

## Chapter 1: FEARLESS AND FLAWLESS

Two weeks earlier, King Finbar, King of all the Fairies, had summoned Finn to his Palace of the Sidhe, deep within the Mount of Peace. Finn was worried – he had recently needed all his trickery and cunning to avoid losing his treasure to a family of humans in County Mayo. He knew it had been careless to let himself be captured, and he had only narrowly escaped with his gold. Being ordered to appear before the King of all the Fairies was no small thing at the best of times.

What fate was in store for him he knew not, but he was in dread of it as he was escorted to the throne room by a pair of stern-looking fairy guards.

King Finbar and his gracious queen, Maeve, hailed him as a brother, bidding him welcome and enjoining him to share their midday meal. Finn was surprised at such a warm and friendly greeting. His wonderment did not prevent him from enjoying an elegant luncheon of mushrooms, and chunks of bread spread with 'fairy butter', but his nervousness remained. When at length a second glass of mead had been poured, and mellow contentment spread throughout the court, King Finbar rose from the dais where he rested. Eyes shining and golden crown glittering, he put his hand on Finn's trembling shoulder and spoke. Finn kept his eyes firmly

shut, as though he could shut out the world by just not looking.

‘Finn, my son,’ he began. ‘You have done well. During the whole of my reign, you have not succumbed to trickery by human beings. I know you have been captured, but you have never had to surrender your gold. You are a most clever leprechaun. You are wise, intelligent and witty, skilled in shoemaking and knowledgeable in the ways of all creatures of the air, land and sea. Each year I award the Armband of the Fearless and Flawless to a leprechaun who demonstrates these traits. This year I award it to you.’

Trumpets sounded and bagpipes skirled. Finn was astonished. He opened his eyes. Into the throne room, a band of trooping fairies processed, with dignity and solemnity. Shouts and hurrahs rang out from the assembled

courtiers, and tiny red hats and green hats flew into the air. The red-jacketed fairy at the head of the parade held up a pillow. And upon the pillow sparkled the golden armband. The fairy orchestra heralded the ceremony with ‘Vibrato and Tremolo’, the kingly salute.

‘Rise up, O Finn!’ commanded the king. ‘Extend your left arm.’

King Finbar lifted the Armband of the Fearless and Flawless from its cushion and placed it upon Finn’s arm. It fitted securely, but not too tightly. Satisfied, he kissed Finn on both his cheeks, then held him in a kingly embrace. Queen Maeve enfolded him in her arms as well. The assembled crowd whistled and cheered wildly.

‘Congratulations, my brother,’ the Queen said to Finn. ‘Now I will bestow on you the gift that accompanies this award. During this



year of honour, you will have the power to change the life of one human being. You can right what is wrong, restore what is lost, and sanctify what is profane. Use this gift well. Remember, it can be used once and only once. The band around your arm will be a constant reminder, not only of your title but also of this gift. In twelve months return to us. We will celebrate and sing, and you will tell us the tale of what you did. It will cheer our hearts.'

Finn stood proudly in front of the fairy court as more mead was served. The dancing went on long into the night.

