Tommy," she heard the child's mother say suddenly. "would you like an ice cream? Let's go and get you a Ninety-Nine."

The boy grinned and nodded, and his mother took his hand and led him away from the giraffe's cage. She stopped at the ice cream vendor's booth, and Maggie smiled at the boy's wide-eyed delight in the frosty treat.

"Pure coincidence. She probably saw him looking at that other kid's ice cream and thought he'd like one, too," she said with a dismissive shrug. "There's nothing magical about a mother knowing her own child's

desires. I hear moms are like that."

She didn't want to believe him, couldn't believe him. It was too ludicrous. Magical powers? It was pure nonsense. This was all a joke; and she, for one, didn't think it was very funny. She'd sensed Brian was a little flighty, but this was going too far. She began to look around for a policeman, wondering if she might be in trouble here.

"Ah, you're a hard one," Brian sighed. "Let's find something you won't be able to explain away so easily." He let his gaze wander around the crowd, finally settling on an elderly couple sitting on a bench. He squeezed Maggie's hand. "There, you see that old fella and his wife? Watch carefully. I wish that old fellow would find a twenty-pound note on the ground in front of him and use it to buy his wife a souvenir giraffe."

Maggie felt the tingle in her hand again, felt the air ripple and suddenly noticed a twenty-pound note on the ground in front of the elderly couple. She frowned, certain the money had not been there a moment ago. Her pulse began to pound in her ears. No, this couldn't be true. It couldn't be happening. If the old man offered to buy his wife a giraffe, she didn't know what she'd do.

"Look here, Mary!" the elderly gent exclaimed, bending over to retrieve the money. "Look what I've found!" He waved the twenty-pound note in front of his wife, gleefully laughing. "Let's go to the souvenir shop and I'll get you a cuddly toy. Would you like a giraffe?"

The couple stood and started in the direction of the souvenir stand.

"Wow," Maggie breathed. "Did I do that? No, it's impossible. It's just a coincidence. Isn't it?"

"No, it isn't," Brian told her. "It's what I've been trying to tell you all along. You have the power to grant wishes."

"That can't be true. I wished for a hundred pounds, and my purse

got stolen. How do you explain that?"

"Well, that's the other side of the coin, isn't it. When a Nexus makes a wish the opposite comes true. You lost a hundred pounds that day, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did," Maggie replied thoughtfully. "Exactly a hundred pounds." She shook her head. "This is ridiculous. It can't be happening. I don't have any magical powers."

* * *

"Ah, Maggie, I wish you would believe me," Brian sighed again, still holding her hand. He hated the idea of turning her own powers against her, but he didn't see any other way to get her to believe him, and he needed her to believe him. He had definitely learned a trick or two over the last few thousand years; and while it pained him to use Maggie in this way, he had to save his people.

Besides, he could spend all day proving he was right or take a shortcut. Eventually, Maggie would have to believe him, because he was telling the truth. *I'm only doing it for her own good*, he told himself. Time was running out.

Maggie—looked at Brian curiously, cocked her head and said, "You know, it's funny—I do believe you."

"I know you do. I wished for it, and it came true. I'm sorry I had to do it, but you didn't leave me any choice."

Maggie snatched her hand away and rubbed it. "Don't touch me, Brian. I don't want you making anymore wishes."

"I won't," Brian assured her, holding his arms stiffly by his sides. "It's too dangerous, anyway. That's why I'm here. You're a threat to the Daoine Sidhe."

"Threat my Aunt Fanny. You men are all alike."

"I'm not a man," Brian insisted. "I'm a fairy, one of the Daoine Sidhe. And I've come here to the mortal realm to try to convince you to leave Erin forever."

"But I am leaving, in a couple of weeks or so."

"That's not soon enough. Your powers get stronger the closer we get to Midsummer's Eve, and that's only a few days away."

"I still don't understand. What does my leaving Ireland have to do with my powers? And why haven't they ever manifested before? And how did I get this power, anyway?"

Brian took a deep breath. He didn't want there to be any more secrets between them.

"Your mother was impregnated by a Daoine Sidhe, which makes you half-fairy. Your powers only work while you're here in Erin. Once you leave, you'll be back to plain, ordinary Maggie again."

* * *

Maggie frowned. So, her mother had told the truth about her pregnancy. No one had believed her. They had called her crazy, but she wasn't the least bit crazy. She really had had a fairy lover.

Then, she realized what else Brian had said. *Plain? Ordinary?* In all fairness, she had never thought of herself as beautiful or even especially pretty, but being considered plain and ordinary didn't really appeal to her, either. She felt a sudden perverse desire to hurt Brian as his unthinking remark had hurt her, and to avenge the humiliation her mother had suffered at the hands of the Daoine Sidhe. If that one of them hadn't started all of this, her mother never would've gotten pregnant; and she wouldn't have had to be born away from her family—and, what's more, she wouldn't have this magical power that was starting to become a real inconvenience.

"You're saying one of your people got my mother pregnant?" she repeated angrily. "That's the reason she left Ireland in the first place. She got pregnant out of wedlock, and my grandparents were so ashamed they left their home and took her with them. They called her crazy, Brian. But she wasn't crazy, was she? Because of the Daoine Sidhe, I spent my entire life without a family. So, tell me, fairy-boy, why should I help you? Your people ruined my mother's life—ruined my life."

"Well..." Brian shuffled his feet uncomfortably. "...most fairies don't see anything wrong with seducing mortal women or stealing from human beings, including stealing human beings themselves. They abduct women to serve as midwives when fairy children are born. And many fairies abduct men and women—especially those of great physical beauty—to be their lovers. I've heard your mother was a great beauty, Maggie. Just as you are."

"Funny, just a minute ago I was plain and ordinary. Now, all of a sudden, I'm the Rose of Tralee," Maggie crossed her arms and glared at him. She was furious that the Daoine Sidhe had such little regard for mortals. If what he said was true, then she figured there was a better than good chance Brian himself had abducted and seduced his share of mortal women. The thought infuriated her further. *How typical!* she thought. *Whether they're mortal or fairies, they only think of themselves, never how their actions affect the people who love them.* She ignored the fact that she'd probably just revealed her feelings for Brian. Nothing mattered right now except her anger, and her overwhelming desire to hurt him. Not even the fact that she had fallen in love with him. Why else would he have this frightening power to hurt her?

"Ah, no, colleen, I didn't mean that," he stuttered. "I only meant when you leave Erin your powers go with you."

"Uh-huh. Well, what if I don't want to leave Ireland? You know, my aunt Deirdre has asked me to stay here and move in with her. In fact, I'm even thinking about staying right here in Dublin forever, now that I've finally found the family you people have denied me my whole life."

"I'm afraid that's not an option."

"No? Why not?"

"Because Queen Maeve wouldn't allow it," Brian said. "There is an alternative, though. You could return to Tir na nOg with me and learn to control your powers. It wouldn't be easy, you see, because you're so old, but it could be done."

"Oh, so now I'm plain, ordinary and ancient, too!" She spun on her heel and strode angrily toward the entrance. *That did it*, she fumed. *I don't care if I never see that man again. I'm going back to Deirdre's house and promptly forget all about Mr. Brian O'Shea, the pub singer with the spectacular tush. Then, I'm going back to Dublin Township and live the rest of my life quite well without him, thank you very much. And then I'm going to forget all this fairy nonsense and live happily ever after.*

"Wait, Maggie! I didn't say that!" Brian ran after her, catching her as she went through the gate.

"Take your hands off me!" she shouted, shaking him off.

"Is there a problem, miss?" A police officer walked toward them, glaring suspiciously at Brian. "Is this fellow bothering you?"

"Oh, yes, he's bothering me, but I can handle it, thank you," Maggie said. She asked sweetly, "Would you please tell me which bus will take me back to Santry?"

Brian sighed, checked to see that no one was watching, then turned himself invisible and walked away. He was somewhat bewildered by Maggie's reaction. After all, she'd just found out she had magical powers,

and she didn't seem the least bit impressed by it. She could have shown a little gratitude, in his opinion. Not every mortal was given such a magnificent gift. His own sudden truthfulness notwithstanding, he was actually surprised she wasn't taking this better. Any other mortal would be rubbing his hands together with avaricious glee, wondering what to wish for first; but Maggie seemed contemptuous of her gifts—and even more contemptuous of the Daoine Sidhe.

That could have gone better, he thought. Maybe I shouldn't have told her the truth. Maybe I should've just kidnapped her and whisked her back to Tir na nOg when I first met her. By the Sun and the Rain, I hate it when Orla is right.

Maggie glared at the scenery rushing past the bus. "I knew it," she muttered, drawing a few curious looks from her fellow passengers. "I just knew he was up to something."

She propped her chin in her cupped hand and rested it against the window, clearly lost in thought and just as clearly on the verge of tears.

Brian, in his invisible state, sat in the seat beside her, watching silently the play of emotions as they crossed her face. By the Wind and the Sun, she was beautiful, and he ached for the chance to console her, hating himself for causing her pain but knowing he'd had no choice. He wished he could make her see how dangerous she was, how important it was for her to leave Erin as soon as possible, or to enter Tir na nOg. He'd protect her; there was no doubt about that. It wasn't safe, her walking around Dublin, granting wishes left and right, never knowing what someone was going to say as they shook her hand or casually touched her arm.

Then, too, there was always the chance the Firbolgs could get their

hands on her. By the Wind and the Moon, what they wouldn't give to get a Nexus in their nasty clutches. It would give them the leverage they'd needed for centuries to finally defeat the Daoine Sidhe. No matter what, he would never allow that to happen.

* * *

I'm not ready to leave Ireland just yet, Maggie decided. *I don't care what he says, I've just found my family, and I'm not ready to leave them yet.* She loved her little house in Dublin Township, especially the little shed in the backyard. Her grandfather built it for her when she started to make money from her jewelry-making hobby. It was completely furnished with shelves, worktables and her computer. The house itself was a replica of every other house on the street, except it had no family to fill it.

She was not anxious to go back to that stifling void, not yet. Not ever, if the truth be known. Maggie questioned her attraction to Brian, wondering if he had wished for it. She recalled their conversations, trying to remember what he had said and exactly how he had phrased it. All at once, she remembered their conversation in the pub.

"I wish you would go back to wherever you came from," she'd said. According to Brian, her wish would have the opposite effect, preventing him from returning to wherever he had come from, which, according to Brian, was Tir na nOg, the Land of Eternal Youth.

"Ah-ha!" she declared aloud, drawing a few more curious looks from her fellow passengers. "That's why he's been pestering me. He wants me to wish him back home, except I'd have to wish him to stay here forever."

She heard a cough behind her and realized she'd been thinking out loud.

That's why he's been trying to seduce me, she thought. *If I wish*

he'd stay with me forever he could go back to fairyland whenever he wants. She grinned, delighted at the thought of exacting a little revenge on the Daoine Sidhe on her mother's behalf. She wasn't convinced Brian was telling her the whole truth about the situation, but she was more convinced than ever his motives were anything but pure. Men couldn't be trusted, and fairies could be trusted even less. A male fairy was completely untrustworthy.

She needed more information, and she knew exactly where to get that information. Luckily, she just happened to be related to Ireland's foremost expert on the Daoine Sidhe.

CHAPTER 9

Cormac seemed thrilled at Maggie's request—she called him as soon as she returned from the zoo. Playing on his professional pride, she told him his lecture the other evening had whetted her appetite for more information about the Daoine Sidhe. He seemed anxious to show off his extensive knowledge and invited her to his office the next afternoon.

"My last class ends at half-three," he told her. "That'll be three-thirty to you. Come by my office at Trinity, and I'll answer all your questions."

He had started to explain how to get to Trinity when Dermot snatched the receiver away.

"Cormac, never mind," he said. "I've been dying to get my niece alone since she got here. I'll bring her to your office in the afternoon. In the morning, she's all mine. If she'd like, I'd be happy to show her Clontarf Castle."

He winked at Maggie, and she nodded enthusiastically as he rang off.

"While you're visiting with Cormac, I think I'll wait for you in Iveagh's on Dame Street. It's just around the corner. You can easily meet me there afterward. I'd rather wait there than have to sit through another of Cormac's lectures, if you don't mind. And after you've listened to him for a bit you might decide you need a drink or two yourself."

"Great," Maggie smiled. "I can't wait to see Clontarf Castle. Wasn't that Brian Boru's castle?"

"Aye, indeed it was." Dermot nodded. "Brian Boru was the Ard Ri, the high king of Ireland. He defeated the Danes and united Ireland for the first and only time in history. The castle is still there, but it's a bit of a nightclub now. We can still have a little look around, though."

Maggie sighed thoughtfully. She intended to go to bed early but feared her dreams. "Dermot," she said, "I'm having a little trouble sleeping. I wonder if you might have a sleeping pill or something I can take."

"Not a bit of it," Dermot shook his head. "But we can dash up the road to the chemist and get you something."

"The chemist? Why in the world do we need to see a scientist?"

Dermot laughed. "That's what you'd call the pharmacist."

Maggie did go to bed early after taking a sleeping pill and slept dream-free. The next morning, she and Dermot spent hours exploring Clontarf Castle, the seat of King Brian Boru's empire, then enjoyed a late lunch in a nearby pub with a spectacular view of the castle. They took the bus to College Green, and Dermot left her off in front of the Bank of Ireland.

"There's Trinity there." He pointed across the street. "Before you go to see Cormac—you've plenty of time, don't worry—stop and see the Book of Kells. The Irish saved Christianity because of that particular

book—two books actually, but it's usually referred to as one book—and the other manuscripts Irish monks copied and hid."

Dermot gestured toward the college, oblivious to the small crowd of people gathered at the bus stop waiting for the next bus. Maggie noticed a few of them were nodding, silently approving the impromptu lecture.

"The Book of Kells is an illustrated manuscript of the four Holy Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Every day a different page is displayed, but the Book itself is kept under lock and key, preserved from light. It's one of the national treasures of Ireland. You must stop in and see it," he repeated, patting her on the shoulder.

Maggie nodded, intrigued enough to want see the ancient book but nervous about having Dermot's hand on her shoulder. What if he wished for something during his lesson?

"I'll meet you at Iveagh's on Dame Street." He gave her directions to both the pub and Cormac's office then tipped his hat at her with a grin and headed off down College Green, whistling.

Maggie crossed the street quickly with the crowd as the light changed and paused for a moment in front of the entrance to Trinity College.

"I wonder how old this place is?" she murmured.

"Oh, I can tell you that, miss," a young man to her left answered. "American, are you? Here for a bit of a holiday? Sure, you are."

Maggie smiled. "Are you a student here?" she asked.

"That I am, indeed," he answered, extending his hand for a shake. "Daniel Corcoran, at your service. I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have, love. Don't you know, every Irishman fancies himself a tour guide!"

"Well, thanks." Maggie gripped his hand and quickly let go, worried

he might inadvertently wish for something. "I was just wondering how old it is—you know, the college."

"Ah, well, now," the student replied, crossing his arms and adopting a pose in imitation of a lecturer, "Trinity College was established in 1592 by Elizabeth I. In fact, the actual name of the place is 'the College of the Holy and Undivided Trinity of Queen Elizabeth.' But the library, the dining hall and the theater weren't added until the eighteenth century. Jonathan Swift studied here, and so did Samuel Beckett. And, of course, our own Mary Robinson, the President of Ireland."

"Wow," Maggie breathed. "It's hard to believe America wasn't even technically a country in 1592, and here you are building universities!"

"Yeah, there's a joke about that, actually. Do you know the difference between an American and an Irishman?" Maggie shook her head, and he answered, "An American thinks a hundred years is a long time, and an Irishman thinks a hundred miles is a long way."

"That's probably true," she agreed with a smile. "I was just on my way to see the Book of Kells."

"Right, that's in the Old Library right over there," the young man indicated a large building on the far side of the quad. "Will I give you a tour? You really should see the Long Room while you're there. Brian Boru's harp is there, and loads of old books."

"Thanks, anyway," Maggie replied. "I think I know where I'm going."

"Cheerio, then." He waved and smiled and disappeared into the flood of students.

I wonder if Brian is as old as Trinity College. He could be hundreds of years old, thousands, maybe. Maggie stood patiently in line waiting to see the famous Book of Kells, but her thoughts were with Brian. She was

conscious of the proximity of the people around her, and she continually adjusted her position so as not to inadvertently touch anyone.

Finally, it was her turn to see the famous Gospels, and she stepped up to the glass case where the two enormous books lay open, each displaying two pages of Latin writing and bold drawings in brilliant colors. While she studied the brightly colored pages, she wondered at Brian's words. *You could return to Tir na nOg with me*, he'd said. *You're a threat to the Daoine Sidhe*. What kind of a threat? So, she could grant a few wishes. She'd have to be very careful not to touch anyone, at least until she figured this thing out or until she got back home.

Her eyes filled with sudden tears. *If I stay here*, she realized, *I can't ever touch anyone*. She couldn't imagine going the rest of her life not ever touching anyone, not ever being able to trust anyone, not ever revealing her true nature. What was the alternative? Go to Tir na nOg, some kind of fairyland? Spend the rest of her life among the people who made her own mother an outcast, without regard for how it might affect her or her family? This was all just getting more ridiculous by the second, and Maggie was beginning to wonder if this was something Brian had cooked up as a practical joke.

Except the whole world, it seemed, had to be in on it. Just when she'd finally found some semblance of a family, people she was coming to love, something like this had to happen. She couldn't help but believe what Brian had told her. But believing and understanding were two completely different things.

The room felt like it was getting smaller, and suddenly she had to get out. It seemed everyone was touching someone, holding their hands, arms around their waists, their shoulders. She stopped breathing for a moment when a teenage girl accidentally bumped into her.

"Sorry," she muttered, turning back toward her friends; and Maggie thrust her hands in her pockets, turning away quickly and heading out the door.

She gulped in fresh air as soon as she got outside. She leaned against the wall and caught her breath. *Time to end all this*, she thought. *Let's go see what Cormac has to say. The heck with Brian Boru's harp.*

She had no trouble finding Cormac's office, following Dermot's explicit directions. She knocked once on his door then turned the handle and entered.

"Maggie! I'm delighted to see you! Please, sit down. Would you like a cup of tea? I've just made a pot, here let me get you a cup, and tell me how I can help you." Cormac stood and took her hand, leading her to a padded chair across from his desk. She snatched it away as quickly as she could without being rude. This was definitely not going to be easy to live with.

She sat down and folded her hands neatly in her lap. She accepted a cup of tea, more to have something to do with her hands than because she was thirsty, especially since there seemed to be something floating in it.

"I wanted to hear more about fairies," she began, wondering how to explain her sudden interest, but Cormac nodded thoughtfully, muttered, "Yes, of course" and slipped back into the lecture mode he'd affected in the pub, leaning on his desk. His red plaid waistcoat fell open, revealing his potbelly

"There are two major schools of thought as to how these remarkable creatures originated," he told her. "On the one hand, they are said to be the dwindled folk of the Tuatha de Dannan, those early settlers of Ireland. Another tradition says they are fallen angels, 'not good enough

to be saved, nor bad enough to be lost.' Followers of the first school will cite as evidence the fact that many fairy chiefs have the same names as the old Tuatha heroes, and that they have the habit of meeting on the burial grounds of that ancient race. As to their being fallen angels, evidence is offered as to their mischievous nature, their habit of repaying evil with evil, good for good and their desire to be regarded with respect and have offerings made to them."

Maggie relaxed a little. Evidently, she didn't need to explain a thing to Cormac. He was just delighted to talk, and she was equally delighted to pump him for information.

"W.B. Yeats has given us a good picture of them," he continued, selecting a book from his desk and reading aloud. "He said, 'Do not think the fairies are always little. Everything is capricious about them, even their size. They seem to take what size or shape pleases them. Their chief occupations are feasting, fighting, and making love..."

Maggie blushed, remembering her passionate dreams about Brian, but continued listening to Cormac's droning voice.

"...and playing the most beautiful music. They have only one industrious person amongst them: the leprechaun, the shoemaker. Perhaps they wear their shoes out with dancing.'" He closed the book and returned it to his desk. "They have three great festivals of the year: May Eve for fighting; Midsummer Eve when they are gayest, lighting bonfires on every hill and often stealing mortal brides; and November Eve when they mourn the coming of winter and dance with ghosts. They have their own palaces, or raths, where they gather for these revels. Yeats also reports that their singing has the power to bewitch any listener, and if they are provoked to anger they have fairy darts, which can paralyze men or cattle. In dreams, mortals go amongst them."

Maggie nodded thoughtfully. So, it hadn't been just a dream after all! Brian really had visited her while she slept. She lowered her head to hide the blush she felt creeping up her face again, remembering how she'd thrown herself at him. She could still feel the warmth of his hands on her body, his fiery kisses and the way he licked her neck in all the right places. Well, she hadn't known any better then, but now that she did she resolved not to make the same mistake again.

"Is there something wrong with your tea, Maggie?" Cormac interrupted her musings.

"Oh, no, it's just that Dermot and I just had lunch; and well, not to put too fine a point on it, there's something floating in the cup. I'm sorry, I—uh—I don't mean to be rude," she stammered apologetically. The idea of Brian's actually having made love to her in her dream had startled her. She hadn't meant to ridicule Cormac's offering.

"Ah, not at all," Cormac laughed, and his potbelly shook like a little water balloon. "You see, I thought I'd tell your fortune from the tea leaves in your cup. That's what's floating, just tea leaves. Drink up your tea, now, and when you've finished, I'll tell you your future."

"You can do that?"

"Well, anyone can, really, but it's something that's been in my family for generations."

"I don't remember anyone ever telling me about it before," Maggie said with a frown.

"That's because it's not an O'Hara family trait. I get it from my Mam, who was a Grady from County Connacht. Now, drink up your tea, and tell me what else you'd like to know."

"Tell me about Tir na nOg," she said, taking a sip.

Cormac obliged enthusiastically, closing his eyes as he spoke. He

seemed quite knowledgeable, but almost contemptuous of his subject matter.

"Tir na nOg, the Land of Eternal Youth or, as it's usually called, fairyland, is a place or a land distinct from the human world. It is a utopia, a paradise that is full of joy and delights. Honey and wine are abundant, and the days are passed feasting, playing and drinking. Sweet music plays continuously. However, visits to fairyland by mortals involve danger." Cormac opened his eyes and watched Maggie drink her tea. "If they eat anything while they are there, they might never be able to return to their own world. Some of those who do return may lose their reason or may be half-witted the rest of their days. And some that come back from fairyland live for only a short time. In fairyland, time passes much more slowly than in the human world. A few hours there may be days or even weeks here. There is a widespread belief that fairies themselves are immortal—or at least they age very gradually. Human beings who enter fairyland do not usually grow older as long as they stay there, but if they return to their own world they begin aging again or may become old very quickly.

"It is ordinarily inaccessible to mortals, yet it is ever near at hand. The invisible barriers may be, and often are, crossed by mortal men; and the fairies themselves frequently come forth from them. Mortals may win brides of fairies who mysteriously leave them after a while, and women bear glorious children of supernatural fatherhood."

Maggie nodded. *Glorious children*, she thought. *Now that's more like it. I definitely like "glorious" much better than "plain old ordinary."*

"It is always dangerous to enter an area or place that the fairies regard as belonging to them, and they may pinch a trespasser black-and-blue or inflict much more serious harm. At certain times, especially at

Midsummer Eve, the fairies are especially active; and a person intruding upon them runs the risk of being seriously harmed."

"Isn't there any way mortals can protect themselves from the fairies?" Maggie asked. This was especially important, since she wanted to be able to keep Brian at a distance until she figured out how to deal with him. Not that it would do any good, really. If she was half-fairy, as Brian had claimed she was, anything she could use against him would probably be hazardous to her health, too.

"Oh, yes," Cormac nodded with a grin. "People can protect themselves against the fairies by such means as making the sign of the cross or uttering certain incantations. Fairies have a special fear of iron, salt and various religious objects."

Maggie closed her eyes as a lifetime of inexplicable moments became suddenly clear. She never worked in iron, only gold, silver and, occasionally, platinum. Also, she never put salt on her food, preferring its natural sweetness; and come to think of it, her grandparents had kept a crucifix in their bedroom but she had always felt uncomfortable in that room and had never entered it. After her grandparents died, she had called a homeless shelter and had them remove everything from it—furniture, clothing and books—and take it with them. She had often wondered if that room was haunted, but as soon as it had been emptied her discomfort had vanished. As much as she hated to admit it, it seemed that Brian was being truthful about her heritage.

She regarded Cormac speculatively and wondered how he'd react to her next question. She took a deep gulp of her tea and asked nonchalantly, "So, is a Nexus a type of fairy?"

"A Nexus, is it? Well, now, let me think," Cormac furrowed his brow and squinted in concentration. "I seem to recall something about a Nexus

in...ah, now, which book was it?" He hopped off his desk and went to the bookshelf. He traced the titles of various books with his fingers before he finally settled on one.

"There you are, now!" he declared. "Sidheóg, which is the Irish word for fairy. This book is in Irish—what you'd call Gaelic. I'll have to translate it for you."

"If you wouldn't mind," Maggie encouraged.

"Not at all!" Cormac riffled through the pages, easily locating the passage he sought. "Ah, yes, a Nexus is a conduit between the magical realm and the mortal realm. According to this, anyone who touches a Nexus while making a wish will get whatever it is they wish for. But when a Nexus makes a wish the opposite will come true. Ah, typical sidheóg rules of magic. Nothing's ever simple with them."

Cormac looked up from his reading and frowned at Maggie thoughtfully. "Where did you hear about the Nexus, Maggie? It's rather obscure; and in fact, I don't even include it in my curriculum. I don't think more than two other people in the whole of Ireland even know where to find that information."

"My grandparents must have mentioned it," she dismissed. She wasn't prepared to answer any of Cormac's questions, not just yet. "One more question, Cormac, if you don't mind."

"Not at all."

"Do the fairies have any enemies? Anyone who could defeat them?"

"Well, as you recall, I mentioned in the pub the other night that the Milesians defeated them; but of course, the Firbolgs are their ancient enemies. Some people are inclined to believe that the Firbolgs still exist to this day and have sworn eternal vengeance on the Daoine Sidhe for slaying their king."

"King Mac Erc, right? I remember that from Christie's video game."

"Why, yes, I actually helped her with the design of that game," Cormac told her, flushing with pleasure. "All finished with your tea, are you?"

Maggie handed him her cup, which he swirled, dispersing tea leaves around the inside of the cup, and peered into it with great interest.

"Well, now, let's see what the future has in store for our Maggie." He gasped, shot a terrified look at her and dropped the cup. It shattered on the hardwood floor. "It's true? I thought maybe...the other night in the pub...but, really, I wasn't sure..." he whispered, taking a step back. Then he stopped and took a step toward her, smiling speculatively.

Maggie stood up and walked backward toward the door.

"Thanks for all your help, Cormac," she said, grasping the door handle. "I can't tell you how much I appreciate your taking time out from your busy schedule to let me pick your brain."

"Not at all," he assured her. "Wait a minute, Maggie. Don't go—you didn't get your future told."

"From the look on your face, I'd say I know my future pretty well."

"It's just that, well, I've never seen that particular configuration before, although I've heard of it. You're a Nexus, aren't you?"

Maggie stopped in the middle of the doorway. She hesitated, wondering if she could trust Cormac. She needed to trust someone, and after all, he was family. She scanned his face, looking for evil intentions and finding only curiosity mixed with awe. She sighed. "That's what I've been told."

"Who told you?"

"A fairy."

"A fairy, is it? Which fairy?"

"Brian, that singer from the Cauldron."

"The bollix," Cormac grumbled. "I knew there was something about him."

"He says he's a fairy."

Cormac nodded, apparently deep in thought. Maggie waited to see what he would say, but he was silent for several moments, his dark brows clenched.

"Okay, well," she said, heading out the door. "Dermot's waiting for me, and I think I need a drink. So, thanks very much for all your help, and I'll see you later. Okay?"

"Wait," Cormac announced, grabbing his hat and following her out. "I'll come with you. I could use a sip of something myself."

Maggie sighed to herself. She didn't really want to be subjected to what was bound to be a night of unending questions and discussions about fairies; but after all the information he'd given her, she couldn't see a way to refuse him. Besides, she needed someone to confide in, and Cormac knew about fairies.

She didn't quite trust his smile, though; and family or not, she knew she'd have to remain on her guard against touching him. *That's not going to be much of a problem*, she thought.

She remembered Brian insinuating himself between her and Cormac at the pub and smiled a little. Cormac took another step forward, and she shook her finger at him.

"Alright, but let's get one thing straight. Don't touch me," she said. "And don't tell anyone about this Nexus thing. I haven't decided what I'm going to do about it yet, and I'd appreciate it if you could just keep quiet about it. I wouldn't want to have to wish something," she added with a dark look.

Cormac took a step backward. "I wouldn't dream of it, Maggie, love," he assured her.

Maggie turned on her heel, and he followed her out the door and down the hallway to the exit. She walked quickly toward the pub, Cormac nearly running to keep up with her.

CHAPTER 10

That night, Maggie crawled into bed warily. What if Brian visited her dreams again? She had considered sprinkling salt all over the bed then rejected that idea. Salt would hurt her as much as it would him. She really didn't want to take another sleeping pill, either.

She had spent three hours listening to Cormac drone on and on about the fairies, Firbolgs and various Celtic deities who seemed to be quite a warlike, yet imaginative, lot. Her favorite was Cormac's namesake, Cormac MacAirt, a wise man and warrior of Irish legend. MacAirt had a gold cup that shattered when three lies were uttered into it and re-formed when three truths were told into it, and who also possessed a magical branch that protected the sick and wounded. It really was the stuff of fairy tales.

Thinking of fairy tales made her think of Brian. First he told her he wanted her to leave Ireland forever, then he offered to whisk her away to Tir na nOg. Maggie found it difficult to trust someone who obviously couldn't even keep his lies straight.

Just as she'd feared, Cormac had questioned her relentlessly and lectured her on fairy lore until her head throbbed. Fairies loved dairy products, especially milk. She'd always known that, milk being her beverage of choice more often than not. He'd described Queen Maeve, the ruler of Tir na nOg. He'd given her lots of advice on how to evade fairy magic and how to repel a fairy, not that any of it would do her any good.

While Dermot exchanged a long conversation with an old friend at the bar, Maggie had revealed her wish for Brian, and how it had backfired and trapped him in the mortal realm until she were to wish he would stay here forever.

"When are you going to wish that?" Cormac asked her.

"I don't know. Not right yet, anyway. I'm still ticked about that fairy getting my mother knocked up—"

"Knocked up? A fairy woke your mother up in the morning?" Cormac interrupted.

"No, he got her pregnant."

"Pregnant? Ah, of course, Grania was expecting a fairy child. That's why Tevis and Kathleen whisked her off to America, never to return. They must've known what you were."

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Maggie lowered her voice and looked around. No one appeared to be eavesdropping. Most people were engaged in their own conversations. "So, I'm a little ticked that her life got ruined because of them; and frankly, I'm just not all that inclined to wish him anywhere. I mean, if not for the fairies my family wouldn't have splintered, and I wouldn't have grown up all alone. I'd have had an aunt and uncles and cousins, maybe even brothers and sisters. Well," she declared, crossing her arms beneath her breasts, "now that I have them,

I'm not sure I want to give them up. I've even been thinking about moving here permanently. There's nothing in Ohio for me—no boyfriend and no real friends. I kind of like the idea of living here, seeing my family on a regular basis and, eventually, maybe even raising a family here. The fairies deprived me of a lot, and Brian can just cool his heels for awhile until I can figure out what to do."

"You're playing with fire, you are, colleen," Cormac growled. "Fairies are very powerful, and they don't hesitate to use their powers against mortals. They don't like us very much."

"Well, I don't like them very much right now, and I'm one of them. I'm going to have to spend the rest of my vacation trying to keep people from touching me and watching everything I say in case I accidentally wish for something. Brian was right about that, at least. This could be very dangerous."

The thought of accidentally wishing someone hurt or dead, or of someone's touching her and wishing for who-knows-what scared Maggie more than she wanted to admit. Too, there was the threat of someone finding out who and what she really was and using her Nexus powers for his or her own nefarious ends.

"You don't know the half of it," Cormac muttered.

"What's that supposed to mean, Cormac? What are you holding back? I need to know. We're talking about my life here!" Maggie was close to tears, but she took a few deep breaths and a few hefty gulps of Bass ale and pulled herself together. This was not the time to panic. She usually wasn't the panicking type, but she'd had a lot to absorb recently. Finding out she was an omnipotent being took a bit of getting used to.

"Midsummer Eve is three days from today," he mused.

"Yeah, Brian mentioned something about that. So what?"

"The fairies celebrate a bit more this time of year; and naturally, they often steal mortal brides on Midsummer Eve because, well, it's considered a very fertile time, you see. Some of the older folks do quite a bit of harvesting on Midsummer Eve. Especially certain plants associated with magic, because their magic is the strongest then. A fairy child who is conceived on Midsummer Eve and born on May Eve is very strong."

"My birthday is April 30. So, what exactly does this mean?"

Maggie had to wait nearly an hour for her answer. Dermot returned just then, and Cormac excused himself to the restroom.

"Are you enjoying yourself, then, Maggie?" Dermot asked with his customary grin.

She smiled weakly in response and, lifting her glass, answered, "The craic is ninety, Uncle."

Dermot roared with laughter, pounding on the table. "That's right!" he said. "Ah, you're a grand girl, Maggie." He picked up his glass of Guinness and drained the last of his brew. "Another round for me and my American niece!" he shouted to a passing server. Maggie grinned hugely, aware that Dermot's delight at her use of Irish slang was genuine.

It's easy to like the O'Haras, she thought. "Not a bad one in the bunch," her grandmother would have said, and immediately Maggie thought of Cormac. *Well, maybe one weird one*, she thought. Cormac was more brooding and darker in coloring than the rest of the O'Haras. But there was something more. Cormac didn't share the jovial personalities the rest of the family exhibited. He was much more somber and serious. *Must be the Grady in him*, she thought with a shrug.

Finally, after an hour of trading stories and jokes, Dermot spotted another friend who had just entered the pub and excused himself to the bar for a few minutes. Maggie had learned a few Irish minutes were

equivalent to approximately one-half of an American hour. She immediately leveled her gaze at Cormac.

"Okay, Cormac, so what does Midsummer Eve have to do with me?"

"Let me try to explain this. You see, you've been granting fairly easy wishes. A few bob on a horse, a Cindy doll, even changing someone's mind is not that great a feat of magic. But there are wishes out there, Maggie, strong wishes that would require a great deal of magic—the kind of magic that is only present during Midsummer Eve. There are even wishes that could destroy the magic altogether or obliterate mankind, the kind that you'd not be able to grant during Midwinter. I'm not sure how much would be possible on Midsummer Eve. You could potentially grant a wish for the end of the world."

"I don't get it."

"As a Nexus, your powers wax and wane, just as the tide. On Midsummer's Eve, your powers will peak, but then they'll gradually weaken until Midwinter. At that time of year, you probably couldn't grant a wish for snow. After that, the cycle begins again until you reach Midsummer."

"Isn't there some way I can get rid of these powers? Can't Queen Maeve just wave her magic wand and make it all go away? Maybe I should go to Tir na nOg and try to talk to her. I'm not crazy about the idea, but if it's the only way..."

"Talk to the fairy queen?" Cormac scoffed. "You can't make a bargain with a fairy, especially not Queen Maeve. Have you not been listening, colleen? Fairies don't care about mortals, or even half-mortals. If you go to Tir na nOg, I can guarantee you'll never leave."

Maggie traced her finger around the rim of her glass. "So, what you saying is I'm stuck with these stupid powers whether I like it or not. But

that's not fair! I don't want to leave Ireland. Not yet, anyway. Maybe not ever."

"Then perhaps you should go to Tir na nOg," Cormac said. "Let the fairies have their way with you." He snorted and took a long drink of his Guinness.

"Right, and never come out again, even if I am part fairy. I only suggested it as a last resort. There is no way I'm going to fairyland with Brian or anyone else. I might not come out for a hundred years, and then age and die in an instant like in that story you told me. Forget Tir na nOg."

"Well, then, what are you going to do?" Cormac asked.

"I'm not sure. Maybe I'll just come down with a summer cold or something and spend a few days in bed. I could really use a rest anyway. This has all been so terrible and frightening. Look, Midsummer Eve is only a few days away. I can keep this thing under control, I know it. Please don't blow my cover, okay?"

Cormac looked confused for a moment then sighed resignedly, finally figuring out what she meant. "I won't tell anyone. But you must be very careful, Maggie. You don't know the power you have. And you don't know the power this fairy has. Brian is a dangerous adversary, and you're not prepared to deal with a magical being."

"I've been listening to everything you've been saying, don't worry," Maggie said, unconsciously patting his arm. He gasped and pulled away as if her touch had set a fire.

"Do you see, colleen? Do you see how dangerous that was? What if you had said, 'I wish you wouldn't worry?' Then what? I'd be telling you 'It's a grand idea staying here in Ireland. Why don't you just buy a house!'" He rubbed his arm and scolded her in whispered tones.

"Uh, I'm sorry," she stammered. "I forgot. I'm so sorry." She pressed her hands together in an attitude of prayer and stared at them, as if they held the secret to her powers.

"Watch what you say, colleen, and don't touch anyone. You don't know what you're doing, Maggie. You need some help. I can help you. Why don't you put yourself in my capable hands? There's no one else in the world who knows as much as I do about the Daoine Sidhe."

Maggie had shaken her head and sipped her pint quietly after that, and when Dermot jokingly asked if Cormac's lecturing had given her a headache she glared pointedly at Cormac and answered in the affirmative. Dermot walked her toward the bus stop, and Maggie cringed whenever someone bumped into her on the street. Cormac left the pub right behind them and walked in the other direction toward his own bus stop.

Maggie was relieved to finally arrive at Deirdre's house without incident. She was beginning to feel like Bad Luck Schleprock—from the old Flintstones cartoons—the little teenage caveman over whom rested an omnipresent black rain cloud and whose very presence ensured bad fortune to everyone around him. She got through dinner; then, pleading the same headache, she'd downed a Dispirin and gone to bed early, exhausted.

"If I had Cormac MacAirt's magic cup, I'd make Brian sit and talk to it until I got the answers I wanted," Maggie whispered. She snuggled under the covers, and closed her eyes. "Please, Brian, don't visit my dreams tonight. I really need to get some sleep."

She idly thought about making some sort of wish to keep him away, then realized that she'd probably never get the phrasing right. Since the

opposite of what she wished happened, there was no telling what the outcome of a badly phrased wish could be.

* * *

Brian jumped when Maggie address him then realized it was just a general plea, not really directed toward him as he sat watching her, invisible in the corner chair. She couldn't see him, didn't know how.

He'd avoided her since their argument at the zoo; but despite Maggie's desires to the contrary, he had to visit her dreams tonight. He had to convince her she was a danger to the Daoine Sidhe, not to mention all of Erin. He had to convince her to leave, and to make it possible for him to return home.

He sighed with misery. Fairies had no problem lying, either to themselves or others, but he forced himself to admit the truth: he neither wanted Maggie to leave Erin nor to return him home. He wasn't sure when it had happened, but he had fallen in love with her.

He loved the way she smiled shyly, innocently at him, then turned into a raging furnace of desire when he kissed her. He loved her fascination with all things Irish, especially the jewelry of ancient Erin, a period in history he felt had been unequaled throughout all time. Ancient Irish jewelry had a deceptive simplicity about it, a mathematically precise element of design coupled with the whimsy and elegance of Erin herself. He preferred even the Viking invaders to some modern Irishmen, but any time he felt homesick for the old ways he would take himself to the Aran Islands, where people still spoke Gaelic and where they still treated the Daoine Sidhe with respect.

He closed his eyes and entered her dream. He found himself standing in a room he recognized from Clontarf Castle, having spent a great deal of time watching over King Brian Boru, the Ard Ri, not that it

had done any good in the end. The sweet-faced, red-haired little boy who shared his name grew up to unite Erin for the one and only time in its long and bloody history. He dominated the Norse but was later murdered after his battle with the Danes at Clontarf. Brian had berated himself for almost a thousand years for leaving the Ard Ri alone, and that moment of inattentiveness while he chased down a comely colleen and stolen a kiss had cost Brian Boru his life. He must not be distracted during this mission. He owed Brian Boru, and he owed Queen Maeve.

Brian realized Maggie must have visited Clontarf Castle sometime after he had left her alone. He grinned. *Brilliant!* He had spent a lot of time at Clontarf, and he knew she could never evade him here. That is, if she wanted to.

Mortals acted very differently in their dreams than they did in real life. Often, in a dream, a mortal would do what he or she only longed to do in reality, believing they could never be blamed for what they did in a dream. After all, so the mortals thought, dreams weren't real. Maggie had responded to his raw sexuality before, and Brian was sure he could make her respond again. Seduction was a particular skill he had honed like a fine blade over thousands of years. He was determined to bend her will to his—determined to keep his people safe no matter if it cost him his heart or his life.

He scanned the room, and finally found Maggie, lying on the massive bed that dominated the room. She was wearing a white cotton nightgown and nothing else. She slept, her arm thrown over her eyes, her legs sprawled over half the bed, her nightgown bunched around her thighs. Brian's heart wrenched as he felt a suddenly desire to watch her sleep like that forever. *She must be really knackered if she's dreaming that she's sleeping*, he thought with a surge of affection and concern. He

yearned to hold her as she slept in her own bed, stroking her hair and loving her. He shook the feeling off and forced himself to concentrate on the task ahead.

He must convince her to do the right thing. He'd had some success with the seduction scenario, not quite as much with the "tell the truth" scenario, so he decided to return to seduction. He had seduced thousands of young Irish maidens but had only told the truth perhaps a dozen times; and in connection with Maggie, it had turned out very poorly, indeed.

He stretched out on the bed next to her. His forest-green trousers shimmered and disappeared, and he was naked. Maggie's nightgown shimmered and disappeared as well, and her lush body was revealed to him in all its glory. He admired her full breasts, her gently sloping belly and her magnificent thighs. His arousal was instantaneous. He wondered for a moment who was seducing whom.

As he lay next to her, he could smell the scent that was exclusively Maggie. She smelled of sunshine and gold, power and compassion, combined with a musky aroma that shot straight to his groin. He groaned, determined that this time he would have her, and nothing would stop him. He would convince her of his love with kisses.

He stroked her thigh with feathery caresses, and Maggie purred with pleasure. She opened her eyes, slowly slid her arms around his neck and pulled his face down to kiss him. He resisted for a moment. *What about after the seduction?* he wondered. *Can I make Maggie love me as much as I love her?* This thought so jarred him that he pulled back and stared at Maggie. *Oh, Great Queen Maeve, help me,* he thought. *I can feel it. I'm going to tell the truth.*

"Maggie," he stroked her cheek with his fingertips, willing her to

meet his gaze. "Maggie, I love you, I swear by the Wind and Sun, I love you."

"Brian," she whispered, "am I dreaming?"

"Yes, love."

He watched her struggle to wake herself within the dream. "I'm dreaming that I'm sleeping? How weird is that?"

"Aye, that's so," he agreed with a smile. He returned his fingers to her thigh, stroking in circles, higher and higher. He needed to seduce her, but more than that he wanted to love her, to please her.

* * *

"This is Clontarf Castle. I visited it today," Maggie sighed, reveling in the feel of Brian's touch. His fingertips telegraphed impulses directly to her most intimate places, and she unconsciously spread her legs. She pulled his face down to hers and began to kiss him and to return his caresses. She didn't care, suddenly, that he had kept the truth from her. Her desire for him was primal. She couldn't help herself, and she didn't want to. She surrendered to her need, telling herself it was just a dream and that it didn't matter. *I really must be part fairy, if I find it so easy to lie to myself*, she thought with amusement.

"I've visited it a time or two myself," Brian whispered against her neck, where he was gently nipping and licking a path from her earlobe down toward her chin. Maggie gasped with delight as his fingers finally tangled themselves in the curly hair of her nether regions.

"Oh, that feels so good," she whispered, then forgot how to speak as Brian tantalized her toward the peaks of pleasure again and again. He used his fingers, his tongue, and then he rolled on top of her, suckling and kneading her breasts while he rubbed his granite-hard erection against her most sensitive nub. Maggie shook as waves of pure pleasure

washed over her.

* * *

Brian ached to relieve his need with her, but he hesitated. He couldn't just "take" Maggie. He wanted to join with her, for this to be what she wanted, too. The more time he spent with her, the more mortal morality infringed on his being. He rolled off her onto his side, still teasing her nipples with his fingers and thumbs, and kissed her, his tongue searching for a partner with whom to dance.

"Maggie, I want you," he groaned into her mouth. "Please."

Maggie kissed him back, her legs wrapped around his, trying to get closer. Finally, she rolled him onto his back and sat astride him, a little surprised at her own audacity. The dominant position gave her an even greater thrill. She decided to do to Brian what he had been doing to her, to give as good as she got. She licked and sucked and kissed all of his secret places, while Brian thrashed and grunted against his pillow as she had.

Finally, he roared, "Enough!"

Maggie stopped in surprise. Was she doing something wrong?

Brian grasped her wrists and pulled her up. "Maggie," he growled. "I want you. Please."

"Brian," she responded with a hot, wet kiss on his left earlobe. "I want you, too. Please." She took hold of his pike and impaled herself with one swift stroke. She never felt the pain of her maidenhead's breach because it was all a dream. Brian gasped and grabbed her buttocks, thrusting as she rode him for all she was worth. She exploded in one mighty mind-blowing moment, and he followed her over the edge.

CHAPTER 11

They lay together, a tangle of arms and legs, panting with spent passion and exhaustion. Maggie pushed herself up, with Brian still inside her, and sat staring at him.

"Were you telling me the truth, fairy-boy? Do you really love me? Can fairies love?" she asked him wistfully. She began to rotate her hips in a very small circle, caressing his stomach muscles and tickling his silver-blond hairs with her fingertips.

"Aye, colleen, to all three. I swear by the Sun and the Wind, by the Earth and the Sky, I love you now and for all time."

"What does that mean to us? You want me to leave Ireland forever. You can never leave."

"That's not exactly true," Brian closed his eyes. He was growing hard again, responding to the gentle gyrations of her hips. "I can leave Erin while I'm in my mortal form, but I will lose all my powers—and my immortality."

"You'd never do that, would you?" Maggie asked, knowing the

answer. Brian had made it perfectly clear the Daoine Sidhe came first in his life.

"I'd do it if you would, colleen."

Maggie froze. "What are you talking about?"

Brian opened his eyes and stared liquid blue at her. "I want to be with you forever, or as long as forever lasts as a mortal. I love you, Maggie. I'll come back to America with you. But we need to leave soon, before Midsummer Eve."

"Is that what this is all about? Making sure I leave Ireland before Midsummer Eve? And brave Brian the Martyr, willing to give up everything to save fairydom from destruction."

She leaped from the bed and wrapped herself in a shawl that was suddenly and conveniently lying at the foot of the bed. *Dreams are pretty cool*, she thought crazily.

"Fairies only care about themselves, and right now the only thing you care about is what's best for the fairies, right?"

Brian threw his legs over the side of the bed, not attempting to hide his nakedness. His ire was also aroused, and he lashed out.

"What's wrong with that? You care about your people, don't you? Why shouldn't I care about the fairies? My people face destruction every day. Bulldozers level fairy mounds and sweep away fairy trees, and my people are unable to defend and preserve their homes. Nobody ever applies to the fairies for permission and approval when he wishes to build a house. Fairy places are no longer treated with respect. No farmer nowadays would allow some of the milk from his milking machine to run off on the ground as tribute for the fairies, and no farmer's wife puts out a bit of bread." He crossed his arms and scowled at her.

Maggie was speechless. She heard in his words his passionate love

for his people and knew the truth of it. If he could love them, assuming he was capable of love, couldn't he love her? She wanted to believe him.

"You'd really give up your immortality for me?" she asked quietly.

"Not for me, for us," he answered soberly. "I want us to be together, to have children, to grow old and live happily ever after."

"Just like in the fairy tales, huh? But what about my family here in Ireland? Who knows if I'll ever see any of them again. I'm not rich, you know. Trips to Europe cost money."

"We'll find a way. We can visit during Midwinter when the magic is at its lowest. I can get a job."

"Doing what? There aren't many listings for fairies in the want ads."

"I can do what I've been doing in the Cauldron. Singing Irish songs. Your home is called Dublin Township, is it not? Surely there's a pub or two in town where I can get a position as an entertainer."

Maggie thought for a moment. "Well, now that you mention it, you probably could. Is singing one of your magic talents? Are you going to lose your ability to sing when you leave here?"

"Not at all," Brian reassured her with a smile. "All fairies can sing. Sure, aren't you a grand singer yourself? Even in America?"

Maggie couldn't argue with that. She'd been a member of the school choir, and loved to sing while she worked.

She studied Brian's face carefully. She saw hope in his eyes, bare and raw, without duplicity. She thought, *I can't believe I had to come all the way to Ireland to find someone I could love, and he turns out to be a fairy! It's true, I do love him.*

She loved his voice, his sense of humor, his willingness to sacrifice himself for his principles, his sensual energy. No other man had made her feel this way. For once, a man was willing to change who he was to suit

her. She was terrified and completely at peace, flying and free-falling, trusting and utterly exposed.

She knew then that she could not hold him in the mortal realm. No matter what the Daoine Sidhe had done to her mother, she couldn't hold Brian responsible for their sins against her family. Knowing she was one of them, she couldn't allow them to be destroyed without giving herself a chance to get to know them.

The time spent with Cormac had made her realize she had an entire heritage she knew nothing about. Maybe there were some innocent Daoine Sidhe, she reasoned, and they certainly didn't deserve to be hurt.

Brian was absolutely right, she realized. She couldn't hurt innocent people, fairies or otherwise. Her heritage frightened her. She didn't want to be a Nexus. She was terrified someone would find a way to corrupt her powers. But most of all, she couldn't leave Brian trapped in the mortal world. He was a fairy, and he belonged in Tir na nOg. She had to let him go, and she had to leave her beloved Ireland, too.

She stepped toward him and took his hands in hers. "I wish you could never return to Tir na nOg," she said.

Brian vanished in a cloud of sparkling dust, and Maggie awoke with tears in her eyes. "It was the only way," she whispered and sobbed into her pillow until she drifted off to a restless, dreamless sleep.

The next morning she announced her decision to return to America as soon as possible at breakfast.

"What? You must be joking!" Christie cried. "You only just got here!"

"But why, love?" Deirdre asked. "Are you not enjoying yourself here?"

"Oh, no, it's nothing like that," she assured them. "I just have to

tend to my business. There's a problem with one of the suppliers, and I really have to get back sooner than I thought." She smiled gamely and munched her toast. She hated lying to them, but neither could she tell them the truth. Cormac knew, and that was enough.

"I'll find a way to come back, maybe for Christmas sometime," she said. "I'm sorry I have to leave so suddenly, but I promise I'll come back." She waved off their protests with tears in her eyes. "I know, I'm sorry. I have to go. I'm going to pack."

She rushed from the room, more miserable than she'd ever felt before. *I'll definitely be back for Christmas*, she thought, determined. *When my powers on are on the wane, I'll come back and we'll have a great time*. She wiped her eyes on the back of her hand and began to pack.

As Maggie folded clothes and packed her suitcase, Christie popped in to inform her that the earliest flight she could find departed the next morning at eight.

"It's high-season," she explained. "Most of the flights are full, but there were a few cancellations while I was on the phone—that was strange altogether—so I was able to get a reservation for you. Mam's planning a little family get-together for this evening at the house. We all want to say good-bye. In fact, some of us were hoping you might like it enough here to stay awhile longer," she hinted broadly.

She plopped onto the bed and crossed her arms, eyeing Maggie as she organized her toiletries into small plastic bags.

Maggie smiled grimly. Only moments ago she had mumbled, "I wish there wouldn't be a cancellation on a flight to New York in the next twenty-four hours." Since she knew what she was, she saw no harm in using her powers to facilitate her escape from Ireland. She hated the

thought of ruining someone else's travel plans, but it was imperative she leave as soon as she could. Maybe whoever she had bumped would appreciate an extra day in Ireland.

She stopped packing and turned to Christie. "I know. I do love it here. But I really have to get back."

"I hope that great eejit Cormac didn't say anything to upset you. Da said he drilled in your ear for three hours yesterday about the wee folk. He was just coddling you, right? Nobody believes all that anymore."

"No, it's nothing like that. I told you, I just have to get back home right away." She resumed packing.

"Maggie, I thought we were friends."

"We are."

"Then, why don't you tell me the truth. Is it that pub singer? Did you have a row with him? Or was it something Cormac said? Don't mind him, love, he can't help himself, being a great bollix. Or was it something I did?" Christie asked.

"No." Maggie shook her head and kept packing. "It's nothing like that. It's just my business."

"You know, love, we were all kind of hoping you'd stay on a bit, like."

"I know, I was thinking of it myself, but I don't think that's going to be possible now."

"Why not, Maggie? Jesus, Mary and Joseph," Christie swore. Maggie felt a chill and knew it for what it was—her fairy heritage, and another reminder that she could never remain in Ireland.

"I'm sorry, Christie," she cried softly, wiping her eyes with the backs of her hands. "I really am. I wish..." She stopped, suddenly horrified at what she'd been about to say. She covered her mouth with

her hands and gaped at Christie. She could see the hurt and confusion on Christie's face; and even with all her magic powers, she could do nothing to erase the pain.

The atmosphere in the O'Hara household that evening was anything but festive. Maggie was determined that her last hours in Ireland not be funereal. She stood up, raised her glass and declared, "As my grandfather used to say, I've seen better heads on cheap beer. I hereby declare an end to all mourning. Let's sing a song or something."

The O'Haras quickly obliged, naturally preferring to sing rather than weep; and Dermot immediately started to sing "The Town I Loved So Well," while Deirdre sang along. Soon, one song followed another, and sooner still, it was midnight and little Brigid was curling up on the floor to sleep.

"Just leave her," Deirdre cooed, covering her with an afghan. "We'll all sleep here tonight, so there's no drinking and driving. They'll all want to go with you to the airport tomorrow, anyway."

Maggie was exhausted from trying not to touch the gregarious family members, who were equally determined to hug her repeatedly. More than once she had dodged an O'Hara about to utter, "Ah, I wish you'd change your mind, love," or "Don't I wish you could've stayed a little longer?"

"Well, I'll go on up to bed, then," she stretched and yawned, genuinely tired. Christie followed her up the stairs, saying "Liam and Martina are taking my room tonight, so I'll share a bed with you, alright then, Maggie?"

Maggie wondered how to refuse, then realized that no matter what she said Christie's feelings would be hurt. She shrugged and mumbled, "As long as you don't talk in your sleep."

The two women changed into their nightwear, then climbed into the bed.

"Good night and pleasant dreams, Maggie," Christie murmured, falling asleep almost as soon as she laid her head on the pillow.

Maggie closed her eyes. "Night," she whispered, and fell asleep herself, utterly exhausted despite her nervous energy.

* * *

"Maggie." She heard Brian's voice before she saw him. "Maggie, my love. What have you done?"

She turned, and he took her in his arms. She threw her arms around him, kissing his face, his cheeks, his nose, and finally his lips. She felt as though she had come home as he returned her passionate embrace.

"I feel like I haven't seen you in a thousand years," he whispered against her hair.

Maggie returned his embrace hungrily. *Will I always be able to see you in my dreams?* she thought. *Always*, she heard, and knew it was not her own thought.

"Cormac told me that time passed more slowly in Tir na nOg."

"That's true enough, but I still missed you."

"I'm leaving Ireland, Brian," Maggie said, pushing him away a little. He held her at arms' length, refusing to relinquish his hold. "I'm on a flight to New York at eight in the morning. I should be gone a full twenty-four hours before Midsummer Eve. You have nothing to worry about."

"Nothing except the love of my life is leaving me forever."

"I'll be back someday."

"I want to go with you."

"No, you can't. I won't let you give up your immortality. You don't

know what it's like out there. Stay in Tir na nOg, stay with your people. I love you too much to let you sacrifice your powers."

"You love me, do you?" Brian smirked. "Would you do anything for me, then?"

"Of course."

"Then let me come with you to America. I want to be with you always."

"I can't let you do that."

"You can't stop me. I wish I could go to America with you."

The air shimmered, and Maggie gasped as she wrenched herself loose from Brian's embrace. It was too late. The wish had been made, and now it would come true. Tears filled her eyes.

"What have you done?"

Brian swept her up in an embrace and kissed her feverishly. He lifted her nightgown and gently cupped her breasts. "Maggie, my love, I'll never let you go. I'd do anything for your kiss, your touch, your love."

She returned his kisses, her saltwater tears mingling with their lips, their bodies hot and magnetized toward each other. The room sparkled, and suddenly they were back in Clontarf Castle, in the massive bed, naked. They made love all night; and when Maggie awoke, she felt refreshed and joyful.

Maggie awoke early; and without waking Christie, she dressed quickly, dragged her suitcases downstairs and was making tea before anyone else awoke. The O'Hara family was sleeping soundly all over the house, some of them curled up with blankets, quilts and afghans on the floor; Cormac stretched out on the sofa. Raymond and Marie had made a bed of blankets and quilts on the floor beside Brigid.

She quickly unplugged the electric kettle as soon as it began to whistle, but the damage was done. The sound of the kettle's call to tea brought nearly every O'Hara to the kitchen in minutes.

"Ah, you're a grand girl, making the tea on the last day of your holiday," Deirdre announced, bolder sipping the boiling hot tea after adding just a few drops of milk.

"You know, you don't all have to go to the airport with me. I could just call a taxi, or maybe just Christie could take me."

"Nonsense!"

"Divil a bit of it!"

"Get out of that!"

A chorus of O'Hara dissents filled the small kitchen, and Maggie gave up. Over the din of breakfast, Brigid suddenly shouted, "The door! I'll get it!" and she sped off down the hall toward the front door.

"It's probably the log man, though it's a bit early for him," Deirdre said snatching her purse and following her. She returned to the kitchen waving her purse and whispering loudly to Maggie, "It's Brian O'Shea! The pub singer! He wants to have a word with you!" She pushed and shoved O'Haras out of the way, guiding Maggie to the kitchen doorway. "Go on, love, go see what he wants."

She shoved Maggie down the hall and returned to the kitchen to announce this latest development.

"Hi, Brian." Maggie smiled warmly. "I sort of expected to see you this morning."

He brandished his suitcase and a wallet. "Got my immigration papers," he grinned. "I'll be going to America with you."

"Immigration papers?"

"Hmm. Almost like magic, eh?"

"I thought that was just a dream," she whispered, her heart racing wildly out of control.

Brian dropped his suitcase and took her in his arms. "It was, love," he said as he hugged her. "It was a dream come true."

In the end, Deirdre refused to accompany the O'Haras as they escorted Maggie to the airport.

"No," she pleaded, waving the crowd out the door. "I'll just stay here on my own and have a good cry." She'd hugged Maggie tightly, kissed her cheek and warned Brian to take good care of her.

"I'm sorry you're not staying, love, but at least you've got a good strong man to look after you. And next time we see you, please God, we'll have a little one to spoil as well." Maggie couldn't resist one more hug.

"I'll be back, Deirdre, I promise," Maggie cried against her aunt's neck.

"Ah, sure you will," Deirdre replied, stroking Maggie's hair. "We'll all get together at Christmastime. We'll have a lovely time."

"I'll miss you," Maggie whispered, and her voice broke as she murmured, "I love you."

"I love you, too, colleen. Good-bye and God bless," Deirdre kissed her cheek quickly, then rushed back into the house and slammed the door behind her. Maggie shuddered, then resignedly climbed into the backseat of Christie's car and held Brian's hand all the way to the airport.

The O'Haras took up most of the departure lounge, and empty cups littered the tables where they sat drinking tea.

"So, when do you think you'll be able to come back?" Christie asked. "You know we loved having you here."

"Well," Maggie answered, "I can promise you this. The next time

we come back, it will be in the winter time."

"Ah, that's very smart," Cormac agreed, sulking in corner booth. The O'Haras turned in a body at the first words he'd spoken all day, and he sputtered, "It'll be nice to have the two of you here for the holidays, that's what I meant." He crossed his arms and slouched down into his seat, scowling at Maggie and Brian.

"Well, the winters are very mild here," Raymond offered. "And the fares are loads cheaper in January. I'll keep an eye out for a special deal. Sure, we'll be on the phone all the time, won't we?"

"Of course," Maggie agreed, smiling through the tears that were threatening to spill down her cheeks. "And we'll e-mail each other, and, Christie, we'll chat at least once a week, right?"

"Sure, you're right," Christie sniffed. "We'll stay in touch until we see you again."

All at once, their flight number was called and it was time to leave. Maggie hugged each of her new family members in turn. She held Brigid close to her as she whispered her good-byes.

Brigid scrunched her eyes closed, squeezed Maggie's neck and cried out, "I wish you would never leave Ireland!"

The air shimmered around them, and Maggie gasped. She sent a helpless look toward Brian, who returned an equally helpless look. Cormac sat up straight and looked as though he might be sick. The loudspeaker crackled for a brief moment, then a voice announced in both English and Gaelic, "Attention, passengers. We're experiencing some unusual weather changes. A thick fog has begun to settle over Dublin Airport. Visibility is zero. All flights out of Dublin are cancelled until further notice. For further information, contact the reservations counter for your airline. Thank you."

But the reservations counter clerk had no further information.
Maggie's worst fears had abruptly come true.

CHAPTER 12

Deirdre was predictably exhilarated that Maggie had to stay at least one more day, Brian noted with amusement.

"Sure, that gives me one more day to convince you to stay altogether," she exclaimed happily. And although Cormac had initially been unhappy about the idea, he seemed to be taking it all in stride now.

The O'Hara clan went their separate ways, citing work and other responsibilities but giving Maggie lots of hugs, all of which she cut extremely short. Cormac declined a hug, glaring at Brian as though this whole dreadful situation was somehow his entire fault. Brian wondered at the intensity of Cormac's seeming dislike of him but shrugged it off in favor of worrying about Maggie instead. He had to get her alone for a while, try to figure out what they were going to do. All the O'Haras going home fit into his plans wonderfully. He tried to catch Maggie's eye, and she nodded at him. They had to figure a way out of this, and quickly.

They excused themselves to go for a walk, which thrilled Deirdre all the more. She tweaked Brian's cheek, winked at him and chuckled, "Ah, you boyo," as they left the house.

* * *

They walked hand-in-hand down the street toward the Cauldron. Maggie didn't feel completely safe holding Brian's hand after he had tricked her in her dream the night before, wishing he could come to America with her. She wanted to trust him, but who could understand the mind of a fairy? He'd spent thousands of years—a concept she could barely comprehend—interfering in the lives of mortals without a care about them. What could cause this sudden reversal of his attitude?

She wanted to believe it was love, but was it? More than anything, she wanted Brian to love her the way she loved him. Unfortunately, they would have to delay things until they found a way to reverse Brigid's wish. Brian obviously had no intention of reversing his wish, even if he could.

"Now what?" she asked. "Is there some way to cancel the wish? Maybe, wish for the opposite?"

"The ways of magic are arcane. Wishing to cancel a wish, or wishing the opposite, could have ramifications that are unpredictable. Especially this close to Midsummer Eve. We don't dare make a load of casual wishes, love. We'd most likely just end up making things worse."

"So, what are we supposed we do?"

"Ah, love, I wish I knew," he sighed. The air rippled around them, and Maggie withdrew her hand with a furious shriek.

"Don't do that!" she shouted.

"I'm sorry, Maggie, I don't know what I was thinking." He kissed her ear. "It was an accident, sweetheart."

"You've got to stop wishing for things, or else stop touching me," she scolded. She wasn't sure it was an accident. She still hadn't decided whether or not to trust him. This most recent behavior did not bode well

in his favor.

"I couldn't ever stop touching you, love, and by the way, you're forgetting something. I got my wish. I know what to do. I feel a right eejit, I do, for not thinking of it sooner." He grinned at her, tweaked her nose, then grabbed her hand and quickly led her up the street past the Cauldron to his bed and breakfast. When Maggie had unexpectedly banished him to Tir na nOg, he hadn't had time to inform the innkeeper of his departure, which now worked out splendidly.

"I'll tell you when we're inside," he winked, holding open the door. He led the way to his room and firmly closed the door and locked it behind them. He turned to face Maggie and smiled reassuringly.

"So, what's the big secret, fairy-boy?" she asked, returning his smile.

"It's that odd cousin of yours, Cormac," Brian told her, taking her hands in his and kissing her knuckles. "He knows more about my people than even I do, probably more than Queen Maeve herself. We'll ask him how to countermand Brigid's wish. If there's anyone who'll know what to do, it'll be Cormac."

"You couldn't tell me that out on the street?" she teased. She put her arms around his neck, lacing her fingers behind his head. Brian rested his hands on her hips.

"I wanted to get you alone. I've been sharing you with O'Haras all the day, and I want you all to myself now."

"What do you intend to do to me, now that you have me?"

Brian nuzzled her neck just below her ear, kissing and murmuring, "Fulfill a dream."

"Hmm?" Maggie was rapidly losing interest in the conversation. She caressed Brian's back, slowly lowering her hands to his firm backside.

"I've only made love to you in your dreams, and now I want to do it here, in the mortal realm. I want to love you," he whispered. Then he kissed her, forcing her lips open as he claimed her mouth. Maggie ground her pelvis into his obvious arousal, moaning and struggling to remove both their clothes. In a matter of moments, their clothing was discarded and forgotten on the floor; and the pair found their way mindlessly to the bed, where they lay together, forgetting the world and their problems as easily as they had forgotten their clothing. Maggie willingly gave him her most precious gift—the virginity she'd been saving for her one true love, and knew Brian was that one true love. She had to keep believing it was only a matter of time before this dreadful Nexus situation resolved itself and they could be together.

"Well, we can't stay in bed forever," she sighed much later, trailing her fingertips along Brian's spine. She had no idea what time it was, but her stomach growled, informing her it was mealtime. Brian lay prone, half-dozing.

"Why not?" he asked sleepily.

"Because I'm starving, for one," she answered, gently slapping his behind. "Get up, lazy, and feed me."

"Your wish is my command," Brian groaned as he pushed off the bed and sorting through the clothes on the floor, tossing Maggie's onto the bed. He got dressed quickly, and waited while she donned her outfit. "If you take much longer putting that on, I'm going to have to remove it again. You're making me mad with desire just watching you."

Maggie chuckled. "You're feeling kind of frisky for someone whose entire existence is on the brink of disaster."

Brian sobered immediately. "You're right. We have to get to that sour-faced cousin of yours. Where does he live?"

"I don't know, I only met him at his office," Maggie said, tucking her T-shirt into her jeans. "We can ask Deirdre. Meanwhile, I'm starving to death."

She opened the door and stepped out in the hallway—and came face-to-face with Cormac.

Maggie stepped back and squealed. "Cormac! We were just on our way to find you! What are you doing here? How did you find us?"

"There aren't many bed and breakfasts in this neighborhood, and I knew he'd be living near the Cauldron somewhere," he growled. He gave her a shove, and Maggie stumbled backward into the room. Cormac followed her, closed the door and locked it. He didn't miss the rumpled sheets on the bed, nor the look Brian and Maggie exchanged as he took in the entire room in a matter of seconds.

"Well, Daoine Sidhe, you've made a right bollix of things this time, haven't you?" he muttered. He crossed his arms and glared at the couple.

"What do you mean?" Maggie asked. Cormac had startled her in the hallway, and she was feeling a little lightheaded, probably from hunger. It dawned on her he was acting like a jerk, more so than usual, but she ignored his bad behavior. He was probably just as upset as she and Brian were. "Anyway, we were coming to find you, after we get something to eat."

"Is that right?" he sneered. "Have you not looked out the window since you came here to your love nest?"

Maggie and Brian exchanged another look then rushed to the window. Brian pulled back the white lace curtains and gasped.

"Oh, no," Maggie whispered, and covered her mouth with her hand. The fog that had enveloped Dublin Airport had spread to the outskirts and had thickened. She couldn't even see the fish-and-chips shop across the

street.

“‘Oh, no,’ indeed,” Cormac shuddered and plopped down onto the rocking chair in front of the fireplace. “That’s not the worst of it. It’s spread all over Dublin. Because of the fog, public transportation has been shut down, and the Lord Mayor has declared a state of emergency. The entire city is immobilized.”

“Because of me?” Maggie asked fearfully.

“Well, of course, because of you,” Cormac shouted, furious. He pounded the arm of the chair with his fist, glaring at her. “Because you wouldn’t leave Ireland as soon as you realized what you were! Instead, you tried to do it your own way, wouldn’t let me help you, would you? No, you turned to this Daoine Sidhe. Now look what you’ve done.”

“No,” Brian shook his head ruefully. “It’s because of me. I wished I could go to America with Maggie, and then little Brigid wished she would never leave Ireland. It set up a paradox. I knew what the problem was—I just didn’t know how to fix it.”

“A paradox?” Maggie asked.

“When two people wish for opposite things, the wishes don’t cancel each other out.” Cormac enunciated each word carefully, as though speaking to a very small child. “They just both try to fulfill themselves, and that sets up a paradox.”

Maggie’s temper started to boil. She wasn’t stupid, regardless of what Cormac thought. “Well, thank you very much, Answer Man. I know what a paradox is. I watch “Star Trek,” you know. So, what happens now?”

“Well, I suppose the wishes each keep trying to fulfill themselves until the end of the world,” Cormac spat. “Which doesn’t look all that far away, from the looks of things. I’m hearing estimates on the BBC that if it

keeps expanding, the fog will completely cover all of Europe in a matter of days."

"Well, can't we wish for something else? Like, what if we wish none of this had ever happened?" Maggie was desperate to solve this dilemma. She was beginning to wish she had never come to Ireland, but sensibly did not say so. Brian discerned her anguish, and put his arm around her shoulders. She drew strength from his embrace, leaning her head against him.

Cormac leaped to his feet.

"Just watch yourselves, touching like that! Don't be wishing any wishes!" he told her. "You, either, Daoine Sidhe," he shouted, pointing his finger at Brian. Maggie stepped between the two men.

"Just knock it off, guys. Cormac, we really were coming to see you. Brian wished he knew an answer to this problem, and he says you're it," she told him, poking his chest. "So, give. What's the answer?"

"How should I know?" Cormac grumbled. "All of my reference materials are in my office; and at the moment, I can't get to my office."

"Now, that I can fix," Brian exclaimed. He clamped his hand on Cormac's arm; and in a sparkle of light, the trio left the room.

* * *

Queen Maeve paced her throne room restlessly, muttering to herself and shooting desperate looks at anyone who approached her. Suddenly, she stopped pacing as a shimmering column of light formed in front of her. She watched as Brian, Maggie and Cormac materialized in front of her.

"Not to worry, Your Majesty," Brian assured her quickly. "Just passing through."

As suddenly as they had appeared, the shimmering trio

disappeared. Queen Maeve shrieked, and Orla and Conor rushed to her side.

"What is it? What's wrong, Your Majesty?" they asked worriedly. Queen Maeve closed her eyes and rubbed her temples with her fingertips. She was trembling. Conor drew his sword, and Orla hid herself behind him.

"Brian and the Nexus just materialized here in my own throne room with a Firbolg," she moaned. Orla and Conor just stared at her in unabashed horror.

* * *

Cormac had been searching his reference books for hours, and Maggie was getting hungrier by the minute. Brian had offered to conjure up some food, but she was suspicious of eating fairy food, despite his assurances her fairy heritage would protect her from harm. Cormac had a bag of sweets stashed in his desk, but she and Brian had polished them off immediately upon their arrival. Now they were hungry again, and crashing from their sugar high on top of it. Tempers were getting shorter, and the fog was getting thicker.

Maggie looked out the office window to the AIB bank across College Street and couldn't see a thing, even though their lights should have been on at this time of the night. Perhaps they were on. She was hearing more sirens as time wore on, and their mournful wails stretched her nerves even thinner. The trip through Tir na nOg, however brief, hadn't helped either.

As soon as she saw the tall dark-haired woman in the flowing red gown she knew it was Queen Maeve. The astonished expression on the fairy queen's face was comical in retrospect. Maggie knew there was more to that look than simply surprise. As she'd passed through Tir na

nOg, she'd felt a shift in her awareness. Thoughts exploded in her mind that didn't belong to her, but she knew somehow whose thoughts they were. She could feel the sources of the thoughts, and she knew their names.

Orla, Maeve's dearest friend and most trusted advisor, was a slender blonde woman who appeared to be in her early twenties, but who was, in fact, thousands of years old. *Nexus*, she'd thought, and Maggie felt her fear and awe. She felt the one named Conor's cold fury in his thoughts, *Leave Erin! You're not wanted here!* She couldn't reconcile his warlike attitude with his impossible beauty.

There were others, dozens of others. She caught stray thoughts about Brian, too, and realized she knew more about him now, as if a curtain had been lifted and his life put on display for her to see. She saw what he'd seen, felt what he'd felt and knew what he knew. Most of it had disappeared as soon as they left Tir na nOg, but she still retained some of the memories. Her heart ached with his over Brian Boru's death. She grieved with him and shared his guilt.

Maeve's thoughts had reflected amazement, and yet there had been fear, outrage and a strange sense of déjà vu. *Not again*, she'd thought. Maggie didn't believe the queen had been referring to her, but to something else she couldn't quite recall. She remembered Maeve, the magnificent warrior queen of the Daoine Sidhe, very well, however, and now understood Brian's reluctance to confront her. With the morals of a junkyard dog and the temper to match, Queen Maeve was not an adversary Maggie wanted to oppose.

They had materialized in Cormac's office in an instant, and Brian kissed her forehead quickly, murmuring, "That wasn't so bad, now, was it?"

"Just like 'Star Trek,'" Maggie giggled nervously. "'Beam me up, Scotty.'"

Cormac snorted and started pulling texts from his library. "Best get to it," he muttered. "Before the bleeding world ends."

Maggie called Deirdre and Dermot to let them know she was at Cormac's office.

"Now, how in the world did you end up there?"

"We, uh, met up with him at the pub and he invited us out to dinner, but then the fog got really bad, so we just came here because it was closer."

"I see, and where did you have dinner?" Deirdre had pressed.

"Oh, I don't remember, Cormac took us there. He said the food was really good."

"And was it, now? What did you have?"

Maggie closed her eyes, wondering what to tell her aunt. *Oh, I haven't actually eaten because I've been busy making love with Brian, visiting fairyland and trying to save the world from annihilation,* she thought. *Yeah, right, that would work.* "Listen, Deirdre, I have to go. Cormac wants to use the phone." She hung up without waiting for a response.

"Got anything to eat?" she asked Cormac.

Eventually, she decided if she ever found out she had only a year to live she'd want to spend it in Cormac's office. Every minute seemed like an eternity.

"Haven't you found anything yet?" she asked for the thirtieth time.

He shook his head absently, completely absorbed in the thick and dusty tome lying open on his desk. She continued to pace, occasionally

looking out the window, feeling more claustrophobic by the minute. Brian had stretched out in a chair and was dozing.

"Here, now, what's this?" Cormac observed. Maggie stopped pacing long enough to peer over his shoulder at the unfamiliar Celtic script then resumed walking around the small, cluttered office. It was not the first time he had paused in his research, but so far he had come up empty. Brian snored softly. Maggie was a little annoyed he wasn't a nervous wreck, too.

"'Three wishes I'll grant you/Great wishes and small/But if you wish a fourth/You lose them all.' That's very interesting, but it only applies to leprechauns."

"I'm not a leprechaun," Maggie glowered at him. "Look for the Nexus stuff. That's what we need."

"It's not that easy," he pointed out. "The ancient texts are not indexed, you know. There's no table of contents. It takes a bit of patience."

"We don't have time for patience!" she shouted. Cormac looked up at her, surprised at her vehemence. "Sorry, Cormac. I know you're doing your best. I don't mean to pester you. Keep looking."

He stretched his arms above his head. "To tell you the truth, I could use a bit of a break. Are there any sweets left?" She shook her head ruefully. "That's okay. I'm a bit peckish, but I think I can wait until breakfast. What time is it?"

"It's nearly midnight."

"Is that all?" Cormac walked over to the fire and warmed his hands. "That fog brings a terrible chill, doesn't it, now?" He left the fire and casually wandered over to a shelf behind Brian's chair. He lifted a sheepskin vest and draped it across Brian's sleeping form.

"Now, we can have a bit of privacy." He grinned at Maggie, who was suddenly reminded of the big, bad wolf. "You see, I made that vest myself, sewn with my own two hands, with little iron pellets in the lining. Your great Daoine Sidhe hero is as immobilized as the city of Dublin. And now, I have you and your powers all to myself."

"What are you talking about?"

"Ah, so, you weren't really paying during my lectures, were you, now? Don't you remember when I told you about iron restraining fairies? Your Daoine Sidhe is powerless now. Look at him."

Maggie did look, and to her Brian just seemed to be sleeping peacefully. "Brian?" she called. "Wake up, Brian."

He shook himself, then howled, coming fully awake in an instant. He struggled to throw off the fleece, wriggling ineffectually and straining to raise his arms.

"What is this!" he shouted. "Get this off me!" His futile struggles told the truth of Cormac's words. Brian didn't even have the strength to shrug off the sheepskin. He slumped in the chair, drained from his efforts.

Maggie started toward him, but Cormac grabbed her shoulder and spun her around.

"Don't even think about it, colleen," he growled. He twisted her arm up behind her back.

She squirmed and screamed, "Take your hands off me! What do you think you're doing! Get off me!"

Brian still struggled to rise but was effectively hampered by Cormac's ingeniously devised vest. Maggie hoped he could free himself and use his fairy powers to save them. She was half-fairy, but she had no idea how to exercise her magic; and besides, Cormac was hurting her. *What's the opposite of "I wish that vest would disappear?" I wish it would*

stay forever? I wish it wouldn't disappear? Oh, how in the world can I word it? What if I wish the wrong wish? She tried to turn around and remove her arm from Cormac's grip, but he twisted it even harder.

"You still don't get it, do you, Daoine Sidhe?" He laughed at Brian's attempts to escape even as he cruelly applied pressure to Maggie's wrist. "You still don't know who I am, do you?"

Maggie stopped struggling and tried to turn to look at him. "What are you talking about?"

"Well, since he hasn't figured it out yet, I'll tell you," he said. He grinned maliciously at Brian. "You see, the Daoine Sidhe have relied on their magic for so long, they've forgotten how to use their brains. My people haven't forgotten. My people haven't forgotten a thing."

"Your people?" Maggie asked, curious in spite of her predicament.

"Yes, the people of Connacht," he sneered.

Brian's already stormy countenance twisted in fury. "Firbolg!" he roared as he redoubled his efforts to win free from the fleece. He'd wanted to kill Cormac for trapping him; then when the man had grabbed Maggie and hurt her, he'd decided killing him was too good for the bollix, he'd torture him for eternity instead. Now, he still wanted to murder the man, but he'd torture him to death for Maggie's sake.

He cursed himself for not recognizing his ancient enemy. The Firbolgs had been tormenting and attacking fairies for centuries, ever since the Daoine Sidhe had exiled them to Connacht. Their feeble efforts for revenge were no match for the fairies, but they were a nuisance. With the power of the Nexus at their disposal, however, the threat the Daoine Sidhe had feared for millennia was now a reality.

"So, you finally figured it out!" Cormac laughed. "That's right, Daoine Sidhe. Firbolg, through and through. And as it's just turned

midnight, it is officially Midsummer Eve; and as I now have the Nexus, I thought I might begin by making a few simple wishes..."

"No!" Maggie screamed. "Don't!" She squirmed to escape Cormac's grasp, throwing her body sideways and windmilling her arm so that Cormac couldn't maintain his grip. Brian resumed his frantic struggles and the fleece began to slip down, freeing his arms. Maggie shoved Cormac as hard as she could and he fell back against a pile of books. She rushed to Brian's side, grasped the sheepskin vest and with their combined strength, managed to pull it off and drop it onto the floor.

The moment he was free, he stood up and she threw herself into his arms. Brian quickly hugged her to him.

"I can't deal with you here and now as I'd like," he growled. "But rest assured, we will meet again, Firbolg." He pointed a finger at Cormac in the same instant he transported them both to Tir na nOg. The last thing they heard was Cormac's shriek of frustration.

CHAPTER 13

Brian was relieved Queen Maeve was happy enough to see him with the Nexus, she forgave him for the brief encounter she'd suffered with a Firbolg—right in her own throne room, no less. Her countenance was unreadable, but he could sense her thoughts. She was glad to see him and satisfied with the successful completion of his mission. She was greatly displeased the Firbolg had captured not only the Nexus but him, too. She was even more displeased to learn about the fog that even now continued to spread across her demesne. She knew Brian had intended to live a mortal life with the Nexus, but since that wasn't possible, she considered it extraneous information, completely inconsequential, and ignored it.

Maeve was a jealous ruler—greedy and selfish. She'd had many consorts, but ultimately refused to share her power with any of them. Brian knew she would never let them leave Tir na nOg alive, especially with the Firbolg so near.

Fairies were darting about, eager to get a glimpse of the Nexus;

and Brian wrapped her protectively in his embrace. Maggie was growing increasingly anxious, but he felt as helpless against the enthusiasm of his own people as he had been against the iron-laden vest. He could sense them all trying to talk to her at once, and Maggie trying vainly to reply. Her powers were strong, but untrained; and she couldn't block out their voices.

"Enough!" Queen Maeve raised her voice only slightly, but the effect was instantaneous. Everyone froze for a moment, then the room cleared in a dazzling display of light. Only the queen, Brian and Maggie O'Hara were left in the enormous throne room.

The queen stated in a quiet but firm voice. "Come with me." She gently pried Maggie away from Brian. "Let's go somewhere quiet where we can have a chat."

She led Maggie to her private chambers, a lavishly appointed room decorated in diaphanous purple fabric and gold trim, with inlaid gemstones at every angle. The enormous bed frame was actually the root system of a huge oak tree, and they twisted and curled in support of a thick mattress covered with satin pillows. Maggie sat on one side of the fireplace, resting her head on the arm of the massive chair. She closed her eyes for a moment, utterly exhausted, sensing the queen of the fairies had taken a seat across from her.

"So, you're the Nexus," Queen Maeve observed.

"So, you're the queen," Maggie replied. She sat up straight, a terrible thought suddenly occurring to her. "How long have I been here?"

"Just a few hours in fairy time," Queen Maeve assured her. "Not more than a day or so in the mortal realm."

"So, Midsummer Eve is over?"

"That it is."

"And the danger has passed?"

"Some of it. There's still the matter of the paradoxical wishes."

Maggie groaned. "I take it the fog is still covering Dublin?"

"All of Erin now, and a bit of the North Sea."

The constant stress of the last few days finally hit Maggie all at once. She covered her face and began to cry. Queen Maeve squirmed in her chair, a little uncomfortable. She hadn't left Tir na nOg in thousands of years, and it had been that long since she had seen anyone cry. Fairies generally didn't care enough to cry, and the few mortals who found their way to Tir na nOg rarely had a reason to in the Land of Eternal Youth.

She conjured a handkerchief and passed it to Maggie. Maggie continued to sob, apologizing.

"I'm not usually such a wimp, sorry. It's just that so much has happened, and Deirdre and Dermot must be worried sick about me."

"Not at all. Brian sent Orla to give them the message you and he were going away for a few days. They think you've taken rooms at a bed and breakfast in Baggot Street. You're safe for the moment."

"That was really thoughtful of him," Maggie hiccuped. She blew her nose loudly and glanced apologetically at the fairy queen. "Not at all like a fairy. What about Cormac?"

"Not at all like a fairy," Queen Maeve agreed thoughtfully. "And don't you be worrying about that nasty Firbolg. He can't come here, not without fairy help; and there isn't a fairy who would help him."

"Thank you."

"Well, what else is family for, then?" Queen Maeve waved her hand, and suddenly she and Maggie were each holding a cup of tea.

"Family?" Maggie asked, taking a sip. *Nothing like a good cup of scald*, she smiled to herself. *Too bad we don't have any bickies*, she

thought, and a plate filled with chocolate chip cookies appeared on the table beside her.

"Of course, love. Your father was a Daoine Sidhe, and a very good friend of mine. I never knew your mother, of course; but in the way that all fairies know about each other, I was aware of her through your father."

"You said he 'was' a Daoine Sidhe," Maggie prompted.

"Yes, that's right."

"Isn't he a one anymore?"

"Not exactly, love. He was killed a few years ago in a skirmish with the Firbolg."

"I would have liked to have met him," Maggie sighed. "You know, it was because of him my grandparents had to leave Ireland. They must have known the truth about my mother. It's the only explanation." She picked up a cookie and stared at it, wondering if it was safe to eat it. Her hunger decided for her, and she took a cautious bite. It was delicious. She sighed and ate two of them, washing them down with gulps of tea.

"That's true," Queen Maeve agreed. "They did know. In fact, your grandfather attacked Devin—your father. He threw salt all over him and drove him from your mother's bedroom." She chuckled, the frightening memory turned bittersweet after so many years. "You should have seen him, dancing about, squawking like a chicken, trying to get the salt off of himself, and no one would help him, sure they wouldn't. No one wanted to get it on themselves, you see."

Maggie smiled in spite of herself. She could see the image in her mind. He was tall, even for a Daoine Sidhe. His eyes were silver-green. His silvery-blond hair was tied back with a ribbon of silver, and he was dressed in shimmering pale green. She wondered if she had conjured the

image herself or—in the way the fairies seemed to have—if Queen Maeve had projected it to her.

“What was my father like?” she asked. She was abruptly reminded of the family reunions she had seen on television—on “Oprah” and “Unsolved Mysteries.” *This is more like “Montel,”* she thought. *“Psychic Sylvia Browne reunites a fairy family—live on Montel!”*

She noticed Queen Maeve smiling at her and wondered, *Can she sense what I’m thinking?* In her mind, she heard a tinkling laugh, *Of course, love! Didn’t I just show you your father?*

Maggie stared open-mouthed at the fairy queen.

“Close your mouth, colleen, you look like a codfish,” the queen smiled. “Now, your father, is it? Well, he was as mischievous as the next fairy, I suppose. I do remember one time he tricked this young fellow, oh, five or six hundred years ago, it was.

“Devin had gone into the forest to practice his harp, you see. A lovely golden harp, it was. This young fellow was cutting down trees, nasty little poltroon, and hauling them away. Anyway, he heard the fairy music and used an iron chain to capture poor Devin. Devin offered to lead this fellow to some gold if only he’d release him. Standard Daoine Sidhe agreement, naturally.”

“Naturally,” Maggie couldn’t help saying.

“Naturally. And, naturally, the fellow agrees, being the greedy little beggar that he is, and Devin takes him traipsing hither and yon about the forest, finally coming to this tree and telling the fellow to dig beneath it and he’ll get all the gold he desires. Well, this mortal is no fool, you see, and he takes off his kerchief and ties it to one of the branches. Then, he makes Devin promise not to remove the kerchief whilst he dashes off to fetch a spade. Devin promises, of course—he has to—and the fellow

releases Devin, who promptly returns home to Tir na nOg. Well, when the young eejit returned with a spade, what do you suppose he found?"

Maggie shook her head.

"Devin had tied an identical kerchief to every tree in the thirty acres surrounding the tree," Queen Maeve revealed with a mischievous grin. "I almost felt sorry for that mortal."

Maggie couldn't help but laugh. She could picture the poor mortal, leaning on his spade, scratching his head, looking at all those kerchiefs. She knew Maeve was projecting the image, and she was grateful to her. Only through a fairy could she get such a real glimpse of her father. *Even Sylvia Browne can't do that*, she thought.

Who is Sylvia Browne? she heard Queen Maeve ask.

"Never mind," Maggie shook her head. She set her empty teacup on the table next to her. "I guess I hadn't really considered that the Daoine Sidhe are my family, too. I mean, I'm half-fairy and half-O'Hara. I'll have to get used to that. But this Nexus thing, how am I supposed to live like this? I'm cringing when people touch me, watching every little thing I say. I don't know what to do. I mean, does this thing still work here in fairyland?"

"Yes, of course, but we've seen more than one Nexus in the past few millennia, and we know what we're dealing with. The wishes must be spoken aloud, and here in Tir na nOg, we simply project our thoughts. It's much more efficient. The mortals haven't seen a Nexus in generations. And the Firbolgs, well, we've got to keep you away from them at all costs."

"What exactly are 'all costs,'" Maggie asked suspiciously, "Are you suggesting I stay here in Tir na nOg forever? Because that's not going to happen."

"Well, we can talk about it later." Queen Maeve waved her hand, and the two empty teacups disappeared, along with the cookies. "Now, what are we going to do about these wishes? On the one hand, Brian has wished he could go to America with you; and on the other hand, young Brigid O'Hara has wished you would never leave Erin. The two wishes have created a paradox, you know."

"And there's no way to countermand or take back either wish, is there?"

"Not exactly. But the situation is not completely hopeless, either."

"I don't understand."

"Well, to be perfectly honest, it's all a matter of interpretation. You see, Brian wished he could go to America with you. Brigid wished you would never leave Erin. You see, Maggie, you're the Nexus—the crossroads of magic. It's your indecision that's causing the paradox fog. On the one hand, you wish Brian would go to America with you, but you also wish you could stay in Erin forever."

"I still don't get it," Maggie sniffed.

"Ah, yes, you do. You just haven't figured it out yet," Queen Maeve assured her. She waved her hand in the air, and a shimmering fairy girl appeared. "Take the Nexus to her chamber, and send for Brian."

The fairy nodded, and she and Maggie disappeared in a column of sparkling light. Maggie reappeared in a luxurious white-and-silver bedroom—not as lavish as the queen's, but still as fine as any room she had ever seen. A huge silver bed surrounded by a shimmering bed curtain dominated the room. A sofa and two armchairs faced the fireplace and on the opposite wall was a window showcasing a vast meadow of grass and wildflowers. She could smell the flowers and feel the gentle touch of the breeze. Her fairy escort was nowhere to be seen.

"I'm starting to feel like Dorothy, and this definitely isn't Kansas. More like the Star Trek universe, with all this transporting here and there. It's just as weird, anyhow." The ornate silver bed in the middle of the room captured her attention. She was tired—too tired to think, too tired to worry, too tired for anything. She settled on the bed, drew the covers to her chin, curled up into a little ball and almost immediately fell into a deep, exhausted slumber.

* * *

"Ah, there's our Brian. You boyo, still up to your old tricks, are you?" Queen Maeve asked, chuckling.

"What tricks are you talking about, Your Majesty? I did carry out my mission, after all, did I not? I got her here before Midsummer Eve; and don't be forgetting, I did rescue her from the Firbolg as well."

Queen Maeve nodded. "More like she rescued you. And let's not forget how you managed to cover my entire realm with fog as thick as your head."

"Well, that was an accident. It wasn't entirely my fault."

"No, not entirely, but mostly, I'd wager," the queen retorted. She clucked at Brian. "You wishing you could go to America. What were you thinking, Brian?"

"I was thinking that I'm in love with the colleen."

"Nonsense. Fairies don't fall in love."

"Well, then, maybe I'm not a true fairy."

"You're as true as I am."

"No, I'm not. I never was."

"Ah, sure, you always were a bit odd, with that sense of responsibility you have. What are you saying, lad?"

"I'm saying I want to be with Maggie, now and forever."

"Forever only lasts as long as you're in Tir na nOg."

"Well, as long as forever lasts for a mortal, then."

"That's not very long at all, not at all. Besides, she hasn't made up her mind yet."

"Made up her mind? About what?"

"About you, about Erin. It's all a matter of interpretation, you see. And she hasn't yet interpreted the wishes. Once she finally realizes she has no choice but to remain here in Erin forever—once she finally decides to stay—the fog will lift. It will only keep her from leaving as long as she desires to leave."

Brian scratched his head. "I don't understand."

"You don't have to. I understand, and that's all that's important. Before long, young Maggie will understand as well."

"Then, what should I do?"

"You must convince Maggie O'Hara to stay here in Tir na nOg."

"But she won't stay here! By the Rain and the Sun, she could destroy all of Erin, all of the world, if she stays here. She knows that, and she's willing to leave forever, if only she could leave."

"She will destroy Erin unless she decides to remain here. The choice has been made for her. The young mortal's wish is irreversible."

"We can't protect her in Erin. That cousin of hers wasn't the only Firbolg there. There are others, you know. Others who would use her to destroy us."

"We can protect her here, in Tir na nOg."

"She won't stay here."

"She will stay." Queen Maeve nodded once, ending the discussion.

Maggie had declared her love for him in her dreams. She had been willing to leave Erin, and he had been willing to go with her, even at the

expense of his own immortality. Would Maggie be as willing to give up her life and consent to spend the rest of her days in Tir na nOg? Queen Maeve could not be opposed—not by Maggie, by Brian, even by all the Daoine Sidhe combined. Maggie would remain in Tir na nOg. Their desires were irrelevant.

“Where is she?” he asked.

Queen Maeve waved her arm, and a vision of Maggie sleeping on the silver bed appeared in the air beside her.

“She’s sleeping, the poor dear, and dreaming about sleeping, of all things. She must be truly knackered if she’s dreaming about sleeping.”

Brian smiled. *Here we go again*, he thought. He left the queen and appeared in Maggie’s bedchamber, stretched out beside her on the bed. He closed his eyes and joined her in her dream.

* * *

Maggie slowly awoke to the sensation of warmth and moistness on her breast. She moaned slightly and turned to find the source of the sensation. She opened her eyes, saw the top of Brian’s head as he suckled and teased her nipple and smiled.

“Brian,” she whispered.

“Maggie, my love,” he whispered. He kissed her lips with a feathery-light touch and stroked her cheek lovingly.

“Am I dreaming?”

“Yes, love.”

“Where are we?”

“We’re in Tir na nOg, sharing the same bed, sharing the same dream.”

“You mean we’re in bed together in reality?”

“If you consider Tir na nOg to be reality, then yes.”

"And we're in the same bed in my dream?"

"Absolutely yes."

"The fog?"

"Still there, I'm afraid."

"How long has it been?"

"A few days, no more."

Maggie sat up in bed, suddenly wide-awake in her dream. "Oh, no, what are we going to do? Queen Maeve tried to explain things to me, but I still don't get it."

"It's a matter of interpretation, so she told me."

"She told me the same thing," Maggie groused. She rubbed her eyes with her fists. Stubbornly, she said, "I still don't get it."

"Brigid wished you would stay in Erin forever, right?"

"Right."

"So, unfortunately, whether you like it or not, you're stuck here. That's just the way it is. You can't ever leave Erin."

"What, not ever? You're kidding. Tell me you're kidding."

Brian sat up, holding her hand. He stroked the back and softly told her, "I'm not coddling you, love. It's all true."

"So, what do I do?"

"Stay here."

"I can't stay here. Remember Cormac? What if somebody else figures out who and what I am and tries the same thing? What if Cormac tries it again? I can't spend the rest of my life not touching anyone, not making wishes, and I certainly don't want to live in Tir na nOg forever."

"Maeve will never let you go."

Maggie shook her head. "I'd never be able to contact my family again. Like when I lived with my grandparents. I can't go back to that,

Brian. I love my family, and I refuse to go back to being lonely again."

* * *

"Well, then, what do you suggest yourself?" he snapped. He didn't see why this was such a difficult decision. She couldn't leave, therefore she should just decide to stay and get this nonsense over with. "You can't leave Erin without destroying it, yet you won't stay in Tir na nOg where you'll be safe. Face facts, Maggie, you can't ever go back to America. Tell me, what's in America you're so anxious to return to, anyway? Hmm? An empty house? A jewelry business you'd be better off running from Erin anyway? The O'Haras aren't the only family you have, love. We're your family, too, and we only want what's best for you."

Maggie quietly digested his words, chewing on the truth of them. She really didn't have any reason to return to America. Her career would undoubtedly be more successful here; she could easily get a barrow on Henry Street to sell her replicas of ancient Irish jewelry or sell to some of the jewelry stores and tourist shops all along O'Connell Street and in St. Stephen's Green. And she could still sell her jewelry on the Internet. There was certainly a market for her wares.

And it was true about her family, as well. In the short time she had stayed with them, with the singular exception of Cormac, she had grown extremely close to the O'Haras and found in them the remedy to her loneliness. Deirdre and Dermot had become surrogate parents, and Christie and Brigid, little sisters. She adored her aunts and uncles and her cousins, the Irish Hunk Twins. And, of course, there was Brian.

"Alright, so I'm stuck here. I don't want to destroy all of Ireland, so I'll stay."

Brian whooped for joy and enfolded Maggie in his arms, hugging and kissing her all over.

She pulled away from him.

"Not so fast, fairy-boy. I'm not staying here in fairyland. So, start thinking. What am I going to do about this Nexus thing? And Cormac? If I'm going to live here, I've got to find some way to protect myself and my family."

"The Daoine Sidhe could train you," he suggested.

"But that would mean I'd have to stay in Tir na nOg; and since time passes more quickly in the mortal realm, my whole family could be dead and buried by the time I know what I'm doing. There must be an answer to this," she asserted, punching a pillow. "And I'm not going to quit until I find it."

"In the meantime, you could use a bit of sleep," Brian smiled, his eyes shining with tenderness. "Rest your head on my shoulder," he instructed, pulling her down to the pillows with him. Maggie breathed in the scent of him—the aroma of rain and sun and primitive male animal—and was utterly distracted from her quest. There would be time enough; and in the meantime, she could use a bit of sleep.

"You're forgetting something," she murmured, tracing the soft, downy auburn hairline that began in the middle of his chest and dove into his skintight jeans. As she touched his zipper, the jeans shimmered and disappeared, leaving no doubt as to where the line of hair led. "I'm already asleep."

CHAPTER 14

When Maggie awoke, Brian was still lying beside her on the bed, a different bed than the one in her dream but the same Brian. She tucked an errant lock of his flaming red hair behind his ear, admiring the sheer beauty of him. His eyes fluttered open, and when he saw her, his face lit up.

"Top of the morning to you," Maggie whispered, her heart filled with love for the fairy man resting beside her.

"And the rest of the day to yourself," he answered. He kissed her cheek, then her nose, then captured her lips. She pressed her body against his, silently willing them closer; and without warning, their clothing shimmered and disappeared and they were both naked.

Maggie gasped. "I thought that only happened in dreams!"

"Tir na nOg is the land of dreams, love."

Their sudden nakedness thrilled her, and she reached down to clasp her fingers around Brian's erection. He moaned and pushed her back on the pillows, trapping her hand between them. He licked her neck, nibbling

on her earlobe, teasing her nipples with his thumbs and fingers.

"I love you, Maggie," he whispered as he took her breast in his mouth, swirling his tongue around the hardened nipple.

Maggie's breath escaped her. She wriggled beneath him, finally managing to position herself so his shaft was poised to enter her. Brian couldn't stop himself—he thrust into her joyously, and Maggie was launched over the moon. Their bodies joined in timeless rhythm, and as Brian lost control they held each other and cried out their love as one.

* * *

"Just a few minutes ago, did you wish we were naked or did I?" Maggie asked suddenly. She had been stroking Brian's hair, holding his head closer to her breast as they enjoyed a few moments of peace and quiet.

"Hmm?"

"Brian, this could be important. Did you wish we were naked or did I?"

"I don't remember. Why is it important?"

"Well, I'm a Nexus because I'm part fairy, right?"

"Yes. I remember your father well."

"Then I should have magical powers?"

"Hmm, yes, some magical powers. Not as much as a full-blooded Daoine Sidhe, naturally."

"Naturally. All right, let's try a little experiment. Right now, I'm thinking—not wishing out loud, mind you, just thinking—we should get dressed and get something to eat." As soon as the words left her mouth, she and Brian were instantly clothed in matching green outfits—he in green trousers and a pale green shirt, and she in a green blouse and matching green skirt, with green satin slippers for her dainty feet. A

sideboard appeared bearing hamburgers, French fries and milkshakes from her favorite fast food place.

"Did I do that?" she exclaimed.

"Well, I'm sure I didn't do it," Brian agreed jovially.

"Then, I do have some magic powers," she mused. "Aside from the Nexus stuff, I mean."

"Naturally."

"Brian, could you teach me how to use my powers? Maybe if I had better control Maeve wouldn't worry about me so much, and she'd let me go back home."

"I thought we resolved all that last night." He frowned.

"No, I meant home to Dublin." Maggie grinned. "I need to start looking for a place to live. We can't stay with Uncle Dermot and Aunt Deirdre forever, you know."

* * *

"Maggie..." Brian started to tell her how futile her plans were. Maeve would never let them leave Tir na nOg. He stopped when he saw the hope shining in her eyes. He sighed and nodded.

"I'll instruct you in the ways of defensive magic, and then you'll be able to defend yourself against any mortal, Firbolg or otherwise."

Maggie hopped off the bed and attacked one of the hamburgers. "So, instruct," she said around a mouthful. "And then let's make like a shepherd and get the flock out of here."

* * *

"Maggie, my love, you're making this much more difficult than it is." Brian sighed.

"I don't get it," she scowled. "I didn't have any problems before. Why can't I get it now?"

He stroked her cheek lightly with the back of his hand. "Because before you weren't thinking about what you were doing. Making magic isn't like making jewelry. You can't force the magic—you can only try to focus it. Just think about what you want then let it happen. Here, try turning yourself invisible again."

Maggie closed her eyes and concentrated.

"No," he objected.

She opened her eyes and cocked her head at him.

"You're still trying to force it. Keep your eyes open, and try not to think about it. Just let it happen."

"Why can't I get this?" Maggie muttered.

"Feel the magic around you," he told her. "Gather it to you, then let it turn you invisible."

All at once, she could see little sparkling lights all around her. If she tried to look directly at them, they disappeared, but she could see hundreds of them in her peripheral vision. She imagined herself as a magic magnet, and the lights moved closer to her.

This room may look empty, but I'm still here—only I'm invisible, she thought, and suddenly, she was.

"That's it!" Brian shouted. "You've got it!"

Maggie imagined herself visible again and threw her arms around his neck.

"I did it!" she cried. "I really did it! I mean, I did it before, but I didn't know how I did it. This time, I knew what I was doing, and I still did it!" She laughed delightedly and kissed his cheek.

"Not bad at all," he agreed. "Now, let's move on. There's still quite a bit for you to learn, and we haven't much time."

"Right, what's next?"

"Shape shifting. It's quite distracting to a mortal."

"I'll buy that," Maggie agreed. "So, how do I do it?"

"It's just the same technique, love. Think about what you'd like to be, gather the magic around you, then change your shape."

"Okay," She rubbed her hands together. "What should I try first?"

"Whatever you'd like. It doesn't matter whether you're big or small—it's the same magic altogether."

"Well, then, how about a rabbit?" Maggie pictured a rabbit in her mind, while at the same time gathering the surrounding magic to her. In an instant, she was looking at the tops of Brian's shoes, and she realized she was a rabbit. Brian picked her up gently and began stroking her soft fur. With a smile, Maggie shifted back to her human form, and suddenly, he was holding the real Maggie in his arms.

She kissed him again and said, "I think I'm beginning to get the hang of this magic stuff."

"You are, indeed." Brian grinned.

* * *

Maggie was no longer worried about leaving Tir na nOg. After several hours of practice under Brian's capable tutelage, she felt capable of handling anyone with her magic powers—even a Firbolg. Besides, Brian would be with her, and she knew now he was one of the most powerful fairies in Tir na nOg.

In the mortal realm, it had been nearly two days since Midsummer Eve, and the fog that suffocated Ireland had dissipated soon after Maggie made her decision to remain on the Emerald Isle. She felt ready for anything and was anxious to see her family again.

"Okay, let's get going," she said as she cast one last look at her silver-and-white room. She would always have fond memories of the

night she and Brian had spent together in fairyland.

"First, we've got to see Queen Maeve. But don't worry," Brian assured her with a smile as he squeezed her shoulder gently. "You've done well in your studies. You might even have a chance of convincing her you can take care of yourself in the mortal world."

"Well, what if she doesn't want us to go? She can't keep us here, Brian, can she?"

"Actually, she can. The truth is, she doesn't want you to leave Tir na nOg."

"Why not? I can take care of myself, you even said so."

"Ah, sure you can. However, you must remember, a Nexus can be a powerful weapon for the fairies as well."

"But surely she must know I'm not safe around the fairies, either. From what I've heard, fairies aren't exactly conscientious types. Any one of them could use me against her. Besides, I would never willingly use my powers for evil. Oh, for heaven's sake, I sound like Superman or something."

"Aye, you do, and in some ways you are like Superman. Queen Maeve is willing to gamble you'll not use your powers against her, no other fairy would oppose her and, someday, she could turn you to her side of the battle."

"What battle?" Maggie grew alarmed.

Brian threw back his head and laughed. "Don't you know, love? You're in Erin! There's always a battle!"

"Impossible."

"But, Your Highness, I can't stay here in Tir na nOg. My life, my family—look, I've agreed not to leave Ireland, isn't that enough?" Maggie

argued. She couldn't understand why the fairy queen was being so completely unreasonable. She refused to even look at Maggie, never mind grant her request.

"No."

Maggie had begged, argued, cajoled, pleaded; and in the end, Queen Maeve gave her permission to spend three days in the mortal realm. That, the monarch reasoned, was long enough for Maggie to get her affairs in order. At the end of that time, she would return to Tir na nOg whether she liked it or not. Brian would accompany her, and the look in his queen's eyes warned him to ensure her safe return or face dire consequences.

Brian and Maggie materialized in the foyer of the Cauldron, having determined through the Tir na nOg grapevine that Deirdre and Dermot, along with Christie and Cormac, were there. They walked into the lounge, and Tommy MacNamara, proprietor of the Cauldron, immediately set upon Brian.

"Where have you been, boyo! Was it trapped in the fog you were, ah, sure it was. Well, it's grand to have you back—get your instrument and let's have a song." Having delivered his message, Tommy turned and walked briskly back to the bar.

"I'd better get to work." Brian smiled and kissed Maggie on the forehead. "I might need this job before we're through."

Maggie watched the graceful sway of his hips as he made his way to the bar, hopped up to sit on it and began to strum his guitar. Suddenly, she felt a pair of arms around her, and she stiffened in alarm.

"Maggie! Are you all right, sure you are, and aren't you standing right here before my eyes," Deirdre shouted, spinning her niece around to face her and hugging her again. "I've been so worried, with the fog and

all. But you're alright, sure you are, and parching from the thirst, no doubt."

She led the way to the family's table, sat next to Maggie on the sofa and ordered Dermot to get her a pint of ale. Cormac glared at Maggie, and she smiled sweetly in return. She was determined to get a little revenge on him, especially after the way he'd treated her and Brian in his office. But he was, after all, family, so she wouldn't be too hard on him.

"You know what I wish, Deirdre?" she began, enjoying the look of sheer terror that lit up Cormac's face. He pushed himself away from the table, hurriedly excusing himself, nearly tripping over a serving lad in his haste to get away from her.

"What's that Maggie, love," Deirdre asked, staring wonderingly after him.

"Oh, nothing," Maggie chuckled. "I just want to make sure you and Dermot and Christie stay here until Brian finishes his set. We have something to tell you."

Christie squealed. "Oh, sure you're not getting married and staying in Dublin like young Brigid wished, sure you're not?"

"I'm not sure what you just said, but I think the answer is yes." Maggie grinned. "But wait and ask me again when Brian comes over. I don't want him to miss the big moment."

Dermot cleared his throat. "Well, now, this calls for a celebration," he boomed, grabbing the wrist of a passing serving girl. "Here, love, we're celebrating an engagement in the family! So, I'd like you to bring us a round of drinks every twenty minutes until somebody passes out, then bring one every thirty minutes. Are you right?"

The girl smiled, nodded and hurried off to fill the order. The O'Haras

toasted each other and sang along with Brian until the end of his set. He hopped off the bar and made his way to the table.

* * *

Dermot clapped him on the back, shook his hand and declared, "So, this will be the latest addition to the great O'Hara clan. You're very welcome, O'Shea. Very welcome, indeed. We could use a good singer in the family."

"Speak for yourself, Dermot." Deirdre slapped him playfully on the shoulder, then took Brian in her arms. "It's grand to have you join our family, Brian O'Shea. You're very welcome. Only if you ever hurt our Maggie you must know we'll kill you," she added with a chuckle. "And Dermot's right after all—we can always use another good singer in the family."

Brian accepted the congratulations with a little trepidation. He hated having to deceive these fine people with regard to his origins and his family, such as it was, but it would be unconscionable for him to reveal his true identity. He would have to be very careful around the O'Haras, at least until he had a good cover story.

Also, aside from a few—well, more than a few—sexual conquests, a couple of self-appointed guardian stints and several pranks, he didn't have much experience dealing with mortals. Mortals had funny ideas about things sometimes; and having been in love only a few days, he was still stumbling through morality. But at least he had Maggie as his tour guide. He knew he could not fail with her on his side.

It was clear from the joy on their faces Maggie hadn't yet mentioned their plans to live with his "family." He knew she still hoped to find a way to live in the mortal world, despite Maeve's determination to keep her in Tir na nOg.

"Did I see Cormac here earlier?" he asked casually, looking at her. He was confident of her abilities to defend herself; but then again, the Firbolgs were crafty devils, and he didn't trust them as far as he could spit. He'd seen Cormac's mad dash for the exit and wondered what Maggie had said to him. He'd recently come to realize the love of his life had a twisted sense of humor and a bit of a temper. It only made him love her more.

"Yes, he had to leave suddenly," Maggie replied with a knowing smile. "Very suddenly."

"I don't know what's got into him lately, but I'm very sorry he missed the good news," Deirdre grinned. "He'll be sorry he missed the celebration as well."

She raised her glass to Maggie and toasted, "Here's to our Maggie, home at last, safe in the arms of St. Patrick, God bless us all."

Maggie and Brian both shivered slightly from the blessing then lifted their glasses in a silent salute.

"Tell me, Brian, what are your plans?" Dermot wiped the creamy foam from his lips and fixed his gaze firmly on the Daoine Sidhe. Deirdre raised her eyebrows questioningly, clearly interested in Brian's answer.

"Well, we're not sure yet," he stammered, looking toward Maggie for support. "It's all happened so fast."

"I know for sure I'm going to stay here in Ireland forever," Maggie grinned, winking at him. "Now that I'm home, I'm never going to leave again."

"And what about your business?" Deirdre asked.

"The Internet is a funny thing, Deirdre," Maggie replied. She sipped her ale and smiled at Brian. "I think I can probably find a moving company online and handle all the arrangements from here. My next-door

neighbor has a key to my place. I know she won't mind supervising—she's really sweet."

"And where will you be living?" Deirdre asked anxiously. "You know, you're always welcome at our house."

"We haven't really decided where we're going to live right now," Maggie answered. "Brian's family is kind of pressuring us to stay with them."

Brian rolled his eyes. Maggie obviously didn't want to lie to her aunt and uncle, but neither could she tell them the truth.

"And where does your family live?" Deirdre shifted her attention to Brian.

"Well..." Brian began, unsure how to answer her.

"They're from all over, really," Maggie rescued him with a warm smile. "We'll be close enough to visit, though, so don't worry."

"I have to get back to work." Brian downed the last of his porter and stood quickly. "Maggie, I'll see you in a bit, love."

He strode toward the bar briskly and picked up his guitar. Let Maggie deal with her family, and somehow, he'd find a way to deal with his. He strummed softly and began to sing "When You Were Sweet Sixteen." At least, for a few minutes, Maggie would have a reprieve from Deirdre and Dermot's interrogation. They'd be too busy singing.

CHAPTER 15

Maggie and Brian materialized at Cormac's office at 3:35 the next afternoon. Maggie had remembered Cormac's last class ended at 3:30, and they wanted to ensure he would be alone in his office. He walked in moments after Maggie and Brian arrived. He spotted them, squealed like a puppy and tried to back out the door, but Brian was too quick for him. He grabbed him roughly by the collar and dragged him into the office, seating him behind his desk, indicating with a nod that Maggie should close the door.

"Alright, professor," Brian growled. "You know what we're here for."

"No, no, I don't know," Cormac insisted. "I'm very sorry about the other day, sincerely. I never meant to hurt anyone. I was only going to wish for riches, I swear it."

"Lying Firbolg," Brian hissed. "You were going to destroy Tir na nOg, weren't you? Don't deny it. I can see it in your eyes."

"Yeah, so I was," Cormac roared, suddenly turning to Maggie and bellowing, "So I was, until you interfered! Why didn't you let me destroy them?" His chubby little body shook with fury.

"Because I'm one of them," Maggie countered calmly. "I'm a fairy, too—half-fairy, anyway. Didn't you know the Nexus has to be part fairy?"

Cormac's eyebrows furrowed, "Of course," he spat furiously. "I'm an authority on fairies, remember?"

Brian rolled his eyes at Maggie. "That's right. You are. Now, tell us what we need to know, professor," he repeated.

"What is it you need to know, exactly?"

Maggie sighed, growing more irritated by the moment. If she didn't know better, she'd think the man was stalling for time.

"Look, Cormac, I'm tired of fooling around here. Tell me how to get rid of these annoying wish-granting powers. Is that clear enough for you? Tell me how to not be a Nexus anymore."

He chuckled darkly. "Now, why would I want to do that? You're the best chance the Firbolg have of getting their revenge on the Daoine Sidhe."

"I won't help you, you must know that. The Daoine Sidhe are my people, too, and I'll never cooperate with the Firbolg against them."

"I don't need your cooperation," Cormac retorted. "I have all the help I need."

The door banged open; and six short, dark, pot-bellied, grim-faced men swarmed into the room and threw a huge net over Maggie and Brian. Maggie howled as the iron pellets woven into the net drained her of her strength, forcing her to the floor. Brian used his remaining energy to pull her to him, shielding her body with his.

The men hooted and cheered, slapping one another on the back and exchanging high fives.

"Well done, lads!" Cormac shouted.

He stood up behind his desk and began to strut around the office,

shaking hands and presenting the new arrivals by name.

"Maggie O'Hara and Brian of the Daoine Sidhe, may I present the Grady clan of Connacht. These are my brothers, Curran and Cullen, twins as you can see, and my cousins, Dugan, Keelan, Larkin, and Niall. I've spent the last two days tracking them down. They've been installed in the office next door all day; and fortunately, these walls are paper-thin. I knew you'd be back, and I knew you'd have to come to good old cousin Cormac for help."

"Please don't do this, Cormac," Maggie pleaded. "We're family."

She'd never been so exhausted in her life. The iron drained her energy, sapped her strength. She could barely turn her head to glare at him.

"Family, are we?" he sneered. "No, I don't think so. These lads here are my family."

He beamed at the men, who nodded in return. They were a sullen group, all dressed in black trousers with sweaters and sports jackets of dark colors. The twins sported caps, and identical tufts of hair fell from beneath the two brims. The family resemblance was obvious, with their dark looks and squat bodies.

Maggie eyed them angrily.

"Let us go!" she shouted, squirming under the net. They laughed at her, punching one another on the arms and mocking her cries.

"You're not giving the orders here, colleen, I am. You and your Daoine Sidhe lover have no powers, now." Cormac turned to his family and smirked evilly. "Well, lads, if you've ever had a wish, now's the time to wish it."

The Gradys surveyed Maggie hungrily, and she shivered from the looks in their eyes. She could hear Brian growling softly.

"Should we wish for the pot of gold?" asked one of the twin brothers.

"No, I think we should wish for health and long life," replied his twin.

"Hold your whist." Cormac waved at them absently. "I'll be making the first wish, and it won't be for a pot of gold, sure it won't."

"What'll you wish for?" one of the cousins asked. Maggie didn't know which one—she'd been a little distracted during the introductions.

"Perhaps I'll wish for the end of the Daoine Sidhe." Cormac smiled.

"You wouldn't," Brian growled. He kicked at the net, but his movements were weak. Maggie knew the iron was affecting him worse than her. Once again, her half-mortal heritage had protected her. *There must be some way out of this*, she thought.

"Ah, now, wouldn't I," argued Cormac. "Sure, I'd be a hero to my people, so I would." He struck a pose and continued, "Cormac O'Hara, the Firbolg who defeated the Daoine Sidhe."

"With our help," reminded one of the twins.

Cormac ignored him.

"Or perhaps I'll wish that the Firbolgs had the Daoine Sidhe powers. That would be fair, sure it would. And I'd have Queen Maeve for a concubine."

His cousins roared with laughter, and Cormac positively beamed from all the attention.

"Do you want to know the really comical part about this whole thing?" he asked. "The answer you were looking for was right in your face the whole time, you silly git. It's pure common sense, if you understand the rules of magic, which, obviously, you do not. All you had to do was get someone else to touch you and wish you weren't the Nexus. Now,

don't you feel incredibly stupid after all?"

The Gradys laughed again, nudging one another with their elbows and clapping one another on the back. Maggie exchanged a look of excitement with Brian. If they ever got out of this they could do an end-run around Maeve and be back at the Cauldron in time for Brian's first set.

Cormac squatted and took her hand through the net. "Maybe that's what I'll wish for, that I'm the Nexus. What do you think of that, Maggie?" he asked her quietly.

Maggie replied by biting his hand. He yelped and fell onto his backside, much to the amusement of his brothers and cousins.

"You'll soon be regretting that, colleen," he growled at her. Maggie turned her head so she could whisper in Brian's ear. He smiled at her and whispered a reply. Suddenly, the pair vanished in a cloud of sparkling dust. The iron-laced netting fell to the floor with a thud, and the jaws of the Grady boys followed suit.

* * *

"That was a brilliant idea, Maggie, getting me to wish us to Tir na nOg," Brian chuckled in between the kisses he bestowed on her. He hugged her close, remembering the fear he'd felt in Cormac's office when he'd been utterly powerless to protect her.

"Well, I just wondered if the power of the Nexus in me could overcome the iron that trapped the fairy in me. Cormac seemed to think it could. I figured it out when he touched me through the net and started to make a wish," Maggie replied modestly. In a burst of inspiration, she had whispered to Brian, "Don't you wish we were safe in Tir na nOg?" and he had whispered back, "Aye, love, I wish we were."

"Well, it was just brilliant, love."

"We have the answer we were looking for, too," Maggie laughed. "All you have to do is touch me and wish I weren't a Nexus, and our troubles will be over."

"I can't let him do that," a voice interjected. Maggie and Brian looked toward the sound of it. Queen Maeve stepped out of the shadows and approached them on silent footsteps. Brian and Maggie quickly leapt to their feet and stood respectfully before her. "If Brian were to wish you weren't a Nexus, we'd lose a powerful weapon. I can't allow that to happen. We need you."

"So, that's what all this is about. You don't care about me personally. All you really care about is me as a weapon you can use." Maggie retorted. "Well, I really don't care what you want, Your Majesty. No offense, but I don't want to be a Nexus anymore. I'm getting out of the wish-granting business for good."

"I'm sorry, I can't allow that." Queen Maeve shook her head regretfully. "We must not tamper with this magic, and we cannot allow you to leave the protection of Tir na nOg. The Firbolg are a greater threat than ever, and now they know who and what you are. Your most recent visit to the mortal realm has proven that. I can't allow you to ever leave Tir na nOg again."

With that, she disappeared in a shower of sparkling light.

Maggie felt the last of her hope disappear as the last of the magic dust settled onto the floor and vanished. She sat down heavily on the bed, sighing loudly.

"Now what?" she muttered miserably. "I'm tired of being a Nexus. I just want to live a normal life again."

Brian joined her on the bed and took her hand in his. "I'm sorry, Maggie. I don't know what to do. I can't go against Queen Maeve."

"Why not?" Maggie asked, suddenly angry with Brian for not defending her. "I realize she's the queen of the fairies and all that, but still, Brian, you asked me to be your wife. Now, are you a man or a mouse?"

"Actually, I could be either," he said with a twinkle in his eye. In a shimmering dust devil, he transformed himself into a mouse. Just as suddenly, he resumed his mortal appearance.

"Not funny," Maggie sulked. "Just tell me this, what would happen if you defied Queen Maeve and wished your wish anyway?"

"I don't know, love," he answered, scratching his head thoughtfully. "I don't believe it's ever been done. I can't recall anyone who has ever defied her majesty, the queen of the fairies. If they have, they've vanished entirely, even in memory."

"I wouldn't want to vanish entirely."

"Nor would I."

"But I don't want to be a Nexus anymore, either."

"Nor would I."

"I wish..." Before she could finish, Brian touched a finger to her lips, silencing her.

"Maggie! Be careful what you're saying."

"Oh, sorry. My mind was wandering, and I forgot."

"You're alright. Tell me, what you were thinking about wishing for, love."

"I was just thinking, not wishing, just thinking about what life would be like if we were both just plain, ordinary mortals living plain, ordinary lives. I mean, it would really be nice, living here with you and being able to keep my family."

"I could keep my job at the pub," Brian suggested, smiling at the

thought. Like all Daoine Sidhe, he loved music and was not surprised to discover he liked singing in front of an audience.

"And I could make jewelry to sell at the tourist shops."

"We could start a family." He gathered her into his arms. "We could start that right now, as a matter of fact."

Maggie had a sudden thought. "Speaking of families, are there any children in Tir na nOg? I don't remember seeing any."

Brian closed his eyes. "There haven't been for centuries. No one here gets any older, but no one's having babies, either. It's because the mortals don't believe in us anymore, love. There used to be millions of us, all over the world. Now there are only a few hundred left, here in Tir na nOg. It won't be long before we're all gone. The mortals are all fascinated with science and technology—cell phones and DVD's and hand-held computers. Pretty soon they won't have a need for magic anymore. When that happens, the Daoine Sidhe will disappear for good and all. You see, love, science and magic are two sides of the same coin. One cannot exist where the other does."

"How sad." Maggie sighed. She rested her head on Brian's chest. "Does that mean we wouldn't be able to have a family if we stayed in Tir na nOg?"

"Maybe. I don't know for sure. Don't worry, Maggie. The mortals will believe in us for another few thousand years at least. And we'll live practically forever."

"This isn't paradise, it's hell," Maggie announced firmly. "We can't stay here."

"Maggie, we can't leave," Brian insisted. "We can't go against the queen."

Maggie ignored his protests, took his hand and concentrated on

transporting them to Brian's room at the bed and breakfast. Nothing happened.

"You see, colleen?" Brian sighed and shook his head in resignation. "She won't ever let us go. We're here to stay."

"No!" Maggie stamped her foot, her temper rising. "I don't care what you say, and I don't care what her Royal Highness Queen Maeve says, either. I've had it with magic and wishes. Brian, I can't live like this. I want to go home. I want to be free to love you and have a family with you. I've agreed to never leave Ireland, why can't she just let us go? What is it with that power-crazed lunatic, anyway? I mean, she's queen of all the fairies, for crying out loud. What else does she want?"

"What did you say, love?" Brian had a sudden notion, and he hastily shielded his thoughts.

Maggie's eyes widened in alarm. "I didn't just wish for something, did I?"

"No, love, but I think you've just found the answer to all our problems." He hugged her and danced her around the room in delight. "Ah, Maggie, love, I could just kiss you."

"Then why don't you?"

"I will," he replied, bending down to do just that.

They made love in the silver bed, and Maggie begged him to tell her what his plan was; but he steadfastly refused to tell her.

"If I tell you," he whispered as he teased her earlobe with his tongue, "then Maeve will know what I'm up to. She can't read my thoughts as easily she can read yours, if I'm careful to block them. Just trust me, love."

It was an extraordinary leap of faith for her, but she knew she had to trust Brian. She had given him her heart, now she had to give him her

faith, too. More than anything, she wanted a man she could trust completely, a man who would never let her down, a man who would always tell her the truth. She thought Brian might be that man, in spite of the fact he was a fairy, a race notorious for their deceptions. She loved Brian. If he said he had a plan, then he had a plan. She had to believe that.

* * *

"I have an idea Queen Maeve might be a bit more receptive now," Brian mentioned casually as they broke their fast with tea and scones. Maggie was delighted with the way the scones seemed to melt on her tongue.

"Why is that?" she murmured as she sipped the scalding hot tea.

"Just a feeling." Brian downed the last of his tea and took her hand. "Let's go and see her, shall we?"

Maggie nodded, wiped her lips with a beautifully embroidered linen napkin—only the best, here in Tir na nOg, it seemed—and willed herself and Brian to wherever the Queen of the Fairies might be.

"Come to try to change my mind, have you, ah, you have," Queen Maeve said as she sat resolutely perched on her throne of gold and gemstones. She plucked absently at a nonexistent dust mote on her black-and-red dress.

"Please, Your Highness," Maggie begged. "There must be some way to resolve this."

"There isn't," Maeve assured them. "And the subject is becoming very tiresome."

"You can't really wish for us to stay here, sure you can't," Brian said sweetly.

"Sure I can, you boyo. I wish you to remain in Tir na nOg forever.

And nothing is going to change my mind..."

Her voice trailed off as she watched in confusion and astonishment as Brian, waving at her gleefully, disappeared with Maggie in a cloud of fairy dust.

* * *

Brian and Maggie rejoiced when they found themselves in front of the Cauldron, hugging and laughing like children who have just heard the school burned down.

"I knew it would work! I just knew it!" Brian crowed. He leaped and danced around on the sidewalk, drawing a few stares from patrons who were leaving the pub.

"What did you do?" Maggie gaped at her surroundings in wonder. "How did we get here? Brian, what the heck is going on?"

"It was all your idea, Maggie, my love." He kissed her fiercely on the lips. "When you called Maeve a 'power-crazed lunatic,' I believe it was, I realized she didn't really trust you, but at least she thought she could control you. Now, the only person Maeve has more control over than you is herself, of course. That's why she would only be satisfied if she were a Nexus. While we were making love, I whispered that I wished Queen Maeve were a Nexus instead of you. So, naturally, when she wished we would stay in Tir na nOg forever..."

"We were banished from Tir na nOg forever!" Maggie finished his sentence in amazement. "Do we still have our powers?"

"Yes, of course." He smiled and nodded. "She only wished us away from Tir na nOg. Sure, she didn't wish us mortal, as well."

With a flourish, he produced a bouquet of red roses interspersed with shamrocks. Maggie took it from him and inhaled deeply of the roses' perfume.

"And I'm not a Nexus anymore?" she asked warily.

"Not a bit of it. Here, I'll prove it." Brian took her hand and intoned, "I wish a purple dragon would fall out of the sky and hit me on the head."

Maggie's gaze followed his skyward where she half-expected to see a purple dragon come tumbling down. Nothing happened, and she returned Brian's grin.

"See? No more Nexus. No more wishes," Brian said.

Maggie squealed with delight and hugged him again. Then, a terrible thought struck her. She stepped back and regarded him thoughtfully.

"Brian, you can never return to Tir na nOg. You're stuck in the mortal realm again, just like you were when I wished my wish."

"I'm not stuck anywhere, love, except at your side for all eternity, which may be a good long time here in the mortal realm, considering our exceptional good health. A hundred years or more, barring an unfortunate accident."

"Are you sure that's what you want?" she asked, smiling nervously.

Brian leaned down and captured her mouth with his, kissing her lips, then her chin, her nose. He nibbled her ear and whispered against her cheek, "Maggie, my love. This is exactly what I would have wished for."

EPILOGUE

The Daoine Sidhe were in an uproar. Queen Maeve's announcement that she, Orla and Conor were to attend Brian's wedding in the mortal world had sent them scurrying about in a panic. How could the Queen of the Fairies even consider leaving Tir na nOg, never mind that she was taking two of the three most powerful fairies with her. Never mind that the third most powerful fairy had already departed Paradise for the mortal world, permanently, it seemed. And himself the very reason Queen Maeve was taking this dangerous, ludicrous holiday to the mortal realm!

Finally, an equitable solution to the Nexus Trouble, as it came to be known, had been found. Queen Maeve was more powerful than ever, seven Firbolgs had been identified—thereby effectively nullifying their clandestine activities—and best of all, a powerful fairy prince was soon to be born. So, why did their queen have to go traipsing off to the human's home for the wedding? Wasn't there anyone who could wish Brian back to Tir na nOg, at least long enough for a wedding?

But, no, the mortals had steadfastly refused to come to Tir na nOg,

and Brian and Maggie had refused to get married without them; so Queen Maeve had graciously volunteered to preside over the nuptials there. Orla volunteered to accompany her, and Conor insisted on coming along for protection. The queen diplomatically did not bother to point out that since Brian had wished her to be a Nexus her power was greater than that of any being on earth.

"Time is moving on," she admonished her entourage. Even though she had instructed them to dress unobtrusively, their inner beauty could not be denied. "Now, Conor..." She spied a sword hanging at the warrior's side. "...we're supposed to be going to a wedding, not a bloody Viking invasion. You're not taking the sword, and that's that."

"But I need my sword!" Conor objected. "I don't like the idea of being caught unarmed in the mortal realm, with you to protect."

"I am confident enough in your skills as a warrior to attend a simple wedding without the benefit of weaponry." She smiled. "Besides, won't I have Orla by my side the whole time?" She clasped Orla's hand in hers and held them up triumphantly. "Sure, didn't she think of sending Brian to the mortal world to deal with the Nexus Trouble, and didn't that turn out just grand altogether?"

"Did it, now?" Conor grumbled. "If you'd have let me slay the wench for a start, we wouldn't be having this discussion, now, would we?"

"Let's just make a move, shall we?" the queen sighed. She winked at Conor, and his sword disappeared. Then, abruptly, the three of them vanished in a swirl of shimmering dust.

Maggie and Brian had decided to tell her family the truth. It went completely against Brian's Daoine Sidhe nature, but Maggie remained firm. She refused to live a lie. Moreover, she felt it was extremely

important to vindicate her mother's memory. They had always believed their beloved sister was crazy, but Maggie's story almost changed their minds. When Brian turned himself invisible right there in Deirdre's parlor, they were almost convinced. Maggie turned herself into a rabbit then shifted back to her own form, and they believed.

"So, Grania was telling the truth all the time," Deirdre murmured. "Poor little thing, and no one believing her."

"That's why Mam and Da left Ireland," Liam speculated. Raymond nodded in agreement. "They must have known the truth."

"So, why did they never tell us?" Deirdre wondered aloud.

"Maybe they were just trying to protect you," Maggie speculated. "The way they tried to protect me."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, it's too bad you gave up that power, love," Dermot remarked with characteristic aplomb. He seemed to be taking the whole story in stride, as though fairies and Firbolgs were common occurrences in his daily routine. "I would have loved to have taken that bookie for a few more quid."

"I knew it!" Brigid shrieked with delight and danced around the room, hugging Maggie around the waist. "You're a fairy princess, just like Cindy! Can you take me to Tir na nOg? Will we see Queen Maeve? Oh, please, will you turn me invisible? Please?"

Maggie hugged her young cousin, then knelt down beside her. "I'm afraid Brian and I can never go to Tir na nOg again. Queen Maeve banished us forever."

"You mean, you can never go home?" Brigid asked Brian. He shook his head, and she frowned.

"Never mind, you boyo," Deirdre patted his cheek. "You've a home here, sure you have."

Christie reacted to Maggie's story with a resigned sigh. "So, now I'll never know if Decker would have really liked my video game. It was all because of you that I got that contract. I suppose I should call him and— oh, Glory be to God, what in the world would I say to the man? 'Sorry, here's your contract back. Thanks very much, but I can't take your money because a fairy wish made you buy my game.' Bollix. He'll think I'm a right eejit."

Cormac's part in the whole misadventure was glossed over slightly. After all, Maggie reasoned, he was family, and no one was really hurt. Now that Queen Maeve knew about him and his clan, they were essentially neutralized. Firbolgs worked best when they worked in secret, and that had become impossible for Cormac now. Still, Queen Maeve wasn't about to offer him an invitation to Tir na nOg any time soon.

Deirdre had clocked him a good one across his ear as Maggie related the incident with the net in Cormac's office; but hours later, after a few drinks and songs, all was forgiven. Cormac couldn't help being Cormac, after all, and family was family.

"We want to get married as soon as possible," Maggie told her aunt. "But we can't get married in a church."

"Sure, you can't," Deirdre replied, "but never mind. We'll have the ceremony in the back garden. Don't worry about a thing. I'll handle everything."

"And don't spare the expense, missus," Brian told her with a wink. "I've got a pot of gold around here somewhere to pay for it all."

Maggie and Brian stood silently before Queen Maeve, their hands clasped as the queen bound them together with a silver thread. No words were spoken, in Daoine Sidhe tradition. Orla remained at the queen's side

throughout the ceremony, unobtrusively resting her hand on the queen's lower back.

Conor was seated next to little Brigid O'Hara, who sat happily clutching her Fairy Princess Cindy doll to her breast and making little cooing noises throughout the ceremony. He tried to glower at her, but her natural charm and obvious excitement captivated him. As Maggie and Brian exchanged a final kiss, everyone stood and cheered, throwing confetti at the radiant couple. Conor even put Brigid onto his shoulders so she could see over the heads of her uncles and aunts.

Maggie danced with all of her uncles and her twin cousins, and was just as happy when Cormac declined to ask her for a spin around the garden. Queen Maeve sat at a small umbrella-shaded table with Deirdre, Orla casually resting her hand on the fairy queen's knee beneath the table. The fickle Irish weather had blessed them all with a sunny, warm day.

"Lovely day for a wedding, altogether," Deirdre observed.

"You're entirely welcome," Queen Maeve answered with a wry grin. Deirdre chuckled a little uncertainly.

"So, tell me this, Your Majesty," Deirdre said, lifting her glass of ale and using it to indicate the assembled party. "What do you think of all this?"

"The wedding, you mean? I thought it was bloody marvelous."

"It wasn't bad. No, I mean this business of mortals and fairies mingling together. I mean, what are the children going to be like?"

"They'll be three-quarters Daoine Sidhe and one-quarter human, of course. Their sons will be princes."

"Princes, is it. Well, that's all right, then. And how many sons would you be talking about, then?"

"Three. And one daughter."

"Well, now. That's just fine, altogether. I'll have lots of little great-nephews and a great-niece to spoil, won't I?"

"Assuming they decide to remain here. Tir na nOg will be their home, as well."

"We'll work something out, I'm sure." Deirdre patted the queen's hand. She indicated Maggie and Brian, sharing a dance and gazing adoringly at one another. "Those two seem to be getting on altogether well."

"Yes, they do. It's been a difficult time, and I'm glad it's over." Queen Maeve sighed heavily. "It's not easy being the queen."

"I know just what you mean, I do, indeed," Deirdre nodded resignedly.

* * *

Conor somehow ended up sitting between David and Alan when Brigid deserted him to investigate the wedding cake. He'd endeavored to find a quiet spot where he could keep his eye on the queen, but they'd sought him out and their natural ebullience was driving him mad.

"So, you're a fairy, then?" David asked with a quick wink at his twin brother. "What's that like, eh?"

"Grand. Just grand," Conor snarled, wishing Queen Maeve had let him bring his sword.

"Like to dance around in the moonlight, do you," Alan asked with a grin and a return wink to his twin. "Flutter about on your little fairy wings, eh?"

Conor scowled at him and made no reply. If not for Queen Maeve's orders, he'd have sliced the little bollix in two, wedding or not.

"Know any good shoemakers, do you?" David slapped his twin on

the back and guffawed. "I've got an old pair of hobnailed boots that need a bit of a fix." Alan joined in the hilarity as Conor fumed silently.

"Say, could you get me a discount on Fairy soap? Or maybe slip me a few fairy cakes? Oh, wait, I know. Tell me, do you know the Tooth Fairy, by any chance?" Alan asked through snorts of laughter.

Conor fixed his steely gaze on them, and his eyes briefly turned fiery red. His silvery hair flared out like a lion's mane, and he gnarled at the twins menacingly.

"I think I'll get myself a bite," David said, quickly rising and heading for the buffet Deirdre had laid out. Alan followed just as quickly, saying, "Yeah, I'm starved with the hunger all of a sudden."

* * *

Maggie was oblivious to her surroundings, her eyes fixed firmly on her husband's handsome face.

"Happy, are you?" Brian asked her softly.

"The happiest," she replied with a grin. "I've got my Prince Charming. Now all I need are a few of those babies you promised me, and I'll have my happily-ever-after, too."

"Well, now, that's a wish I can easily grant."

"I guess we'll have to get started right away, huh?" Maggie asked with a lascivious leer. "Deirdre can't wait to get her hands on our firstborn."

"Well, she'll have to wait at least another eight months."

"What do you mean?" Maggie stopped dancing.

"Do you remember that first night we spent in Tir na nOg?"

"How could I forget?" Maggie smiled, and felt a surge of love for her husband so forceful she forgot to blush.

"Well, that night we conceived our son. He'll be the first child born

to the Daoine Sidhe in nearly four centuries, except you, of course."

"But that was Midsummer's Eve, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Brian replied with a sly grin. "And according to Maeve, our little prince will be born on April 30."

"No," Maggie groaned. "That's my birthday. And it's May Eve, isn't it? Didn't Cormac tell me a child who is conceived on Midsummer's Eve and born on May Eve will have exceptional powers?"

"That's the theory, love." Brian chuckled.

"So, what you're saying is I don't get a happily-ever-after? Instead, I get 'stay tuned for more exciting adventures?' Brian, I think I've had just about all the exciting adventures I can stand."

"Not at all, love." He kissed her forehead. "We're in for the most exciting adventure of them all."