



**NICOLE
MURPHY**

SECRET
ONES



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HARPER

Voyager

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*To my husband Tim,
who believed in me when I didn't.*

ASARLAI

There was a momentary feeling of pressure against her mind, then the stone door shimmered and disappeared. The woman who called herself Asarlai, meaning sorcerer, stepped into the stone chamber and looked around. This was an ancient place, forged centuries earlier out of the rock; used first as regular storage, it now hid things people would rather forget existed.

Her eyes skimmed over the forbidden objects stored on shelves and tables – knives, mirrors, books, cupboards, wands and hats. From each came a sense of darkness, of power that shouldn't be touched. Some were carved with sigils she didn't recognise. Others were stained with a reddish colour that she hoped was rust, not blood.

None of them had been moved. That, along with the mustiness of the air and the layer of dust that covered the shelves, the furniture and the floor told her that no one had been down here since she last had. She had covered her tracks well, and her work was undisturbed.

Her fingers tingled as she turned to study the black lacquered cabinet at the end of the room. She felt the anticipation building within her and took a deep breath

to remain calm. Today would be the day it all became hers. But there was still delicate work to be done.

With a wave of her hand the door to the chamber reappeared: solid, reassuring stone. No one would sneak up on her while she worked.

Asarlai walked down the long, thin room, the soles of her shoes slapping against the stone floor. She stopped and knelt in front of the cabinet and put a hand up to the gilt lock. It quivered and she nodded. The spell was still working. The lock was under such stress, it shouldn't take long to break it.

She pulled a long sliver of metal out from her sleeve and shook her head, disappointed that this required such a human skill as lock-picking. She slipped the metal into the keyhole and gently began to push it around. Finally, a click and a whir and then silence. Asarlai pulled the pick free and grasped one of the handles. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, then opened her eyes and pulled.

There was a hesitation, just enough to make her wonder, begin to despair, then the ages gave way and the door opened.

Asarlai felt it straight away — blackness, fullness, power. It surrounded her, teased her, pulled at her and she leant back on her heels and closed her eyes, ready to bathe herself in the warmth. A warning rang in her mind and she shook her head to clear her thoughts. She didn't have time now. Once she was safe in her own laboratory, then she could enjoy.

There were five books in all, each bound in soft leather, some gilt, some carved. She reached in and pulled out the slimmest volume. Tracing a finger

over the edges, she felt its desire to live again, and she smiled.

Asarlai took the rest of the books out and piled them up to one side, then closed and locked the cabinet again. It was highly unlikely anyone would come near this chamber and, if they did, they would studiously avoid even touching the cabinet, fearing the contamination. No one would know the books were free until she announced it.

She carried the books over to the door of the chamber, then turned back and made sure that her passage had left no trace and that the dust lay evenly over every surface. Then she opened the door, carried her booty outside and locked the room behind her. Hoisting the books into her arms, Asarlai began to make her way through the bardria building toward escape.

This was the moment she had dreaded. Over the years, she'd spent a great deal of time walking these corridors with books such as these, so it was a common sight. People waved, but generally no one stopped her – they were too busy about their own business. But if someone did decide today was the day to chat, and if someone who knew enough came close enough ...

Sweat formed on the back of her neck and she concentrated on keeping a relaxed face. No one would know how nervous she was.

She was more than halfway to the transfer room now, more than halfway to freedom. But her arms were starting to ache – somehow, these books were heavier than any she had ever carried.

She rounded a corner; there was a young man walking toward her. Sean Flaherty. Recently returned

from the family property in England. Moderate ability, moderate power. Asarlai relaxed. Sean didn't notice anything he didn't think was important, and she was less than important. For now.

But just as she passed him Asarlai stumbled. The books shifted in her arms and one slid and began to fall. She watched in horror, unable to do anything else.

Flaherty moved quickly and caught the book before it hit the floor. With a smile, he put it back on the top of the pile.

'Take care,' he said with a jaunty tilt of his head. Then he continued on his way.

Asarlai let go of the breath she'd been holding and started walking again. She saw people from a distance, but as she had hoped, she was unremarkable. She finally reached the transfer room of departure and it was empty. She stood in the middle, pictured her own laboratory and transferred.

The pull on her body, her senses, the force compelling her toward her destination was greater than she had ever known, yet her feet felt glued to the floor. For a moment she panicked: would the transfer be successful? Would she be caught between there and here and forever lost? But then it was over and she was standing in her laboratory, all five books in hand.

She hurried over to a bench and gently put the books down on the space she had prepared – carefully swept and then covered in a rich purple silk, the rightful resting place of such important tomes. She laid them out, side by side, then stepped back to look at them. Contentment overwhelmed her. Finally, after all these

years, the forbidden teachings belonged to her. It was now time to rediscover, time to learn, time to educate, so that the gadda would multiply, and become what they were destined to be – lords of the earth.

CHAPTER ONE

‘Celebrating something, Maggie?’

Maggie Shaunessy looked at the selection on the counter. Two bottles of the finest Champagne, crackers, cheese, strawberries, fresh bread and pâté. It certainly was a meal of celebration – she’d heard that morning that she’d received her Master of Education degree. But she wasn’t going to let Harry Botherly know that. No matter how friendly he appeared, she didn’t know his political leanings on humans and didn’t want to find out through a scene at Sclossin’s main supermarket. ‘Does a girl need an excuse to spoil herself, Harry?’

He grinned. ‘Not if it means you’re going to spend up big at my store.’

The goods were quickly put in bags and paid for and she walked out of the store. As Maggie stepped from the warmth into the cold, she stopped and shifted the bags to one hand so she could throw her scarf around her throat and pull her beanie down around her ears.

When she’d come to Sclossin from Australia as a seventeen-year-old, she’d barely made it through her first winter, and swore she would never go outside in January again. But over the past decade, she’d come to

appreciate the tingle of icy air against her skin — as long as she knew she would soon be warm again.

Star, I hated Sclossin, she thought as she strode down the pathway, nodding to the few others who were braving the threat of rain. It was so different from home. Winton was a country town: wide verandahed houses with tin roofs, swarms of flies in summer, frosts in winter. Sclossin was centuries old: stone buildings, wooden doors, green hedges in summer, fog-enclosed streets in winter.

Maggie walked to the end of the strip of shops and turned onto Bardria Street, moving away from the slowly-flowing waters of the creek that ran parallel to the main drag. To her left, the crenellated form of the Bardria, the home of the governing council of the gadda, loomed under the grey sky. In weather like this, she'd always fancied the building looked angry. In the infrequent bursts of sunshine they experienced, it became merely surly.

Next to the Bardria was the Sclossin Inn — the only place that humans were ever to be found at night in the town. Generally, the humans were happy for the people of Sclossin to govern themselves — it was part of an age-old charter with a medieval king that the modern political world of Ireland wasn't worried about. It had enabled the residents to ensure that only gadda lived and worked there.

However, business people and tourists were unavoidable — business for the times the human world couldn't be held back, tourists because Sclossin was a very pretty town. For the sake of keeping the secret, the inn was the only place humans could stay and if any

of them realised that after their meal in the restaurant they found themselves oddly tired and inevitably went straight to bed – well, none had reported it.

When she'd arrived, Maggie hadn't seen the attractions of Sclossin, especially for humans. She herself was only there to do her first order study at the gadda school. Then she was going home, back to Australia and the human life that she'd been striving for.

Star, that had been a mistake. Her steps slowed as she remembered the years of trying to subdue her rapidly quickening power, while focussed on the adolescent goal of being just like everyone else. Coming from one of the richest families in Winton had helped; being smart, a bit dumpy and having to suddenly dash away when she felt her power building inside her hadn't.

Then there'd been her crush. What was his name? She chewed the inside of her cheek, and then smiled. Scott Campbell. The local football star and all-round hunk. When he'd chosen her to be his partner during chemistry in year eleven, she'd thought that meant her efforts were worth it, that she'd made an impact. Turned out he was thinking more of the impact her brains would have on his falling grades.

When finally her mother had sat down and talked about whether she might be cheating herself of the life she should have by refusing her heritage, Maggie had been forced to admit that trying to be human was stupid. She wasn't human. She was gadda. She was a member of a secret race with abilities and power that humans could only dream about.

Maggie had expected her year in Sclossin to be drudgery and horror – the only seventeen-year-old in a class of twelve-year-olds.

But then she'd met Ione – there for her second attempt at first order – and Maggie had found a close friendship like none she'd ever known. They'd got even closer when Jack was born, but their bond was cemented when Patrick, Ione's husband, died. Maggie had stepped in and kept the little family going until the worst of the grief was spent.

She'd also started to build a relationship with her father, long estranged. Over the years the large mansions, the foggy landscape, even the draughts in the old buildings had become very dear to her. She'd come to appreciate the gadda way enough to go on to second order, although her heart still belonged in the human world.

She turned to cross the road and, as she did, misjudged her step and put her foot into a puddle of water. It splashed up over her ankle boots and soaked her socks.

'Shit.' She pulled her foot from the water and stepped back up onto the path.

'Problem, Maggie?'

Maggie spun around to see Blair Callaghan grinning at her. She pulled a face at her old teacher. 'There are moments, just moments you know, when I hate Sclossin.'

'Well, if you'd kept up with your training like you should have, you'd be third order by now and you could probably dry your sock yourself.' The admonishment was spoken with a smile that took the heat from the words.

Blair was one of those people for whom it was impossible to see any other career choice but teacher. She, along with Ione, had been responsible for helping Maggie through that first hard year.

‘Now, give me your groceries and then jump over the gutter onto the road.’ Blair held out her hands.

Maggie handed the bags over and, as she did, noted that Blair seemed to have aged a great deal recently. Her once smooth skin was now harsher in texture and covered in myriad small lines, and there was grey scattered among the reddish-brown of her hair. It surprised Maggie – not only did she work with teachers, she’d grown up around them and had thought only the ones who didn’t like the job aged. But then, she didn’t know how old Blair was. Maybe she was much older than she appeared, and the years were finally catching up.

Maggie stepped over the puddle and turned to get her groceries, but Blair also stepped onto the road, undoubtedly helped by a subtle push of power. The two women walked across the deserted street together.

‘This looks like the makings of a celebration,’ Blair said.

Maggie made a snap decision. Unlike some of the teachers, who had made their Purist philosophy clear and had harangued Maggie for her desire to interact with human society, Blair had always been very considerate of Maggie’s drive to continue her human studies. ‘I am celebrating, actually. I’ve just completed my Master’s degree. It’s kinda like getting sixth order for humans.’ Maggie jumped onto the footpath on the other side of the road, and took a quick glance up at

the building. The lights shone through the windows of the apartment she shared with Ione and her son Jack. It was like a beacon, speaking to her of warmth and dry socks.

She turned to watch Blair jump, and the older woman held out her bags with a smile. She'd been right – Blair either sympathised with her wish to work with humans or didn't care either way. 'Congratulations, Maggie. You must feel very proud of yourself.'

'I do.' Maggie took back her bags.

'I hope this means that you will now put the same level of dedication and concentration into reaching the real sixth order.'

Maggie laughed. 'You never let up, do you?'

'Not on students with potential,' Blair said. 'Speaking of which, tell Ione to give me a call. I've got a few ideas that just might break that blockage after all.'

Ione was quite a rarity in the gadda – she couldn't even pass first order. She'd made seven attempts at the test, had attended the gadda school twice and had had countless tutors. None of it mattered. The prognosis was that Ione had very little power, and very little natural ability. A talented person might have been able to work that level of power to pass the test, but Ione could not.

It was one of the great mysteries of the gadda. Ione's family, the Hammonds, were renowned for their talent and power and boasted more than their fair share of sixth orders. How could one of theirs not pass first?

Neither Ione nor her family were particularly concerned. They'd been more worried when Maggie, through her university studies, had introduced Ione to

computers. The Hammonds didn't mind humans, but they couldn't see how doing such a human-centred job would be good for Ione.

Ione however had proven to have a talent for the technology, and now made her living as a self-employed database programmer.

Maggie shook her head and grinned at her old teacher.

'If I were you, Blair, I'd give up. Ione's going to be the one that got away.'

Blair shook her head. 'I can't. It's pathological, I'm afraid.' The two women smiled at each other. 'Enjoy your celebration.'

With yet another impulse, Maggie leant forward and kissed Blair on the cheek. 'Thank you,' she said. 'If you hadn't been such a good teacher, I doubt I would have survived the first year here.'

'You can do anything you set your mind to, Margaret Shaunessy. Now go. Party. Enjoy.' Blair waved her hand toward the building and then walked around Maggie and down the street to the shops.

As she watched Blair walk away, Maggie recalled her horrendous first day at the gadda school. It had started with history with Bart O'Hanlon and he'd spent the entire lesson explaining to the children how Maggie was the perfect example of everything that was wrong with the Humanist movement.

'The gadda are not human,' he'd barked out the first tenet of the Purist manifesto. 'Humans are a lesser life form, just as much use to us as dogs or birds or fish or horses. Actually, less use than fish or horses — at least you can eat one and use the other for travel.'

Humans are nothing but a blight on this planet. To try to be one is foolish in the extreme, and I expect you will all show Miss Shaunessy the mistake she has made over the coming year.'

Maggie had walked into her next lesson – control with Blair Callaghan – shaking and wondering how much this teacher would hate her. However, Blair had treated Maggie as just another student – praise when it was deserved, censure on occasion but otherwise calm and polite. Her lessons had become Maggie's refuge, until with Ione's help she'd found her voice and stood up to the other teachers.

The fact she'd managed to outscore nearly every other child in the class and prove that she hadn't been defiled by her years living with humans had helped too.

Shaking the memories from her mind, Maggie used her shoulder to push open the door into the building. The apartment was on the second floor, and she made her way upstairs quickly.

She shifted the bags in her arms, used her elbow to bang on the door and frowned at Ione when she finally opened it. 'You took your time.' She stomped into the room, dumped the shopping on the dining table that stood at one end and slumped down on the lounge that stood at the other. She quickly whipped her boots and socks off.

'I hope that's not our Champagne you're thumping around.' Ione moved over to the table and opened the bag. 'Shame on you, Mags. Have you no sense of style?' She looked over her shoulder, saw Maggie pull the second sock off and drop it on the floor with the other

one, and laughed. ‘Been walking through the brook, have you?’

Maggie glared at her. ‘Shut up and pour me a drink.’ She picked up her wet things and took them to the washing machine. Then she went into her bedroom, cramped with a queen-sized bed, cupboards, desk and bookshelves. She stopped and looked at the desk. The hours she’d spent there at her laptop worrying her way through word after word to ensure that her research was as clear and concise as possible. It had all been worth it: time to celebrate. She grabbed another pair of socks, pulled them on and went back out to her friend.

Ione handed her a crystal glass full of Champagne and raised her own into the air. ‘Here’s to Ms Education 2010. May the caelleach never find out how you achieved it.’

Maggie rolled her eyes. ‘Shit, Ione, stop making a big deal out of it. Are *you* planning to tell him? The people at the uni are keeping it quiet, my family isn’t gonna blab. *If* he finds out I wrote a children’s story with magic, and that’s a big if, it won’t be for ages. And anyway, you know I’ll be able to talk him around. I even have the speech prepared. So stop worrying and drink up.’ She lifted her glass and tapped it against Ione’s. Then she downed the sweet Champagne, the bubbles tickling her nose.

‘I hope you’re right. Personally, I’m over rescuing you from Caelleach Cormac, especially since I’m beginning to suspect you enjoy it.’ Ione put her glass down and started setting up the food on the table. She had a knack for making everything look pretty and inviting. There were colourful tubs of herbs growing

on the sill in the kitchen, throw rugs and cushions in greens and pinks on the black lounge and beautiful embroidery on the handtowels in the bathroom.

Maggie screwed up her nose. 'It's not my fault he doesn't get me. And besides I wouldn't be an O'Hara if I wasn't pissing people off. Speaking of which, I wonder where Mum and Grandpa are.' Maggie looked at her watch.

'If they're going to be late, they'll just miss out on the drink.' Ione poured herself another glass.

A low, vibrating tone shifted the air around them: a request to transfer into the apartment. 'Speak of the devil,' Maggie said, putting her glass down as she silently gave permission.

She stood and faced the transfer spot in the middle of the room. It was important to have a dedicated place for transferring – appearing in the wrong spot could be fatal. The air went opaque and shivered and her grandfather appeared, a broad smile on his face.

John O'Hara was a large man, with a farmer's hands and a poet's eyes. His shoulders were beginning to stoop a little, his hair was white and his face heavily creased, but his voice held laughter and his eyes were still sharp enough to put hearts in a spin.

'Here's my girl!' John moved forward and wrapped his arms around Maggie. She returned the bear hug for a moment, but soon was having trouble breathing.

'Grandpa, breath, please,' she gasped.

John chuckled as he released her. 'Don't know my own strength.'

'I suppose it's not bad for an old bloke.'

John staggered back, as though he'd been struck.

'Maggie, you wound me,' he said. 'I hope you've got a good whiskey to soothe my damaged soul, Ione.'

'Have I ever not had a good whiskey for you? In fact, I discovered a terrific little distillery down near Leenane the other month, and I've been saving it for your next visit.'

'Bless you. Nice to know one of my favourite girls cares for my delicate health.' He went over to the table, sat down and reached for the cheese.

Maggie snorted. Her grandfather was on the wrong side of seventy, but he was as healthy as many men half his age.

'And where's Jack?' John popped a cracker topped with brie into his mouth, and looked around for the little boy. Ione's son had become as much a part of the O'Hara family as Ione herself over the years.

'Jack is at my sister's. He really doesn't need to see the debauchery that Maggie has planned for tonight.' Ione gave the whiskey to John.

'Nothing too debauched, please, Maggie. The family has a reputation to maintain, you know.'

'Hence the need for the debauchery.' Maggie had reached for her Champagne when another tone rang in the air, this one deep yet musical.

O'Hara's head whipped around. 'Why would the Sabhamir be coming over?'

Maggie couldn't hold back a shiver of fear. The Sabhamir was the protector of the gadda, the muscle of the bardria. His unexpected arrival was never good news.

‘It’s the story,’ Ione said cheerfully. ‘I’ve been telling her, John, the caelleach was always going to find out.’

‘It can’t be the story,’ Maggie said, as much to convince herself as anyone else. ‘He can’t know about it. There’s no way.’ She closed her eyes and gave the signal for the Sabhamir to come into her home.

Before she had taken a breath, the Sabhamir stood on their transfer spot. Tall and dressed in unrelenting black, he looked what he was – the most powerful man alive.

‘Margaret Shaunessy, you are summoned to appear before the bardria of the gadda,’ he announced in a deep voice that seemed to vibrate right through Maggie. Then he bowed his head. ‘John. Ione.’

Maggie stared at the Sabhamir, sure she had misheard. Why was she being called before the entire bardria? If it was the story, surely it would only be Caelleach Cormac wanting to see her.

‘Sabhamir.’ O’Hara stood and bowed. ‘May I ask what this is regarding?’

‘I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to say, John. However, you and Ione may accompany Ms Shaunessy, if you wish. I suspect she may welcome the support.’

‘Yep, it’s the story,’ Ione said, quickly swallowing the Champagne left in her glass.

Maggie’s stomach roiled, and all her excitement disappeared. It couldn’t be, not the story, it couldn’t be. Not the whole bardria.

John walked over to her and put his hand on her shoulder. No matter what she’d done, her grandfather would support her – and he was more than capable of standing up to the bardria. ‘Is it the story?’

The Sabhamir raised a sculpted eyebrow. 'Let me put it this way, the bardria doesn't take any discussion of power with humans lightly.'

Maggie moaned. She was in trouble, much more trouble than she'd ever considered. 'I think I'm going to be sick.'

'Rubbish. The bardria are just being protective. You'll be fine.' John gave her shoulder a squeeze.

'If you wouldn't mind escorting Ione, I'll take Ms Shaunessy,' the Sabhamir said.

John leant forward. 'You'll be fine, Maggie. Just don't panic or start apologising all over the place.'

Maggie barely kept herself from calling out as John's hand left her shoulder. Don't panic? Hard, when she already had.

The Sabhamir stepped forward and held out his hand to her. Maggie looked up at him as she took hold and he helped her to her feet, wondering if he could feel her shaking. While his face remained passive, she was sure his eyes softened. He gave a short nod and she felt more confident. If the Sabhamir was on her side, it couldn't be that bad.

Without warning, they were transferring. Maggie felt the pull on every cell in her body, as it fought to remain where it should be, then the power took over and there was a sensation of rushing, busyness and nothingness, before she came back to herself, standing in a large room.

The Sabhamir walked behind her, taking a protective position. Maggie wasn't sure whether he was protecting her, or protecting the bardria *from* her.

She looked around, having never been in the bardria room before. The first thing that struck her was how plain it was – wooden floor, wood panelling three-quarters of the way up the wall, whitewashed panelling above. It was a simple room, and empty but for the two of them, yet she could feel the power in it. Judgements were made here; people's lives changed irrevocably, sometimes for the good, sometimes the bad.

In front of her was a long table with twenty chairs behind it. Each chair was the same size, made of the same wood. There was no sense that any seat gave distinction to its occupant, but she knew that this apparent equality wasn't the case. The representatives of the six original families were the real power of the bardria, led by the current caelleach, Horatio Cormac. He was a man renowned for being fair and just. Maggie's experience of him was of a man with little sense of humour and brimming with frustration.

Behind her were rows of chairs for an audience. She hoped they'd stay empty. If she was going to be humiliated, she didn't want dozens of gadda watching.

She tilted her head back to look at the famous first representation of the star of gulagh, the emblem of the gadda. The six-pointed star represented the original six families, the founders of the gadda and the orders and rules that all now followed. In the middle of the star was a heart, showing that emotion was at the centre of all the power the gadda wielded. The star sat in the middle of a glass ceiling, allowing the sun to light the room.

It gave a softness to the space that belied the darkness often dealt with here. This was where the

bardria addressed the most dreadful of gadda crimes. Here people had their power stripped and were banished forever from the entire community. And the man behind her was responsible for enacting all sentences.

What would it be for her? Would she get an insignificant punishment? Or were the bardria so annoyed they would banish her? Surely what she had done wasn't so dreadful that they would cut off her powers, was it? Shit, what if this time she really had gone too far?

A door beyond the table swung open and Maggie jumped and squeaked. The Sabhamir nudged her and she looked over her shoulder at him. He gave her another small nod, and she relaxed. Yep, he's definitely on my side.

The bardria filed in, members of the most important families of the gadda, life-time appointees. Dressed in purple floor-length robes, each was marked with the level of skill he or she had reached – stripes for the gadda way, stars for the gadma way. They also had gold piping around the collars of their robes, and the symbol of the gadda on their breast, the sign they were councillors. Each walked to stand behind a chair. Once all were in position, they sat in unison.

Maggie quickly scanned the impassive faces. Those she knew favoured the Purist view of keeping the gadda and humans separate were looking at her with disdain, which she expected. The other half – the bardria was split fifty/fifty politically – kept their expressions blank. She couldn't tell if those people who normally supported her family would now support her.

She focussed on the man who sat in the centre – the caelleach, Horatio Cormac. Ultimately, he was the one she needed to impress. He was also likely to be the most annoyed about what she had done.

Cormac was nominally Humanist. Certainly, he'd been more than sympathetic to her grandfather and mother and had helped smooth things a number of times when John O'Hara's enthusiasm for humans got out of hand.

But he was also very much a traditionalist, and Maggie had realised within days of arriving in Sclossin that the caelleach wasn't happy she'd waited so long to come for her training. Nor did he like that once she passed first order, she went back to focussing on her human education. He'd had a heated discussion with her when she'd chosen to get her teacher's degree and work in public schools. He'd been so incensed by her introducing Ione to the world of computers that he'd screamed at her. The night she'd thrown a party in her and Ione's flat for the other teachers at her school, he'd ended up in the healer's wing with high blood pressure.

If he *had* found out about her story, then he'd probably be on the verge of a heart attack.

She watched Cormac look around the room, as if he could see who was present even though he was blind. She had often wondered just how much he could and couldn't see.

As the caelleach looked, two more people appeared in the room. One Maggie recognised immediately – the Ceamir, who ensured that gadda treated humans well and humans remained unsuspecting. The elderly

woman was wearing a ceremonial robe of deep, rich red, the front of which hung from her hunched shoulders and dragged on the ground before her. No one knew how old the Ceamir was and no one was prepared to ask.

The man who had arrived with the old woman was dressed in a navy blue robe, and that told Maggie that he was the Firimir. It was his task to ensure that everyone who spoke to the bardria told the truth, and he did it by reading witnesses' minds. The sight of him in the room made her legs shake.

'Are we ready, Sabhamir?' Cormac said.

'Ms Shaunessy's grandfather and flatmate are coming, sir. They should be here —' The sound of a door opening interrupted the Sabhamir's speech. Maggie looked over her shoulder and saw John and Ione walk in.

'— now,' the Sabhamir finished.

John and Ione stopped beside Maggie and bowed to the table. 'Caelleach Cormac, councillors, greetings to you all. My heart burns with joy at being in Sclossin again,' John said.

'O'Hara. Ms Gorton.' Cormac bowed his head. 'Can I assume that you'll both wish to speak in Ms Shaunessy's defence?'

'Should it prove necessary, of course, but I doubt it will.' John bowed again, took Ione's arm and they sat down.

Maggie watched the caelleach's jaw tighten and almost shuddered. It wasn't looking good.

'Firimir, take your position,' he all but growled. The Firimir came over and stood behind Maggie. She

was surprised to discover as he approached that he wasn't that much taller than she was — he had an aura of power that made him seem as tall as the Sabhamir.

The Firimir put his hands on either side of Maggie's head, and she felt a squeezing sensation against her brain before warmth enveloped her. All external noise and sights dimmed, and she was aware solely of the caelleach's face and voice.

'Margaret Shaunessy, you have been brought before the bardria because we are concerned that you do not understand the importance of keeping the truth of the gadda secret from the humans.' Cormac waved his hand and a pile of papers appeared. 'We have read this ... children's story, which we believe was part of — what is it called again?' He looked to one side of the table.

Another voice intruded on Maggie's consciousness. 'A Master's degree, Caelleach. A form of qualification among the humans.' The answer came from Helga Flaherty. She looked at Maggie and smiled.

And Maggie understood why she stood in front of the entire bardria. This wasn't just about the caelleach being annoyed at her again. It was part of the long-standing feud between the Flaherty and O'Hara families, one strongly Purist, the other committed to helping humans.

'We have read this story and it is disturbing, Ms Shaunessy. The name of a gadda is now irretrievably linked to a piece of writing about the use of power. I am at a loss as to how you could have considered this a good idea.'

Right now, so was Maggie. And boy, did she want to know how the bardria had got hold of it so

quickly, not that this was the time to ask. She mentally reviewed her prepared speech, prayed that it would be enough for the Firimir, and began. 'Caelleach Cormac, councillors. My field of study in achieving my Master's degree was children's literature. Magic, as the humans call it, has always been a feature of writing for children. However, I felt that there wasn't enough writing about losing belief in magic. As you can see from having read my story, it deals with a child who comes to realise there is no such thing as magic and must learn to live happily in a world of humans. I contend that my story discourages belief in magic and could actually draw human minds away from the gadda, which we know is a good thing.' She smiled at the bardria members, knowing that keeping the gadda secret was one thing both ends of the political spectrum agreed on.

'I fail to see how having the name of a gadda linked to talk of "magic" is a good thing for us, regardless of the nature of that link,' Cormac said. 'You have completed the initial studies of our race, Ms Shaunessy, and in fact did it much more recently than anyone else here. Surely you have not already forgotten the lessons you learnt about what happens when humans associate gadda with what they call magic?'

Maggie winced. 'No, Caelleach, I have not forgotten. I do not believe that my case is similar to those tragedies.'

'I believe it is up to us to decide whether it is similar, Ms Shaunessy.' Cormac leant back in his chair. 'How many people will know about this story?'

'The staff at the university where I studied,' Maggie said. 'That is all.'

Cormac leant forward again, and Maggie realised she'd just scored a point for herself. 'And can these people be trusted not to speak of it?'

'I have asked them not to speak of it, or publish it, or let it be known. Its purpose was so I could achieve my degree, and further my education. I have no wish for it to go beyond that.'

'You asked them not to speak of it?' Helga Flaherty frowned. 'Could it be that you knew that it would not be a good idea for humans to find out about this? If so, why do it in the first place?'

Maggie scrambled quickly for an answer. She couldn't admit that Helga Flaherty was right, because that would be an admission of guilt. 'I chose this topic because it had not been pursued before and thus was more likely to be considered well by the people marking it,' she said. She noted confusion on the faces of some of the councillors, and wasn't sure if that was a good thing.

'If I might speak, Caelleach.' The Ceamir's soft voice floated through Maggie.

'Go ahead, Ceamir.'

'There is no doubting that Ms Shaunessy's name will now be linked with magic for a very long time, if not her entire lifetime, within that circle of people, and the association could certainly spread. However, I believe the impression will be that she is against magic, and therefore it would never be thought that she would have any interest in it herself. I think that if she stays visible in human society and minimises her contact with gadda for a while, there will be no suspicion about her and all will be well.'

Maggie felt her heart freeze. Oh shit, I'm going to be banished.

'What are you suggesting, Ceamir?' Cormac said.

'Ms Shaunessy should be sent home to Australia and banned from returning to Sclossin for, say, two years. By living and interacting with humans, something she has experience at, and limiting her contact to gadda to just her immediate family – all of whom pass very well as human – there will be little chance that the truth will be discovered.'

'And tell me how that is a punishment for her, Ceamir,' Helga Flaherty said. 'You return her to her family, allow her to do what she wants to do, and that punishes her?'

'Ms Shaunessy has lived here in Sclossin for ten years, ma'am. She has developed ties and links to this town, not the least of which are some close friendships. Not being able to see those people for two years will be a trial for her. And then there is the fact that, while living away from our community, she and her family will have to be circumspect about their use of their powers. If word of the story spreads, the O'Haras will need to live very human lives for a time.'

Delight flashed across Helga Flaherty's face. No doubt she was picturing John O'Hara hampered in using his power. 'I see the wisdom in your words, Ceamir. I believe you propose a suitable punishment, although I would add one caveat. I believe her father should also go to Australia with her, to ensure she remains connected to her gadda heritage.' Maggie's eyes widened, and she barely bit back a cry of *No*. 'Ms Shaunessy's development was hampered by her late

arrival for training, which was no doubt encouraged by the O'Haras. There is still hope she can be taught our ways.'

Star above! thought Maggie. Her father, in Australia, near her mother, for two years? They'd kill each other long before that time was up.

'I believe that is a very suitable suggestion, Helga,' Cormac said. Maggie looked at him and he smiled at her. Damn, she thought. He had sensed her reaction and liked it. 'What say you, John O'Hara?'

John stood and bowed. 'I thank the councillors for their leniency toward my granddaughter, for I fear that her ill-conceived writing could have caused great difficulty for us all. As to Peter Shaunessy accompanying Maggie to Australia, he will not be welcome in my home.'

Helga frowned and opened her mouth but Cormac got in first. 'Fine. The bardria will assist Peter in finding a home nearby. Sabhamir?'

The protector nodded. 'It is a good solution, Caelleach.'

'Firimir?'

The Firimir removed his hands from Maggie's head. There was a pause, then the waft of wonderfully scented flowers flowed through the air. 'Margaret Shaunessy speaks truth.'

'Then it is decided – Margaret Shaunessy will be banned from all contact with citizens of Sclossin for the next two years, and must return to her family home in Australia within a week.'

Maggie watched the gavel hit the table with a resounding thud and tried to convince herself it could

have been worse. She could have been banished. She could have been stripped of her power and sent out into the world, never to be gadda again.

This was what she'd always wanted, she told herself as she turned to John and Ione – to be human, and such she'd have to be for the next two years. But then she looked at Ione's pale face, and realised it wasn't what she wanted at all. She'd come to enjoy her dual life in Ireland – she could be as human as she liked during the day, and then come back to Sclossin each night and embrace the power that lit her life.

She had, she realised, found herself a very nice balance, which her foolishness had destroyed.

She smiled at Ione. 'That went well, I thought.' She tried to force gaiety into her voice and was sure she'd failed.

'Home, with both of you.' John took both girls by the arm. As a sixth-order oman, John had the power to transfer two people the short distance from the bardria building to the flat.

Once they were back in the loungeroom, Ione threw her arms around Maggie's neck. 'I can't believe they're making you leave,' she said. 'What am I supposed to do for the next two years?'

Maggie fought back tears. 'You've got Jack, and your programming. You'll be fine.'

'I told you.' Ione pulled back and slapped Maggie's arm, hard. 'When you told me the idea, what did I say?'

“Don't do it, Mags. The caelleach will crucify you.” You were right. It was stupid of me to think they wouldn't find out and, if they did, that they wouldn't

care.’ Maggie frowned. ‘How the hell did they find out? It’s obvious that the Flahertys are behind this.’

‘They were watching you,’ John said. ‘Undoubtedly they’ve been spying on you from the moment you got here. A bit of power against a lock, a quick search of your lecturer’s office and there you have it – one manuscript.’

‘I didn’t know. I mean, I know the Purists are against us, but to do this ...’ Maggie went over and slumped on the lounge. She looked up at Ione and John. ‘How do I explain this to the school? The children? I can’t just pack up and leave my human life.’

‘Illness, darling.’ John came and sat next to her. ‘You tell your principal that your mother has suddenly taken ill, and you have to go to Australia.’

‘Why Siobhan?’ Ione asked.

‘Because she’s not here,’ John said, humour returning to the group. ‘Now, when you get to Australia, we’ll tell the authorities that you had a vicious break-up with a boyfriend and decided it was time to come home. Horrible thing to have happen just after Christmas, you know. You’ll have to organise the paperwork to get into the educational system there, and in the meantime you can do something at the university. I’ve been told I need a personal assistant, maybe you can trial the position for me.’

‘Working for you? That sounds like more than a reasonable punishment,’ Ione said.

Maggie tried to smile. She knew they were both lightening the mood so she wouldn’t be swamped in misery. She felt the effort was doomed to failure. She loved her life in Ireland. She loved the children in

her year four class. She loved living with Ione and Jack.

John scoffed. 'She's going to have to play interference between her parents. *That* will be the cruel and unusual punishment.'

'Star above, Mum's gonna kill me,' Maggie said, and thought that it might not be such a bad idea.

Moments later Siobhan arrived, having been kept in Australia by her duties as one of Winton's GPs.

By the end of the retelling of Maggie's confrontation with the bardria, Siobhan was frowning. 'A shame your foolishness has to punish us all, Maggie.'

Maggie knew her mother was talking about Peter Shaunessy moving to Winton. She'd never lacked for knowledge of her mother's antipathy to her father. 'I'll keep him away from you. I'm sorry, Mum.'

'Here, Siobhan, have Maggie's drink as the beginning of her punishment.' Ione handed Siobhan a flute of Champagne with an evil grin.

'Not actually Maggie's glass, right?' Siobhan eyed the drink carefully.

'No, but the last of the bottle, so she's going to have to go fend for herself. Cheers.'

Maggie watched the glasses clinking with sadness and also a sense of dread. Somehow, she knew this was all going to come back at her, and not in a good way.

CHAPTER TWO

Lucas Valeroso looked at the selection on the table – sandwiches, crackers, cheese, strawberries, fresh bread, pâté, and flutes of Champagne. It all looked very inviting, but he wasn't hungry. Instead, his mind and body were focussed on controlling his nerves.

Nerves. He almost laughed. He was too old for nerves. But then, he was about to receive the world's pre-eminent physics prize, and that was worth a few twinges of anxiety.

He went over to the bar, grabbed a glass of water and turned to survey the crowd. The greatest scientists, academics and business people in America, all here to honour him and his work. For a moment, he basked in the glory of that, the knowledge that he'd made it. Then he acknowledged that they were probably all here for the free food and booze, not him, and smiled wryly.

The Julius Edgar Lilienfeld Prize was worth \$50,000, which was nice, but nicer was the recognition of his work and his place as one of the best physicists in the world. Not a bad achievement for a boy from the ghetto, who'd made his way through a lot of his adolescence in gangs, struggling just to survive. He

wished his boys could see him now, but then decided that wasn't worth it – they wouldn't understand what this moment meant for him and his career.

‘Valeroso.’

He swung around and found himself face to face with Lee Suy Chin, his first boss. ‘Professor Chin.’ They shook hands.

‘Well, I have to say I expected to be here with you one day, although I did expect it a few years earlier than this.’ Chin had always been vocal in his belief in Lucas.

Lucas had thought so too, but then his past seemed to have a way of affecting his present. Normally in the form of one blackmailing little – he stopped the thought in its tracks. ‘Life can be a bitch sometimes,’ Lucas murmured, and Chin laughed.

‘Well, you made it anyway, and it's a terrific little piece of research. My team's been going ape over it.’

‘Thank you,’ Lucas said. ‘How are things at NJU?’

‘A lot quieter since you left.’ Chin laughed. ‘I could never get over the number of things that would go wrong around you. Never your fault, of course.’

Lucas winced. He'd forgotten how weird things used to happen for no apparent reason. Light bulbs would explode, equipment would fall off the desk, and computers would mysteriously switch on and off. It hadn't happened for years, and he'd long ago put it down to coincidence. ‘The poltergeist must have been bored.’

Chin shrugged. ‘Well, you got here in the end, and I'm hoping you might consider coming back to the beginning. I've been asked to be vice-chancellor, so we need a new chair of physics. Sound like an idea?’

Shit, it sounded like a fantastic idea. A great career move. However, it wasn't quite what Lucas was interested in. 'Being chair doesn't give you much time in the lab.'

'True, it would curtail your research a little. But in terms of your long-term future, it could make you. Listen, have a think about it and call me in a couple of days.' Chin shook his hand and then went off to circulate.

Lucas tried to stop a huge grin and barely succeeded, smirking instead. The boy from the Bronx, a chair of physics while still in his mid-thirties. Unbelievable. The angry, scared kid who had only found contentment when deep in an experiment, now highly regarded and sought for positions of responsibility. It was almost enough to make a man believe that the good could win. Almost.

A bell rang, the signal that everyone should take their seats for the presentation. Lucas began to make his way to the table at the front and centre of the room, but as he walked through the crowd a small, round man with a fuzz of dark hair on the top of his head suddenly blocked his way.

Oh, shit, Lucas thought as Professor Hayden Smith-Jenkins turned his face up to the light. Head of the physics department at Carolina Tech and the only man to have persecuted Lucas because of his past.

Five years after learning the 'truth', the professor still wouldn't look at Lucas. He raised his nose higher in the air, turned and walked away.

And just like that, Lucas was reminded that he might be a brilliant physicist, but in some eyes he was

a poor excuse for a human being. He made his way to his seat, his enjoyment of the day dissipated. The prize was given, he made his speech and his peers applauded him, but all he could do was wonder what they would do if they knew they were honouring an ex-con.

He knew he was expected to mingle, allow the guests their moment of joy in talking to the Julius Edgar Lilienfeld Fellow, but he was really bad at it. And now he wasn't in the mood to even pretend he didn't loathe it. He shook the minimum of hands, escaped and took himself back to the hotel. He packed and made his way to JFK to fly back to Chicago, there to lose himself again in his work, the only place he found any peace.

No peace this time. He couldn't stop thinking about how things had turned out for him at Carolina Tech.

He'd never told prospective employers about his juvenile record for theft and hijacking a car – as far as both society and he were concerned, he'd paid the price for his adolescent stupidity and he started his adult life with a clean slate.

When he'd arrived to teach at Caro Tech, it was to find the man who'd hired him had been replaced by Smith-Jenkins. His opening line – 'You don't look Hispanic' – had started their working relationship off badly.

Then Holly had arrived. She'd found him thanks to a report of his new job at their high school reunion.

'Well, look at you.' She'd whistled as she walked around him. 'Lucas Valeroso, a professor at university. What a scream.'

The students had gawked at the bleached blonde curls and very bright yellow dress. Lucas had been horrified. He hadn't seen Holly for seven years and had hoped never to again.

'Doing well for yourself. Much better than me.'

Lucas knew what was coming – during his student days, Holly had supported herself by blackmailing him, amongst other things.

This time he was a grown man, well-regarded in his field, and so he'd found the strength to tell her no.

He hadn't expected her to go to Smith-Jenkins. He really hadn't expected his boss to care about juvie crimes. She did. He did.

After months of being treated like a pariah – anti-discrimination laws meant Smith-Jenkins couldn't sack him – Lucas had quit.

He's spent the last few years both rebuilding after that hiccup in his career and hiding from Holly.

As he sat next to the gleaming silver platform that represented his current research, it occurred to Lucas that the publicity from winning the award might draw Holly to him again.

He began to pray it wouldn't.

CHAPTER THREE

When the party was over and Maggie's family had returned to Australia, Maggie had regained her good mood. There was nothing she could do to change the bardria's decision and for tonight her focus would be on celebrating her achievement and enjoying Ione's company.

Kitty's Star Bar was a hive of activity. A few small groups of day-drinkers remained, greying heads bent over pints of cloudy dark liquor as they attempted to solve the problems of the world. Younger people were three deep at the bar, ready to get their night started, and the dance floor was half full.

Maggie and Ione shook the doorman's hand as they went in. Maggie felt the pulse of his power against her palm and there was a twinge of sadness. For the next two years, she'd only feel this mark of the gadda from her family.

With Champagne still buzzing through their system, the women happily ignored the crush at the bar to hit the dance floor. The latest gadda tunes pumped through the air, while balls of light danced and weaved around and between the dancers. Maggie loved dancing and soon lost herself in the music, uncaring that Ione

quickly found herself a partner for some fun in a dark corner of the bar.

After a couple of dances, Maggie decided it was time to refresh her alcohol quotient, and made her way over to the bar, now less busy. She squeezed in between a couple of women and signalled the barman.

‘Great to see you, Maggie,’ Simon said as he wiped the counter in front of her. ‘The usual?’

‘Actually, I’ll have a martini, thanks,’ she said.

Simon cocked an eyebrow. ‘Getting on the hard stuff a bit early, aren’t you?’

‘Hey, I’m young, and I don’t have to work tomorrow, so party on.’

‘That’s what I like to hear.’ He mixed the drink and Maggie carefully carried it from the bar. She stood beside the dance floor, tapping her foot and sipping on the drink while she watched the lights flash from colour to colour and weave between people’s legs. The lights could be conjured to react to a multitude of things – the beat of the music, people’s power, even the amount of alcohol sold. Tonight it seemed it was gender. Specifically, the lights seemed to be hovering around the men’s faces, lighting every plane and curve.

Maggie wondered if that meant Kitty was looking for husband number four or if she just wanted to perve. Whatever the reason, Maggie was grateful.

As she watched, the lights shone on the sharp angles of a male face she had never seen before. That was odd – Sclossin was such a small town, you soon knew everyone around your age. A visitor, she decided. Whoever he was, he certainly knew how to move. Cute

too – she didn't normally go for guys with red hair, but his was rich and deep, and his bearing was king-like.

She caught his eye and smiled; he smiled back and the night started looking even better. He left the dance floor and made his way over to her and she was pleased to see his body seemed to match his face – nice height, slim build but muscular.

'I hope you're dancing,' he said, his eyes moving over her. 'It would be a tragedy for the most beautiful woman in the room to not be.'

Up close, his eyes were a brilliant light blue and his lips, while thin, curved nicely. And that slight streak of arrogance was attractive too. 'I could be persuaded.' She stirred the olive around and fluttered her eyelashes at him.

'Then persuaded you shall be.' Her mystery man put his hand out, not so much as a request to join him but as a demand.

Wow, Maggie thought, talk about your typical romantic hero. If he puts this level of intensity into his lovemaking ...

She put the glass down on a table behind her and took his hand. Their power met and heat swirled in her belly as his desire touched hers. Oh yes, she thought as he led her onto the dance floor. It was going to be a fun night.

There was just enough conversation to find out his name was Sean and he was from Sclossin, but had been working on his father's property in England for the past five years, explaining why she didn't know him.

Then conversation wasn't important any more, and the priority became looking, teasing, touching – first

the arm, then the hip, then their bodies drew together, moving in unison.

Their hips meshed and a thrill ran through Maggie as she felt his erection. Her nipples tightened – his smile became wolfish. With perfect timing, a slow song began and they wrapped their arms around each other, and ground their bodies together until Maggie was sure her blood was boiling, she felt so hot.

Sean moved his mouth close to hers, until their breath was mingling, and whispered, ‘We don’t really want to spend the rest of the night here, do we?’

‘Absolutely not.’ Maggie brushed her lower lip against his while squashing her breasts into his chest. Her nipples were so sensitive they sent a jolt of pleasure through her body to pool in her groin. She grabbed Sean’s hand and pulled him out of the pub.

The cold air outside hit her and she stumbled. Her mind cleared, and a little voice wondered if maybe ... then Sean pulled her to him and kissed her, and all thoughts left her mind. Her power rose and met his, his arousal washing over her with a flood of sensation. His mouth pressed hers open and then his tongue was stroking in and out, stoking the fire within.

Nothing mattered other than getting him home, where she could release all the pleasure his touch promised. She pulled back, gasping. ‘I live just around the corner.’

‘Good,’ he said and kissed her again. One of the great things about being gadda was how your power spoke to your partner’s during sex – no need for

spoken directions or guessing what turned the other on: you could feel it. Something else she'd miss out on for the next two years.

At the door to the flat, she had a moment of concern – what if Ione was home? But then, Ione would be the last person to care what Maggie was doing. And Jack was away, so noise wasn't an issue.

They barely made it into Maggie's room before they started undressing each other. Sean kissed her and tugged on her nipples. The kiss was nice, the tug not so much. He just needs guidance, Maggie thought, and pulled his mouth down to her breasts, giving him a push of power to show she liked it.

Sean took to it enthusiastically and Maggie gasped and moaned her delight.

Then, too quickly for her liking he was pushing inside her, filling her wetness. It felt so good she forgave him his haste. They moved together, and Maggie felt her climax coming closer and closer.

But then Sean strained, cried out, and he pumped into her one last time. Oh, shit no, Maggie thought; her body was so ready, so desperate for release. His power washed over her, highlighting the intensity of his orgasm and the lack of hers.

Sean lifted his head and smiled down at her. 'Wow,' he whispered. 'Just ... wow.'

Maggie smiled, even as her body raged its disappointment. Settle down, she told her flaming nerve-endings.

She relaxed, wondering what he'd do. Perhaps he could go again, or go down on her, or maybe he'd be even more inventive?

She dismissed the first possibility when he pulled out of her. She remained calm as he spoke the words to ensure his sperm did not impregnate her – gadda had no need to practise safe sex otherwise, as infections and viruses were no match for their healing skills – and then cuddled her into his arms.

She kissed his shoulder, and pressed her clitoris against his hip, keeping the furious pulse of her desire alive.

Sean held her and stroked her back, and his emotions started to register as his power melded into hers. Her anticipation faltered then gave way to frustration as it dawned on her that he wasn't going to do anything to make her feel just as good. Not a bloody thing. She opened her mouth to tell him to get on with it but he stopped her words with a kiss.

'Unfortunately I have to go, I've got a meeting in the morning. But once that's over I'll come and take you out for lunch. This is the beginning of something wonderful, Margaret.'

'It's Maggie. And wonderful?' Maggie could barely believe what she was hearing. She could read the blossoming rightness and power within him – he had spoken the truth: he did feel that they had formed a special link.

'I knew you felt the same.' He kissed her again, got out of bed, and got dressed. Maggie raised herself onto one elbow and watched him with disbelief. How could he not know that she hadn't orgasmed? Or did he know but not care? She had had a handful of lovers in the past nine years and never had any of them left her without an orgasm.

Sean blew her one more kiss and then he was gone. Maggie flopped back onto the bed. He wasn't worth the effort, she decided, even as his certainty moved within her. She'd tell him so when he came to get her for lunch and within a week she'd be back in Australia and not have to worry about selfish Sean ever again.

Her body began to quiver with rage. Shame he didn't finished the job, she thought. She'd take care of it herself, if she wasn't far too angry to concentrate. Nice of him to make it so clear at the beginning that he was a total jerk – it saved her expending any time on him.

Maggie rolled over, punched her pillow and tried to relax. Then she rolled to the other side. Then she flopped onto her back and threw the doona off, scowling at the ceiling. Then she was back onto her side again and snuggling into the cover's comforting warmth. Soon, her body calmed, her mind stopped plotting ways to make Sean pay and eventually, she fell asleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

As dusk grew, the shadows in Lucas's apartment lengthened. Lucas squinted to see through the gathering gloom. He should get up to put a light on, but the experiment was going so well.

He lay on a trolley underneath a large metal platform, big enough to be a bed, and made the final adjustments to his latest attempt at a teleporter. After turning a screw to adjust two bits of metal until they were the perfect distance apart, he pushed himself out, rolling on the wooden floor until he was clear of the structure. He stood, pulled a car key from the pocket of his jeans and placed it in the middle of the platform.

Lucas walked over to the kitchen counter, which was covered with bits of wire and metal, screws and various tools. In the middle of the mess sat a computer screen and keyboard. He keyed in some instructions aimed at tricking the atoms making up the key into 'believing' they were in another place, and then turned around to inspect the platform. It began to shake, very gently. Lucas took a step closer, focussing his attention on the key. Was it starting to waver? Yes? No? He hoped to see it bleed into transparency as its particles started to reconfigure in the new location.

It should disappear and reappear on a matching platform on the other side of the room. He drew in a deep breath. Then the shaking increased and the platform began to rock.

‘Shit.’ Lucas typed furiously, trying to shut the apparatus down before it blew a fuse ... but it was too late. There was a pop and darkness descended.

Silence reigned and he became aware of how late it was, aware of the cold seeping into his body. Better get the power back on. When he’d replaced the blown fuse and come back in from the landing, he turned on the gas heater, picked up a screwdriver and began dismantling the platform. Dr Warren, the old quack who’d gotten him fascinated with science, would have been horrified to see Lucas dismantling an experiment. If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again, was Dr Warren’s maxim. Lucas had added to it: after the tenth attempt, however, pull the fucking thing apart and start again.

Now his concentration had been broken, his body decided it was free to complain about the long hours. His neck began to ache, his back became stiff and his stomach growled alarmingly. He checked the time on his computer. He’d just worked twelve-and-a-half hours non-stop. No wonder he felt like shit.

He grabbed a dinner from the freezer and noted he only had two left. He put the dinner in the microwave that stood on top of the fridge and started heating it. He moved over to his main computer and called up his diary. He added *cook* to the free two-hour slot on Thursday morning, then sat back and considered his calendar.

Most of his available time was taken up with teaching and marking. He knew passing on his love for physics to future scientists was a valuable thing to do, but he was starting to get over it.

The ringing phone interrupted his reverie.

‘Hello. Lucas Valeroso.’

‘Lucas, glad to get hold of you. It’s John O’Hara here, from Winton University, Australia.’

Lucas’s mind whirled into action. Winton was a world-class tertiary institution with an internationally renowned science faculty. John O’Hara had begun his own academic career as a talented chemist. ‘Professor O’Hara, an honour, sir. I read your report in the latest edition of *Quemular*. Fascinating stuff.’

Instead of preening, as experience had taught Lucas most academics would, John O’Hara scoffed. ‘Piece of fluff. Only wrote it as a favour to the editor. He needed a filler.’

Lucas lifted an eyebrow. If the man considered a well-researched and -written paper like that a piece of fluff, he would be a hard taskmaster. ‘What can I do for you, Professor?’

‘Well, Doctor, I want to offer you a position here at Winton.’

Lucas nodded. This made offer number thirteen. Everyone wanted the current Julius Edgar Lilienfeld Fellow. It would be interesting to see what this job offer was. ‘Tell me more.’

‘Research, Valeroso. Pure and simple. Don’t want you wasting your time in the classroom.’

Sweet Jesus. Was the man a mindreader? ‘No teaching at all?’

O'Hara snorted. 'You're not a teacher, you're a scientist. You need a place where your creativity can run free, where you have time to explore and discover.'

Lucas was beginning to like John O'Hara. 'I've heard good things about your science faculty.'

'Of course you have. I've worked bloody hard to build up my science staff. And it's going to get better.'

It might not be as good a career move as his other offers, but it was everything he actually wanted. A smile spread across Lucas's face, but he tried to keep his tone business-like. 'Can you e-mail me through a contract?' He gave O'Hara his e-mail address.

'Absolutely.'

'I'll read it, and then call you back.'

O'Hara gave his number in Australia and then hung up. Lucas finished his now-cold dinner and waited for the contract to arrive.

After printing it out and reading it, he realised he had to go with his gut instinct. He called John O'Hara.

'You've got yourself a researcher,' Lucas said, after O'Hara answered. 'When do you want me?'

'ASAP. I'll fix up the visa and when it's OK I'll book you some flights. Shouldn't take more than a couple of weeks. In the meantime, I'll organise for your belongings to be packed and shipped over, so they'll be here when you arrive, if you don't mind being without them for a while over there. We'll put you up at a hotel there as well while you wait, if you don't have family to stay with.'

Lucas looked wistfully at his apartment. The two platforms, one near the kitchen, the other standing

where his bed would pull down. There was a lot of work he could do in two weeks. But then, it would be better to be able to start as soon as he got to Australia. 'A hotel will be fine. I'll need to give notice here, and I've got some classes so I'll be able to keep busy enough and not miss my research.' Not too much, anyway.

'Terrific. Pack lots of shorts and T-shirts, my boy. It's summer over here and you're going to love it.'

As he hung up, Lucas thought that he might just love it, at that.