

TRESSA'S TREASURES

Belinda M Gordon

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For my *Anam Cara*,

Paul

*For all the hillside was haunted
By the faery folk come again;
And down in the heart-light enchanted
Were opal-coloured men.*

—George William Russel,
The Dream of the Children

1 CHAPTER ONE

In my youth, we celebrated the first day of spring with fire. A custom that marked the beginning of transformation as the warmth of the new season melted away the winter frost. That year a Nor'easter swept up the coast, foreshadowing the turmoil that the coming months would bring.

I worked on an intricate filigree bracelet in my quiet shop as the storm raged. I twisted delicate silver wire into a lacey pattern, adding bits of amethyst here and there. The amethyst would bring a peaceful energy to whoever eventually wore it.

Business had been slow all day; the relentless rain and turbulent wind discouraged people from going outside. I enjoyed the sounds of the storm: the howling wind, the rustling tree branches, the rain pinging against the windows and dinging against the metal on the cars outside combined to create music that entertained me as I worked.

Holly, the young woman who runs the store for me, wasn't as happy with the lack of customers or the rain. Yet she spent the day cleaning and organizing shelves without complaint. When you sell crystal and china, the dusting never seems to end.

The storm had eased up by late afternoon, though it continued to rain lightly. The streets became busy with people leaving work or school and those deciding to finally venture outdoors.

Most of the people walking past the store window were heading to JR's, a popular pub in the building next to us. I didn't pay much attention to the activity outside until the chimes hanging over our door jingled.

Three teenage girls wearing matching red and black varsity jackets from the local high school shuffled into

TRESSA'S TREASURES

the store. They chatted happily as they closed their umbrellas and wiped their feet on the mat.

Linda Singer, a cute brunette whose mother owned the hair salon down the street, led the way. The two girls who followed were her constant companions. They came into the store often to see the new pieces in the jewelry display.

I interrupted my work to greet them. "Good afternoon, girls. How nice to see you again."

They waved and continued their chatter as they scurried over to the long display case that held our jewelry.

Holly met them there. She pulled out the newest pieces, pointing out the finer details of each with the white tip of her French-manicured fingernail. Linda tried on a delicate silver bracelet accented with amazonite.

I smiled when she twisted her wrist around, showing the bracelet off to her friends. Then, as they were in Holly's capable hands, I settled back into working on the amethyst bracelet.

I had just picked up my pliers when door chimes jingled again. Sensing the relaxed atmosphere of the afternoon ending, I placed the tool back onto the workstation. I lay a protective cloth over the unfinished piece and went to greet the newcomers.

A girl of four or five skipped in on pink, sneaker-clad feet, moving with energy only a child could muster. She looked at me with a sweet, angelic smile. Then she shook her wet head, sending tiny droplets of rainwater through the air. They sprayed onto the carpet and splashed gently against the glass of a display case.

She wiped a tiny hand across her face, brushing away her disarrayed hair, revealing just the type of exotic beauty the ancients would have collected.

"Sophia."

At the sound of a deep, stern male voice, I looked up, and the child spun around. A tall dark-haired man had come through the door a few steps behind the girl. With just a quick glance at his handsome face, I could see the family resemblance.

He gave the girl a meaningful look before fumbling to close the large umbrella in his hand. The umbrella had kept him relatively dry, but judging by the girl's wet hair and jacket, he hadn't been able to keep her under its protection.

She spun back around; her grin remained in place despite his implied reprimand. "Sorry... Sorry!" she said. She spoke in a singsong manner.

I pressed my lips together to suppress a smile, not wanting to undermine her father's discipline.

"I'm Sophia. What's your name?" the child asked.

TRESSA'S TREASURES

"Hello, Pretty Sophia. My name is Tressa. Can I help you find something today?"

"Thanks, but we're just looking," her father answered in his deep throaty voice.

I nodded and extended my arm to invite them to look around.

While they browsed, I went into our small bathroom to grab a wad of paper towels. I feared the child would catch a cold with her hair so wet. It may have been the first day of spring, but outside was only forty degrees.

When I came out of the bathroom, I found them in the far corner of the store by the mill goods. I walked over and crouched down to the child's level, sliding a hand along the back of my skirt to tuck it behind my knees.

"Pretty Sophia, may I dry your hair a wee bit?"

I addressed the question to her, but I looked up at her father for permission. I noticed several small scars—shaped like exclamation points—marred the otherwise smooth olive skin on his right cheek.

They both nodded, so I reached behind her with the paper towels and gently squeezed the moisture from her chin length dark brown hair. I smiled to make her comfortable with having me so close to her.

"I like this store. It's got lots of sparkly stuff," she said.

I glanced at the freshly cleaned crystal stemware. "I guess it does, at that."

"Your eyes are sparkly too."

Startled, my expression froze as I grasped the gemstone brooch on my sweater. I relaxed when I touched the cold silver and smooth stones. I stood and then turned away from them briefly, throwing away the wet paper towels and fiddling with the brooch to move it closer to my face. I hoped the action seemed natural.

"You talk funny too."

Sophia had noticed my accent, just as everyone does.

Grateful she had changed the subject, I gave her my standard explanation. "You're right, I do. That's because I'm from a place called Ireland. All of these lovely things come from Ireland too." I gestured at the merchandise in the store. "Except the jewelry. I make that myself."

"Leprechauns come from there," she said matter-of-factly. "We had a St. Patrick's Day party at my school last week." The rest came out in a rush, as though she couldn't wait to show off how much she knew. "And we saw a movie about a family of Leprechauns. If you catch them, they have lots of gold to give you. And the Irish are lucky."

I smiled, but inwardly I cringed as I always did when reminded of the trend to glorify those nasty Leprechauns.

TRESSA'S TREASURES

"Sure and that's what they say," I said, keeping my tone light.

I was about to excuse myself when the child reached out to touch one of the sweaters displayed on the shelves lining the wall. I flinched, thinking about how dirty those little hands just might be.

Whether from my reaction or of his own accord, her father pulled her hand back before she touched it. She pouted at him.

"But Daddy, I just wanted to see what it felt like!"

I crouched down again and offered her the sleeve of my sweater.

"You can feel it here," I said. "I'm wearing the same one."

That sweet grin returned to her face. Instead of reaching out for the sweater as I had expected, she put her arms around my neck and hugged me.

"I like you," she said.

This one is an enchanter for sure. I gave her a squeeze and stood.

"And I like you," I said. I left them alone to browse.

At the register, Holly rang up a sale for the teenagers. She had sold Linda a pair of tanzanite earrings, placed on discount the previous week.

"What a lovely choice, Lin, dear. They'll bring out the color of your eyes," I said.

"Thanks, Tressa. If Mike comes in, steer him toward the matching bracelet, okay?"

"Sure I will."

We grinned at our shared joke. She always made suggestions in case her boyfriend came in to buy her a gift. He had yet to set foot in the store as far as I knew.

As Linda and her friends turned to leave, the shop door flew open and crashed against the wall, making all of us at the register jump. Fred Moyer, Holly's estranged husband, staggered in, the stench of sweat and alcohol radiating from him.

Holly took what looked like an involuntary step back from the register. That single step had put her in the corner with no possibility of escape. She cringed, pulling her body inward. Already a petite woman, this made her appear even smaller, more vulnerable.

Holly's fear was justified. She had often suffered abuse at his hand before she had mustered the courage to leave him, just three weeks earlier.

Fred stumbled over the threshold with a murderous look in his blue eyes, his thin lips pressed together. He stared at Holly intently, as though he had to concentrate to stay standing.

"Away with you now, girls," I said, hastily guiding the teenagers behind him and out the door.

In my peripheral vision, I saw Sophia's face flush and her eyes grow wide before her father pushed her

behind him, shielding her from danger. I felt the tension rising in him as he considered what action to take. I bit my lip in frustration. Their presence made it difficult to intercede.

"It's time for you to get your ass home," Fred growled. "Time to stop this whoring around."

"What?" Confusion filled Holly's doe eyes; she shook her head, shaking off the insult. "Stay away from me, Fred." Her quivering voice negated any impact her words may have had. "I'm staying with Eileen. You know that."

"The hell you are," he roared. "You're coming home with me where you belong. You live with me."

"Not any more I don't." She lifted her chin.

Cursing, he lunged toward her, stumbled, and lost his balance. As he pitched forward, he threw out a beefy hand to catch himself. His palm hit the glass door of a large antique curio that served as a display case. The thin glass fractured, slicing his hand.

In a rush of anger, he grabbed the frame of the cabinet with both hands and threw it down, shattering the remaining glass. The china inside flew in every direction, crashing to the floor and smashing into pieces.

Holly screamed. The sound cut into my eardrums. I covered my ears with my hands and reflexively turned away. At once, the foolishness of having my back to him hit me.

I turned back to see Fred lumbering toward Holly. He stumbled again and plowed his shoulder into her. She fell back and hit her head on a low hanging shelf on the wall behind her. Blood poured from a gash in her head, matting her carefully styled, wispy brown hair. Holly whimpered, holding her hands up in a feeble attempt to protect her face.

The sight of the blood overrode my concern over exposing my identity. I ran to help her, disregarding the audience. Sophia's father did the same, but I got there first. I jumped between them as Fred drew his cut and bloody fist back, preparing to hit Holly again.

I drew up to my full five feet seven inches. Although he was still several inches taller than I was, I locked eyes with him.

"Fredrick Moyer, husband of Holly Moyer, you will leave this building immediately and never cross its threshold again," I said with all the authority I could command. "You lousy bastard," I muttered under my breath.

Fred blinked several times, the fury in his eyes fading with each flutter of his eyelids. He ran his injured hand through his short blond hair, streaking it with blood. Then he turned and calmly left the shop.

I held my breath until he was gone.

Behind me, Holly sank to the floor sobbing. I knelt and took her into my arms, rocking her gently as she

cried on my shoulder. While I murmured to her, telling her he was gone and she was safe, I heard both our hearts thumping.

Sophia's father had followed Fred, watching his retreat. He stayed in front of the door, standing guard against his return. Fred would not come back, but I couldn't tell him that.

Then I heard light footsteps. Sophia threw her body against her father, hugging his leg. He reached down and pulled the weeping child into his arms. She clung to his neck, her face buried in his shoulder.

He turned and stared at me. I cringed at his incredulous expression.