THE LOST GIRL KING

CATHERINE DOYLE

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Chapter One

THE HOUSE BETWEEN WORLDS

Way out west, where the roads run out and the craggy hills of Connemara slope down to meet the Atlantic Ocean, a yellow house sat on the edge of two worlds. It was a home lined with books and filled with knick-knacks, surrounded by stony mountains that groaned in the winter and blossomed in the spring.

The house belonged to Amy Bell's grandmother, Dorothy, and by the time her mum's car was trundling up the driveway towards it, Amy was fast asleep in the back seat. Her full-mouthed snores fogged up the window, which made little difference to the view of the grey mist outside.

'Here we are then. All in one piece,' announced Mum, as the engine sputtered to a stop. 'I expect you two to be

on your best behaviour. Don't go making any trouble for Gran.'

In the front seat, Amy's older brother, Liam, looked up from his book. '*Mum*,' he huffed. 'You know how responsible I am.'

'Yes, love.' Mum glanced pointedly at Amy in the rear-view mirror. When she received no answer, she launched into her loud operatic voice, usually reserved for school mornings. 'Wakey-wakey, sunshine!'

Amy stirred. 'Sunshine? Where?'

'Not here,' said Liam. 'I wouldn't get your hopes up.'

The rain had followed them all the way from the city, and was tip-tapping against the car windows.

Mum folded her hands in her lap. 'Let's just give it a minute.'

Liam pushed his glasses up his nose and squinted through the windscreen. 'I don't think a minute will do it, Mum. I can barely see the mountains through this fog.'

Amy scowled. It was bad enough that she had to spend her first week of school freedom so far away from her friends, Lily and Gita, whose families were off camping on the Aran Islands together, but now she was trapped inside this stubborn rain cloud. It was hardly a recipe for adventure.

'What kind of summer is this?' she mumbled.

'An unpredictable one,' said Mum brightly. 'Which are the best kind, if you ask me.'

Amy's scowl deepened. It was easy for Mum to be chirpy. Her new boyfriend Paul was whisking her away to Santorini in the morning. A paradise, by the looks of the photos, where the sea was so clear it sparkled and all the restaurants served rainbow-coloured drinks with tiny umbrellas. 'There's nothing unpredictable about the rain in Connemara. I'm going to be so *bored* here.'

'I did tell you to bring a book,' said Liam, who wasn't at all bothered by the rain. In his opinion, the outdoors was fraught with danger anyway. He hated insects and sports, and was the only person he knew who could get sunburnt on a cloudy day. To Liam, a rainy week at Gran's house was *better* than a week in sunny Santorini. 'I've got a really interesting one about sharks, if you want to borrow it. But don't dog-ear the pages.'

'I'd rather eat a bowl of my own hair,' said Amy, her heart sinking at the distant roll of thunder. She pressed her forehead against the window and yelped at the sudden appearance of a face on the other side. 'Gran!'

Gran's smile was bubblegum-pink and her eyes were the bright blue of a behaving sky. She rapped her knuckles against the glass. 'Are you coming out, or do I have to climb in and fetch you?'

Amy swung the door open and launched herself into her grandmother's arms. She couldn't help being pleased to see her, even if there was no adventure in sight.

Liam shoved his book into his hoody and clambered out after her. Gran had to stand on tiptoes to gather him into a hug.

'Goodness, you're as tall as a beanstalk!' She craned her neck, shouting into the car. 'What have you been feeding him, Darcy? Miracle-gro?'

Mum waggled her fingers in greeting. 'Well, one of us needs to be able to reach the lightbulbs!'

'Too right.' Gran patted Amy primly on the head. 'Don't worry, love. You'll catch up.'

Liam patted her on the head too. 'Maybe someday.'

Amy stuck her tongue out. 'Actually, I like being small. It's much better for sneaking around.'

'I'll try not to read too much into that,' said Gran, as she shooed them towards the house. 'Let's get out of this deluge before it makes a puddle of us. I've made rhubarb crumble so I suggest we do the sensible thing and start dinner with dessert.'

Mum said goodbye, planting a wet kiss on each of their cheeks before hopping back into the car and speeding away. Liam and Amy waved her off from the doorway, both of them feeling a bit disgruntled at how delighted she was to be leaving.

In the hallway, Gran shed her raincoat like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis. She was wearing her personality underneath – a gold blouse, blue trousers, and bright yellow wellies. She took the children to warm up in the living room, where a fire was crackling. Liam beat Amy to the shaggy beanbag in the corner, flinging himself into it with gusto.

'You're too big for it now,' said Amy, nudging him with her shoe. 'You're going to burst it.'

'Nice try,' said Liam, as he stretched his hands behind his head. 'You're never too big for a beanbag.'

'Whatever.' Amy kicked her trainers off and sank into the over-stuffed armchair by the fireplace. The bookshelves on either side of the mantelpiece looked even more lopsided than usual, and for a heartbeat, she wondered if this would be the trip where they finally toppled over and flattened her.

She looked up at the books, their gilded spines winking at her as she tried to guess how many it would take to *really* squish her. The well-thumbed copy of *Old Ireland Through the Centuries: A Complete Compendium of Celtic Legends* was at least 800 pages long. It would certainly do a lot more damage than *Seven Ways to Spot a Faerie Fort in the Wild* and *Banishing a Banshee in Three Easy Steps*, which were really more like pamphlets. Amy's favourite book,

Hidden Battles of the Atlantic: Where Selkies and Merrows Collide, was skulking on the bottom shelf – a safe zone – beside several copies of a shiny new book called *Myth or Madness? Searching for the Magical Kingdom of Tír na nÓg*, which Amy had never seen before. Then she noticed the name of the author.

'Gran! This one has your name on the spine! Did you really write a book?'

Liam surveyed his sister's excitement with suspicion. 'If this is a trick to get me out of the beanbag, I'm not falling for it.'

Gran chuckled from the doorway. 'Well, I spent so many years teaching my students about Irish fairytales, I thought I might as well write some of them down. I've got time, now I'm officially retired.'

Amy removed a copy of Gran's book and plonked it on her lap. 'This is *so* cool,' she said as she cracked it open. 'I bet you could knock a burglar out with it.'

After two flailing attempts, Liam managed to sit up in the beanbag to get a better look. 'I thought you said books are boring.'

'No. I said *your* books are boring,' Amy corrected him. 'This one is written by Gran. Which automatically makes it the best book in the world. And it makes me famous by association.'

To Amy, Gran had always seemed to be more of an archaeologist than a literature professor. She dug out the exciting bits of stories and mined the magic from their bones. And best of all, she believed in everything she researched – from magical sea-creatures and roaming giants to enchanted trees and wandering ghosts. For Gran, they were all real. As was the lost kingdom of Tír na nÓg.

'You know what else is famous?' she said now, with a twinkle in her eye. 'My rhubarb crumble. Come and have some before it gets cold.'

Amy surrendered her grandmother's tome of fairytales, but kept hold of her curiosity as she followed the smell of freshly baked crumble into the little kitchen at the back of the house.

* * *

'So, if Tír na nÓg exists, then how come no one's found it yet?' she asked that evening, after they had polished off dessert and were halfway through a cottage pie heaped with fluffy mashed potatoes.

'How do you know it hasn't been?' said Gran, very seriously. 'Lots of people claim to have found it over the centuries.'

'Well, lots of people say the earth is flat, but that doesn't mean it is,' said Liam, swishing his knife around.

'In fact, it's ridiculous when you consider how easy it is to prove the curvature of the—'

'Please stop blabbering on about science,' Amy cut in. 'This is a conversation about magic.'

Liam glowered at his sister. 'I thought you might want to actually learn something.'

'I do,' said Amy. 'I want to learn how to find Tír na nÓg.'

'You'll probably need an imaginary map then,' said Liam. 'Since it's quite obviously an imaginary place.'

Gran *hmm*'d as she pushed a pea around her plate. 'Perhaps it's simply hidden,' she said, skewering it with her fork. 'Sometimes places don't want to be found. And we must respect that.'

Liam snorted around a mouthful of mince. 'That's ridiculous.'

Amy's eyes flashed. '*Liam*.'

'What? It doesn't make any sense.'

While Amy loved talking about Gran's research, Liam could never bring himself to take it seriously. Writing some of her stories down in a book didn't change anything in his mind. It was quite clearly a work of 'speculative fiction', which was a fancy way of saying it was all made up.

'That's the joy of fairytales, love. They don't have to make sense.' Gran took her plate to the sink and leaned

against the countertop, her gaze turning to the hinterland as she began to sing her favourite song. *'Through fields of green and mountains old, where magic glitters bright as gold …'*

A fresh hail of rain battered the window.

Amy harrumphed. 'I bet it never rains in Tír na nÓg.'

Gran fell out of her song. 'The sun always shines on Tír na nÓg. The birds there are every colour of the rainbow, and the trees are full of ancient spirits, with trunks as tall as skyscrapers,' she went on dreamily. 'The rivers sing and the wind laughs, and when the moon rises at night, it's so bright the land glows like a star.'

'That sounds way better than the Aran Islands,' said Amy wistfully. 'Imagine climbing those trees!'

Liam pulled a face. 'Imagine falling out of one. You'd break all your bones and then your arms and legs would end up like jelly.'

Amy glared at him. 'Why are you like this?'

'What?' said Liam defensively. 'You mean sensible?'

Gran smiled at them over her shoulder. 'There's a story about a little girl who found her way to Tír na nÓg many years ago.' She dropped her voice, and Amy leaned in, as if to dip her toes into the story. 'The ocean there was full of creatures that swam like seals but talked like humans. They wore seaweed all over their bodies like a second skin, so no one could tell where the sea ended and they began …'

'*Cool*,' said Amy.

Liam's chair screeched as he pushed away from the table. 'Good story,' he said, as he plonked his dish in the sink. 'But please stop encouraging her, Gran. You know it's complete nonsense.'

Amy swatted him with a tea towel.

'No offence,' Liam added hastily.

Gran turned from the window, and patted him warmly on the shoulder. 'If you ask me, I think there's a drop of truth in every story … Or sometimes an entire waterfall of truth.'

Liam looked at her in confusion. 'Er, right.'

'He'll change his tune once I find the lost kingdom,' Amy announced as she stood up. She dropped her plate in the sink with a triumphant clatter. 'I'm going to go looking for it once the rain clears up tomorrow.'

'You certainly will not.' Gran's frown was sharp and sudden. It made the temperature in the room plummet. 'They're just stories, Amy. A treat to read, but never to chase.'

'But—'

'Now then,' said Gran, clapping her hands. 'Whoever's still standing here in ten seconds gets the esteemed honour of cleaning the big pot. Ten, nine, eight …'

Liam bolted from the room, with Amy hot on his heels.

Hours later, after a movie and two bowls of slightly burnt microwave popcorn, when the fire in the living room had dwindled to its embers and the moon was a crescent hanging in a velvet sky, Amy and Liam trudged up the creaky staircase to bed. In the box bedroom at the back of the house, they returned to their time-honoured tradition of playing rock-paper-scissors for the top bunk, which Amy lost even after demanding four consecutive rematches.

She tipped her head back, her bright red hair tumbling over the edge of the bottom bunk like a tangerine waterfall. 'It'll be *your* fault if this rickety old thing crushes me in the middle of the night,' she said, sticking her tongue out at the sagging mattress above.

'I can feel that, just so you know,' came Liam's voice.

Amy listened to the wheeze of her brother's breath in the dark as he drifted off to sleep. She tossed and turned, trying to get comfortable, but the creaky slats kept her awake. She flopped on to her stomach and flung her arm down the side of the bunk. To her surprise, the back of her hand brushed against a hole in the wall. She was so used to winning the top bunk that she'd never noticed it before …

She peered over the edge and found a small hollow just above the skirting board. It was stuffed with junk: four hair bobbins and a spool of thread, a tarnished gold earring and an old tissue. *Gross.*

And wedged right at the back, a silver coin.

Amy plucked the coin free and held it up to the moonlight. She traced the wolfhound on the front, and then the harp on the back. She didn't recognise it, which meant it must be *really* old. She wondered how much it was worth, and if she might become wildly rich by selling it. Then, she could sail all the way to the Aran Islands and wave at Lily and Gita from her brand-new yacht.

She drifted off with the coin still clenched in her fist, and in that final fleeting moment between wakefulness and sleep, she swore she heard a tap at the window.