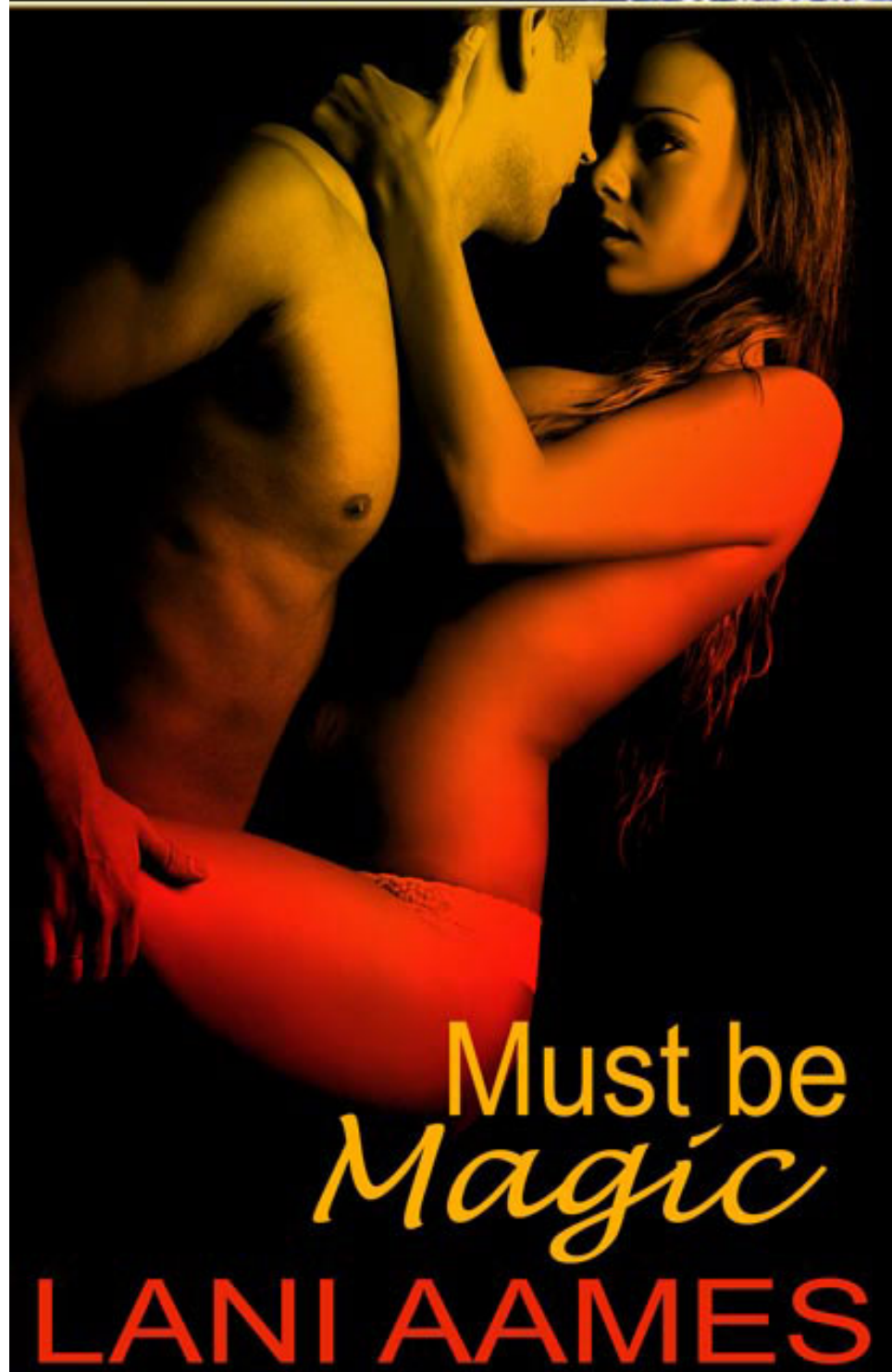


ELLORA'S CAVE XANADU



Must be
Magic

LANI AAMES

Must Be Magic

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To save his principedom from the greedy Faerie King, the Prince of Pixieland must marry by the next Equinox. A desperate spell hurls him into the realm of his Heart Match—who just happens to be a mortal woman!

Cast into the Other Realm—the human world—on St. Patrick’s Day, Prince Myghal pursues Kerry O’Neill with physical pleasures beyond her wildest dreams. He has only three days to convince her they are meant to be together.

Kerry has to believe that the man she had fantastic sex with and is falling hard for is actually the Prince of Pixies. She *must* accept it, because she has to brave the tunnels of the Troll who lives under the bridge across the street to save Myghal. And her heart has known all along that their incredible connection must be magic.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Must be Magic

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MUST BE MAGIC

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Chapter One

The rush of high winds displaced the roar of furiously beating Faerie wings as Prince Myghal darted through the doorway at the top of the tallest turret of Castle Faer. His trusted men, Malthe right behind him, and Sirrin bringing up the rear, slammed the heavy wooden door shut and leaned against it just in time.

Myghal relaxed. Two Pixies, especially if one of them was his massive friend and personal guard Sirrin, could easily hold back a horde of infernal Faeries.

As soon as Myghal stepped out from the shelter of stone around the doorway, the gusting wind made it difficult to stand, but he bent into the wind and made his way to the edge of the parapet. Leaning over in the narrow space between the protective blocks of stone, he looked down.

Winks of light, indicating cozy homes, dotted the storm-shrouded landscape as far as he could see to the right. In the other direction, there was nothing but the darkness that marked the edge of Wildwood, the dense and treacherous forest separating the Faerie Kingdom from his home, Pixieland.

Looking down, he saw that most of the Faerie Guard had made their way outside and were fighting the gusting wind to the top of the turret. The storm delayed them, but Myghal and his friends had to think of something. Fast.

"My liege," Malthe shouted from his side. "It appears we're trapped."

Myghal agreed with his Chancellor who had the most annoying habit of stating the obvious. Still, Malthe's habit allowed them both to look at a situation clearly.

Faeries at the door, Faeries swarming the turret by air, and even Faeries who probably thought they might reach them faster than braving the wind were climbing the side of the tower. Myghal had been held captive for nearly two moons, and he was sick to death of Faeries.

Sirrin joined them, his bulk blocking most of the wind. Beside him, Malthé was dwarfed, even though the Chancellor was as tall as Myghal himself. Sirrin made anyone in his vicinity look small and insignificant.

Myghal glanced back at the door. Sirrin had moved a huge block of stone from somewhere to hold the door closed. Myghal wouldn't be surprised to find out that he had ripped it from the sheltering wall. Unusually large and muscular for a Pixie, Sirrin's strength often came in handy.

"I'll fight to the death, Myghal." Sirrin's brown eyes sparked, and he punctuated his impassioned declaration by drawing his broadsword.

"No." Myghal laid his hand on his friend's shoulder. Sirrin had been with him since childhood and, since the death of Myghal's father had made Myghal ruler of Pixieland, the only person to call him by his given name. "We've not spilled Faerie blood so far and we won't. They won't be able to hold us responsible for this in any way."

Sirrin slid his weapon back into its sheath, but his wide forehead creased and his eyes narrowed. "We're not responsible at all. Who would blame us for defending ourselves and our prince?"

Myghal exchanged meaningful glances with his Chancellor. Sirrin was his best friend, but the politics of the principedom and their sometimes precarious position within the Faerie Realm escaped him.

"They'll find a way. They always do." Myghal looked out over the edge of the parapet again. The Faerie Guard drew closer, but battling the stiff winds would keep them at bay a while longer. Maybe long enough for them to think of something.

Sirrin snorted. "If I can't kill'em, can I clip their wings?"

"No!" Myghal shouted.

Sirrin's growl of disappointment was his only response.

"Do you have any dust?" Myghal asked when he turned back to his men. His supply of pixie dust had been confiscated at the time of his kidnapping.

“My liege,” Malthe began in a tone of voice that signified what he was about to say was not good news at all. “Sir Sirrin and I brought as much as we could carry, but the Faeries were taking no chances. They had half the Guard on watch and it took all the dust we had to get past them and reach you. I used the last of it on the six guarding your cell.”

Suddenly, Sirrin drew back and swung his meaty fist toward Myghal’s head. Luckily, Myghal’s reflexes were quick. He ducked and Sirrin’s fist smashed into a Faerie face. The guardsman shrieked as he fell back.

Sirrin looked at Myghal and shrugged. “I didn’t kill him and I didn’t touch his wings.”

Malthe frowned, his brows furrowing over his eyes. “We have to do something and soon. It won’t be long before more than we can dispatch will be upon us.”

Myghal agreed. But what could they do? Pixies didn’t have wings. They could fly, but only for short distances. None of them would make it to the ground from this height or through these high winds alive. They needed dust.

Sirrin laughed and clapped Malthe’s thin back, nearly sending the older man to his knees. “You have Myghal’s Heart Match dust.”

Malthe’s pale blue eyes widened. “Of course. As required by law, I have the charmed dust on me at all times.”

Myghal held out his hand. “Give it to me.”

“But, my liege—” Malthe began with a splutter.

“We don’t have time to argue and we don’t have any other choice,” Myghal snapped.

Malthe reached beneath his cloak and tunic, to a pouch fastened around his waist. “The dust has already been charmed and can’t be used for anything else. You know this.”

By the laws set upon them when Pixieland broke away from the Faerie Realm and declared their independence, a newly coronated prince must be wed by the next Equinox or the principdom would revert to Faerie rule. Myghal had had his share of women, but he'd never found one he favored over another. Having no preference, Myghal had decided to invoke the ancient custom of using Pixie magic to find the perfect mate to be his Princess.

The night before the ceremony was scheduled to take place, he had been kidnapped by the Faeries. Norfe, the Faerie King, had been trying to regain control of Pixieland for as long as he'd been on the throne. The Pixies supplied the Faeries with dust, and rulers before Norfe had recognized the importance of keeping the Pixies happy. Norfe's pride wouldn't have him or his realm beholden to anything or anyone.

Malthe and Sirrin had managed to infiltrate the castle and rescue Myghal, but now they all were trapped without Pixie dust. Using the Heart Match dust was the only way.

"The incantation brings your mate to you," Malthe reminded him, still clutching the pouch. "Transporting an unsuspecting maiden into the middle of this situation will only give King Norfe a greater advantage in preventing your marriage."

Myghal nodded, but the idea had already formed. "Can't I change the incantation?"

Malthe's eyes grew wide again. "My liege, that incantation was composed eons ago and has been tested by time. To change the spell without careful thought is to invite disaster."

"What could be more disastrous than the mess we're in now?" Myghal asked and took the bag from Malthe.

The three men huddled around the small bag of dust as Myghal untied the knot. "How does it go?"

Malthe recited the rhyme:

"In the realm of Fae and Kin,

"We have dwelled, alone, apart.

"Bring to me, in good will and good faith,

"The other half of my heart."

Myghal thought a moment, then put his hand into the bag and brought out a fistful of dust. "I'll change one line, to take us to my Heart Match instead of bringing her here. That should be all right, shouldn't it? Are you ready?"

"I think changing that one part won't be harmful. But my liege," Malthe added quietly, "the dust will only work on you."

Myghal looked at his friends. He'd forgotten about that. If he used the dust, he'd have to leave his two most valuable advisors – and friends – behind.

"Hurry!" Sirrin suddenly shouted. "Here they come!"

Myghal looked up. Two Faeries, with swords unsheathed, hovered over the parapet trying to land safely in the wind. He was glad it had always been standard procedure to charm the dust before it was shipped to the faeries so that they had limited use. They couldn't use it to transport and couldn't use it against Pixies. Otherwise, he and his friends would have been surrounded by faeries before they'd gone far from his cell. Now, at least, they had a chance, however slim.

"He's right, Prince Myghal," Malthe said. "Do it."

"As soon as I'm gone, give yourselves up," Myghal shouted his orders. "They don't have any reason to harm you, and they know if they do, they'll lose their shipments of dust."

Sirrin growled.

"You heard your Prince," Malthe said sternly.

But before Sirrin could agree, the Faeries landed. One leaned into the wind, and with a feral growl, charged.

Myghal watched as Sirrin blocked the Faerie. He grabbed the guardsman's slender wrist in his huge hand, and Myghal heard a bone snap. Myghal started toward them, but Malthe held him back.

“Hurry!” his Chancellor shouted into his ear. “You have to go. I’ll keep Sirrin under control.”

Myghal knew he had no choice. He tossed the dust straight up and as it fell the wind whisked it around him, the fine glittering crystals swirling around him in ever widening spirals. More Faeries landed and raced toward him. He didn’t have time to recite the entire incantation.

“Take me to the other half of my heart!” he shouted.

Through the sparkling haze of the dust as it enveloped him and his body began to disintegrate, he saw Malthe’s eyes widen in horror at his abbreviated spell. By Malthe’s reaction, one would have thought he’d bring about an end to civilization as they knew it by shortening the incantation. Malthe was overreacting, as usual. What could go wrong? Myghal would be taken to the one woman who would make the best life-companion for him, and he for her.

Malthe and Sirrin had backed away from him.

Myghal didn’t often use the dust to transport himself and the sensation was unsettling. His stomach lurched, and he felt as if every joint was being pulled apart. He knew he’d arrive in one piece, wherever he landed, but the journey there was never something he looked forward to.

Through the thickening haze, he saw several Faeries capture Malthe and Sirrin. A couple of the guardsmen braved the dust and reached in for him, but their hands went completely through his now transparent body.

Then everything went black.

Chapter Two

Kerry O'Neill bumped into the Leprechaun when she turned around from hanging the latest sale price sign. He caught her before she fell, his strong hands on her shoulders, and she clutched his arms to regain her balance. Her eyes swept over him. She'd seen any number of Leprechaun costumes since the first of March, but this one was the worst yet. Aside from his eyes, which were the color of tender spring shoots flecked with gold, he wasn't wearing a speck of green.

He wore brown leather half-boots, tan leggings, and a maroon tunic laced over a billowy sleeved shirt cinched in with a brown belt. His long ash-blond hair fell in thick waves below his shoulders, random strands in tiny braids decorated with beads and feathers. He reminded Kerry of the elf in the *Lord of the Rings* movies...except that his rugged face, height, and breadth was more than any elf could ever hope for.

"Are you all right?" He spoke with a slight British accent in a deep resonant baritone.

"Fine, thanks." Kerry found her balance, removed her hands, and backed away, shrugging off his hold on her. There was something achingly familiar about his touch, as if she belonged in his arms and he belonged in hers. But she was certain she'd never seen him before in her life.

"You're at the wrong place," she told him, kneeling to replace the hammer in her toolbox that sat on the ground. "The Leprechaun costume contest is across the street at Sir Plantsalot."

His gaze followed hers to the medieval themed garden nursery on the other side of the thoroughfare. The false front was shaped and painted like a castle complete with a turret at each end. The entrance and exit driveways were drawbridges over the drainage ditch "moat". Strands of colorful pennants ran from the tops of the turrets to

the ground. Larger pennants fluttered in the breeze from poles in the cone-shaped tower roofs.

“I’m not a —” he began.

But Kerry didn’t care what he was or wasn’t. She slammed the toolbox shut, drowning out whatever he was saying. “They stole my idea. Somehow, they caught wind of the Leprechaun costume contest I was planning for St. Patrick’s Day, and they stole it.”

Kerry picked up the toolbox and brushed past him, once again all too aware of his physical presence. She couldn’t understand her reaction, why her body was responding to him as if they were lovers.

Shaking her head, she pushed through the gate that led to the lawn and garden ornaments. The toolshed was in the back. When she reached it, she opened the door, but the darkness within was like a black abyss just waiting to swallow her up and crush her. She flipped the switch a couple of times, but no flare of light filled the small shed. The damn light bulb had blown again. Sweat broke out on her upper lip, and she set the toolbox just inside the threshold, pushing it farther in with her foot. Shutting the door, she turned around — only to collide with the Leprechaun again.

Once more she found herself in his embrace, and her body immediately switched from an unnatural fear to a natural arousal. Her heart raced and blood pounded through her. She didn’t know why she was having such a disturbing physical reaction to him. Her hormones didn’t normally go off the chart over every good-looking man she encountered.

Maybe because it had been too long since she’d been with a man, but she didn’t have time to deal with it. Ever since Sir Plantsalot moved in across the street six months ago, with its extravagant display and double the area of her own nursery, she’d been concentrating on trying to keep the business afloat. But it had been an uphill battle. She extricated herself from his arms.

"I told you, the contest is over there." She backed away from him with a toss of her head then looked him up and down again. "Tell you the truth, I don't think you have a very good chance of winning. You don't look like a Leprechaun. You're not wearing green."

"But I'm not—"

Kerry didn't wait to hear his response. She strode off toward the greenhouse. She had too much work to do without getting involved with a badly dressed Leprechaun...no matter how attracted to him she was.

"...a Leprechaun," Myghal finished to empty air.

He frowned as he watched her hurry down the path toward the transparent building filled with all kinds of plants. He'd never considered his Heart Match could possibly be in the Other Realm, the dimension where humans lived. It'd been a long time since he'd walked among humans. Their world was too noisy and flashy, their air too dirty. They were always rushing, yet they seemed to accomplish little.

And how was he supposed to carry a human woman back into Pixieland in the Faerie Realm when he was out of dust and wasn't sure he could get back himself?

But he found his gaze drawn to the way her hips swayed in the tight blue leggings she wore. No, they were called jeans, he suddenly remembered. He liked everything about her, from her red-gold hair to her crystal blue eyes to the sprinkling of freckles across her upturned nose. Twice, she had slammed into him, and twice, her generous breasts had pressed against his chest. He'd seen her nipples tighten under the form-fitting shirt she wore—T-shirt, it was called.

A dull ache began in his balls as his cock responded to...her. He didn't even know her name.

She didn't seem to want anything to do with him and that went against what the dust was supposed to do. His Heart Match was supposed to instantly recognize him as

her mate, as well. But she seemed to have other things on her mind. Like the contest across the street.

She disappeared through the door, and Myghal's gaze drifted over the statuary inside the fence. An army of garden gnomes—from small ones only as tall as a handspan to two in the back that were about the right size for Gnomes—was spread out over most of the area, along with bird baths, small benches, and flower pots. Too bad the Gnomes weren't real.

He smiled. No self-respecting Gnome would be caught in the clothing these wore. Red vests, blue trousers, yellow shirts, purple caps. Gnomes dressed in browns and tans and dark greens to blend in with the forest they lived in and the earth they worked in.

One of the two tall statues near the fence caught his eye. It looked suspiciously like a Troll... Myghal strolled through the stone army. No, not stone—concrete. The human words were coming back to him slowly. He wandered near the suspect statue. That one looked like a Troll because humans had no idea what Gnomes and Trolls really looked like. Just as they had no idea how evil Faeries could be or they wouldn't present them as children's playthings.

Satisfied that the statue was only human error, Myghal turned around and headed toward the building where she had gone. If it was what humans called St. Patrick's Day here, then he had only a few days before the Spring Equinox. Not much time to convince the human woman that he was Prince of the Pixies, she was destined to be his Princess, and discover a way to get them both back to Pixieland.

* * * * *

Tredje, the Troll, sucked in a deep breath when the Pixie Prince disappeared into the building. He punched the Gnome next to him. "Do ye think the Pixie recognized us?"

Gomit grunted. "Here, now. I don't have to suffer that kind of abuse."

Tredje snarled. Neither of them was happy with the situation, and the other knew it. When the old Faerie Queen—the present King’s great-grandmother—banished the Trolls to live with other assorted earth-based kin in the Other Realm, they had declared their independence from the Fae. Of course, the Fae still considered them in their service. Fortunately, the Fae rarely visited the Other Realm these days and seldom had need of Trolls.

But the Sprite messenger, tiny in both realms and able to pass from one to the other in a body of water as small as a dewdrop, had arrived a month ago and called on the Troll Thane and the Gnome General. Through its ability to locate Faerie Realm folk that all Sprites possessed, it had brought news that the Pixie Prince would soon pass into the Other Realm to go to his Heart Match. Sprites were also able to pass through the time continuum as well. This one had slipped through to see where the Prince had gone and who he had gone to, then it had brought the news into this realm before the Prince’s escape actually happened in the Faerie Realm.

The Trolls and the Gnomes were to stop the Prince by any means necessary. It happened that Tredje lived across the way from where the Prince would land, and the General had chosen Gomit, so the two had been paired to carry out the Faerie King’s mission. A sorrier warrior, Tredje had never seen. Still, a sorry Gnome warrior could beat the best Pixie any day. And with the help of a Troll, they’d soon be done with this assignment and Tredje could be back home under his bridge sipping dandelion wine in no time at all.

Gomit scratched behind his ear. “I don’t know. He looked at you a long time, but I think we blend in well enough.”

Tredje looked at the colorful clothes and little pointy hats he’d pilfered for them to wear to match the other Gnome statues. Pitiful, what humans thought of Gnomes.

“Aye, but Pixies have a sense about things, I’ll give’em that,” Tredje said and tugged his beard.

“Do we have a plan?”

Tredje sighed. They'd been over it dozens of times while waiting for the Prince to arrive, but the Gnome's short term memory was shorter than he was.

It would have been easier if they'd been able to snatch the woman before the Pixie showed up, but the Pixie's spell would have brought him to the exact spot where they would have hidden the woman, so it had to be done after he arrived. "We kidnap the woman until after the Equinox. With the woman out of the way, the Pixie won't be able to wed her and all will be well for King Norfe."

"True, true. But how do we get her?"

"We wait until dark. You know as well as I do that she stays here until past sunset. Then we grab her."

"And where did we say we'd hide her?"

Tredje sighed heavily. The Gnome was hopeless. "We'll take her back to me bridge across the street. The Pixie won't think to look right under his nose."

Chapter Three

Kerry was all too aware when the Leprechaun entered the greenhouse. She continued to trowel dirt, moving plants to bigger pots. She couldn't stand the thought of throwing out any plant and tried to keep them all until they sold. Or died. She really wasn't very good at running a nursery, something she'd always dreamed of doing. But her dreams had entailed actually working all day with the plants, not spending most of her time taking care of the business end.

Kerry had decided long ago what she really needed was a job as a gardener. Unfortunately, she didn't discover this until after she'd borrowed the money to open Cockleshells & Silverbells Nursery...well, the whimsical name had sounded good at the time.

She watched the Leprechaun out of the corner of her eye as he surveyed the rows of plants. Too bad he wasn't a real Leprechaun because she'd caught him twice. Inadvertently, but still she'd had her hands on him both times. He would have to give her his pot of gold, and she'd never have to worry about money again.

When he started moving the plants around, she stood and called out to him.

"Hey, is there something I can do for you?"

"The plants aren't happy. Coriander and dill should be together, but mint should never be near the parsley."

He sounded like he knew what he was talking about. And if re-organizing her plants kept him away from her, then all the better. Why he didn't just go across the street and enter the contest, she didn't know.

After a while, when she'd almost finished, she looked up. He'd moved nearly every plant in the herb section and had started on the flowers. But, she had to admit, the new

arrangement looked—and even felt—more harmonious as she walked between the rows of herbs to stand beside him.

“You really do have a wonderful way with plants,” Kerry said, not in the least jealous. Well, maybe a little. She had a green thumb and plants prospered under her care. But she didn’t have any kind of sixth sense that let her just *know* which plants should be where.

“Where I come from, knowing about flowers and plants is natural,” he said with a shrug.

“Where do you come from? You sound like you might be from England, but your accent’s not quite like anything I’ve ever heard before.” Then Kerry laughed. “Not that I hear very many English accents around here. Mostly what I hear is on TV or in the movies, and I imagine most of them are faked.”

“England,” he said as he stepped around her to move another pot of marigolds.

Kerry had the feeling he was just repeating the word, not really confirming that it was where he was from. When he didn’t say anything else, she didn’t pursue it. It wasn’t any of her business anyway.

“My name’s Kerry O’Neill. I own Cockleshells & Silverbells, and I wish I could afford to hire you. Although if I could hire anybody, it’d be a bookkeeper, so that I could spend all my time with the plants.”

He straightened another pot and looked at her. His eyes were the lightest and loveliest shade of green she’d ever seen. Even the color of spring shoots was too dark. Misty green...like morning fog drifting across a forested mountain in summer...

Kerry shook her head. When did she become poetic again? There had been a period in her life when she could take the time to stop and smell the roses she loved to tend, and then describe the experience in poetry or prose, but she hadn’t been able to do that in too long. Now, all her energy was spent in keeping her head above water.

“Kerry is a beautiful name. I’m Myghal,” he said.

Strange name for a strange man.

"Thank you. Myghal is an unusual name."

"Not where I'm from."

"England?"

"England."

"Right." Kerry had the feeling he wasn't being entirely truthful with her, but he wasn't exactly lying either. He was...a puzzlement. "I'm sorry, but all I can offer for all your help is to share my lunch."

"You have a smudge." He raised his hand to her face, his fingers splayed across her cheek and jaw as his thumb wiped a spot at the point of her chin. Then the tip of his thumb slowly swiped across her bottom lip.

She had the sudden urge to share more than her lunch, like her bed. Desire, hot and sweet, swept through her at his touch. She just wanted to close her eyes and let him kiss her like he seemed to want to do. Maybe if she lost herself in a kiss and sex with a stranger, she wouldn't have to worry about the nursery or how to make the loan payment or anything else for a while. It would be nice not to have to think about anything except physical pleasure.

It would be over too soon, though, and the money problems would still exist. She sighed and backed up a step, tilting her head away from his hand. He took the hint and his arm dropped to his side.

"Let's get cleaned up and then we can eat." A quaver in her voice revealed how much he affected her.

She led the way to the sink, washed up, and left him to do the same. She hurried to her desk, set in a corner of the greenhouse behind a row of potted pampas grass. There was a smaller building in front, but she had felt suffocated and closed in when she tried to work there. One day she had simply dragged her desk and chair out into the greenhouse. Afterwards, much of her anxiety about doing paperwork had disappeared.

Not all, but quite a bit. Being closed inside a tiny office with no window had just about sent her over the edge.

She pulled her lunch out of the mini-fridge and opened the first plastic bowl. Four boiled eggs. She hadn't had time to make a sandwich that morning. She lifted the lid on the other bowl to reveal pale green grapes. She split the bunch and dropped one in each bowl, then put two of the eggs in the other bowl. Two eggs and half a bunch of grapes would hold her until supper.

Myghal joined her as she opened a desk drawer. She kept salt and pepper shakers on hand, so she wouldn't have to remember to bring them from home if she needed them for her lunch. She motioned for Myghal to take a seat, then pushed aside papers and a handful of pens looking for the containers. She found the black pepper shaker easily enough, but the white saltshaker was nowhere to be found.

"I know it's got to be here somewhere," she muttered, rifling through the papers again. The drawer wasn't that big and it wasn't that cluttered. She should be able to find a four-inch-tall shaker.

"What are you searching for?"

She set the black shaker down with a solid thud. "All I have is pepper. I can't find the —"

She'd pulled the drawer out too far and it fell with a clatter, scattering pens and papers in all directions. Myghal helped her to gather them up. She still hadn't found the saltshaker. Where could she have put it? She'd never moved it from her desk before.

As Kerry reached in the refrigerator for something to drink, she thought she must be losing her mind. Her first set of plans for the Leprechaun contest had disappeared, too. She'd manage to recreate half of them when she saw the sign across the street at Sir Plantsalot announcing a Leprechaun costume contest. She'd thrown them away in disgust, wondering if someone from Sir Plantsalot had pretended to be a customer and stolen her papers. Now, it seemed she might have mislaid them herself and the contest was an unhappy coincidence.

Chapter Four

Kerry brought out two bottles of water, her last, and made a mental note to add it to her grocery list.

"I usually have iced tea, but I was running late this morning and left it sitting on the kitchen counter. We'll have to drink water."

She pushed one bowl and a bottle of water toward him.

He plucked a couple of the grapes and popped them in his mouth. She had the urge to tell him he should eat the eggs first, but who was she to tell anyone how to eat their lunch? Even if it was her lunch.

"What was the sign you were putting up when I—when I arrived?" he asked as he ate a few more grapes.

Kerry chewed a bite of egg and swallowed, washing it down with water. "Posting the latest sale, trying to get rid of the shamrocks and Irish roses. I ordered more than I should have in anticipation of the Leprechaun costume contest bringing in crowds of people. It did, but not for me. Sir Plantsalot has had a booming business all week long. I've seen people over there that used to be my best customers. But that happened as soon as Sir Plantsalot moved in."

Myghal had started eating an egg. "Why do you think your customers abandoned you?"

"The ambiance. You can't compete with a castle. And they have a wider variety of stock at lower prices because they can buy in bulk. Even if I could afford to carry everything they do, I don't have the space. Their place is twice the size of mine." Kerry shook her head and sighed. "I was doing very well before they moved in six months ago. I was the only nursery in this part of the city and had built a nice clientele for only having been in business one year. But the first weekend they opened, my sales where

half what they had been the week before. They've gone down ever since. I had to let go the one full-time employee and the two part-timers, and I had to give up my dream of hiring someone to keep the books so I could concentrate on working with the plants. Some weeks I don't break even. I guess you noticed that you've been here a few hours and not one customer has shown up. They're all over there, voting on the best Leprechaun costume."

Kerry stopped. She was surprised at how bitter she sounded. She shouldn't be going on and on about her problems.

"I'm sorry things aren't going well for you, Kerry," Myghal said. He sounded as if he were truly sorry and not just being polite.

"Thanks. I wish it could have worked out, too. The sign I put up slashed everything by fifty percent. I guess I need to change it to seventy-five percent now. I'm losing money, but I'd rather see the plants be sold than left to wither and die. Tomorrow, I'll give away a shamrock and an Irish rose with every purchase. If there are any purchases, that is."

It was time to change the subject. Talking about how her nursery had failed was depressing. "Lunch isn't much, but it's the only way I can thank you for what you did with the plants. How do you know which plants go where?"

"They tell me," he said with a mischievous smile. He bit into an egg, foregoing the pepper, and washed it down with a gulp of water.

She stopped chewing and pressed her lips together. She loved plants more than most people, and she often talked to them, but she had never even imagined that they talked back. She should have known better than to allow him to hang around. He was a stranger with a strange name and strange clothes, even for St. Paddy's Day. Maybe he'd got a head start on consuming green beer this morning.

He laughed, the corners of his eyes crinkling and his perfect white teeth shining. "I'm sorry, but the look on your face. I don't mean they talk to me, but they do

communicate in their own way. It's hard to explain, but I can feel where they want to be."

"Of course, that's what you meant," Kerry said and ducked her head to pop in the last of the egg. "I wish I had that kind of affinity with plants. They flourish under my care, but I don't hear what they have to say."

"Then you're not listening," he said. "All plants have an area of energy around them that changes when they're happy or sick or dying."

"An aura?"

"Yes, like an aura. You have to listen to the energy, feel its changes. Only then can you know what the plant wants." Myghal rose, came around the desk, and stood behind her. He leaned over, his head close to hers and took her hand. Holding her palm about two inches from the nearest pampas grass plant, he whispered. "Close your eyes and listen, Kerry O'Neill."

Kerry grinned, but did as he said. She heard nothing except his deep, even breathing. She felt nothing except his arm along hers, his fingers entwined with hers. His breath brushed her cheek each time he exhaled. She couldn't concentrate with him so close. He was too much of a distraction and a temptation.

"Do you feel it?" He whispered again, a sexy, husky murmur of words that made her feel things, all right, but not what he had in mind. Or did he?

She opened her eyes and shook her head, turning to look at him. This close, she could see the tiny flecks of gold clearly enough to count them. His fingers stayed snugly with hers as he brought her hand back away from the pampas grass and rested it on the desk.

"If you practice, you'll understand what they have to tell you."

She nodded, unable to speak. She wanted him to kiss her, wanted to kiss him, but she couldn't bring herself to make the first move. She didn't have time for a man in her life as much as she wanted one and needed one...no, wanted *this* one—Myghal.

She wanted Myghal badly. So badly that her nipples burned and her skin prickled where he touched. She had been slightly aroused since bumping into him the first time. The sexual feelings had heated to a slow simmer when he'd cleaned the smudge from her chin. Now, it bubbled through her, causing her to dampen her panties and her clit to pulse with an intense ache she hadn't experienced in a long time, if ever, and never this quickly. If she didn't do something, she would regret it for the rest of her life.

Kerry took a chance. She kissed him.

* * * * *

Tredje directed Gomit to stay with the Gnome statues. Gomit didn't object, just as Tredje suspected he wouldn't. In battle, Gnomes couldn't be stopped, but outside of full-scale war, they were the laziest of creatures. Taking up underground work after the Realm Wars had ceased, when there was no longer a need for an army of Gnomes, had softened the ugly blighters.

Turning his attention to the human woman, he'd noted her business wasn't very busy. Proudly, he'd also noticed a steady stream of human conveyances entering and leaving his castle across the way. That's what having a Troll reside beneath a bridge did for you! It also helped when the Troll stole the plans for a Leprechaun contest and stuffed them beneath your door. The contest would have brought in too many humans. He and the Gnome wouldn't have had the chance to capture the woman.

But back to the matter at hand. Aside from the Pixie—and Gomit and himself, of course—Tredje had yet to see another living soul enter the front gate this day. Not that the Pixie had entered by traditional human means. He'd popped into this dimension right behind where the woman stood after tacking a new sign across the old.

So, Tredje didn't try to conceal himself as he scurried across the loose gravel toward the building the Prince and his intended Princess had entered. He did try to make as little noise as possible as he neared the transparent wall. The greenhouse was full of

potted plants that fortunately obscured the outside view from the inside. Unfortunately, they obscured the inside view from the outside as well. Tredje couldn't see a thing.

He motioned for Gomit to join him. But either the Gnome was taking his statue act too seriously or he'd fallen asleep standing up. Tredje waved his arm in ever-widening arcs until Gomit finally saw him. Gomit trudged across the space between them, huffing for breath as he joined Tredje.

"We have to lure the woman out here somehow..." Tredje tapped his bearded chin as he looked around for inspiration. He espied the little hut in the back. The woman had gone to it to put up her tools earlier. Tredje had seen her flip the little switch that gave humans illumination, but no light had come on. And there was no window in the building. The perfect spot.

He poked Gomit. "There. That little hut. If we make some kind of noise out by the hut, she'll come running to see what it is. We'll trap her inside and tie her up. Then as soon as everything is quiet, we'll carry her to me bridge."

Gomit remained quiet, as he should, and Tredje grinned broadly. There was never anything wrong with a Troll's plans.

Then Gomit opened his mouth. "If we make a noise loud enough to bring the woman, won't the Pixie come, too?"

Tredje's grin turned to a snarl. Leave it to a Gnome to spoil a perfect Troll plan.

Tredje tapped his chin again. "We'll have to wait until the woman comes out to close for the night. She always inspects the grounds before leaving. We'll make a quieter noise, one she can hear but the Pixie can't. When she enters the hut to see what it is, we'll grab her then."

"But what if the Pixie comes with the woman to inspect the grounds before they leave?" Gomit whined, wringing his hands.

Tredje was ready with an answer. He poked Gomit in the chest. "In that case, Gnome, you'll have the privilege of creating a diversion to get the Pixie out of the way."

Chapter Five

Myghal was taken by pleasant surprise when Kerry pressed her lips to his. He knew she found him a curiosity, but she hadn't seemed particularly attracted to him until this moment. He had begun to think he'd ruined everything by not reciting the entire incantation, and that the dust had landed him with Kerry at random. But as she deepened the kiss, sliding her lips over his, slipping her arm around his neck, he knew she was his perfect match, the other half of his heart. He could feel it the same way he could sense what the plants wanted.

His cock thought so, too—a painful, throbbing reminder that he'd been imprisoned at Castle Faer for two moons without female companionship of any kind. By the time Malthe and Sirrin had rescued him, even the female Faerie guards were starting to look good.

How would it be with Kerry? he wondered. Need always drove him. The physical need he had no control over, and the emotional need was just as uncontrollable but impossible to slake. While he always found physical release, he'd never found an emotional connection with any Pixie female he'd fucked. Would it be different with Kerry? Pixie lore said that coupling with the other half of his heart would be an experience like no other.

If this melding of lips and mingling of breaths were indications, then he didn't need to worry at all.

Kerry's other hand slid down his chest, brushing his nipple, and his sac tightened. He knelt, fitting himself between her legs, and rested his hands on her thighs. She drew in a deep, sudden breath.

Myghal pushed his tongue between her parted lips as his hands glided up her thighs. His thumbs met where the seams of the material came together and were sewn

into a thick bump. He pressed in, rubbing in circles, and Kerry moaned into his mouth, her lips trembling against his. He continued the pressure and the circles until her hips thrust back and forth, rocking her clit into his thumbs in a constant rhythm.

He felt the tension build in her, felt her excitement escalate. Her breathing deepened and her lips went lax. She laid her head on his shoulder and put both arms around him. She was nearing her peak and he wanted to join her, to peel the jeans from her long legs and drive his cock into her hot wetness.

He shook and his knees grew weak at the mental image of fucking Kerry, but he managed to restrain himself. Kerry needed this as a gradual acceptance of their intimacy. If he tried to do more, the interruption might make her think twice about letting a stranger touch her like this, and she might refuse any further closeness. Without physical intimacy, he had little chance of convincing Kerry to travel to another dimension and marry him.

When her rhythm increased and little noises escaped her throat, Myghal knew it was almost time. He gentled the pressure of his thumbs, making her move into him harder. With only a few more strokes, her hips bucked and he felt her hands fist in the material of his tunic. She moaned, one long, low vibration that sounded like the sweetest music he'd ever heard and almost did him in, then her body went limp against him. He removed one hand and put his arm around her, caressing the long hank of hair down her back while his other thumb continued to massage the tender spot.

Gradually, her hands released his tunic, but she didn't move from his embrace. After a few moments, she cleared her throat.

"I-I'm sorry, I don't know what—"

"Shhh, don't be sorry," he said soothingly. "I only wanted to make you feel good."

She laughed, but it was a small sound and almost ended on a sob. She did pull away from him, then, wiping her eyes, but not meeting his. "It did feel good, Myghal. But I don't know why I let you do that. Especially here, in the middle of the day. Oh, my God, anybody could have walked in."

"But they didn't," he said and brushed strands of hair from her face. He placed a finger under her chin, compelling her to look at him. Her blue eyes were luminous with tears and her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. He was relieved to find no regret in her warm gaze.

She drew away from his touch and stood, a hand on her desk until she was steady. He was still kneeling and his face was now in an interesting location. If she were naked, he could have buried his tongue in her pussy easily. She seemed to suddenly become aware of this and her eyes grew wide. She stepped around and away from him.

He pushed himself to his feet with difficulty. His stiff cock made maneuvering a challenge if he didn't want to hurt himself. His weakened knees threatened to buckle, and, like Kerry, he used the desk for support until he was sure he could stand and walk.

"I have to go..." She waved in the general direction of the restroom. "I—" Then she kissed him, quickly, but with meaning. "I owe you one."

Then she was gone. He was almost in pain from the hard-on, but he grinned. He had Kerry's promise to take care of that problem. He just didn't know when.

Chapter Six

Out of embarrassment, Kerry spent the rest of the day putting as much distance between Myghal and herself as she could. He seemed to understand because he spent most of the afternoon outside, rearranging the plants out there. Every once in a while he caught her watching him, but he only smiled that incredibly sexy smile, all-knowing but not arrogant, as if they shared a secret no one else in the world could share.

She supposed that was true. No one else could know about what he'd done to her that afternoon in her office chair, that he'd given her the most intense orgasm she'd ever felt. Or perhaps it just seemed that way because it was him. Didn't sex seem better when it was with someone you felt an incredible connection to?

Not if you'd just met that someone a few hours ago.

But she had just met Myghal that morning, and she did feel an inexplicable connection to him, as if he were the missing piece in the jigsaw puzzle she called life.

All afternoon, she tried to reason with herself. She didn't really believe in love at first sight. That worked in old movies, fairy-tales, and romance novels, not in the real world. In the real world, there was so much to consider—backgrounds, religion, whether children were wanted, and a million other things she couldn't think of off-hand. Properly taking the time to get to know one another would reveal them.

Then she would look at Myghal and her heart would race. Every rational thought would dissolve in the heat of her desire for him. More than desire was impossible right now, but desire was enough.

Kerry had put up another sign announcing seventy-five percent off everything and business had picked up. There was a sporadic stream of customers in and out all afternoon and many of them actually bought something. She remained open until long after Sir Plantsalot had closed, hoping to catch people on their way home from work.

It was well past sunset and there hadn't been a customer for half an hour when she decided to call it a night. She asked Myghal to make sure all the lights were off in the front building and the greenhouse while she made sure everything was secured outside. When she finished, they could leave.

As she covered the grounds, she thought about Myghal. She hadn't thought much about anything else except him all day. A customer might distract her for a few moments, but as soon as she saw him across the lot, she would go all tingly and warm. It had been difficult to concentrate on selling plants. And became even more difficult when Kerry got the impression that Myghal expected to go home with her.

Well, she had practically promised him a hand-job.

She felt her face heat up in embarrassment...but her body heated up as well. By the size of the bulge in his britches when the tunic lay tight across his lap, she wouldn't be disappointed. As long as he knew how to use it.

She suspected he knew how to use it very well.

Kerry grinned at the prospect of experiencing mind-blowing sex later that night.

She'd come full circle and was standing in front of the toolshed when she remembered about the blown bulb. The grin faded away. She'd just have to do it tomorrow...in the light of day. So she could see how to screw it in. Yeah, that excuse worked every time.

She had started up the walkway toward the greenhouse where Myghal waited when she heard the noise. It sounded like a pitiful mewling coming from inside the shed. How could a kitten have gotten in there? She'd only been to the shed twice that day, when she'd changed the signs, and she hadn't seen a stray cat all day. She hesitated. The shed had its back to the nearest outside light, and she only had a penlight with her. The small beam of light would do little to dispel the darkness within the shed.

Kerry couldn't leave the kitten in the shed all night. It was probably cold and hungry. She could call Myghal to help her, but then she'd have to explain why she needed him to get a tiny kitten out of her own shed. Well, chances were, when she

opened the door the kitten would run out and streak off into the night. Maybe she didn't need to get Myghal at all.

Turning on the penlight, she approached the shed. Her palms were already slick with sweat, even though the night air was chill enough for a heavy jacket. She put her hand on the doorknob, but her fingers just slid around it. She wiped her palm on her jeans and tried again. This time the knob turned.

She released it and gave the door a little push to open it wide. She waited, but no tiny ball of fluff shot out through the door. Then she heard the mewing again. It came from the back of the shed. The poor thing was probably too frightened to come out.

"Here, kitty, kitty, kitty," she called out softly and scratched the jamb, hoping to make an interesting enough noise so the kitten would investigate. "Come on, kitty, kitty, kitty."

Still no furball. The mewing sounded again from the farthest corner of the shed. Kerry gripped the penlight tighter. This was ridiculous. It was just a shed full of tools and one tiny kitten. All she had to do was walk to the back, flash the light around until she found the stray, pick it up, and leave. No big deal. Something anybody else could do without a second thought. Why was it making her heart pound and her upper lip break into a cold sweat?

"I can do this," she whispered.

She shone the narrow beam of light into the yawning maw of darkness inside the shed. Her breathing had turned to quick, shallow gasps. If she didn't get control of herself she would hyperventilate. She concentrated, taking deep breaths through her nose and out her mouth.

But the longer she stood there thinking about it, the worse it would get. She needed to plunge into the shed and get it over with. She'd just be in there for a few seconds, maybe a minute, and then she could come out into the open where the floodlights gave the night enough brightness that she didn't feel trapped.

Kerry drew in a deep breath, clutched the jamb, and put one foot up on the threshold. She waited a moment, but she hadn't begun to really panic yet, so she brought up her other foot.

Concentrate on saving the cat. "Come here, kitty, kitty, kitty," she called again.

More mewling, but it didn't seem to have moved away from the far corner.

Just do it.

With the beam of the penlight illuminating only a narrow strip of floor ahead of her, she took another deep breath and walked forward. Halfway across the shed, the door slammed shut behind her.

She stopped and screamed, a short sharp sound that seemed to be swallowed up by the darkness. She swung around, losing her bearings. Sweeping the penlight back and forth, she tried to find something that looked familiar, but panic was seizing her, clawing at her chest and throat. She thought she heard something scuttle to her left and jerked the penlight in that direction. The plastic housing slipped from her sweaty hand, rolling with a frightening clatter across the floor and under the shelving. Pitch blackness closed in on her, pressed into her skin from all sides, and stole the breath from her lungs. When something touched her arm, she dragged in a gulp of air and screamed as long and as loud as she could. The high-pitched sound of terror went on for an eternity.

Chapter Seven

The shouting of her name brought Kerry back to her senses. Myghal had somehow managed to get her out of the shed because she had space around her and she had air to breathe. She stopped screaming, although by that time the sound she was making was little more than a hoarse squawk. Her legs gave way and her body crumpled. She didn't lose consciousness, but it was as if every muscle in her body turned to jelly.

Myghal scooped her up and carried her into the greenhouse. He put her down in the chair at her desk, the one where he'd done such wonderful things to her body that afternoon. Sex seemed to be the last thing on his mind as he hovered over her, his face a frowning mask of worry.

She reached out and stroked a lock of his long, ash blond hair. "I'm all right now," she said. The words burned her throat, and she reached for the bottle of water she'd left on the desk at lunch.

Myghal got it for her, uncapped it and put it to her lips. She drank the few swallows that remained. He set the empty bottle aside and picked up his, letting her drink from it. She swallowed greedily, but wondered what he would think of her when she told him about her irrational fears.

It mattered a great deal—maybe too much, considering how short a time they'd known each other—what Myghal thought about her.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, his voice thick with concern. "Do you need something? More water? Should I find a healer?"

She shook her head, happy to be able to breathe normally. She should have known better than to go into that dark shed alone with only a feeble penlight to relieve the crushing blackness.

"I'm fine now," she assured him and sat up straight. Her muscles and bones no longer felt as unstable as gelatin.

"Are you sure?" Myghal held her hands in his. His touch was comforting. "Was someone out there?"

She shook her head again. "It's my own fault. I have claustrophobia. If I'm in a dark, enclosed place, I panic."

She stopped, waiting for him to laugh or look relieved that it was nothing more serious or drop her hands as if she were a silly person wasting his time. Different people had done all those things and more over the years. But Myghal didn't laugh, look relieved, or drop her hands. He waited patiently for her to continue.

"I shouldn't have gone into the shed knowing the bulb was blown."

"Why did you go in there?"

She grinned awkwardly. "I heard a noise that sounded like a kitten. I thought I could just open the door and the kitten would run out. When that didn't happen, I thought I could quickly go in, get the kitten, and get out before—before I panicked."

He squeezed her hands. "You didn't see or hear anything else?"

"Not really, but the door slammed shut by itself. It's never done that before. The door isn't hung square on the frame, so if left alone it'll slowly swing open, not shut." She thought a moment. "And right before I started screaming, I heard a scuffling sound and felt something touch my arm."

"It sounds like someone was in the shed." Myghal gave her hands another squeeze then he stood. "I'm going out there and look around."

"No, you don't have to do that," she protested.

"If someone was in there to hurt you, you need to call your guardsmen." He started toward the door.

"Wait, Myghal. You'll need a flashlight." Testing her legs before she stood up because she felt as shaky as she had when he'd brought her to orgasm earlier in the day,

she found she could stand and walk. With Myghal following, she went to the supply shelf over the sink and got the heavy-duty flashlight.

He took it, but she had to show him how to turn it on and off.

"I'll be back soon," he said and kissed her as naturally as if they'd known each other forever and were madly in love.

She followed him to the door.

"Be careful," she called, locking the door behind him.

Kerry watched him hurry along the path to the toolshed and go inside. He left the door open and it stayed open. An ice water chill raced along her spine. Someone had been in the shed with her. She hoped whoever it was had gone and Myghal would be safe.

And what of Myghal? He was a stranger to her, yet she had allowed him to touch her intimately and was now depending upon his help. What if it was a scam? What if Myghal was working with someone else, the person who had been in the shed? To gain her confidence, Myghal was playing the gorgeous hunk protecting her from the bad man who was threatening her. But what could they possibly want? She had no money and had made that clear to Myghal...but he was still here.

Kerry had a feeling it was much more complicated than a scam and that Myghal was more than a con man looking to score—the way he was dressed but with no interest in the contest, he'd said healer instead of doctor and guardsmen instead of police, and he didn't know how to operate something as simple as a flashlight.

Who was he and where was he from?

* * * * *

Against the better judgment of a tiny voice in the back of her mind warning her not to, Kerry took Myghal home with her. On the way there, she wondered a thousand times if she was doing the right thing. After all, a good-looking guy in a bad Leprechaun costume could easily be a serial killer. Weren't most serial killers handsome

and charming? After all, who would trust an ugly fiend who actually *looked* like a murderer?

But what else could she do? She still owed the guy a hand-job.

She'd asked him where his car was. He'd said he didn't have one. She'd asked him where he lived, but he'd said he'd just arrived today and didn't have a place to stay. She could have interrogated him further, but she was simply afraid of what he might say, afraid his story would be too fantastic to believe.

Kerry went through the drive-through window of a fast food joint to get something for supper. He stared at the blinking lights and neon signs as if he'd never seen anything like them before. When she asked him what he wanted, he said he'd have the same thing she was having. He didn't offer to pay.

At home, while they ate at her small dining table, Kerry decided she might as well tell him the whole story. She had been pleased when he didn't ask what caused her claustrophobia. He seemed to accept it as part of her. Everybody else always asked why, and that was when she clammed up and shrugged it off, saying she'd always been that way. But it wasn't true.

She swallowed a bite of burger and cleared her throat.

"I dated this guy in high school. I was a freshman and he was a senior. He was the bad boy type, always getting into trouble, but I thought that made him more attractive. He had a temper, too. I didn't really know how bad it was until one day he thought I was flirting with another guy."

Kerry sucked up a big mouthful of chocolate shake, letting the creaminess melt in her mouth. Myghal didn't say anything, just watched her while he chewed on a french fry.

"Anyway, we were out at the old gravel pit. That's where we all hung out because the pit wasn't being used anymore. There were a couple of old dilapidated sheds where we stashed beer and stuff. He accused me of making a fool of him with this other boy and smacked me around —"

“He struck you?” Myghal’s eyes blazed in anger, and his hands clenched into fists.

Kerry nodded. “Yeah, it was the first time – and the last. After he slapped me a few times, he shoved me in one of the sheds and left me there. The shock of him hitting me was almost enough to send me over the edge, but it was just after sundown and it was so dark. I screamed until my throat was raw and I couldn’t make another sound. Then I just curled up into a ball in the middle of the floor. I didn’t sleep, I just lay there all night with my eyes shut tight. It was mid-morning before anyone found me. Everyone was out looking for me, and a friend thought to check at the pit. My boyfriend said he’d only meant to leave me out there a couple of hours to teach me a lesson, but he’d gone off with his buddies, got drunk and forgot all about me.”

Kerry crumpled up her wrappers and sucked the last of her shake.

“I never saw the guy again. He left town and I heard later that he’d gone to prison for a few years. Didn’t surprise me. But ever since then I can’t be in dark, confined places without screaming or curling up in a corner. Sometimes this house isn’t big enough.”

Myghal looked thoughtful. “Thank you for telling me, Kerry. I’m sorry you were treated so badly.”

“Me, too. It only happened that once. I steer clear of bad boy types now. You never know what they’ll do.”

Of course, Kerry thought as they cleared off the table together, Myghal looked like a medieval bad boy with that long blond hair laced with tiny braids, the boots, leggings, and tunic. He didn’t act tough, though. She squirted dishwashing liquid under the rush of water in the sink to wash up the few dishes she’d left from the night before. He was thoughtful and kind, and had seen to her pleasure before his own.

That reminded her...she owed him one.

Chapter Eight

When Kerry had washed the dishes and Myghal had rinsed them and set them to air dry, she turned to face him. She licked her lips and noticed his warm gaze on the action. She had done it as a stalling tactic because she didn't know what to say or how to begin.

If she didn't do something, the moment would be lost and she'd have to start all over later. She reached for his tunic and pulled the material up until the waistband of his leggings was exposed. The bulge was huge behind the criss-cross lacings, and Kerry felt guilty she'd waited so long to do this. He must have been uncomfortable all afternoon by the size of his hard-on. Slowly, she undid the tie and pulled the lace through the eyelets until the material parted and his cock was free.

Kerry dipped her hands in the dishwater again. Fingers dripping hot sudsy water, she wrapped both hands around his rigid length. Myghal groaned at her hot, slippery caress, and he thrust his hips into her grip, his cock sliding back and forth with ease. His hands went to her shoulders to hold them both steady

Remembering what he'd done to her at lunch and imagining what he must be feeling now stirred Kerry's blood. As her clit thrummed and desire coiled in her womb, she wished she could lead him by the cock into her bed and let him drive that hard shaft into her. But she'd promised to return the favor of a hand-job.

She put one hand into the water to re-lubricate. She entwined her fingers and folded her hands over his cock, placing her thumbs on top. He thrust into her makeshift channel, and she moved closer until the tip bumped into her belly.

While he pumped into her hands, Kerry's hips matched his rhythm and her clit burned for attention. Later, she told herself. This was just the beginning of a long, passionate night ahead of them.

His hands slid off her shoulders, tugged the T-shirt up until her bra was exposed. He dipped his fingers into the cups and scooped her breasts free. The touch of his warm flesh on her nipples sent currents of electricity shooting through her body. She closed her eyes, enjoying the sensations his touch intensified.

Kerry wanted more, so much more. She wanted to drop all their clothing, roll naked across her bed, entwining their limbs until it would be difficult for anyone to tell where one left off and the other began. She wanted him between her legs, deeply inside her, first increasing the pleasurable ache that ravaged her, then relieving it in a burst of heat that would spread from her center to her extremities.

Myghal's thumbs caressed her nipples, and he bent his head to suckle one, tonguing it until the peak was stiff and sensitized. His thumb took over, swirling in the wetness he'd left behind, as he placed his lips around the other, his tongue flicking and teasing.

Kerry tossed back her head and moaned. At the sound of her throaty expression of pleasure, Myghal's hip movements quickened into her hands. The soapy water had evaporated, but he provided enough natural lubrication for his cock to easily glide in and out of her hands.

Kerry knew when he neared release. His cock reached a higher degree of rigidity, and his thrusts were frenzied and deep, as if he could reach her sex from this awkward angle and through her layers of clothing. When he shuddered and his lips clamped tightly around her nipple, Kerry felt the orgasm ripple through his body and an echoing wave shuttled through her, too.

Gasping, Kerry put her arms around him, her hands slick with his semen, and held him close. She'd never had anything like that happen to her before. It hadn't been a true orgasm because her clit still ached, but it had been a release of some kind for her. A sympathy orgasm? She didn't know what else to call it, comparing it to the sympathy pains some men felt when their wives went into labor.

Their bodies were so in tune with one another, she'd literally experienced his pleasure. She couldn't imagine what would happen once they actually joined their bodies. They might explode. Or implode and take the universe with them, sucking creation into the black hole they'd left behind. She hoped not. She had a feeling she would want to fuck Myghal more than once.

Myghal released her nipple with a soft *plop* and straightened up. Neither of them was steady on their feet. Kerry reached over to grab the edge of the counter. She looked into his gold-flecked eyes and felt like she was looking into the mirror of her soul. Myghal smiled and swept a hand across her neck and into her hair, his thumb resting on her cheek and rubbing lightly.

She smiled back at him, unable to contain the sheer joy that bubbled up within her. "I hope that made you feel as good as you made me feel today at the nursery."

He nodded, as if he hadn't yet regained control of his voice.

"I don't understand what this incredible connection is that we have. I just know that everything feels so right."

He nodded again. "I'm glad you feel it, too."

She breathed. It wasn't her imagination. He felt the same force that drew them together like iron to a magnet. Physical lust didn't begin to encompass it all. She'd been physically attracted to other men, but had never felt compelled to act on it within hours of their meeting.

And none of the men she'd had in her life had ever admitted feeling anything like what was happening between her and Myghal. They had come into the relationship with the expectation that it would be temporary, drifting away after the newness wore off. She had, too, until now. This was different. This was more than a temporary fling with a stranger to keep the loneliness at bay.

She felt all this and they had yet to properly have sex.

Sex sounded like a good idea right then.

"The kitchen can wait," she murmured. "But the bedroom can't."

"Neither can I." He kissed her, a short kiss but as full of promise as a longer, deeper one. "Where is your bed chamber, Kerry O'Neill?"

"Down the hall, second door to the right."

She laughed as he picked her up and cradled her against him. She pressed her lips to his, working her mouth against his. This wasn't a quick kiss, but a lingering one that stirred a fire in their blood.

He laid her down in the center of her bed, kneeling beside her. She looked up at him, wishing she knew everything there was to know about him. It would be fun to discover all the little things as well as the big things about him, but she couldn't help wondering what it would have been like if they'd grown up together and been friends for years instead of only knowing each other for mere hours.

Myghal was a stranger. She couldn't lose sight of that fact, no matter how drawn to him she was.

Kerry sat up straight. "Are you clean?"

He frowned in puzzlement then looked down at himself. "You cleansed one part of me well, but I could use a bath."

She giggled. "No, I mean clean as in free of sexual diseases. As much as I want you and as close as I feel to you, we've only known each other today."

"Oh, I see. No, I have no diseases."

"Neither do I. And I'm on birth control, so we don't have to worry about pregnancy."

"That's good." But his response didn't sound relieved as most men's did. The crease deepened across his forehead. "You do want children, don't you, Kerry?"

It was an odd question coming from a man she'd known less than a day. She couldn't remember any of the men she'd seriously dated ever asking that question.

“Sure, when the time is right and the man and I agree it’s what we want. What about you?”

“Aye, I want enough children to fill a pala – a home.”

He’d stumbled over a word. Had he been about to say palace? What an eccentric man Myghal was.

“Now, I’d like to take a bath.”

She sighed. “Probably a good idea. We both worked up a sweat this afternoon at the nursery. But a shower would be quicker.”

“A shower?” His eyes narrowed in concentration. “Oh, like a waterfall.”

“Something like that. I’ll throw your clothes in the washer, too.” She scooted off the bed. Reluctantly. As much as she wanted him right that second, he needed a little time to recover from the hand-job in the kitchen. And after grubbing around in potting soil and fertilizer all day, a shower sounded like a great idea.

Chapter Nine

After showers and washing and drying Myghal's clothing, Kerry and Myghal returned to the bed. To Kerry, this was the culmination of all they'd been through together that day. They had satisfied each other's physical needs, but now was the time to fulfill her longing to be in his arms, to be one with him.

Kerry wished she understood where this driving passion came from because she'd never felt it with any other man. There had been men in her life that she'd merely wanted physically, some she'd felt close to, and a few she'd even thought she loved. Myghal had become an obsession, both physically and emotionally, and in less than twenty-four hours.

She was beginning to wonder if her feelings were healthy when Myghal ran a hand over her slowly, from breast to mound, and kissed the center of her belly, near her navel. She knew then she didn't care. Perhaps this one night and a hard, sweaty fuck would purge her of these unrealistic romantic notions.

"Myghal." She breathed his name as if it were her last.

He slid over her leg, bending it to make room for him. "Yes, Kerry?"

"I don't know. I feel so many things for you. I'm feeling too much and it doesn't make sense."

Myghal smiled and dipped below her line of vision. Kerry raised her head and watched him trail kisses from her belly button, across the slight round of her abdomen, to the dark red-gold patch. She squirmed in anticipation, waiting for the moment his tongue delved into the curls, and spread her legs.

Myghal placed his arms beneath her thighs, his hands on her hips, and settled down. He licked the curls first, teasing her, the tip of his tongue barely touching her clit. But each tender flick sent waves of pure pleasure through her. She wiggled and pushed

forward, trying to catch his tongue, but he darted and dodged. He went farther down, caressing each soft fold in turn.

“Please, Myghal,” she begged, trying to push her pussy into his face.

Myghal’s grip tightened on her hipbones, and he thrust his tongue deeply into her channel, stroking up until his lips surrounded her clit. Her pelvis undulated against his mouth and her hips rose higher. When the moment came, it caught her off guard, vibrating through her like the deep pounding of a bass drum.

When the beats grew farther and farther apart, Kerry’s back relaxed against the mattress. Myghal still nibbled at her pussy, helping to bring her down easy. A soft sigh left her lips. Her body surprised her. Myghal’s continued caresses built up the thrumming tension again. She still wanted Myghal, wanted his cock inside of her, wanted to be even closer to him. Didn’t want to ever let him go.

She writhed against him and he looked up at her. His hands slid around her as he gave her one last lick and moved up over her.

“Your nectar tastes like the honey made from the sweetest flowers.”

His words made her toes curl. She’d never heard such poetry from a man, especially a man in her bed.

His chest glided across her stomach, but he stopped long enough to suckle one breast and then the other. She rubbed her pussy against him, not even sure which part of his body she touched. It didn’t matter. She was connecting with Myghal and that was what drove her.

She ran her fingers through his long hair, drawing him up to her. He settled between her thighs, his hot cock cradled against her curls as she bent her legs and hugged his waist.

“We’ve waited long enough.” She whispered the words between gasps for air. “I want you inside of me now, Myghal. Now.”

“With the greatest of pleasure, Kerry O’Neill.”

He gathered her to him, and the tip of his cock nudged her first. She quivered in anticipation and need when he pulled back. Then he thrust forward, hard, his cock sinking completely into her molten depths. She cried out and held him fast with her arms and legs, levering her hips side to side as if to seal him in, until they were fused together and could never be separated.

Tears filled her eyes and spilled from beneath her closed lids. How could she feel this oneness with him? She barely knew him, but they fit together like the two pieces that made the whole of a puzzle.

She hadn't locked him in, of course. He held onto her firmly and withdrew. She mimicked his movement, the friction of his rigid cock against her velvet walls creating a heat that infused her. Each thrust sent a wave that raged out of control and seared every nerve ending.

When the burst of pleasure was near, their movements grew frenzied, and Kerry felt a surge of energy surround them. It was almost as if she were feather-light and floating, as if her body touching Myghal's was the only contact she had with anything solid. Their lovemaking must have made her delusional because she even had the sensation of cooler air passing across her back, as if the mattress had disappeared or she'd left the warm surface behind.

Then she shattered into a million white-hot fragments, her spine bowing with the intensity. She lost sense of time and place and everything except Myghal's cock riding her fast into oblivion. Then his grip tightened on her, his back arched, and for a moment his body became as stiff as his cock had been. She felt his hot seed pump into her and bathe her channel, strengthening their unity. She had a part of Myghal within her. His semen would soak into her flesh, and he would truly become one with her. Their mystical connection was heightened by their physical union.

Kerry held him tightly. At the same time that Myghal's body went limp around her, she felt a little jolt as if something had bumped up against them. Her eyes flew open,

but nothing seemed out of place. She flexed her shoulders and found the mattress solid beneath her again. She attributed it to the mystery of their bond.

Myghal rolled to his side, wrapping her in his arms, and Kerry snuggled against him.

* * * * *

“Oh, my,” Gomit whispered faintly and turned away from the window. Gomit had been standing watch around the corner of the human woman’s dwelling, but had joined Tredje to report he’d seen nothing amiss. When he’d glanced through the glass, he lost his color and looked like he might faint. Tredje had never known Gnomes to be prudes, but Gomit was a weakling in many areas.

From his hiding place in the shrubbery, Tredje had watched the Prince and his intended Princess with interest. Perhaps the time had come to make a trip to the Thane’s Golden Gate Bridge and purchase one of his daughters for a wife-slave. The thought of a Troll maid doing to him what the Prince had done to the human woman—lapping at her cunt with as much enthusiasm as a cat licking cream—made his cock ache.

He absently rubbed his stiff member through the silly blue Gnome trousers he still wore as a disguise. Tredje wondered how much of his cache of gold he’d have to relinquish for one of the Thane’s daughters. Greedier than most Trolls, the Thane would want double or triple the going rate for a wife-slave. But to have one of the Thane’s daughters as his own would raise his status in the Troll community. He had to weigh the matter carefully.

The coupling couple floated in the air, about halfway between the bed and the ceiling, in what Tredje knew to be the ultimate in Pixie pleasure. Levitation while fucking meant that the Prince had indeed found his Heart Match. Not that the Faeries doubted he had, but they might reward Tredje for the information. Who knew what tidbit the Faeries would find valuable?

The human woman's back arched. She had reached her peak, crying out her pleasure noisily while the Prince rammed into her again and again. Tredje stroked his cock briskly until he brought himself relief with a grunt, spurting his seed into the blue trousers. The Prince found his as well, and they landed on the mattress, lightly enough that neither was disturbed.

Tredje sighed. The urgent need to couple disappeared with his release. As usual, when lecherous thoughts prompted him to think about paying out good gold for a wife-slave, his own hand proved to be more than capable of taking care of the problem. No need to dip into his cache after all.

"We should go," the Gnome whispered from the other end of the row of bushes.

"We're here because your plan to capture the human woman in the hut failed," Tredje reminded him. The Gnome wouldn't dare disagree although they both knew it had been Tredje's idea. "We have to watch and seize any opportunity that arises to grab her tonight."

The Gnome snorted, then Tredje heard him draw in a deep breath. "The Prince won't leave her side until morning."

"More than likely, he won't leave her front." Tredje sniggered at his own joke. "But, aye, you're right. They'll be at it all night, fucking like rabbits."

"Aye," Gomit agreed. "And a goblet of dandelion wine beside the fire sounds good right now."

"That it does, that it does." Tredje contemplated the situation. They still had several days before the Equinox, and the Prince didn't seem to be in any hurry to find a way back to the Faerie Realm. Tredje suspected he had to convince the human woman to go with him first. By the way she seemed to enjoy his fucking, Tredje didn't think it would be too difficult for the Prince to talk her into it.

Tredje pulled at his beard. He would enjoy watching them fuck again and might even find relief once more, but the lure of dandelion wine was too great.

“Let’s go home to me bridge and have some wine. Ye know, that’s the best idea I’ve had all day,” he said as they left their hiding place and disappeared into the night.

Chapter Ten

Kerry awoke to the wonder of warm and protective masculine arms around her just as they'd been when she fell asleep. Myghal. Just the thought of his name and what it invoked, all the feelings and sensations it stirred in her from merely one night, filled her with awe. For a long moment, she couldn't remember the last time she'd awakened in the arms of a man. And when she did finally recall the boyfriend from last year, she could barely remember what he looked like. She had certainly never felt like this.

It didn't matter that Myghal hadn't told her his last name. It didn't matter that she'd known him less than twenty-four hours. None of it mattered because she was falling for Myghal, falling hard, and nothing he could do or say would change what she felt for him.

She thought one night would rid her of the needs of her body, but it was so much more than that. None of it made sense, but she didn't think she'd ever get enough of him. While making love to him, she'd felt as if the mattress had vanished or that she was floating. A trick of passion, no doubt, but it had actually felt as if they'd risen into the air. For a few moments, she felt nothing beneath her and a cool rush of air passing over her back.

Kerry eased out of his arms and from the bed. He made a sound, a cross between a sigh and a moan and shifted position, burying his head deeper into the pillow until she could see only one of his closed eyes. She watched him with a fond smile. His long ash-blond hair lay in a tangle across his shoulders.

She reached out to touch him, to run her fingers over his arm, but stopped herself in time. She shouldn't wake him. If he woke up and smiled at her and looked at her with his sleepy bedroom eyes, she'd be too tempted to return to bed.

But before Kerry withdrew her hand, his eye blinked open and he reached for her, his fingers wrapping around her wrist. He tugged her toward him as he rolled onto his back. She resisted only a second because he did smile, and now both eyes were on her, inviting her. She moved with him until her body lay over his with only the sheet between them.

"Where are you going?" Myghal murmured as he planted kisses on her palm and the inside of her wrist.

The touches warmed her all over, especially the pit of her belly. When her clit began a rhythmic throb, she almost moaned. Instead, she bit her lip. Hard. A little pain would bring her to her senses.

"It's morning and I have a business to run."

He shook his head at her, and she felt his cock grow in length beneath her. She wanted nothing more than to yank the sheet away from him and repeat what they'd done the night before. Floating sensation and all.

"I have something better in mind."

Kerry laughed, a throaty sound because of her arousal. "I don't think it's your mind that's working right now."

He smiled again and Kerry melted. Then shook her head.

"Those plants can't sell themselves, and I have a loan payment to make." She kissed him lightly on the lips and tried to slip away from him, but he held her tightly.

"The plants will wait." He pulled her up until she straddled his body, balanced on her knees. "Turn around, Kerry."

"Myghal, I have to open the nursery," she protested, but her voice sounded weak.

"You will. In a little while," he promised. "Now, turn around."

The simmering heat that surrounded her clit wouldn't let her say no again. She did as he said, and while she was off of his body, he kicked the sheet to the foot of the bed. She straddled him again, this time facing away from him. In front of her, his cock stood

tall, thick and rigid from its nest of light brown curls. She bent over, brushing her hair out of the way, and took the engorged head in her mouth.

Myghal's hands on her thighs guided her back until his mouth was on her pussy. His fingers slid up to her cheeks, rubbing and squeezing as he greedily licked and sucked the sensitized folds of flesh. Kerry pumped her hips, raking her clit against his tongue. How many times had Myghal brought her to orgasm since he'd walked into her life the day before? It might as well have been the first time because her body raged with need.

She lubricated his cock with her mouth, taking him deep into her throat and still didn't reach the base. She wrapped her fingers around his shaft, moving her hands and mouth up and down in tandem.

By the time they settled into a matching rhythm, Kerry tripped along the edge of passion and felt Myghal's cock grow even harder in her hands. One more stroke for each of them, and Kerry plummeted over at the same moment Myghal's hips thrust up hard. They both groaned with the release, hers a throaty sound because of Myghal's hot, tangy semen spilling into her mouth, and their bodies bent with the effort. She continued to milk his cock while she wriggled against his lips, drawing out the last bit of pleasure for both of them.

* * * * *

Lazily, Myghal watched Kerry enter the bathroom and a few moments later heard the shower running. He imagined her beneath the running water, her hair drenched, her breasts and the red-glinted thatch of hair between her legs glistening wet. The enticing image he conjured made his exhausted cock stir against his thigh. He was tempted to join her in the shower, bend her over and fuck her from behind, but by the time he finished playing it out in his mind, the sound of the shower had stopped. Later, he promised himself.

As his Princess, she'd never have to worry about such mundane things as currency again. Her time would be filled with helping him run the principedom and, eventually, they'd share in raising their children. She could oversee the palace gardens and work with the plants as much as she liked.

Sitting up, he tried to ignore the building ache in his balls. If he still had any doubts the spell worked, this constant state of arousal while near her would have convinced him otherwise. That they'd levitated while coupling had been proof enough. A Pixie only levitated during sex without conscious thought when with his Heart Match.

He was already half in love with her. Just knowing they were destined for one another was enough to open his heart to her. His first task was to find a way back to the Faerie Realm. After that, he had to convince her of who he was and what they were to one another. It wouldn't be easy. Kerry was too practical, too grounded. And while Myghal understood the need for practicality and grounding in this magically bereft Other Realm, she would have to open her mind and imagination to all the possibilities to even begin to believe in him and his realm.

He had only a few days to accomplish everything.

When Kerry sailed through the bedroom, throwing him a smile along with his clean clothes, Myghal got up. He showered and dressed, but when he walked into the kitchen and Kerry giggled, he frowned. She kissed him quickly.

"I'm sorry, Myghal. What you're wearing was all right for yesterday. Everybody goes a little crazy and expects to see Leprechauns on St. Patrick's Day. Especially those of us of Irish descent." She poured coffee into two mugs. "But today is back to the real world, and you'll get more than a few strange looks if you go out in that get-up."

Myghal drew in a deep breath. "I'm not a Leprechaun."

"Oh." The grin fell from her lips as she set a plate holding a muffin in front of him. "Well, then why are you dressed like that?"

"I'm a Pixie," he said and carefully watched her reaction.

She frowned, as if thinking, and handed him a mug. "Are Pixies Irish?"

"No."

"Ah. Okay. Uh, sugar and creamer are here on the counter."

Suddenly, Myghal wasn't looking at Kerry. She was spooning tiny white crystals from a bowl into her coffee, and his attention was focused on the bowl. Could it possibly be...?

He waited until Kerry had turned her back before he stepped to the counter. Setting his mug aside, he stuck his finger into the bowl of precious crystals. He didn't feel the energy radiating from the matrices of the crystals, but that could be because he was in the Other Realm where too many other forms of energy contaminated every inch of space.

He touched a few of the crystals to his tongue. Sweetness saturated his taste buds and disappointment flooded through the rest of him. Although these crystals looked exactly like raw pixie dust, they weren't what he needed to return to the Faerie Realm.

"—won't be gone long," Kerry was saying as she walked toward the door. "The mall is just a few miles away. I'll be back before you know it with some clothes that won't get you arrested."

The door shut behind her and she was gone. Distracted by the crystals in the bowl, Myghal hadn't read her reaction. She could very well be going for help if she thought he was dangerously deranged.

Myghal poured his coffee down the drain and rinsed out his cup. They didn't have coffee in the Faerie Realm. They drank water, wine, and mead. They didn't have—what did she call it? Oh, yes. Sugar. Food in the Faerie Realm was sweetened with honey, but more often than not was eaten in its natural state.

Thinking of Kerry's confusion when he told her he was a Pixie, not a Leprechaun, he wondered if he should leave the house and stay out of sight until he knew if she returned alone or brought someone to take him away.

Myghal finally decided he would trust that the charmed dust knew what it was doing when it thrust him into Kerry's life and trust Kerry to recognize the connection between them even if she didn't know exactly what it was.

All he could do was wait and see.

Chapter Eleven

Kerry stood behind some tall potted plants, pretending to prune them. She wore gardening gloves and held a pair of shears, but she was really observing Myghal. He was busy rearranging the flower section and seemed happy doing so.

When she'd left the house, it had been her intention to go to the police and have Myghal carted away. But the more she thought about it, she knew she couldn't do it. She found herself going to the strip mall and buying jeans, shirts, and a jacket for him, paying out money she couldn't really afford.

She'd been pinching pennies until Lincoln squealed as the saying went, for so long that it felt strange to walk into a shop and buy something new that didn't have to do with the nursery.

The guy just needed a chance to get back on his feet. As to why he thought he should dress like a Pixie instead of a Leprechaun for St. Patrick's Day, she didn't have a clue. He had that slight English accent, so maybe it was a tradition wherever he was from. A place where they had healers instead of doctors and guardsmen instead of police.

Calling things by different names and dressing like a Pixie wasn't enough to get him committed.

He'd certainly been a boon for business! Cars all but screeched to a halt and quickly turned into her driveway. Myghal had spent the morning working with the flower plants, rearranging them, watering them, repotting those that needed it. After lunch, he'd taken off his jacket and worked in his shirtsleeves in the unseasonably warm afternoon. With few exceptions, the drivers of the cars were female. Most held two or three.

The women would begin by strolling through the plants, but they invariably gravitated toward Myghal. As far as Kerry could tell, the women would strike up the conversations, but she couldn't help but notice that Myghal was almost as attentive to them as he was to her. Almost.

Many of them wandered away again, with smiles on their faces and plants in their arms. Myghal made sure each one left with a shamrock and an Irish rose. But one woman had been there longer than any of them. She was pretty in a dark, sultry way with a mane of black hair and long, lithe legs. She stayed close to Myghal even when others approached, as if staking out her property.

Several times, Kerry started to go out there but stopped herself. She'd never been the jealous type, and she didn't understand where this overwhelming need to claim him came from. Maybe the same place her feelings for him originated. Some place deep inside that no man had ever tapped before.

She told herself over and over there was no reason to be jealous. She hadn't seen him touch any of them intimately or lean close to whisper suggestively—not even the sultry brunette. Perhaps he was just being polite. Perhaps...

Kerry threw down the shears and yanked off her gloves.

Perhaps he was just being *more* polite to her. Free room and board and sex. What more could an itinerant alien ask for?

Kerry crossed the greenhouse to her desk in the corner. She had paperwork to do. Piles and piles of paperwork. And as grateful as she was for this day's little spurt in sales, it was too little, too late. She barely had enough to cover next month's expenses. What about the month after that? If Myghal could keep pulling them in in droves for the next six months, she *might* make it, but she had the feeling the novelty would wear off soon enough—especially if he didn't respond to their obvious advances.

What if he did?

Her suspicions provoked, she couldn't put *that* genie back in the bottle.

Both situations—financial and emotional—were hopeless. With one last bitter glance at Myghal and the black-haired woman standing almost close enough to touch, she dove into her paperwork.

* * * * *

For a long time Kerry was aware of nothing except columns of numbers that were never big enough for incoming and too big for outgoing. Suddenly, she looked up to find Myghal staring at her from the edge of her office space. He smiled, and she almost melted. Then she remembered the brunette and looked out the tiny area of window not obscured by plants. The leggy woman was still out there, standing among the rose bushes, her arms crossed. She seemed impatient.

Kerry turned her gaze back to Myghal. “Your customer is waiting for you.”

He shrugged. Was the movement too casual, as if he were only pretending not to care? Kerry shook herself mentally. It really wasn’t in her nature to be overly suspicious. But a woman like *that* didn’t hang around unless she was sure of a payoff.

“She won’t buy anything, but she won’t go away.” He held up an empty bottle. “Do you have more?”

Kerry nodded and opened the mini-fridge. She handed him a full bottle of water from the six-pack she’d bought that morning. He uncapped it and took a long drink. Kerry couldn’t help the thought that flitted through her mind—that she wished his lips were sucking on her clit instead of the water bottle. Her body grew warm, watching him, thinking about what he could do with those talented lips. It was all she could do not to sweep her desk clean, sprawl on her back, and spread her legs for him.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Thank you. Here, water in bottles tastes much better than what pours from your...uh, spigots.”

Kerry pushed aside the ledger she’d been working on. “You don’t have bottled or running water where you come from?”

He slowly screwed the cap back on the bottle. He looked cornered, as if he searched for a way to answer her.

"No bottled water," he said at last.

But that didn't answer the second part of her question about running water. She didn't ask again. She wasn't sure she wanted to know. After all, a stream could be called running water.

Kerry jumped to her feet. She had to move, to get away from her corner. The transparent walls of the greenhouse were beginning to close in on her, and that wasn't good at all. She marched around the desk and headed for the door.

"I'm going to see if your friend wants anything."

Myghal caught up to her and stopped her before she'd gone another yard.

"She's not my friend. You're the only friend I have here."

She pulled loose from his hold on her arm. "Why is that? I don't understand where you're from, what you're doing here, or why I—"

Kerry broke off and bit her lip. She wasn't about to spill her guts to him about her feelings when she knew so little about him.

"You sound angry, Kerry O'Neill." Gently, he took her into his arms. "Have I done something wrong?"

She almost blurted out that everything was all wrong, but she went into his embrace instead. And that made everything all right. It felt right to be close to him, to hold him and be held by him, to make love with him until it seemed like they floated off the bed.

"I'm not angry. I'm—" But she was at a loss for words, unable to express all the emotions boiling over inside of her.

"You're what, Kerry? Fighting the urge to make love?"

She nodded. It wasn't all she was fighting, but sex with Myghal seemed to have taken over and become the most important. What was balancing the books and trying to find a way to save her business compared to fucking Myghal?

He kissed her, taking her breath and her tongue, sucking hard. The mock fucking set her clit afire and desire burning through her veins. He backed her up all the way to her office space, past the row of potted pampas grass, until the backs of her thighs hit the edge of her desk. Was he a mind reader?

His fingers fumbled with the snap and zipper of her jeans as his mouth continued to devour her. When he grunted in frustration, Kerry helped to unfasten her pants, then undid his as well. She reached in and pulled his cock free, the silky skin hot and hard. She stroked it repeatedly as Myghal's hand dove inside her panties, two fingers curling up inside her, the knuckle of his thumb pressed to her clit.

"I don't understand..." Kerry whispered, massaging his cock and leaning into his hand as his fingers fucked her. "I don't understand why I want you all the time."

His fingers delved even deeper. "We were meant for each other."

Chapter Twelve

Kerry believed in lust at first sight, but not love at first sight. He hadn't said anything about love, had he? But didn't "meant for each other" mean love, too?

His other hand slid inside her panties, leaving a hot trail across her cheeks as he peeled her underwear and jeans below her hips. She started to help him push them lower but he stayed her hand. Instead, he turned her around so that her backside was to him and bent her over the desk.

Questing fingers found her wet lips again, and his cock nudged her there. Arms resting on the desktop, she arched her spine, pushing her pelvis back and up to make his entrance easier. His hands slid beneath her blouse, over her stomach and ribs and under her bra until her breasts were in his palms, thumbs pinching her nipples against his forefingers.

Myghal rocked against her and his cock drove into her pussy. She increased the arch of her hips until his balls struck her clit with each thrust. He glided in and out in a smooth, fast rhythm, squeezing her nipples with each forward thrust. Kerry closed her eyes and enjoyed the building tension coiling in her womb. As her orgasm neared, her hips joined his pace, striving to make contact with his balls.

When the explosion came, surging warmly through her entire body, Kerry moaned with the intense pleasure. She rubbed her clit against his tight sac to prolong the sensation. Myghal's long thrusts turned into short, quick jabs until he ground his hips into her with a guttural groan. His hands tightened on her breasts, and she felt him spurt within her.

He collapsed across her, and all Kerry could hear was the sound of their breath coming in gasps. His deflated cock was still inside her. Kerry flexed her inner muscles

around it. She wanted him to fuck her again and again, but she knew he needed time to recover and —

They were draped across her desk, once again where anyone could walk in and find them. The pampas grass plants afforded some privacy, but her corner didn't have a door. Why did all common sense take flight where Myghal was concerned?

"Myghal..." Kerry moved, and Myghal gave her nipples one last squeeze before he stood up. Kerry rose, too, straightening her bra and blouse and pulling up her jeans. She turned to face him. "We've got to stop doing this here. If someone walked in —"

Myghal swung her around. "Don't be ashamed of pleasure."

She shook her head. "I'm not. But it's something that should be private. For some reason, I can't keep my hands off of you."

"I'm glad," he said with a sensual grin that made her heart flip-flop in her chest. He kissed her. "I can't keep my hands off of you or my cock out of you." He took her hand and placed it on his crotch. "Already I want to fuck you again."

She squeezed his growing bulge. "Me, too. But we can't do this anymore."

He frowned when she took her hand away and peeked through the plants. The brunette was still there, impatiently pacing through the hardy evergreen shrubs. Several other customers wandered around.

"I'll give them each a shamrock and an Irish rose and send them on their way." His hand slid between her legs and rubbed her swollen, aching pussy. "Then I'll come back and lock the door so I can fuck you until you scream."

Kerry moaned, his promise and his touch stirring her desires again. She didn't know why she was constantly horny around this man. Perhaps it was an overreaction to the fact that she hadn't been laid in six months before Myghal walked into her life. Had it only been yesterday? It felt as if she'd known him forever. Even if she didn't know much about him.

“Oh, Myghal.” Reluctantly, she pulled away from him. He was disappointed but didn’t persist. “They’re potential customers. They might buy something.”

He nodded, touched her cheek, kissed her, and turned to leave. She almost called him back, the tingling in her clit insisting that she do so, but she bit her lip to keep from saying his name. She watched him cross the greenhouse and walk out the door...with the oddest premonition that she might never see him again.

* * * * *

Kerry looked out the window one more time. The brunette smiled seductively when she saw Myghal emerge from the greenhouse. Kerry wondered what the brunette would think if she knew what Myghal had been doing in here. Several other women flocked to him, and he had a smile and a word for each of them.

All these women today...and yesterday, too, she suddenly realized. What she thought had been in response to her drastic sale prices might have actually been Myghal’s magnetic presence. They seemed drawn to him even from as far away as the road. As if there were something...magical about him.

She shook her head. She needed to get her head out of the clouds and back into her books. Looking at the disarray on her desk, she shook her head again and ran a hand through her hair. How was she ever going to concentrate on bookkeeping when all she could think of was bending over the desk while Myghal fucked her from behind.

Kerry plopped down in her chair—a place that conjured up more images to distract her—and pulled the ledger toward her. She straightened up the stack of receipts and started going through them one at a time. Glancing up from time to time, she always saw the brunette hovering close to Myghal. Her mouth moved, but Kerry had no idea what she might be saying. Well, she had an idea, but she didn’t *know*. That woman had been out there all afternoon. What else could she want except Myghal?

Kerry became absorbed in making columns of numbers balance, quite a while passed until she looked up for the last time before snapping the book shut. She rubbed her neck and stared out the window.

Shadows had lengthened considerably as the sun moved lower in the sky. She'd spent more time on the books than she meant to, but at least she'd done most of her work. She rested her elbows on the desk and rubbed her neck while gazing out across the rows and rows of potted shrubs.

She couldn't see anyone, not even Myghal. Perhaps she could close early and make up to him what she'd denied them earlier. Turning him down hadn't been easy for her, but he'd seemed really disappointed.

Kerry stood and walked outside her office area. Pushing leafy plants aside, she looked outside. From here, she had a good view of the parking area. No vehicles of any kind. So, the leggy brunette had finally given up. Kerry smiled triumphantly and turned away. She spent the better part of an hour straightening up the greenhouse.

When everything was put away, she wondered why Myghal hadn't come in. Surely he'd finished rearranging all the outside plants by now. She left the greenhouse and stood on the path to the toolshed, looking over her grounds, but Myghal was nowhere to be seen.

Kerry wondered if he could have possibly been hurt or sick and lying among the plants or statuary. She ran back inside for a flashlight and jacket. It was almost twilight and the air had cooled considerably.

By the time she'd searched between every row of shrubs and behind every stack of bags of mulch and fertilizer and even every corner of the front building and toolshed, night had fallen. Where could Myghal have gone?

The image of the leggy brunette with the seductive smile exploded in her mind.

Just a few hours ago, she would have sworn that Myghal was not the kind of man who would just walk out on her without a word. She hadn't thought he would walk out

at all because there was a connection between them. She didn't understand it, but it was real. Even Myghal said he felt it.

But she'd looked everywhere on her property and hadn't found an injured or ill Myghal. He said he didn't know anybody else here. Where else could he have gone?

The only answer was with the brunette.

Kerry closed her eyes against the burn of unshed tears. She felt like an idiot, a gullible fool. Myghal had just appeared out of nowhere into her life. Why wouldn't he disappear just as easily? He'd never made her any promises. They'd known each other a little over twenty-four hours.

So why did it hurt so much?

With tears scalding her cheeks, Kerry ran inside long enough to grab her purse. She ran through the gates and locked them behind her. Behind the wheel of her car, she swiped tears away as she stabbed at the ignition.

Myghal was gone.

Chapter Thirteen

"Lady Kerry," the Gnome said with bowed head as he removed his cap. "I am Gomit, your humble servant."

Kerry stumbled back in surprise. She bumped into the side of the small front building. She blinked at the little man who was dressed just like the taller garden Gnome statues she had for sale.

Myghal leaving her must have cracked her mind. She'd spent a sleepless, restless night, her body enflamed with need and aching for Myghal. She'd come to work, hoping to find him here, that he'd wandered away for some reason and got lost but somehow found his way back again. But he hadn't been here when she arrived, her eyes red and swollen from weeping, and he didn't show up all day. She'd resigned herself to the fact that Myghal had gotten what he wanted until a better offer came along. Namely, the leggy brunette.

The day had dragged by. She'd been about to go home when the garden Gnome introduced himself to her. Kerry didn't know whether to scream or run. All she could manage was a whimper. The Gnome continued talking.

"'Tis regretful I am to inform you that his royal highness, Prince Myghal, has been captured by a despicable Troll."

"Wh-Wh—" Kerry clamped her lips together and swallowed hard. The little man dressed like a Gnome spoke English, and she heard every word he said, but none of it made sense. Servant, royalty, captured... Prince Myghal? "Wh-What are you t-talking about?" she was finally able to sputter. "Wh-Who are you?"

"Gomit, at your service. 'Tis a shock, I understand. Prince Myghal hadn't a chance to tell you everything, indeed. I—"

"Why are you calling him *prince*?" Kerry was surprised she was able to speak a whole sentence without stopping to catch her breath. "What is he prince of? And by captured, do you mean he's been kidnapped?"

"Aye, Lady Kerry."

"Oh." She breathed easy for the first time since she'd found Myghal gone. But she immediately tightened up again. She shouldn't feel relief. He hadn't left her, but had been kidnapped.

"'Tis sorry I am to admit my part in the deed, but my liege, General Gorgicz, instructed this worthless servant to play along with the Troll but to thwart him at the first opportunity."

"General Gorg— And a Troll." Kerry pressed against the brick.

The Gnome seemed harmless enough and subservient enough, but she had yet to wrap her mind around the fact that one of her Gnome statues had come to life. No, that was impossible. The Gnome just happened to look like the statues because...well, because he was a Gnome. And he was telling a wild tale about a man who might be a prince that she had just met and fallen head over heels in lust with two days ago.

What was she supposed to do? Stand here and listen to a Gnome? Yes, because he said Myghal had been kidnapped.

"'Tis a long story, Lady, and time is of the essence, if I understand the Prince's situation correctly. If you please, I'll tell you what I know."

Kerry drew in a deep, shaky breath. "It would please me greatly. If you'll come in the greenhouse, you can tell me all about it."

Gomit followed behind her, cap still in hand. She glanced back at him while she led the way, but he was doing nothing more than pumping his short legs to keep up with her. She slowed her walk the rest of the way.

Inside, she flipped on the lights. She went to her desk and fell into her chair. She hadn't realized how weak her legs were until that moment. She offered him the extra chair and he climbed into the seat.

"Maybe you should start at the beginning," Kerry suggested.

"'Twould take all night, I fear. Besides, some of it's not my place to tell. I'll be brief as I can. The Troll, Tredje, and I were sent to prevent Prince Myghal from taking y—"

"Prince?" Kerry interrupted. "Myghal never told me he was a prince. Prince of what?"

"Prince of Pixieland, a part of the Faerie Realm."

"Pixieland?" Kerry's tone rose in disbelief. "Myghal has to be over six feet tall. Trust me, there's nothing pixie about him."

Gomit's gnarled face split into a grin. "Aye, but his royal highness is indeed Prince of the Pixies. The old Prince, Myghal's father, died over three months ago. Myghal, being his only child, inherited the title. And the responsibilities. Unlike most royalty in your human realm, rulers actually rule their domains in the Faerie Realm."

"I see." Then Kerry shook her head. "No, I don't really see at all. I'm supposed to believe this, but if it were coming from someone other than one of my garden Gnomes, I'd have called the police already."

"Nay, Lady. Your humble servant isn't one of your statues come to life. My home is far away from here."

"Right. Okay. Let's get back to Myghal. You say he's been kidnapped. By a Troll." Kerry couldn't believe the words that were coming out of her mouth.

"Aye. The Faerie King sent word that Prince Myghal was to be stopped from bringing you to the Faerie Realm before the Equinox at all cost. Tredje tried once to kidnap you, but—"

"Tredje?"

"Aye. Tredje the Troll."

"Of course. And the Equinox is..." Kerry pulled her desk calendar closer. "Tomorrow. Why would Myghal need to take me to the Faerie Realm before the Equinox?"

Gomit squirmed in his seat and ducked his head. "I couldn't say, Lady. But the Gnomes and Trolls and some other Faerie Realm folk who live in your world are expected to do King Norfe's bidding even though we consider ourselves independent from the Faerie Realm."

The little Gnome's tale was getting more and more complicated, and Kerry's suspension of disbelief was wearing thin. This had to be some trick? But who would be playing it on her? And why? April Fool's was another two weeks away.

"I don't mean to be rude, but could you please not get into Mother Goose's political agendas." She said it with a smile, but she felt as if she was being had. Possibly by Myghal himself. He'd been dressed like a Leprechaun, after all. Strike that. In light of what Myghal had told her and Gomit had just confirmed, Myghal had been dressed like a Pixie. No wonder he'd had no interest in the contest across the street.

"Aye, Lady Kerry. As I said, instructions came from King Norfe to stop Prince Myghal from taking you into the Faerie Realm at all cost. The Trolls sent Tredje, and our leader, General Gorgicz, sent me. What the Trolls don't know is that we Gnomes have been in service to the Pixies since longer than any of us can remember. We are bound by honor to serve the Pixies before the Faeries. The allegiance goes back so far that even our Elders don't remember why, but we believe the Pixie Prince at that time did a great deed for the Gnomes, and we are obligated to repay the kindness until the end of time."

"I understand," Kerry said. The quiet dignity of the homely little Gnome touched her deeply.

"Then you understand why I joined with Tredje, just to upset his plans and help in my small way. I've managed to convince Tredje that I'm dim-witted and clumsy so he hasn't relied on me too much." Gomit sighed heavily. "I daresay a Pixie Prince has helped them out a time or two, but Trolls have no honor."

While part of her found his tale ludicrous, another part of her was beginning to believe. The little man sitting in a chair in front of her was not merely a midget in a Gnome costume. His features were unlike anything she'd ever seen on a human being. Yellow eyes, nose, mouth, and jaw were smashed or out of alignment. And everything he said meshed with what she knew about Myghal – little as it was.

Now, she started to worry about Myghal. If the Faerie King commanded they stop Myghal at all cost, and if the Troll had no honor, this Tredje might kill Myghal.

He must have read the concern on her face because he smiled a little. "Tredje is too lazy to expend the energy to hurt the Prince and too vain to think his plan of holding him captive will fail. I can distract Tredje, but you'll have to free the Prince. The Troll mustn't know I've helped the Prince or I would do it myself. The Gnomes' honor-bound liege to the Pixies has to remain a secret in case another occasion should arise when our help is needed."

Kerry ran a hand through her hair. The surreal quality of the past few days since meeting Myghal had increased tenfold. "I thought all you fairy-tale type people had powers. Why couldn't Myghal just zap the Troll or something?"

Gomit shook his head. "It's not that easy in this realm. We Gnomes have never had any special powers. And here, the Pixies have almost no magic. The Prince is as vulnerable as any human. The Troll has a bit of limited magic. When he uses it, he has to take the time to recover his energy before he can use it again."

"All right." Obviously, there were rules that had never made it into any book of fairy-tales Kerry had ever read. "Where is the Troll holding him?"

"In Tredje's dwelling beneath the bridge across the street."

"At Sir Plantsalot? You mean, Trolls really do live under bridges?"

Gomit's eyes widened, showing how startlingly yellow the irises were. Not golden-yellow or amber-yellow, but bright buttercup-yellow. And now, Kerry realized, it was more than the unusual color. The pupils were vertically slitted, like the eyes of a reptile.

“Of course. Where else would Trolls live? Most are too lazy to do more than sleep in the rushes underneath. But Tredje has been uncommonly industrious in this case. He has excavated an extensive series of tunnels and chambers in the embankment between the two bridges. He says you must always go into his dwelling beneath the bridge marked ‘enter’ and leave beneath the bridge marked ‘exit’. He’s quite proud to have two bridges to himself, especially near a castle, even if it isn’t real. Castles are quite a rarity in this country.”

“Quite,” Kerry said absently. Myghal held in an underground dwelling. The Troll was probably no bigger than Gomit, so the tunnels and chambers would be small and dark and suffocating. She broke into a sweat just thinking about it.

She couldn’t... Could she? She had to be the one to save Myghal because no one else would believe the story, and Gomit had to preserve the secrecy of his allegiance to the Pixies. But how was she supposed to force herself into the cramped quarters of the Troll?

Chapter Fourteen

Kerry slipped on dark coveralls and strapped on a tool belt with an array of tools that could be used as weapons in case Tredje the Troll saw through Gomit's distraction and discovered what she was doing. She also carried a box cutter to release Myghal's bonds. Gomit had assured her that Myghal was bound with rope, not chains.

She checked the bright beam of the heavy-duty flashlight several times as they crossed the five lanes to Sir Plantsalot. By that time of night all businesses along the thoroughfare were closed and very little traffic moved along the street.

Gomit lead her to the exit bridge. Kerry watched as he quickly scrambled down the side of the drainage ditch. She glanced around to make sure no cars were coming and no one was lurking about then went after him.

The ditch was deeper than she was tall, so no one would be able to see what they were doing unless they were right on the side of the street or on the bridge above. Kerry switched on a small penlight as they moved into the shadows beneath the bridge.

"Tredje's sitting chamber is near the entrance," Gomit explained, keeping his voice low so it wouldn't carry on the night air. "He stays there all evening until he goes to bed. His bed chamber is about halfway between the entrance and the exit."

Kerry could already feel the sweat collecting on her upper lip and trickling down the small of her back even though she should have been comfortable or even a little chilled in the crisp night air. It was too dark beneath the bridge, among the scrubby weeds, and she was only able to tolerate it because Gomit was with her. What was she going to do when he left her alone? How was she supposed to crawl into that small opening and travel along the cramped tunnels without screaming?

"Wha—" Her mouth was dry, her tongue like a wad of cotton. She swallowed. "What if he decides to check on Myghal?"

Gomit thought a moment. "He might before he goes to bed, but you should have the Prince freed and both of you away from here by then. You'll need to move quickly."

Quickly. Kerry didn't think she could move at all. Already, she felt the pressure of the darkness. She could imagine the tunnel walls bearing down on her from all sides. Suddenly, her chest felt heavy and she gasped for air.

"Are you all right, Lady Kerry?" Gomit asked, his voice thick with concern.

She shook her head and closed her eyes. No, she was not all right. She was scared. More than scared, she was petrified.

"Is there anything I can do?"

She shook her head again. She had to save Myghal, but she didn't know how she was going to force herself to enter that tunnel where it was dark and small and closed in. Before she realized what she was doing, she had crawled out from beneath the bridge into the open. She rose to her knees and turned her face to the sky, breathing in deep gulps of air.

"I'm sorry, Lady Kerry," Gomit said close to her ear. "We don't have much time. If I don't return soon, Tredje will become suspicious. He might decide to look in on the Prince and make sure he hasn't escaped. Trolls are naturally distrustful and Tredje keeps a close watch on me. This is the first chance I've had to tell you about the Prince. Will you be able to free him?"

Would she? She had to. Somehow, she would have to make herself enter the Troll's tunnel and find and free Myghal. Kerry swiped the back of her hand across her upper lip.

"I'll do it," she said.

Gomit sighed in relief. "I knew I could count on you, Lady. Give this to the Prince. He'll know what to do with it."

Gomit pressed a small, ridged bottle into her hand.

"Now, I must get back. Do you remember the way?"

Kerry nodded, then watched as Gomit trundled down the ditch toward the entrance bridge. Gomit had gone over the directions with her as she readied for the strangest adventure she would certainly ever have in her life. She had repeated them over and over until she had them memorized. Now, she went over them again in her head, but she realized it was a delaying tactic.

Myghal needed her. Why wasn't that enough to overcome this stupid, irrational fear of dark, enclosed places? Myghal had helped her through being locked in the toolshed. He'd told her that she was strong enough to defeat the fear whenever she was ready to do it. She had to be ready now.

Kerry got to her feet. She looked at the bottle that Gomit put in her hand. She stared at it in bewilderment. The bottle was the saltshaker from her desk in the greenhouse and had been missing a couple of days. Why would Gomit steal it? And how would it help Myghal?

With no answers, she tucked the saltshaker into the zippered pocket that held the box cutters and turned around. She used the penlight to find the opening again. The small hole looked to be nothing more than perhaps where dirt had been washed away. It was barely big enough for her to wriggle through. What would be on the other side?

"Take it one step at a time," she muttered and bent to go under the bridge again. "A ladder. Gomit said there would be a rope ladder fastened to a large root that protruded just under the hole."

Kerry forced one foot in front of the other until she was at the hole. She switched on the large flashlight and put the penlight away. The beam revealed a space that was barely large enough for her to enter. Sweeping the light down, she saw thick ropes knotted around a root bigger than her leg.

But the dark and enclosed space was too much and she had to close her eyes or run. She couldn't run. She had to do this to save Myghal.

Kerry took deep, even breaths, breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth. The tightness in her chest, that panicky, fluttery feeling, eased a little. She had to try again.

Slowly, she opened her eyes, keeping her breath even. She focused on the bright beam of light following the rope ladder until it reached the bottom. It looked to be about a ten-foot drop. She could climb down that far. Sure, she could. She just wasn't sure what would happen after that. Would she start shrieking until Tredje the Troll found her and did who-knew-what to her? Or would she just curl up into a little ball in the corner until Tredje and Gomit ran across her days later? Either could happen. She'd just been lucky that she'd screamed in the shed the day before. Otherwise, Myghal might never have found her and she'd still be there, huddled in the corner in the dark.

The dark, her enemy. Enclosed spaces, the bane of her existence. She faced both right now, but she had to overcome them to save Myghal. She took another slow, deep breath.

Holding on to the dirt above the hole, she put one leg, then the other through. Before she could think about it too much, she wiggled around until she was on her stomach, her legs dangling. She was barely holding on because one hand held the flashlight. There was no way in hell she was releasing the light, so she had to think of something and quick.

She managed to hold the light under her chin and rummage in the pocket on the tool belt until she found the bungee strap. She looped it around her neck and fastened the ends through the handle on the flashlight. She immediately lowered herself until one foot reached the root. She tested her weight, then put both feet on it when it held.

She gripped the dirt at the bottom of the hole and bent until she could feel the root with her other hand. She lowered one foot, taking a quick look with the flashlight to place the next step. In this way, she was able to move downward until she could hold the rope with both hands. She finished climbing down.

Keeping busy had kept her mind off of where she was.

But now she felt the walls of the tunnel pressing in on all sides. Faint light came through the hole at the top of the ladder. Up there was open space and air to breathe. Her throat threatened to close, and her chest tightened up again. All she had to do was scramble up the ladder and she would be able to breathe again.

"Myghal," Kerry whispered and closed her eyes. She gripped a rung of the ladder and pressed her forehead against it. She had to focus on helping Myghal.

Once more she took deep even breaths until her heart was no longer racing in her chest. She had to save Myghal. It was extremely important for him to return to his realm before the Equinox on Tuesday. Even though she didn't have any idea why, if it was important to Myghal, then it was important to her. She couldn't save him if she allowed herself to dissolve into a puddle of neuroses or, worse, run away. He might forgive her, but she'd never be able to forgive herself.

All right, what was she supposed to do next? What had Gomit told her? She had to think a minute before she recalled his directions.

Stand at the bottom with the ladder at her back, then turn left.

Slowly and without opening her eyes, Kerry turned around until she could feel the knots of rope digging into her spine. She swung the flashlight up with her left hand and opened her eyes.

Dizziness swept over her, as if the tunnel was tilting one way and then the other. She had to close her eyes again or she might topple over or puke. Or both. Tears of frustration scalded them, but she refused to cry. She didn't have time. She had to free Myghal. She took a step, her hand pressed against the dirt to her left. She moved to the left a few more feet then tried to open her eyes again.

This time the dizziness wasn't enough to make her stomach churn. She angled the beam of the flashlight against the far wall to give the greatest area of light and tried not to think about the expanse of darkness surrounding her or how the ceiling lowered the farther she walked until she was nearly bent double. She finally had to drop to her hands and knees.

Kerry had never been in a situation where everything seemed to literally close in on her.

She focused her gaze on the circle of light cast by the flashlight, and concentrated on the directions Gomit had given her.

Taking a deep breath, Kerry reminded herself once again that she had to save Myghal. That thought alone gave her the courage to crawl forward.

Chapter Fifteen

Gomit called them doorways, but they were no more than arched openings cut in the dirt that led to either another tunnel or a chamber. When Kerry reached the doorway to the chamber where Myghal was being held—if she had followed the Gnome’s directions correctly—she barely stuck her head in with the flashlight.

“Myghal?” Kerry whispered. According to Gomit, this part of the Troll’s lair was far enough away from his sitting room that she didn’t have to worry about making noise, but the tightness in her chest and throat didn’t allow her to speak above a whisper. “Myghal, are you here?”

Kerry heard a grunt, then a scuffling sound. She flashed the beam of light all around the chamber. It was much larger than she’d expected, with almost as much floor space as her bedroom. The ceiling was, of course, no higher than the tunnel ceiling. She would still have to crawl to enter.

A bright reflection made her stop moving the flashlight. Unruly ash blond hair glittered in the beam. Myghal! He lay on his side, a rag secured in his mouth with a piece of cloth tied tightly around his head. She scuttled through the archway toward him.

His hands had been bound behind his back, and his feet tied together. Another rope, drawn through the rope between his hands, then through a metal loop fastened to a post buried solidly in the dirt, and the one between his feet ensured he couldn’t move from the spot.

Kerry set the flashlight so that the beam illuminated them both, but didn’t shine directly into their eyes. She untied the cloth around his mouth first and withdrew the rag between his lips.

He looked at her with such tender emotion while he worked his jaw that Kerry saw no need to ever tell him that she had doubted him and thought he'd gone off with the leggy brunette.

He grinned. "You know, don't you?"

Being with Myghal eased her anxiety, and the tightness in her chest and throat had relaxed, so she could speak normally.

"That Faeries and Gnomes and Trolls exist? Yes. That you're a Prince instead of a slightly eccentric Brit who doesn't know the difference between a Pixie and a Leprechaun? Yes." Kerry took a deep breath and grinned back. "That I think I might be falling in love with you? Yes to that, too."

"The feeling's mutual. Now, if you could get me loose, I'll show you how much."

Kerry unzipped a pocket and reached in. She felt the box cutter and the saltshaker and brought out both. Gomit had said the shaker would be important to Myghal. She began cutting the rope behind Myghal.

"As much as I'd love to right now, we won't have time to explore exactly how much. The Gnome, Gomit, said we needed to get out of here as quickly as possible. The Troll—I think his name is Tredje—would be checking on you before he goes to bed."

Myghal groaned as he straightened his legs.

"I'm not sure why. By the size of these tunnels, the Troll isn't much bigger than the Gnome. It seems to me you and I could handle him."

Myghal shook his arms to get circulation back into them. "Trolls are mean little bastards. They have magic all their own and no ethics to keep it in check. That's why the old Faerie Queen—and the Faeries aren't known for their morality, so you can imagine how bad the Trolls are—banished the Trolls to this realm. Their magic is severely limited here and keeps them where they can do the least amount of damage. But they still have control of some magic."

Kerry massaged his legs. "If the Faeries are the ones who banished the Trolls, why would a Troll help them prevent you from going back into your realm? Why would a Troll help a Faerie?"

"The Trolls are still in service to the Faeries and are required to do their bidding when called upon."

Kerry nodded. All of this was supposed to make perfect sense. She supposed it did...in some other dimension.

"How did they capture you?"

"When the last customer left--"

"The tall brunette?" Kerry couldn't help but ask.

He nodded. "She didn't seem to want to leave, but I finally made her understand it was closing time."

Kerry thought he sounded exasperated rather than flattered by the attention. She bit her lip to keep from grinning like an idiot.

Myghal stretched out one leg then the other. "They had strung rope across one of the walkways, and I tripped. I caught a glimpse of Tredje before he knocked me out. When I came to, I was here and all tied up."

"Gomit said you have to return to Pixieland by the Equinox. He didn't say why, though." Kerry's elation dissipated. She was afraid to hear the answer to her next question. She had a feeling it wasn't going to be an answer she liked. "When you go, you'll be gone for good, won't you?"

Myghal reached for her, placing a hand at her neck and drawing her closer. He kissed her, his lips possessing hers. Tears filled her eyes. *This is good-bye, isn't it?* One last burning kiss to carry with her the rest of her life. When they broke apart, gasping for breath, Myghal rested his head against hers.

Kerry didn't wait for his answer. She jerked away, knocking his hand aside. She tried to scramble back, but Myghal lunged for her. He caught her and they rolled

together across the chamber floor. When they stopped, Myghal was on top, straddling her, pinning her to the dirt with her arms raised over her head.

"Let me go!" she said between gritted teeth as she struggled to get the big lug off of her. "What's the point? You're leaving and that's that."

"You didn't let me finish, love," Myghal said softly.

"What does it matter? What were you going to say? Something like—Hey, next time you're in the woods and find a pixie ring, wave and say hi."

She tried to wrench her arms free from his grip, but he was holding her too tightly.

"No, I was going to explain why I need to return to my realm by the Equinox...and why you'll be coming with me."

When the words sank in, Kerry froze. She could see his face by the beam of the flashlight, and he didn't look like he was teasing her.

"You— You want me to...visit?" she stammered. She never thought he would want her to go with him or that she would even be welcome in his realm.

"No, I want you to come with me and be my wife."

Kerry's mouth worked, but no sound came out. Had she heard him correctly? Was he asking her to marry him?

He slid his hands into hers as he spread his length over hers. She still held the saltshaker in one hand, and it was trapped between their palms as he entwined his fingers with hers.

"The truth is I have to be married by the Equinox for Pixieland to retain its independence from the Faeries. But," he murmured as his mouth came close to hers again, "you're the only woman I want for my Princess. Will you marry me, Kerry O'Neill?"

Chapter Sixteen

Marry him? Going from never seeing him again to marrying him gave her mental whiplash. She hadn't considered marriage. At all. They'd only known each other a few days. How could they even think about marriage?

He had to marry by the Equinox to save Pixieland...but she was the only woman he wanted to be his Princess. What should she do?

"I know everything is moving too fast." His heartfelt apology touched her. "I wish I had time to court you like you deserve. But I can promise you I'll do everything within my power to make you happy. The palace gardens will be yours to do with as you will. And we can visit this realm whenever you like."

"Gardens?"

He grinned. "The palace is surrounded by gardens, filled with every flower and herb imaginable—and some not imagined in this realm. We'll rule Pixieland together, but the gardens will be yours."

The thought of expansive gardens, a sea of colorful flowers and blooming herbs, tempted her. But a marriage couldn't survive on the promise of a garden alone.

"What— What will happen if I say no?"

"My heart will break," Myghal said. "If I don't marry, Pixieland will revert to the Faerie kingdom. The Faerie folk would invade, and the Faerie Guard would police us. We would wither under their rule. Are you saying no, Kerry? If you say no, I'll have to return to the Faerie realm and marry to save my principedom. I have to do this for my people. But I'll never forget you, Kerry, and I'll never love another, not even the one who would be my Princess. You are the other half of my heart."

Kerry's eyes filled with tears again, but this time because of what she felt for Myghal. If she never saw him again, her heart would break as well.

"Yes, I'll marry you."

"Are you sure, Kerry?" he asked, but he was smiling.

She nodded. "I'm not sure what I'm getting into, but I do know what I feel for you is real."

"Good." He kissed her again, a lingering fusion of their lips that left her breathless. When he pulled away, he touched her face. "We probably should get out of here before the Troll comes."

"Yes, we should."

Myghal helped her sit up. Only then did she remember the saltshaker. She handed it to him and showed him how to remove the top.

"Gomit said you would need this. But I can't imagine what you can do with salt."

He stuck his finger into the salt crystals and touched them to his tongue. He became more excited than when she'd agreed to marry him.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked incredulously.

"It's salt."

He laughed. "It's Pixie dust in its raw form."

"Salt is Pixie dust?"

"And Faerie dust. Pixieland supplies the Faeries with their dust. That's why King Norfe wants control over us, so he can control the dust. But what none of the Faeries or other folk know is that dust isn't mined in Pixieland. It comes from here, your realm."

"We supply you with Pixie dust?" Kerry had momentary visions of mining conglomerates shipping truckloads of salt to Pixieland.

"The Gnomes do. They were always soldiers, but after the Realm Wars ended, they started mining these crystals for us to use with our magic. The crystals have to be reconditioned and charmed, but —"

A thud reverberated through the tunnels, and Kerry heard a gruff voice shout, "On your feet, you clumsy git."

"The Troll is coming," she whispered anxiously. "Can you use the salt to get us out of here?"

"Not like this. I have to change the matrix and charm it. It will take a few moments. Can you keep the Troll distracted until it's done?"

"Sure," Kerry said, but she wasn't sure at all.

Myghal poured the salt into his palm and cupped his other hand over it. His face pinched in concentration, and a pale white light, growing stronger as she watched, glowed through his fingers.

Footsteps sounded just outside the doorway. She didn't know how to keep the Troll occupied, but blocking the doorway would be a start. She crawled forward and when she reached the opening, she looked up into a misshapen face—sunken muddy black eyes, a twisted bulbous nose, and a lipless slit for a mouth revealing mismatched and discolored teeth. It was the ugliest face she'd ever seen.

The Troll lifted his lantern. "Well, now, what have we here?" he growled.

"What do you want?" Kerry snapped.

"You're an intruder in me home and ye ask what I want?" He jerked his chin to indicate the chamber behind Kerry. "Gomit, get in there and see that the Pixie is still secured. I'll take care of the human."

The Troll reached out one stubby hand, aiming a blunt finger at her. She felt a pull behind her navel, then she was jerked through the doorway and slammed against the opposite tunnel wall.

Dazed, Kerry watch as Gomit, moving slowly, entered the tunnel. He glanced back at her, and she thought she saw him wink. Then the Troll was in her face, his lantern raised high.

"If ye weren't so damn ugly, I'd keep ye for my wife-slave after I send the Pixie Prince back to his own realm." His fetid breath washed over her and she gagged,

shrinking back from him as far as she could. "But I can't stand the look of ye. I'll have to get rid of ye for knowing too much about me bridge."

Before she could tell him the feeling was mutual, sparkles in the air caught her eye. They glittered in the lantern light and floated down around the Troll. He gasped and his eyes widened when they came within his view. "What th—?"

Before he could finish the sentence, his body went stiff. Just as he started to topple over, Myghal plucked the lantern from his grasp, and the Troll fell with a solid thunk.

Myghal helped her to sit up. "He'll be all right. In a couple of days."

Kerry grinned. "What about Gomit?"

"I'm here, Lady Kerry." The little Gnome, not nearly as ugly when compared to the Troll, appeared in the doorway. "You'd both best be off now. Tredje had received a message by Sprite that more Trolls are on their way because the Thane isn't pleased with the way Tredje is handling the situation. They could arrive at any time."

"You're right, Sir Gomit." Myghal flashed him a smile. "I thank you, and all the Pixies thank you for your help."

Gomit bowed. "It's been a privilege and an honor to serve in my small way."

Myghal looked at her. "Are you ready to go with me into the Faerie Realm?"

"What about Gomit? Won't Tredje and the other Trolls think it's strange if Gomit isn't unconscious or something? I wouldn't want him to get in trouble."

"Never fear, Lady. The Prince has charmed a little dust for me."

Myghal laughed. "He'll be unconscious with bruises and cuts all over him, but without the pain. They'll think he put up a good fight."

Gomit leaned closer to Myghal. "An excellent choice, my liege. She cares about those who serve. The mark of a true Princess."

Kerry blushed, but Myghal nodded and clapped him on the back.

Once again, Kerry heard sounds—this time, loud voices ranting and raving—echo through the tunnels.

"It's time, my liege," Gomit whispered.

"Are you ready, Kerry? Transportation will feel strange, but it will be over almost instantaneously."

She nodded that she understood.

"Hold my hand. You'll experience complete darkness, but it will be over in a moment." He looked at her questioningly, as if asking if she'd be all right.

She nodded and did as he directed, intertwining her fingers firmly with his. Then he threw a bit of dust over them, and sparkles filled the air, each miniscule crystal shimmering and glinting in the lantern light. The crystals coalesced into a swirl that whipped around them both. Her bones felt loose and a sharp sensation sank to the pit of her stomach. Then all went dark.

Chapter Seventeen

Kerry walked along the path of rose-pink stone through the wildest part of the vast gardens that surrounded the Palace. Here, indigenous plants were allowed to flourish and overflow every available space. The garden was a riot of color and the air scented as sweetly as a perfumery with every plant in full bloom even though it was only the first day of spring.

Her wedding had been as magical as any childhood fantasy. Whisked away by Pixie dust to a land somewhere over the Rainbow—as good a description as any, as far as she was concerned—the wedding had taken place immediately. No one needed to fill out a form to get a license.

She wore a wedding dress straight out of a fairy-tale, a frothy confection of iridescent white, shimmering with every color of the rainbow whenever she moved. The longest points of the uneven handkerchief hem barely reached her ankles, the shortest her knees. She'd been crowned with a circlet of white and blue roses. And she'd already seen beds of blue roses, all shades from palest sky blue to deepest indigo.

Blue roses were a genetic impossibility in her world.

How strange that even as a child she'd never envisioned being swept off her feet by a prince and taken to his castle...er, palace. She had always pretended to slay the dragon, find the treasure, and save the kingdom...er, principedom. Yet, here she was, the only human—as far as she knew—to marry a prince and become a fairy princess...er, Pixie Princess.

She'd slain no dragons—Myghal said they lived deep in Wildwood, the dark and forbidding forest that separated Pixieland from the Faerie Kingdom—but by marrying a Prince she'd saved the principedom.

And the only treasure she ever wanted was Myghal.

Princess Kerry turned to find her husband, Prince Myghal, a few steps behind her. He was devastatingly handsome in fawn-colored leggings and a billowy-sleeved shirt made of the same soft-as-cotton but iridescent material as her gown. Their ceremony had been performed in a Pixie circle, witnessed by most of the good folk of Pixieland, and presided over by Chancellor Malthe. Myghal's friend Sirrin had served as his best man, and Sirrin's sister had acted as her maid of honor. They were called by different terms, but the meanings were the same.

At the conclusion, they'd been showered with a cloud of glittering, sparkling Pixie dust that had been charmed to bring them all kinds of good luck, good fortune, and bright blessings. Kerry had watched the sunlight play off the bits of crystal, knowing in its raw form it was simply salt mined from the earth in her realm by the Gnomes. That was a royal secret, of course.

While everyone had danced to wild Pixie music and drunk dandelion wine and honeymead, she and Myghal had slipped away to be alone. The gardens were empty. Everyone, including the gardeners, were celebrating the royal marriage and the saving of Pixieland.

"Are you happy?" Myghal asked as he caught up to her.

She nodded and melted into his arms. She was happy, satisfied, contented. This was an entirely different world, but she felt up to the challenge of trying to fit in and be a princess. With Myghal to help her, everything would turn out all right. He had said they could visit her realm any time she wanted. She had family and friends she needed to explain to...somehow.

"I wish Gomit could have been here. Without him, none of this would have happened."

"In time to save Pixieland," Myghal amended. "I would have made you my wife, regardless."

Kerry kissed him, a lip-searing kiss that aroused her. It had the same effect on Myghal. She felt his cock stir through their layers of clothing.

"Do you think he'll be all right? That the Trolls will believe his story?"

"In case you didn't notice, Trolls aren't the smartest of creatures. Tredje was typical. Mean and self-centered but dim. They'll believe Gomit because they believe Gnomes to be worthless."

"They wouldn't hurt him, would they?"

"No, because that would require effort. Even if they decided to, I have faith Gomit will talk them out of it. Gnomes are quite glib."

"It's a very good thing the Pixies did them a kindness in the past, so that Gomit was there to help us. He said no one really remembered because it happened so long ago. Do you know what the Pixies did for the Gnomes to win their allegiance?"

Myghal thought a moment. "Ah, yes, I remember the story. A Pixie Princess fell in love with a Gnome soldier."

Kerry stepped back, her eyes widened in disbelief. The Pixies were enough like humans that they could pass in her realm with no difficulty. But Gnomes, if they were all like Gomit, were quite different. "Are you sure about that?"

Myghal grinned. "Well, it's said he was uncommonly tall and handsome for a Gnome, and she was exceptionally short and plain for a Pixie. She was the youngest of a large brood of the Prince's offspring, and therefore not in line to inherit the principedom. And because she wasn't the most beautiful, to put it kindly, her father despaired of ever marrying her off and eagerly gave his blessing. The Gnomes, fearing the wrath of the Pixies over one of their kind having the audacity to ask for a Princess in marriage, were greatly relieved and swore their allegiance to the Pixies for forever and a day."

When Kerry had moved back, she'd stepped off the pink stone path and into a bed of wild mint. The tender leaves, warmed by the sun and crushed beneath her feet, released a cool crisp scent that wafted around them on the light breeze. She caught Myghal's hand and drew him into the center of the bed of mint and into her arms. Her hand slid down between their bodies and found the hard length of his cock. It swelled at her touch.

"You know, we have yet to consummate this marriage," Kerry whispered. "In my world, a marriage isn't a true marriage unless it's consummated."

"The same is true here." Myghal sounded as if he fought for breath, and his fingers skimmed the neckline of her bodice. "Our marriage won't be recognized as legitimate until we complete the union."

He plucked the intricately tied bow in the center and pulled the lacings free. When her breasts were exposed to his eager gaze, he cupped one, his caress as light as the breeze but strong enough to send a surge of hot pleasure speeding through her body, from nipple to clit in less than six seconds.

"You're saying...Pixieland is still in danger?" Kerry murmured between gasps for air. "Then we must sacrifice for the good of the principedom."

"Aye," Myghal agreed and swooped his head low to take the erect tip of one breast between his lips. "For the good of the prince and the princess as well."

Kerry laughed breathlessly. She found the lacings of his leggings and untied them. Dipping her hand inside, she wrapped her fingers around his thick cock and rubbed back and forth along its rigid length. With a deep sigh, Myghal tugged her gown until it was bunched at her waist. He went down on his knees and slid her gown and panties down at the same time. She stepped free of them and went down to her knees as well.

"I want you, now, Myghal."

"Your wish is my command, wife."

Kerry lay back as Myghal climbed between her thighs. He tugged at his leggings, freeing his cock, and thrust into her. Kerry rested her bent legs on his hips, matching the tempo of her hips to his. She opened her eyes. She wanted to see him, see her husband.

"I love you, Myghal."

He looked down at her, his green eyes darkened with passion. "I love you, Kerry O'Neill."

Their bodies moved and built momentum. Kerry held onto his shoulders and watched the reflection of his desire cross his face. With one hand, she reached down to crush more mint and fill the air with its scent...but her hand touched nothing.

She turned her head and her hands scrambled to hug Myghal closer. "We-We're floating!"

"Aye, we are." He spun them into an upright position, so that now Kerry sat on his lap but was still impaled by his cock. "Spontaneous levitation during sex only happens when the couple is meant for each other."

Although it defied the laws of physics, Myghal pumped into her without shooting them off into space. Tentatively, Kerry moved her hips, catching his rhythm again. When they continued to hover about a yard above the mint bed, she relaxed against him, her arms around his neck.

When the heat of their desire burst and soared through her, she knew without a doubt that Myghal was the other half of her heart, body, and soul. She would gladly pledge her love forever and a day to her prince of pleasure.

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Lani Aames resides in west Tennessee with her family and a clowder of cats. She is multi-published in a variety of subgenres of erotic romance, and also writes romance as Lanette Curington. For the latest updates, visit her websites.

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