

Bewitched

Two friends travel to Ireland to vacation and explore the folklore of this ancient land. What happens when jealousy, lust, and magic collide? Find out in this Halloween tale.

Tess Everett used the blunt end of a red pencil to punch a button on her phone. "Yeah?"

"A Doctor Morrow is on line three."

Tess gritted her teeth and forced herself to reply with a drop of kindness that was utterly spurious. "I only have two lines, Nellie. You're on line two, so may I assume Doctor Morrow is on one?"

There was a pause, a pause far too long to imply understanding. Tess pressed line one, cutting her new secretary off without ado. "Will you please stop referring to yourself as Doctor Morrow? My rent-a-secretary must think I have a terminal disease."

Julie Morrow knew her friend well enough to know that her teasing words were a front for what was probably a very bad day. "Who's this week's victim?"

"Some dunce who can't count to three. I've been calling her Nellie, and she hasn't objected, so Nellie it is."

"Tess, you've gotta learn how to go a little easier on them. I've had my office manager since I started my practice, and you know how great Keisha is."

"That's because you can pay her whatever you want. This cheap-ass ad agency has a pay scale that FDR approved during the New Deal. If I could bypass personnel and hire my own secretary, I'd be fine."

"Uh-huh." Julie and Tess had had this conversation at least once a year for the seven years they'd known one another. Julie was certain this wasn't the last time, and equally certain that Tess would never be an easy woman to work for. She wanted a secretary who was as quick and as sharp as she was, and she wanted the person to work an erratic schedule and not mind being rebuked for her errors. Add those requirements to a lower-than-average salary for secretaries in the Detroit area, and the outcome was preordained.

"You're not sympathetic," Tess said without rancor. "But if you're not going to fix my problems, you'd better have good news."

"I do. Really good news. I found us a place to stay."

"Cool. Did you take my advice and call a good travel agent?"

"Of course not!"

Julie's outraged tone made Tess laugh. "Do you have to do everything yourself, Jules? Neither one of us has been to Ireland. We don't know if the little towns you want to see even have hotels. Why not let a professional handle everything?"

"You can't get good deals that way. Any idiot can call a travel agent. But a real Internet magician can find the hidden bargains."

"Hidden bargains is another term for a flea-bag hotel," Tess said. "But I'm not gonna complain. I know this means a lot to you."

"It really does," Julie agreed. "I think having my first book set in Ireland would make it a little unique. Even though there's a lot of great folklore in England, I don't want my books to seem like copies of J. K. Rowling's formula. I wanna save England for the fourth or fifth book." Tess smiled to herself. Julie was so earnest about her plans that she'd never tell her that writing a series of books aimed at the nine-to-twelve-year-old reader, focusing on a girl who

gets involved in all sorts of mischief when she delves into local folklore, was pretty darned close to Ms. Rowling's formula. "Your series will be way different," Tess assured her. "Yours features a girl, for one thing, and she's just a regular girl-not some wizard kid. And your kid gets to change locations in every book. That's a good hook." Come to think of it, that is a good hook. "Your books are gonna teach kids about the countries they're set in, too. The kids'll learn something-but they won't know it."

"Thanks," Julie said, her voice taking on the shy, self-effacing tone she always adopted when she was being complimented.

Tess frowned. I wish I could have met her parents. *I'd love to see exactly what they did to screw Jules up. They managed to make a smart, sweet, gorgeous woman feel like every kind word is a total surprise. She'd be fighting women off with a stick if she could just see herself like everyone who knows her does.*

A hot well of unexpressed anger bubbled up, and Tess had to fight to stop herself from saying what was on her mind. *That shrew, Suzanne, should have been worshiping at Jules's feet instead of jerking her around for five years. I hope she chokes on one of those ridiculous fake fingernails she used to wear. If I ever see her again, I'm gonna tell her that all of Jules's friends had a "Ding dong the witch is dead" party after they broke up-even though we didn't.*

Reining in her emotions, Tess asked, "So ... where are we staying, Motel Sixpence?"

"Nope. We're staying someplace nice in Dublin, so you can acclimate. It's close to where the best boutiques are, so you can shop while I do my research."

An enormous smile lit Tess's face. "Now you're talkin'!" Nobody knew her like Jules did. "Are we bunking together?"

"Nope. I know you'll be hooked up with some flight attendant by the time we leave the airport."

"I have a certain indefinable charm," Tess said, laughing. "Women are drawn to me."

"I have another, interpretation. You're easy."

"I'm open-minded," Tess insisted haughtily. "Where do we go after I conquer the women of Dublin?"

"County Clare. To a castle with a cool spiral staircase in a turret. We'll have the place all to ourselves."

"You rented a whole castle?" Tess's eyes were wide. "Am I gonna have to take out a loan?"

"Nope. Since it's the start of the off season, the owner is gonna be on vacation. She's gonna let us stay there if we pay the fuel bill for the week."

There was a lengthy silence on Tess's end. "An empty castle that we can have for next to nothing. Something's wrong."

"No, no, really. I talked to her on the phone. She seems like a great lady. She inherited the place from her late husband. Claims she doesn't have to rent it out at all ... just likes to have company. She's gonna be in Monaco while we're there."

"Uh-huh. A nice, rich woman who practically gives a stranger the keys to her castle. Doesn't add up, Dent."

Even though she protested, Julie secretly liked it when Tess called her Dent. "I'm a doctor," she sniffed. "A doctor of dental science."

"Okay, Doc Dent. It still doesn't add up."

"Some people like to be helpful," Julie reminded her. "I'd do the same thing if I were in her shoes."

"Well, I'd soak people for as much as I could squeeze out of 'em. I'm more normal."

"Yeah, you might be, but some people do things just because they can. I'm gonna believe that old Mrs. McCree is exactly who she claims to be."

"Maybe the heating bill is a couple thou a week," Tess said.

"She said it's high at this time of year, especially if we want the place to be fairly warm. But she said the highest it's ever been was around a hundred Euros a week, when some Italians insisted she keep it warm enough to grow orchids."

"I've always loved the Italians," Tess said wistfully, imagining Julie and her drinking Bellinis on a veranda overlooking the sea. "Maybe we should start there."

Julie chuckled. "Ireland. One month from Saturday. We'll get to spend Halloween there. Pack light and then take half of everything out. I'm not gonna carry your third suitcase this time."

"You're taller than I am. It's the least you can do."

"One inch," Julie shot back. "And you're stronger. Pack light and don't whine."

"Me? Whine? Why, Doctor Morrow, I've never heard such a scurrilous accusation."

"When Suzanne and I went camping with you and Pamela, Pamela and I were plotting about how we could leave you and Suzanne in the middle of the night. I had to forcibly stop Pamela from suffocating you in your sleep."

"Don't ever put me in a category with Suzanne," Tess said, her voice low and filled with warning. "Any category."

"Hey, you're only like her in your need for nice beds and hot food," Julie said, a little taken aback by the icy tone of Tess's voice. "That's all."

"I'm gonna start sleeping on a bed of nails and eating spaghetti from a can," Tess hissed.

"Anything to not resemble that bitch in any way."

"Okay," Julie soothed, sorry she'd brought up her ex in the first place. "You're not like her. You predate her and you postdate her. Let's act like she never existed."

"Best idea you've had in months." I just wish it were true. *That bitch broke my buddy's heart, and that's not forgivable.*

"God, I'm tired." Tess rubbed her eyes as she slid into the back of a taxi. The driver was too busy welcoming Julie to Ireland to pay her any mind.

"We need to go to Frankie's Guest House, please," Julie finally said, oblivious to the man's solicitous attention. "It's near University College on 8 Camden-"

"No worries, Miss." The driver gave her a slightly disappointed look. "I know the way."

Julie blinked. "Umm... Okay, then." She stuffed the piece of paper with their B&B's address on it into her pants pocket and tossed a medium-sized duffle bag between her and Tess before ducking inside. "Thanks."

Tess closed her eyes. "I can't believe I let you book the plane tickets."

"It wasn't that bad," Julie lied. Four connections, however, was a little much, even for her. Still, she'd saved them a bundle by taking a rather odd route to Ireland.

Tess's eyebrows lifted as the taxi driver gunned the engine and shot into the flow of mid-morning traffic exiting Dublin International Airport. "Yeah, that nine-hour layover in Iceland was really something to write home about." They'd been traveling for more than twenty-two hours.

Julie nodded seriously. "Exactly. Look at the fascinating places you go with me. If you weren't so stubborn about not eating meat, you could have tried my reindeer burger and gotten a real taste of the culture."

"Ugh. And ruin Christmas for the rest of my life? I think not!"

Their eyes met and both women began to laugh. "I'm sorry, Tess," Julie said, pleased that her friend's good humor was beginning to reappear. "I'll change our return flight."

Indulgently, Tess patted Julie's corduroy-covered leg. "I'll live. Besides, I wouldn't want to deprive you from getting the best price in the history of Northwest Airlines. Now you can brag to your captive victims all you want."

"I prefer to call them patients."

A grin twitched at Tess's lips, but she didn't allow it to blossom into a full smile. She glanced outside the window, but so far, there wasn't much to see other than incredibly green, flat, grassy fields and other cars. Then slightly bloodshot blue eyes shifted back to Julie, who was taking off her reading glasses and stuffing them in her bag. "Is your outfit new?" After an accident involving a cup of coffee, Julie had changed into a fresh set of clothes in the airport ladies' room.

Julie nodded, pleased that Tess had noticed. Self-consciously, she ran her fingers through the wavy dark hair that curled to a length just above her collarbone. "Yeah. Do you like it?"

"I thought you were going to stop buying all your clothes at L.L. Bean."

Julie's eyes turned to slits. "I don't buy all my clothes from them," she protested, lifting her square jaw.

Tess just continued to stare at her.

"Fine," Julie finally murmured, quick to admit defeat when it came to fashion. "I do buy almost all my clothes there. But this isn't L.L. Bean. It's Eddie Bauer."

Tess rolled her eyes.

"They're different!"

"Uh-huh."

"They are!"

Tess studied Julie's outfit. A soft, rust-colored chambray shirt was tucked neatly into a pair of chocolate-brown cords. A sturdy pair of hiking boots peeked out of the legs. The shirt was one size too big, the way Julie preferred all of her shirts, and it hid her very feminine figure. Unable to hold it in any longer, Tess smiled warmly. "You look great."

Julie beamed. "Just for that, I'll go shopping with you at least once."

"You will?"

"No."

The driver, who had been eavesdropping on the women's conversation, snorted, causing Tess to cross her arms over her chest and glare at him.

Both he and Julie were prudently silent for the rest of the journey.

"You booked us in a gay-friendly bed and breakfast?" Tess called out through the open door that separated her room from Julie's. She picked up one of her suitcases and set it on the foot of the bed to open it.

Frankie's Guesthouse was located in an old Georgian-style building on what appeared to be a relatively quiet downtown street. Flower boxes decorated each window. The rooms were small but comfortable, and the entire place smelled faintly of sandalwood. "Did you really think I was going to bring some strange woman back to my room?" There was a hint of hurt in her voice that caused Julie to appear in their shared doorway.

"That's not it at all, Tess." She frequently teased her friend about being a "babe magnet", but had come to terms with the fact that Tess just dealt with things ... like Tess. When Tess and

Pamela broke up six months ago, Tess had thrown herself back into dating with a daring optimism that Julie herself had never quite been able to muster.

Tess nodded crisply. "Okay."

Julie sighed. "This place is one block from not one but *two* of the libraries I want to visit. University College and Trinity College have the most extensive collections of texts on Irish folklore in the country. We're in the heart of leprechaun Mecca. Besides," she pointed to a door on the other side of the room, "we each have a private bath here. The gay-friendly part is just icing on the cake."

Suddenly, Tess felt very tired and a little foolish for making a big deal out of nothing. She flopped down on her sinfully comfortable twin bed and threw her arm over her eyes. "I'm wiped, but I want to go out and hit shops and sights. Did you see those boutiques we passed on the way here? They rival the ones on the Champs Elysees. Who knew Dublin was such a trendy spot?"

Julie perched on the bed next to Tess and affectionately stroked her soft blonde hair. "I think you'd feel better if you took a nap and then set out."

Tess melted under her friend's tender touch. Somehow she found the strength to open one eyeball and rotate it to regard Julie. "Why aren't you exhausted? You're the only thirty-seven-year-old I know who goes to bed every night by ten o'clock, and yet after a full day of getting off and on planes, you don't look the least bit tired." She yawned.

Julie grinned wildly. "You're wrong. I'm exhausted. But I'm too excited to sleep. We're in Ireland, Tess!" She rose to her feet and gestured with her hands as she spoke. "All the things I've been reading about over the past year are really here. Or at least their legends are."

Tess rolled over onto her stomach and propped her head up on her fist. "You mean those things you told me about on the plane? Banshees, demon brides, and polkas?" She loved seeing her normally reticent friend so enthusiastic about something.

"Pookahs," Julie clarified phonetically, "are hobgoblins. Polkas are dances my relatives in Wisconsin do at weddings." She snapped her fingers. "That reminds me. Hang on." She ran back into her bedroom, and Tess shook her head tolerantly as she heard Julie rifling through her bag.

"Jules, don't tell me you bought a hobgoblin at the airport gift shop. We'll never get it through customs on the way home."

"But wouldn't it make a great story?" Julie yelled back from her room.

Tess sighed. Her friend was willing to consider the most outlandish tales of creatures and spirits, but if she ever told her that their taxi driver had been more than a little interested in her, Julie wouldn't believe it for a second. She idly wondered how Julie would respond to her revelation that she'd been thinking of her in a surprisingly romantic way. She smiled to herself, knowing that it would take weeks for Julie to notice the most outrageous overtures. Luckily, she had time to take it slow.

Tess was almost asleep when she felt the bed move and Julie's warm presence. "Didn't think you were coming back," she mumbled sleepily, her face peaceful, eyes closed.

"It took me a minute to find it. I almost thought I'd forgotten it." Unconsciously, a smile transformed Julie's face. *She looks so young when she's relaxed.* Tess tended to be a bundle of energy, even restless in sleep. "I'll come back later." Julie started to get up.

Tess pried her eyes open. "No. No." She gently grabbed Julie's arm and forced herself to focus. "What did you almost forget?"

"Just this." Julie held up a long silver chain with a small, silver four-leaf clover dangling from the end.

Tess lifted her eyebrows, her gaze darting between Julie and the necklace. "For me?"

Julie nodded, and Tess could have sworn her friend's cheeks were turning pink.

Tess took the necklace and ran her fingertip over the clover, which was covered with a tiny etched pattern. The exquisite detail spoke of expert craftsmanship. "It's amazing," Tess said quietly.

Julie looked away, but it was clear by the expression on her face that she was pleased.

"What's it for? My birthday was last month."

Not really sure how to articulate that she'd seen the piece in a jewelry store months ago and thought of Tess the moment she'd laid eyes on it, she simply shrugged. "For luck."

After three days of research for Julie and three days of shopping for Tess, the pair took off for Clare in a tiny rental car. Julie was driving, concentrating hard on minding the confusing directions.

"We're coming up to another one of those circle things," Tess said. "Make sure you stay on the left side."

"I made one tiny mistake." Julie squinted to read the signs.

"Yeah. One tiny head-on collision is one more than I want."

"Oh, don't be so dramatic. The truck stopped in plenty of time."

"I'm not responsible for the upholstery if I wet my pants," Tess warned. "And if you touch noses with another truck that's the least of your problems."

Julie's brow was furrowed and she went around the roundabout very slowly. "You know, I'm not sure this is the right road. I think I'd better ask as soon as we reach a town."

Tess turned the map upside down. "It looks the same to me no matter which way I hold this thing."

"Maybe you weren't the best choice for navigator," Julie said, glancing quickly at her friend.

Julie scowled. They'd been driving for hours but a glance at the odometer told her she'd barely averaged forty miles per hour. Once they'd left what was the Irish equivalent of a highway, the quality of the roads went downhill quickly. "They clearly don't believe in road signs in this country."

Tess inclined her head toward a large black mound that sat on the edge of a rocky field. "I swear we've passed that same pile of peat at least twenty times."

"And those sheep look familiar, too. Maybe we're going in circles."

Ooh!" Tess perked up as she gazed over a faraway hill. "I see civilization!"

Relieved that she wouldn't have to kill her own sheep for lunch, Julie turned onto the main street of a very small town.

"My God, Jules, this can't be real. Drive around the back. This has to be a movie set."

Julie was grinning so hard her cheeks hurt. "This is so adorable! Just like I'd imagined."

Tess scanned the village, taking in the impossibly green hillside that cropped up from directly behind the cluster of gaily painted shops and tidy, diminutive homes. "Terminally adorable," she said. "This is cute, but why would you live out here in an Irish Spring commercial if you could live in Dublin? That was a real city."

"Yeah, Dublin was nice, but it's huge. This is the real Ireland. Look! There's a pub. We can have some lunch and get directions."

"No steak and kidney pie or any of that mystery meat for me," Tess reminded her. "I need a nice salad."

"Fish and chips?" Julie asked, giving her friend a playful smile.

"You fed me very well in Dublin, Dent. Don't disappoint me now."

They went into the pub, finding the small place empty. "Anyone home?" Julie called out. A middle-aged woman appeared from behind the bar. "Hello," she said. "What can I do for you?"

"We need directions and lunch," Julie said. "We're trying to find Quin."

"Ahh ... then you're lucky you stopped here," the woman said, a friendly smile on her open face.

"Quin isn't known for its food. But I can get you there in two shakes of a lamb's tail once you've had a good meal. You're not very far away."

"That's great." Tess took a seat at the bar stool and looked at the woman expectantly. "I'm starved."

"Here's the menu. And you can call me Emily."

Julie sat next to Tess and they perused the sheet. "What do you recommend?" Julie asked.

"I make everything on that menu, so I recommend it all. Most people passing through get the fish and chips. Nice and traditional."

"Okay." Julie didn't take much convincing. "I'll have that and a Coke."

Tess was scowling when she said, "I guess I'll have the toasted cheese sandwich."

"What do you really want?" Emily asked. "I can tell it's not a cheese sandwich."

The young woman grimaced. "Sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. But I don't eat meat, and I'm worried that I'm going to be sick of cheese after a week."

"How about a nice, big salad?" Emily asked. "My youngest is a health nut. I've always got fresh vegetables on hand."

"That's just what I've been craving." Tess's attitude perked up instantly. "That'd be wonderful."

"Back in a min." Emily disappeared to prepare their meal.

Tess got up and poked around the pub, looking at the photos and reading the newspaper articles tacked up on the walls. Emily was back quickly, and the women started to eat, both happy with their selections.

"Where are you staying in Quin?" Emily asked.

"At Ballyhannan Castle." Julie leaned forward on her stool. "Do you know it?"

"I do," Emily answered; then she went behind the bar again, not reappearing until another customer entered the pub. "Oh, hello, John," she greeted. "The usual?"

"Why not?" He sat down and nodded to Julie and Tess. "Americans?"

Julie glanced down at herself. "Yes. It's that obvious, huh?"

He waved a dismissive hand. "No, I just know everyone from around here, and I saw your car parked in front."

"We're staying in Quin," Tess told him. "At Ballyhannan Castle. Are you familiar with it?"

"Sure am." He shared a look with Emily when she placed a pint in front of him.

The silent exchange wasn't lost on Tess. "Is it a nice place?" she asked.

"Surely," John said. "It's lovely." He took a sip of his beer and stared straight ahead.

Tess and Julie shared puzzled glances. Images of every sort of hobgoblin Julie read about danced through her head, and she wished she'd booked them into a nice, new motel somewhere.

But Tess wasn't as shy as her friend. "Pardon me, but is there something about the castle you're not telling us?"

"Oh, I forgot to give you directions." Emily took a bar napkin and wrote a few sentences, then handed it to Tess. "You shouldn't have any problems."

Tess's lips were pursed and she was about to confront the locals more directly when Julie looked at the directions and said, "This will take us directly to the castle. But we have to stop in Quin first. Mrs. McCree left the key at the police ... I mean, the Garda station."

Emily stared at her for a moment then asked, "Is that so?"

"Yes. Mrs. McCree is out of the country. She was kind enough to let us stay at the castle while she's gone."

Looking reassured, both Emily and John smiled at the younger women. "Oh, she's a lovely woman," Emily said. "Always going out of her way."

Tess set her fork down. "You know her?"

"Everyone knows Mary McCree," John said. "She's the salt of the earth."

"Then why did you act so funny when we said we were staying there?" Tess was unwilling to let the incident slide.

Emily was busy writing new directions, and she paused to say, "You never know about people. I didn't want to say too much just in case something funny was going on. I was going to call the garda as soon as you left and tell him some people were headed out to Ballyhannan. I know Mrs. McCree's going to be gone for quite some time."

"Oh!" Julie looked immensely relieved. "You were just watching out for her. I was afraid you knew something awful about the place."

"What could be awful about a fine old castle?" Emily handed Julie the new directions. "Here you go, girls. Have a grand time. I hope the leprechauns dance over your beds and bring you sweet dreams."

Quin was, Tess and Julie soon found out, a typical Irish village. With a population of barely 400, it still managed to have four pubs, several ancient churches, two castles, and a thousand-year-old abbey that attracted its share of tourists in the high season. A scattering of brightly painted local shops, most already closed for the year, lined windy streets that quickly melted into country lanes. Stone houses, a few even sporting thatched roofs, and countless white sheep, dotted the surrounding landscape. Traffic was almost non-existent. The few residents that were out and about on this cool autumn day were traveling on foot.

Julie smiled at a very old man who was slowly crossing the street in front of her car, his walking stick thumping with every step.

He tipped his cap.

Tess quirked a grin. "I think we're in Brigadoon."

"That's Scotland."

"Whatever," Tess murmured absently as she surveyed her surroundings. "I didn't know places like this still existed."

Julie eased the car forward through the intersection. "It's a weird mix of primeval and modern," she commented as she watched an elderly woman step out of a small bakery. She was flanked by two enormous wolfhounds and animatedly talking on her cell phone.

Tess snorted softly. "Brigadoon meets T-Mobile."

"Help me find the garda station, will ya?" Julie glanced down at the map Emily had provided.

"Could you hand me my glass?"

Tess took the map. "I can read it for you. Says to turn right at-Holy shit!"

Julie blinked. "There's a street named Holy Shit?"

But Tess was no longer listening. Her eyes were fixed on a beautiful stranger who was heading for a narrow alleyway about twenty yards ahead of them.

Sensing that she was being watched, the woman turned around and locked gazes with Tess.

Then she smiled broadly, her black eyes glinting in the gray afternoon light.

Transfixed, Tess could feel her insides begin to quiver. She couldn't help but smile back.

"Tess?"

No response.

"Oh, Tess?" Julie drew out her words.

"Hmm?" Tess gazed wistfully at the woman as she turned and disappeared into the alleyway.

Julie waved her hand in front of Tess's face then snapped her fingers, breaking the blonde out of her trance. "Earth to Tess."

Tess gave her head a little shake then shifted in her seat, giving Julie a penetrating look. "Did you see her?"

"Who?"

"What do you mean who?" Tess boomed, looking at Julie as though she were insane.

Julie jumped at the volume of Tess's voice. "What are you talking about?" There were no cars behind them, so she stopped in the middle of the road.

"Only the most beautiful woman I've ever seen!"

"You mean the small redhead?"

"No," Tess said, clearly impatient. "I mean the beauty with the flowing red curls that trailed down her amazing breasts and didn't stop until they reached her perfect waist."

Julie's eyes went round. "Uhh ... I didn't see that!"

"Let's follow her." Tess moved to open her door.

"Are you crazy? You want to stalk some stranger you saw for all of three seconds?"

"Yes."

"No way."

"Jules!"

Julie patted Tess's leg. "We need to find the garda station and get the key to our castle. Otherwise, we're going to be navigating these country roads in the dark. The sun sets by six o'clock."

Tess sighed. Julie was right. Which sucked. "Okay," she finally relented, rolling down her window and letting in a blast of cool air tinged with the scent of wet grass and wood smoke. She drew in a deep cleansing breath, a little embarrassed by her outburst. "I don't know what got into me."

"You wanna to get laid."

Tess's face broke into an unrepentant grin. "And you don't?"

Playfully, Julie pinched Tess's leg.

"Ouch!"

"The directions, please? Eventually some impatient sheep is going to want to get by us on the road and I'm going to have to move."

"Okay, okay. Jeesh." Tess focused on Emily's map. "Keep going south."

"I'm going east, Tess."

"Oh." She flipped the map around. "I guess you need to turn then, huh?"

"Oh, boy."

When Tess and Julie approached their rental car, Tess was holding a large set of keys.

The blonde's brows furrowed as she opened the door to the passenger side. "They must not get too many women traveling alone. I thought that cop was going to personally escort us to Ballyhannan. What a worrywart."

Julie grunted a little as she slid into her seat and started the ignition. "No kidding." She turned and faced Tess. "Did you think he was being a little--"

"Weird?"

Julie blew out a slow breath. "Yeah. That's just what I was thinking. Of course, I've done nothing but read about all sorts of mythical Irish creatures for the past three days." days." The corner of her mouth curled upward. "My spooked factor is probably a little off the scale." "Your spooked factor has never been on the scale," Tess teased good-naturedly. "I think you saw one too many scary movies as a kid. You get all hinky every Halloween." She winked at her friend. "It's the magic that is you."

Julie rubbed her chin. "Maybe I'm just not used to people being so concerned for our well-being?"

"What about me? I'm always concerned for you, Jules."

And that, Julie admitted, was undeniably true. She acknowledged Tess's words with a shy grin.

"Everyone needs someone they can count on no matter what, huh?"

"It makes life a hell of a lot easier."

"Well, you can count on me to get us to the castle." *And for a lot more than that, my friend.*

Two minutes later, Julie turned off onto an unmarked, private, and very lonely gravel road.

Tess did her best not to squeal when they hit an enormous pothole. She glanced farther down the road and buckled her seatbelt before quickly making the sign of the cross.

"You're not religious, Tess," Julie growled, not tearing her eyes from the road. The car swerved wildly as they traversed another hole. "Yikes."

"I am today."

"Wow."

"Wow isn't close," Julie breathed.

In awe, the women sat in their car, staring at Ballyhannan Castle. Built in the 1400s, the structure looked like something out of a fairytale.

The castle sat in the middle of an impossibly green field that looked as though it had recently been spray-painted a lush Kelly green. Its five-story tower shot up into a dreary sky. An enormous medieval archway framed the entrance, and a tall stone fence circled the old fortress, doing the same reliable job of keeping out unwanted visitors that it had been doing for the past six hundred years.

When Tess and Julie stepped out of the car they were greeted with a gust of cool air and the sound of the wind whistling through the tall grass in the fields behind them.

Tess was astounded. The size and strength of the keep were overwhelming, bringing with it a sense of security as well as foreboding. "You got this for at most a couple of hundred bucks a week?"

Julie gazed dumbly at the imposing structure. "Uh-huh."

"Is it missing the roof or something, Jules? This place is gorgeous. Nobody gets a deal this good. There's no such thing as a free lunch."

Julie made her way to the trunk of the car and started pulling out Tess's bags. "Oh, yes they do. It pays to be friendly to the owner. I called twenty castles in this part of Ireland before I found this one. That's not luck; that's work."

Tess gave Julie a mischievous smile and put her hands on her hips. "You flirted with the owner to get this, didn't you?"

Julie gaped. "I did not." Then, to her dismay, her face turned bright red.

Tess pointed at Julie's cheeks. "Oh, my God! You did. You flirted!" She had only been teasing, but Julie's flaming face told her she was right. She hadn't expected that, and she was a little disconcerted.

"There's a difference between flirting and being friendly," Julie insisted, slamming shut the trunk. "I exchanged a few e-mails with Mary, that's all."

"Oh, so it's Mary now? What happened to Mrs. McCree?"

Julie's eyebrows disappeared behind wavy, windblown bangs. "Are you jealous?"

Tess's mouth clicked shut. Several seconds of awkward silence passed between them before Tess softly said, "Of course not." But she wasn't so sure. How could Julie have flirted with someone without telling her about it? Julie did not flirt. And if she'd decided to start, certainly she should have clued in her best friend, right?

"Good." Julie felt a little guilty for letting Tess's teasing get to her. Her demeanor softened.

"I'll ... umm ... I'll help you with your bags." She grabbed her own duffel from the back seat and hefted the biggest of Tess's suitcases as she started up the gravel path to the entrance.

Tess followed behind her, lost in thought.

"Hello there, lass."

Tess turned around at the musical sounds of a stranger's voice, only to find herself face to face with the woman she'd seen in Quin. The woman smiled brightly at her, and suddenly, she was speechless. Her bags fell from her loose hands.

Julie glanced around for a second car, but the road and field around the castle were empty. Confused, she said, "Hi. Can I help you?"

The woman extended her hand to Tess, and Tess automatically shook it.

Tess felt a nearly electric charge when their skin touched, making her forget to let go.

"I think 'tis I who should be askin' that question. Mary McCree bade me to welcome you to Ballyhannan." She bowed deeply, her flowing scarlet hair nearly touching the ground as she did. Then she opened her arms wide and her white dress fluttered gently in the breeze.

"Welcome."

Tess drank in the sight of the woman and felt her mouth go bone dry.

The stranger was small, barely more than five feet tall, with a girlish, upturned nose and fine, almost-pointy features. Her age was impossible to tell. A slender streak of silver tore through the middle of her bright red hair, but her porcelain skin was completely unlined and looked as smooth as silk.

The woman's figure was as lush as Tess had ever seen, and just as quickly as her mouth had gone dry, it began to water.

"That was nice of Mrs. McCree." Julie tried not to scowl. "I suppose." *Why didn't Mary mention her?* "I'm Julie Morrow."

"'Tis a pleasure to meet you, Julie Morrow." The woman's penetrating gaze never left Tess. Julie rolled her eyes at her suddenly mute friend. Tess was clearly smitten. "And this very quiet woman still latched onto to your hand is Tess Everett."

That seemed to wake Tess up, and she stammered, "Nice to meet you." Reluctantly, she let go of the warm hand she was holding, feeling the loss of contact in the pit of her stomach.

The woman laughed, a melodious sound that seemed to fill up the space between them. "And I'm Binne."

"Won't you come in, Binne?" Tess heard herself saying. She produced the set of keys from her jacket pocket. She stepped forward, and with a sultry look, took Binne's hand again. "I'll bet you know a lot about the castle's history, and I'd love to hear more about it."

"Since when?" Julie asked bluntly.

"Since right this second, Jules," Tess ground out, doing her best to maintain her smile as she spoke.

Binne lifted one slim eyebrow and ran her thumb across the sensitive skin on the back of Tess's hand. "What a kind offer, Tess. I'd love to—"

"Oh, that won't be necessary," Julie interrupted. "We wouldn't want to waste your valuable time. We can show ourselves around the castle. And Mary sent me an entire packet on the castle's history."

Tess tore her eyes off of Binne and turned to glare at Julie. She silently mouthed "What the fuck?", but Julie ignored her.

Binne was clearly disappointed. "Then I'll be on my way."

Tess spun around. "No!" She cleared her throat. "I mean, no," she said in a more normal tone of voice. "You don't have to leave. Jules is going to spend the rest of the day pouring over her notes. I won't have anything to do and would love the company."

Binne smiled sadly, but flashed a steely look at Julie. "My timing was poor, but I am certain, Tess Everett, that I'll have the pleasure of your company another day."

Peeved at the way Tess was throwing herself at Binne, Julie took the keys from Tess's limp hand and began to work the lock to the large oak door.

Tess followed her. "Say something," she whispered harshly in her ear. "I don't want her to go!" Julie was being unnecessarily rude, and she knew it. It was none of her business who Tess ended up sweaty and naked with. "I apologize, Binne. Please—" She glanced over her shoulder only to discover that the woman had vanished.

"Where did she go?" Tess's gaze flickered around the lawn.

"I don't know." Julie blinked slowly. "I—" But before she had time to consider Binne's disappearance, Tess was in her face.

"Why did you do that?" Tess demanded angrily. "That was the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, and she was interested in me. I could tell!"

"I-I-I" Julie was at a loss and said the first thing that popped into her mind. "You're exaggerating. She wasn't that hot."

"Are you blind? That woman was magnificent. I have never, *ever* seen anyone like her."

"You wanted her in your bed." It wasn't a question. Tess and Binne had been giving off such a strong sexual vibe that Julie felt like she needed a cold shower.

"Well, duh!" Exasperated by Julie's odd behavior, Tess threw her hands in the air. "Who wouldn't?"

"I wouldn't." Julie made a face. "She had a cross bite."

"That's a lie!"

"No, it isn't. I'm a professional. I would know. It was slight, but it was still there." And in case that wasn't enough to convince Tess that Binne was all wrong for her, Julie added, "And her hair was the color of Bozo the Clown's."

"You've lost your mind, you know that?" Tess stepped around Julie and unlocked the door herself. The castle was pitch-black inside, and the enormous door creaked loudly when it opened. But Tess was too angry to wonder what lay in the darkness. "You'd better hope I get

another chance with Binne, Jules," she warned. "There's nothing to do in Quin, and I've got four days to kill while you discover the secret of the Loch Ness monster."

"That's Scotland again."

Tess stamped her foot. "I don't give a god damn!"

Something wasn't right about Binne. Why couldn't Tess see that? "I'm sorry," Julie murmured weakly.

Tess grabbed her bags and was about to storm into the castle when Julie's outstretched arm stopped her. "I'm sorry," Julie said again, this time her eyes reflecting the sentiment.

Tess sighed and counted to ten. She was powerless against Julie's puppy dog eyes, which the brunette was flaunting shamelessly. Impulsively, she leaned forward and softly kissed Julie on the cheek. "You're forgiven. But only if you feed me. I'm starved."

Julie was weak with relief and let loose a dazzling grin. "It's a deal."

Tess twined several strands of spaghetti around her fork, careful to include a chunk of sun-dried tomato before guiding it to her mouth. She chewed happily then swallowed before speaking. "You're smarter than you look, Dent."

Julie tittered softly. "I knew you'd be hungry when we got here, and I had a feeling there wouldn't be a good grocery store in Quin. I'm gonna add stocking up in Dublin to my list of accomplishments."

They were sitting in the unexpectedly cheery kitchen, the colossal vintage stove still radiating heat. Tess reached across the oak table and scratched her friend's arm. "Your list is already pretty long, buddy. You did a great job in finding this place and getting us settled. Thanks."

Wrinkling her nose, Julie let the compliment slide by. "I know you. If you're not fed every few hours, your horns start to come out."

"Speaking of horns," Tess said, looking at her bowl to avoid Julie's eyes, "I'm sorry for the way I acted this afternoon. I don't usually try to hump a woman's leg until I've known her for a few hours. I still don't know what came over me."

"No big deal," Julie said. "You don't have anything to apologize for. I was the one who acted like an idiot. I think I wanted to "ooh" and "ahh" with you while we looked around. I didn't want to have to share you."

Tess met her eyes and smiled, charmed by Julie's revelation. "I'll never complain about two beautiful women fighting over me."

With a mildly derisive laugh, Julie said, "That's not what you said this afternoon. You acted like Binne was every beautiful woman rolled into one."

Tess flinched, hating to admit that her friend was right. "It must have been jet lag or something in the air or ..." She made a futile gesture with her hands. "Maybe the leprechauns have gotten to me."

Julie caught Tess's hand and held it for a moment while she looked at her with a deadly serious expression. "This is important. If you see a leprechaun, grab him and don't let go until he tells you where his pot of gold is." She laughed at the abashed look on her friend's face.

"No, I don't believe that. But if the situation comes up ..."

"I'll make a note," Tess said, laughing along with Julie.

They sat in the kitchen for a long time, talking about their plans and their impressions of the trip so far. It finally became obvious that they'd both mined all of the possible veins of conversation, but that neither was making a move to go upstairs.

Julie motioned towards the staircase in the turret and said, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Tess's eyes followed her friend's, and she sat quietly for a moment. "I have no idea what you're thinking, but I'm thinking I'll just sleep in the living room. That sofa is as big as my bed back home anyway."

"Flip ya for it," Julie said, still staring into the pitch-blackness.

"Would it kill Mrs. McCree to put some lights into that hell-hole?"

"I'll bet some guests want to be a little scared. If they didn't want a unique experience, they'd be in a regular hotel. Besides, it'd probably cost a ton."

Tess turned and locked gazes with her friend. "It'd be worth it."

Julie took Tess's hand. "I got us into this, so I'll go first and light the candles."

"No way!" Tess refused to move. "It's always the one in the back who gets picked off by the psycho killer!"

"Tessy," Julie soothed, "there isn't a psycho killer in here. And if there were, why would he stay upstairs while we were down here? He'd kill us and be done with it."

"Maybe he gets his thrills by making us relax, then jumping out at us as soon as we get upstairs and think we're safe. That's what I'd do."

"You don't think like a psycho killer. So there's no way he'd do that." Julie smiled, pleased with her impeccable logic.

Tess stood and picked up the box of long, wooden matches. Candleholders lined steps. She gathered her courage and blew out a breath. "Let's go."

Julie walked behind her, the pair climbing slowly but steadily. "I'm right behind you," Julie said, trying to sound confident.

"I know. I can feel your breath on my ass."

"Oops. I'll back up a step."

Tess reached around and patted her friend's head. "My butt's a little cold. You can stay right where you are." Moments later she lit the final candle and flicked the switch to turn on the lights that illuminated the hall between the bedrooms. "Made it!"

"Why do huge dark staircases seem so much creepier at night?" Julie asked. "Neither one of us had a problem with it when we checked the place out this afternoon."

"That's because killers don't butcher people in the afternoon. I swear, you're painfully unaware of the basic behavior patterns of psychos. Are you sure you live in Detroit?"

Julie draped her arm around Tess's shoulders. "I'll walk you to your room and check under your bed for you."

"That's old school, buddy. When you're down on your knees, he'll jump out of the armoire and grab me. I'll just get into bed and hope for the best." She turned and gave Julie a hug. "Do you need me to help you check out your room?"

Julie held onto her friend just a little longer than she normally did. "I'm fine. This place really feels very warm and friendly ... except for that staircase."

Squeezing Julie firmly, Tess whispered, "So do you. If I get cold later I'm gonna sneak across the hall and climb into bed with you."

"You're always welcome. I have a reputation for being hot in bed. Temperature wise, that is." She released Tess and ruffled her hair. "Sleep tight."

"Don't let the leprechauns bite!"

Thunder boomed, but it wasn't enough to wake either Julie or Tess, both of whom were lightly snoring the night away. It was well past midnight when the front door of Ballyhannan Castle opened, and Binne slipped inside on the breeze. The fireplace was filled with small glowing embers, and Binne gave the living room a cursory glance before stealthily moving up the stairs. She'd been in the castle many times over the years and was able to ascend the stairs without need of a candle.

At the top of the stairs, she tapped her pointy chin with a finger. "First bedroom or second, Tess? Where are you, luv?" She lifted her nose and sniffed delicately. A sweet smile transformed her face. "Second it is."

She crept into Tess's room so quietly that Tess didn't stir.

When Binne glanced down at the younger woman, her smile grew. Tess was nude beneath the sheets. A naked arm and leg were outside the covers, along with the very top of a tousled blonde head.

Gracefully, and in utter silence, Binne eased onto the bed next to Tess, moving close enough to feel the woman's breath on her cheek. Binne's heart began to pound, and she felt the rush of adrenaline that always accompanied a conquest. Ever so gently she placed a kiss on the tip of Tess's nose, and with careful fingers, she reached out and drew the sheet down Tess's body, not stopping until it lay at her waist.

Lighting flashed, highlighting Tess's breasts, and Binne felt herself grow wet. She circled one of Tess's nipples with the sharp tip of her fingernail and bit back a sigh of delight.

What if Tess woke up now? she wondered. Would she welcome her touch? Binne thought back to the blue-eyed gaze, hazy with lust that had bored into hers just the day before. Oh, yes, she was nearly ready. If Binne wanted to be honest with herself, she would have acknowledged that she could have Tess now, if she chose. The young woman was filled with hunger and as ripe as the juiciest of berries, heavy and ready to fall from the vine.

Binne groaned, the soft sound escaping through nearly closed lips. She could pepper Tess's face and slender neck with sublime kisses, slide her hand, then tongue, between her moist thighs and make Tess crave her forever.

Suddenly, Binne frowned. She wasn't ready for the chase to be over. That was her favorite part. Almost.

On the very verge of giving in to the sweetest of temptations, Binne lingered on the warm sheets next to Tess. She whispered, "Ahh, my pretty human, lass. I've missed the scent and taste of a woman so. I just didn't realize it until ya caught my eye."

A bolt of lightening crackled across the sky, and thunder boomed. Tess stirred and murmured Julie's name in her sleep.

Binne's expression turned to ice. Stung, she withdrew from the bed and stood at its foot, her mind awirl, her heart seared with pain. Tess and Julie weren't lovers, she was sure of that.

Thin scarlet eyebrows drew together as she thought. If she were allowed to, Julie would stop her from claiming Tess. She would deny her friend the ecstasy that Binne could bring her.

Their time together would likely be short. But a lifetime of unquenched longing was a small price for the blonde to pay for the pleasure she'd know. Tess would agree in an instant if she were asked. Binne was certain of that. Julie would not be allowed to interfere.

Moving with unnatural speed, her feet barely touching the ground, Binne entered Julie's room, not stopping until she was poised at the head the bed.

Julie was asleep on her stomach on top of the blankets. Her tank top hung loosely off one shoulder, and her soft cotton shorts rode low on her hips. A pair of reading glasses was still stuck in her hair, and the book she'd been reading lay just out of her reach.

Binne held her ground for a moment and allowed the pitter-patter of the rain against the window to soothe her temper. She picked up the book and glanced idly at its cover. *A Treasury of Irish Myth, Legend and Folklore*. She turned the book over and read a paragraph, snorting with disgust before she could finish the blurb. "Where do Americans get such rubbish?"

She set the book back on the bed and crouched down. Binne cocked her head to the side as she regarded the troublesome stranger. She drew her finger tips down Julie's forehead and watched with grim satisfaction as disturbing thoughts began to overtake Julie's pleasant dream. Softly, she clicked her tongue and shook her head. "Be careful where you tread, Julie Morrow. I'll not be chased off." She recalled Julie's poorly veiled mix of annoyance and possession when Tess had invited her inside the castle. "And you won't be havin' for yourself what I've already claimed as mine."

Binne bared her teeth and made a sharp, catlike hissing noise. Before she could stop herself, she reached out and dug razor sharp nails into the smooth skin of Julie's upper back.

Regaining control of herself at last possible millisecond, she pulled back. But it was too late; she'd already pierced the flesh, though just barely. Three tiny droplets of blood rose to the surface of the pale skin. Julie flinched, but was caught so firmly in the grasp of her dream that she didn't wake up.

Binne didn't bother to ponder what she'd done. That was already the past, and tomorrow was where true possibility lay.

Anxious for dawn, Binne disappeared into the shadows of Ballyhannan.

It was well past 9:00 when the sun streaming through her bedroom window woke Tess. She yawned and lifted her arms over her head for a long, decadent stretch. She felt worlds better after a good night's sleep, and she jumped out of bed with surprising gusto.

Once again, she and Julie had adjoining bedrooms, and she padded to their shared door and pressed her ear to the cool wood.

"Huh. Dent's either downstairs with her cute little nose stuffed into a book, or she's still asleep." Tess's money was on finding her friend lounging on the sofa. Julie was a notoriously early riser. She decided to shower after she had prepared an enormous breakfast for the two of them. She smiled as she pulled on sweats and a pair of comfortable sheepskin slippers. "You make fun of how much I pack, Jules." She wiggled her toes. "But I know what feels good."

A quick trip to the bathroom to take care of necessities, brush her teeth and run a comb through her hair, and she was jogging down the tall spiral staircase. Every ten feet or so, narrow, rectangular-shaped openings had been cut into the thick stone walls. The openings, Julie had explained, were placed there so that archers could shoot anyone attacking the castle. Now they were filled in with glass to let in the cheerful morning light.

"Hey, Jules, I hope you're hungry," she said as she leapt off the last step and bounded into the kitchen. "Because I'm starved!"

But the kitchen was empty. She called out louder this time as she made her way into the living room. "Jules?" Her gaze flitted around the room.

"Huh." She scratched her head and looked at her watch. "I guess all your work finally caught up with you, and you decided to sleep in." She grinned at the thought that she would get to cook for her friend. It was usually the other way around. Julie would good-naturedly grumble

about not having bacon, but all would be forgiven when Tess made her some fresh-squeezed juice from the gorgeous oranges that sat in a bowl near the stove.

Tess had only finished squeezing her third orange when she heard the faint sound of someone knocking on the door. She wiped her hands on a dishtowel and draped it over her shoulder as she headed towards the entryway. "How'd you get outside without my noticing, Jules? You didn't go into town for a traditional Irish breakfast of sausage, bacon, tomato, and more sausage, and forget your key, didja?" She opened the door.

"I surely did not," Binne said, smiling brightly.

"Binne." Tess's heart soared.

The redhead held up a paper sack. "I hope you like scones."

Tess beamed. "I love them." She stepped aside and made a sweeping motion towards the living room. "Won't you come in?"

"Will your friend Julie mind?" Binne asked, feigning worry.

Tess stepped forward and gently laid her hand on Binne's arm. "Don't worry about Jules. She's probably upstairs crashed. Please come in." She wasn't above begging, and she was about to do just that when Binne broke in with a laugh.

"Your friend doesn't strike me as the lazy, loungin'-in-bed type."

"She's not lazy." Tess's utter loyalty was evident by her tone. "She's just been working really hard lately and probably a little jet lagged."

"I see." Binne frowned. Julie had a claim on Tess's heart, though neither woman seemed to know it.

The sight of Binne's frown was enough to break Tess's heart.

Binne looked deeply into Tess's eyes. "Do you know what would make me happy, luv?"

Tess swallowed and shook her head. Whatever it was, she would kill herself to make it happen. Binne lifted herself to her tiptoes and brushed her lips against Tess's. The kiss was brief, but it was more than enough to take Tess's breath away.

"I don't think your friend Julie would like what I just did." Binne waited to see if Tess's response would be satisfactory.

Tess was being tested and she knew it. "No more talk about Julie," she said, desperate to do whatever it took to get another one of those kisses. "Shall we?" She stepped aside so that Binne could enter and the woman strode past her, her lips curled into a pleased grin.

Binne murmured out of Tess's hearing, "Oh, Tess, I'm certain we shall."

It was nearly noon, and Tess and Binne were snuggled close together on the sofa with Tess swooning over the smaller woman. Binne's voice, her laugh, her smile, were all mesmerizing. Tess found herself thinking of remaining in Ireland after Jules went home. True love sometimes required sacrifice. Julie would understand.

Binne kissed Tess softly, nibbling at her lower lip and making Tess whimper with need.

"Are ya happy, luv?" Binne asked, tangling her fingers in Tess's hair.

Tess gave Binne a dreamy look. "I'm so happy, I might just get up on the kitchen table and dance a jig!"

"Dancing!" Binne squealed with delight. She'd forgotten what tomorrow was. Things were working out perfectly. "Tomorrow's Halloween. There'll be a grand festival and costume dance in Quin."

Tess nodded. "The officer at the garda station told us to be sure not to miss it." Tess leaned forward for another kiss, but Binne moved away at the last second.

Binne batted her eyelashes. "I'll see ya at the dance?"

Tess's eyes widened. "You're leaving now? But why?" She wanted to wail.

"Not for long, luv."

"But, but-"

"If you want to see me again before tomorrow, take a walk by the river. You'll likely find me there this afternoon. 'Tis one of my favorite spots."

"I don't want to you go at all!"

"Patience, luv," Binne soothed, petting Tess's cheek. "We'll be together soon."

Binne headed for the door, and suddenly Tess heard another set of footsteps on the stairs.

Binne winked at Tess before slipping out. "'Til later," she called softly.

Tess waved weakly just as a bedraggled Julie, who was still in her pajamas, entered the living room.

Tess moaned and dropped her head into her hands, closing her eyes. Binne was gone, and she felt sick to her stomach.

"Well, good morning to you, too," Julie said, running her hands through her wild hair.

Tess sighed. She was about to snap at Julie when she lifted her head and got a good look at her friend. For the moment, thoughts of Binne receded and Tess shot to her feet. "What happened to you? You look like shit."

"I love you, too."

"Jules, I'm serious." Tess circled her, growing more worried the longer she looked. "Your eyes are bloodshot and you're so pale. You ... you look like you slept in your car or something!"

"I feel like warmed over crap," Julie said shakily. "I couldn't wake up."

Tess winced in sympathy. "Lemme get you some of the juice I made. Err... that I started making. You just sit down." She guided Julie to a chair. "You must have really needed to sleep to stay in bed till noon. You haven't done that since I've known you!"

Julie's eyes were round and wide. "I was dreaming. It was weird. I-I-I knew I was dreaming and that I wanted to wake up. I just couldn't!" She didn't tell Tess that in her dreams, they had argued over Tess's staying in Ireland. Tess had seemed irrational in her insistence, unstable even, and after Julie had done everything from cajole her to threaten kidnapping, they'd parted with harsh words, their friendship in ruins.

Tears pooled in Julie's eyes just remembering.

"Hey," Tess said softly. "What's wrong, Jules?" She put the orange down and rushed to Julie's side.

"Nothing." Julie swallowed thickly. She was being silly. It was just a dream, after all.

"I think you need a big hug." Tess opened her arms.

Julie's heart swelled. "I think you're right."

The women embraced, and Tess held Julie close, feeling her friend's heart beating fast against her own chest. "Jules?"

"Hmm?"

"What happened to your back?"

"Huh?"

Julie glanced over her shoulder, and Tess moved the tank top strap aside. It strap was lightly smeared with blood, and there were three red dots on her skin.

Tess lifted her eyebrows in question. "Well?"

"I have no idea."

Tess ran her fingertips over the marks. "They don't look like a bug bites."

Julie craned to see the tiny marks that formed a triangle. "I must have scraped it somehow." But she knew in her heart her words weren't true.

"You just missed Binne," Tess said, watching Julie carefully in order to gauge her reaction.

Julie had to bite her tongue for a few seconds before she could control her instinctively negative response to the news. "She came over, huh?" She avoided Tess's eyes.

Tess relaxed. Julie didn't seem as angry about Binne's presence in the house. "She brought us some scones." She pointed to the cabinet. "They're in the bag."

"Us?"

"Okay," Tess relented, "she brought me some scones. But I'll share."

Julie lifted the bag. The paper was still rolled tightly closed. She opened it and peered inside.

Several scones were neatly stacked. "Were they good?"

Tess's face turned pink. "Uhm ... I don't, I dunno. We were sort of busy...uhm ... talking and forgot to eat."

Julie didn't ask why Tess was blushing. She was pretty sure she didn't want to know. "Oh."

Set the bag down again, her stomach roiling.

"Don't you want any?"

"No." Julie shook her head and headed towards the stairs, determined to dress as quickly as she could and get out of the castle for the afternoon. "I've lost my appetite."

It took her a long time to get the cobwebs out, but Julie was determined to make full use of her afternoon. She'd made an appointment to meet with the librarian in charge of the folklore and myth reference section, and after studying a map, headed for the Clare Library in Ennis. She arrived right on time and found Bertie Cummings sitting at a large desk. The man looked to be in his eighties, and he was no more than five and a half feet tall, but he hopped to his feet and gave her a lively handshake when she introduced herself.

"So tell me what you're looking for, Miss Morrow? I'll help in any way I can."

Julie shifted her weight and moved her papers from one hand to the other. "I spent a few days in Dublin, and I think I've got a good overview of traditional Irish folktales. But I'm planning on writing a book, and I want to set it in Clare. I was hoping to find some tales that are specific to this area."

He laughed and winked at her. "You're looking for a local angle, eh?"

"Yes. That would be wonderful if you can think of anything."

Bertie's lips pursed, and he looked over Julie's shoulder while he thought. He tapped his chin with a thin, misshapen finger. "We have our share of legends. Most of the counties do."

Julie waited for him to continue, but he didn't. He just stood there, with his thumb rubbing the bottom of his chin, raking across some stubble he'd missed.

"Can you tell me about any of them?" Julie finally asked.

He leaned against his desk and looked at her carefully. "Why is it you're wanting to know?"

"I'm writing a book," she said, wondering if the old man's memory was going.

"About what?"

"Why does that matter?" She had nothing to hide, but she didn't understand why he was prying.

"It doesn't ... mostly."

She looked into his eyes and saw that they were clear and intelligent looking. She sensed that he wasn't going to answer her questions unless she answered his. "I'm writing a book ... a series

of books, that is, about a young girl who travels around the world with her family. Her father is in the diplomatic service, and they move frequently."

"Ah-ha. And how does she get interested in County Clare?"

"Her family comes to Clare on a vacation when her father is stationed in London. They spend two weeks here, and she learns about a local legend. That's where I need your help. I want this to be as fact-based as possible."

"To disprove the legend?" he asked.

"No, not at all. This is fiction, Mr. Cummings. She's going to encounter this being and learn something from him or her. The point of my books is that every country has unique folktales. It doesn't matter if they're true or not ... although my character will find that they're all true. What matters is respecting other cultures and learning something from them."

"I see." He walked around to thumb through a large, old Rolodex file, filled with neatly handwritten entries. "So the girl honors these traditions, is that correct? There'll be no mocking or belittling the people who believe in them?"

Julie's eyes popped open wide. "Of course not!" She debated for an instant, then decided to tell the truth. "Mr. Cummings, I believe in many things that can't be explained by science, and I'm a scientist. Children have such open, accepting attitudes about the spirit world. That's why I'm targeting that audience. Adults are often so jaded."

He squinted at her for a moment, then his face broke into an open smile. "You don't need a library, young lady. You need a man who knows his local history."

Giving him a tentative smile, she asked, "Where would I find such a man?"

He threaded his arm along hers, and said, "He's the fellow who's gonna buy you a cup of tea."

An hour later, Julie was furiously scribbling in her notebook, trying to write down at least some of the information Mr. Cummings was lavishing on her. "Let me make sure I've got a rough outline," she said, trying to read her own handwriting. "You've heard of dozens of fairy rings, at least two banshees that people have seen in the last few years, and you saw a pooka when you were a boy."

"I did," he said solemnly. "And it was a sight I'll never forget. He was a horse, dark as midnight, and as fast as any I've ever seen. His eyes were the color of sulphur set ablaze, and his mane was twice as long and twice as wild as any horse in Ireland."

Julie's heart was racing, and her palms were damp. "You must have been terrified!"

"I'm not ashamed to say that I was. I was just a boy, no more than eight at the time, but I remember it like it was last night. That demon kicked gates open, knocked down wooden fences, demolished an entire crop of onions just about to be picked. The whole town talked about it, but I was the only one to see him."

"Did anyone believe you?"

He looked stunned. "Of course! It was a clear, warm, windless night. Something evil had to cause that damage. It would have taken two or three strong men to do what he'd done, and for what purpose?"

"That must have been reassuring," Julie said. "In America, many people don't like to believe in things they can't explain."

"Ha! I'll give a year's pay to the man who can explain love!" He laughed heartily then took a sip of his tea. "You can't explain everything, Miss Morrow. If you could, then you'd be able to explain ... her."

Julie stared at the man. "Her?"

"Yes. The most feared mistress of all."

Julie blinked. "The ... what?"

"You heard me," he said, nodding. "No one can describe her. No one's ever lived long enough to. Men die willingly to be with her. Many men," he added quietly.

"Tell me!" she whispered, licking her lips in anticipation.

"She's frighteningly powerful. They say there isn't a man who can resist her. It's hard to call it love when she takes a man as her slave, but that's her name-lianhan shee-the love fairy." He laughed ruefully. "She captivates them so thoroughly that they'll do anything to be with her. But she's tricky, she is. She tells them she can't mate with them on human lands. They have to travel to Tir-Na-n-Og."

"What is Tir-Na-n-Og?"

"The land of youth," Bertie said. "It's on the other side ... past death."

"What happens then?" Julie's heart was beating so fast she could hardly form words.

"No one knows," he said, shaking his head sadly. "That's one place no one has ever returned from. Maybe she lavishes them with the love she promised. Maybe they spend eternity seeking her out, never to see her again. We'll likely never know."

"What ... what does she look like?"

"No one has ever described her. Some say that men are so jealous of losing her that they won't tell another soul about her. Others say she's desire itself and beyond description. All I know is that once a man is captivated-he's not long for this world."

"But she only takes men? Are you sure?" A sharp pain was pounding in her head, and she could feel the puncture wounds on her back.

"Yes, yes, only men," he said, letting her breathe a sigh of relief. "She makes them fall in love with her, Miss Morrow. She appeals to a man's sexual drive. A woman would have no interest in her."

Julie jumped to her feet. "I've got to go. Thank you so much, Mr. Cummings, but I've got to go!" She grabbed her bag and ran for the door, leaving a puzzled old man in her wake.

Tess tried to stop herself from running when she spotted Binne by the river. She knew she was behaving like a besotted teenager, but she'd never been so overcome with lust. Her whole body seemed to pulse with sensation the moment she saw Binne, and the feelings got stronger as she drew near. "Hello," she said, her voice taking on a low, sexy tone. "I've found you."

Binne was sitting by the bank of the clear-flowing water, and she turned and smiled at Tess's greeting. "You certainly have." She patted the long, verdant grass beside her. "Come sit with me."

Practically diving for her, Tess managed to sit down and force her hands under her thighs. She was certain she'd grab Binne if she didn't exercise some form of control, and she somehow knew that Binne wouldn't appreciate being unceremoniously pawed. "It's lovely here," she said, having not looked at the river at all.

Binne met her eyes. "Yes, you are," she said, the frank sexual innuendo catching Tess by surprise.

Tentatively, she let one hand escape and allowed it to rest lightly on Binne's thigh. "I've been thinking about you. About nothing but you." Her smile grew brighter. "Julie's gone for the afternoon." Her fingers began to follow the folds of the fine fabric. "We could be alone."

Binne took in a deep breath, mesmerizing Tess who was staring at her chest. "We're alone now." She leaned towards her and put her hand on the back of Tess's head. Exerting gentle pressure, she drew her in for a delicate kiss.

Tess's lips burned like they'd been singed, and she felt as though Binne's hand would leave a permanent mark on her head. Every touch from this delicate woman carried an impact that Tess was wholly unfamiliar with. She impulsively wrapped her arms around Binne's tiny waist, but, impossibly, the woman managed to slip away from her. Tess blinked, befuddled as to how Binne was now just out of her grasp.

"This isn't the place," Binne said gently.

"The castle's the place." Tess knew her voice was high and tight, but she had little control over any part of her body. "Please, let's go now."

Binne touched her cheek, and Tess felt every nerve grow more sensitive. "We'll be together, Tess. Make no mistake. We will be together."

"But when? I can't ... I can't wait." She hated to whine. But she didn't have any other weapons at her disposal.

"Shh." Binne raised a finger and silenced Tess with the most delicate touch. "There are reasons, my love. Reasons you couldn't possibly understand. This isn't the place for us."

"What is? I'll go anywhere. I'll do anything!"

"Ahh ... such a darling woman." Binne kissed her again, and Tess could feel all of the blood leave her extremities and settle in her belly where it throbbed heavily. "You must be patient, Tess. I know what must be done, and I'll know when the time is right. You trust me, don't you?"

Tess's head nodded up and down. "Completely."

"Nothing could make me happier." Binne sat on her heels and leaned forward, presenting Tess with a mouth-watering display of her rapturously perfect breasts. She took Tess's hand and began to guide it to her bosom, smiling when she felt the pulse pounding in Tess's wrist. But she changed direction at the last instant and kissed the palm, nearly making Tess swoon.

"Trust me."

"I do. I do."

"Tomorrow then, at the dance. I'll tell you everything you need to know." She leaned close, and Tess could feel her soul flowing into Binne's fathomless eyes. "We'll go away. Far, far away from here. We'll feast on each other forever."

"Forever," Tess said, feeling like that wouldn't nearly be long enough.

Julie leaned against the door, fumbling with the castle's keys, when the door creaked loudly and swung open. She stuffed the keys into her jacket pocket as she ran inside, her heart pounding. "Tess!"

The living room was empty.

"Tess, where are you?" Julie's yelled, scanning the kitchen. It was empty as well. "Shit." She dashed up the tall spiral staircase, taking the steps two at a time and muttering, "Reading. You told me you were going to spend the afternoon reading. So where are you?"

She flung open Tess's bedroom door and instantly spotted Tess sitting upright in a large antique chair that seemed to swallow her. Her arms were limp and lifeless and hung loosely over the arms of the chair. Her eyes were closed.

Julie's heart stopped beating. She didn't even remember crossing the room. The next thing she knew, she was grabbing Tess by the shoulders and giving her a desperate shake. "Tess! Tess!"

Tess's entire body jerked and her eyes popped wide open. Terrified, she began to scream and paw at her assailant. "Ahhh!"

Julie screamed in response. "Ahhh!" She yanked her hands back as though they'd been burned and stumbled backwards, nearly tripping over her own feet.

"Jesus Christ!" Tess roared, once she realized she wasn't being attacked by a deranged maniac. Well, a deranged maniac who was a stranger, anyway. "What the fuck sort of way is that to wake someone up?" She put her hands to her chest to verify that her heart was still beating. "God, you nearly gave me a heart attack."

Panting, Julie reached behind her until she found the foot of Tess's bed. She sat down heavily. "You're okay," she said, reassuring herself, her hands trembling.

"Why wouldn't I be? I was sitting here reading." She bent and picked up a book that had fallen to the floor, "and I must have fallen asleep."

Julie searched her mind for an explanation for her behavior that didn't sound paranoid. "You looked so still."

"Jules," Tess scrubbed her face with one hand, "what's going on with you lately?"

"I was just worried about you."

"There's no reason to worry about me." Tess stood and joined Julie on the foot of the bed. She patted Julie's thigh. "I've had a perfectly great, and very safe," she added, raising her eyebrows for emphasis, "day."

Julie let out a slow breath and did her best to smile. "What'd you do today?"

Tess hesitated, but decided to tell the truth. This was something that Julie was going to have to get used to. "Binne and I—"

Julie shot off the bed and threw her hands in the air. "Her again?"

Tess's lips thinned. "Yes, her again. I told you yesterday that I was interested in her. The feeling's very mutual."

Julie knelt in front of Tess and gently took her hands. "Can't you see there's something..." She shook her head, searching for the words that would make sense to Tess. "Something not right about her?"

Tess blinked. "No. I don't see that at all."

"Okay," Julie licked her lips. "Think of the other women you've been in relationships with. They didn't look anything like her, right?"

Tess's eyes grew dreamy as she thought of Binne. "I know."

"No." Julie's jaw clenched. "You don't. Pamela was a model. And before her, you were with Kris, who was an actress."

Tess frowned. "So?"

"They were both gorgeous, Tess. And not just a little bit. You always fall for beauties, and they fall right back."

Tess couldn't believe what she was hearing. "And you're saying Binne's ugly?"

"Not ugly," Julie corrected. There was no easy way to say this. "It's just that she's not up to your usual standards."

Tess snorted. "I don't know what's wrong with your eyesight, but you'd better get it checked, Dent. Binne puts Pam and Kris to shame. When I look at her, I feel like my insides have turned to jelly."

Julie sighed, her belief that Binne had cast some sort of spell over Tess growing every second.

"Okay, forget for a second that she's a mix of Cruella DeVil, Lily Munster, and Bozo."

Tess sneered. "She is not!"

"Forget all that," Julie said dismissively, trying another tactic. "Let's consider how long you've known her. It's only been a day. One day! How can you be so attached to someone in such a short amount of time? You didn't tell Pamela you loved her for nearly a year, and even then we talked and talked about how you were still unsure."

Tess squirmed a little. She'd handled that relationship badly, and though she hated to admit it, she knew she should have taken Julie's advice. "I wasn't sure how I felt with Pam. And I'll admit that I told her what I thought she wanted to hear. At least at first. But it's not like that with Binne." Her face took on a serious expression. "Jules, Binne completes me."

Julie stood up and ran her hands through her hair. She wanted to pull it out by the roots. "Listen to yourself. You're not making sense."

A confused, hurt expression flickered across Tess's face. "I thought you wanted me to be happy."

"Of course I do, Tessy. That's all I want."

"Then you should be glad that I've found the perfect woman."

"She's not perfect. I don't think she's even human!" Julie shouted in frustration.

Tess's mouth dropped open. "What?" she finally spluttered.

"Listen to me, Tess. Do you believe that I love you?"

Tess nodded. They'd been best friends for years, they'd lived through the death of Julie's parents and Tess's deciding to change careers mid-stream, not to mention the failed romances that had broken their hearts. "I love you, too."

Julie smiled a little. "Good. Then you need to trust me." She drew in a deep breath. "I know this is going to sound out there. And I know that you don't believe in anything that can't be proven absolutely. But I think that Binne is a fairy."

"You think she's a gay man?"

"No," Julie looked upward for divine assistance. "A *real* fairy. The sort that can be invisible and live for hundreds of years."

Tess just stared at her.

Julie gulped. "Tess?"

"What?" she said flatly, her expression blank.

"Don't you have a reaction to what I just said? I think Binne is a fairy."

"Have you been drinking?"

"Tess!"

"What! What do you want me to say? Yes, the woman I love is secretly the Tooth Fairy?"

Julie's eyes widened. "You love her?" she whispered, her worst fears confirmed.

"Absolutely. And we're going to retire together in Never Never Land and live happily ever after on her endless supply of nickels and quarters. The end."

"This is not a joke. I think she's enchanted you! That's why you don't see her for what she really is. How does she come or go? Have you ever seen a car or bicycle or anything when she shows up? Or," Julie snapped her fingers, "does she just appear out of the blue?"

Tess rolled her eyes. "You're talking crazy."

"She's forced you to fall in love with her."

Anger suddenly flared in Tess's eyes. "Nobody has forced anyone to do anything. I can't even believe we're having this ridiculous discussion. You haven't given Binne a single chance. She's wonderful and beautiful and sexy as hell, and, God, I just want to eat her alive! When we're together, I feel so alive my entire body tingles. Why can't you be happy for me?"

Julie felt like crying. Her words weren't even denting Binne's hold on Tess. "Because what you're feeling isn't real. It's a spell. A trick."

"Jesus, Jules." Tess shook her head in disbelief. "Fine. I can't believe I'm going to say this, but what if by some freakish miracle you're right, and Binne is a fairy?" The expression on her face made it clear that Tess didn't believe what she was saying. "What's so bad about being under her spell? If this is a love spell, which it's not, then aren't I the luckiest woman on the planet? We'll always be hot for each other! That's awesome!"

"No, no, no! Fairies aren't cute creatures from Disney cartoons. They can be mean, spiteful things. They put spells on people, and then they turn their human toys into slaves. They use lust as a weapon—"

"So have half the women I've dated."

"Tessy, please," Julie begged. "Believe what I'm telling you! Fairies can use the sexual pull they have on humans to tease them until their victims go insane or commit suicide from longing. And once a person is totally enchanted, there's no going back. Ever. Without her fairy the poor besotted woman lives a life of abject misery, her heart breaking. With her fairy, she loses herself completely. A fairy's victim gets so wrapped up in her devotion to her mistress that she'll do anything for her. *Anything*. Even die."

Tess wasn't deterred. "Wouldn't you die for someone you loved?"

Julie swallowed hard and stared straight into Tess's eyes. The answer came without thought.

"In a heartbeat. But only if I *really* loved her, and she *really* loved me back."

Tess couldn't hold Julie's gaze, and her stare dropped to the floor. For just a split second, she felt a sliver of doubt. Binne hadn't allowed them to consummate their relationship, and it was true that she was about to go mad from wanting. And Tess had never heard her normally placid friend rant like this. She wanted to believe that Julie only had her best interests at heart, but what she was saying was more than any rational adult could accept. What she felt for Binne was the strongest feeling she'd ever known. She had to trust it.

Tess glanced up. "I know you believe what you're telling me, Jules."

Julie looked at Tess hopefully.

"But I can't let some superstitious nonsense stand in the way of what I could have with Binne. I'm sorry. You're just going to have to accept the fact that we share—"

"What?" Julie took Tess's hands again. "Love?" Tess opened her mouth, but Julie didn't give her a chance to respond. "Love is something that grows over time. It's based on trust and friendship and shared dreams. Something that you feel in the bottom of your soul for someone who has earned that special place in your heart by being there for you, and caring about you more than she cares about herself." Julie shook her head. "You can't say any of that about Binne, Tessy."

Tess didn't know what to say. She closed her eyes, feeling slightly out of control. "I can't be without her, Jules. I just can't. I'm sorry." She surged forward and kissed Julie on the cheek, then ran from the room.

Julie lifted her hand to her face and touched the spot where Tess's lips had so recently been. Binne hadn't enchanted Tess completely, or they'd be together right now. Julie had seen the tiniest bit of doubt flash in Tess's eyes, and with that hope to hold on to, she wasn't going to give up. "It's not too late. I won't let it be."

The women spent a rather sullen evening together. Tess was preoccupied, barely saying a word. And Julie was nearly going mad trying to think of ways to keep her friend from falling completely under Binne's spell.

Around 11:00, Tess stood and said, "I think I'm gonna turn in."

Julie immediately put her book down. "I'll go with you."

Tess looked like she was about to say something, but she pursed her lips and started to walk towards the spiral staircase. "I think one candle will do, don't you?"

"Yeah. I got up just a few minutes after we went to bed last night and blew out all of the candles. I kept thinking they'd set the place on fire."

"Mmm ... a several-foot-thick castle wall with stone floors. Those can go up like that." Tess snapped her fingers for emphasis, and Julie laughed.

"It's a habit. I'm a careful person."

Tess lit a pillar candle and carried it in one hand, while she put her other arm around Julie. "I know that you're careful. But I am, too. I know you don't think I'm making a good choice, but I have to follow my heart."

Julie swallowed then nodded. "I know that. I hope you don't think I'm sticking my nose where it doesn't belong ..."

"I would never think that, Jules. You're my best bud."

They reached the top of the stairs, and Tess smiled at her friend. "G'night."

Julie's return smile was hesitant. "I know you think I'm overreacting, but I'd like to sleep in your room tonight."

Tess frowned. "Now what?"

"I'm just worried, okay? You know how much I care for you, and you know how this whole thing has gotten to me. So ... I'm just asking ... as a friend. Humor me, Tessy. Just humor me."

Tess patted her friend on the cheek. "You know I can't resist you. Go put your jammies on and brush your teeth."

Minutes later, Julie stood at the foot of Tess's bed, waiting for her friend to finish in the bathroom. When Tess came out, Julie said, "We haven't slept together in a while."

"There was that one night after you and Suzanne broke up," Tess said. She walked to the far side of the bed and started to pull the quilt down. Julie matched her movements. "You'd had too much to drink, and I wouldn't let you drive home."

"I was trying to forget that time," Julie said, smiling. "I was thinking of the time we went to Women's Week in Provincetown."

"Oh, right! Kris couldn't come with us because she was touring with 'The Red Velvet Goat,' and you were single at the time. God, we had a blast, didn't we?"

"Sure did." They got into bed and rustled around a bit while trying to get comfortable.

"Remember how small that bed was? The owner of the B&B kept insisting it was a queen, but it must have been made for the queen of the munchkins."

Tess rolled onto her side and smiled at her friend. "If the whole town hadn't been sold out, we would have told him to stuff it. I think it would have fit!"

Julie lay quietly for a moment, then, in a soft voice, she said, "It wasn't so bad. You're nice to sleep with."

"So I'm told," Tess joked. She looked at Julie and saw her friend gazing at her intently.

"What?"

"Tell me why you love Binne."

"Oh, Jules, not this again!"

Julie put her hand on Tess's chest. "I won't say a word. I just want to know. You always tell me about the women you fall for. Why should this be any different?"

"You don't normally tell me my girlfriends look like Bozo the clown." Tess narrowed her eyes and glared at her friend.

"I was out of line. And stupid." Tess still looked angry. "And wrong."

Tess's expression showed how hurt she'd been. "Why did you say that?"

"I don't know," Julie said. "Maybe I'm a little jealous."

Tess's eyes opened wide. "Jealous?"

"Maybe just a little." She smiled, showing her recently-whitened teeth. "I never think anyone's good enough for you."

"Oh, Jules." Tess put her arms around her friend and gave her a long hug. "I feel the same about you."

"We're a pair, aren't we?" Julie patted Tess's back when she pulled away. "Now tell me about Binne."

"I've already told you a lot. All of my senses are heightened when we're together. I tingle all over when she's near me."

"What does she do for a living?"

"I ... I don't know."

"Does she live in town?"

Tess scratched her cheek. "She didn't say."

"Is her family from the area? What's her last name?"

Tess made a face and shrugged. "Those things aren't important, Jules. I don't know her resume, but I know how I feel. And I'm in love with her. Deeply in love. That's all that matters."

Julie looked into her eyes and saw that Tess had adopted her most determined persona. The one she used when she was passionate about a new product she was trying to sell. She knew that she'd antagonize her if she pressed any further. "You're right," she said. "Loving someone is the only thing that matters. You know it's love when you'd do anything to keep her safe and happy."

Not long after the women fell asleep, Binne opened the door to Tess's room and glared indignantly at the scene. She could sense the aura of protectiveness that Julie projected, and that was the only thing keeping the woman alive. Binne would not tolerate anyone touching her property. Closing her eyes, she focused on Tess, reassured that her feelings had not faded. "You'll live another day, Julie Morrow. But don't tempt fate by further involving yourself in Tess's affairs." She summoned her powers and cast a spell on Julie, again putting her into a light coma. "Now listen to your friend reach heights she'll never reach with you, you lowly mortal."

Julie's body grew limp, and Binne grasped her by the neck and pulled her from the bed.

Laughing, she let go and watched the woman fall to the floor, landing in a heap. Then she slid into bed with Tess and lifted her shirt. "Such lovely breasts," she sighed. "They'll be mine tomorrow. But until then ..." She smiled and decided what type of spell to cast on Tess. "I'd like to see you perform for me, my pet."

She put her hand over Tess's body and moved it over each breast, giggling when Tess started to pant. Like a symphony conductor, she moved her hands to an inner rhythm, squealing with delight while Tess moaned and whimpered. She worked over her body for a long time until,

tiring of her game, she caused Tess to have a thunderous orgasm, making the woman desperately scream out her name.

Binne leaned over Tess and watched the sweat bead on her body. Sticking out the tip of her tongue, she tasted the salty liquid and hummed her approval. "You'll be saying that name for a very long time, my love. Until I tire of you, of course." She laughed again and moved to Tess's neck. She sniffed delicately and spent a moment deciding if she could bite her like she wanted to without Tess's realizing she'd been in her bed. Choosing moderation, she imagined biting her until the skin broke. She breathed deeply, smelling the metallic scent of Tess's blood through her skin. Satisfied, she blew the woman a kiss. "Until later, my sweet." She slipped from the bed, using Julie's body as a step. As she left the room, she heard Julie groaning in pain, unable to move. "Sweet dreams, Julie. You'll awaken with the sun, and not a moment before."

The second the sun peeked over the horizon, Julie sat bolt-upright from her spot on the floor. She was breathing hard, and her heart threatened to escape from the confines of her chest. She glanced up at the bed and found Tess sound asleep. The covers were scrunched down and resting on her feet, her T-shirt pushed up, exposing one breast to the cool morning air.

"God," Julie exhaled raggedly. She tore her eyes off Tess and shut them tightly, visions of her friend's body arching in climax still dancing behind her closed lids. Guilt gnawed at her as every delicious second of her dream swirled in her head. Julie's entire body thrummed with arousal, and she crossed her legs in a vain attempt to ease the ache that was driving her to distraction. "What's the matter with me?" She couldn't decide what was more disturbing: that she'd had a sex dream about her best friend in the first place; that during the dream itself she'd imagined Binne bringing Tess to a mind-blowing orgasm; or the fact that she couldn't help but wish that it had been she touching Tess so intimately ... that it had been her name that Tess called out in the heights of passion.

"It was just a dream," she whispered to herself. "It doesn't mean anything." She gripped the side of her head with her hands. "It wasn't real." But the dampness between her legs and the fear in her heart over Binne's control of Tess told a different story.

"Jules?" Tess called out softly as she reached across the bed and found it empty. Her eyes were still closed when she said, "Why are you mumbling to yourself? And where are you?"

It took a second for Julie to realize that she was on the floor. She glanced around in confusion. "What the hell?" She winced when her sore back made itself known as she crawled back into bed, the scent of Tess's arousal causing her to swallow hard. *Looks like I wasn't the only one having X-rated dreams last night!* "I'm here," she said softly. "Go back to sleep."

Tess smiled, her eyes still closed, her speech slurred. "I had the most fantastic dream."

Julie reached over and tugged Tess's T-shirt down to give her a modicum of privacy. The gesture was futile, because the sight of Tess writhing in pleasure was burned into her brain permanently. Fondly, she brushed Tess's cheek with the back of her hand. "Tell me what you dreamt about."

"Mmm...Binne."

Julie's eyes widened before narrowing. "Go back to sleep. It's early."

Tess smacked her lips and turned onto her side, curling up into a ball before falling asleep almost immediately. Julie watched her for a moment then turned away. She knew she wouldn't be able to sleep, but she didn't want to leave Tess's side. She let her hand rest on the bed at the small of her friend's back, feeling the heat from her skin.

They'd been friends for years, and Julie had never allowed herself to think of the lovely woman in a sexual way. She'd always tried to control her mind, never allowing it to dwell in areas that bore no possibility for fulfillment. But, for the first time in their long friendship, they were both single. Giving into temptation, Julie rolled onto her side and indulged in the guilty pleasure of looking at Tess's body. The mere curve of her hip made Julie's heart race, and she realized that her feelings had been slowly turning into the sexual realm-and that she had no desire to control them. She was afraid to take the leap ... afraid of rejection ... afraid of what might happen to their friendship. But she had to admit that while her primary motivation for exposing Binne was to keep Tess safe, another growing stimulus was to have Tess to herself.

Her sexual feelings were too overpowering for her to remain in bed with her friend. So she got up and walked into the bathroom, gasping in alarm when she saw faint bluish marks on her skin, like a necklace of fingerprints. Her hand went to her throat, and she gently pressed one of the marks, wincing when she touched it. She yanked off her tank top and examined her body, finding a large, yellow-green bruise on her lower back. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

She was still holding her shirt in her hands when Tess came charging into the bathroom, eyes wide. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, shit, how loud was I?"

"Loud!" Tess said, panting in fright. "Really loud. What's wrong?" Her eyes roved over Julie's bare torso, looking for whatever had caused her friend such alarm.

Julie's voice was filled with dread. "Look," she said, pointing at faint marks on her neck.

Tess moved closer and gently touched the skin. "Bruises?"

"Bruises," Julie agreed. "And look at this one." She turned and showed Julie the bigger, more painful bruise.

Tess let out a breath. "Damn. What happened, honey?" She barely brushed her fingers over the mark, her touch so soft and loving that Julie's knees felt weak.

Putting as much portent into her voice as she could, Julie said, "Binne was here."

Tess's brows shot up. "What? When?"

"I don't know. We were asleep."

Tess rolled her eyes. "Not this again."

Julie grasped her friend's shoulders. "Yes. Again. She obviously grabbed my throat and punched or kicked me, then threw me to the floor. My body's so sore." She sucked in a breath as her hands traveled over her hips and legs, feeling bruises everywhere.

Concerned, Tess covered Julie's hand with her own. "You fell out of bed, Jules. Doing that while you're asleep is bound to make you sore. But Binne didn't do anything to you. You obviously had a bad dream and thrashed around until you fell."

"I didn't fall." Julie's certainty showed in her voice. "I've never fallen out of bed, and even if I had, I wouldn't have tried to strangle myself."

Tess touched the marks again. "Jules, you're obviously hurt, but a million things could have happened. You could have bruised yourself by falling or hitting the bed or the nightstand ..."

"None of those things are shaped like fingers," Julie said, glaring at Tess. "She threw me to the floor, then she had sex with you. I heard her ... I heard you."

"Julie!" Tess's face was pink with embarrassment. "I dreamt about her, I already told you that. Maybe I was talking in my sleep."

"I heard you have an orgasm," Julie said, unable to look into Tess's eyes. "That was no dream. She had sex with you while you slept. Is that the kind of ... being ... you want to be with?"

Annoyed, Tess looked at herself in the mirror, carefully scanning her body for signs of struggle. "I had a dream," she repeated. "A very sexual dream about a woman I love. I got excited, and I could have had an orgasm. I've touched myself in my sleep before, Jules." Julie stared at her, trying to resist the urge to shake some sense into her. "Can you come without touching yourself? Because you didn't masturbate, Tess. Binne was here. She threw me out of bed, and she fucked you without your permission. That's the truth." She turned and left the room, slamming the door behind her.

Tess slipped out of her clothes and examined her body in the full-length mirror. There wasn't a mark anywhere. Tentatively, she cupped her hands over her nose and mouth, smelling only soap. Her hand dropped, and she touched her vulva, finding it slightly swollen and wet. Her heart started to beat faster, but she shut her eyes and took in a deep breath. The desire she felt for Binne could easily have made her have a spontaneous orgasm. That was the only thing that made sense. And, in this world, everything had a rational explanation—even if it wasn't obviously apparent.

The streets of Quin had been blocked off for tonight's dance. Julie and Tess parked their rental car at the edge of town and began walking towards the music. The weather had turned warmer, and though the night was still clear and cool, it wasn't so cold as to require a jacket. The air was still, and the women could smell the smoke from the bonfire in the center of town. Lighted jack-o-lanterns lined the streets, and a gaggle of children dressed as goblins and witches ran past Tess and Julie, carrying sacks of candy that they'd collected over the evening. Tess smiled, remembering the many Halloweens of her youth. "Hey, Jules?" She bumped shoulders with her friend. "What was your favorite Halloween costume when you were a kid?" Julie didn't talk much about her childhood and it was a subject that Tess was always curious about.

Julie chuckled. "A dentist."

Tess gaped. "You lie!"

"Nope. I had a short white lab coat and a little drill. Oh," Julie smiled, "and a handful of toothbrushes sticking out of my breast pocket. I wore it every single year."

"You scare me sometimes, you know that?"

"Yeah?" Julie stepped down off a curb. "What about you? Let me guess. A princess."

"Not!" Tess sniffed and wound her arm around Julie's. "A vampire, of course."

"You dressed according to type, too."

"Ha, ha."

They crossed the street, and Tess nodded at several laughing couples who were dressed as male and female fairies, complete with wings. Julie almost pulled Tess's arm out of its socket when she stopped very abruptly. "Jules!" Tess backtracked, rubbing her shoulder. Then she followed the line of Julie's vision. "Don't say it. Don't even think it! Those are not real fairies." She pointed at two children dressed in sheets with holes cut out for the eyes, "Just like those aren't real ghosts."

Julie frowned. "I know that."

Tess looked at her intently. "Do you really? I think you're having trouble telling what's real and what's make-believe."

Julie sighed. There was no point in arguing any more. Her stomach had been in knots all day, fixated on what would happen if she didn't keep Binne away from Tess. "I know what's real and what's not." She gave her a reassuring smile. "I promise."

Even though Tess was unconvinced, Julie knew that Binne was all too real-but not a real human. The costumes would make it harder for her to spot the fairy, but that just made her more determined. She'd learned that Halloween was the one night of the year that fairies were at their busiest collecting human souls. But she was determined to send Binne home disappointed. Julie squeezed Tess's hand. "Let's not talk about all that. We're here to have fun, remember?"

Tess let out a relieved breath. "Yes, we are. Thank you for being reasonable and understanding, Jules." They began to walk again, and after turning the next corner an enormous bonfire, a live band on a wooden platform near the fire, and throngs of dancers came into view. "There are hundreds of people here! Everyone in Quin must be here." The festive atmosphere reminded Tess of Mardi Gras, only without topless women and the smell of urine. She smirked. Not that she minded the topless women.

"You know, I love being here with you, but I'm a little sad I won't be home to greet the neighborhood trick-or-treaters."

Tess snorted loudly and ineffectually tried to cover her mouth with her hand.

"What?"

"The kids are really gonna miss that dental floss you pass out."

"Hey!" Julie feigned insult. "I give peppermint flavor, don't I?"

"On the bright side, they won't have a reason to egg your house this year."

Julie was about to protest when a chubby shopkeeper, who was standing outside his store and passing out tidbits of something from a tray, blocked their path. "Go on, kiddies." He shooed away several young footballers who were clustered near him. "These ain't for you." The man was dressed in an elaborate costume, and the women did have to admit he bore a striking resemblance to an ancient Irish king. "Hello, ladies," he addressed Tess and Julie cordially.

"Are ya married?"

Tess and Julie looked at each other and then back at the man. "To each other?" Tess asked. The man blushed to the roots of his red hair. "Bite into one of these." He lifted his tray under their noses.

Puzzled, Julie and Tess each lifted a piece of a cabbage leaf from the platter.

"What are these for?" Julie wondered aloud, about to bite into the leaf.

The man smiled. "Legend says a taste of the leaf will foretell your future husband's disposition. Bitter or sweet."

Both Tess and Julie dropped their leaves as though the cabbage had been poisoned.

The man blinked. "What's wrong?"

"I'm full," Julie answered.

"I'm allergic," said Tess at the same time.

"Oh." He shrugged. "Two lasses as lovely as yourselves won't have any trouble finding a fine mate. Cabbage or no."

"I hope you're right," Julie said under her breath.

Tess gave the shopkeeper a friendly wave good-bye and tugged Julie in the direction of the bonfire. "C'mon, we're burning moonlight." She scanned the crowd. The costumes were a little more ghoulish than what she'd come to expect from Halloween parties back home, with witches, goblins, and ghosts clearly being the town favorites. The bonfire cast exaggerated, dancing shadows on the buildings nearby, but the raucous laughter and enthusiastic foot-stomping made the scene more inviting than frightening. Nearly everyone wore masks, and, to Tess's disappointment, she didn't catch sight of Binne among the party-goers.

"What are you looking for?" Julie jumped backwards a few steps to avoid a line of merry dancers. Several of the men tipped their hats at her and whistled as they passed. "Oh ..." Tess hesitated. "I was just looking for a spot for us to join in." She hated lying to her friend, but Julie's crazy behavior of late had left her little choice. Julie grinned and grabbed hold of Tess's hand. "How about here?" And with that, she flung them into the crowd, where they were quickly carried away by the partygoers and music.

It was nearly midnight, and the town's children had long since been sent home to bed. But the bonfire and dancers were still going strong. The traditional promenades didn't pair a man with a woman. Rather, people danced in groups and lines, exchanging partners every few steps. Julie couldn't remember when she'd had so much fun. Tess twirled by her, being led by a tall man dressed as a soldier, and Julie gave her a swat on the bottom as she spun by.

"I'll get you for that, Dent," Tess shouted as the dance carried her to the other side of the fire.

Grinning, Julie stepped out of the dancing ring, slightly out of breath. Then she watched through the flames as a small, red-headed woman, wearing a glittering gold mask began dancing with Tess. The smile melted from Julie's face. "Tess!" Julie called, but she couldn't be heard above the band. She began to push her way through the crowd, but the dancers seemed to be forcing her farther and farther from Tess. "Tess!"

Binne spun Tess once, twice, and then the women vanished into the darkness.

Julie was beside herself. She redoubled her efforts, shouldering her way past the dancers who bumped into her at every turn. When she finally made it to the place she last saw Tess and Binne, they were long gone. "Damn!" she roared. "Hey," she grabbed the teenaged boy next to her. He had a nearly empty pint in his hand. "Did you see a red-headed woman dressed like a fairy with a pretty blonde who wasn't wearing a costume? They were dancing right here."

The boy nodded and hiccupped. "I did, indeed." He took another sip of ale, creating a foamy mustache on his upper lip.

"Well?"

"I asked the comely blonde for a kiss, but then the red-haired banshee showed up and hissed in me face." His glassy eyes were wide. "I backed away. I'm no fool!"

"Which way did they go?" Julie asked anxiously as she stared into the darkness.

"That way." He pointed to a space between two buildings. Julie was about to take off running when he added, "They're probably goin' to walk one of the paths. It's a grand night for it." She forced herself to stay in place long enough to listen to what he was saying. "What paths?" "Two paths start at the end of that alley. One leads to a grassy field." He lowered his voice and snickered. "That's where lovers go to consort with each other." Then he shrugged. "And the other goes to the river, of course." He hiccupped again and grinned stupidly. "How's about a kiss for me troubles?"

Julie planted a quick kiss on his cheek and took off running, her feet pounding hard against the moist ground.

"That's not what I had in mind!" the boy yelled after her. But she had already vanished into the night.

"I missed you so this evenin'," Binne told Tess as they walked arm in arm. "Did you enjoy the dance, luv?"

Tess was so happy she felt as though she could take flight. "All I could think about was you."

Binne smiled. "Is that so?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well, then," Binne stopped walking and rose to her tiptoes. "You deserve one of these." She kissed Tess soundly, causing the younger woman to swoon.

Tess moaned in protest when Binne finally pulled away. "Don't stop!" She tried to corral the fairy with her arms, but Binne was too quick.

"I won't ever stop." They started walking again with Binne leading Tess by the hand. "Soon we'll be together always."

"Always?"

"Yes, luv." Binne's eyes twinkled. "For eternity."

Julie was out of breath by the time she skidded to a halt atop a grassy plateau. She cursed herself for not asking the boy which trail was which. In her haste, she'd picked one and crossed her fingers. "Tess?" she bellowed. "Answer me!"

A man and his betrothed poked their heads up out of the tall grass, but even in the moonlight, Julie could tell that they weren't whom she was looking for. She spun around and bolted back towards the town and the other path. She just prayed she wasn't too late.

"Here we are," Binne finally said, coming to rest on a log only a few feet from the river. Heavy rains had soaked County Clare this autumn, and the river was swollen, running faster and deeper than normal.

Tess sat next to Binne and took her hand. "I don't care where we are, so long as we're together."

"That's right," Binne soothed, brushing an errant lock of hair from Tess's cheek. "I did promise, didn't I?" She smiled when Tess nodded fervently. "Now is finally the time."

"What do I have to do?" Tess asked eagerly. "I'll do anything you want." Her gaze was drawn to Binne's full, dark lips, and Tess licked her own lips in anticipation.

"'Tis simple, luv." Binne stood and moved a few paces over to a stone the size of a bowling ball. She lifted it as though it were light as a feather and set it in Tess's lap. "There."

"Uff." Tess adjusted the heavy rock on her thighs. She glanced at the rock and then Binne, her confusion clear. "I don't understand."

"This is how you and I are going to be together forever." With infinite tenderness, Binne drew a fingertip down Tess's cheek. "Take hold of the rock, luv, and walk into the river. When you're far under the water, draw in a deep breath." Binne smiled a brilliant smile that took Tess's breath away. "And then you'll enter the land of Tir-Na-n-Og. There we'll be together always. Beautiful and young forever more. 'Tis the only way."

Tess looked at the river. She inhaled of its lush scent and closed her eyes. Her need for Binne was overpowering, and she gave into it eagerly, feeling a rush of adrenaline suffuse her blood.

"That's how we'll be together?"

"Never to part again," Binne confirmed seriously. "I swear it."

Tess stood, grunting from the weight of the rock.

"That's it, luv. A few steps for a hundred lifetimes of pleasure. Do it for me."

Tess gripped the rock to her chest took a step toward the river.

"I love you. Do this for us."

Another step.

"Tess!" Julie exploded from the woods and ran to Tess just as the younger woman was about to step into the river. Startled, Tess dropped the rock.

Binne swore in a language that neither woman had ever heard before.

"Stay out of my way, Julie, I have to go into the river!"

"Go into the river?" Julie grabbed Tess's hands and refused to let go. She looked at Binne, who, though furious, remained silent.

"I have to walk into the river and take a deep breath," Tess explained as though talking to a child. "That's the only way we can be together."

"She wants you to kill yourself?" Julie sucked in a breath and shouted. "She wants you to kill yourself!"

Binne couldn't remain silent another second. "You can't think of it that way, luv. It's but a means to a glorious end." She moved to embrace Tess, but Julie put herself between her friend and the fairy.

Julie lifted her hands, prepared to fight if she had to. "I won't stand here and let her kill herself for you! You can't have her."

Binne's eyes darkened. "I already have her. Heart, body, and very soon ... soul."

"Stop talking about me like I'm not here," Tess demanded. "I have to do this, Jules. I'm sorry." Tears welled in Tess's eyes. "I have to."

Binne chuckled, the sound coming from low in her throat. "Of course you do. C'mon now, luv. Into the water with ya."

"She doesn't love you, Tess!"

"You're wrong." Tess cupped Julie's cheek lovingly, then gently pushed her away. "You just don't feel what I feel. Then you'd know. Now leave us alone!"

Julie was starting to panic. "Someone who loves you wouldn't ask you to die for her. Don't do it! Don't die for her, Tessy! Live ...Live for me."

Tess blinked slowly, trying to understand what her friend was saying. "Live *for* you?"

Julie placed her hands on Tess's shoulders and looked into her eyes. "Live for me ... live with me. Choose me. Let me love you." Her voice broke as she spoke.

Tess's cheeks flushed and she looked befuddled. "You love me?"

"Yes! I just didn't realize it before. But I do, Tessy. I love you with my whole heart!"

Tess smiled tentatively at her friend, with Binne's anger mounting as the smile grew brighter. The fairy could feel Tess's allegiance wavering, and she knew Julie's damnable interference had to stop. She was furious at the thought of this woman stepping in at the last moment to ruin her plans. Tess was hers!

With a lightening fast move, she grasped Julie by her shoulder and the seat of her pants and hurled the woman into the air, her body pinwheeling until it splashed impressively into the deepest part of the river.

Tess gasped and whirled to face Binne. She had never seen Binne display such strength and anger. "Why did you do that?"

The fairy gently stroked Tess's arm, stoking her ardor, and feeling the attraction between them surge with new life. "She wanted to keep us apart, luv. She was a selfish woman who didn't understand what we have."

Tess leaned against Binne, forlornly staring at the rushing river. "But she was my friend."

"Yes, she was. But you'll have more friends than you can count in Tir-Na-n-Og. There we can love without limits. Time has no meaning. Now go into the river, and we'll be there before you can blink." She handed Tess the rock and urged her forward.

At her tentative first step into the river, the bitterly cold water shocked Tess's entire body. She glanced at Binne, who made a shooing gesture. "Go on, now. The faster you go, the sooner we're together, Tess. Please, luv."

Swallowing, Tess picked up the pace, moving quickly down the slope of the riverside until she reached the center of the swift-flowing stream. As she walked, the water alternately burned and chilled her skin, making her ache with a pain she'd never experienced. But after a few seconds, she felt little; her mind was utterly tranquil.

The water was remarkably clear, and the moonlight illuminated the depths in an other-worldly way. Once Tess was fully submerged, she braced herself to take in a breath. Images of Binne and her living forever in paradise flooded her soul, and she resolutely let the first trickle of water enter her lungs.

Automatically, her body fought the sensation. She choked and sputtered, every instinct urging her to the surface. The rock fell from her grasp as her arms and legs tried to propel her. The second the stone left her possession she felt as though she was emerging from a thick fog. The spell was broken and her first thought was of Julie. Disoriented, she panicked and fought against the water, kicking and thrashing. Thanks more to nature's efforts than her own, she began to surface. As she ascended, she saw a vision that chilled her very soul.

Julie's lifeless body hung from a submerged tree limb about ten feet downstream. Her arms, her legs, and her hair moved with the rhythm of the river, the macabre dance making Tess scream in agony. Somehow she bobbed to the surface, where she emerged, gasping and crying in pain.

Wildly, she searched the bank, looking for Binne, but the fairy was gone. Tess forced her heavy, numb limbs to move, trying to fight against the current. Each kick was more painful than the last, but she had to move to the right to find Julie. *Julie*. Nothing in the world was more important than Julie. And for one terrifying second she let herself accept the thought of her life without Julie. And it was more than she could bear. Tess pushed every muscle to its limit, trying to fight the strong current. She was certain she would share in her friend's fate, but she had to try.

She reached out, even though it seemed she had missed her last chance, and surprised herself by latching onto a stout root. She burst through to the surface with the cool air burning as it entered her ravaged lungs. But she forced herself to submerge once again to claim Julie. She couldn't again betray the friend who was willing to risk so much for her. Tess wouldn't lose her to the river forever.

The tree was huge; its roots thick and slimy. Three times Tess dove, only to come up empty-handed. On the fourth time, she grabbed hold of Julie's jeans and pulled with all of her might, freeing the body. She surfaced and pulled herself along the trunk, her free arm around Julie's waist. She was crying so hard that she couldn't see, but she felt her way, inch by inch, until her foot sank into the mossy bank.

Julie's body was heavy and grew heavier as Tess tried to push it from the river. She had to use both hands and was certain that her effort would allow the river to take her again. But she didn't care. She cared about nothing but Julie.

The cold had dulled her reactions, and she was clumsy and slow. She tried to snag Julie's body onto a limb, hoping to be able to push her onto the bank. But she couldn't manage it. Her strength was almost gone. Her hand brushed against Julie's thick belt, and her numb fingers fumbled with the buckle. Drawing it from the belt loops, she wrapped it around Julie's upper

arm and held the leather in her teeth while she used the limbs of the fallen tree to climb out of the water.

Slowly, she worked to pull Julie's limp, heavy body from the river, wailing disconsolately the whole time. Finally, she yanked with all of her strength and fell backwards, hitting her head on a flat rock. Bright flames of color danced before her eyes, then she knew nothing but darkness.

Tess moaned, the pain in her head winning the battle for superiority with the numb ache of the rest of her body. The horror of the last few hours came flooding back, and she refused to open her eyes. Even though she knew she might die of exposure if she didn't find shelter, she didn't move. Julie was gone and her world had ended.

At a soft coughing sound, she blinked and saw Binne sitting on a boulder, watching her with mild interest. "Open your eyes, luv. You've got your wish."

Tess's eyes shifted, and she saw Julie; pale, shivering, and obviously in pain ... but alive ... blessedly alive. "How ...?" She didn't bother to finish framing her question. She scooted along the soggy ground to wrap her arms around her friend and clutch her fiercely to her breast. Hot tears ran down her cheeks, and she looked once again at Binne. "Why?" was the only question that mattered.

The fairy made a face, and, for the first time, Tess saw how very odd the woman's face was. "I went to Tir-Na-n-Og to wait for you. When you didn't arrive, I came back and found you pulling Julie onto land. Contrary to popular opinion, not all of us are heartless. I lost you. Julie won you. It seemed mean-spirited ... literally ... to let you both die."

Julie coughed again, then turned her head to vomit up another bit of water. Tess gently patted her back, then hugged her close again. "We're alive, Jules. We're alive!" She cried again, her sobs making her whole body shake.

Julie tried to smile at her, but she was far too weak. She whispered something, and Tess leaned over to hear her. Then Tess sat up and said to Binne, "Julie wants to know what you did to save us. Are we enchanted?"

Binne laughed derisively. "You humans always want to believe in the fanciful, even when the simple solution is obvious."

Tess stared at her dumbly.

"I used CPR on her, ya fool! Not everything has to be fairy dust and spells, ya know." She looked quite indignant, and Tess realized that the spell must have been enormously powerful for her to have found Binne attractive in the first place, much less ravishing.

Binne nodded in Julie's direction. "You should thank your stars the river was as cold as it was. You were quite dead, ya know."

Tess stared at the fairy, too numb with fear to speak. "Thank you," she finally murmured. "I know you didn't have to do this."

Binne stood and brushed the lichen from her gossamer skirt. "True love is a rare thing, Tess. No one, in heaven or on earth, should waste it."

Before Tess could blink, she was gone. In the distance, she heard voices and saw people running towards them, flashlights illuminating a wildly bouncing path. "We'll be safe soon," she whispered, leaning close to warm Julie's ear with her breath. The four leaf clover necklace that Julie had given her the day they'd arrived in Ireland was cool against the wet skin of her neck, reminding her of its presence. Tonight, however, Tess felt more blessed than lucky.

"We'll be safe and warm and together, Julie. Forever."