

# ~ Masquerade ~

by Colleen

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**Author's Note:** This a just short, non spooky Halloween visit with some old friends.

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Henry the VIII trotted down the long hall, his buckled shoes screeching along the highly polished marble flooring. His opulent clothing rustled around his bulk. The bell rang for a second time as he reached the front door of his castle. A turkey leg was clutched in one hand so he grasped the handle in the other and pulled it open. He bellowed a jolly greeting to the family of four coming to the party.

A tall, dark haired pirate queen stepped inside, pointed to the roasted poultry gam and asked, "Hey Henry got any more of those; I'm starved?"

The royal man chuckled. "Aye, aye cap'n. The galley be that way."

Calamity Jane was dressed in brushed buckskin from blonde head to booted toe. She had, however, decided to forgo the fake six shooters. She stepped up and kissed the king on his pseudo bearded cheek. "Hi Dad. Looks like it's going to be a great party." The cowgirl shifted the baby elephant in her arms before the little pachyderm could grab for her grandpa's whiskers.

King Henry grabbed the little hand and kissed it. "Hello peaches," he said, his rumbling voice making the baby giggle. "You are even prettier than the last time I saw you."

"Which was last week Dad," Calamity reminded him.

With a baby monkey on her hip, the dashing pirate wrapped an arm around Calamity's shoulder and followed Henry down the hall. The suave swashbuckler was wearing a white blouse with flowing sleeves, an open black vest, tight black pants with a red sash hanging off her right hip and black knee high boots. Around her coal colored hair was a crimson headband with the two ends streaming down passed her right shoulder. And of course the appropriate gold earring. Her spouse had chosen the costume, wanting her pirate to be sleek and sexy, not scruffy and definitely not masculine. In return, the pirate had been allowed to choose the under garments which currently resided beneath the brown buckskin.

The lavish mansion was decorated for the October holiday with many different themed rooms. The dining room had taken a dip under the sea. A room for dancing had become a medieval

kingdom and then there was a typical Halloween area with bats, spiders and monsters.

Cleopatra excused herself from the Three Musketeers when she saw her grandchildren enter the room. "There they are," she called as she hurried to them. "Give me my grandbabies."

"We're fine too Mom," said the blonde. "Thanks for asking."

Cleo, who was known as Danielle Casey the rest of the year, turned to her daughter. "Erin, I love you dearly." She turned to the statuesque pirate. "You too Jamie. My friends know you, but they haven't met my beautiful grandchildren." Danielle took monkey Noah in one arm and Erin placed Jordan the elephant in her other arm and off she ran to show off her pride and joys.

Jamie Sheridan and Erin Casey ducked under the sea to get some much needed food. Superman was there, chowing down on his second plate of food. "Hey Brad," Erin said to the man with the big S, "where is my sister and your offspring?"

"Well, my two oldest are out in the back playing on the shipwreck your dad had built."

"It's not one of mine," pirate Jamie assured. She bent down and whispered in her wife's ear. "But my most treasured chest is right here beside me." Erin giggled and blushed slightly in front of her brother-in-law.

Brad was sure he didn't want to know what that was all about. "Bridget went to get little Frankie," he finished explaining.

"Who's Frankie?" Erin asked.

Superman pointed toward the doorway. The couple turned to see Wonder Woman entering the room. Toddling by her side, attached to her index finger was a tiny Frankenstein, complete with squared head and neck bolts. A pair of brown woolen pants and a black jacket finished his costume. The twelve month old was just learning to walk and his stiff legged gait was the perfect monster mannerism.

Erin laughed out loud. "Oh, how cute you are." She sat down and lifted her young nephew onto her lap, noticing the extra pounds he had over his twin cousins.

"Nice costume Bridget," Jamie said. She pointed to the gold rope looped at the woman's waist. "Does your super man always tell you the truth? Or do you have to use that on him?"

"The only time my man...of steel," she stressed, "lies is right next to me at night." Jamie groaned and made a face. Erin pretended like she didn't hear a word. "You guys are late," the redhead said, "the party started an hour ago."

Jamie made a different face. "You know how it is, a two hour drive with two nine month olds. Diaper stops, snack time..."

"Bathroom break for mama since she forgot to go before we left," Erin added, tugging on the embarrassed pirate's sash.

Jamie was saved from any further teasing when Peter Pan and Tinkerbell ran into the room. "Aunt Erin, Aunt Jamie," came the stereo calls.

Jamie viewed the boy dressed in varying shades of green with a little wooden sword in his belt. "Looking good little Pan man."

Conner puffed out his chest and grinned. He thought his Aunt Jamie was just so cool and loved it when she noticed him. And with that he decided he needed another cookie.

"You too Miss Bell," Erin said.

Tiny Frankie Stein grabbed for his big sister's magic wand. Aunt Erin took his wondering appendage before the inevitable, sisterly complaint. "What are you doing Matthew?" The tot giggled and kissed her on the cheek. Somehow he had learned that little deed would keep him out of trouble. Jamie turned to fix some plates of food for herself and her spouse, also helping Caitlin pore herself a cup of kid friendly punch.

"Where are the twins?" Caitlin asked after a sip of her fruity concoction.

Erin was still playing with Matthew, bouncing him on her lap. "Grandma has them somewhere," she replied.

"You might not get them back," Matthew said. "Last week Gramma took us to the church fair and we were the last ones to leave. Aunt Jamie, come with me out back and see this awesome pirate ship Grandpa made."

"Conner, let your aunts eat please," Bridget said.

Jamie winked at the anxious young man. "I'll come out and see it when I'm done buddy. We'll take some pictures of you in the crow's nest." That made him very happy and he ran off to wait. Jamie turned to her spouse and picked up their plates. "I'm gonna take these and find us a seat."

Erin handed off little Matthew to his wonder mom and they left to mingle some more. Erin joined Jamie who had already finished half of the roast beef sandwich and the other food on her plate. The blonde bent over and kissed the swashbuckler's dark head. "Thanks for waiting for me honey," she joked.

Jamie swallowed and wiped her mouth with a napkin. She looked back in chagrin. "Sorry babe."

Erin leaned down and kissed her. "You're forgiven." She licked her lips. "Mmm, horseradish."

Jamie grinned. "Care for another taste?"

Erin had a second helping and stayed for a third while slipping onto her wife's lap.

"Hey," a voice said, "there are kids in the room." Actually they had been alone in the dining room until then.

Erin instantly recognized the voice. She looked up and smiled, not the least bit embarrassed. "Well Anne, you and your wife could take some pointers...for when you grow up."

"Aunt Erin?"

"Hi sweetie," the cowgirl said and ran to hug her adorable goddaughter. Erin played playfully with little Sarah's braided pigtails, and then smoothed out her blue checked dress. "Someone's been watching The Wizard of Oz," Erin suggested.

"Over the rainbow," Sarah said with a smile. The girl, who had been born blind, had been with her adopted family for almost a year. Everyone fell instantly in love with the beautiful child.

"That's my favorite part," Erin agreed.

"Mama said we had to leave my Toto at home," Dorothy junior said in a totally bummed tone. The dog her mother had adopted had become instantly attached to the girl and watched over her carefully, even though never specifically trained to do so. Everyone who saw them together and heard the story called it a gift from God.

"Well, Mama knows best," Erin said. "Have you guys eaten yet?" she asked the girl's parents.

"No," said Anne Carson, who was dressed in a white, fur trimmed, full length dress. The self appointed winter princess took her daughter by the hand and helped her to a seat at the table.

"We'll watch Sarah," Jamie offered, "get some food and join us."

The leopard print clad Leah Curry kissed her daughter's head before joining her wife at the buffet. Sarah rattled on, as most youngsters do, about what she had been doing in school and the movies she had been watching...over and over again. She sang her cute renditions of her favorite Disney songs, giving Erin and Jamie a glimpse of their future with the twins. Of course there was also some adult conversation mixed as well.

\* \* \*

With five empty plates staring them in the face, the little group decided it was probably time to visit with the other guests, and Jamie had a promise to fulfill in the backyard. Caitlin came inside and promised to look after her friend Sarah, so Tinkerbell took Dorothy by the hand and they slowly walked to the playroom. Wonder Woman had also signaled that she would watch over them, so Anne and Leah felt very secure in letting her go. Having a handicapped child was challenging, but they both knew their decision to adopt the little girl had been the best one they'd ever made.

Jamie emerged into the grand backyard of the Brentwood mansion and was immediately transported to a grand pirate adventure. A tall, wooden ship had crashed against the rocks, its decks stocked with skeleton pirates and littered with chests full of coins and jewels. It has been cleverly constructed just behind the pool of blue water, which now had a wave machine installed to add to the illusion. Jamie spotted Peter Pan on the deck. Beside him, she also recognized the seated Jedi Master, swinging a lightsaber against imaginary foes. Suddenly a suave, blonde vampire appeared...with a plastic sword and battled Peter and the Jedi.

"Who's the bigger kid?" Jamie asked the woman also watching the playful scene.

"It's definitely a tie," Minda said. "He's been playing with Scottie and Conner for over an hour. Jamie, it's good to see you." The woman smiled and hugged the tall pirate. Jamie's friend, Chad Benson had been a lonely guy until he had met Minda Hale at an event at Jamie's ranch just a year earlier. They had an instant attraction and now they were engaged to be married before Christmas. Her nine year old son, Scottie was in a wheelchair due to a car accident, but loved playing with Chad. Plans were already in the works for the veterinarian to adopt Scottie right after the wedding.

"He's a great Dad," Jamie said. She was very happy for and proud of her friend.

"Aunt Jamie, hurry and take our pictures," Conner yelled, waving wildly from the deck of the schooner.

She climbed up on the pseudo ship and engaged in the pirate playtime. She took pictures and they all made a short movie, which Conner couldn't wait to show to his super parents.

"Permission to come aboard," a voice called from the ground.

Jamie looked down over the rail and waved at Indiana Jones. "Granted," the pirate queen answered. She moved to the top of the staircase and greeted her brother with a hug. "Good to see you Jeremy. How have you been?" Both siblings led pretty busy lives and hadn't had the chance to see one another in over two months.

"Pretty good," he answered. "Looks like you're having a good time."

Jamie grinned. "Oh yeah, I'm in the spirit."

Jeremy looked around, seeing only the one other adult and four kids. "Where are my favorite sister-in-law and the twins?"

"Oh, they're around. Katie's here too I guess."

At the mention of his girlfriend, Jeremy bit back a secret smile. "Can I talk to you alone for a minute Jamie?"

"Sure." They climbed down to the ground and walked to the back of the grassy yard where they had a seat on a marble bench. The sun was setting and Jamie saw the lights around the bustling patio pop on. She happened to look up at a second story window and saw her beloved and her son, who had obviously been watching Jamie playing on the ship. Both adults smiled joyously and mom waved little Noah's hand. Erin blew her spouse a kiss, and only when she walked away did Jamie return her attention to the man beside her. "What did you want Jeremy?"

He hesitated a moment and then pointed to where Erin had been standing. "I want that," he finally said.

Jamie was confused and slightly alarmed. "You want what?"

"I want what you have."

"Um..."

"You have it all Jamie. And I want to experience exactly that." Jeremy pulled a small box from his pocket and opened it. The diamond ring inside sparkled a hello. "I'm going to propose to Katie on Thanksgiving."

Jamie released a silly breath and gave an internal laugh at the ridiculous thought that had pricked her mind.

"Jamie," Jeremy said, "you've shown me how to cherish someone and to always put them first in my life. I know I want that lifetime commitment and everything that means. And everything that comes with it...including children."

A very excited sister hugged him. "That's great Jeremy! I'm so happy for you. And the ring is beautiful; she'll love it."

"I know I'm getting a little ahead of myself, but will you stand up for me? There's no one I'd rather have."

"Absolutely. I'll be right beside you little brother."

\* \* \*

Jamie walked back into the house, in search of her wife. King Henry saw her dash passed the doorway of the dance hall. He had been taking his precious granddaughter for a spin across the floor, but a sudden odor had him a bit panicky. "Jamie," he roared. The pirate backtracked and poked her head in the door. "I think this little lady could use a new diaper," Tim said. He kissed Jordan's pink cheek and handed her off to her mama. "I would have taken care of it, but it's been so long; Dani has always..."

"It's okay Tim," she laughed, "Jordan's become quite a little wiggle worm during diaper changes." Jamie tickled her daughter's tummy. "Haven't you pony girl? Noah, on the other hand,

just give him a toy and he'll study it for minutes, hardly realizing what's being done."

Jamie climbed the wide staircase and went into the fully supplied nursery that Danielle had created for sleepovers. With a surprising amount of cooperation, Jamie had a clean diaper in place just as mommy and the monkey walked into the room in need of the same thing.

"Look who's here Noah," Erin said. "You and your sister are in sync again." She unsnapped the brown suit as she asked her spouse, "Did you have fun honey?"

Jamie patted a buckskin covered bottom. "Not as much fun as I have with you," she said in a sexy voice. "And I intend to prove it later."

Erin picked up her now dry son and the plastic keys he was shaking. "Let's go feed our children buccaneer." She flashed the smile that she knew got Jamie hot. "I'll be counting the minutes until our playtime."

\* \* \*

With a couple of jars of baby food emptied, Erin and Jamie cleaned up their tots and checked the time. It was still pretty early and Erin knew her father liked to entertain well after dark. But they still had a drive out to the beach house, so Erin decided after one more hour they would say goodnight.

Darkness and chillier temperatures had driven all the children inside and Caitlin, leading Sarah by the hand, came in and asked, "Can Jordan and Noah come to the story telling? Katie is gonna tell some ghost stories from Ireland."

"Oh, that sounds like fun," Erin said. "We'll all go and listen."

\* \* \*

Almost twenty bodies filed into the large room, taking chairs that had been arranged in a semi-circle. The carved jack-o-lanterns sat the back of the room, glowing eerily through smiles joyous and wicked. Streamers and paper bats hung from the ceiling, swaying gently in the air current. A few, not too scary ghosts shimmered in the corners and a lone mummy greeted everyone at the door. Once everyone was settled in, the lights dimmed and a woman stepped into the open space and addressed her audience.

"Arguably no place in Ireland is as strange and eerie as the Burren of County Clare. The name 'Burren' comes from the Gaelic bhoireann, meaning "rocky place", and there is no other landscape like it in Europe. In parts of it the country takes on the quality of a lunar surface - vast areas of moss-covered limestone, thick with strange flowers and fauna, matched by great fists of rock rising out of the calcified surface as if to threaten the unwary traveler. This is also a land of druid stones, ancient forts, the ivy-clad tower-houses of long-vanished families and of deserted villages and overgrown roads. It is indeed a lonely and sinister place.

Because the Burren is composed of sedimentary rock, water comes and goes through it, creating

deep caves and fissures in its surface. There is a belief that they are the portals to the dark fairy world, near which ancient heroes slumber on their sentry duty. But let the interloper beware, for the slightest sound may stir them into action. Indeed, there are many local tales concerning those who have been so ill-advised as to trespass on their domain.

They say that there is a cave out on the Burren that only opens once in every seven years. Some would tell you that there is a grand treasure hidden there, but that it is unwise to enter it, for it is the abode of the fairies and the gold rightfully belongs to them. It is as well to leave it alone.

There was a man named MacMahon, a poacher, who lived over beyond Ballynalackin and he was out hunting very early one morning, near the old castle there, when he came upon the entrance to a cave that he hadn't noticed before. He had been chasing hares across the rocks when they had suddenly disappeared and, under a rocky overhang, he came upon the mouth of a tunnel, nearly hidden by long grasses. Now he was a curious man and, as he knew the locality well and had never seen this cave-mouth before, he was anxious to know where it went. He had heard old stories of hidden treasures far below the Burren and thought that there might be a lost fortune to be found if he were to explore further.

So, winding long grasses and dry hay into several crude torches which he was able to light with a bit of flint from his tinderbox, he went down into the cave and far beyond the clear daylight. The cave extended back into the rock, like a kind of passage, and MacMahon noticed that its walls seemed to be hung with ancient weaponry, partly gone to rust, and ancient shields marked with a long-vanished heraldry. The place was obviously very old indeed and a voice in the back of his mind told him to turn about and run. Yet, both greed and curiosity overcame the warning. If the cavern was indeed old, he reasoned, then it was quite possible that there would be a treasure of some sort near at hand." Katie was dressed, appropriately enough, as a slightly overgrown leprechaun. She spoke well and clearly, even with the fairly heavy Irish accent she had developed since articulating her first words in her birth land. Katie was on her way to becoming a teacher. And she was going to be a good one.

"He waded across a small stream," she continued, "which flowed through the passageway and crouched down to pass below a rocky overhang as he traveled on into the gloom. Not even his improvised torch gave him much light in this underground world. Squeezing through a narrow section of the rock, he suddenly found himself in a high vaulted chamber where stalactites hung down from the parts of the roof that he could actually see. As for the rest of the ceiling, it vaulted away upwards into the dark and was lost to view. The whole place suggested the style of some old hall or burial crypt of some mighty church. Holding up the last of the torches, which was already threatening to burn down, MacMahon examined the rocky walls around him, still convinced that treasure lay in the furthest recesses of the place.

He found no fortune, but he saw that the walls were black with soot, as if several fires had been lit against them. Here and there, bits of old armor and abandoned weapons had been scattered across the floor and lay in rough heaps close to the wall. Further along, he found a couple of ancient and primitive fireplaces where charred wood still lay, though it had been cold for a long time. How the smoke had escaped through the shadowy roof he couldn't tell, but it was evident that fires had burned here in times long past. Then, half-way up the wall, resting in a large niche



in the rock, he saw a large silver horn. It was long and curved and appeared to be carved with antique hunting and battle scenes. It lay almost beyond his grasp and, as he stretched up to take it down, MacMahon suddenly became aware that he was not alone in the cavern.

Although his torch had all but expired, his eyes had become accustomed to the gloom and a strange light seemed to glow from a kind of fungus which grew along the rocky walls. He turned around quickly and was amazed to see several figures lying stretched on the ground close to a pile of ancient weaponry, covered with furs and animal pelts. Massive double-headed axes and halberds lay within easy reach of them and, for a second, MacMahon thought that they were dead and that he had blundered into some prehistoric mausoleum, the grave of a Celtic king and his attendants.

As he gazed at them, he realized that they were in fact sleeping, for their chests rose in a strange, regular motion and he heard their deep, steady breathing. He paid them little attention, for their sleep seemed very sound, and turned his thoughts back to the silver horn. It was a fabulous thing and, by stretching a little more, he was able to seize it and lift it down. Standing in the gloom of the cavern, he imagined it even more valuable than he had at first thought, and wondered who had fashioned it and what it might sound like. It had clearly been designed for a man of larger proportions than an ordinary mortal. He was tempted to raise it to his lips and blow, yet heard a warning voice in the back of his head: `Take care, foolish fellow! Beware!'

But MacMahon was a stubborn man and, dismissing the threat, raised the horn to his lips and gave a blow. He could hardly produce a sound. It made but a tiny noise like the faint squawk of a goose. Even so, it seemed enough to trouble one of the sleepers for, with a groan, he stirred in his slumber and stretched himself slightly.

"Is it time yet?" he asked, in a voice that was deep and gruff, and which clearly had been unused to human speech for a long time. He made to rise and, in the dim light of the wall mosses, armor and with a great horned helmet on his head. With a shudder, the poacher realized that he had stumbled into the resting place of a band of ancient warriors - perhaps even the great Fionn MacCumhaill and his men - who were deep in enchanted slumber. The sound of the horn - low though it had been - had broken that sleep. His heart was fairly stopping within him but, in a trembling voice, he answered: "No, it's not time yet. Go back to sleep!"

Now, given the situation, he had displayed a surprising presence of mind. But the ancient warrior was persistent. Hoisting himself up onto one knee, he gripped the shaft of a rusted spear and looked out from under his helmet with red and glittering eyes.

"Then why have you disturbed our sleep?" he asked in hollow, ringing tones which reverberated from the rocky walls round about. To his increasing terror, MacMahon noticed that several of the other sleepers were now beginning to stir and he saw an ancient hand reach for a fallen sword lying nearby. Dragging himself up to his full height, the soldier took an awkward step forward. With a cry born out of pure horror, MacMahon dropped the horn and ran back towards the entrance to the cavern. With a throaty roar, all the warriors now began to stir and to stumble unsteadily to their feet. MacMahon ran along the dark rock passage, conscious of the horrid throng which followed him, gasping and leaping until he at last reached the cave entrance

through which he had come.

Once on the upper earth of the Burren, he fell exhausted to the ground whilst, behind him, the entrance closed with a sound like the clap of thunder. When he looked down at the arm which had held the horn, he found it withered, and it remained so until the day he died. But he had had a lucky escape and never more did he go poaching in the Burren close to Ballynalackin Castle. Who knows, but those ancient soldiers still sleeping somewhere out there may once again rise and..." Katie casually passed by Conner then suddenly she tickled him, "reach for you in your dreams!"

The appreciative crowd applauded and she began another spooky tale.

\* \* \*

Erin sang to the baby in her arms as she rocked back and forth in the comfortable chair in the corner of the nursery. They were both dressed in warm pjs and ready for bed. Noah sucked lazily at the bottle in his mommy's hand, but as an extra measure of security he had a tiny hand placed against hers, just so she didn't drop the bottle. His blue green eyes were drooping as her song and the background ocean noises lulled him into a land of baby dreams and nursery rhymes.

It was much too cold for an open window, but Jamie had rigged a microphone at the back of the house to bring in the live sounds of the crashing surf to both bedrooms. Erin still loved the beach house; it held so many memories. They tried to spend at least a few days a month there, wanting to expose the twins to the placid sand and beautiful water.

Jamie softly padded into the room; in her arms a snoozing baby girl who had already finished her nighttime snack. The tall mom kissed a chubby cheek then placed Jordan in one of the two cribs and pulled a warm, peach colored blanket over her small body. Jamie turned to find her wife watching her tender actions. Erin smiled silently then mirrored those actions, slipping Noah into the other baby bed. He peeked at her one last and she rubbed his belly for a few seconds, until she was sure he was going to stay asleep. Checking one final time that everything was in order, including the baby monitors, the parents left the room with an arm wrapped around the other's waist.

"Are you tired sweetie?" Jamie asked as she nuzzled the blonde head.

"No more than usual as the mother of twins." They stepped into their bedroom and Erin released a small gasp of surprise. The lights were dimmed, the Pacific sounding in the background. A tray was sitting in the middle of the bed; on it was a single rose, two tall glasses of milk and two small plates topped with sweet confections.

"Mom sent dessert home," Jamie explained.

Erin studied the delectable food with hungry eyes. "Well, I guess we shouldn't disappoint her."

They gingerly climbed onto the mattress and pulled the tray between them. One plate held a

generous piece of triple layer, raspberry filled white chocolate cake. On the other was an equal sized piece of caramel apple pie and a portion of milk chocolate boonana pudding topped with fresh whipped cream and dark chocolate shavings. They slowly traded spoonfuls of fruit, chocolate and cream. There was very little conversation, but a whole lot was being said. Two pairs of expressive eyes communicated the urges that had been building all day long as their make believe personas had teased and taunted with words and body language.

Jamie took a long, leisurely lick of the back of her spoon. "Now this is what I call a Halloween treat," she said.

"But Halloween isn't until tomorrow."

"Details," Jamie muttered as she removed the empty plates and glasses. With a quick movement, she grabbed Erin and gently pressed her back onto the mattress. She slipped under her lover's top and caressed the flat stomach, slowly inching upward. "I want to go trick or treating tonight," she stressed with a deep, ravenous kiss. With her other hand, Jamie reached beneath her pillow and pulled out the long red, silk sash from her pirate's costume. A pair of dark brows wiggled. "Let's go on another adventure cowgirl."

Erin ran her fingers through Jamie's thick, raven hair. "Loving you," she said, "being married to you is the greatest adventure every day of my life. I love you." She tenderly kissed Jamie's lips, never ever tiring of the smooth texture and delightful taste of the sweet flesh. She pulled back and her eyes suddenly darkened with emerald passion. "Take me..." Erin whispered the rest in Jamie's ear and brought her hands together near the headboard.

The expression on Jamie's face showed her surprise at the sheer eroticism of Erin's words. But she soon smiled and happily proceeded to fulfill the request.

**The End.**

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