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Stitches in Time

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# ***STITCHES IN TIME***

**Diana Hunter**

## **Chapter One**

“Eight hundred, eighty-one Euros? Did I hear you right?” Liam Finnerty couldn’t quite believe his ears. That tiny scrap of a tapestry—torn from a much larger work, frayed, stained with who knows what, and not much bigger than an oversized postcard—cost how much? “That’s over a thousand U.S. dollars!”

“I know. You don’t need to make such a big deal of it.” Maggie’s exasperated sigh could be heard throughout the antique store. “This is all that’s left of the castle tapestry. Look, out of the entire picture, only the lucky leprechaun is left. All I said was that was that it wasn’t a lot to pay for a piece that old.”

Liam Finnerty looked at the petite woman beside him and wondered for the millionth time just why he needed to bring her to Ireland with him on this trip. Liam hadn’t exactly been given much say in the matter. Maggie was the boss’s daughter and he was expected to teach her his job. But still. The woman had done little but sit in surly silence on the plane all the way across the ocean, and, since their arrival in Dublin, had done little but complain. Sure, she was cute, with deep brown eyes a man could fall into and never want to find his way out again. Sure, the woman had auburn hair that glinted with golden highlights, but she kept it curled tight in that damn knot. How was a man to know whether it was long or short? And sure, she had a figure that looked terrific in the tailored suits she always wore; she even managed to make low-heeled, sensible shoes look sexy. But Maggie Andrew’s alabaster skin came wrapped in an invisible shell of professionalism that, so far, Liam Finnerty had been unable to crack.

Maggie Andrews might be the daughter of the company president, but she prided herself on the fact that she had worked her way up through the rungs of corporate life. Her father told her she would take over the company when he retired, but that a good leader knew every single aspect of the business and learning Liam’s job had been the

next rung she needed to climb. When her father told her she needed to accompany the overbearing man to the Emerald Isles, however, she almost quit right there. Yes, he was incredibly handsome, with broad, muscular shoulders hidden under his custom-made Italian suit. She noticed the jet-black hair that curled around his ears and piercing blue eyes that saw through her every trick, every shortcut she tried to make in doing the job. He was as bad as her father in that way, never letting her get away with doing anything other than her best.

“Maggie, me dear, you get paid a salary—you buy it if you want it so badly.” Liam decided he was not about to be pushed around by the boss’s daughter—no matter how cute she was. He was not in the habit of buying expensive presents for women he barely knew. And he already knew this one as much as he wanted to.

“You’re as American as I am, so you can stop affecting the Irish accent,” she shot back at him, her anger building. “I’m not asking you to buy it for me. And for your information, I do not get paid for what I do. My father is old school; believing I should live at home, learn the job, and take over the business when he’s good and ready to leave it to me.”

She hadn’t meant to sound so bitter. Truth was, if her older brother hadn’t been killed in that motorcycle accident, she would have already gone on to a career of her own choosing. Forced by her sense of familial obligation to set aside her dreams and instead learn the business, she had mastered every level in the company, while still on an allowance. Yes, it was a generous allowance, but her father insisted that she not receive a paycheck. That was a direct result of Thomas’ spending habits—and his death. Tom had lived hard and played hard, and had died as a result. Now his sister paid the price. On an allowance of a thousand dollars per month, Maggie could not afford such an extravagance as this wonderful piece of art.

“Never mind.” Maggie turned and stalked away. She didn’t want Liam Finnerty to see her frustration and anger with her father—it wasn’t professional. Neither were the tears that threatened to fall. In another place and another time, Liam would have been

someone she would have wanted to get to know in more than a professional sense. But her commitment to her father and to the company left little room for romantic entanglements. Her jaw in a hard line, she walked to the other end of the store to put as much distance as she could between herself and the man she was forced to work with.

"Now, can't ye see the poor girl's hurtin'?"

Liam turned, prepared to blast the wizened old proprietor for sticking his nose in where it didn't belong, except the aisle behind him was empty. Frowning, he turned in a circle, trying to determine who had spoken.

"Sure, an' ye can't see what's in front of yer nose. Lookin' down from that great height, I suppose. Probably miss most of us little folk 'cause ye're always lookin' only at what's right in front of ye, 'stead of bendin' down to see what's hidden in plain sight."

Liam looked toward his shoes, half expecting a fairy he didn't believe in to appear before his eyes. But no dwarf, real or imagined appeared to bedevil him. A loud snort of laughter made him peer at the tapestry again, the colors bright in the dim light of the antique shop. He jumped back when the cloth leprechaun waved at him.

"Fine, strappin' boy ye are!" The little man took Liam's measure even as the American stared at the impossible.

"You're not really talking to me. I only had that one cup of Irish coffee when we got off the plane, but the whiskey in Ireland is known to be strong. That's it, just a wee bit too much whiskey." He rubbed his eyes. "My God, the woman was right, I *am* beginning to talk like one of them and we've only been in the country two hours!"

"That's 'cause Ireland is the country in yer blood, boy-o. I couldn't talk to ye if it weren't."

"I'm going crazy, that's what it is. Stress. Stress and that blasted woman!"

"Ah, yes, and a beauty ye've got there as well. But a bit of a temper, I see." Liam watched in amazement as the leprechaun sighed and crossed his arms, leaning against the bole of a tree. The leaves overhead had been ripped off when the piece was torn

away; in fact, all that remained was the outside border on two sides, a rock, the tree – and the saucy-looking leprechaun.

“She’s not mine, thank you very much.” Of course, that hadn’t been for a lack of trying on his part. The woman made his fingers itch to rip off that hard shell of hers, to break the professionalism she hid behind. That little slip of the tongue there – about not being paid? He hadn’t known that. ‘Course it was easy to see why she’d agree to such an arrangement; the woman stood to be very rich when she inherited the company from Daddy. Still, Liam knew she maintained her own apartment outside the city; that showed an independent spirit. Still, it galled him to find out she was worse off financially than he was, president’s daughter or not.

“Ah, I see yer heart has moved a little. That’s a good thing, me boy-o, ‘cause that’s the girl yer goin’ to marry!”

Liam’s incredulous look was partly because of the absurdity of the leprechaun’s statement and partly because he was actually carrying on a conversation with a piece of cloth. The leprechaun grinned and Liam could swear he saw a twinkle in the little man’s eyes.

“Oh, face it, man. Ye’ve undressed that woman so often in yer dreams ye’re half-convinced ye already know the sweetness she’s covering up.”

Liam nodded and then recovered. “Stop it. I am not about to stand here discussing my boss’s daughter with a scrap of fabric.”

“Ah, the boss’s daughter is it? All the better, me boy-o, all the better!” The leprechaun crooked his finger, and before Liam could stop himself he was leaning down to hear what the leprechaun whispered in his ear. “And ye already know I’m more than a scrap of fabric, lad. Ye find the rest of me tapestry, and I’ll get you that girl.”

“You’re serious.” Liam stared at the frayed edges; the unique Celtic knot border design would make matching it to its mate easy – if he knew where to look for it. With a start, he shook his head as if coming out of a dream.

“No. I can’t believe I’m standing here talking to a leprechaun. Leprechauns don’t exist, and neither do talking tapestries. Sorry. This is that Irish coffee talking, that’s all. I need to go now.”

He turned to leave and took a resolute step forward. Risking a glance backward at the tapestry, his relief was palpable. The small piece of cloth looked just as it had when they had first walked over to it. Quickly he walked away from it, searching for his companion. It was time to leave this place before he fancied the statues talked to him as well.

For several moments he searched the small shop; where could she have gotten? Circling around and weaving through the various items for sale, he stopped short when he finally found her. She was standing before that blasted piece of cloth again, her slender finger brushing along the frayed edges, a faraway look in her deep brown eyes. In an unguarded moment, the mask of the professional woman had slipped, revealing a creature of poetic beauty underneath. Maggie’s face had softened, the hard stress lines had disappeared. Sadness emanated from her very soul and Liam recognized her yearning as a longing for something out of her reach.

But even as he watched, she transformed again, her hand dropping to her side and her posture becoming ramrod straight once more. He saw the president’s daughter take a deep breath and raise her chin, although he thought he detected a slight hesitation as she did so. With a final wistful little smile at the piece of fabric, the thoroughly professional woman turned away from it, her eyes searching the store for him.

Liam bent down quickly, his heart beating hard. Could he ever hope to break that tough hide of hers that encased such a vulnerable heart? Was it something he even wanted to try? The leprechaun’s words came back to him. “You find the rest of me tapestry and I’ll get ye that girl.” Well, he still thought that coffee had been way too strong for his American system, but if she wanted that scrap of cloth, he’d buy it for her if only to see the woman inside her once more.



Maggie had wandered out of the shop in her search for Liam, obviously getting more and more frustrated with not finding him. That suited him just fine. Grabbing the tapestry from the wall, he ignored the tinkle of laughter that emanated from between his fingers and gave the cloth and his credit card to the proprietor. The sale seemed to make the man very happy; Liam briefly wondered if the old man behind the counter heard the leprechaun's voice as well. Liam was not about to embarrass himself by asking.

Arranging to have the tapestry delivered to the hotel did not take long and then Liam sauntered out of the store, his hands in his pockets and whistling an Irish tune. He knew his nonchalance would bother her and so he took his time to make her wait for him.

Impatient, Maggie stood outside the door tapping her foot. Part of her was curious about what he had found to purchase in that place, but she was not about to ask. She never should have drawn his attention to that tapestry to begin with.

"It's been long enough, our rooms should be ready at the hotel." Not looking to see if he even followed, Maggie turned on her heel and stalked off down the street.

The trip over the ocean had been unusual in that they had landed in Dublin almost an hour ahead of schedule, which, in turn, meant their rooms at the hotel were not ready. After blistering the manager and leaving their luggage, she had resigned herself to spending more time in the company of her traveling companion. Among the single women in the company, she knew Liam was considered a true catch, and she could not deny the man's attractiveness. But she had a job to do and was not about to let her own personal desires get in the way of learning what she was here to learn. Still she had been grateful for Liam's suggestion that they spend their unexpected gift of time exploring the block rather than just sitting in the lobby waiting for their rooms.

Now, however, she just wanted a long soak in a hot bath.

Liam let her lead the way, content to walk a few steps behind her and enjoy the view. Oh, but he would love to get his hands on that fine, firm ass of hers. Even though her jacket always partially covered that delicious fullness, Liam let his mind imagine how those twin cheeks must taper to her waist. Daddy's little girl may or may not be a virgin—she had spent several years away from home while going to college—but he doubted anyone had as yet taken that ass the way it cried out to be taken.

But his was not the only appreciative glance Maggie received. The hotel was only around the corner, yet Liam saw at least three men looking their fill at the swing in her backyard. He grinned. She might choose to ignore the sexpot inside her, but that part of her had ways of making itself known. When one of the men moved up close to Maggie, however, Liam's protective shield locked into place without conscious thought. Lengthening his stride, he closed the distance between the two of them and put his arm around her waist.

She stopped dead in the street and he was hard pressed to push her forward. He did *not* like the look in the predator's eye. "Just come along, dear. The hotel is right here." He almost shoved her through the building's quaint revolving door, turning to eyeball the man who had been about to approach Maggie. The man grinned, nodded, and continued on his way. With a glare, Liam turned and walked his half circle around to meet a very angry Maggie in the lobby.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" Her face red with embarrassment and anger, Maggie had to work to keep her voice from echoing throughout the establishment.

"Now hold on. There was a man who was going to pick your pocket." Liam paused to let his gaze wander along her curves. She had no pockets in the trim suit she wore. "Or steal you purse."

"Liam Finnerty, I can take care of a purse snatcher and I don't need you to protect me. I am perfectly capable of handling myself." Maggie tugged her jacket back into

place and smoothed her hair back into its knot. Scowling, she marched up to the registration desk. "Are our rooms ready yet?"

Again, her voice was harsher than she meant it to be. When had she become so uptight? It was that blasted scrap from the old tapestry, that was what it was. It brought to the surface all the dreams she had buried long ago. She was a grown-up now and her family expected her to behave as one. Maggie knew she should rephrase her question to the man behind the counter and she made an effort to still her anger and soften her voice. "Excuse me." Plastering a smile onto her face, she poured sugar into her voice and asked again. "I would like to be shown to my room now. Ms. Andrews." At the man's blank look, she added, "I have a reservation here. Ms. Maggie Andrews?"

A nervous man by nature, the concierge's weak smile did not please Maggie in the least. Her eyes narrowed as the man fussed with the papers on his side of the high desk. Liam sauntered over, deciding that getting into another argument with Miss-High-And-Mighty right now wasn't worth it. They had two weeks in the Emerald Isle and so far, the time felt like it was a lifetime sentence. Still, why wasn't the manager answering her?

"What's the matter, man? Are our rooms ready or aren't they? My secretary made the reservation. One room for Miss Andrews, another for me—check under Liam Finnerty."

"According to our records, Mr. Finnerty, there is a room reserved for you—only." The man's Adam's apple bounced as he swallowed and looked at Maggie as if he expected an eruption. Earlier, he had been on the receiving end of her tongue when the rooms were not prepared for their early arrival. It was only after the couple had gone for their walk that the man discovered only one room had been reserved.

But Maggie did not erupt. She got quiet. Deadly quiet. "Then get on the phone and find me a room in another hotel. Now."

"I'm sorry, Madam, but I have already tried. We pride ourselves on our service and I have called every hotel in the city. There are no rooms in any of the better hotels. Even the motels are filled. It is St. Patrick's Day, day after tomorrow, after all."

"Well, I am not going sleep in the street!" Her voice broke and her pleasant demeanor cracked wide open. Between the stress of the flight over, seeing the tapestry in the little shop, and being forced to accompany a man who hated her, she was tired, cranky and the dam was about to burst.

"How many beds are in the room reserved for me?" Liam could see the floodwaters rising. Let her be mad at him rather than this poor old sot who was obviously scared of the petite woman beside him. Her glare at him was hot enough to melt iron, yet he steadfastly ignored her.

"There is only one bed, sir. It is a queen size bed, but there is only one in the room." The man sidled toward Liam as if for protection.

"I am not going to sleep in your bed, Mr. Finnerty. Try again." She crossed her arms, narrowing her eyes and glowering.

Liam sighed and turned again to the flustered man. "Is there a cot in the place that could be sent up?" He turned to the angry woman. "I'm not much in favor of sharing a room with you either, but you can have the bed and I'll take the cot."

"Sorry, sir, no cot."

"So much for your chivalry." Maggie tossed her head as if daring him to respond to her tart answer.

But Liam just shrugged. "We'll take it. Have the lady's bags sent up along with mine."

"What? We will not...Leave those bags right where they are—"

But the manager had his answer. The shrew was this poor man's problem now. Ignoring her, he signaled to the bellhop to do as he had been told. Maggie was outnumbered.

\* \* \* \* \*

Considering the amount of money the company was paying for this room, it certainly wasn't very big. The bellhop led them in, depositing the two suitcases and two carry-ons at the foot of a beautiful, four-poster queen-sized bed. It was the old-fashioned kind, with drapes hanging to the sides of the bed, drawn back against the posts. Squeezing himself between the luggage and the wall, the boy opened the drapes, letting the sun in to light up the tiny room. Only then could they see the Celtic dragons carved into the wooden headboard.

Between the far side of the bed and the wall with the window there was just enough room for one person to walk. Sitting on that edge of the bed to put on one's shoes wasn't an option. Not unless that person wanted to sit with his head out the window while doing it.

The near side had quite a bit more room—enough for the ornate dresser that sat beside it and doubled as a nightstand. A small door facing the bed led to the bath, the bellhop explained. The place spoke of a previous era and a certain quaintness—which was the polite way of saying the hotel was old and out of date.

Maggie let Liam tip the bellhop—it was his room, after all. Of course, she would probably find it on his expense account when they returned. All right, maybe she was being unfair. But she was in no mood to think pleasant thoughts about anyone. Unwrapping her scarf and shrugging out of her coat, she dropped both onto the bed and then peeked into the bath.

A wonderfully large, claw-footed, porcelain tub took up most of the room. The bedroom, decorated in nondescript beige, paled in comparison to the dusty rose and burgundy scheme of the bath. A pedestal sink just barely large enough to wash one's face, and a white toilet with a flowered seat cover squeezed into the tiny space that remained. No showerhead poked out of the wall; no curtain enclosed the tub. Maggie checked the door—the sliding bolt would serve to protect her privacy.

Liam closed the door to their tiny boudoir, clicking the lock home as he did so. A small closet behind the door held a few coat hangers, but was otherwise empty. The initial plan called for the two of them to remain in Dublin, meeting with potential clients for two days before moving out to several other Irish cities—that gave them three nights together in the hotel. He sighed and felt the tension gathering in his shoulders.

The water was already running in the bathroom as, in two long strides, he crossed the distance from the door along the short corridor and into the room proper. His jaw set when he saw her coat thrown on the bed and he stepped into the bath to tell her to hang it up. But the words died on his tongue.

Maggie had turned the water on to begin filling the tub; her back was to the bathroom door. As Liam watched, her slender fingers reached up behind her to loosen the tight bun at the crown of her head. She pulled out one, two, three pins and shook her head to loosen her hair. It cascaded down, a river of auburn waves. With her head thrown back, she sighed and ran her fingers from her temples back through her hair, combing out the tension the day had wrought in her psyche. Her arms stretched to either side and as she lowered them and brought her head up a yawn escaped.

How many times had he dreamed of watching that hair fall? Graceful curls fell from her shoulders beyond the middle of her back. He longed to run his fingers through that mass, to feel its silky softness caress his chest, his stomach, his...

She started to turn and Liam quickly backed away. For the second time in a day, he had caught her in an unguarded moment and the sight took his breath away. By the time she re-entered the bedroom, he had moved to the tiny closet to hang up his own coat.

Without a word, Maggie picked up her overcoat and waited until he'd cleared the corridor. There wasn't room for two people, at least, not unless they knew each other very well. And she had no intention of getting to know Liam Finnerty any better than

she already knew him. As she passed him, she glared at him as if to dare him to say anything about her unbound hair.

Liam knew better than to bite. Instead, he opened his own suitcase and called out to her. "I'll take the bottom two drawers and you can have the top two."

Maggie eyed him with suspicion; he was being nice to her. What was he plotting? She hung her coat beside his, being sure to leave plenty of room between the two. Shaking her head at her own childish foolishness, she took the three steps back to the bedroom proper.

At least the man was efficient. She watched in silence as he took out his carefully folded shirts and set them on the bed. Her suitcase already lay on the bed, ready to be opened. She distinctly remembered the bellhop putting them on the floor. Her eyes narrowed again. Why was he being so nice to her? What was his game?

"Thank you for putting my suitcase in such easy reach, Mr. Finnerty." The sweetness dripped from her voice as she simpered over to the bed and unzipped the case. She gave him a coy smile and batted her lashes at him for good measure to be sure he got the point.

He did. Damn woman. A scowl crossed his features as he sought to regain the upper hand. "Don't let that tub overflow in there or it's you who will be paying the hotel bill."

"I'm paying it anyway," she shot back. "Or did you forget you charged the room to your expense account?"

He had. Damn her again. Slamming the drawer shut, he opened his mouth to blast her. A knock at the door, however, saved her from the blistering he had been about to deliver.

Maggie didn't wait to see who was at the door. She collected her kit from her bag and headed into the bath. Tempted as she was to slam the door on his insufferable attitude, she heard the bellhop's voice and decided discretion was the better course. Closing it gently but firmly, she locked the door and sighed.

The steam from the hot water had already filled the room and Maggie took another deep breath, letting the moist air fill her lungs and cleanse her of the tension she carried. A third breath left her entire body sagging against the door as the 'professional woman' mask fell away.

She felt defeated today. The plane ride over had been a nightmare, having been forced to endure the company of that man. As she tested the water, Maggie tried to determine just why the two of them had taken such a dislike to one another – and why she was so attracted to him in spite of that dislike. The water was perfect. With a deft twist, she turned off the faucets, then opened a small bottle she had brought with her. Pouring in a small amount of liquid soap, she recapped it and took off her no-nonsense business suit before swishing her hand around in the water to make the bubbles foam.

Only a few bubbles today. While submersing herself in a tub filled to the brim with opalescent globes was her favorite way to relax, her practical side had packed only a small bottle of her favorite bubble bath. One thing her father's financial decree had taught her was the value of small luxuries.

Feeling slightly hedonistic, Maggie dropped her clothes on the floor; her frugal nature usually dictated a more careful handling of the few expensive pieces she allowed herself. But the hell with it. She was stuck in a perfectly beautiful country, in a wonderfully quaint little hotel room, with the most rude, obnoxious, and gorgeous man to walk the earth. She might as well enjoy her time in the bath.

A wicked thought made her grin. In here, she would have the privacy denied her by the hotel's mistake. Liam Finnerty might be a cad, but he wouldn't come in here while she was bathing. Stepping into the hot water and sinking down into the bubbles, she moaned in delight with the combined relaxing of her muscles and the realization that, at the moment, she had the upper hand.

For several moments, she let her mind wander as her body adjusted to the temperature of the water. Closing her eyes and letting out a satisfied groan, she let the hot water carry away all the stresses, the tensions, the lost dreams, the realities of life. In



bliss, she soaked, letting her arms float on the water as she slid her knees up until the water was at her chin. Childlike, she blew on the bubbles and watched several float up and away to burst like little rainbows on the bathroom mirror.

Voices broke through her reverie although she could not understand the words. Liam must be talking to the bellhop, she decided. Too bad for him. He could deal with any problems that arose while she sat here and got waterlogged.

He certainly could handle the problems her father threw at him. She might be learning his job, but it was not one she would ever be able to perform with the same panache. Being outgoing and polite, cajoling customers and distributors while balancing the demands of the company at the same time made Maggie dizzy. But Liam always knew what was going on; always remembered to ask about a customer's spouse and kids; always made everyone feel welcome.

Except her. Sometimes he treated her like a child and then at other times he looked at her as if she were a sex object. Did he think she wanted his job? Was that why he seemed so demeaning? What for? There was a much better one waiting for her in a few years. In fact, Maggie was hoping to move to vice-president after this trip. Or did Liam want that promotion? Well, if he did, he could wait. Within the next five years, her father planned to retire and turn the reins over to her. Liam could move up then, if she decided he could play nice. Extending a long, slender leg, she admired the shapely curves of her calf as the soap ran down her thigh to the water. Smiling, she knew these legs attracted men's glances—whatever Liam might think of her, men still found her attractive. Someday she would have time for men again.

"What? Are you crazy?" Liam's voice bellowed through the door and Maggie felt a bit of tension creeping back in. No, she was not going to let his problems bother her. She ducked down under the water to wet her hair and block out the discussion going on in the other room.

The still-hot water worked its magic and her face relaxed. She stayed under as long as she could before coming up and wiping the water from her eyes. Eying the sink,

Maggie thought about the best way to wash this long mop of hers. That tiny sink was way too small; half her hair would end up being pulled down the drain. A small bottle of hotel shampoo rested on a shelf beside her and she opened it, pouring out a generous amount to use on her hair. What the heck. If they billed the room for additional bottles, let them. He wasn't the only one who might take a small advantage of that expense account.

Gathering her long auburn tresses, she worked the soap into her scalp, piling the long locks on top of her head. The soap would keep her hair out of her face for a while. Waving her hands in the water, she churned up more bubbles to play with as the relatively cool air of the bathroom gave her goose bumps. She grinned at her nipples, now standing straight out. Pinching them a bit to make them hard, her body responded and a different form of relaxation stole over her. Moaning in satisfaction, she leaned against the tub again, letting her head rest on the back while one hand dipped lower in the water.

Pinching her nipple again as her fingers found her clit, her sudden intake of breath, followed by a small moan, echoed in the quiet room. There was no need to remind herself to be quiet—after years of doing this on the sly, silence was ingrained. Maggie was no stranger to creating her own orgasms; creating “le petite mal” at her own hand greatly reduced her daily stress. Although her virginity was lost in college, since coming to work for her father, she had put aside relationships with men to concentrate on her family obligations. But her lack of a sex life was no one's business but hers, and as her fingers slipped along her slit her moans became sighs of contentment.

Slipping one finger into her tight vagina, her other hand slid over her belly to find her clit and tease it. Her body relaxed even further as that tiny organ slipped out from under its hood. Maggie floated in peacefulness; surrounded by bubbles, her eyes closed as her thoughts drifted to her fantasy lover.

For several months now, he had been taking shape in her thoughts. He was tall—over a head taller than her own five-and-a-half foot frame—broad-shouldered and

muscular, but not overly so. No bodybuilder for her. Her lips parted as she imagined him walking through the bathroom door to find her naked in the bath. With increasing fervor, her fingers rubbed along the sides of her clit as she slipped two fingers into her pussy. His shirt was open...no, he wore no shirt...and the soft downy hair of his chest shimmered in the diffused light of her imagination.

She watched in fascination as her imaginary lover slowly peeled off his trousers to reveal a magnificent cock nestled between strong thighs of well-toned muscle. A cock already long and hard and pulsing; its glistening head deep purple with desire. Her lover teased her now, turning so she could look her fill. Was there anything more perfect than a man's ass? Especially his. Firm, molded, muscled. She longed to run her hands over and between those magnificent cheeks. In her mind's eye, he turned, drew closer and her body arched, inviting him. His thick cock was at her mouth and she licked her lips in anticipation. Driving her fingers deep into her open hole, she pressed on her clit. Her body gently convulsed as the rolling waves of her orgasm rolled through her. Unable to stop herself, a loud moan escaped even as her fantasy lover faded.

Opening her eyes, Maggie needed a moment to reorient. A satisfied smile spread across her wet lips and she bit the bottom one between her teeth as she stretched and enjoyed the last of the spasms spreading from her clit.

Slowly she became aware that the water had gone cold. With a sigh for her fading fantasy lover, she leaned forward to pull the plug. A hard knocking at the door made her jump and splash water onto the floor.

"That's a shared bathroom, woman. Your hour is up!"

Anger came back with a rush. How dare he? "I'll get out when I'm good and ready to get out!" she shot back.

Defiantly, she leaned back in the tub. But a soapy lock of hair fell down into her face and the water was now uncomfortably cold. Ripping the plug from the drain, she stood,

letting the water cascade from her as she shook each shapely leg and stepped out of the tub.

The towels were long and thick with a terrycloth pile and gratefully Maggie wrapped one around her. It was then she saw the rubber hose with a sprinkler head at one end; the other end obviously fit over the faucet to make a makeshift shower. Perfect for rinsing her hair.

Throwing a small towel over the tub's side, Maggie attached the tubing and turned on the water, which immediately sprayed out the nozzle. Grinning, she bent down and let the hot water run over her head, her fingers combing her hair to remove all the soap. It took only a few moments to rinse and twist her hair up into another towel.

It was then she discovered a terrible truth. The only clothes she had in the little room were the soiled ones she had just taken off. They lay in a sodden heap beside the bath where she dropped them in her fit of carelessness, soaked when she splashed at his knock. Maggie had no clothes to wear to get from here to her suitcase.

\* \* \* \* \*

The bellhop held a shirt-sized box tied with twine in his hands, an expectant look on his face. Liam sighed. The tapestry. And another five Euros out of his pocket. Still, you never knew when a generous tip would pay off. Closing the door, he took the box to the bed and sat, running his fingers through his dark curly hair.

Why had he bought this thing? And what was he going to do with it now? In Maggie's present mood, no way was he going to just hand this to her. She was mad enough just because he had been nice and put her suitcase up on the bed. Damn that woman! A leprechaun torn from an old tapestry catches her fancy and he goes and buys it for her because...he shook his head. Because the leprechaun told him to. No more Irish coffee for Liam Finnerty, that was for darn sure!

The box jumped in his hands. Startled, Liam dropped it on the floor and stared. A not-so-gentle rapping came from inside the lid and Liam stood, putting several feet

between himself and the box. In his shock, he spoke out loud. "No, it wasn't real. Leprechauns don't really exist, especially not leprechauns in tapestries that talk. Okay, so I'm in Ireland. Lots of Irishmen like to tell stories about the little people. But they don't exist. I was delivered the wrong box is all. That's it, it's the wrong box."

"Open it up, me boy-o! It's dark in here. I like me light, so be a good boy and open the box, lad."

There was no mistaking that brogue or that voice. "You're a figment of me...of my imagination. Go away." Liam fought to retain his carefully cultured standard American accent.

"Can't. You bought me piece of the tapestry." Even though muffled by the box, the leprechaun's voice came through loud and clear.

"Oh, fine." Liam picked up the box and dropped it on the bed. Scissors and knives were no longer allowed on planes, so he didn't have his trusty pocketknife. Bending to the task of unknitting the twine, he thought he heard a moan from the bath.

Remaining still, he listened intently, but there was no further sound. "Damn woman," he muttered again, just because he felt like it.

The knot came loose and Liam set the box on the bed, carefully nudging up one corner to peek inside.

"Oh, come on, man! I'm not going to bite you." With that, the leprechaun pushed on the lid and it fell off to one side.

"You...you're standing." Liam stated the obvious.

"Well, now, it would be impolite to carry on a conversation with ye from lying down, now, wouldn't it? Of course, I'm standing." The little man planted his feet wide and put his fists on his hips.

Liam peered around the leprechaun. Mounted in an oak frame, no glass covered the work of art, a fact that had slipped by him before. The rock was still there, and the bole of the tree, but the space previously occupied by the little elf-like creature had filled in

to look like grass. The leprechaun was still clothed in the traditional dark green frockcoat and breeches, the buckles on his shoes tarnished with age. Liam squinted at him. Was he three dimensional now?

Keeping a wary eye on the little man, Liam circled around the box where it lay on the bed. The leprechaun, narrowing his eyes as well, turned with him.

"Stop that!" Liam snapped. "Let me see your back."

"No. Ye don't want to see it. It isn't pretty an' you'll only see me front."

Liam gave up trying. He was getting dizzy. "I suppose your name is Darby O'Gill."

"It isn't. And I'll thank ye kindly for not givin' me the name of that old sot."

The little man crossed his arms and looked decidedly out of sorts. He put his foot up in the air and the rock from the tapestry rose to meet it so the leprechaun could put his foot against it. Liam closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. He didn't want to believe there really was a leprechaun taking his ease in his hotel room. "Well, are you going to tell me your name? Or do I have to guess it like Rumpelstiltskin?"

With a snort, the leprechaun sat on his rock. "Not likely. 'E was a mean old bugger. Got what 'e deserved, 'e did."

"I suppose you knew him."

"Of course. Know all the little people. We're not a very big community, ye know." The leprechaun's tone took on a pedantic tone and Liam hastened to cut him off.

"So what is your name, then, little leprechaun?" Maybe if he patronized the little sucker he could get rid of him.

"Oh, so it's rude yer goin' to be to me! Is that the way of it? Well, then. Perhaps I ought to just go into that there bath and tell the naked little woman that yer madly in love with her and can't wait to jump her bones."

"What!? Are you crazy?" Liam's voice rose and a sudden quiet from the bathroom made him lower his voice. "Besides, no matter how much you might want to be a peeping Tom, you can't leave that tapestry, so don't go making threats, you puny

pipsqueak." Liam was rather pleased at his alliteration, although the leprechaun was not.

"Oh, now, me boy-o, now ye done it. Ye've gone and called me honor into question." The little man took a glove out of one of his deep side pockets and waved it in the air as if striking Liam on the cheek.

"Ouch!" Liam's hand flew to his cheek, which most definitely stung from the blow.

"Pull out your sword, man. I'll fight ye fair." From somewhere, the leprechaun produced a tiny silver sword no bigger than a toothpick. Liam was about to protest the absolute ridiculousness of the fight, when a sword appeared in his hand. For several moments, he stared at it, wearing a blank look as his mind wrestled with the inconceivable.

"Well, c'mon, man. Put it up." The leprechaun held his sword to his nose in a salute.

Liam, his brain wrapped in a fog, did the same. Dimly he noted the writing along the flat side of his blade and he turned his head sideways to read it. But his eyes could make no sense of the script that flowed from hilt to tip. As he finally realized the words were from a foreign language, he heard a swish of air and realized the leprechaun had brought his sword to bear. Before he could respond, he felt a pinprick in his belly.

"There! I claim first blood!" The little man put his sword down with a satisfied smile across his face. Liam looked down and saw a small rip in his shirt, the edges stained with red. Pulling aside his shirt with one hand while his sword hand fell to his side, he examined the inch-long scratch in his skin.

"You hurt me!"

"Oh, don't be a baby. 'Tis just a scratch. And me honor is satisfied. No more insulting Seamus O'Brien, understood?"

Liam nodded, still marveling that his belly bled. How had that happened? He glanced at the sword in his hand that he had not even used. Celtic filigree danced along the crosspiece; one of those knot designs that made him dizzy. The hilt was wrapped in

dark leather, the blade almost as long as his arm. Yet it was balanced perfectly and felt light in his hand.

“Yes, boy-o. The blade is for ye. My gift.”

Liam’s eyes narrowed. “Why? What’s the catch?”

“No catch.” Seamus shrugged his shoulders. “Ye bought me slice of tapestry to give to yon Maggie, now didn’t ye?” When Liam nodded, Seamus continued. “Well ye want the shrew for yer wife, even if ye don’t know it yet.” The leprechaun held up his hands to stave off Liam’s protest. “Yes, she’s the one ye’ll marry, but...” Seamus voice dropped low and, in spite of himself, Liam leaned in to hear him. “But...ye need to tame the shrew in her first.”

“Just how am I going to do that?” Liam stood up, shaking his head. “The woman wants no part of me, you saw that. And how do you know I want any part of her?” It was his turn to cross his arms and look defiant.

“Ye bought me tapestry.”

Liam’s arms fell in defeat. He had bought the old scrap just because she liked it. “I’m not in love with her.” Liam’s tone was softer, but still just as adamant.

“No, yer not. Yet.” Seamus’ eyes twinkled. “But we’ll see where it goes, boy-o. We’ll just see where it goes. Now, she’s been in that bath long enough and ye need a cleaning, too. Go tell her to get out and to be quick about it.”

Liam’s anger at Maggie had long since faded. Now he sought to take her side against the leprechaun’s attack. “She’s had a long day. Let her soak all she wants.”

“Oh, no, lad! That’s not the way to win her respect. Being all wishy-washy? Woman like that will only give her heart over to a man who stands up to her. Who can prove he’s man enough to handle her. Go! Get her out of there!”

Liam’s two strides took him to the door and he knocked harder than he intended. He heard the water splash and knew he’d startled her. Oh, well, the damage was done. “That’s a shared bathroom, woman. Your hour is up!”



The leprechaun nodded. "That was a good beginning. Now, leave the top off so as I can breath, and put me down under the bed. Ye bought me out of the kindness of yer heart, but it ain't kindness she'll be wanting from ye. At least, not just yet. Ye can tell her ye bought the sword at the store."

Not quite sure why, Liam did as he was instructed. A bedskirt covered the area, so Maggie wouldn't know he'd stowed a leprechaun under the bed. He shook his head and snorted. Did he really just have a conversation with a little man named Seamus? The late afternoon light shone through the window and glinted off the sword he'd propped against the dresser. Yes, apparently he had.

The water turned on again in the bath and Liam stood, intending to bang on the door again. But the leprechaun's words came back to him. He'd referred to Maggie as a "naked little woman." Liam's mouth curled in a smile. Yes, that pretty, tight-assed, ultra-professional female, was in the next room as naked as the day she was born. His cock nudged against his pants as he imagined those firm breasts in his hands as he wrapped his fingers around her soft flesh. Liam closed his eyes as he fantasized about tasting her nipples. He imagined himself lying beside her, taking a nipple between his lips, licking it to make it hard and hearing her moan.

His cock was rock-hard now and he squirmed, its length uncomfortable in his slacks. But he could find no relief here; not when she might walk out of that bath any moment.

As if he were prescient, the door to the bath cracked open and Maggie stuck her head out.

"Mr. Finnerty, I have forgotten to bring my clothes in here. I am going to come into the room and you will come in here until I have finished dressing."

The blush on her cheeks belied her self-assured commands. The woman was embarrassed! Liam grinned, turning so she would not see the bulge his thoughts had produced. He didn't want her thinking she was responsible for his reaction. Well, she was, but she didn't need to know that.

His grin was no more than she expected. Lout. His mocking bow to her as he acquiesced made her realize her tone had been rather imperious. But she would not apologize for it. If she weren't commanding, he wouldn't respect her. Not that he did anyway.

Liam moved aside and made a show of turning his back so she could enter. But with her body and hair wrapped in two towels, her modesty was assured, so he faced her as he gathered up his own change of clothes and sauntered into the bath.

"Your wish is my command, highness. If you haven't used up all the hot water, I'll take a bath." He paused and poked his head out of the little room. "Oh, and be careful of the sword. It's sharp." The door shut firmly and Maggie was alone again.

## **Chapter Two**

Blast, but what that woman did to him! Liam's thoughts prevented the hot water from relaxing him the way it should have. His brain kept returning to those soft, white shoulders he glimpsed on his way into the shower. Why hadn't he noticed the graceful sweep of her neck or the pearly tint of her skin before?

Liam ran a wet hand through his curly hair and tried to make sense out of the day's events. Stuck on the plane with a partner who barely spoke, landing in Dublin to discover their rooms weren't ready, trying to make the day more pleasant by suggesting a short walk, buying a tapestry scrap that he had no business buying because a leprechaun talked to him, a leprechaun who seemed determined to run his love life, Liam shook his head. Too much for one day.

His thoughts came full circle as he dunked his head under the water and thought about the woman he was traveling with. Maggie Andrews as the girl he would marry? She certainly intrigued him and had since the first day he saw her in her father's office. At that time, she still was several levels below him in position but that tightly wound auburn hair and those intelligent deep brown eyes interested him even then. He had turned on the charm, but her demeanor had been cold and distant and he remembered thinking she had a lot to learn about working with people.

Coming up for air, he shook the water out of his eyes and poured the shampoo generously. Liam considered Maggie's rise up the corporate ladder as he washed his hair. He had kept an eye on her and was pleasantly surprised to see her efficient handling of every project she was given. Her professionalism impressed many of her co-workers even as her lack of interest in their personal lives made them label her with unflattering nicknames. Liam did not get involved. It was her own problem and she would have to deal with it in her own way. But it did make him concerned about what

might happen when the old man gave control to his daughter. People worked for Old Man Andrews because they respected him. People would work for his daughter because they got paid.

But they hadn't seen Maggie's momentary vulnerability in the store. Or what she looked like with her hair down. Where Liam reined in his imagination before, now he let it wander. In his mind, her hair was already dry and yet she wore nothing but a towel. He would stand before her and rip that towel from her body, to look his fill at her shapely form. In reality, sensible suits always covered her cleavage, but the glimpse he viewed as she left the bath proved to him that her ample breasts were round and firm; he imagined holding them in his large hands, feeling her soft flesh squeeze out between his fingers. Letting his gaze travel down her body, past her smooth, flat stomach, Liam's imagination viewed the curly patch of auburn hair that would cover her more private area.

But it was the image of that flowing mane of reddish-brown curls that hardened his cock in the water. The way her hair fell from that bun as she shook her head and let herself relax. Grinning, he knew exactly what he would have her do with that hair.

Leading her to the bed, he pictured those long auburn tresses spread out over his chest, their silky softness caressing his skin. The willing woman would move her body sensuously over his, draping her hair to cover his stomach, his waist; dragging her head down to let her curls float over his cock and tickle his balls and the muscles of his thighs.

Leaning back against the porcelain tub, Liam closed his eyes and cupped his thick cock in his hand. Teasing himself with the image of Maggie kneeling over him, he rubbed his thumb along the top, feeling the purple veins ridging along his length. Sliding the bar of soap over his hardened cock, he imagined Maggie leaning forward to blanket his cock with the feathery softness of her hair. Her long and slender fingers would hold him firmly and she would need both hands to massage him since his cock was too long for her to hold in only one.

Liam dwelt on the feel of her hands on him as he slid the soap under and around his balls. While one hand rubbed his cock, the other spread the soap over the twin sacs that hung beneath. And then the little vixen switched positions to use her tongue to torment him. Her face disappeared from view so her little pink tongue could dart around the base of his cock and suckle on the stones hidden in his balls.

And then, her face peering from around his thick cock, she would brush her hair to the side, a naughty grin on her face as she licked her warm, wet tongue from the base of his cock all the way to the very tip. Her mouth surrounded the sensitive, dark tip and Liam's fingers tightened on his cock in response. Her tongue flicked out to lick the small amount of pre-come that gathered in the slit and his hand pumped his cock faster. For many long moments, he hung on the edge as he imagined her ardent lips pressing down just behind the head of his cock while her tongue continued to torment him, sliding around the tip and slithering in and out of that tiny slit. Drawing in her breath, she sucked hard as she kept up the pressure and the exquisite agony.

And then, with her eyes turned up to him in an attitude of servitude and trust, she opened wider and went down on him, taking in his entire length.

His cock hit the back of her throat and she swallowed him down, her throat constricting around his cock as his hand pumped and squeezed tight. She pulled up; his respite was brief before she plunged down again to squeeze his cock with the deep muscles of her throat.

Liam could stand it no longer. Raising his cock so the tip was just above the surface of the water, he groaned as his seed spurted like a geyser to land back in the water near his feet. Over and over the muscles of his body contracted as he pumped his cock until, with an explosive sigh, his body finally emptied and relaxed.

Standing before his semen could cling to him, Liam got out of the tub and let the water drip off his muscled chest. He was proud of his physique and worked hard to maintain the hardened muscles of his youth. Fine, dark hair covered his chest and back and grabbing a towel, he rubbed his tanned skin dry.

He grinned. No doubt he'd lose his job if the boss's daughter ever caught him fantasizing about her that way. The leprechaun had said he would marry her—Liam didn't know about that. But he certainly would not mind bedding the woman—especially if she could really fuck like that.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Liam dressed and entered the bedroom, it was almost eight o'clock, and time for them to meet their first client over dinner. Maggie's professional look firmly in place again, she had dressed in a tailored suit of chocolate brown; an ivory button up blouse peeked from under the buttoned jacket; the straight skirt came demurely to just below her knee. Once again in dark, low heels, she stood as she heard Liam's hand on the doorknob.

Damn, but the man was handsome! In spite of her dislike of his take-charge demeanor, Maggie had to admit he looked incredible. His still-wet dark hair clung to his neck and twisted in little pincurls around his temple. He wore a crisp, white shirt that looked freshly pressed, smoke-gray slacks and, as of yet, no socks. He also wore a satisfied grin. Now she knew for sure what that groan of his had been for.

"We need to get going." Her manner was firm; what he did in the privacy of the bath was his own concern. The fact that she had pleased herself in the same way was none of his business.

Liam noted that the sword had been moved and her suitcase put away. He couldn't resist as he sat on the edge of the bed to put on his socks. "So, Ms. Andrews, what do you think of the sword?"

She had examined it at length while he had been otherwise occupied. For some reason, it looked vaguely familiar to her. Something about the filigree work tugged at her memory, but since she couldn't quite place it—and certainly she did not read Gaelic—eventually she simply set the long sword on the bed and dressed. Why Liam had bought it was a mystery to her. "It's an interesting piece. Are you a collector?"

"I wasn't." There seemed to be a wryness to his voice and at Maggie's look, he continued. "But one must start sometime."

"You'll have a devil of a time if you try to take that through customs. You'd better mail it back to the States with all the proper paperwork." She was not about to have to spend one extra day with this man because he decided he wanted to collect sharp, pointed objects instead of something safe, like condoms from around the world. She bit her lip to keep from laughing at her suddenly naughty thought.

Where Maggie had brought three pairs of shoes—the navy ones she had worn earlier, the brown ones she wore now and a pair of sneakers she doubted she would need—Liam only brought the one pair of dress loafers. She sighed as he slipped his feet into them and shrugged his broad shoulders into his suit coat. It wasn't fair.

Sliding his wallet into his breast pocket, Liam gestured toward the door. The hotel key lay on the dresser where he had dropped it earlier and Maggie scooped it up, dropping it into her purse with a satisfied smile. Okay, it was only a symbol of control, but right now, she would take every tiny scrap that she could. Looking far more self-assured than she felt, she strode past him and out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Maggie had never seen Liam work a client before; that was why she was on this trip. As the future president of the company, she actually had little to do at the moment but sit back and watch a master at work.

And a master he was. Liam had the facts, the figures, the information all stored in his head. He knew when to push, and he knew when to sit back and let the client lead. After a while, Maggie even found herself enjoying his repartee and the stories he told about the company's success. She was not surprised when the client agreed and Andrew's Unlimited became an international player.

No, the trouble did not start until the two of them returned to the hotel room. Flush with success, Maggie's eyes shone brightly; she would have wonderful news to tell her

father when she called him tomorrow. Still conservative, she would not tell him anything until there was a signed piece of paper.

So when she came out of the little bathroom to discover Liam on the phone with her father, already telling him the news, she was furious. Her eyes blazed, then watered with disappointment. It was his right to tell—he made the deal. She turned away to hide the emptiness inside.

But Liam caught a glimpse of her face just as she turned away. What was her problem? He finished his conversation quickly and hung up just as Maggie reached to pull down the covers of the bed.

As she did so, Maggie's foot hit something solid under the bed. She bent down to look as she removed her jacket, but the dust ruffle was in the way and she couldn't see what it was.

"Maggie, no. What are you doing?" He had to stop her. That blasted tapestry was still under the bed, its cover off so the leprechaun could have light. Even to him it sounded absurd.

"There's something under the bed. My foot kicked it." She knelt and pulled up the bedskirt.

"Well, leave it. It's probably something the housekeeper keeps under there. I wouldn't worry about it..." His voice trailed off as she pulled out the box.

For a moment Maggie stared at the tapestry piece, her face a study of confusion. How did this get here? She looked up and saw defeat and guilt plastered all over Liam's face. He had bought it. He had known she really liked it and had bought it just to spite her. She should have known.

He saw the distant coldness spread through her entire being. "Now, Maggie, it isn't what you think..."

"And just what do I think, Mr. Finnerty?" Resolute, she kept her eyes from straying back to the box. It hurt her heart too much.



Liam realized he was trapped. Nothing he could say right now would be right. He ran his fingers through his hair in frustration. He knew she simmered under that icy exterior, but his hopes of thawing the ever-thickening veneer were dimming quickly. Resigned, he shrugged, his shoulders drooping with defeat. "I bought it because you liked it. I was planning to give it to you as a present."

"A thousand-dollar present?" Her eyes darkened. "And just what did you expect me to do for you to deserve a thousand-dollar present, Mr. Finnerty?"

"I expect you to marry me, Maggie Andrews."

Her mouth opened and closed several times. "What?" She shook her head. Surely she had not heard him properly.

Liam couldn't believe what had come out of his mouth. That damn leprechaun. Putting ideas in his head when he wasn't looking. But even as he reconsidered and thought about pulling the words back, Liam realized he didn't want to. Okay, maybe marriage was going a bit too far...but he would no longer deny that he wanted this woman. He let the statement stand.

Maggie shook her head as anger, newly enflamed, built up its heat. "You have a funny way of courting a woman, Mr. Finnerty. Save your money for a woman you can buy."

She flung the box onto the bed where the little leprechaun's jaunty figure gleamed in the light.

"Ah, boy-o, ye've messed this up fer sure."

Liam glared at the leprechaun who stood in the box egging him on. A glance at Maggie made him realize she had not heard the little man's booming voice, nor did she see him standing. Turning his back on her and the box, he strode across the tiny room.

"Yer goin' to have to make it up to her, ye know."

"I know, I know!" Liam forgot himself.

"Well, if you know that, then why did you buy the tapestry?" Maggie's voice was tart.

Now it was Liam's turn to stare blankly. Then he realized he'd spoken out loud the words he meant for the leprechaun. Frustrated, he sketched an exaggerated bow. "Ms. Andrews, I'm sorry. I was presumptuous. I bought the scrap of cloth because I saw that you liked it and for some unknown reason, I decided to do something nice for you." Liam was in no mood to be pleasant. His earlier euphoria at making a deal had evaporated as soon as she kicked the stupid box. And what had made him say he wanted to marry the shrew? He glared again at the leprechaun who merely sighed at him.

"Oh, no, boy-o. Yer not going to win this battle that way."

Maggie's chin shook as Liam's words stung, but she refused to break down and cry in front of him. Pursing her lips, she raised her head and lashed back. "I do not accept it. Take it back in the morning. I cannot be bought, Mr. Finnerty."

"No. I will not take it back. You might reject my present and you might reject me, but you cannot deny your own heart." He held up his hand to stave off her rebuttal. He already had a leprechaun trying to give him orders, he was not about to let this woman tell him what to do. Liam threw down his challenge. "Something about this tapestry spoke to you. I saw it in your eyes. In the shop."

Maggie's shell softened slightly as he spoke of the little tapestry scrap; it *had* spoken to her heart and only she knew the reason why. That tiny little leprechaun, torn from the master tapestry, represented all the years of work and dreams she had invested in life before her brother Tom died. With a Master's in textile art and almost finished with her doctorate in art restoration, Maggie had been well on her way to making a name for herself in a world that did not include her father's business. To find the other piece of this scrap and reunite the two would be the work she had always dreamed of.

He saw her internal struggle. Opening his mouth to urge her to tell him what it was that hurt her so much, he shut it again when Seamus shook his head and held up his hand. There was decidedly less frost in her voice when she spoke again.

"I cannot accept such a present from you, Mr. Finnerty. If you wish to keep it, that is your business. My answer is final." The steady look she gave him convinced him she meant it.

"Get 'er to find the rest of me tapestry, lad. Now, while she's still softened up a bit."

Liam made a face at Seamus and shook his head no. The leprechaun stamped his foot.

"Yes, man! Now! Tell 'er ye've a fancy for wantin' to put the two pieces back together. Tell 'er, or I won't be helpin' ye out of yer troubles no more." The little man crossed his arms and leaned against the bole of the tree once more, a defiant look on his face.

"Fine." Liam's answer was accepted by both of them. Seamus nodded in satisfaction and Maggie simply looked relieved. "I do intend to keep it, Ms. Andrews." Liam ignored the triumphant look on the leprechaun's face. "I intend to find the rest of the tapestry and then have it restored. I will frame the entire piece and hang it in my house as a testament to my folly." He scooped up the box and glared at Seamus as the little man grinned and sat down on his rock.

"You're going...but..." Maggie was torn. She would give her eyeteeth to be a part of this, but how could she tell him that? Assuming an air of indifference, she crossed her arms. "And where are you going to look? Heaven only knows how long ago that scrap was torn off."

Liam looked at the scrap and the leprechaun shrugged his shoulders. "Sorry, boy-o. Ye have got to find it on your own. It's a part of the curse."

"Curse? What curse?" Liam hadn't intended to speak out loud. Maggie's shocked look had him scrambling to cover his mistake. The last thing he wanted was for her to know he was talking to the damn thing. "I mean, what should I do about the curse on

it? That's a problem, you know. It can't be reunited with the other piece of cloth until...until..." Liam shook the box to prompt the leprechaun.

"Until me owner finds his one true love."

"Until his owner finds his one true love." The words registered with a vengeance. "What?"

Maggie crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. She seemed to be doing that a lot lately. If she didn't stop, she was going to end up with crow's feet long before her time. While impressed with Liam's smooth-talking abilities at dinner, the fact that now he seemed bent on giving her a load of baloney did not sit well.

"You're daft, to use a word of the land." Ignoring him, she gathered up her nightclothes and pushed him out of her way so she could change in the bath. "Please try to have your story straight by the time I return." Throwing her hair over her shoulder, she tossed her head and closed the door behind her.

Liam heard the bolt slide home on the bathroom door and threw the box onto the bed. "All right, Seamus O'Brien. Out with it. I want the whole story and I want it fast."

"All right, man, all right. Calm down, it's not that long a story. Sit down and I'll tell ye the whole bloody mess."

Liam sat heavily and propped the tapestry up against one of the hotel pillows. The little man paced two steps one way and two steps the other—all the space he had.

"Well, ye see, it was like this. A long time ago, there were two young lovers. Young William, 'e was a handsome lad, strong and tall. A warrior and leader of his clan. Pretty Margaret was the daughter of the English lord. Yea, ye can see the trouble brewin' already, I see."

Liam nodded his head. The Troubles still raged in parts of Ireland. His family had emigrated over a hundred years ago and still the stories of atrocities—both English and Irish—had been handed down through the generations.

"Well, William and Margaret, they were so much in love...it just broke me heart. So, using a bit o' me magic, I managed to give them a life together. The two eloped."

"Something tells me they didn't live happily ever after."

"Well, they did for quite some time. But then William, he was exiled by Margaret's father for what he done, stealing his daughter an' all. The two lived in hidin' for over five years. Durin' that time, young Margaret worked on a tapestry to immortalize their love. Ah, t'was a beautiful work of art, too. The two of them standing under the trees, looking so lovingly at each other..." Seamus' voice trailed off and Liam scowled.

"Well, come on, tell me what happened. She'll be out of the bathroom in a minute."

The little man shook himself. "Ah, yes. Well, eventually they got caught. The two were brought before her father, who cursed them both."

"By tearing the tapestry?"

"Ach, no, man—that came later. No, his curse was powerless. The man had no power except over the two of them. He sentenced William to the gallows and made Margaret watch as he hanged her true love."

Liam sat unable to speak for several heartbeats. "And did it happen? Did her father really have him hanged?"

"Aye, he did. And she watched her love die a most horrible death. That's when she cursed me, for havin' brought them their heart's desire in the first place."

"And that's when she ripped the tapestry."

"Well, no. Ye see, I wasn't a part of the tapestry, then. I was a free-roamin' leprechaun. But she caught me when I went to console the poor lass and sewed me into the corner in her need for revenge."

"So when did she rip the two pieces apart?"

"She didn't. Her mother did that after they found the girl hanging in the bedroom they'd locked her into after William was dead. It was her mother who found the

tapestry and when I spoke to her and tried to get her to let me go, she ripped the piece in two and threw me out the window. I never saw the rest of me cloth again.”

“Why do I think there’s a lot of this story you aren’t telling?”

“Because ye wanted the short version, lad. Here comes yon lass. What are ye goin’ to tell her?”

Liam didn’t answer, since Maggie opened the door at that precise moment. His reaction was immediate. Dressed in lacy, navy blue baby doll lingerie, Maggie’s shapely body was revealed in all her glory. Liam’s eye traveled from the graceful curve of her neck over her alabaster shoulders to two beautifully shaped breasts just hidden by the dark, silky material. In the coolness of the room, little buds blossomed at the tips and Liam’s cock stirred. His eyes continued downward toward her narrow waist and well-formed thighs – and that was as far as he got.

Blushing to the roots of her hair, Maggie rushed across the room and scrambled into the bed, pulling the blankets up to cover herself. She had paced for several minutes in the bathroom, trying to gather the nerve to make the dash. Now she glared at him from the safety of the bed. “Believe me, Mr. Finnerty, had I known I would be sharing a room with you, I would have packed differently.”

He grinned and the devil was in his eyes. “No doubt you would have, Ms. Andrews, no doubt you would have. But now I have visual proof that there’s a passionate heart that beats behind those tailored suits.” His grin grew wider. “I, however, do not have to worry about what to wear to bed...” Liam stripped off his shirt and tossed it on the floor. His naked chest glimmered just as Maggie always thought it would; a gorgeous, muscular torso faintly covered with soft dark hair that glimmered in the soft light of the hotel room. Her sudden intake of breath was audible in the quiet room.

To cover her reaction, Maggie feigned shock. “Well, you’re not sleeping in the nude tonight! I’m tempted to make you sleep in the tub.” She had been, too, but had discarded the idea as childish and immature. They were two grown adults stuck in an

uncomfortable situation, and she didn't need to get all melodramatic about it. But she had known she wouldn't make it to the bed without some comment from him about her sleepwear. What she hadn't been ready for was his complete appreciation for her appearance. Despite her intent to keep her distance from him, his obvious enjoyment of her teddy gave her a very warm feeling inside. A feeling that resided way too low for her own comfort.

"That's it lad, bed her!"

Through gritted teeth, only the little man heard Liam's murmured, "Shut up." Bending to pull down the covers on his side of the bed, Liam lowered just enough of the blankets to give him a better glimpse of her shapely thighs. But Maggie's hand slammed down and his view was cut off again.

Irritated at the leprechaun and aroused by Maggie's body, Liam straightened to take off his pants. With a tug, he pulled at his snagged belt, making it snap as it came out of the belt loops. The sound cracked through the air and Liam snapped it again, glaring at the little man in the tapestry. His meaning was clear. Seamus shrugged and perched on top of his rock.

At the first snap of his belt, Maggie jumped, but then realized it was unintentional. At the second snap, the warm feeling between her legs gushed with arousal and a sudden fear. Did he intend to use that on her?

Maggie was no virgin, but she hadn't had a lover since she entered the family business. Now she could not deny the excitement she suddenly felt in Liam's presence. Did he intend to have his way with her?

But Liam wasn't looking at her, he was looking at that blasted piece of cloth. She sighed as he dropped the belt on the floor and unzipped his pants.

Liam looked up at the sound of her sigh. Her lips were parted and there was a yearning expression on her face as her eyes rested on his crotch. But then she noticed his glance and turned away fussing with the blankets. Damn the woman, just what did she want from him?

He slid his pants down and kicked them into the corner beside his shirt. Not usually a slob, tonight he just didn't care. Between the long flight, the shopping, the successful business dealings, a talking leprechaun and a woman who didn't know if she wanted to be fire or ice, his head ached. At least he wouldn't be embarrassed by his underwear; plain, old, plaid boxers.

Sliding into the bed, he turned his back to her and pulled the little chain that turned off the light. In the sudden darkness, he squirmed down into the bed and rolled so his back was to Maggie. He could feel the warmth of her body and knew that if he faced her, he would breathe in her sweet scent. Traces of it wafted to his nose and his cock twitched again. He buried his head in his pillow and tried to think about cold things.

Maggie didn't know whether to be relieved or insulted. His look told her he liked what he saw; his body language now indicated he wasn't really interested in her. She knew she should be grateful. Why, then, was she so disappointed? Sliding down under the covers, she was careful not to touch his body with any part of hers. The queen size bed meant it was possible for two to sleep without touching, but only if both slept on the outer rim of the mattress; a place Maggie was not used to sleeping. Still, she pulled the blankets to her ears and lay on her side with her back to the man who didn't want any part of her.

Maggie knew the reputation for cold professionalism she had in the company. But it was important that everyone respect her. She didn't have all the degrees they did; while most in the company studied business and marketing, she spent her time in the arts. Now suddenly thrown in with the wolves, her tough hide was all that got her through some days.

But tonight the cracks in that hide threatened to break open. The long flight, the disappointment in the shop—only to find out Liam had bought the stupid thing just for her, then forced to share a room with him, sitting on the sidelines while he wined and dined the client and made the deal, his obvious appreciation for her body yet lack of desire for her, all piled up on her, pushing her thoughts inward. Inside, where she was



lonely and afraid. Her drive to be what her father wanted left her little time for friends or lovers and she spent most of her days afraid the others would discover what a fraud she was in doing her job. A tear trickled from the side of her eye to wet the hotel pillow.

"Ah, the lass is cryin'. Go on, boy, take her in yer arms and tell her it'll be all right."

"You've gotten me in enough trouble tonight. Go away." Liam's quiet whisper could barely be heard.

"But ye need me help, me boy-o. Can't ye see the lass is ripe?"

"I said, go away." Liam reached up and took the box off the dresser. In the dim light that leaked in through the window, Liam saw the little man sitting cross-legged on his rock. "If I wanted to make love to the woman, I wouldn't need your advice."

"What?" Maggie surreptitiously wiped her eyes and peered over her shoulder.

"What?" Liam echoed, trying to sound nonchalant.

"I thought you said something."

"No, not me. Just putting the tapestry away, that's all." Liam set the box on the floor and slid under the covers again.

"Oh."

The word was flat and lifeless and pierced like a dagger through Liam's heart. The leprechaun was right; Maggie was hurting. But the devil take him if he knew why. Rolling onto his back, he tried to make things right between them.

"Maggie, look. I know you don't like me and you're mad because I bought the tapestry when you couldn't afford it. I'm sorry your father's not paying you what you deserve, but I just wanted to do something nice for you. As a friend."

"No, man! As a lover, not a friend! Tell her that her lips are as soft as the budding rose bloom, or that her hair intoxicates you with its satiny shimmer, but don't tell her you only want her as a friend!"

Liam's long arm reached down and shoved the box under the bed.

The strain of keeping the mask in place required too much energy. She sighed as she rolled over onto her back, staring at the ceiling. "Thank you, Liam. I'm sorry I got angry with you. It's just that little scrap of cloth represents so much of what I can't have. It's hard to look at it and know my responsibilities will always keep me from doing what I love."

"And what do you love, Maggie Andrews?" His voice was soft.

In the darkness of the room, Maggie's energy gave out; her mask slid off and the pent-up words tumbled out. "I love finding the piece of art that needs just a touch of restoration to bring it to life once again. Whether it is rare or common, it doesn't matter. To know that I have the skill to restore it to its former glory and give it a new life in our world; to see a piece I've spent hours, days, months uncovering, researching, painstakingly put back together and on display in a museum or gallery for others to see. That's what I love. Knowing that two of us—the talents of the original artist combined with my skills in restoration—produce an entirely recreated piece that shines for a new generation to appreciate."

Liam didn't need a light on to know her eyes shone with passion. This was what the woman had been trained to do; this was what she should be doing. Much as he appreciated her father's business sense, he now doubted the man's parenting skills. The woman's soul wasn't interested in the bottom line; her soul was tied to the glories of ancient art.

"Then why do you work for your father, woman? Why don't you follow your heart?" He knew the answer even as he asked the question, but needed to hear how Maggie saw it.

She was just so tired. Tired of hiding her real personality under a thick wall of professionalism; tired of working for her father's dream instead of her own; tired of not having a friend. Maybe it was the Irish moonlight, maybe it was her own exhaustion, but Maggie found herself answering.

"Because he is my father. He built that company from scratch. He missed so many family gatherings, so many birthdays, because he was working so hard to make a go of it. Thomas..." Her voice cracked and she paused. Swallowing hard, she took a deep breath to steady herself. The scent of Liam's aftershave filled her nose and desperately she grabbed onto the shreds of her control.

"But Tom died." Liam prompted her. "And you still grieve for him by trying to do his job."

The shreds slipped between her fingers and tears slid from the corners of her eyes. Not trusting her voice, she nodded in the darkness.

"A job you don't really want, do you, Maggie?"

His voice was kind, soft and understanding, gentle. A small sob escaped and she clapped her fingers to her mouth, trying to stuff everything back inside again. But his arm slipped behind her neck and for the first time in her adult life, Maggie cried on another person's shoulder.

She could not hold back the sobs. She cried for her brother's wasted life, and she cried for her lost dreams. She cried for her own inadequacies and for the fact that she couldn't afford the tapestry. Her sobs came from the very depths of her soul and all Liam could do was hold her as her grief and sorrow poured out.

"Ach, the poor lass. She's been shuttin' that in for a long, long time." Seamus' voice floated up and Liam nodded, knowing that somehow, the leprechaun could see him.

"Just hold her, lad. That's all she needs; a good, strong shoulder to cry on."

"Don't suppose you could get me some of those tissues?" Liam's voice was quiet and he pointed in the general direction of the tissue box on the dresser.

"Sure, boy-o. Here ye go."

Liam felt the outline of the box suddenly under his fingers. Deciding this was not the time to worry about the little man's magic, he pulled out several tissues. Maggie's

hands lay limply against his chest, and he pushed a tissue between her fingers. As if on automatic, she began to wipe her eyes, taking deep breaths as her tears passed.

"How long have you been holding that in?" Liam brushed a stray lock of auburn hair from her face.

Maggie struggled to sit up. She couldn't breathe lying down after a cry like that. He helped her upright and she looked over at his dim figure and shook her head. "I don't know. I didn't cry like this at his funeral." She sighed. "Look, Liam, I'm sorry. It's been a long day and I didn't mean to impose on you like that."

Liam frowned; she was putting up her barriers again. "It wasn't an imposition, Maggie. If you don't take care of emotions, they tend to blow up on you when you least expect it. It's all right." He knew her eyes would be swollen and red from her tears and he couldn't help himself. He didn't want those walls to go back up. "You are a passionate woman, Maggie, who has denied herself, her real self, for far too long." He leaned in, his cheek brushing along hers to revel in her sweet perfume.

Maggie swayed; her eyes closing as his lips softly caressed her cheek. She turned her face toward him, seeking those lips, wanting to drown her sorrows in his kiss. And when they met, a small whimper sounded from the back of her throat, moved by the gentleness and understanding in his touch.

The salty remains of her tears sank into Liam's consciousness. He shouldn't be doing this. She was vulnerable; it was wrong to take a woman when her defenses had collapsed. But her scent filled his being and when she opened her lips, inviting him deeper into the kiss, he decided to be sorry about it later. His tongue explored her mouth, tasting her deeply, entwining around her tongue as he felt her arms go around his neck.

Maggie knew exactly what she was doing as she threw away her mask. Screw the company, screw her reputation, screw it all. She was tired of carrying the weight of her father's will. Tonight, she wanted only one thing, and she knew Liam would willingly

give it to her. The morning was soon enough to pick up her burden and put Liam back in his place. Tonight, she just wanted him to make love to her.

The taste of her tongue ignited the pilot light that had been burning in his belly since the day they met. He took her mouth, possessed it, felt her give it up to him; his cock grew heavy in response. The blood pumped its way through the veins that surrounded it, fed it life as Liam pulled Maggie closer.

His hand traced along her shoulder, pushing the thin strap of the baby doll down her arm. Not letting go of his kiss, she gracefully extricated her elbow from the strap and moaned as his fingers ran over the thin fabric covering her breasts. He cupped her breast through the fabric, his fingers lingering on her nipple, teasing it into hardness. Gently he squeezed the tiny bud until he heard her gasp of pleasure.

Maggie's pussy responded, flooding her panties as he pinched her nipple; her body threatened to turn to jelly at his touch. With one arm still around her, supporting her against him, Liam's hand now brushed the other strap off her shoulder. Shifting position, Maggie leaned into him, nuzzling her kisses under his chin and along his neck as he pushed the garment to her waist. Too long had she gone without a man's touch; far too long had she craved the heat Liam's hands ignited in her body.

The softness of her skin against his chest sent a surge of desire coursing to Liam's cock and it stiffened; his need more intense. Even as he bent to take her nipple between his lips, as her fingers entwined in his hair and her breasts rose to meet him, the forgotten leprechaun spoke up. "Slowly, boy-o. Don't frighten the filly." The leprechaun's voice was soft in his ear, so quiet that Liam might have deemed it his own thought but for the Irish terms.

Liam growled and Maggie grinned. She arched her back to push her breast up, inviting him to play with it. When his lips closed around her hardened nipple, she sighed. And when he used his teeth to gently pull it out toward him, she moaned. "Oh yes, Liam. Please..." another moan cut off the rest of her request.

He lay her back onto the bed, pushing the covers aside to give them both room. Shifting his attention to her nearer breast, he cupped it, rubbing his forefinger over the tightened nipple. With his other hand, he took her arm and raised it up over her head to rest on the pillow. Grinning, she did the same with the other arm, arching her back and letting him play with her body.

“Leave them there until I give you permission to move them.” His voice was raspy with his craving for her submission.

Maggie complied with a pleased sigh. No more control. No more worries. Just Liam’s hands on her body, fondling her, carrying her off. She moaned again as his hands ran along her sides, pulling her sexy lingerie down and off her slender legs. Only the navy blue satin panties remained on her otherwise naked body.

For months, Liam had wondered what lay behind Maggie’s hard shell. Tonight, her veneer had cracked and for the first time, Liam glimpsed the powerful, sexy tigress that lay at rest behind that professional mask. Controlling such an animal required careful handling – and Liam Finnerty loved a challenge.

“Aye, that’s the way, lad. Get yer own knickers off now before ye rip right through ‘em. That’s a fine twig ‘n berry set ye have there – put it to use tonight!”

Liam growled again. “I know how to make love to a woman!”

“Yes, Liam, don’t stop.” Maggie’s voice was breathless, letting herself be carried away.

With another low-throated growl to cover his mistake, he launched himself at Maggie’s breasts, kneading one breast while pulling the other into his mouth; gratified by the feel of her body writhing under him. Her hands stayed above her head, her back arching invitingly and Liam let his tongue circle the hard little bud he suckled. He heard her nails on the headboard as her hands sought for purchase on the carved dragons. As long as she didn’t bring those hands down to stop him, Liam knew he was on safe ground.

Maggie pushed her breasts up to meet his hungry mouth; he most certainly did know how to make love to a woman. Never had her hunger been greater. It was almost as if her tears released the lock she kept on all her desires and now they flowed out with a vengeance. If he did not let that hand drift lower soon, she knew her need would command her and that she would push his hand down to invade her pussy.

But she held back and kept her hands above her head, as Liam had told her to. There was something deliciously naughty about submitting to him, letting him control her; something that appealed to the tigress that lived entrenched in the deep caverns of her psyche. Not one man had ever been able to let that animal loose. Maggie knew it was there, when she chose to look that deep. But it was too painful to admit that that side of her needed to be locked away, and so she did not look very often. Liam's command of her body threatened to wake the tigress and Maggie squirmed under his touch, both wanting and fearing the animal's release. Breathless, urging him with her body to stroke her even as she feared where his touch would take her, the animal cried out through Maggie's mouth with wordless cries.

Liam needed to get his cock free of his underwear. He was fully extended and much as he didn't want to admit that the leprechaun was right—these boxers needed to come off. Oh, but this breast was so wonderful to torment; it yielded such incredible noises from the woman beneath him. Giving a last small bite to her nipple just to hear her moan, he slid off the bed and pulled down his boxers.

The huskiness in Maggie's voice betrayed how wanton she felt. "I wish there were more light so I could see you, Liam. I want to see all of the man who claims me tonight."

"Yer wish is my command, Lady!"

A thin shaft of moonlight suddenly beamed through the parting in the window curtains to fall directly on Liam's cock. He was vain enough to be pleased by her sudden intake of breath and he rubbed along its length to give her its measure. Two full handspans it stretched from his body and still the purpled tip poked out from his fist.

"I intend to take you, Maggie Andrews. I will bury every inch of this cock inside that hot pussy of yours. Your body will buck against mine and I will feel your pussy clench around my cock as I force you to come."

Yes! This was what she wanted—to be carried away from the real world by the force of Liam's cock driving into her. Keeping her arms above her head, she squirmed on the bed trying to get relief by the friction of her soaked panties.

"Aye, man, ye've got her right where ye want her now. Take that little scrap of fabric off her and give yerself a clear shot."

Ignoring the leprechaun, Liam did exactly what Seamus told him. With a deep growl, Liam reached forward and roughly yanked down Maggie's panties. Her scent was strong and Liam parted her legs to run his finger down her slit and into her hot, wet pussy.

A dim part of her mind understood that Liam's rough touch was exactly what she needed right now and Maggie's body responded. Another wordless cry escaped her as the tigress clawed at her cage and Maggie threw her head back into the pillows, spreading her legs wider. She was shameless tonight and she reveled in it. Throwing her arms to the sides above her head, one hand curled around the curtains as the fingers of her other hand dug into a pillow. Liam's fingers pumped her pussy and she let her body dance for him.

Oh, but she was tight! While tempted to just plunge his cock into that dark, damp hole, Liam held back; he didn't want to hurt her. While the fingers of one hand worked her pussy, the thumb of the other came up to circle her engorged clit and tease her unmercifully.

"Oh, Liam, please. Please let me come!" Even as the words left her mouth, Maggie couldn't believe she had said them. Never, ever had she begged for release. She always controlled her own orgasms. Always. Until tonight.

"That's it, man! That's yer cue!"

"Stop talking. I know what I'm doing!"



"Yes, Liam..." Another moan as Liam's fingers savagely fucked her pussy cut off anything further Maggie might have said.

"Damn." Liam didn't know whether to be angry at having an audience that found it necessary to give him advice, or pleased. His words, meant for Seamus, had definitely had an effect on Maggie. Her body cried out for release and he controlled it. He dreamt about so much power over a woman and here the little leprechaun had delivered it.

But he was barely controlling his own needs right now. His cock throbbed painfully, the veins bulging with their life-giving blood. Removing his fingers, he put a hand on either side of her. Laying his length between her legs, he eased the tip of his cock into the opening of her waiting pussy.

Eagerly, Maggie raised her hips to make his entrance easier. His movements slow, he groaned as his cock entered her tight, wet, waiting pussy. In and out he pumped, each gentle thrust stretching her; each thrust pushing his thick cock deeper within her willing body. Relaxing into his pace, the last vestiges of her control slid away and she followed his lead as he manipulated her body.

His cock filled the snug space she so eagerly provided. Dutifully, she kept her hands above her head as her body moved to his rhythm. Liam bent down to possess her mouth again as, with a deep thrust, he pushed his entire length into her. Their tempo increasing, he felt her body convulsing under his as his pubic bone crushed her clit on each stroke. Her legs encircled him as her mouth opened to him and the tempo increased again.

Maggie had never felt so stretched. Liam's presence surrounded her; she could not escape him. His cock impaled her pussy; his tongue entwined with hers. There were no choices left. The tingling between her legs grew stronger. She could not take much more.

"Come for me now, Maggie. Come around my cock."

Maggie's body suddenly went stiff as time stood still. She couldn't breathe and didn't want to. Poised on the edge, Liam's cock slammed into her and her body arched

as she cried out. Desperately she clung to the cliff's edge, but his cock slammed into her again and she plunged into the abyss. In bliss, the waves of her orgasm swept over her, from the tips of her fingers where she clutched the curtain, to the ends of her feet where they wrapped around Liam's back. Maggie's voice filled the air with wordless cries as she hung onto Liam's body and rode him.

Liam grinned as she screamed and her pussy contracted around his cock. Dimly he hoped the hotel had thick walls otherwise security would be here any second. As the contractions in her pussy squeezed him, he groaned and thrust hard again. And then time stood still for him as well. With loud, satisfied groans, he pumped his seed into her as her muscles milked him dry.

Panting, their movements slowed. Liam remained in her as long as he could, but the tip had become sensitive; pulling out, he shuddered as he collapsed alongside her body. "Maggie..." He wanted to tell her it had never been like that before. He wanted to tell her that he would make love to her like that every time. He wanted to tell her he was falling in love with her.

But she put her finger over his lips. She didn't want him to say words he'd regret in the morning. Long ago she had armed herself against the words of men and even though her heart yearned to hear the soft words he would speak, her already-damaged heart couldn't stand being broken right now. Instead, she snuggled beside him as the coolness of the night made her shiver.

The covers floated up and covered the two of them where they lay entwined in each other's arms, but neither noticed. Contentment and sheer exhaustion had claimed them both.

"Aye, Seamus O'Brien, it is a genius you are."

And under the bed, the little leprechaun doused the magical moonlight and rested in his tapestry.

## Chapter Three

Maggie awoke to the sound of a baritone voice singing “When Irish Eyes are Smiling.” Blinking against the morning light and stretching, she suddenly remembered where she was and what she had done last night. Peeking under the covers the sight of her naked body was confirmation. Moaning, she put her hands to her head and sat up.

“Maggie Andrews, I can’t believe you did that! What were you thinking, girl?” She glanced over to the closed bathroom door as the words of the song dissolved into a very fine humming. The swishing of water followed by a clink on the porcelain sink told her he was shaving.

Rushing to get her clothes before he came out of the bathroom, Maggie found her discarded lingerie flung to the other side of the room. “Flannel. Today I go buy a flannel nightgown. And a robe. You definitely need a robe.” Expecting to be in a room all by herself, she hadn’t bothered to pack one.

His shirt lay near her discarded nightclothes; it would do. She slipped her arms into it and pulled it together in front of her. At least it covered her rear end. Just as she buttoned the last button, Liam sang the last line of the song and made his entrance.

“Irish eyes are smiling, Sure ‘n, they steal your heart away.” He grinned to see her in his shirt. “Mornin’, Maggie!”

“Good morning, Mr. Finnerty.” She gathered up the clothes she would need for the day while trying to ignore the fact that Liam wore only a towel around his waist.

“Oh, we’re back to that, are we?”

His amused smile did nothing to sway her mind. She was determined to put the feelings he stirred in her back into the box where they belonged. She had a job to do.

“Yes, Mr. Finnerty, we are back to that. We never should have left in the first place.”

“Oh, lad, she’s a handful! Go on, kiss ‘er! Let her know who’s the boss here.”

Liam reached down and scooped up the box from under the bed, giving Seamus a warning glance. For answer the little leprechaun just pointed toward Maggie and made kissing noises.

In disgust, he dropped the box onto the bed and the frame rattled against the cardboard.

“Be careful of that!” Maggie’s two steps brought her to the side of the bed. She picked up the frame and turned it over, clucking in dismay as she did so. “Look, it wasn’t even mounted properly. There’s been a lot of fraying on this piece since it was separated. See? Look here.”

Liam bent in close to see where she was pointing. Her formality was still in place, but when she spoke about the little piece of fabric, her tone was softer. His hand slipped around her waist and he felt her stiffen, although she did not move away. She couldn’t. He’d left her no room.

The casual familiarity of Liam’s hand on her waist threatened to melt her resolve. Frowning, Maggie tried to move around him, but he had her trapped in a tiny space. Pinned between the dresser, the bed and his body, the sudden closeness made her heartbeat race and her cheeks colored to a pretty rose-pink as her flustering attempts to get around him failed.

“Maggie,” Liam whispered softly into her ear. She was so sexy wearing his shirt, with her long, slender legs now pinned between his much larger, much stronger thighs. The sight of her – still mussed from sleep, flustered, obviously aroused – stirred his cock beneath the thin hotel towel.

The tapestry frame pressed against his chest where she held it between them; giving it a gentle tug, he pulled it from her fingers and set it on the bed. Face down. Not that he thought that would stop Seamus, but Liam hoped it would at least mute the leprechaun’s voice.

Maggie's fingers were nerveless. Liam's eyes did not leave hers. He smelled so clean, of soap and shaving cream and toothpaste; she still wore their combined scents from last night's lovemaking. One of his hands still rested on her waist, with the other, Liam now reached for her top button.

God help her, but she wanted this. All her resolutions to put him in his place dissipated in the heat of his touch. The man was a masterful lover and Maggie found she didn't want to say no.

But she had to. She had already sullied her reputation with Liam—now was the time to repair the damage before things got out of hand. Gritting her teeth, she maneuvered her knee so that it just touched his hardening cock.

"Mr. Finnerty, back away now."

Liam saw the change in her eyes just seconds before he felt her knee in position. He could easily outmaneuver her; by physical strength alone, if necessary. He knew he would lose her forever if he did. Dropping his hands to his side, he stepped back.

"Maggie, you cannot deny what we did last night."

"I do not intend to. It was a mistake. I was vulnerable and you took advantage of that. I will not be so little-girlish as to confide in you again."

"Little-girlish? Maggie, you were no little girl last night. I saw the real you. The one you bury under those tailored suits and that tight bun—just like an old spinster. Is that what you want, Maggie Andrews? Tell me the truth—is that what you want? To be the spinster head of a company you hate?"

"I don't hate my father's company!"

"You hate working there, admit it. Maggie, you have the soul of an artist; I see the way you look at that scrap of fabric. That piece of tapestry means nothing to me but that it touches your heart. When you look at it, I get glimpses of the passionate woman I made love to last night."

She wanted to lie to him, to tell him he was wrong—she loved her work and would be very happy to be married to the company. Unbidden, an image floated in her mind: herself ten years from now, sitting in her father's chair, unsmiling, controlled, professional, alone. A spinster. Spinning on her heel so he would not read the truth in her face, she turned her back to him.

On the bed, face down, lay the tiny tapestry scrap that started it all. That blasted thing had been the catalyst that spiraled her out of control last night and threatened to do so again. What was it about that little leprechaun that moved her heart so? Her heart full, she picked it up and turned it over, once again running her finger along the edges, drinking in its every detail.

Liam knew Maggie could not see the thumbs up sign the little man gave him, but with a frown, he hushed Seamus anyway. Maggie stood on the cusp of a great decision, although Liam doubted she knew it yet. He did not want to disturb the thoughts he had set in motion.

How had the ancient weaver managed to find colors so vibrant? Who was she? Where had this piece come from? Questions swirled around Maggie's brain as she considered the mystery. Liam, of course, was right. For two years she pretended she loved the company, loved the idea of taking over, while fighting the panic that she wasn't good enough. And she wasn't. She never would be. The realization felt like a dagger of betrayal through her heart.

"You remind me of things I left in my past, Mr. Finnerty. My father counts on me; he has always built the company so that he might someday turn it over to his own son. Or daughter. I cannot spend my life wishing Tom back to life. I can only make the best of what I have. To turn my back on my father is not an option."

The words were bitter in her mouth. Setting the tapestry onto the bed, her finger trailed along the edge one last time before she turned away.

"Maggie..." Liam tried to stop her as she stepped toward the bathroom.

"Grab her, man! Don't just stand there like some bloody doormat!"

In desperation, Liam followed Seamus' advice. Taking a step to block the door, he grabbed her shoulders to prevent her from running away.

"Maggie, you have to get rid of your martyr complex. You don't owe this to your father—and he has no right to ask it of you. I remember how surprised he was when you came to him after Tom's funeral and told him you'd like to learn how to lead. He didn't expect it of you, then."

"But he does now."

"Yes, because your act has convinced him you love what you're doing. But a blind man can see you hate it."

"I fooled you. Until that blasted tapestry showed up."

"Well, you have me there. I was convinced you were just a tight-ass with no personality."

Liam knew the words hurt her, but he didn't back down. He had fallen in love with the woman underneath. If being candid was the only way to make her realize she was living a lie, then candid he would be.

"Maggie, you tried so hard to bury the artistic side of you that you went and buried your passion along with it. I've seen how much you love art, and last night I felt your passion." His voice gentled as his fingers traced the line of her jaw. "Maggie, you are a beautiful woman when you aren't hiding from yourself."

Her eyes dropped as she fought back the tears. "Oh, Liam, you don't understand. I can't...I can't let my father down."

She looked like a wounded dove. Sliding his hand under his chin, he tilted her head up and watched a tear escape to slide down her cheek. With his thumb, he brushed it away and bent to kiss her quivering red lips.

Maggie's control hung by a thread. She stood very still as Liam's lips touched hers, desperately trying not to give in. For two years she had been a pillar of steel, denying

the life she wanted. Her shoulders slumped as she leaned into him and returned his kiss.

Liam wanted her. God help him, but her pain fanned the embers inside him. His protective nature ignited and he imagined himself with great big wings that he could fold over the two of them, giving her refuge. When he heard Seamus' voice, he dared not look up for fear of seeing those wings in reality.

"Aye, that's the way, man. Gentle her. She's like a hurt wild bird, she is."

Maggie broke the kiss, swallowing hard. Barely able to breathe, she sought his eyes as she faced her truths. "If I don't take the company and keep it in the family, then who would? He would have to sell it or he would be forced to work until he dies. Neither is an option I can allow."

Her eyes searched his and Liam understood she wanted an answer. She only saw the two options; did he have a third?

"Perhaps he can find someone to sell it to he would trust." He took a deep breath and ventured deep, keeping his hands around her waist. "Someone like me."

"You?" Maggie took a step back.

"What's wrong with me? I know the company inside and out. I'm good at what I do—very good. You saw last night. Strange as it may seem, I am not content to stay where I am the rest of my life. I already decided I'd stay for another three years because of the expansion your father is doing—I want to see that through. But then I plan to leave and start my own business."

"And if I weren't there to take over for my father..."

"Then I'd consider staying." He sighed. "No, never mind. It wouldn't work."

"Why not?" The more Maggie considered Liam in her father's position, the more she saw the advantages. She was privy to her father's counsel and knew he thought of Liam as his right hand.



“Because I’ve set aside enough money to start up a business, not to buy one that’s well-established.” His eyes narrowed. “Unless...”

He shot a glance at the tapestry.

“Oh, no, boy-o. No pot o’ gold here. That’s a fairy tale told by them pesky creatures to get us leprechauns in trouble. Sorry, but there’s no money to be had from me.”

Maggie followed his glance. “How can the tapestry help? Even if we find the other piece and I do restore it, selling it still wouldn’t be enough.”

Liam’s shoulders slumped. “I know.”

But Maggie wasn’t ready to give up so easily. For the first time since her brother’s death, she saw a way out—a way to please both herself and her father. Liam Finnerty was the perfect person to take over the company—and she was going to make sure he did.

She backed away and put her hands on her hips. “Liam...what’s your middle name?”

He frowned at her non sequitur. “Patrick, why?”

“Liam Patrick Finnerty, if you don’t have more confidence than that, then you’ll never get my father’s company. If you’re really serious, and I mean really, really serious, then I will help you make it happen.”

She smiled at his look of astonishment and let her hands drop down. “Liam, you’re right. I don’t want to work for my father and I don’t want to own the company. I want to find a quiet museum or a nice antiques bureau somewhere, and restore ancient art to my heart’s content.” She laughed out loud for the first time in ages. “It may not be glamorous, and I’ll never have a position out front, but that’s just fine with me.”

Liam had never heard her laugh. Like long, deep wind chimes, softly sounding on a warm summer’s night, their tones peeling through the darkness, her laughter sang in his heart and he knew his course. With a resolute step, he swept her into his arms and kissed her soundly.

She yielded to him, to the strength in his arms, to the force of his tongue on her lips. Sliding her hands along his forearms, she reveled in the firm muscles bunched under his skin. Her hands slid up and around his neck, feeling freer than she had ever felt before. His tongue slid into her mouth and she tasted him with hunger reawakened.

This time Liam broke the kiss as he stepped back long enough to scoop her up in his arms. "Maggie Andrews, I want to hear you laugh again."

She couldn't hold it in. Her startled exclamation turned into a full-throated laugh; lacing her fingers behind his neck and holding on tightly, she let her head fall back. A river of golden-red hair tumbled over his arm exposing her long, slender neck to his kiss. Twirling her toward the bed, he bent to kiss that vulnerable whiteness. He felt the vibration of her moan through his lips and he kissed her neck again.

Maggie pulled herself up to nuzzle against his ear, but Liam pulled back, raised her up several inches higher – and dropped her on the bed. She shrieked and put her hands out as she bounced, her laughter filling the room again.

The edge of the tapestry frame rested alongside her arm, but before she could pick it up, Liam reached for it.

"Let's just set this little fellow aside for the moment, shall we?" Grinning, he started to set it on the dresser.

"Oh, me boy-o, don't put me upside down again!"

"Sorry, Seamus, my friend. I don't much care for an audience right now." Liam deliberately turned the frame over and set it face down.

Maggie giggled. "You named the leprechaun?"

Liam's mischievous grin answered her. "Well, it just seemed the little guy should have a name, that's all. Ms. Andrews, you are a beautiful woman and I want you very much."

She giggled again and gestured toward the bulge under the towel. "So I can see. Well, Mr. Finnerty, what are you waiting for?"

Liam stripped the towel from his waist in one quick motion. His magnificent cock stood straight out, the dark head pulsing with his arousal. A bit of pre-come already glistened at the tip and Maggie's eyes darkened with desire.

She slithered around on the bed, turning over onto her stomach and lying lengthwise so that she held herself up by her elbows just at the edge of the bed. Her nipples had grown hard under the shirt that now rode up, exposing her rear to his view. She wiggled her ass, enticing him, mischief in her eyes. And when he stepped forward, his long cock right before her face, she complied, wrapping her diminutive hand around his thick shaft and teasing the smooth, velvety tip of his cock with her warm, wet tongue.

His groan gave her a deep feeling of satisfaction. Widening her mouth, she leaned forward to close her soft lips around the entire tip of his cock, permitting him to revel in her tight, wet, warmth. Caressing the head of his cock with her tongue, she tasted her fill of him, her body unable to remain still on the bed as her own need grew.

Damn, but the woman turned him on. Power surged through his body at the sight of her stretched out on the bed, her warm eyes turned up toward him and her sensuous lips wrapped around his cock. "Yes, woman. Suck me."

Maggie grinned around her mouthful of cock. She had always preferred strong men. Not that she had that many lovers in years past, but she was no virgin, despite being chaste for the last several years. Lowering her eyes to appreciate the beauty in front of her, she sucked hard and pulled more of his hard cock into her mouth. The ridges of his throbbing veins rubbed her tongue as she slid it along the underside of his thick shaft.

Liam was tall and broad shouldered, with a cock to match his size. She tried to take it all, but found only about two-thirds of it could fit into her mouth and down her throat in the position she was in. Pulling away, she started to shift position when he stopped her.

"No, not yet. Take off that shirt, Maggie girl."

With a brazen smile, Maggie kneeled on the bed facing him. Her fingers undid the buttons, pulling apart the sides of the shirt to reveal her ample breasts, heavy with arousal. Her nipples, reddened and hard, tingled as the shirt passed over them. Tossing it toward the pile of clothes already on the floor, Maggie sat back on her heels and cupped her breasts, holding them up for his inspection.

His own hand rubbing along his cock, he watched her play with herself. The tigress he had glimpsed last night was now a playful kitten, grinning at him with an abandon he had only dreamed about. She pinched her nipples and he knew he wanted to pinch them harder, just to hear the wonderful noises she would make. But then her hand started to glide down the smooth surface of her stomach and Liam reached out to stop her.

“That’s for me to explore. Come here.” He knelt on the bed beside her and pushed her backwards, both of them now lay side-by-side across the bed. Her breasts rose and fell with her quickened breathing as he caressed one, squeezing the softness in his hand. Pulling a nipple into his mouth, his tongue flicked over it and felt the little bud swell and become hard.

Taking his time, he teased her nipple, pulling on it with his teeth, then letting it go and smoothing it with his tongue. Glancing up at her face, he saw her eyes were closed; her brow furrowed with pain. But when she arched her back, pushed her breast up to him and used her hands to keep his face where it was, he knew the pain was also pleasure.

Liam shifted his attention to her other breast and Maggie squirmed as he played with her body. He was controlling her and the tigress paced in her cage. Each touch of his hand, his lips, his tongue pushed the bolt further and further back. Last night she had barely controlled the animal. Today, Maggie wondered if she had any control at all. And when his mouth left her breast and his tongue licked its way down her stomach, she knew the animal was in Liam’s hands – not hers.

Maggie responded with such incredibly delicious sounds as his tongue traced a path over her smooth skin from her breasts to her navel and over her belly. The hair that covered her mound gathered dark and thick, hiding what he sought. He paused to run his fingers through the fine, silky hair relishing the softness. Another moan made him grin. She made a wonderful instrument for him to play.

Oh, but the man was driving her wild! Her hands groped downward, running along his back, feeling the soft curls of his thick black hair. His breath on her mound made her ache and she tried to arch herself up to him, to hurry him along.

Liam grinned at her attempts to take control and looked up at her. "Maggie, my dear, your body is mine. Now if you can't behave, I'll just have to tie you down so I can play in peace."

"You wouldn't!" In spite of her words, the thought actually excited her and she knew more of her juices had joined the pool gathering at the entrance of her pussy.

His eyes narrowed. "Is that a dare?"

After a moment's hesitation, she replied. "No." She pulled her hands from his shoulders and raised them over her head. Immediately she felt vulnerable and open to his every whim—and it excited her even as it raised her curiosity.

"Good. Now keep them there."

Liam turned back to her mound, where he had continuously been running his fingers. Hiding his grin, he couldn't believe that she had done what he asked. That hardened, professional, always-in-control woman really was a front, just as he always suspected. Underneath was a passionate, sexy, submissive woman. Changing positions, he knelt on the bed and decided to test his theory.

"Spread your legs."

The command was demeaning and Maggie kept her legs shut tight, even though she wanted his touch. She was no whore to be ordered about.

He stroked his cock and raised an eyebrow at her. "You need to let me in, Maggie. Now spread your legs for me."

Liam knew he could just as easily part her thighs himself and that in the normal course of lovemaking, he probably would have. But he wanted to see just how far her submissiveness extended.

"Make me."

She threw the challenge at him with a glint of laughter in her eyes. He wanted to dominate her? He needed to tame the tigress first. Did he have it in him? Fervently, Maggie hoped Liam would accept the challenge.

A slow smile spread over his face as Liam understood. "Very well." He stood and bent down beside the bed to pull out the bottom drawer with a hard tug. Taking out something from the inside, he palmed it and stood up. "I warned you."

Liam reached forward, ostensibly to caress her calf. But when his hand reached her ankle, he pulled on it, turning her on the bed while sliding his tie under her limb. Before she could pull away, her ankle was caught in a noose. Grinning, he tied the other end of his good silk tie to the post at the corner of the bed.

"What! Liam! I can't believe..." Maggie sat up quickly, her voice trailing off as he bent to get another tie. Even as her fingers tried to undo the first knot, Liam pulled her other leg and spread her wide open. Off balance, she leaned to the side, still trying to work the first knot.

But Liam had picked up two ties this time. Once her leg was firmly anchored to the post, he took his last tie and grabbed her hands. Not stopping to let her catch her breath, he looped the tie around her wrists and tied her hands together. Then, forcing her to lie down, he pulled her hands up over her head.

But now he was stuck. The carved wooden headboard gave him no place to anchor the last tie. And he had only brought three with him. Hanging onto the end of her tether, he stood beside the bed and flipped over the tapestry.

"Oh, now ye need me help, ye'll let me watch ye."

Maggie was giggling on the bed at Liam's predicament. Clearly he would not be able to tie her up quite as much as he wanted to. Part of her triumphed and pulled on the tie he held; part of her was disappointed and she turned her head.

And so she did not see Liam's urgent look at the little leprechaun. Nor did she see a small opening appear in the headboard right at mattress level. All she felt was Liam's tug on her bindings as he straightened out her arms and fastened them to the headboard.

Only then did he pause and look her in the eye, gauging her reaction.

Her face was snarled with frustration. How had he done that? She struggled against her bindings and Liam checked to see that they did not tighten. They didn't. He knew how to tie a knot that wouldn't move and cut off her circulation. Maggie was held fast.

"Liam Finnerty, you let me go right now!"

"Is that what you want, Maggie? Do you really want me to let you go?" His fingers caressed her skin, running along her chin and brushing over her neck.

She almost spit out the word "yes," but found it stuck in her throat. She was helpless, at his mercy. His hand slid back to her breast and his fingers rolled her nipple, squeezing it tightly. She moaned instead.

"I'll take that as permission to continue." His smile was soft and gentle as his hand drifted down her body, making her writhe again.

She knew where he was going. He would touch her pussy and find out how wet she was. He had mastered her at her own game and her juices flowed freely. Never had anyone tied her down and as she pulled against her bindings, Maggie was surprised at how freeing they were. For the first time in her life, she could not control the situation in any matter whatsoever. Totally at Liam's mercy, she only had to relax and enjoy what he did to her. Still, nervousness kept her on edge.

Reaching up, Liam pulled a pillow down and slid it under Maggie's hips. He hid his delight when she raised her body to give him room. The little tigress enjoyed this!

Satisfied she was in easy reach, he slid onto the bed and lay between her spread knees, his face inches from her pussy.

The smell of her arousal was potent. With her legs spread wide, she could not stop him from touching her and that, in turn, made him hard again. But he would play just a little more before he entered her. He wanted to see how far she would let him go before begging him for release.

Maggie could feel his warm breath on her pussy lips. No one had ever tasted her before. No one. She held her breath in anticipation. Would he? Or would Liam turn away as other lovers had? Swallowing down a whimper, she waited.

Liam sensed her stillness and glanced up at her face. Her breathing was steady and deep and after a moment, she looked down at him with longing in her eyes. He smiled and inched himself forward, turning his attention to those two luscious lips that hid a treasure he wished to sample.

With his fingers, he parted those twin gates that leaked their precious fluid and gazed at her exquisite sex. Her vagina gaped open, her creamy whiteness pooled just inside, a testament to her arousal. Just above, her clit peeked out from under its hood and Liam knew his tongue would engorge it further.

Using his fingers to spread her labia, he leaned forward to take her clit between his lips. Sucking gently, he slowly rolled his tongue over and around the hard little bud. She moaned and he glanced up to see her head thrown back and her breasts pointed to the ceiling as she arched her back.

Maggie didn't know if it was pleasure or pain, but she didn't want it to stop. She cried out as his tongue moved faster. His teeth closed on her sensitive bud and her mind went numb. She heard the cars and trucks in the street outside, but they ceased to have meaning. Over and over, his tongue flicked her clit without mercy and she thrashed in her bindings.

"What do you want, Maggie? I control your body, but I will give you back that control if you want it. Tell me, Maggie, shall I untie you?"



Liam's voice compelled an answer, but her ragged breath could only gasp out her answer. "No! Liam, please. Please don't stop."

Her juices caused his fingers to slip on her labia so he adjusted his position, pulling back those swollen lips. Again Maggie's inner lips opened of their own volition, inviting him in; this time he accepted the invitation. His hot tongue scooped up a large swallow of her juices, savoring her salty taste and her musky scent before he swallowed her essence, making her a part of him. Plunging his tongue into her pussy, he pushed on her clit with his nose, overwhelming himself with her scent and taste. Grinding his face into her, he drove her body fiercely. Bucking against her bindings, she begged him for release.

Maggie was past thinking. Her pleas and wordless cries turned raspy as he enjoyed her clit and Liam knew she could not take much more. Withdrawing, he knelt, much as he had last night. She lay spread before him; helpless, spread-eagled for his pleasure and Liam prepared to ram his cock home where it belonged.

"I am going to take you hard, Maggie Andrews. And you will come only when I say so. Do you hear me?"

Through the agony of her need, Liam's words resonated in her soul and her body replied to his domination with increased fervor. "Yes, Liam, please. Oh, please, take me now. Please!"

She had begged. It was all he asked for. With a forceful thrust, Liam's cock entered her, stretching her wide. She screamed and he thrust again.

"Yes, Liam! Oh, please, yes." Maggie's muscles grabbed his thick cock, hungry to have him deeper into her body.

Liam's groans joined hers as he pounded into her again and again. Suddenly she lay very still, every muscle tightened, poised; breathing in tiny spurts; whimpering. One second. Two. She lost count. The tigress pounced and, with a cry wrenched from her soul, Maggie's body wracked her passion upon his cock. Again and again, Liam felt

her muscles milk him until, with a cry to match hers, his body shuddered as his seed shot deep into her body.

How long she stayed, balanced on the edge of her orgasm, Maggie had no idea. Only that when she exploded, she felt it deep into her soul. She let go and her body writhed as each wave convulsed through her being. Every thrust Liam made carried her higher. For long minutes she floated as spasms wracked her body; dimly she was aware of them slowing, then stopping.

Spent, Liam collapsed beside her. For several moments, he could not think, but simply floated in his own haze of sated exhaustion. He lay his head on her breast, listening to her heartbeat slow to a more normal pace and when he had the strength, he raised his head to look at her.

Maggie's eyes were still closed, but as he watched, she took in a deep breath, letting it out in a long, slow, contented sigh. Opening her eyes, she smiled a lazy smile and shivered.

"Let me get you untied." Liam stretched as he stood, his now limp cock shrunken, yet still impressive. In a few moments, Maggie was free and she stretched along the bed, not really wanting to get up. Liam humored her, pulling the covers up over her and sliding in beside her.

She nestled into his arms and looked up at him.

"Do I dare believe I might really not have to run the company?"

"Dare to believe it, Maggie. I don't know how I can get enough money to buy it from your father, but I'm sure something will turn up." He leaned over and winked at the tapestry. "Right, Seamus?"

"Ah, me boy-o, I do believe yer right. In fact..."

Seamus' comment was cut off by Maggie's cry. "Liam! The time! You have an appointment in fifteen minutes!"

"Damn!"

In a flash, Liam was out of the bed and on his way into the bath to wash up after their escapade. "Damn and damn again." Returning, he took the boxers Maggie held out for him. "You're not going?"

Maggie laughed out loud at the absurd thought. "No, Liam, my savior. I am not going. I'm staying here and taking a long, leisurely bath to wash off not one, but two sexual rendezvous!"

He grinned. "Give me a little while and I'll cover you again, Maggie Andrews. And make you beg me for it."

She wrinkled her nose as he pulled up his pants. "Fat chance, Liam Finnerty. You may have pushed my buttons this time, but we'll see who the boss is next time."

Maggie buttoned his sleeves as he buttoned his shirt. All his ties were still tied around the bedposts and she chose one while he finished up. Smoothing it out as best she could, she handed it to him.

"Ye can always blame the wrinkles on yer suitcase, lad."

Liam grinned into the mirror over the dresser and tightened the knot. Perhaps he'd stop and buy another tie on his way back to the hotel. He turned and Maggie handed him his briefcase. Still nude, she had forgotten her nakedness in the rush to get him out the door. Leaning over, he tweaked a nipple as he stole a goodbye kiss.

She squealed and pushed him toward the door, ducking into the bath so she couldn't be seen from the hallway. Waiting until she heard the door click shut, she emerged, rummaging around the drawers until she found the clothes she wanted. Humming to herself, she went off to take her bath.

And on the little scrap of cloth, sitting face up on the dresser top, a little man dressed all in green clapped his hands and kicked his heels.

"Ah, yes, Seamus O'Brien. Ye are a genius indeed!"

## **Chapter Four**

After her bath, dressed in jeans and sweater, Maggie felt truly relaxed for the first time in two years. Telling her father she would no longer accept responsibility for the company would be difficult; but already the wheels were turning in her brain, determining just how she would broach the subject and tell him her plans.

There was no denying her emotions were running high. Liam's dominance of her this morning had no right to thrill her as much as it did. She was an independent, modern woman, damn it. So why was she so excited when he tied her up? He certainly hadn't raped her – Maggie knew she consented to every part of what he did to her. And boy, what he did to her!

A knock at the door disrupted her reverie; the bellboy stood there with the morning paper in his hand. "Mr. Finnerty said to bring this up to you, Ma'am. He said you might want something to read."

And Mr. Finnerty must've already tipped him well, Maggie surmised as the young man simply delivered the paper and left without holding out his hand. Shutting the door, she threw the paper on the bed and opened the curtains

Sunlight streamed in, but Maggie could see the day was a chilly one. Everyone who hurried below had their collars turned up and bent their bodies into the wind. Glad she didn't need to go out into the cold, she decided a morning spent with the paper wasn't such a bad idea. Tucking her legs under her, she curled up on the bed with the tapestry on the dresser beside her and the paper spread on her lap.

"Well, Seamus, looks like it's just the two of us for the rest of the morning."

Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw the leprechaun wink. Looking again, it looked no different than before and she just shook her head.

The front pages of the paper were dedicated to world and national news; Maggie skimmed the headlines—the world was still turning. Another section, devoted to local affairs, seemed more promising. Sightseeing was not why they were in Ireland, but still, she had hopes that they might get around to see a few of the landmarks before they had to fly home.

Scanning the articles, she was just about to turn the page when a rather striking photograph of an old castle tower caught her eye. Ireland was filled with old ruins, but for some reason, this structure looked familiar. “Glenquin Castle...south of Limerick. Pretty country. Wonder what’s going on there?”

Her gaze skimmed the article under the picture—apparently the castle was undergoing restoration and some items of interest had been found. A hidden vault under the structure had been opened and the archeologists had discovered a treasure trove of antiquities. Several pieces of common jewelry, dozens of casks and crocks of all sizes, clothing, and a few old, rusted swords. A price hadn’t yet been put on the value of the find.

She read the article all the way to the last paragraph, where she stopped, reading out loud in her shock. “The most curious find was that of a torn tapestry, according to the curator of Glenquin Castle. Faded and worn, the figures of a man and woman embracing are still visible. What makes it so unique is the Celtic pattern of the border around the outside of the tapestry. This interwoven knot is unlike most others in early Irish design. It is thought to be, perhaps, a family motif.”

For several moments, Maggie stared at the paragraph, reading over the words, her heart thumping in her chest. With wide eyes, she reached for the tapestry scrap and examined it again. Unlike the tapestry mentioned in the paper, her leprechaun’s colors were still bright and vibrant. And the knot design that niggled at her brain in the store...she grabbed the paper and read the last line again. “It is thought to be, perhaps, a family design.”

"A family design...blast it! I know I've seen that pattern somewhere before! But it looks like we may have found your greater half, little leprechaun." She snorted. "Seamus. Leave it to Liam to name a figure in a picture."

\* \* \* \* \*

Liam returned just after lunch, but Maggie wasn't in the room. The tapestry lay on the pillow with a note on top:

"Gone to rent a car. Be back soon."

"Seamus, what is she up to?"

The little leprechaun popped up out of the fabric. "Ah, me boy-o, I'm not spilling the lass's secrets! But she's a fine woman and I'm almost home."

"What do you mean—almost home?"

Seamus danced around the tree bole, which had also popped up, and clicked his heels again. "Not tellin' ye. The lass will be back any minute and she'll tell ye, she will. Just do as she asks, mind ye. It'll sound preposterous, but do it anyway. Promise me."

"Her note says she's gone to rent a car."

"Aye. Now give me yer promise that ye'll do as she asks. Don't make me get out me sword again."

Liam remembered all too well how the little leprechaun drew first blood the last time they had 'dueled' and he held up his hands in surrender. "Fine, fine! I promise I'll do as she asks."

The key turned in the lock and Maggie entered, looking a bit flustered. "I did it! I rented a car and got directions to Limerick. From there we go to Newcastlewest and then sort of south to Killeedy." She waved a piece of paper as she entered.

"Why do we want to kill Edie?" Seamus was right, this was a preposterous request.

Maggie stopped mid-stride and gave him a puzzled look, then laughed. "We're not going to kill anyone. We're going to a place called Killeedy. See?" She showed him the map she had picked up downstairs at the desk. A line highlighted a route from Dublin

toward Limerick, then veered south to pass through another large town before stopping at a vague point between North and South Killeedy.

“Do I get to ask why?”

“I’ll tell you in the car. Go ahead and change into comfortable clothes—did you bring boots?” When Liam shook his head, she continued. “Neither did I. Well, with any luck, it won’t be too wet. Go on, change your clothes.”

Liam stepped up to her and kissed her soundly instead.

The crush of his lips on hers took her breath away and for a moment, she forgot their mission. Her head swimming, she swayed and Liam caught her shoulders to steady her. Opening her eyes, Maggie needed to blink several times before his broad chest came back into focus. “What was that for?”

“Because I have never seen you so beautiful. The uptight, unhappy woman I walked into this hotel with yesterday is certainly not the excited, vibrant woman who’s ordering me about today. I like you better this way.”

His compliment made her blush and smile. So intent was she on solving the mystery of the tapestry that she had forgotten to put on the mask that would keep him at a distance. A distance she no longer wanted. “Maybe I should just give you some privacy and let you get dressed...” Feeling suddenly shy and awkward, she escaped into the bath.

“So what’s in Killeedy, Seamus?” Liam pulled out a pair of jeans and quickly changed.

“True love,” was the only answer the little man would give him.

Collecting the tapestry, Liam knocked on the bathroom door. In only a few more moments, they were out the door and on their way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Driving on the left side of the road through the city would have given Liam nightmares, but Maggie handled the car as if she’d been driving ‘backwards’ all her life.

Confident and self-assured, she wove in and out of the traffic while filling in the story for Liam.

"I don't know any more about that tapestry other than what the newspaper said, but the border patterns have to match! I just wish I could remember where I've seen that pattern before."

"What, the border pattern? Why? What's so special about it?" They were out of Dublin now and moving quickly down the motorway, bound for Limerick.

"I know I've seen it somewhere before. The paper said the experts thought it might be a family knot design, although that's not traditionally how they were used."

Liam frowned. "How else might they have been used?"

"Mostly borders of that sort were just decoration. The Book of Kells has lots of them; practically every page is bordered by some sort of design. Animals, knots, flowers or vines." Maggie shrugged. "The tapestry has a rare pattern, however."

"Well, it can't be that rare. It's the same pattern as on my ring."

"What?" In shock, Maggie looked over at Liam, who held up his hand. *That* was where she'd seen the pattern before! All this time it had been right in front of her! "Why didn't you say something?"

"I didn't think it was important. This ring has been in the family for eons. But there's nothing fancy about it; just silver twisted into a bunch of knots. Always thought it a bit plain, myself."

"The simplicity is what makes it beautiful. If you follow the pattern, you'll see it's all one line interwoven on itself."

"I know. It used to keep me occupied when sitting through boring meetings." He grinned and Maggie laughed.

"I thought you loved the company and all that went with it."

"Doesn't mean I didn't find some of those meetings deadly boring. Especially early on when I wasn't leading them."



She chose to ignore his comment, although it didn't surprise her. He liked the limelight as much as she hated it. "You said that ring has been in the family for generations. Are there any stories connected with it?"

"If there were, they've all been lost. My grandfather used to wear it and when he died, he bequeathed it to me. All he ever told me was that his grandfather gave it to him with the instruction that he was to pass it on to his own grandson. I wear it more in his honor than anything else."

Maggie had never considered Liam's family. To know he honored his grandfather's memory touched her; in spite of his earlier words, he valued family as well.

The scenery was beautiful and although tempted to stop several times, the two continued driving. While the hundred and thirty or so miles would take only a little over two hours on US highways, traveling in Ireland took a little longer. While they were on the main motorway, they made good time, but as the roads became smaller and smaller, the amount of money spent on their upkeep dwindled. Soon Maggie was dodging potholes and swerving around corners not designed for cars. Again, Liam was impressed with Maggie's driving abilities. When she wasn't putting on a show for the employees, her natural confidence beamed.

She also wasn't afraid to stop and ask directions. Since neither of them knew exactly where Glenquin Castle was, they were dependent on the locals to get them the final few miles. Finally they saw the tower looming in the distance and it was simply a matter of getting to it.

Three stories of almost solid grey stone climbed into the sky. The cylindrical tower was the tallest structure within eyesight and they found it with ease.

Parking the car, Liam picked up the tapestry and held his ring to the side. The knot designs were identical. Maggie shook her head, still amazed. "If the curator here is right and that design is a family one, then perhaps your ancestors lived here at one time."

"My ancestors did come from County Limerick, but that was a hundred and fifty years ago. I'm afraid what part of the county is lost information."

“Ah, me home! I haven’t seen me castle in hundreds of years. Nice to see the people doing some work to keep it up.”

Liam chanced a glance at the leprechaun. Seamus was standing on his rock, peering out toward the building they approached. With a loud sniff, the little man pulled out a huge green handkerchief, noisily blew his nose and wiped his eyes. Liam sighed. Soon the leprechaun would be reunited with the lovers he’d been torn from and Liam would never see him again. Just as he was getting used to having the little guy around.

This was Maggie’s show and Liam stepped back as they approached the castle entrance. Her no-nonsense business attitude stood her in good stead when she asked to meet with the curator. At first the attendant tried to put Maggie off as just another American tourist, but Maggie politely put the woman in her place and insisted on an interview with the man in charge.

A short, balding, bespectacled man, looking rather like an Irish leprechaun, came out of an office at the attendant’s bidding. Perhaps it was his forest green waistcoat, trimmed with gold buttons, or perhaps it was his round face, lit up with a jovial smile. But for Liam it was the twinkle in his eye as he winked at him when the two introduced themselves. He couldn’t help but glance down at the tapestry piece in his hands to be sure that Seamus was still in place. The tapestry leprechaun was only cloth.

Before Liam could say anything, however, the curator was ushering them into his office and bidding them to have a seat in the large leather chairs that sat before his desk.

“Please call me Ian. I’ve lived in these parts all me life and I can’t say we’ve ever had such a find as the treasure we found in the storeroom. We’ll be years researchin’ and restorin’. A curator’s dream!” Sitting up on the edge of the chair, he leaned over the desk with excitement in his eye. “Now, ye say ye have the matching piece to our tapestry that was hidden all these long years?”

“Yes, we think we do. Liam?” Maggie gestured to Liam, who still held the scrap of fabric in its frame. Almost reluctantly, he set it on the desk before the curator, eyeing him suspiciously. Seamus-the-leprechaun remained just a picture while the curator

picked up the frame to examine the cloth. They might have different names, and their features might only be similar, but Liam was becoming more and more convinced the leprechaun was playing tricks somehow.

“The colors here are much more vibrant than the colors of the tapestry we found.”

“Yes, but that could be due to several reasons.” Maggie prepared to list them, but the curator held up his hand. She paused.

“I cannot be sure without checking the two pieces together. Why don’t the two of you take a walk around the grounds while I get the other piece?”

Maggie hesitated, looking to Liam for support. While she was sure the curator would be careful with their little piece, she didn’t just want to give it to the man, especially when it wasn’t really hers.

Liam stood. “That will be fine. Maggie?” Gesturing to the door, Liam’s intent was clear. She stood and started toward the door with Liam right behind her. Just about to leave, she turned and looked at the curator, who stood behind his desk, a bemused expression on his face. His spectacles were pushed up on his head and he held the piece close to his eyes. Without a word, Maggie turned and left the office.

Once more outside the building, she took Liam’s arm, a look of consternation on her face.

“What’s the matter?” He squeezed her hand where it rested in the crook of his arm. Leading her around the tower, he steered her toward a hedgerow. The late afternoon sun hung low in the clear sky. If the sailor’s adage was true, there would be fair weather for the parade on the morrow.

Maggie’s sigh came from her toes. “I don’t know, Liam. Didn’t you think there was something odd about that man?”

Chancing an askance look at the woman beside him, Liam feigned an air of nonchalance. “Odd? No, I didn’t think so.”

She shook her head. "I can't quite put my finger on it, but it's almost like I've met him before."

Liam steered her further away from the tower and toward a more private area of the grounds. "I don't know where you would have met him." He needed to get her off the topic. A low rock just ahead provided a diversion. "Here, let's have a seat."

With a gentleman-like flourish, Liam brushed off the stone and made an elaborate bow to his lady. Giggling, Maggie curtsied to him and flounced out imaginary skirts as she turned and sat on the rock. Liam put his foot next to her and leaned down to kiss her.

Except that the rock was slippery with moss and his foot slipped. Maggie squealed and only her hands catching his shoulders saved his head from banging on the tree behind them. He righted himself and the two burst into laughter.

"So much for my romantic side." Liam brushed the dirt from his jeans.

"You are very romantic, Liam." Maggie stood and put her hands out to him. He took them and swung her around in a circle until they were dizzy and out of breath. She wobbled over to lean against a tree to catch her breath, laughing at him, swaying and regaining his balance where he stood.

His grin was decidedly lopsided as he gazed at her. "Do you realize that's the first time you've ever called me 'Liam'?"

She blushed. It was. Her heart lodged in her throat at the sight of him striding toward her, the breeze lifting the curls of his hair. With new eyes she saw him, as if he were clad in armor, a sword strapped to his side, a horse waiting behind him. With a sudden clarity, Maggie saw him for what he was—her knight in shining armor and she loved him.

In two strides, Liam covered the distance between them to bury his fingers in her hair and turn her face toward his. A face so incredibly beautiful in the soft, dying light of the day. The sun's rays glimmered in her auburn tresses, forming a halo of fire around her face. In his mind's eye, she wore a garland woven of wildflowers and a

flowing gown the color of pure ivory. Her eyes radiated love and trust and Liam admitted what the leprechaun knew all along: he loved Maggie Andrews.

So intent on one another, they did not hear the approach of quiet footsteps. Ian, the curator, carried two pieces of cloth in his hands, one large and faded, one small and vibrant. The two lovers embraced and he held the larger piece up, a mirror image of the couple before him; William of Killeedy dressed in armor for battle and Margaret of Glenquin, the Englishman's daughter, in her billowing dress.

"Aye, just the way it was meant to be, eh, Seamus, me brother?"

"Would ye just put the two pieces together? I've been stuck here long enough! Besides which these two are the rightful owners of me tapestry and old Bantry will be wantin' to get home."

"Ah, don't go gettin' yer knickers in a twist. Here."

Ian held up the smaller piece, now released from the frame. As Liam leaned in to kiss Maggie, the two pieces touched, their edges melding as the threads rewove themselves. Color flowed from Seamus through the mend and flowers faded with time suddenly sprang to new life. The leaves on the tree turned green as life spread up the bole of the tree, now rejoined with its branches. And a pair of lovers, pale and grey, now glowed with renewal as their love blossomed again.

And beneath a real tree, only a little ways away, another pair of lovers embraced one another in the fading light.

"Kiss her, me boy-o. Kiss her and me spell is broken."

If Liam heard the little leprechaun, he gave him no heed; his attention too intent upon the woman whose face looked up at him, so trusting, so beautiful. Leaning forward, he brushed his lips against hers, savoring their softness. In the darkness, his voice was a whisper. "I love you, Maggie Andrews."

Maggie stood on tiptoe to meet him; a soft kiss at first, before pressing closer. His hands encircled her waist and she slid her palms along the muscles of his arms to

embrace his shoulders. With a small, satisfied sigh, the last vestiges of her hard, professional shell slipped away. "I love you, Liam Finnerty."

Unnoticed by the lovers, Seamus O'Brien, at last freed from his spell, popped out of the tapestry and landed with a spring next to Ian, his brother leprechaun.

"Ian, I do believe ye've grown since last I stood next to ye!"

"Seamus, lad. That's what ye get for gettin' yerself stuck in a piece o' cloth all these years. Ahh, don't they look good together?"

"Aye, that they do." For several moments, the magical men watched Liam and Maggie fall more deeply in love. As the moon rose and the last of the sunlight faded from the sky, Seamus chuckled as he spread the tapestry upon the rock. Turning to his brother, they left the lovers.

"Ah, yes, Ian-lad, I tell ye, 'tis a genius I am."

## About the Author

For many years, Diana Hunter confined herself to mainstream writing. Her interest in the world of dominance and submission, dormant for years, bloomed when she met a man who was willing to let her explore the submissive side of her personality. In her academic approach to learning about the lifestyle, she discovered hundreds of short stories that existed on the topic, but none of them seemed to express her view of a D/s relationship. Challenged by a friend to write a better one, she wrote her first BDSM novel, *Secret Submission*, published by Ellora's Cave Publishing.

Diana welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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