



Land of a Thousand Dreams- An Emerald Ballad, **Book 3**

by B.J. Hoff

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Nelson Hall, Dublin, 1848

On the third consecutive day of disobeying the surgeon's instructions, Morgan took his harp along when he went to Finola's room....

It was an unnerving thing, seeing those glorious blue eyes opened wide, even turned in his direction, yet seemingly unaware of his presence. It made him feel invisible—and altogether helpless.

He stopped halfway through the doorway, waiting. Although Finola seemed to pay no heed whatsoever to his being there, there was always the danger she would stir and panic at his presence, just as the surgeon had warned.

He noted with satisfaction that her face, although still somewhat bruised, seemed to be healing nicely. Scrubbed of the excessive paint the women at Gemma's had taught her to use, she looked younger than before...and lovelier still. Her hands were folded atop the bed linen, her hair fanned out on the pillows. She appeared peaceful, and, although too thin by far, more fit than Morgan had seen her for weeks. Had it not been for the vacant stare and a certain slackness to her facial muscles, she would have looked to be enjoying a perfectly normal rest.

He had to knot his hands into fists to keep from reaching out to her, to smooth back the golden strand of hair that had fallen across her forehead. Instead, he sat, unmoving, speaking to her in soft, lulling tones.

As he spoke, he lightly plucked the harp. When he could no longer think of anything to say, he went on playing. Slow, quiet ballads at first, then a happier, carefree children's tune. Finally, he began to sing, at first so softly the words played over the bed like water lapping across small stones in a riverbed.

At last he turned his voice to the song he had written for her—"Finola's Song." The song of the beautiful, enchanted swan whose sorrowful lament was eventually transformed to a hymn of glory.

Finola moved among a tapestry of dreamscapes. She had rejected the real world. It was too real, too harsh, too painful.

At times the world of her mind, the new world that she was even now still creating, was also frightening and painful. Yet even the darkest of its ominous shadows were less forbidding than the pitiless reality of the other world...the real world.

She was walking beside a lake, watching the swans, listening to birdsong. In one hand she held a tin whistle. From time to time she stopped to imitate a bird's call, then went on.

The sun was going down, but there was still light for walking and gazing into the lake. Suddenly a shadow, wide and deep, fell across her path, and Finola started, whirling to look around her.

A huge black bird—no, not quite a bird, but a bird-like creature—sat beneath a large beech tree, watching her

The creature was nearly as tall as a man, and, perched as it was with its long, webbed wings folded at its sides, it took on the appearance of one of the hideous other-world beasts of the ancient legends. The small eyes locked on Finola were the color of slate and altogether lacking in expression.

Frozen by fear, Finola saw the sinister creature take a step with one large, clawed foot. Slowly, with a rush of air, it spread its wings and stood, poised, not to fly, she sensed, but to spring at her in attack.

Suddenly, as if the sun itself had recoiled in horror and fled the sky, the last light of evening trembled, then went out.

Panicked, Finola tried to scream, but no sound came. She looked around in desperation for help, but there was no one. She was alone.

As she watched, the bird's beak opened, and the thing seemed to smile—a terrible, menacing rictus of evil.

A shudder of cold terror seized Finola. At that moment, she realized that this loathsome creature, obviously bent on her destruction, somehow embodied the whole of her worst

fears. Whatever evil she might have imagined, whatever danger she had ever sensed lurking in the night—every horror that had ever struck her with dread—faced her now, in the form of this dark abomination.

She whipped around to run, but there was nowhere to go. She was surrounded by dark forest and lake water.

Her only hope was the lake. Somehow she knew the vile bird-creature could not touch her in the lake. She would go to the lake with the swans. She would become one of them.

Finola, the enchanted swan...

She tossed the tin whistle onto the ground, then slowly walked into the lake, where the swans were waiting. In the pale glow of the water, she saw the vast, dark shadow above her, circling, heard the grinding of wings, the angry screeching....

She followed the swans into the middle of the lake, and felt herself changing, diminishing in size, becoming more graceful and fleet. Drifting now, gliding over the lake, a peace began to settle over her.

Overhead, the huge wings beat the wind...swooping...hovering...watching. Finally the shadow lifted, then disappeared altogether.

She was safe. For a time, Finola glided with the swans, serene, comforted by the cool, placid water all around her, the stillness and peace of the lake.

But now the swans broke away, began to move swiftly toward the shore, as if in answer to a call.

Alone in the middle of the lake, wondering, curious, but not yet frightened, she waited and listened.

The sound at first seemed to come from the forest. Softly, so softly she thought she might be imagining it...but, no, it was closer now, clearer.

A voice. The sound of singing...

At last Finola followed after the swans, gliding across the quiet, glowing lake in search of the Singer.

As she approached, the other swans parted, allowing her to move among them, then past, toward the shore.

As she approached the shore, Finola became aware that the voice of the Singer was calling to her...only to her...calling her to leave the lake...to come to him....

Suddenly Finola looked up, above the forest, and saw the dark shadow looming over the trees. The demon bird was still there, waiting...waiting for her.

Terrified, she started to turn back, then stopped. The Singer was still calling to her, and, unable now to turn away, Finola began to drift toward the voice...toward the song...toward the Singer....

The shadow dipped lower, the whirring of wings grew louder. If she left the lake, the creature would be waiting for her, lurking in the forest.

If she stayed on the lake, she would be safe. But she would never reach the Singer, never hear his song again.

Leave the lake! whispered her heart. *Leave the lake...go to the Singer....*

Go to the Singer....

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