

T.A. CHASE



Ghost
OF A
CHANCE

Loose Id

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Chapter One

The sound of scuffling drew Padraig's attention, and he drifted over to an alley. One slender guy was struggling against two bulkier men. He'd seen enough robberies in his time to know what was happening there. Curiosity drove him closer, even though there wasn't any way he could help the poor sod getting his ass kicked. Sometimes being a ghost sucked.

He couldn't make out much in the shadows cast by what little light the street lamps threw down the alley, but he caught the glint of a knife, and he started to shout out a warning. Too late, Padraig remembered no one could hear him.

Gasping, their victim sank to his knees. Padraig was afraid it wasn't going to end well.

"Shit." One of the assailants whirled on the other. "Why the hell did you do that?"

"I didn't stab him on purpose. You pushed him into me."

"Fuck. It doesn't matter. We need to get out of here before anyone sees us."

He didn't move as the two assailants rushed toward him. They shivered as they passed through him. Padraig had to let them go. Being invisible made it impossible for him to do anything, really. Concern drove him closer to the body on the ground.

Crouching down, he looked at the man dying among the garbage in the alley. Even if Padraig had been human, he wouldn't have been able to save the man. Blood pumped from a

severed artery in the man's stomach and pooled under him. Padraig reached out, knowing he couldn't offer comfort to the victim, but needing to make some effort.

He gasped as his hand touched the warm liquid surrounding the wound. The dying man's eyelids fluttered, and Padraig jerked when those eyes opened and focused on him.

"Are you an angel?"

He shook his head. He'd never been accused of being angelic, even when he was alive, just being scary and creepy. "You can see me?" Padraig glanced over his shoulder, wondering if anyone was going to come help this man.

"Yes. Am I not supposed to?"

He coughed, and Padraig grimaced at the wet sound in the man's lungs.

"No one except crazy people and dogs have been able to see me for ten years." He shrugged. "And now it seems that dying people can see me. I'm Padraig."

"I'm Steven. I'm dying, huh?" The effort to talk strained Steven's voice.

There was no point in lying to the man. "I'm afraid so, Steven. I can't help you, and it doesn't look like anyone else is coming."

A slight lift of Steven's shoulders caused the man to groan. Padraig tried removing his hand from the wound but couldn't. Blood stuck to Padraig's hand like warm glue. He tugged and his hand sank in deeper. It was like he was being sucked into Steven's body.

"Bloody hell," he muttered, wondering what the fuck was going on.

"Do you see a light?" Steven's unfocused gaze went over Padraig's shoulder.

Fighting the urge to look, he grimaced as he slid up to his elbow in the gaping wound. "If I saw a bloody fucking light, I wouldn't be here." He rolled his eyes.

Steven's lips moved, but nothing came out.

Padraig struggled, pulling away as he tried to free himself. What the bloody hell was happening to him? Was he suddenly going to heaven or hell, whichever place the higher

power chose to send him to? It was like sticking his hand in tar. Every time he tried to get free, it sucked him deeper in. There was no way he could get out, and he slipped farther into Steven's body.

His head spun and sparks flared before his eyes. Nausea made his stomach roil. The darkness whirled and swirled. Helpless, he leaned forward and was pulled down. His fingers scrabbled against the damp concrete of the alley, grabbing for something, anything to anchor him to the world.

It was like he'd been caught in an undertow and was being pulled out to sea. He had no way of fighting it and slid farther under the surface. Pressure built along his body like he was being pushed through a sieve.

Pain shot through him as his muscles tore and his bones broke. It was a strange sensation since Pdraig hadn't had a corporeal body for years. He struggled a few minutes longer before exhaustion set in and he gave up fighting. What did it matter what happened to him? Maybe it was a good thing, and he'd be headed to wherever he was meant to be instead of floating around the world.

Right before he lost consciousness completely, he heard Steven say, "Take it. Maybe he can put it to better use than I did."

Pdraig didn't know how many minutes or hours had passed when he blinked and looked up into the night sky. Shit, whatever he was lying on was cold. The damp soaked through his clothes to cause goose bumps on his skin. Rough concrete scratched his palms as he flexed his fingers. Rough concrete? He shouldn't be touching it, and he definitely shouldn't be feeling the chill. God, his chest hurt, and he raised his hand to see why. Shock ripped through him when he felt the weight of his arm as he lifted it.

"Fuck," he swore softly, looking at the hand he held in front of his face.

It was solid, but it didn't look like his hand. The fingers were long and elegant, not blunt and rough like his were after spending six years working on the docks in Belfast. There

were no scars from ropes, and his left middle finger was straight, not crooked. The doctors hadn't set it right after he broke it in a fight outside a local pub.

"What the fuck is going on?"

Sitting up, he glanced down and saw that not only was his hand solid, but his entire body was real instead of transparent. He wore khaki pants and a button-down green dress shirt, not his usual clothing choices. His feet were clad in a pair of leather dress shoes. He looked like a bloody accountant or something.

Pushing to his feet, he weaved, unused to the feel of gravity and the heaviness of living again. His heart raced, and he could almost feel the blood rush through his veins.

Blood. He looked at his shirt, and there was a red stain marring the fabric, but no tears where the knife had gone in. He shot wild looks around, trying to find Steven. Where had the man gone? Shouldn't he still be lying on the ground in a pool of blood?

Padraig took a step and slid a little bit. He'd set his foot down in a dark spot of liquid. There was no way he was going to bend down to see what that liquid was. He knew it would be blood, and then he'd really freak out.

"No freaking out, Padraig Monaghan. There will time enough to worry about what has gone on in the morning. Tonight, I think you should have a drink at O'Toole's, and maybe the past will catch up to you."

He didn't know whose voice was speaking in his head or whether he hallucinated it, but at the moment, a drink sounded like a grand idea. Walking carefully out of the alley, he saw the flash of bright green neon color coming from the far side of the street.

O'TOOLE'S PUB blinked back at him.

He ignored the flicker of unease dancing down his spine, or maybe it was Steven's spine. Maybe he'd finally cracked under the pressure of being a ghost for so long; he was hallucinating he was solid.

Definitely time for a drink.

Chapter Two

He slid onto a stool and waved at the bartender.

“Give me a Jameson, straight.”

The man nodded, poured out the whiskey, then set it on the bar. “That’ll be four dollars.”

Padraig started. He hadn’t even thought about money. Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled out a brown leather wallet. Good quality, his mind registered. He opened it and thumbed past a couple of hundreds, several twenties, before he pulled out a ten-dollar bill. It looked like the would-be muggers would have gotten quite a haul if they hadn’t been frightened off.

After getting the change and leaving a dollar for the bartender, Padraig pulled the drink to him. He reached out to touch the glass with a trembling hand. His fingers slid along the smooth surface. He pressed a fist to his lips and met the other man’s concerned gaze.

“Are you okay?”

He took a breath. *Don’t act weird, no matter how strange this has become.* “I’m fine. Just need something to eat, I think.”

The bartender set a bowl of pretzels down for him. “What do you think about those Celtics?”

“Ummm...”

Who were the Celtics? Padraig racked his brain trying to figure out what the man was talking about.

“Not much of a basketball fan, are you?”

Relief shot through him. The Celtics were an American basketball team based in Boston. He shrugged and chuckled. “Afraid not, man. Football’s more my style.”

“I’m thinking your football is what we call soccer, given your accent. How long have you been in Boston?” The bartender wiped the bar in front of Padraig.

“Just got here.”

It was strange holding a conversation with someone. Padraig hadn’t tried talking to a live person since the disastrous attempt ten years ago. It had been right after he died. His mother was so grief-stricken, he’d wanted to let her know he was okay. He had no bloody idea what he was doing, but he gathered energy, power, or magic, and spoke to her.

Mama had completely freaked out and called a priest to bless the house. That was how Padraig ended up wandering the world instead of haunting the house he’d lived in all his life.

“Not long enough to lose your accent.” Someone hailed the bartender from the other corner. “Better drink up,” he suggested before wandering off to the other end of the bar.

Padraig leaned forward and breathed deep. The earthy scent of whiskey filled his nose, reminding him of home. Fuck. It’d been so long since he smelled anything. It had to be some kind of trick to mess with his mind. Tears welling in his eyes, he drank the shot fast. Slamming the glass down, he heard the thud as it hit the bar.

Good old Irish whiskey, the nectar of the gods for any good boy born on the Emerald Isle. His eyes stung again and he rubbed them, hoping no one noticed him crying. So many things he missed. Things he’d taken for granted when he had a life and a body. Good

whiskey, playing pool, and the touch of someone's hand on his skin. So many plans he'd made and never gotten to carry out.

Hell, his death was unexpected. No one really planned on dying young. Though in Belfast, back when he lived, it had often felt like only a matter of time before violence sought him out. Maybe he'd gone looking for it as well.

Staring into the mirror over the bar, Padraig thought about what he might have left unfinished while studying the face that wasn't his. Tousled blond hair along with a golden tan spoke more of California beaches than the Irish coast. The nose on this face was straight without a hint of the bump his had had from taking a pool cue across the face during a fight. Everything about the face he looked at spoke of breeding and money, except for the eyes. Those were the same grass green he'd seen every day.

In the mirror, at a table behind him, a man moved. He found himself looking at a face he hadn't seen in the long years since he'd been dead, one as familiar to him as his own used to be.

With strawberry blond hair cut shorter than before, and blue eyes hidden behind square black frames, Gareth Reilly looked only slightly older than he had the last time Padraig had seen him outside the McMurphy's Shipping Company warehouse at the docks where he had worked. Padraig had wanted Gareth with a fierce lust but never had the courage to bridge the gap between them.

Without thinking, he stood and started to walk over to Gareth.

"Where are you going?" asked a voice with a thicker Irish accent than Padraig had ever heard someone use.

Padraig stopped and glanced over at the dark-haired man now sitting at the bar next to him. He hadn't noticed the man sit down. He didn't know the man, and was it any of his business where Padraig was going? Irritation rose in Padraig and he opened his mouth to speak, but the man cut him off.

“To be honest, I don’t care where you’re going, but I think tomorrow you’re going to be questioning what has happened, Pdraig.”

He slammed his mouth shut. How had the stranger known his name? He hadn’t told anyone, and a quick glance at the driver’s license in Steven’s wallet told him Steven’s full name was Steven Patrick Burns. So if the man had caught a glimpse of his license, he would have called him Steven, not Pdraig.

“Do I know you?”

“Yes, but I doubt you remember me.” His smile was soft and gentle. “I know you’re really dead and have just recently been returned to solid form.”

Pdraig shivered like the man had danced on his grave. “How did you...?”

The handsome man shook his head. “It doesn’t matter right this minute. Getting a second chance is much more important than figuring out how you became corporeal again.”

He stepped back as the man stood, towering over Pdraig by several inches. Reaching out, he took the card the man held out for him.

“Call me tomorrow and I’ll answer all your questions.” He winked. “Or at least the ones I’m allowed to answer.”

Someone ran into Pdraig from behind, and he turned to snarl at him. The drunk scooted away, muttering about unfriendly people. Turning back, Pdraig discovered that his stranger had disappeared.

He glanced down at the card and saw there was only a number, no name or address. He put it in his pocket, and picking up his second drink, headed over to the table where Gareth sat.

Chapter Three

Gareth sighed as he felt the weight of someone staring at him. His slender build usually led some drunk to either hit on him or pick a fight. He was getting tired of both events.

He'd come to O'Toole's for a birthday drink, not to get in a fight or get picked up. It had been a long day, and his normal easygoing personality was fraying at the edges. He also wasn't looking forward to spending another birthday alone.

The pressure of the staring didn't disappear. He would have to look up and hope the person didn't take it as a challenge or a come-on. Gareth straightened his shoulders and raised his eyes, meeting green eyes so recognizable, his mouth dropped open in shock.

He shut his eyes, sure the dim lighting in the bar affected his sight. Opening them, he realized they might be the same green as Paddy Monaghan's, but this man was older with all-American blond hair and a golden tan.

Gareth dropped his gaze and snorted. Of course, the stranger was older. Paddy died ten years ago at the tender age of twenty-three, the victim of a bar fight gone wrong. The only thing the man approaching had in common with Paddy was the color of his eyes.

Dressed in khakis and a dress shirt, the stranger had wide shoulders and a narrow waist. His blond hair was cut short on the sides and long on top, enough for that tousled just-out-of-bed look.

"This is going to sound horribly cliché, but you look familiar to me." The man's voice was low and held more than a hint of Ireland in its tone.

Gareth rolled his eyes. "You're right. It is horribly clichéd. You're in luck, though. I happen to love clichés." He gestured at the chair next to him. "Please sit down."

Surprised at his boldness, Gareth took a sip of his drink. Any other man who had ever hit on him using a tired old line like that would have seen the back of Gareth's head as he walked away. What was it about this man that made Gareth willing to break his own rules?

"Thank you." The man held out his hand. "I'm Padraig Burns."

Padraig was a common enough Irish name, Gareth guessed, but how common was it to have two men with the same name and the same brilliant green eyes? Something about this Padraig told Gareth he probably never went by Paddy.

"Gareth Reilly." He shook Padraig's hand and enjoyed the shiver of attraction skating over his nerves to pool in his groin.

"How long have you been in Boston, Gareth?" Padraig sprawled in the chair rather clumsily, like he wasn't used to having limbs to put places.

Gareth wasn't always the most graceful, so he ignored Padraig's flopping. "Four years. You haven't been here long, since you still sound like a homegrown son of Éire."

"I've only just arrived in town, but it's been ten years since I left Ireland. I don't have much call to talk to many people, and I've never gotten to the point where I want to lose my accent. It's a part of home for me since I've moved." Padraig ran his finger around the top of his glass.

Frowning, Gareth remembered being at a party and seeing Paddy Monaghan doing the same thing. Maybe because it was St. Patrick's Day or the color of Padraig's eyes or simply

the fact that he felt lonely even after being in Boston for four years. He didn't understand the urge he had to talk to this stranger.

"How does a man who looks like a California beach bum get an Irish accent?" He waved the waitress over and ordered another drink. "Would you like another one?"

"Oh God yes." Padraig sighed. "Jameson, straight."

He laughed at the fervent tone in Padraig's voice. "I take it you haven't had a good Irish whiskey in a while."

"In a decade." A rueful smile crossed Padraig's face. "Haven't had a lot of things in ten years."

"Why is that?"

"Same reason I look like a surfer but speak like a dockworker, I guess. I've been wandering the world, and being invisible doesn't help. It tends to make it difficult to talk to people." Padraig didn't look up when the waitress set their drinks down.

Gareth couldn't stop his laughter from bursting out. "Invisible? Are you serious? There's no way a hot guy like you could ever be invisible."

An intriguing blush dusted Padraig's cheeks, and Gareth had the odd urge to brush his thumb over those high cheekbones.

"Come on. You can't tell me you don't know how totally gorgeous you are."

Padraig shrugged, fingering the glass in front of him. "At times when I look in the mirror, it's like I don't recognize the face staring back at me."

Gareth nodded. "I've had days like that. Why'd you leave Ireland?"

An odd look passed over Padraig's face, like he wasn't sure about telling Gareth the truth.

Okay, so he didn't realize that was going to be quite a personal question. "You don't have to tell me. I'll guess... Got mixed up in the IRA and the Brits tossed you out on your ass." He grimaced. That one might not have been a joke. Gareth knew men that had

happened to. "Here's another one. You stopped liking football and started enjoying cricket. That would certainly revoke your Irish citizenship."

Padraig laughed, and the husky sound rushed down Gareth's spine like the finest aged whiskey.

"No. My life ended there and I needed to find someplace else to be. Been just about everywhere you can go in this world. Ended up here and figured what the hell. It's not a bad place to hang for a while." He peeked up at Gareth through his eyelashes. "Got enough Irish to almost feel like home. Why'd you move here?"

Getting to know someone was tough, Gareth thought. For four years, he'd never wanted to make the effort, yet there was a connection with Padraig he'd never felt with anyone except Paddy before. He took a drink of his Guinness before answering.

"I got to the point where I decided life was too short to live some place I wasn't happy. Don't get me wrong. I love Ireland, but something happened to make me pull up stakes and head somewhere new for a while."

Padraig took a sip and hunched forward, elbows on the table. "You can be an accountant anywhere, I guess. Shouldn't have been too hard to find a place to work here."

Unease shot through Gareth. "How did you know I was an accountant?"

"Ummm...lucky guess." Padraig lifted his hands in a "got me" gesture. "Maybe it's your clothes. I always think of accountants wearing those."

His clothes? Gareth looked down at his plain blue T-shirt, black jeans, and running shoes. Padraig's clothes were more what Gareth thought an accountant would wear.

He wasn't sure he believed Padraig. There was something buried in those grass green eyes, a secret that only Padraig knew, and he wasn't going to spill it to Gareth anytime soon.

Gareth took another sip of his Guinness and asked, "Did you leave anyone behind when your life ended?"

Chapter Four

Did he leave anyone behind when his life ended? Padraig had had ten long years to think about that, and he'd come to the conclusion that no, he hadn't left anyone behind who really missed him. Oh, his mum had been upset and had cried, but to be honest, he'd become more of a trial to her than a good son should have.

He shook his head and stared down at the table. "No one who knew they were important. How about you?"

Gareth smiled. "Geeky accountants like me don't tend to be the first on anyone's to-date list. I'm not outgoing enough to pick anybody up, either."

"Someone as sexy as you should have a line of potential guys you could get off with. There wasn't one person in Belfast you wanted?" As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Padraig cringed inside. It sounded like he was fishing for a compliment. Of course, Gareth didn't know who he really was, so it wouldn't seem desperate if he asked questions like that.

A hint of sadness came into Gareth's eyes, and Padraig wondered at it.

"There was someone I fancied, but that was six years before I came over here."

Padraig's heart skipped a beat and he couldn't believe Gareth was talking about him.

“Ten years is an awful long time to pine for someone. There truly hasn’t been anyone else?”

It was Gareth’s turn to duck his head and hide his face slightly, but Padraig caught a glimpse of the blush painting Gareth’s cheeks in the faint light of the bar.

“I haven’t been celibate, but no one I was willing to tie my wagon to, I guess. And since I got here, I’ve been too busy for a serious relationship, just dated and made some friends. Maybe I’m just too picky to find someone to live with forever.” Gareth drank his ale.

Padraig thought about it for a second. “I don’t think it’s being too picky. If you know what you want and won’t settle for less, it just means you understand your own worth and don’t see the point in wasting time, yours or someone else’s, on something that won’t last.” He winked at Gareth. “Did this other person spoil you for every other guy?” He bit his tongue. “Or other girl. Sorry, I shouldn’t just assume you’re gay.”

Gareth raised his eyebrows at him and shot a glance around the bar. Padraig looked around as well and realized there wasn’t a female in sight. Who would have known O’Toole’s was a gay bar? It wasn’t like he’d had time to scope the area out before he got sucked into Steven’s body.

“Consider the fact that I said that you were gorgeous and hot. I don’t know many straight guys who would say that to another guy.” Gareth chuckled and gestured to a couple sitting at the table next to them. “There aren’t many straight bars that would put up with two guys kissing like that.”

Padraig looked over to Gareth’s left, and his eyes bugged out of his head while his jaw dropped. A couple sat in the corner of the booth next to them. Their arms wrapped around each other, they devoured each other’s lips. They were so intent on each other that they didn’t notice the music or conversation going on around them.

Two men kissing as intently as that pair would have had their asses handed to them in any pub he’d been to in Belfast. Of course, he’d never gone to one of the gay pubs. He might

have known he was gay back then, but he would never have admitted it, especially to the guys he hung out with. If they ever found out, they would have killed him themselves. That had been the main reason why it took him so long before he worked up the courage to actually approach Gareth.

Well, that and the fact that his father probably would have killed him as well. His father had been a hard man, and there had never been much room in his life for anything outside his realm of experience.

Gareth burst out laughing. "Have you never been in a gay bar before?"

"No." Padraig focused on the glass in his hand. "I wasn't out when I lived in Belfast, and once I left, I didn't have time to go anywhere for fun."

"I shouldn't tease you. I've always been out for the most part. I didn't announce it by walking in parades or anything like that, but I didn't lie about it either."

A slow song filled the bar and a few couples floated onto the makeshift dance floor. Padraig stood, and holding out his hand to Gareth, he asked, "Would you like to dance with me?"

Tilting his head, Gareth studied him for a moment or two before standing and taking his hand. A thrill raced from Padraig's hand to his heart and groin. They wound their way through the tables to the dance floor. Padraig kept Gareth's hand in his and wrapped his arm around Gareth's waist, pulling him close. Not too close, though. He didn't want Gareth feeling uncomfortable.

He needn't have worried about that. Gareth played with the curls at the nape of Padraig's neck and didn't protest as Padraig tucked their hands to his chest. They moved in time with the music, slowly maneuvering around the floor. Padraig stroked his fingers along the small of Gareth's back, relishing the way the slender man fit in his arms. With each turn, he eased Gareth closer to him until their bodies were pressed tighter than two sardines in a can. Gareth rested his cheek on Padraig's chest and sighed.

Padraig slid his free hand down to cup Gareth's ass and rubbed their erections together. Would Gareth moan as softly when he was being fucked or would he be loud? Padraig buried his face in Gareth's strawberry blond curls, breathing in the familiar scent of Gareth's soap. Surprising that Gareth still used the same stuff that Padraig remembered from the few times he'd gotten close enough to Gareth.

He ignored the end of the first song and kept his hold on Gareth while the next one started. Gareth didn't seem inclined to stop. Moving slightly, he nuzzled Gareth's ear and nibbled along Gareth's chin.

"Oh," Gareth breathed, letting his head fall back to give Padraig more access to his throat.

"You smell just like I remember," Padraig murmured.

"What?" Gareth tensed.

"You smell better than anyone I remember," he improvised, hoping he covered his tracks. He scraped his teeth over Gareth's jugular, causing the man in his arms to shiver.

"Oh."

Gareth relaxed further into Padraig's arms, and he licked his way up to trace the curve of Gareth's lips.

"Let me in, please." He would beg on his knees if it got Gareth to open for him. He'd waited for so long to actually kiss the man.

With a sigh, Gareth allowed their kiss to deepen. Padraig cradled his ass with both hands and pulled him as tight as he could with their clothes in the way.

Gareth gripped Padraig's shoulders like a sinking man to a life preserver. Padraig swept in and tasted Guinness with an underlying hint of peppermint. He rocked their bodies together as he thrust his tongue into Gareth's moist mouth.

Heat swamped him and pooled in his groin. It had been so long since he'd felt the touch of a real person, and to have that person be Gareth almost overwhelmed him. His head started spinning as his lungs ran out of oxygen.

Stepping back, he broke their kiss and panted. Gareth stood, his eyes closed and a dreamy expression on his face. Padraig ran his finger down Gareth's nose and over his swollen lips.

"I've never had a kiss like that," he admitted.

Gareth opened his eyes and smiled, then captured one of Padraig's fingers with his teeth and sucking on it.

"Shit," Padraig moaned.

The wicked smile Gareth shot him made his cock harden until he ached with need. Gareth set his finger free and took his hand, leading him back to their table.

He watched, tongue-tied, as Gareth threw some money down before they pushed their way through the crowd to the door.

Chapter Five

“Where are we going?”

Gareth stopped so suddenly, Padraig ran into him. Turning, he met Padraig’s questioning gaze and chuckled self-consciously.

“Sorry. I got caught up in everything. Maybe you aren’t interested in going back to my place.” He bit his lip and his cheeks warmed.

“Ummm...if you couldn’t tell by the kiss back there, I am very interested in going home and doing more to you, or with you, than kissing.” Padraig squeezed his hand.

“Then would you like to come back to my apartment with me? Maybe spend the night?” Gareth couldn’t believe he was asking a man he’d just met to come home with him.

Disregarding the crowd of people on the sidewalk, Padraig swept him into his arms. Gareth opened his mouth, let Padraig in as deep as he could, and wrapped his arms around Padraig’s lean, solid body.

“Get a room,” someone shouted as they shoved past.

They broke apart, laughing and gasping. Gareth waved down a cab and they piled in. After giving the driver his address, he settled back in Padraig’s arms. Nuzzling Padraig’s chin,

he breathed in the spicy scent of aftershave with a hint of pure man. He wanted to burrow closer to his body and bask in the heat Padraig gave off.

What was it about Padraig that made Gareth more than willing to break all his own rules? Or was it the prospect of spending yet another birthday alone?

Padraig rested his cheek on the top of Gareth's head and sighed. The contentment and happiness in that exhalation of air made Gareth smile. Could Padraig be feeling the same connection Gareth was, or was that just wishful thinking on his part? He wanted to be more than just a one-night stand, which was why he rarely took anyone home from a bar. He'd done it often when he was younger, but when he couldn't shake the feeling of being used, he'd decided not to take men home anymore. It had been ten years since... He shook himself mentally.

No thinking about Paddy. He was dead and gone, and nothing short of a miracle would bring him back.

"What are you thinking about?" Padraig's question was low.

"Nothing important." He eased back a few inches so he could meet his gaze. "Mostly I was thinking about how nice it was to be held like this."

Damn, did that sound as silly as he thought?

Padraig's eyes warmed. "I hope as nice as it is to hold you. It's been a long time since I've had someone this close to me."

"I still think you're pulling my leg, Padraig. A man as gorgeous as you should have bed partners lined up around the block." Gareth bit his lip. He really needed to stop saying that.

"It's been a long dry spell, babe, but I'm glad you're going to help me break it."

The cab pulled to a stop in front of Gareth's apartment building. They climbed out, and he paid the driver before leading Padraig up the steps. Gareth hurried to his door, more eager now to get inside and taste Padraig's lips again than he'd ever been before with any other guy.

He rushed in, dragged Padraig behind him, and used the man's body to slam his door shut. His hand fisted Padraig's shirt as he pressed his lips to that tempting mouth.

Padraig cupped Gareth's ass and they merged together like they'd been made for each other. Usually with men Padraig's height, Gareth felt insignificant and weak, but the way this particular man held him filled Gareth with security and an odd sense of rightness.

"Would you let me suck you?" he whispered after nibbling on Padraig's chin.

"That's a trick question, right?" Padraig rasped.

Okay, so it was a stupid question, Gareth admitted silently. What guy didn't like blowjobs? He sank to his knees in front of Padraig and reached for his belt. Leaning back against the door, Padraig stared down at him, his heated gaze wandering over Gareth's face like he was cataloging Gareth's features for future reference.

Working the buckle, buttons, and zipper open, he slid his hand in to grasp Padraig's cock. "Hmmm...no underwear. Definitely an adventurous soul."

A strangled sound came from above him, and he looked up to catch an odd expression cross Padraig's face. He tightened his hand, and Padraig's eyes rolled back. Gareth pushed his pants down, helping him step out of them without letting go of the prick in his hand.

"Get your shirt off," he ordered Padraig while eyeing the flared head and the precum leaking from its slit.

Not paying attention to what was happening above him, Gareth leaned in and licked the drop off, pressing his tongue into the slit to get a little more.

"Fuck me," Padraig moaned.

"Oh I will. Once I get you off."

Whimpering, Padraig arched his hips off the door, enticing Gareth to do more than just lick his cock. Gareth placed his hand on Padraig's left hip and pinned the man to the wood.

"No moving until I say you can."

He didn't continue until Pdraig nodded. With a wink, he swallowed Pdraig's shaft down, and the man shouted, his head thumping against the door.

Chapter Six

“Holy Mother of God!” Padraig shouted.

His head was going to explode. Both of his heads actually. The hot moistness of Gareth’s mouth wrapped around his cock drove all the blood in Padraig’s body to his groin, and his shaft throbbed. His hands curled into Gareth’s hair, holding but not forcing anything. Gareth slid up and down, applying more suction as he let Padraig’s shaft slip from his mouth. He kept just the head between his lips and flicked it with his tongue.

“God, your mouth,” Padraig mumbled.

He saw Gareth smile around his prick. Moving his hand, Gareth fondled Padraig’s firm balls, squeezing in time with each downward stroke of his mouth, and teased the soft patch of skin just behind Padraig’s balls, making Padraig jerk.

“Please,” Padraig whispered.

Gareth removed his hand from Padraig’s hip and nodded slightly, letting him know it was okay to move. Taking a tighter grip on Gareth’s head, he started fucking the man’s mouth, pushing in as deep as he could without choking Gareth.

No struggle or gagging let Padraig know that Gareth could take all he had to give. He gave up worrying and started thrusting in and out. His rhythm was shot to hell, but he didn’t

care. All he thought about was finally coming down Gareth's throat after all those nights of fantasizing about it.

"Soon, baby," he warned Gareth as his balls drew tight to his body and the tingling in his spine built.

Gareth reached farther between his legs, tapping his hole, and Padraig cried out, his cum flooding Gareth's mouth. Fuck, it had been so long. Padraig kept coming, spilling every drop he'd stored up over the years.

When he finally relaxed, he let his hands drop, freeing Gareth to stand. He couldn't keep the goofy smile off his face as Gareth climbed to his feet and looked at him.

"I think you melted me." He managed to lift his hand and wipe a small drop of cum off the corner of Gareth's mouth.

Catching his hand, Gareth sucked his finger clean. "That's always good. I'll help you to the bedroom and then I'll make good on my other promise."

Padraig bent a little, taking Gareth's mouth in a hard kiss. Sweeping his tongue in, he tasted himself and his cock twitched. Gareth gripped his shoulders and tilted his head, taking the kiss deeper.

They rocked together, the roughness of Gareth's clothes rubbing over Padraig's skin, building the lust again.

Padraig broke the kiss. "Take me to your bed, baby."

Gareth stepped away, gathered Padraig's clothes from the floor, and held out his hand. Padraig took it, fighting the urge to pinch himself. However he got to this point, he wasn't going to take a chance on waking up or whatever. He didn't want to lose this moment in time when it might be the only one he got.

A pitiful meow came from the kitchen as they passed by. Gareth laughed as a large orange and white cat stalked from the other room.

"Sorry. I need to feed Finn here."

Padraig crouched and held out a hand for the cat to sniff. Scenting him, Finn started purring and rubbing all over his legs. He studied the feline and felt a rush of recognition race through him at the sight of the ragged left ear and scarred face.

“Wow...you must be good with animals. Finn doesn’t like anyone but me.” Gareth rummaged around the cupboards until he pulled out a bag of cat food.

“Where did you get him?”

He looked up when Gareth didn’t answer right away. Sadness gleamed in Gareth’s eyes for a moment before he blinked and met Padraig’s gaze with a slight smile.

“I used to work in a shipping company at the docks in Belfast. A friend of mine had sort of adopted this scrawny kitten, feeding him and making sure he had a warm place to sleep at night. Well, my friend went away and no one else wanted to take care of him. So I took him home with me.”

Padraig bit his lip hard to keep the tears at bay. Gareth had taken Finn in. Padraig had worried about the kitten once he realized that he was dead. The fact that Gareth had taken on the responsibility of his kitten made Padraig love the man even more.

He stood, snagged Gareth around the waist, then pulled him tight to his chest. Their kiss was gentle and slow. It was a promise and a thank-you. He cradled Gareth’s face in his hands and worshipped the man’s mouth. He nibbled on Gareth’s bottom lip.

Padraig shivered as Gareth wrapped his arms around his waist and the roughness of Gareth’s clothes rubbed against his sensitive skin.

“We need you naked,” he murmured, grinding his groin into Gareth’s.

“Okay. Finn’s fed, so we’re good.”

Gareth moved away, keeping ahold of Padraig’s hand and leading him down the hall to where Gareth’s bedroom had to be. Padraig wanted to pinch himself, but he was afraid it really was some sort of dream state and he’d wake up in the ghost world. It scared him how much he wanted all this to be real.

The door shut behind them, and Gareth stripped quickly. Padraig sat on the edge of the bed to watch, fulfilling another of his fantasies. When Gareth was naked, Padraig gestured for him to come closer. He rested his hands on Gareth's hips and stared at the lean body between his legs.

"God, you're beautiful," he whispered, caressing Gareth's hip bones.

Gareth shifted and sighed, his skin flushing with either embarrassment or pleasure. Padraig wasn't sure which. He trailed one nail up the vein on the underside of Gareth's cock, teasing the bundle of nerves just under the flared head.

"Shit," Gareth cried out, shoving his cock closer to Padraig's mouth.

"Hmmm...pretty."

He leaned forward, licking around the head twice before pressing the tip of his tongue into Gareth's slit. After taking a taste of Gareth's precum, he relaxed his throat and took Gareth all the way down to the base of his cock.

Gareth whimpered and buried his hands in Padraig's hair, gripping him tight. Padraig winced slightly at the pain but didn't stop sucking. He slid one hand under to fondle Gareth's balls, squeezing and tugging on them in rhythm with his working Gareth's prick.

Gareth's movements became jerky, and Padraig knew he'd brought Gareth as far as he was willing to take him at the moment. He pulled off and encircled Gareth's cock with two fingers, creating a ring and keeping Gareth's climax at bay.

"Where's the condoms and lube, love?"

Dazed blue eyes blinked at him for a second before Gareth's mind made it through the haze of lust to what Padraig had asked.

"In the nightstand." Gareth waved at the table closest to Padraig.

"Take this." He wrapped Gareth's hand around his cock. "Don't come. I want you in me when you do."

He scrambled over and yanked open the drawer, then dug around until he found the lube and a foil packet. Shooting a smile over his shoulder, he grabbed them and climbed up onto the bed.

Tossing the condom to Gareth, he said, "Put this on. I'll get myself ready."

Gareth nodded but didn't move, his gaze fastened on the other man. Padraig popped open the top of the bottle and squirted some slick out on his fingers. He braced himself on one hand and his knees, reaching back to rub his wet fingers against his hole.

Fuck, that felt good. It'd been so long since he'd touched himself, or anyone else for that matter. He was going to come again as soon as Gareth pushed into his ass.

Padraig breached his ass with two fingers, accepting the burn as he thrust in. It was like being a virgin all over again. Had Steven been gay, or was Padraig taking this body somewhere it had never been before?

He pushed back, taking his fingers as far as they could go. Spreading them apart, he managed to nail his gland with one knuckle. Electricity shot through him. Padraig dropped his head and shoved three fingers in, flexing them to get his muscles as relaxed as possible, but he didn't want to take too long. He wanted Gareth to fuck him and finally make all his dreams come true.

Chapter Seven

The sight of Padraig kneeling on the bed with his fingers buried deep in his ass almost drove Gareth over the edge. He squeezed his cock hard and struggled to open the condom with one hand. God, he wanted in that ass.

Gareth crowed in triumph when he finally got the packet open with his teeth.

Padraig rocked back, fucking himself with his fingers.

“Come on, Gareth. I need you.”

Padraig’s pleading glance got Gareth moving. He climbed up on the bed, settling between Padraig’s legs. Staring down at the firm, slightly less tanned ass, he couldn’t resist pinching one of those firm cheeks.

“Shit, man. Get slicked up and fuck me already.”

Padraig somehow managed to push the lube back toward Gareth without losing his balance or hesitating with his fingers. Gareth was impressed.

“Eager, aren’t you?” he teased as he opened the tube and spilled the slick on his palm.

“I told you it’s been a long time, and you’re like a dream come true.”

Padraig actually whimpered when Gareth helped him ease his fingers out. Gareth positioned his prick at Padraig's opening and paused.

"What are you waiting for?" Padraig tilted his hips.

"Where did you get this?" Gareth ran his fingers lightly over a jagged scar running the width of Padraig's lower back.

Padraig stilled and looked over his shoulder, trying to see the scar. "A ship's line snapped at the docks where I worked for a while. It caught me across the back. The doctors were afraid I snapped a vertebra for a while, but it turned out just to be a deep muscle wound." Padraig's voice sounded faraway, like he was remembering the day the injury happened.

Paddy had injured himself in that same spot as well. Gareth shivered, remembering the fear he'd felt when he realized the man he'd come to love had been seriously wounded. There had been the same worry about the spine being harmed.

"Gareth, love, come on. I'm dying here."

Padraig pushed back against him, and all the old memories flew out of Gareth's head. Holding his cock in one hand, he gripped the other man's hip and pressed in. Padraig seemed to relax as he sank farther inside. Soon he was sheathed as far as he could go.

He groaned as Padraig tightened his muscles, massaging his prick. Wow. He'd forgotten how good it felt to connect with someone at this physical a level.

"Move," Padraig ordered, rocking away from him.

Gareth laughed as he held Padraig's hips in a strong hold and reamed the man's ass. In and out. Hard and fast. Neither of them was looking for a gentle, slow loving. This time had to be quick.

Their groans mingled as they started moving together. The sound of skin slapping against skin and grunts filled the room along with the scent of sweat and sex.

Padraig's back stretched and flexed in front of Gareth. Prying one hand free, he wrapped it around Padraig's cock. He kept his hold tight and let Padraig slide in and out while he fucked him. Pushing higher on his knees, he nailed Padraig's gland with his cock.

"Fuck. Right there." Padraig dropped his head and arched his back. "Harder, Gareth."

Gareth sped up, his balls tingling, and he could feel the pressure build. The heat surrounding his cock drew him, calling for everything inside him.

"Gonna...soon," Padraig gasped.

"Come on my cock. I want to feel it."

He scratched his nail over the spongy head of Padraig's cock.

"Oh!" Padraig shouted as he came, heat pouring over Gareth's hand.

Padraig's climax sent Gareth over the edge. He drove in and froze, his own climax hitting him, then he filled the condom.

"Hell," he grunted, all the bones in his body melting.

Gareth rolled carefully, making sure the condom stayed on until he was on his back. Grabbing some Kleenex, he took care of it and tossed it into the wastebasket next to his bed.

He settled next to Padraig, resting a hand on his back. "Hey, did you run into something?"

Padraig turned his head and frowned. "Why?"

He brushed the dark spot on Padraig's shoulder blade with his fingers. "It looks like you have a nice bruise there."

Padraig started to say something before stopping and shrugging. "I might have. It doesn't seem to hurt."

"That's good." Gareth yawned. "It's been a long day. You want to stay? I'll cook us breakfast in the morning."

“Don’t know where else to go,” Padraig murmured as he pulled Gareth against his chest.

Gareth drifted asleep, reveling in the having someone to share his bed with for the first time since moving to Boston.

Chapter Eight

Blinking, Padraig focused on the beige ceiling above him. Why was the ceiling there? Had he actually been asleep? He stretched slightly, feeling his muscles relax and the soft cotton sheets caressed his bare skin.

Bare skin? Padraig jerked the blankets up, glancing under them at his naked body.

“Put the covers back down. You’re letting cold air in,” a sleepy voice murmured from the other side of the bed.

Shit. Last night really happened. Somehow, he’d taken over another man’s body and went to a pub where he’d hooked up with Gareth Reilly, the man Padraig had lusted after before he died. Whatever fog covering his mind and keeping him from freaking out lifted, and Padraig’s pulse raced. He needed to think.

After sneaking out of the bed, Padraig tucked the blankets around Gareth. Searching the bedroom, he found his pants and put them on. He headed to the kitchen. Since he was solid again and didn’t know how long it would last, Padraig was going to have coffee and breakfast along with other things he’d missed during his invisible phase, even though it was already noon.

He dug through Gareth’s cupboards, trying to find the coffee and mugs.

“Great,” he muttered, setting the coffeemaker to start brewing.

Leaning against the counter, Padraig scrubbed a hand over his face and sighed. How had this happened, and when was he going to go back to being a ghost?

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye, and turning, he saw a business card floating to the floor. He bent and picked it up. Just a number. No name or address.

I know who and what you are, Padraig.

The man from the bar had told Padraig to call him when the questions started bothering him. Guess there was no time like the present to call.

Padraig looked around for Gareth’s phone. Shit, maybe Steven had a cell, but Padraig didn’t remember one in his pockets or around his body when he became solid.

He spotted a cordless phone on the kitchen counter or somewhere. “Aha!” He snatched it up and sat on the couch. The cat nudged his leg, but Padraig ignored him. He dialed the number, then flipped the card to the coffee table before petting the cat.

“Are you ready to hear what I have to say?”

He jumped, not expecting the voice on the other end.

“Ummm...”

“Come now, Padraig. You must be wondering what happened to you and how it came to be.” Amusement tinged the stranger’s words.

“Who the bloody hell are you?” Padraig snarled, anger heating his skin.

“All in good time, my friend. Meet me at the beginning of the Freedom Trail in Boston Commons around three. We’ll talk then.”

Buzzing in his ear told him the other man had hung up. He shut off the phone and set it on the couch next to him. Scratching his chin, he had no fucking clue where the Freedom Trail was or even which part of Boston the Commons was in.

He glanced around Gareth's apartment, his gaze caught by the row of framed pictures along one wall. Climbing to his feet, he wandered over to check them out. Most of them seemed to be family pictures with a smiling Gareth and an older couple. It looked like he got along with his parents.

Padraig knew most people did like the people who gave birth to them. He had liked his mother well enough, but she'd gotten to the point near the end where she didn't know how to deal with him. He'd been rather a wild teenager and had dropped out of secondary school to go work on the docks. He'd moved out of his parents' house, as well.

His father had a heavy hand, and Padraig wouldn't put up with that, so he left and then he died. It was one way to prove his mother's dire warnings right.

Finn meowed from the floor as he wound around Padraig's ankles. Bending, he picked up the cat and stroked him while he looked at the other photos. A smaller photo, tucked out of sight, almost like Gareth didn't want anyone to notice it, caught his eye. He leaned in to take a closer look and his mouth dropped open.

How the hell had Gareth gotten a picture of him? He reached out a hand to trace the face in the picture. God, he looked so young and crazy. His smile was bright and forced. There were decorations all around him in the background of the photograph, and he remembered when it was taken.

There had been a retirement party for one of the dockworkers, and the people from the McMurphy's office had been invited. Most of them hadn't stayed long. There was an invisible line drawn between the company and the men who worked manual labor. Yet Gareth had seemed to be enjoying himself, and Padraig had almost gathered enough courage to go and talk to the man, but before he could, Gareth had left.

"Another example of an opportunity lost, Finn," he murmured to the cat.

Finn purred and bumped his head against Padraig's chin. He chuckled and went back to the couch, sitting and cuddling the cat to his chest.

“I’m glad he took you in, though I have no doubt you would have survived. You were a pretty scrappy fighter even as a kitten.” He grinned down into the cat’s half-closed eyes. “Sort of like me.”

As he shifted to get more comfortable, the phone bumped his hip. His hand trembled as he picked it up and stared at the buttons. Should he? It would be five in the evening there. What would his mother be doing? For a second he wanted to dial the phone and connect with her. Even though they hadn’t been close, he still loved her and missed her voice and the scent of cigarettes that always clung to her.

What would he say to her that wouldn’t make her think he was some insane prank caller just trying to cause her pain? There was no way she’d believe he was her dead son, suddenly alive and living in Boston. He pushed the On button and held the phone to his ear. The dial tone tempted him. He could call her and hang up when she answered; just to hear her voice would be enough.

Finn batted at the phone, and Padraig sighed as he set the phone and the cat down next to him. He couldn’t do that to her. It was too cruel, and she’d never believe him.

“Making long-distance phone calls behind my back?” Gareth’s teasing warned him before Gareth slipped his arms around Padraig’s neck and kissed his ear.

“I was thinking of calling my mum in Belfast. She likes to know where I land.” He tilted his head a little, giving Gareth more room to touch.

“Wow...that is long-distance.” Gareth nuzzled his chin while sliding a hand down to tweak one of Padraig’s nipples. “It’s evening over there.”

“Ah, yes. Mum doesn’t like to leave the house until she’s heard from me. She talks a lot, so your bill might be a wee high this month.” He bit his lip, fighting laughter and a moan.

“Guess we’ll have to work out some sort of payment plan.”

He tugged on Gareth's hand, silently asking his lover to join him on the couch. Gareth came around, straddled his lap, and Padraig's cock hardened at the sight of Gareth's naked body.

Cradling Gareth's face with one hand, Padraig cupped one of Gareth's firm ass cheeks. He flexed his fingers, and Gareth groaned.

"I made coffee," Padraig murmured, leaving a trail of kisses along Gareth's chin.

"Good for you."

Gareth's absentminded reply caused Padraig to smile. He ran his hand down Gareth's side to grasp the erection straining between them. A quick pump had Gareth rocking against him.

"I want your ass," he whispered in Gareth's ear.

"No condoms out here."

Padraig sucked a dark mark up on Gareth's neck. He leaned back to get a look at his handiwork.

"How about I jerk you off, and then we'll head back to your bed where the condoms and lube are?"

"Sounds like an excellent plan."

Gareth's head dropped forward, resting on Padraig's shoulder while he fucked Padraig's hand.

Padraig whispered, "Come on, babe. Feel my hand holding your cock. Squeezing and stroking. I want your cum all over my hand. Want to lick it from my fingers."

He eased his other hand over and rubbed the tip of one finger over Gareth's hole. As he pressed it past the ring of muscles, Gareth panted.

Chapter Nine

“I don’t remember your hands being so rough,” Gareth groaned as Padraig stroked his cock with quick pumps.

Padraig focused for a second and almost yanked his hand away from Gareth’s body. Shit. Something was seriously fucked up. The smooth skin and hands he’d had last night were now callused and scarred like his used to be after working the docks for seven years.

“Don’t stop,” Gareth pleaded. “I’m gonna come soon, and then you can fuck me.”

Padraig realized he’d slowed down jerking Gareth off. “Sorry, love.”

He buried his face in the crook of Gareth’s neck, emptying his mind of everything but the man in his arms. Nothing else mattered.

Gareth cried out, and heat spilled over Padraig’s hand onto his stomach. Panting, Gareth slumped against his chest.

“My turn.”

Wrapping his arms around Gareth, Padraig managed to stand and make his way back to Gareth’s bedroom. He laid Gareth down on the bed, stripped off his pants, then rummaged through the nightstand for another condom.

By the time he found one, Gareth had gotten the lube open and was readying himself. Padraig tore open the foil, freed the rubber, then tossed the empty packet over his shoulder. He wiped Gareth's cum off his hand before pouring lube on his palm. Gareth watched him as he rolled on the condom and slicked his cock up with efficient movements.

"Now, Padraig. Please."

He couldn't ignore Gareth's begging. He was about to fulfill another of his fantasies. Fucking Gareth was something he dreamed about even more than getting fucked by him.

Padraig knelt between Gareth's spread thighs and set his cock at Gareth's opening. He stared into Gareth's eyes as he pressed forward, breaching the tight hole.

Gazes locked, neither man willing to break the connection between them.

When he was in as far as he could go, Padraig sighed. Home. As weird and sappy as it sounded, he was home. After years of wandering and trying to figure out what the hell had happened to him, Padraig found where he needed to be. In Gareth's arms, loving him and breathing the same air.

"For God's sake, Padraig, move."

Gareth caught his legs behind his knees and pulled them up and out, offering Padraig everything.

Padraig cupped Gareth's ass with his hands and started moving. He nailed Gareth's gland with each slow thrust in. He was going to bring Gareth along with him. He wanted to feel Gareth's climax from the inside.

"Touch yourself," he ordered, speeding up a little.

Moaning, Gareth let go of his thighs, encircling Padraig's waist with his legs while bracing one hand against the headboard above him. He fisted his cock with his free hand.

With Gareth jerking himself off and Padraig hitting Gareth's prostate with each stroke, they knew it wouldn't be long.

Pressure built at the base of his spine and his skin flushed like it was on fire.

“Soon,” Gareth warned, and all Padraig could do was nod.

The instant Gareth’s climax hit, Padraig exploded. Gareth’s hot inner channel drew every last drop of his cum from him, and his hips jerked with aftershocks.

He collapsed to Gareth’s left and panted, staring up at the ceiling, waiting for his vision to clear. Damn that had been the best fuck he’d had in a long time. Actually, it was the best he’d ever had.

Before Padraig died, he’d only had hurried encounters in bathrooms and back alleys of bars. He’d never been on a date or spent the night in someone else’s bed.

He came back to the present when Gareth cuddled close. While he was basking in the afterglow, Gareth had cleaned them both up.

“We have time for a nap,” Gareth muttered, sleep already coloring his voice.

“Good. I don’t think I’d be able to make it to your living room, much less the Commons.”

He flung his arm over Gareth’s side and blinked. The dark golden tan Steven’s body sported when Padraig first possessed it was now fading to the light gold tone of Padraig’s own skin.

Was he reverting back to his old self, or was something else going on? He needed answers soon.

Chapter Ten

Padraig checked the clock on Gareth's nightstand. Two fifteen.

"How far is Boston Commons from here?"

Gareth glanced over his shoulder at him. "Twenty minutes if you walk. Why?"

"I have to meet a guy at the beginning of the Freedom Trail. He's a friend of a friend's who might have a lead on a job for me. That's who I called earlier this morning."

He stroked his hand down Gareth's side, reluctant to leave him.

"You're going to want to grab a shower and leave as soon as you can. The streets are going to be really crowded because of the parade." Gareth sat up and flung off the blankets before climbing out of bed. "You go get ready, and I'll write down directions for you."

"It's St. Patrick's Day and your birthday," Padraig blurted as he suddenly remembered what day it was and what made it special.

A bittersweet memory surfaced. He'd planned on taking Gareth a present all those years ago and declaring his love to Gareth, but life and his own reckless ways had intervened.

Gareth's look was decidedly suspicious. "How did you know it was my birthday?"

Damn. He needed to watch his mouth until he knew whether he was sticking around. "You must have told me last night at some point."

Gareth didn't seem convinced, but he accepted Padraig's explanation without saying anything else.

"Can I borrow a shirt?" Padraig picked his pants off the floor. They were wrinkled but wearable. His shirt was beyond hope with some strange dark stain on it. He studied the stain a little closer. Was that blood? There wasn't any hole where the blade had gone in, but if he remembered right, it was in the same place as Steven's wound.

"Sure. Your shirt's messed up." Gareth opened the closet and pulled out a white dress shirt. "This one is big on me, so it should fit you. I'll get you a towel."

"Can you toss this one out for me? I don't think whatever the stain is, it'll come out." Padraig tossed it to Gareth.

He went into the bathroom and turned on the water. While he waited for it to warm up, he stared at his reflection in the mirror. Was his hair darker or was it just the lighting in Gareth's bathroom?

Touching the scar on his upper lip, he remembered how he'd gotten it in a fight over a football match. Bloody annoying English. The scar hadn't been there last night. The bump in his nose hadn't been there either. Another bar fight, only this one had been about which whiskey was the best. God, he'd been so foolish and reckless back then, believing he'd live forever. He'd learned his lesson quickly enough.

Padraig turned slightly and saw the tattoo on his shoulder in the very same spot Gareth touched last night. Only Gareth had said it looked like a bruise, and now it was clearly a Celtic knot. Padraig had gotten the tattoo when he was eighteen. It was like starting a new life for him.

Now the Celtic symbol of reincarnation seemed rather fitting to Padraig. He hoped the stranger on the phone would be able to explain what was going on.

Padraig showered and dressed in ten minutes. Gareth met him at the apartment door with a coffee mug and directions.

"I'll be back in an hour or so," he promised.

Gareth leaned against the door frame, arms crossed. "How do you know I'll be here? Maybe I have to work."

"Don't be daft. You never work on your birthday."

Padraig brushed a quick kiss over Gareth's open mouth and headed out the door.

* * * * *

Padraig disappeared down the hall before Gareth could ask him how the hell he knew Gareth never worked on his birthday. He pushed the thought out of his head and shut the door.

He wandered back to his bedroom and opened his closet door again. Standing on his tiptoes, he reached up and yanked a box down from the top shelf.

Going back to the living room, he curled up in his favorite chair and opened the box. Gareth stared down at the watch inside for a tick of the second hand before pulling it out and putting it on. It wasn't the most expensive watch he owned, but the memories that went with it made it the most important one.

What a sad, pathetic ritual he engaged in for the past several years, ever since Paddy Monaghan died. He ran his fingers over the watch face and remembered.

Ten years ago, it seemed like he was always running late when he'd slam into Paddy on the docks. Three times in a row, and Gareth had been mortified. There was such a rugged handsomeness about Paddy that tied Gareth's tongue. Maybe Paddy Monaghan's rough edges came from working the docks, or maybe they had been a deep, intrinsic part of the man.

Gareth would turn beet red, mumble something about being late, then run in the opposite direction. It was only after making it to the safety of his office that he'd berate himself for not staying and talking to Paddy.

The last time it happened, Paddy called Gareth his pretty White Rabbit and mentioned getting a watch to keep him on time. Gareth rushed off, and when he returned to work two days later, he learned of Paddy's tragic death.

Gareth smiled. A bar fight was a fitting way to go for a man like Paddy, who seemed to live on the edge. A certain recklessness had lurked in Paddy's grin and grass green eyes. He'd died the way he'd lived.

Taking the watch off, he flipped it over. Engraved on the back was *For my pretty White Rabbit. Love, PM.*

Love. That word always startled Gareth, no matter how many times he read the inscription. Had Paddy Monaghan really loved him? Had Gareth missed his chance all those times he ran away?

He sighed and put the watch away, hiding it deep in his closet again, never to see the light of day until next year.

Paddy was so unlike the smooth blond good looks of the Padraig who had just left Gareth's apartment, and yet both men drew Gareth like a moth to a flame.

Gareth shook his himself like a dog ridding its coat of excess water. Time to take a shower and think about dinner. Padraig would be coming back, and Gareth wanted to feed him something special.

Chapter Eleven

Boston Commons was a beautiful park, balancing on the cusp of spring. Padraig made his way toward the start of the Freedom Trail. He enjoyed the brisk breeze and the dampness of the grass after the short shower a few minutes before.

Unease skittered over his skin. He glanced around, searching for the man from the bar.

“You’re looking happy today, Padraig. Good night? Did you sleep well?”

“Bloody hell, man. Where’d you come from?” He jumped as the man from the bar appeared beside him.

“What do you mean? I was standing right here. You almost walked past me.”

The laughter in the stranger’s voice and the quirk of his lips suggested he knew something Padraig didn’t.

“How do you know who I am?” Padraig eyed him. “Who the fuck are you?”

The stranger gestured for Padraig to follow him, and if he wanted to find anything out, he’d have to go with him.

“My name is Seamus, and the reason I know who you are is simple. I’ve been following you for the last year.”

Padraig stopped and stared at Seamus. "You've been following me?"

Seamus looked over his shoulder and nodded. "You've been a busy ghost. How many states have you been in these past twelve months? I think the only one you haven't visited is Alaska. I've been playing catch up ever since I clued in on you. Thank the goddess, I found you last night."

Glancing around, Padraig spotted a bench. He stumbled over to it and sat. Seamus ambled toward him, grinning at the antics of the kids running around the park and ignoring the stunned expression on Padraig's face.

"Clued in on me? How do you know I'm a ghost who somehow got sucked into this poor guy's body?"

Seamus patted Padraig's shoulder. "Stop freaking out. I can explain, but you have to listen before you react."

"You know it's never going to be good when someone tells you to listen before you react," Padraig muttered as he looked up at Seamus. "You're serious?"

"I wouldn't joke about this with you, Padraig Monaghan. We elves take repaying our debts very seriously."

"Repaying debts? Elves?" Padraig pinched his arm. "Ouch. Shit, I'm not sleeping."

Shaking his head, Seamus laughed. "I asked you not to freak out, and you promised."

"I promised no such thing, and did you really believe I wouldn't react when you say you're an elf? Elves aren't real. They're Irish myths and Christmas tales."

"We're both. I'm an Irish elf who helped create those myths, and I have cousins who are Christmas elves. They like the freezing cold and all that inane music." Seamus shuddered. "I'd never be able to survive having to be that sickly sweet and happy."

Padraig slapped his hand to his head. "I have to be sleeping. This can't be real."

"Stop it. Don't give yourself a concussion. I'll prove to you that what I'm saying is true." Seamus grabbed his shoulders and straightened him out.

“Go ahead. This should be interesting.” Padraig crossed his arms over his chest and frowned.

“When you were ten, you saved a fox from being killed by a pack of dogs.”

“I vaguely remember that. It was right before my family moved to Belfast. Was the fox your pet or something?”

Padraig didn’t know what to think. Elves were part of fairy tales told by his grandma, and yet Seamus knew about an incident he had never mentioned to anyone.

“The fox wasn’t a pet. It was me. A friend had been working on a changing spell and decided to use me as a test subject.” Seamus shook his head. “Unfortunately, he couldn’t remember how to switch me back, and I was stuck in your world.”

Humor him and maybe something will make sense. Padraig nodded when Seamus glanced at him.

“I was being chased by the pack of hounds and thought running through the stream would throw them off my scent, but the current was too strong and I got swept away. You saw me struggling and pulled me out. By the way, that was very brave of you. If I’d been a true wild fox, I could have bitten you.”

The strange docility of the fox Padraig had rescued popped into his mind. Even at ten, he’d recognized the odd reaction the animal had to his plucking him from the cold water. He had assumed the fox was in shock, and that’s why it didn’t fight him, but maybe the keen intelligence he’d seen in the creature’s amber eyes was more human than animal.

“You let me go on the other side of the stream and drove the dogs far enough away for me to recover and find my way to the gate I needed to return to my realm.” Seamus ran his long fingers through his dark hair. “I meant to come back and grant you a wish to repay you for saving my life, but time works differently in the Realm of Dreams. By the time I made it back, you were already dead.”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t something I’d planned on doing. It just sort of happened.”

He hadn't gone looking for a fight or to die that night. Shit. Padraig had planned on going to Gareth's flat and finally telling the man how much he wanted him. He had even bought a birthday present for him.

Seamus chuckled. "I know, but it seems trouble always found you when you were alive, Padraig, and you never went out of your way to avoid it."

True, but walking away had never been his style. Rushing in where angels feared to tread was how he'd lived his life.

"You found me and decided what? Did you kill Steven so I could have his body?" Clenching his hands and horrified at that possibility, Padraig jumped to his feet.

Seamus sat and leaned back against the bench, his expression serene. "Don't start feeling guilty. Steven Burns was fated to die in that alleyway. I couldn't have changed that outcome, no matter how I tried. Your being there *was* my doing, and the magic that helped you possess his body was mine."

"How is that even possible?"

"The spell is far too complicated for you to worry about." Seamus squinted up into the cloudy sky. "I'm just glad I found you today."

"What's so special about today?" A thought hit Padraig as he stood there. "Since you know so much about me and my circumstances, maybe you can tell me why I've been wandering as a ghost the last ten years. Who did I piss off?"

Seamus shook his head. "You didn't piss anyone off as far as I know. Most spirits who linger in this world have unfinished business. Was there something, or someone, you forgot to do?"

Padraig flipped Seamus the finger. "You're saying that for some reason fate chose to make me float around as a ghost because I hadn't completed my life's mission? That sounds rather flimsy."

“I’m just saying that everything has a reason. Maybe you were going to do something, and dying interrupted those plans.”

The watch he’d bought for Gareth had been in his pocket the night he died. Was that the unfinished business?

“Today is important because it’s St. Patrick’s Day, when Irish magic is the strongest. I can cast almost any spell, which is how I managed to cast the body switch on you. As the day grew closer, my power grew. Remember, though, as the day wanes, so does my power, and you won’t be able to keep this body.”

“You mean you made sure I could have a solid body for one day and hook up with the man I lusted after, but I can’t stay?”

Seamus shrugged. “I’m afraid there are rules, and I can’t just give you Steven’s body. You have to go to Gareth and tell him the truth. If he accepts you and loves you, then the spell will be complete and you can stay. If he rejects you, when the clock hits midnight, you’ll leave Steven’s body.”

“And go back to being a ghost?” Padraig shivered.

“I don’t know. I’ve never used this particular spell. I’ll have to go talk to my friends and find out if there’s any other way to finish it without love and acceptance.”

Padraig sat next to Seamus again and leaned forward, dangling his hands between his knees. “I’m not sure it’s going to be that easy.”

“I never said it would be.” Seamus nudged Padraig’s thigh with his knee. “I’m not sure how I would feel if Gareth accepted what you told him right away, but there must be something you can do to convince him.”

Glancing at his watch, Padraig noticed it had been close to two hours since he met up with Seamus.

“If I’m going to confess my love and make Gareth believe me, I’d better get going.”

He stood and pulled out his wallet. "Thank God Steven had money on him. I should go buy Gareth something for his birthday. Maybe that will open his mind to what I have to say."

Standing as well, Seamus hugged him. "Good luck. Whatever happens, you have my number. Make sure you call me."

"I will. Thanks for giving me a second chance with Gareth." He meant it. No matter what the outcome, he'd never regret getting to be with Gareth for even one night.

"One more thing, and I think you've been noticing this. The longer you're in Steven's body, the more it will change. It'll morph into your body, or at least what you looked like before you died."

Padraig's chuckle was slightly hysterical. "Yeah. I caught that. How am I supposed to explain that to Gareth?"

Seamus shrugged. "I don't know, but these changes are one of the reasons why you have to tell Gareth the truth. If you were to stay in this body, you'd wake up one morning, and Gareth would recognize you. Without any warning, it would be a terrible shock to the man."

"Thanks. I have to be crazy to be thinking about telling Gareth any of this."

Seamus smiled. "Remember, Gareth Reilly was meant to be yours, Padraig. That's why I sent you to O'Toole's in the first place -- because I knew Gareth was going to be there."

"You were the one I heard last night."

Seamus nodded. "Clouding your mind to keep you from freaking out was easy. I wanted you to spend time with Gareth, and you wouldn't have been able to do that if you were worrying about other things."

"Thank you for that as well, I guess."

"You're welcome, and I'll be waiting for your call."

Padraig nodded and headed out of the park. He had to flag down a cab and find a present for Gareth. As he glanced back to wave good-bye to Seamus, he discovered the elf was gone.

Chapter Twelve

Gareth jumped when a knock sounded on his door. He frowned and went to answer it. He hadn't made plans with any of his friends for that night anyway, plus being around eight o'clock, it was still too early for the bars.

"Happy birthday, Gareth."

He caught the bouquet of white carnations and shamrocks being shoved in his face. Gareth peered over the flowers to see Padraig standing in the hallway with a nervous smile on his face.

"Padraig." He stepped back and gestured for Padraig to come in.

"I'm sorry it took a little longer for me to get back. I got done with my meeting and realized I didn't get you anything for your birthday."

Padraig clutched a gaily wrapped box in his hands, and Gareth smiled.

"You didn't have to get me anything." He sniffed the carnations. "No one has ever given me flowers before."

"Too girly?"

He kissed Padraig before walking to the kitchen.

“Not girly at all. I’m just surprised. Go sit down while I put these in water.”

“Okay.”

Gareth knew he didn’t have a vase, so he stuck the bouquet into a large glass and carried them to the living room where he set them on the coffee table.

“I’m glad you got back when you did. I was just about to start dinner.”

“Gareth, I have something to tell you. Come sit next to me.”

Gareth didn’t like the seriousness in Padraig’s voice. Sitting, he met the other man’s gaze. “You aren’t married, are you?”

A look of surprise crossed Padraig’s face. “No, I’m not, or at least I don’t think I am.”

“You don’t think you are? How could you not know?” He eyed him suspiciously.

“Just let me tell you, and you can comment afterward.”

“Okay.” Never let it be said Gareth didn’t have an open mind.

“God, where to start?” Padraig stood and paced, running his hands through his hair and glancing at his watch.

“The beginning is always good.”

“That’s just it. This story has two beginnings and both of them sound totally crazy.”

Gareth leaned back on the couch. Something told him he really didn’t want to have this conversation.

“What are you going to tell me? That you aren’t really Padraig Burns?”

Padraig shot him a glance. “Yes, that’s one of the things I wanted to tell you.”

His nerves picked up on Padraig’s uneasiness. What the hell was going on?

“Just bloody well tell me who you are,” he demanded.

“I’m Paddy Monaghan. I worked on the docks while you worked at McMurphy’s Shipping Company.”

“No. You’re lying.” Gareth jumped to his feet, hands clenched at his sides. “Paddy’s dead. I went to his funeral. I watched them bury him.”

Padraig nodded, sadness in those familiar green eyes. “I know, and I am, or was, dead. I’ve been a ghost for ten years, floating around the world. I was so fucking lonely.”

“Ghosts don’t exist, and if you are a ghost, why do you have a solid form?”

Padraig went to the window and stared out, collecting his thoughts. Gareth saw him stroke a finger over the band of the expensive watch on his wrist.

“When I told you I just arrived in Boston, I wasn’t lying. I had literally popped in last night. I barely had time to orient myself when I was drawn to a scuffle in an alley. Two blokes were beating up this other poor sod.”

Padraig shivered, and Gareth could tell the memory bothered the other man.

“Being a ghost means I can’t help people, no matter how much I wish to. The poor sod was stabbed, and the thugs ran off.”

Gareth gasped. “So there’s a dead body out there, and you took the man’s identity. What kind of monster are you?”

He backed away, searching for something he could use as a weapon. Padraig turned, holding his hands out at his sides in an “I’m harmless” gesture.

“No and yes.”

“Shit. What does that mean?” Panic rose in him, but he tried to get ahold of it. It probably wasn’t safe to show how scared he was.

“There isn’t a body out there somewhere, waiting to be discovered, and yes, I took the man’s identity. Look at me, Gareth. Do I look like Paddy Monaghan? Better yet, do I even look like the man you met last night?”

Gareth forced himself to stop and look at Padraig. The man’s sun-streaked blond hair was darker, almost the light brown shade Paddy’s had been. Those eyes were still the same, and maybe that was what convinced Gareth to bring the man home last night. They were

brilliant grass green and reminded him so much of Paddy. He narrowed his eyes. Hadn't Padraig's skin been tanned a dark gold? It was now a light gold.

God, it was like looking at a photograph he hadn't seen in a while. There were things he remembered, but so many little changes to it made him question his own mind.

He shook his head. "You can't be a ghost. Ghosts aren't real. They're just figments of grieving imaginations."

"Do I look like I'm a figment or that I'm not real?" Padraig reached out to touch him.

Gareth backed away. "You look and sound like you're crazy. Have you been watching me? Maybe you did research, found out some things about me, and thought it would be a good way to meet me."

"You think I'm some crazy stalker?" Padraig seemed upset by that. "Why would I tell you all this if I just wanted to fuck you? I could have picked you up at the bar and never mentioned any of this."

"Why did you then? What purpose does trying to convince me you're a dead man come back to life have?" He wrapped his arms around his waist. "Especially that particular dead man."

"My name is Padraig Monaghan. My friends used to call me Paddy. I used to take care of Finn until I died. Once I figured out I was fucking dead, I was so worried about him. Knowing you took him in and provided a home for him made my heart melt."

Gareth backed up until he hit the wall behind him. "No, you can't do that. You can't tell me shit like that. Paddy's dead, and there's *nothing* I can do to make him come back, no matter how I might have wanted to when he died."

Chapter Thirteen

Gareth stared at Padraig, fear and anger welling inside him. How dare this stranger take a precious memory and sully it with this insane explanation? He stalked to the door and jerked it open.

“I want you to leave now.”

He ignored the hurt look on Padraig’s face as the man started to walk past him into the hall. Blinking back tears, he told himself he was so angry he could cry, but it wasn’t that. Somehow in the short time they’d spent together, Padraig had managed to slip under Gareth’s defenses. It couldn’t be love yet, because Gareth didn’t believe in love at first sight. Their relationship had had the possibility of turning serious, but not now. Padraig had to think Gareth was a complete idiot if he thought he’d accept his story.

Padraig reached out and cupped Gareth’s cheek. “My pretty White Rabbit, always running late. I wish I could have given you that watch, and we’d had all the time in the world to fall in love. Now, our second chance seems to be over, but thank you for giving me a chance to know what it was like to love you.”

Stunned, Gareth's throat closed and he couldn't say anything as Padraig disappeared down the hall. By the time Gareth could get his feet moving, Padraig was gone. He slumped against the door for a second, shocked by Padraig's parting words.

He shut the door and raced to the bedroom. Had Padraig found the watch and read the inscription? Was that how he knew about the White Rabbit thing?

The closet door hinges creaked ominously as he flung open the door and started digging through the stuff on his top shelf. When his hand hit the box, he almost dropped to his knees. It was right where he'd put it earlier. There was no way Padraig could have known where the watch was hidden, or even had time to find it.

He grabbed the watch box and went back to the living room where the present Padraig had bought him lay on the coffee table next to the bouquet of flowers. Curling up in the chair, Gareth stared at the brightly wrapped rectangle. Should he open it or should he throw it away?

Curiosity got the better of him, and he set the watch down to pick up the other present. He eased the tape away from the paper, not wanting to rip it. When the object was revealed, Gareth gasped and tears sprung to his eyes.

Maybe Padraig wasn't crazy. Maybe there was something to what he said about being Paddy. Gareth ran his fingers over the aged leather binding of the book. He opened the front cover and checked the copyright.

Holy shit! Padraig had bought him a first edition of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. How had the man known this particular story was his favorite book? Gareth glanced around his apartment. He didn't have any of his books or memorabilia out. Tracing the faded gold lettering on the spine, he thought back to an encounter he'd forgotten through the years.

It was his lunch break, and he liked to get out of his office. Dock Four wasn't being used at the time, so he knew he wouldn't be disturbed. After eating his lunch, he'd taken out his book and started reading.

A few minutes later, he had the oddest feeling someone was watching him. Glancing up, he saw Paddy standing at the entrance to the dock. The man studied him for a second and looked like he wanted to say something, but another worker shouted and Paddy turned. Not before giving Gareth a wink and a smile.

Gareth had been reading Lewis Carroll that time as well. No one at McMurphy's knew how much Gareth liked his books, and yet Paddy had called him White Rabbit and joked about him always running late.

Now Padraig got him this book and used that nickname. Gareth clutched the book to his chest and sighed. Could Padraig be telling the truth? He'd never given reincarnation a thought, tending to believe people only got one shot at life.

Shaking his head, he leaned back in his chair. This wouldn't technically be reincarnation. What would it be considered? Maybe possession, like demons do to people. He shivered. No, he didn't think it worked that way. Demons hurt people, and he'd never gotten the feeling that Padraig wanted to harm him in any way. More like Padraig simply wanted to be with him and love him.

Thoughts raced through his mind, and he groaned. He needed to talk to someone about all this, but who could he call who wouldn't laugh him out of the room?

He jumped when the phone rang. Standing, he put the book on the seat of the chair and went to get the phone.

"Hello?"

"Gareth, *mo leanbh*."

"Grandma?" He checked the clock. "Shouldn't you be in bed? Is everything all right?"

“Aye, everything’s fine here. I got to thinking about you and had a feeling you might need to talk to someone. Who better than *ti seanmháthair*?”

Gareth smiled to himself. “You and your feelings, Grandma.”

“I’m Irish, *mo chroí*. We all have ‘feelings.’ Was I wrong?”

Hearing his grandmother’s familiar voice soothed Gareth, and he realized she was the answer to his prayers. If anyone would listen to his problem without thinking he was crazy, it was his grandmother. He grew up listening to her tell the old stories about ghosts, banshees, and fairies.

“You weren’t wrong, Grandma, as usual. I do have a problem I need to talk to someone about.” He picked the book up and settled back down in his chair.

“Well, good thing I took a nap earlier today.” They both laughed. “Now, talk to me.”

Gareth told her everything that had happened since meeting Padraig in the bar the night before. His grandmother knew he was gay, so he wasn’t worried about offending her. He finally ran out of steam as he finished telling her about the book and what Padraig had said as he left.

The silence on the other end worried Gareth. Had his grandmother fallen asleep?

“Grandma?”

“I’m still here, *mo chroí*. I was just thinking.”

He kept quiet for at least a minute before he said, “What do you think, Grandma? Do you think he was telling the truth?”

Grandma sighed. “Gareth, *mo leanbh*, I think it’s a shame that you’ve lost the ability to believe in possibilities.”

“What do you mean?”

“The first man I ever loved died in World War Two, fighting for Britain, a country I had no use for, but he believed we all had to fight against the horror of Hitler.” Grandma’s voice trailed off for a second. “I met and married your grandfather a year later, yet I never

forgot my soldier. If I had a second chance with him, I would grab it with both hands. It wouldn't matter how he got back to me."

"Are you saying you believe in ghosts and that Padraig really is Paddy Monaghan?" Gareth pulled his phone away from his ear and stared at it for a second. "Grandma, that sounds crazy."

"I understand that it sounds irrational, mo chroí, but you have to think about it this way. If you had the chance to go back ten years and actually see Paddy again, would you make your move? Or would you be too shy and let the same doubts and insecurities plague you?" Sadness colored his grandma's words. "There are so many things I'd do differently if I could go back. I'd have married my soldier the minute he asked, parents be damned, but I didn't, and now I regret that."

Gareth murmured, "Didn't you love Grandpa?"

"Oh, I loved him, Gareth, but part of my heart always belonged to the first man I loved, and I have a feeling that you're the same way. You loved Paddy, and by some miracle, you just might have a chance to be with him for the rest of your life."

Closing his eyes, he thought about how right it felt to lie in bed and hold Padraig to him. Did he have enough faith to take the leap and believe in second chances?

His grandma laughed softly. "Even if there might be a ghost of a chance that Padraig is who he says he is, isn't that worth it to find love?"

He groaned. "That's awful, Grandma."

"I couldn't resist. He knows about the watch and the inscription on it, plus your obsession with *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*."

She was right. Padraig knew all those things, and no one but Paddy would have known about them. Gareth had never told anyone about the watch, and he was sure Paddy wouldn't have said anything either, considering he never knew for sure whether Paddy was gay.

“We Reillys fall in love fast and forever. Remember that, Gareth. Now go out and find your man. Tell him you love him and worry about the rest later.”

“I love you, Grandma.”

“I love you too, mo leanbh. Call me in a couple of days and let me know how everything turns out.”

“I will. Bye.”

Gareth hung up and went to get his coat. He had no idea where to look for Padraig, but he'd search the entire city if he had to. Maybe starting at Boston Commons would be best since. If what Padraig said was true and he really did arrive in town last night, he wouldn't have any clue where else to go.

Before Gareth left, he slipped the watch on and touched the book. Ghost or not, he wasn't ready to let go of Padraig.

Chapter Fourteen

Padraig wandered down the path leading toward where he'd met Seamus earlier that day. Well, the whole telling Gareth thing had just gone fucking great. He was lucky Gareth just kicked him out and didn't call the cops on him.

What was he supposed to do, though? There were hundreds of things he could have said to convince Gareth he really was Paddy Monaghan, but nothing that some other guy with a little research couldn't have figured out.

The White Rabbit comment had been a last-ditch effort, and Gareth hadn't said anything, just stared at him like he was insane. He had to leave, and now he had to get a hold of Seamus, but he couldn't bring himself to find a pay phone and call the elf.

Checking his watch, Padraig realized he'd been walking around the Commons for three-and-a-half hours. It was time to call Seamus. He spotted a phone at one of the entrances to the park. Stalking over, he dug out some coins and punched in the number on the card.

"How did it go?"

God, how did Seamus know it was him?

"We need to meet." He wasn't going to explain anything over the phone.

“Certainly. Meet me in front of the Old North Church in ten minutes. Just follow the Freedom Trail, and it’s one of the stops on it. You’ll see the signs.”

Seamus hung up, and Padraig was left with a dial tone buzzing in his ear. He was going to punch the bloody bastard when he saw him.

Ten minutes later, Padraig stood outside the Old North Church, shoulders hunched and hands stuffed in his pockets. He ignored the press of people around him, milling around Boston after the parade. The city was still crowded at eleven forty-five at night, and the festive atmosphere set his teeth on edge.

Why had he thought Gareth would believe anything he said? Believing in ghosts was one thing. Every Irishman worthy of the name accepted there were things beyond his knowledge. Believing your new lover was actually a man who died ten years ago was another thing entirely.

He started pacing along the sidewalk. Where the hell was Seamus? There wasn’t any point in waiting. Gareth didn’t love him, and Padraig had to accept that. Maybe Seamus would be able to tell him how to move on to wherever spirits went to stay.

Someone bumped into him and murmured an apology before continuing on. God, he would miss having a real body, being able to talk to people and being seen.

“Padraig.”

He turned and saw Seamus standing a few feet away with a frown on his face. He hurried toward the elf.

“It didn’t work. I told Gareth everything, and he accused me of being a crazy stalker.” Padraig shoved his hands through his hair. “I don’t know what else to do to convince him who I am.”

Seamus shook his head. “Unfortunately, my power is waning and we only have twenty minutes before I must start severing the bonds holding you to Steven’s body.”

Padraig heaved a frustrated sigh. Why couldn't anything in his life be easy? Being honest with himself, he admitted he'd brought a lot of his problems on himself. The chip on his shoulder never helped when he drank too much.

"I have never gone down without a fight, but I don't know what to do." He glared at Seamus.

"I wish I could help you, but my hands are tied." Seamus shrugged. "I went and talked to some friends. They all told me the same thing. I can't break the rules."

"I know." Padraig understood rules, though following them wasn't something he did well. "I appreciate your asking."

He walked away and came back, clenching his hands into tight fists at his sides. "I really thought Gareth loved me and would accept what I told him as the truth."

Seamus's burst of laughter surprised him. Glancing at the elf, he frowned. "Why are you laughing?"

Wiping his eyes, Seamus took a deep breath. "You're joking, right? You look different, even though your eyes and voice are the same. That doesn't mean Gareth would recognize you. You've been dead for a decade, Padraig, and he's cautious. Wouldn't you think a person was crazy if he told you he'd come back from the dead?"

"Don't be logical, damn it."

Padraig blinked as his vision darkened around the edges. He held out his hand, not sure what he was reaching for. His knees gave out and he dropped to the ground, crying out at the pain.

Seamus took his hand, and Padraig looked up into the elf's dark eyes.

"Is it time?" he asked through gritted teeth as the pain grew worse.

"Yes. It's almost midnight." Seamus squeezed his hand. "I'll stay with you until the end."

“Seamus.” He bit his lip to keep from whimpering. “Bloody hell, it’s like I’m dying all over again.”

He could feel his ribs break like someone had kicked him in the side. His eyes swelled shut and blood ran from his nose.

“I’m reliving my own death, aren’t I?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, Padraig. I’d help you if I could, but you must leave this body the way you left your old one.”

“This is going to bloody suck,” he muttered. “Why isn’t anyone coming to help?”

“I’ve hidden us. The only people who would be able to see us are people who know you.”

Blackness slowly encroached on his vision. The streetlights dimmed, and the pain worsened.

“Padraig!”

He frowned, blinking his swollen eyelids. Great, now he was hearing things.

“Padraig!”

It sounded like Gareth, even though he knew it couldn’t be. Gareth won’t come looking for him, not when he thought Padraig was crazy.

A dark shape appeared at his left side. Who was that? He hoped it was someone to show him the way to heaven or hell, because he didn’t want to exist in limbo anymore.

“Oh Paddy,” the voice murmured again.

When a hand gripped his, his vision cleared for a second. Gareth leaned over him, his expression filled with so much fear, pain, and love.

“Gareth,” he gasped, mustering the strength to tighten his fingers around Gareth’s hand.

“Love, I searched for you everywhere once I came to my senses and realized the truth.”

“What truth?” He rolled his head to the right, but Seamus was nowhere to be seen, even though his presence still registered with Padraig.

“I love you, Paddy Monaghan, and it doesn’t matter how you came back to me. You’re here now, and I’m taking advantage of this second chance we’ve been given.”

Gareth bent and pressed his lips to Padraig’s mouth. Padraig wanted to cry out with joy. Pain tore through him instead. It rose from his stomach into his chest and lungs. Shit. When he died in the bar fight, he’d been stabbed multiple times in the stomach and chest. Several of the strikes hit his lungs, and he’d drowned in his own blood.

“No. Not now. Seamus, help me. Gareth said he loved me. He said it. Please, Seamus. Please,” he begged as pain and darkness swallowed him again.

Chapter Fifteen

Sobbing assaulted Padraig's ears. He focused on the sound plus the hands wrapped tightly around his and the drops of liquid bathing his face. Who was crying and why?

Tears welled in his own eyes at the heartbroken emotion in the crier's sobs. What had happened?

He shifted and moaned. Fuck. His entire body felt like he'd been worked over with a baseball bat. A sensation he was very familiar with.

"Paddy?"

Frowning, he forced his eyes open. Gareth hovered over him, shock and hesitant hope in his gaze. Padraig tried to speak, but his brain-to-mouth connection was broken at the moment. He blinked and tried to smile.

"It's okay. I'm here, love." Gareth squeezed his hand.

"Gareth," he breathed, grimacing at the pain in his chest. "Why am I still here?"

"I don't know." Gareth shrugged. "You were bleeding and I think you were dying when I got here."

Padraig slowly sorted through his memories, and he remembered begging Seamus to help him, but he didn't remember if Seamus answered him. Gareth slipped his arm beneath Padraig's shoulders and helped him sit up. His head swirled as he moved.

"Easy does it, love. Here, lean against me."

Resting against Gareth's chest, he caught his breath and calmed his racing heartbeat. He looked down at his trembling hands.

"Do I look like me or Steven?" He wasn't sure why he asked Gareth that.

"I think you're starting to get your looks back, Paddy, but let's be glad you can't get your old body back. It's probably started decaying by now."

He wrinkled his nose. "And rotting flesh isn't very sexy."

"Only to other dead people or zombies, I'm sure."

Laughing made his chest hurt even more, but he couldn't stop. Shock and relief combined to make him a little hysterical. Gareth held him and let him work through his fit. When he calmed down, he pushed away from Gareth and stood.

Gareth stood next to him, ready to grab him if he lost his balance. Padraig glanced around, searching the crowd and the night for Seamus.

"Where's Seamus?"

"Who?" Gareth looked puzzled.

Padraig met his gaze and asked, "Didn't you see the dark-haired guy with me when you arrived?"

Gareth shook his head. "There wasn't anyone here. You were lying on the ground bleeding. In fact, it was weird. No one even looked at you. It was like you were invisible or something."

"Seamus said no one would be able to see us unless they knew me." He stepped away from Gareth and shouted, "Seamus, where are you?"

People stared at him but kept moving, not meeting his eyes. As much as he wanted to keep yelling, he had a feeling that the elf wouldn't answer him.

"He's gone." Padraig moved to the bench at the bus stop, his knees threatening to buckle on him.

Gareth joined him, resting his hand on Padraig's thigh. "Who was Seamus again?"

"He's the elf I saved when I was a kid. I forgot to mention him while I was explaining the whole dead and not-being-dead thing. That's how I got Steven's body in the first place. He cast a spell, and I had until the end of St. Patrick's Day to convince you to love me or else I'd go back to being a ghost. The worst was I'd have to die the same way I did the first time." Padraig shivered. "He must have been able to work the magic after you said you loved me." He jerked his head up and stared at Gareth. "You said you loved me. What made you change your mind that I wasn't some crazy stalker?"

Gareth jumped to his feet and paced in front of Padraig, avoiding all the other people strolling along the sidewalk. Padraig enjoyed being able to watch Gareth and let the knowledge that he could touch him whenever he wanted sink in.

"After you left, I thought about throwing a fit and crying. I mean, come on, this great guy that I thought was perfect turns out to be some crazy-ass stalker who knows all these things about me that I don't even remember." Gareth waved his arms around wildly, missing people by inches.

"If that had happened to me, I would have gotten drunk, chased the bastard down, and kicked his ass." Padraig grinned.

Gareth winked at him. "That thought did cross my mind, but I managed to calm down and really think about what you told me, plus I talked to my grandma. Did you ever visit me while you were a ghost?"

He lowered his head and plucked at his pants, absentmindedly thinking he better go get some new clothes soon.

“Paddy, did you visit me?”

“I might have looked in on you once after I died and before I left Belfast. You weren’t doing anything bad, just sitting on your couch and looking at a box. You kept turning it over and over in your hands.” He gave Gareth an apologetic smile. “I felt guilty, like I was intruding on something private, so I left.”

Gareth stopped right in front of Padraig and placed his knuckle under Padraig’s chin, lifting his gaze to meet Gareth’s. “I felt you that day. It was the weirdest thing. I was staring at that box and wanting to cry so bad. I mean, you were dead and I’d never get a chance to talk to you again. Then it was like someone put his arms around me and I felt better, like everything was going to be all right. When you left today, you said you wished you had gotten a chance to give me that watch.”

“I did. I had finally decided to stop being a pussy and declare myself to you. Or at least let you know I was interested in you. I knew St. Patrick’s Day was your birthday, so I got you a present. I couldn’t come to lay my heart bare without bringing you something to butter you up a little first.”

He wanted to lower his eyes, and his cheeks warmed. God, he was blushing, and over something that had happened a while ago.

“That box you saw me looking at was the present you had bought me. It had my name on it, so your mum had your aunt deliver it to me. It was a bit of a shock because I’d never thought you knew my name, much less knew when my birthday was.”

Padraig took a hold of Gareth’s hand and pulled him down on the bench with him. “I knew who you were from the moment you started working at the shipping company, but I wasn’t quite ready to admit to myself that I was gay, so I ignored how I felt about you. Hell, you ran into me enough times. By that St. Patrick’s Day, I figured I was wasting too much time worrying about shit. I had to tell you how I felt even if you didn’t feel the same way.”

Gareth kissed him and Padraig let him, ignoring any disapproving expression that might have been thrown their way. Fourteen years of loneliness when he could have had Gareth in his arms and his bed if he'd only had the courage to say something earlier.

When Gareth eased back, Padraig licked his lips, savoring the taste of his lover on his tongue.

"The box was sealed, which meant no one knew what was in it besides the person who bought it. You told me what it was and you called me 'your pretty White Rabbit' as you walked out. I slapped myself in the forehead and realized no one else knew you ever called me that, plus I'd fallen in love with you somehow. I've never believed in love at first sight, but I believe in it now." Gareth laid his hand on Padraig's chest above his heart. "It doesn't matter what you look like, Paddy. I believe that inside you're the same man I knew all those years ago, and I'm not willing to pass up a second chance to love you."

Not caring who might be watching, Padraig tugged on Gareth until he straddled Padraig's legs. He cupped Gareth's face in his hands, pouring all his love and need into their kiss. Their tongues dueled while he slid one of his hands down to cradle Gareth's ass and rock their groins together.

"Get a room."

They broke apart, panting and blushing at the disgusted-sounding voice interrupting. Gareth climbed to his feet and held out his hand to help Padraig stand. He adjusted his cock and grimaced.

"Actually, I have a room." He pulled out his wallet and opened it, tugging a hotel key card from it. "It seems Steven really did just move to Boston. I'm staying at the Four Seasons."

Gareth's jaw dropped. "You're kidding, right?"

"Why would I kid about that?"

“The Four Seasons is one of the most expensive hotels in Boston. Whoever Steven was, he must have money.” Gareth flagged down a cab.

They piled in the taxi and told the driver where they wanted to go. Padraig wrapped his arm around Gareth’s shoulders and settled the man close to him.

Pressing his lips to Gareth’s ear, he whispered, “Maybe Steven is filthy rich and I won’t have to figure out what kind of work I’m qualified for.”

“If nothing else, we can get you work at the docks here in Boston. I’m sure there’s something for you to do.”

Chapter Sixteen

They piled out of the taxi at the Four Seasons and made their way through the crowd in the lobby to the elevators.

Stepping inside, they moved to the back where Padraig put his arm around Gareth's waist and whispered, "Was the watch the only thing that convinced you I was telling the truth?"

Gareth pulled up his sleeve to show Padraig that he was wearing the watch. "I've never worn it since I got it. In a strange way, it brought back too many memories, and no, the watch wasn't the only thing. You got me a first-edition *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. I didn't even know you knew I liked that book."

"I always saw you sitting off by yourself reading. I wanted to ask what book you found so interesting, but I wasn't sure you'd take me seriously." He shrugged.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm just a dockworker, Gareth. Nothing fancy. Dropped out of school when I was sixteen to go to work. You're educated, got a good job, and you read for fun." Padraig dipped his head a little, slightly embarrassed to be admitting his insecurities to Gareth.

Gareth punched him in the arm. "Don't be an idiot. None of that matters. I can't do what you do. I'd never have survived if I had to work the docks."

"This is our floor."

They pushed through the rest of the people and made it off before the doors shut. Wandering down the hallway, Padraig savored the feel of Gareth's arm wrapped around his waist. They halted at his door, and he got the key card to work.

Gareth pushed him in through the open door, and he stumbled, grabbing Gareth's arm as he went. They ended up in a pile on the bed. Wrestling, they managed to get their coats off, and Padraig pinned Gareth to the bed, using his bigger body to keep Gareth from moving.

He rocked their erections together and bit his lip to keep from moaning. Gareth got his hands between them and pressed against Padraig's chest, stopping him before he could kiss him.

"What?"

"I want you to tell me how you knew about *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*."

"Now?" He groaned.

"Yes, now. Once you tell me, we can get on to more important things...like our making love."

Gareth's soft smile hit Padraig in the gut. Suddenly the knowledge that he would be able to wake up next to this man for the rest of his life hit him. Tears welled and he blinked, trying to get rid of them before Gareth saw.

"What's wrong, Paddy?" Gareth caught a teardrop on his finger.

Shaking his head, he laughed and rolled to the side, keeping an arm over Gareth's waist. "Just getting emotional."

"Mmmm..." Gareth didn't say anything else.

"One time when you ran into me, you dropped a dog-eared copy of *Alice*."

Gareth sat up and stared down at him. "I wondered what happened to it. I looked everywhere in my office and then ended up buying a new copy. A week later, it appeared tucked behind my desk. Did you take it?"

He tried for an innocent look but obviously didn't pull it off because Gareth lifted one eyebrow in skepticism.

"Yeah, I did. I wanted to see what you found so fascinating about it. It took me an entire week to read, but I got through it and then returned it to you." He started unbuttoning his shirt.

"That's why you called me White Rabbit the last time I ran into you, and why you mentioned the watch."

Padraig undid his belt, unbuttoned his pants, then pulled the zipper down, enjoying how Gareth's gaze followed his hands. He pushed his pants down, bracing his feet on the bed and lifting his hips so he could strip.

"You're trying to distract me," Gareth muttered.

"Is it working?" Padraig pumped his cock once before holding out his hand. "Come on, love. I'll tell you everything, but later. The one thing dying has taught me is to enjoy what time we have, because we never know when it'll be taken from us. Now that I have you, I don't want to waste time on talking. Well, not right at this moment anyway."

Gareth chuckled as he climbed off the bed and undressed. Padraig leaned back on the pillows and watched, whistling softly as Gareth's cock popped free of his jeans.

"Come here," he demanded.

Not saying a word, Gareth returned to the bed and let Padraig position him so he was straddling his upper body in a way that put his cock right in front of Padraig's mouth.

"This is what I want."

He licked the wet tip of Gareth's prick, pressing into the slit and making Gareth hiss.

"Hold on to the headboard, babe, and don't be afraid to move. I can take all you've got."

Cupping Gareth's ass, he encouraged him to move while he opened his mouth and sucked Gareth's cock in. He let Gareth in until the flared head hit the back of his throat, and then he swallowed, massaging that slender prick with his muscles.

"Fuck," Gareth breathed, freezing for a second as he stared down at Padraig.

He met Gareth's gaze and hummed, letting his lover know it was okay to move whenever he wanted. He slid his fingers over and down Gareth's crease, teasing his hole a little.

Gareth rocked slowly at first, allowing Padraig to get used to the feel and weight of the warm flesh in his mouth. Padraig relaxed, not fighting or gagging. Who knew he'd be good at giving blowjobs?

Bringing his fingers to his mouth, he slipped them in along with Gareth's cock, getting them wet before setting them back at Gareth's opening. He pushed in as Gareth moved back.

"Oh" was the most he got out of Gareth for a while as they worked together to drive Gareth closer and closer to the edge.

Padraig worked Gareth's prick, licking and sucking with each stroke. He'd only given one blowjob before in his life, and it wasn't anything as hot as this one. He found that he liked pleasuring Gareth this way. He loved the way Gareth looked stretched out above him and the taste of the man's precum on his tongue. Adding another finger, he hit Gareth's gland with a knuckle.

"God," Gareth cried out, his smooth rhythm stuttering and his breath catching with each push against his gland.

Gripping Gareth's hip, Padraig urged him to speed up. Gareth braced his hands on the wall above them and really started to fuck his mouth with fast, quick strokes.

"Paddy, I'm gonna come soon," Gareth warned.

Paddy. How he'd longed to hear that particular name issued from Gareth's lips. Finally, he'd truly gotten what he wanted, Gareth knowing it was Paddy with him and not some guy he'd picked up at a bar.

Humming, he drove three fingers into Gareth and hit Gareth's gland again.

"Paddy," Gareth cried, flooding Padraig's mouth with his cum.

Padraig drank it down like the finest wine, though it was bitter and salty. He swallowed as fast as he could, but a few drops spilled from his mouth and trickled down his chin.

He licked and sucked until Gareth's prick softened in his mouth. With one last kiss to the flared head, he eased away, helping Gareth wiggle down so he was straddling Padraig's hips instead.

Gareth leaned down and, with a swipe of his tongue, cleaned off Padraig's chin before kissing him. Pulling back, Gareth gave him a satisfied grin.

"That was marvelous," Gareth complimented him.

He laughed and lifted his hips a little, getting his erection to bump against Gareth's opening. "Maybe you could help me out with a little problem I have here."

"Doesn't feel little to me." Gareth set his hands on Padraig's chest and tilted his hips, rubbing back against Padraig's cock.

"Thanks for that, love." Padraig chuckled. "Will you help me take care of it?"

"Oh, I'd be glad to."

Chapter Seventeen

Gareth laughed at the shocked look on Padraig's face as he climbed off him and knelt beside the man.

"I'm not sure that's what I had in mind."

He shook his head and grasped Padraig's shaft in his hand. "We don't have any lube, and I'm not taking you without some sort of slick."

Leaning over, he took Padraig into his mouth, getting him as wet as he could before Padraig gripped his hair and tugged him off.

"Even that much is almost too much for me, Gareth. I want to come in your ass."

"Good, because I want to feel you."

Gareth swung back around, took Padraig in his hand again, and steadied him as he pushed back. Padraig bit his lip, and Gareth could see the tremors running through the man's body as Padraig tried not to surge up into him. Gareth threw his head back, working through the burn of Padraig's cock breaching his ass.

"Are you okay?" Padraig reached up and stroked over his chest, pinching his nipples to distract him.

"Yeah, just let me breathe for a second."

"This is your show, love. Take as much time as you need." Padraig played with the light curls at his groin and trailed a finger over his cock, bringing it back to life.

Taking a deep breath, Gareth relaxed and Padraig's prick slid in until Gareth could feel the pubic hair at the base of Padraig's shaft against his ass.

"So full." He rocked slightly, enjoying the feeling of being stretched. "I'm never going to get used to that."

"Good. I don't want you to." Padraig settled his hands on Gareth's hips and gave him an expectant look. "Ready?"

He clenched his inner muscles, and the other man's eyes crossed. "Move already."

Padraig grunted, and Gareth wasn't ready when he lifted him up and slammed him back down on his cock. He cried out, his cock filling again as the head of his lover's prick hit his gland. He closed his eyes, allowing Padraig to dictate the speed and depth of each stroke.

Frustration soon built as Padraig kept his thrusts shallow and slow, never going deep enough. Panting, he braced his hands on Padraig's chest and tried to take over.

Padraig stopped moving and tightened his grip on Gareth's hips, kept him from sliding down farther as well.

"Come on, Paddy. Fuck me," Gareth snarled, taking one of Padraig's nipples between his finger and thumb, and pinched.

"Bloody hell." Padraig jerked but didn't lose his hold.

Gareth pouted. "I want to feel you. Please."

With a heave, Padraig rolled them over, putting Gareth on his back, and grinned as Gareth gasped and grabbed his shoulders.

"Are you ready?"

Swallowing hard, he encircled Padraig's waist with his legs and pressed his hands against the headboard. He nodded and whispered, "Do it."

Padraig grunted and started moving, filling Gareth's ass as deep as he could, and Gareth rocked, unable to do anything but take what Padraig gave him. Padraig slipped his hands under Gareth's shoulders and sped up.

Skin hitting skin filled the air, along with gasps and grunts as Gareth and Padraig connected in the most intimate of ways. Gareth couldn't keep his eyes open as desire swirled through him. He tipped his head back and bit his lip, not wanting to scream but knowing it was a losing battle.

He moaned as Padraig leaned down and bit his shoulder. Taking his hands from above him, he slid them down to hold his lover's flexing ass.

Sweat dripped off Padraig's chin to run down Gareth's chest. The musky tang of sweat and sex scented the room, and Gareth's cock, caught between their bodies, swelled and ached until another climax overwhelmed him.

"Paddy," he screamed, arching up as hot liquid spilled between them.

"Fuck, love." Padraig rode him through his climax and then pulled out. "Hands and knees."

Gareth scrambled to get into that position, offering himself without argument or protest. Padraig shoved back in, and Gareth's cock twitched, a few more drops of cum squirting from it.

They worked together, driving Padraig closer and closer to his own climax. Gareth clenched his inner muscles, continuing to massage Padraig's cock each time the man was buried deep in him.

"Gonna soon," Padraig warned.

"Do it. Fill me up, Paddy. I want to feel your cum inside me."

One more thrust inside and Padraig froze, flooding Gareth's ass with hot seed. Gareth dropped his head forward and milked Padraig's prick, not wanting to let him go until he emptied every last drop.

He whimpered when Padraig slid out and flopped to the bed beside him. Lying on his stomach, he turned his head to find Padraig watching him, chest heaving. Smiling at him, Padraig patted his ass.

“Give me a second to get my muscles working again and I’ll clean us up.”

Gareth grunted and grimaced at the wet, sticky mess trickling along his thighs. Fuck. They hadn’t used a condom. He met Padraig’s gaze.

“No condom,” he muttered.

Padraig gave him a look and pushed up to lean against the pillows at the head of the bed. “I haven’t been with anyone for ten years. You know that, and before I died, I never had sex with a guy.”

“Really? Did you not think you were gay or what?” He climbed off the bed and headed to the bathroom where he washed up before bringing a wet cloth for Padraig.

Padraig wiped off and tossed the cloth back toward the bathroom. Taking Gareth’s hand, he tugged him down on the bed, tucking him close to his side.

“It wasn’t so much not knowing I was gay, I just didn’t want to risk being found out. My friends weren’t the most open-minded, you know. I got some handjobs and blowjobs in back alleys where I knew no one would see me.” Padraig caressed his back. “You were the first guy I ever cared about enough to risk coming out for, and then I was killed in a bloody stupid bar fight.”

“What was the fight about? No one could ever tell me.” He rested his hand on Padraig’s chest, soothed by the feel of his heart beating.

Padraig chuckled. “I don’t remember now. Probably one of my friends shooting off his mouth and needing help to keep from getting his ass kicked. Only he picked the wrong guys to fight with. These carried knives and knew how to use them.”

“It must have been awful.” He shivered.

"It was, and having to relive it was even worse." Padraig paused and then went on. "While I was bleeding to death, all I could think about was you and how I'd never get the chance to tell you how much I care for you or give you the present I bought for you."

Gareth sat up and cupped Padraig's face, staring into those beautiful green eyes he'd always loved. "No more regret, Paddy. We're together and who really cares how it happened. Somehow, fate has decided we get a second chance. We'll have more birthdays to spend together."

He kissed Paddy softly, putting all his love and hope into it. He meant what he said. It didn't matter anymore how Paddy had managed to come back to him. All that mattered was that he was there and Gareth could hold, kiss, and talk to him.

Paddy settled his hands on Gareth's hips and smiled as Gareth sat back. His gaze left Gareth to look around the room.

"What do you suppose Steven did for a living?" Paddy nodded toward the expensive luggage stacked in the corner. "Those bags look like they are worth some money, plus he had a lot of cash in his wallet when he was killed."

Gareth snuggled closer to Paddy and shrugged. "We'll have to go through his stuff and see if there's a cell phone or something. Maybe someone is missing him right now."

"Seamus told me Steven was alone in the world." Paddy closed his eyes for a second. "I felt guilty about taking Steven's body, but Seamus said that Steven was supposed to die in that alley last night. No one was going to miss him."

Gareth thought about it for minute while tracing patterns on Paddy's abs. "I don't think we have to answer all the questions right at the moment. We'll check you out and go back to my place. After getting some sleep, I'll head to work, because they're not going to let me take another day off just yet, and you can do some investigating of Steven's past."

Wiggling a little, Paddy got them covered with blankets and tucked in. "Why don't we just sleep here tonight and worry about all that other stuff in the morning?"

“Even better, because I didn’t feel like leaving and going out in the chilly weather right now. I like being warm and cuddling with you.”

He drifted off to sleep, letting the feel of Paddy’s body next to him ease him.

* * * * *

Padraig climbed out of bed without waking Gareth up. He wandered over to the windows and tugged the curtains open slightly so he could look out, but the city lights wouldn’t bother his lover. Touching the cool glass, his gaze was caught by his hand. It was solid with thick fingers and scarred knuckles. Gone were Steven’s smooth, elegant fingers with no scars to mar them.

He glanced up at his reflection in the window. Seamus was right. His hair had darkened even more and his skin had lightened. No longer was his face thin with high cheekbones and a pointy chin. Now he recognized the face looking back at him.

With a shuddering sigh, he rested his forehead against the smooth surface. How could he be grateful for his second chance when it meant Steven had to die for him to have it?

“Take it. Maybe he can put it to better use than I did” echoed through his head, and he frowned. Had Steven known what was going on? Did he willingly let Seamus take his body for Padraig?

Gareth gave a soft snore, and Padraig turned to look at him. Fate seemed a fickle thing if it took him away from Gareth only to allow them back together ten years later, but he wasn’t going to argue with it, and Gareth had been right. No point regretting what’s gone on before.

“Thank you, Seamus, wherever you are,” he whispered, hoping the elf could hear him.

“We’re even now, Padraig. A life for a life. Don’t waste this one. Maybe I’ll see you next St. Patrick’s Day.” Seamus’s voice echoed through his mind, and he smiled.

“I look forward to it.”

“Paddy?” Gareth sat up in their bed, covers pooling around his waist. “Who are you talking to?”

“Just saying thank you, love.” He climbed back under the blankets and kissed his lover. “Go back to sleep. You have work tomorrow and I have to figure out how to start my life again.”

Gareth kissed him back before settling beside him on his stomach with an arm thrown over Padraig’s waist. He buried his nose in Gareth’s strawberry blond curls and shut his eyes.

Fate and one grateful elf had stepped in to give him another shot at life and love. His life was starting out on the right foot this time, with Gareth in his arms and their love as solid as his new body.

 THE END 

T. A. Chase

I'm a day dreamer and a person who loves to wonder 'what if' all the time. That's how my stories have gotten started with that one little question. I'm intrigued by life and the world. The interactions of humans amaze me. The lengths we go to shut each other out, but also the pain we are willing to endure to love someone.

I live in the Midwest with my partner of nine years. We're doing our best to prove that couples like us can stay faithful and together forever if we so chose. We're owned by two slightly neurotic cats.

Visit me on the Web at <http://tachase.blogspot.com/>