

DEAGLAN'S DECEPTION

Belinda M Gordon

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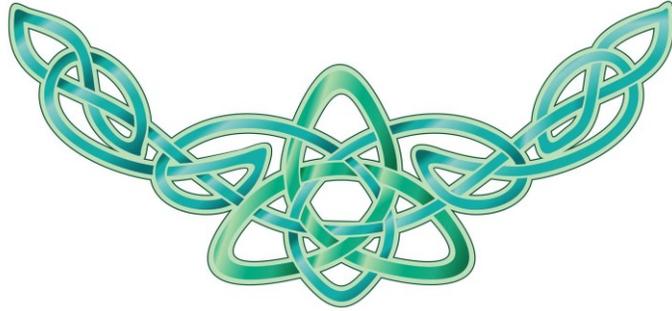
Printed in the United States of America

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Cover Design by Wesley Goulart

Publisher:

Shaggy Dog Productions
221 Skyline Dr., ste 208-228
East Stroudsburg, PA 18301



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For my Parents
Francis and Maureen

Happy is the bride that rain falls on...

.

(A traditional Irish Blessing)

CHAPTER ONE

TRESSA

I stared out the window of my bedroom suite, brooding over the two hundred or so fae encamped in the woods around Pine Ridge Estate.

Children played in the labyrinth my grandmother had planted there years ago, back when she was still new to the Human World. Spring hadn't yet taken hold, and the evergreen labyrinth stood out in stark contrast to the brown grass surrounding it. The children giggled and shouted to one another as they searched for the right path to reach the center. Their sweet voices reached me even through the window pane.

A few of the adults supervised the children, however most of them were still asleep in the fae encampment recently established in the forest behind the labyrinth. The Sidhe, who love the frivolity of late nights of music and dancing, rarely rise before mid-morning.

I had returned home from my most recent visit to the Otherworld officially engaged to my *Anam Cara*, my soul mate, and dreaming of a small, intimate wedding. That hope had died when we discovered a small group of my brethren, already on our doorstep. They had set up tents in the forest just outside the estate, and their small camp had quickly grown into the large settlement that was now established there.

Word of my upcoming marriage had spread at lightning speed and the fae continued to arrive, intent on attending the wedding. The number of Sidhe in the camp grew daily, along with my apprehension.

I was jarred from my thoughts by the sound of footsteps approaching from the hallway. The door opened and dishes clanked as someone placed a tray on the table in the sitting area. I didn't turn around, assuming the butler had brought in my breakfast.

"Shamus, I told you not to bother. I'll wait and eat with the twins." I expected a humph of disapproval; instead, a deep throaty voice responded.

"Tressa, don't you know by now? You can't tell that old Brounie what to do."

I grinned as I turned to greet Alexander. He hugged me, pulling me close and kissing the top of my head. His woodsy scent enveloped and soothed me. The edges of our auras rolled and twisted as they danced together. He gave me a reassuring squeeze.

"You worry too much. Every night I hear music, singing and the sounds of people having fun coming from the camp. They must be doing okay. Once the wedding is over, they'll go on their merry way back to wherever they came from."

"I'm not so sure, Xander. I catch conversations on the wind, and they're less and less about the wedding. They're talking about the Treasures being found, and the King's Jewel marrying Nuada's Heir.

"Aye, they're jubilant; they think their prayers will soon be answered. They're here because they believe that the prophecy will be fulfilled, and the gates of heaven will open again to the Sidhe. I wish it were just about you and me," I said.

"Come," he said, leading me over to the settee near the table of food. "What you need is something warm in your stomach." He handed me a mug of coffee before taking one for himself.

I snuggled closer to him, curling my legs onto the cushioned seat and resting my head on his shoulder.

"You need to stop worrying over every little thing," he repeated.

"I just want our wedding to be perfect. Is that too much to ask?" I grabbed a triangle of toast from the tea tray and took a bite.

"At the end of the day, all that really matters is that we get married."

"Sure, and you aren't helping," I said. He laughed and helped himself to a blueberry muffin.

"By the way, the twins are awake and have eaten already. In fact, the day's drama has already started."

"Maybe holding the wedding on the estate is a mistake," I said as Alexander and I walked downstairs. "If we were to hold the ceremony in The Otherworld, we wouldn't need to hide a camp full of fae."

"Your Uncle Lomán made himself pretty clear when he said you would be safer here. You wouldn't want to go against the King's wishes, would you?"

I shook my head. I couldn't defy my Uncle Lomán. Not because he was the king, but because he was family, and I loved and respected him.

"Besides, I agree with him," Alexander continued. "There's more security here. And anyway, at *Tir na nÓg* there would be thousands of fae."

He kissed me goodbye before grabbing his keys and rushing off to work. I watched him go, admiring everything about him. It didn't matter where we got married, I told myself. It couldn't happen soon enough.

Pleased with this new perspective, I followed the sound of my cousins' bickering voices to the library. Rosheen had turned the space into her workroom, leaving textiles, sketches and sewing equipment scattered around the leather and wood furniture.

"Listen, I'm the designer," Rosheen was saying as I peeked in on the scene. "I get the final say." She flicked her long metallic blue hair over her shoulder and turned away from her sister.

Sophia, Alexander's five-year-old daughter, was ignoring the twins as she danced around the room with a white chiffon fabric draped over her shoulders. She held the cloth out as she twirled, practicing her ballet steps. She looked like an angel with the breezy material swirling and flowing around her.

"I'm just saying, white is for funerals. You can't make Tressa's wedding dress look like she's going to a funeral," Keelin argued from where she lay curled up on a sofa, nearly asleep. "People will think she's dreading the marriage."

"White may be for funerals in the Otherworld, but here it's the traditional bridal color. Do I need to remind you where the wedding is being held?"

"Oh, come on," Keelin said. "Most of the attendees will be fae. You've seen the crowd out there." She turned her sparkling blue eyes in my direction. "Here's the bride; let's ask her. Tressa, what do you think?"

"Before I get into this, tell me: why are you both awake before noon?"

"Shamus," they said together, shaking their heads. Carbon copies of each other except for Rosheen's one gray eye, they wore identical expressions of exasperation.

"He's worse than Mummy, you know," Keelin added. "Who gets up at this ungodly hour?"

"Me and almost everyone in the Human World," I said, amused.

Sophia ran to hug me, white chiffon billowing behind her. She looked up at me with the dark, intense brown eyes she'd inherited from her father.

"Watch me dance, Tressa!"

"Of course, *a leanbh*." I settled into a brown leather chair as she pirouetted away.

"Come on, Tressa, you must agree with me," Keelin said, looking to me for support. I smiled encouragingly at Sophia before turning to my cousins.

"Remember: I want the wedding to combine human and Sidhe traditions. My only specific requirement is that we have the ceremony on Pine Ridge in one of Mamó's gardens."

"But—"

"Keelin, I finished the wedding dress days ago," Rosheen interrupted before her sister could argue further. "And before you ask: no, you can't see it." She laughed at the surprise on her sister's face. "There is no wedding without the wedding gown. Of course I finished it first."

"Keelin, tell me about the party. What have you been able to finalize?" I asked, changing the subject to end the argument over the dress. I hadn't even seen the finished dress myself; only elements of the design.

Keelin picked up a notebook that lay on a table in front of her.

"I put in the order for the cake from the bakery next to your shop, as you requested. She seemed a bit flustered when I told her how many people we needed to serve and that we need it in two weeks."

"How big is the guest list?" I sighed, knowing I wouldn't like the answer.

"Two hundred and fifty, so far."

"Two hundred and fifty!" I repeated. "How can it possibly be so many? We talked about keeping it small."

"We couldn't leave out the Sidhe in the camp," Rosheen reasoned. "They've come a long way, and they're excited to witness the marriage of the King's Jewel."

"And then there's your list of people from the town to invite..."

It was true. We had to include the fae, and it would hurt my friends' feelings if they weren't invited. However, I dreaded the big affair. I would have preferred a simple ceremony in one of the estate's gardens, surrounded by the memory of my grandmother and with just my closest loved ones in attendance. I sighed again as I accepted what had to be.

"Aye, I guess you're right. I'm simply grateful it's coming soon. The longer such a large group of fae are around, the more chance we have of being exposed."

Sophia suddenly stopped playing with the chiffon.

"Are you going to invite me?" she asked, her voice full of concern.

"*A leanbh*, your father and I wouldn't dream of getting married without you by our side. You're the most important guest of all. Rosheen will make a beautiful dress for you to wear."

"And I'm planning something special for the reception," Keelin said. "But we'll talk about it later. It's a surprise." She wiggled her eyebrows and Sophia laughed.

"Did you invite Gobban?" I asked, suddenly remembering the ornery Leprechaun. The twins made identical disgruntled faces, crinkling their noses at the suggestion. "We must include him. He's my friend."

"Oh, come on. He only tolerates you, and he straight out dislikes the rest of us," Rosheen protested. Keelin nodded, for once agreeing with her sister.

"He'll drain out all the happy energy if he's there."

"He likes me," Sophia said with confidence.

"Of course he does, my love. Everybody likes you," Keelin reassured her. She shook her head as she turned back to me. "He wouldn't come, even if we did invite him."

"All these things may well be true, but I still want to invite him." I raised my hand to stop them from protesting further. "I'll ask him myself to be sure it gets done. Sophia, would you like to go with me to visit him this afternoon?"

My phone rang. I dug it out of my pocket and answered it as Sophia readily agreed to visit the old Leprechaun with me. It was Holly, my friend and the manager of my store in town, *Tressa's Treasures*.

"Hi! Sorry to bother you, but Tom Lynch is here—in a professional capacity," she told me. "He's asking when you're expected. I told him you'd be here any minute." Her voice expressed what her words had left out: I know you didn't intend to come in today, but I think you should.

Tom was a friend, but he was also a police officer. If Holly thought it was important, the sooner I got there the better.

"Tell him I'll be there in five minutes."

CHAPTER TWO

I wouldn't normally flit into town during broad daylight; the chances of being seen were too great. I explained this to Sophia as I held her hand, and we flitted to the alley behind the store.

We hadn't yet figured out why Sophia could travel on the wind when other humans couldn't, but it did come in handy at times. Holly's call had demanded expedience. Bringing Sophia along meant I wouldn't need to return for her before visiting Gobban.

We entered *Tressa's Treasures* through the back door, making our way through the large storage room where we kept our supplies, seasonal decorations, and extra merchandise. Holly had outfitted one corner with a mini nursery for her son, Trayce, with a workstation next to it where she made her designer purses.

We found Holly sitting at her worktable and watching as Tom bounced her six-month-old son on his leg. Trayce giggled with delight, his bright eyes twinkling.

"Good morning, Tommy," I said. The police officer quickly handed Trayce to his mother and stood to greet me. Holly leaned over to place Trayce in his playpen. With an approving nod from his mother, Sophia climbed in with him.

I hadn't seen Tom in weeks. His blond hair had gotten long and was beginning to curl around his ears, and his navy uniform was roomier than I remembered.

"Good morning, Tressa. Sorry to bring you in on your day off," he said, taking in my jeans and T-shirt.

"Don't worry about it," I replied with a dismissive wave. "Sophia and I were on our way into town anyway."

"We're going to visit Mr. Gobban," Sophia informed him while shaking a set of toy keys in front of the baby. Tom looked puzzled for a minute as he tried to place the name.

"That grouchy Little Person with the furniture store on Second Avenue?" he asked.

"The very one. What can I do for you, Tommy?" He pressed his lips together, clearly uncomfortable.

"What in the heck is going on out at your place?" he blurted. His bewildered expression would have made me laugh if his words didn't frighten me so much. I worked to keep my face relaxed so my nervousness wouldn't show.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Dispatch has received complaints about loud music and partying every night for the last week. Multiple complaints. I've been brushing them off and claiming the callers are exaggerating; I know you and Alexander aren't partiers. But I can't keep it up. Not when we have mothers complaining about babies being woken up at three in the morning."

I suppressed a shudder as I pictured the flashing lights of police cars arriving at the estate to find several hundred fae camping in the woods.

"Next time I'll have to shut it down and give you at least a formal warning." He raised his hand to stop me from responding. "I don't want to do that, which is why I'm telling you this now. I assume you have guests staying with you, what with the wedding coming up?"

"We do have family visiting. My cousins and a few others," I said, choosing my words carefully.

"The twins?" he asked, momentarily distracted by the mention of my beautiful, flirtatious cousins. I met Holly's gaze over his shoulder and she rolled her eyes. Tom stuttered a moment, embarrassed, before getting himself back on track. "I hate to put a damper on the festivities, but I have to ask you to tone it down."

"That's no problem at all, Tommy," I said, my mind racing as I thought about what we could do to block the noise. I doubted I could squelch habits generations in the making.

"One other thing. I know this will sound crazy, but I need to ask... Do you have people camping in your woods?"

"Camping in the woods?" I echoed, stalling.

"Yeah. It's crazy, but one of the area resorts filed a complaint. If anyone's camping out for more than a day or two, they need to have a permit. If it's more than a handful of people... well, hospitality regulations might come into play." Tom grimaced with discomfort. "Rumors about the music coming from the woods have gotten all of the resorts up in arms. They think you're trying to compete with them off the books."

I stared at him, wide-eyed, caught completely off-guard by the mention of the resorts.

"I'm speechless," I said at last. He shook his head and smiled grimly.

"I apologize, but I had to investigate the complaint. Stop the late-night noise and I'll tell them it was just a party getting a little rowdy."

"Thank you, Tommy." I smiled, keeping my tone congenial as we said our goodbyes despite my pounding heart.

Holly and I exchanged a worried look after he left. Holly was one of the few humans who saw past fae glamour; she knew that I was one of the *Tuatha dé Danann*—a Sidhe from the Otherworld. She had seen for herself the increasing number of visitors amassing around Pine Ridge.

"The noise from the camp does travel pretty far. I heard the music myself last night," she said. "When I opened my bedroom window for some fresh air."

The jangle of the bell over the showroom door announced a new arrival. Holly glanced at Trayce, who looked content in his playpen as he basked in Sophia's attention, before going into the showroom.

A curvy, dark-skinned woman browsed our collection of Belleek china, her straight black hair cropped short in a fashionable bob. She looked up and smiled as Holly entered the room.

"Hello, Allison," said Holly, her tone sounding flat and unwelcoming. "What can I help you with today?" Allison's smile faltered until she noticed me leaning against the doorframe. Her expression grew warmer.

"Tressa! I was hoping you'd be here."

Holly stepped away to give Alison and me space while we talked. However, her curiosity kept her from returning to the storage room. She went over to the display of her purses and fiddled with rearranging them.

"I wanted to make sure everything was okay out at Pine Ridge," Allison said in a low voice. Two inquiries back to back; this wasn't good.

"What do you mean? Everything's fine," I answered, keeping my voice as neutral as possible.

"There have been some crazy rumors floating around my workplace. I heard something about concerts being held out there, or a carnival, or even an illegal campground. And that's the least of it—people are talking about insane things, too: pagan rituals, enchanted forests... even extraterrestrials!" I stared at her, incredulous. Things were worse than I'd imagined.

"I've been worried about Matt," she added without preamble. I blinked a couple of times to catch up with the abrupt change in subject.

"Worried about Matt and the aliens?" I asked. Matt Johnson was Alexander's assistant, our friend, and the only human in our circle other than Holly who could see through fae glamour.

"No," she said, blushing. "He's working too hard. I never get to see him. A couple of weeks ago he told me it would be better if I didn't go out to his place anymore; something about work again. Not that I understand what he does," she grumbled.

"The only thing happening at Pine Ridge is Alexander and I planning our wedding," I assured her. "I can't imagine what started these rumors. As far as Matt goes, it sounds like the two of you need to have a good talk." I smiled, wanting to show that I empathized with her even if I couldn't do anything to help. "You're coming to *JR's* tomorrow, aren't you? You can talk to him there."

Allison asked a few polite questions about our wedding plans as I walked her to the door. Once she had left, Holly and I went back to check on the children.

"Apparently we've done a terrible job hiding our guests; keeping them isolated on the estate hasn't been nearly enough."

"Do you think it was Allison who made the complaint to the police?" I found this hard to believe.

"It could have been anyone. Admit it, Pix, you just don't like her."

"She works at a resort. I assume Matt took her to Pine Ridge at some point; maybe he stopped because she was snooping around or asking too many questions. And she's always complaining about Matt living so far from town."

"Allison complains because she's sweet on him and wishes they lived closer to each other. Anyway, it doesn't matter who made the complaint; I need to figure out how to better camouflage the camp."

"Tressa, Trayce is clapping his hands!" Sophia interrupted.

"Aye, look at that." The baby touched his palms soundlessly together, fingers spread wide, as he tried to mimic Sophia. His face lit up, delighted by his own achievement. Unable to resist, I reached in and picked up the baby. "Let's get our hugs in and be on our way," I told Sophia.

I hugged Trayce to my chest as Sophia scrambled onto a chair, preparing for her turn to hold him. I kissed the top of his blond head. He had that wonderful baby smell that was impossible to get enough of. His aura was bright and innocent— another mark of his babyhood.

"Something else weird happened this morning," Holly said as I placed Trayce in Sophia's lap. "A Leprechaun came into the store. He was asking for you."

"A Leprechaun? But not Gobban?" She shook her head. "Did he say what he wanted?"

"He didn't. He asked if this was Tressa Danann's 'establishment' and said he wanted to speak with you. I tried to get more details, but he wasn't having it.

I puzzled over this as we left the store, unable to imagine why he wanted me. I'd never been fond of Leprechauns as a whole; they were tradesman who often used pressure tactics or outright cons to move their wares. Gobban was the only one I would call a friend.

Sophia and I walked the dozen or so blocks from my shop to the old feed store where Gobban sold refurbished furniture. The streets in town were quiet; spring was generally the slowest season of the year.

Sophia ran ahead of me when the store came into sight. I was surprised she even recognized it—the outside had a fresh coat of paint over the faded brick façade and a new wooden sign hung from a bar, its iron chain-links squeaking as it swung in the breeze.

I looked up as I passed under it. Although the heavy wood barely moved in the gentle breeze, it seemed somehow transparent and insubstantial. I puzzled over the contradiction as I followed Sophia into the store.

The showroom had been transformed as well. Whereas before it had been tired and old, now it was bright and clean with a fresh coat of paint. Beautifully appointed furniture had replaced the battered second-hand pieces that had desperately needed restoration.

I was still examining the changes when I heard the tapping noise of Gobban's shiny black shillelagh, the fighting stick he used as a cane, as he approached us from the backroom. Sophia ran to greet the old Leprechaun, who's stature was so short that he stood head to head with her.

"Mr. Gobban, I brought you a surprise!" She held out a plastic container and pulled off the lid. "Chocolate chip cookies. I made them myself."

"Is that so?" Gobban asked, taking a whiff of the cookies with his large hooked nose.

"Well... I helped."

"You could make a great trade with cookies as good as these. What would you be asking in exchange?" Sophia scrunched her brow.

"It's a gift."

Gobban blew out a breath and looked over her head at me. His expression accused me of not teaching the child correctly. He shook his head.

"We must make a trade. What would you like in exchange for the cookies?" Sophia tilted her head as she thought about it. Then she smiled and said, "a kiss!"

Gobban pulled back in surprise.

"A kiss?" he repeated, astonished. A smile crept onto his grumpy face. "Then you shall have it." He kissed her cheek.

He turned his attention to me with much less enthusiasm than he had greeted Sophia.

"Why must I keep telling you not to come here?"

"You don't leave me any choice if you won't come to me," I said.

I ran my hand over the top of a highboy with a rich cherry finish and abruptly pulled it back. The dresser felt rough, not at all like the smooth surface I was looking at. My mind raced as I tried to figure out why my senses were giving me contradictory information. I touched the matching headboard with the same result.

"You haven't actually refurbished this furniture, have you?"

"You can feel the real piece?" Gobban asked, sighing in response to my nod.

I turned and took a second look at the transformed showroom, taking in a myriad of small details that I had missed on the first examination. There were stains coming through along the edges of the walls, and the room didn't smell right either; there was no aroma of new furniture, nor any hint of the chemical smells that would linger around refinished wood. And then there was the oddness of the sign outside...

"It's an illusion," I said at last.

"Not a good one, if you can see through it." He limped over to a three-legged stool and sat, holding his shillelagh in front of him. I took the opportunity to appraise the condition of his skin while he moved, taking care that he wouldn't notice.

The burns over the right side of his body and his face had finally healed. Smooth scars remained, but I felt confident that the pain, at least, was gone.

"Do you sell the furniture like this?" I asked, trying and failing to keep the disapproval out of my voice. It wouldn't be the first time he had scammed gullible humans; the last time he had been misrepresenting manmade stones as natural gemstones.

"Don't be daft," he scoffed, his lips twisting into a bitter grimace. "Maybe I could've made the illusions last, before my ability was beat out of me..." He went quiet, his posture deflated with the memory. Then, aware that my eyes were on him, he shook it off, sat tall, and looked at me with an indignant expression. "If you must know, selling used furniture before it's refurbished is hard. People have no imagination. I don't have the time or strength to refinish all the pieces; this way I only need to fix the ones that sell."

I scanned the store again, this time appreciating the magnitude of the illusion he had created. I had met a Banshee once who had a gift for making small illusions, but Gobban had covered his entire store, inside and out.

"You have an amazing talent." Gobban sucked his teeth in disgust.

"You don't know what you're talking about. This is nothing, compared to what I used to do." He would have spit on the floor, but he turned to find Sophia standing next to him. He closed his eyes instead and took a deep breath.

"Why did you come here? Was it to remind me of my debt? I haven't forgotten that I made you a promise. It isn't finished yet."

"I came to invite you to my wedding," I said, grinning. "May first, in the gardens at Pine Ridge."

"How many times must I tell you, we—"

"—are *not* friends. Aye, I know. However you must come—it's bad luck to turn down a bride."

Sophia leaned against the Leprechaun.

"We're friends, aren't we Mr. Gobban? And I'll be wearing a beautiful dress." He looked at her and sighed.

"I'll think about it. Now will you leave me be?"

We had already started toward the door when I remembered what Holly had told me. I turned and called to Gobban, who was making his way to the backroom.

"Do you know anything about another Leprechaun in Findale and why he might be looking for me?" He stopped and leaned on his walking stick.

"Another Leprechaun in town? Where did you see him?"

"He came into my shop when I wasn't there. My store manager spoke to him."

A pair of customers entered the store just then: a woman and her daughter, effectively ending our conversation. Not that it mattered—Gobban clearly knew nothing about my visitor.

"Good-bye, Mr. Gobban," Sophia said as I held the door open for her.

"Tell me if you see him again," he called after us.

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Holly has vowed never to lay eyes on her abusive husband again. When he comes up on trial for murder, both sides pressure her to testify for them. Holly must choose between keeping her vow or succumbing to her family's wishes.

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About the Author:

Belinda M Gordon was born and raised in Pennsylvania and currently lives in Northeastern PA in the Pocono Mountains with her wonderfully supportive husband, her thoughtful easy-going son, and two delightful dogs. She is of Irish heritage, which is how she became interested in Celtic Mythology. She used the Celtic Mythology, specifically of Ireland, as the starting point of her Romance/Fantasy series, The King's Jewel.

To learn more about Belinda visit her website at www.belinda-gordon.com