

It was nearly midnight by the time the last of the Morgan children left. The ones still at home were either in bed or upstairs in the attic loft playing video games, saving the world from an apocalypse filled with zombies. Donal waited until he heard the last car leave their driveway before turning off the porch light and locking the front door. Going through the living room, he turned off the rest of the lights and picked up the last of the dishes left behind after Connor's birthday party. The air still held the slight scent of chocolate cake and sugar with a healthy dose of whiskey, probably from the splash Ian spilled on the rug as he toasted his eldest brother.

The soft glow from the kitchen was enough for Donal to see his way through the house. And all the years they'd lived there, the furniture seemed to be nomadic, driven into different configurations by his restless bride. The swish of the dishwasher greeted him as he came through the door, and he held up the stack of plates and glasses he'd brought with him for Brigid to see.

Despite the horde of Morgans and their significant others who'd descended like locusts and brought with them a flurry of chaos, the kitchen was nearly spotless. Another round of trash would probably have to go out in the morning and there was a small stack of plates on the counter next to the pantry, but all things considered, the place was fairly clean. Brigid was wiping down a chopping board with a tea towel, her hips swaying gently as she rolled them in time to a song playing on the stereo.

"These will be going in the next batch then," he rumbled at her in Gaelic, heading towards the sink. They often fell into the language they'd been born into, its rolling musical lilt as much of a comfort as the old house they'd settled into. "And don't ye be thinking ye can open that up and we could fit them in because I have no intention of spending the next hour mopping up soapsuds from the floor."

"I've only done that once." His wife replied back, pushing her curly red hair from her face and tilting her chin up at him.

"Once?" he prodded.

"At the most three. Anything beyond that, I'm denying." She sniffed imperiously, taking the dishes from him. "Get out the box from the back of the fridge and I'll get these soaking."

Donal stood there, leaning against the island in the middle of the kitchen and watched the woman he'd married so many years before fill the sink with water and soap. They'd met in their teens, her flirting striking him mute, and her boldness making him bashful. He'd come from a long line of stoic, stalwart men and women with stern personalities and hard manners, so Brigid Finnegan was the closest thing to playing with fire he could imagine.

He'd ignored her, politely sidestepping her when she approached him at school. He'd done everything he could to ignore the firebrand determined to crack him open until one day he turned around to look down at the copper-haired pixie dogging his steps and asked her if she was insane.

Back then, he'd thought her to be spoiled, a girl raised in riches with little thought to anyone but herself. Brigid Finnegan was no one's spoiled little girl. Her family worked for a living, even with as much coin as they'd gathered up, every Finnegan he knew gave everything they had to further their clan. But most of all, they fought as hard as they played, willing to step in and defend the forgotten and weak.

She'd told him that one day her ring would be on his finger and his heart would be in her hands. And on that day, he would know what it was like to be loved unconditionally and she would battle anyone who stood in their way. She'd been beautiful and scary, a pint-size dollop of Irish beauty and temper.

That's when Donal Morgan realized he'd fallen in love—hook, line and sinker—with the fierce warrior who'd challenged him to think, to dream and most of all, to care.

Her hips were a little wider, having given birth to his clan of children, and a few of the strands in her curly hair were more golden than fire but her eyes were still as lushly green as the island they'd come from, and her face was still as beautiful as any sunset God created.

“Are ye standing there ogling my ass, Donal Morgan?” She tossed him a saucy look over her shoulder. “Or are ye getting that cake out of the ice box?”

He went and got the cake.

It was small — a cupcake really — but it was enough for the two of them to share. By the time Donal finally found an unlit birthday candle in their holiday bin, she was wiping her hands dry after going ahead with washing the dishes he’d brought in. From the looks of its rainbow swirled, glittery length, it was a left over from one of Ryan’s parties and the whimsical nature of it brought a smile to Brigid’s lips.

Donal anchored the tiny candle into the cake’s frosting then carefully lit its bent wick. The flame caught immediately, throwing up a half of bluish gray smoke, settling down into a steady flare. He made room by the counter for his wife to slip into the space besides him, pulling her into a hug and nestling her tiny body against his hip.

The candle’s little flame burned strong, illuminating Brigid’s features and gilding her emerald eyes. She took a breath, and it caught in her throat, hitching her chest slightly. A gleam of tears appeared on her lashes, but she was determined not to let them fall.

She refused to cry for their loss. It was the one constant in their yearly ritual. A promise they’d both made on the day they’d welcomed one son and buried another.

“Happy birthday, my darling Jamison,” Brigid whispered as she bent over the candle. Donal scooped her wealth of hair back, keeping her curls from falling into the flame. “We love ye, our bonny boy.”

They blew the flame out together. As they’d done every year after celebrating Connor’s birthday. It was a small ritual they did alone, something private between two parents mourning their stillborn son while sharing the joy of his twin’s life. Losing Jamison devastated Brigid’s tender heart and she’d railed at everything she might have done wrong despite the doctors’ reassurances their tiny little boy had never been truly there.

They’d buried him in Ireland, leaving him in the embrace and comfort of the entire clan that had come before. Connor grew up knowing he’d been a twin, but they’d taken great care to separate his life from Jamison’s birth, knowing the yoke of guilt could be passed on without anyone noticing.

“Do ye think his soul came back to us one of the others?” Brigid asked softly as Donal turned her around. He held his hands up to her and she clasped his fingers, humming along to the classic rock love song playing through the stereo speakers. “I sometimes wonder about that. If he made his way back around.”

“I don’t know,” Donal confessed, wrapping his arm around her waist as he began to dance her around the kitchen. Their steps were slow and steady, a relaxed waltz of sorts and as usual, Brigid needed to lead. “Maybe not Kane. Maybe one of the more rascally ones. Someone who would have balanced out Connor. Not like our first three didn’t go through their share of trouble but I always imagined Jamison would’ve been more pirate than cop.”

“That’s because ye’ve always wanted to be a pirate,” she teased. “Maybe our Braeden. He’s always been the contrary one.”

“I’m thinking Ian might be dropping out of the Academy but he doesn’t know how to tell me.” Donal pulled her hand up, tucking it under his chin as he held it tight. “I think I’ll be needing to give him a little push. Not every Morgan needs to wear a badge. I’d rather he be happy than wear a star.”

“I’m agreeing with the push.” She nodded and sighed, laying her cheek against his chest. Their steps slowed until their dance became a deep sway. “I did right by myself choosing ye, Donal Morgan. I did right by my family for having ye as my children’s father. My heart is glad for yer company and ye make my soul sing.”

"I'm glad ye chased me down." Donal chuckled, kissing his bride on the top of her head. "We've made a good family. Raised fine men and women. But best of all, I've had ye by my side, the love of my life. The light of my heart. The fire of my blood. I love ye, Brigid Finnegan Morgan. To my dying days and a little bit beyond."

"And to think, my mum was worried ye weren't romantic." Her laughter was a silvery caress around his joy and she snuggled in even closer. "Here we are, just in our fifties and I'm wondering which one of the children I can hit up to get me a grandkid."

The back of his head rang with the brassy symbol of incoming trouble Donal was quite used to hearing after decades of being the Morgan patriarch. Shaking his head, he warned, "That's not something ye should be pushing on. Not like ye are going to pay attention to me because ye never do."

"I listen to ye," Brigid protested then mumbled, "Mostly. Sometimes. Okay, hardly ever but it's better to risk it all and gain some then risk nothing gain nothing back."

"Ye said that about Miki," he reminded her, chucking under her chin. "But, I'll admit the boy has come around a little bit."

"I'm glad ye think so," Brigid replied, lifting her head up and giving him a cheeky grin that always made his stomach clench. "Because I'm thinking about asking how he and Kane feel about adoption."