


The Maiden of Ireland

By Susan Wiggs

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#1 New York Times bestselling author Susan Wiggs sweeps readers away to the misty coast of Ireland in an irresistible tale of falling in love with the enemy...

John Wesley Hawkins was condemned to hang, accused of treason and heresy. As he's transported to the scaffold at Tyburn, however, the Lord Protector steps in and offers him the hand of mercy—if Wesley agrees to travel to Ireland on a dangerous mission into the heart of the Irish resistance against English rule. He'll have to seduce the rebels' secrets from a headstrong Irishwoman, but that shouldn't be a problem for a man of Wesley's reputation....

Caitlin MacBride is mistress of the beleaguered Irish castle Clonmuir, and she makes no secret of her loyalty to her countrymen. She's determined to remain strong for her people, but a wish for true love one evening at sunset yields the one thing that may sway her resolve. When Wesley walks out of the mist that fateful night, Caitlin's faith in the magic of Ireland is briefly restored—until she discovers he's one of the treacherous Englishmen she has spent her life fighting against.

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The Maiden of Ireland By Susan Wiggs Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #638670 in Books
- Published on: 2014-08-26
- Released on: 2014-08-26
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.64" h x 1.11" w x 4.15" l, .41 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 448 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

"Susan Wiggs is a superb storyteller." -RT Book Reviews

"A classic beauty-and-the-beast love story that will stay in your heart long after you've turned the last page."
--New York Times bestselling author Kristin Hannah on *The Lightkeeper*

"Wiggs has a knack for creating engaging characters, and her energetic prose shines through the pages." --
Publishers Weekly on *Enchanted Afternoon*

"Susan Wiggs delves deeply into her characters' hearts and motivations to touch our own." --Romantic Times
on *The Mistress*

"[Wiggs] has created a quiet page-turner that will hold readers spellbound as the relationships, characters and story unfold. Fans of historical romances will naturally flock to this skillfully executed [Chicago Fire] trilogy." --Publishers Weekly on *The Firebrand*

About the Author

Susan Wiggs is the author of many beloved bestsellers, including the popular *Lakeshore Chronicles* series. She has won many awards for her work, including a RITA from Romance Writers of America. Visit her website at www.SusanWiggs.com.

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Castle Clonmuir, Connemara, Ireland

"He's thrown me out!" Magheen MacBride Rafferty's wail keened through the great hall, startling lazy hounds and drawing stares from the castle folk. "'Tis a mad and cruel man he is. My husband of only a fortnight has cast me from his house!"

Caitlin MacBride folded her hands on the blackthorn tabletop and regarded her sister. "What do you mean, Logan's cast you out?"

Magheen spread her arms in a gesture of high drama. She reminded Caitlin of a young willow, albeit one with a temper. "Sure amn't I here?" Lifting the back of her hand to her brow, she sank to the bench opposite Caitlin. "I would rather fall down ice cold and eternally dead than come to you, but he left me no choice. You must help me. You must!"

"Why did he send you home?" Caitlin asked, her voice low because of the avid listeners. Tom Gandy, the steward and self-styled bard, looked on with the interest of a bettor at a cock fight. Rory Breslin, who served as both armorer and marshal, set aside the harness he was braiding. Liam the smith put his finger to his lips to shush the brood of children who cavorted with the shaggy wolfhounds at his feet.

Only Seamus MacBride, chieftain of the sept and Caitlin's father, paid no heed to the drama at the round blackthorn table.

"He sent me home because I refused to share his bed," Magheen stated loudly.

"And you blame him for sending you back?" called Rory Breslin. The other men chuckled in agreement.

Magheen gave a magnificent toss of her head.

Caitlin pressed her hands hard on the table and prayed for patience. "Why? I thought you loved him well."

"I do! What woman wouldn't? The fault's upon your head. You should have told me what Logan demanded as dowry."

"I didn't think you'd be interested," Caitlin said calmly.

"You knew I'd be affronted," Magheen shot back. "Twelve head of cattle and a booley hut besides! Sure that's the price a man demands to take a lesser woman to wife. Logan should be satisfied with me alone."

"Logan Rafferty is a great lord and a man of business," said Caitlin. "Even for you, he asked a dowry." And he was a blessed fool to divulge the amount, she reflected.

Magheen buried her face in her slim white hands. Her shawl slipped back, revealing a sleek blond braid coiled over her head. She was as comely as a primrose, as demanding as a queen.

"Did you ask him to waive the dowry?" Caitlin inquired with a twinge of hope. She had pledged more than she could afford to Logan and despaired of paying it.

"Of course. But he won't listen to me. You've got to put reason in that big thick knob of his."

"The problem is between you and Logan."

"Then the MacBride must settle it," said Magheen.

Caitlin glanced at Seamus, who gazed with feverish concentration at his book of hours. "Daida can't."

"You're as cold as Connemara stone," Magheen snapped. "You don't know what it's like to love a man."

Ah, but I do, thought Caitlin, closing her eyes for a moment. Ah, I do...

"Caitlin MacBride!"

She opened her eyes to see a familiar figure striding toward her. Light from the yard outside limned his broad shoulders, narrow hips, and mane of curly black hair. Spurs jangled like discordant bells with every step he took. His long beard, parted and braided, brushed against his massive chest.

"Eek!" Magheen leaped to her feet and hitched up her skirts. "Stay away from me, Logan Rafferty!"

"Sure I wouldn't have you for thirteen head of cattle and two booley huts!" he shouted.

"Well!" Magheen planted her hands on her hips. "You won't be having me at all." She started toward the privy apartments at the rear of the hall.

"Don't you dare leave," Caitlin said.

"I'll not be after suffering the insults of this greedy *spalpeen*." Magheen walked down the length of the lofty hall, hips swaying, looking over her shoulder in blatant defiance.

Logan watched with longing and regret on his face, but he stood his ground.

From the women's corner, spinning wheels whirred to a halt. A sense of waiting hung in the peat-scented air.

Shoving aside an inquisitive wolfhound, Logan reached the table and stopped. Caitlin inclined her head slightly. "Logan." Although he was her overlord, she addressed him informally. To do otherwise would have seemed strange, for she had grown up in his shadow, hitting short of the mark when she could have hit dead center, losing horse races she could have won, stumbling over poems she could have recited perfectly—all to save the vast male pride of Lord Logan Rafferty.

She had grown accustomed to deferring to him. But she would never grow accustomed to the bitter taste of it.

He eyed Magheen's slowly retreating figure. "A handful, that one." His gaze drifted to her derriere. "Two hands full."

Caitlin faced him squarely across the table. "You've come about my sister?"

"Ah, it's all business you are. You're twenty-two years old, Caitlin MacBride. You'll wither on the tree like an unplucked rowanberry."

His sympathy was as insubstantial as the mist over the mountains. Logan cared not a dram for her unmarried state.

Unmoved, she said, "I know I owe you Magheen's dowry and that I'm in arrears." She slid a glance at her father, who sat poring over his book and looking lost, as he had since the castle chaplain, Father Tully, had mysteriously disappeared just after Magheen's wedding two weeks earlier.

Help me, Daida. She tried to convey the silent message to him, but he continued his quiet study.

"Can payment wait until the calving?"

"I've been waiting. And Magheen won't give herself to me on credit." Mirth rose from the men at the hearth. "My people have gone without Clonmuir milk and meat since Easter." Looking for accord, he glared at the men. "And I've gone without my husbandly privileges."

Caitlin drew a deep breath. Drastic troubles called for drastic measures. "I've the best stable of ponies in Connemara," she said. "Will you accept a mare and a stallion?"

"The Clonmuir ponies do tempt me. But I'll not be taking them. They're only more mouths to feed." Logan leaned toward her. His black beard brushed the table. "And what are you doing with so much fine horseflesh, eh?" he asked softly.

She prayed he would not guess her secret. "The stable has been the pride of the MacBrides since the time

before time. I'll not be turning them out because of a few lean years."

His thick eyebrows clashed. "You're putting the welfare of Clonmuir horses before that of your own dear sister."

She pressed her lips together, thinking of Magheen, of her other people, women and babies—sweet Saint Brigid, so many babies!—who depended on her. "Give me a week. I'll send you a bullock as a token of my good intent."

"What of *my* good intent?" Exuding the proprietary air he had been born with, Logan put out a hand and caressed her cheek. "I've offered a solution if you would but agree."

"Have a spark of sense. You're married to my sister."

His coal-black eyes kindled with annoyance. "By Christ's holy rood, I have no marriage with Magheen."

She glared at him through the light fog of peat smoke. "You could have, if you'd reduce your demands."

"Never," he stated. "A lord can ask no less."

"And I can do no better until the calving." She gathered up her papers. "One healthy bullock. Conn will bring it to you."

His fist crashed down on the table, hammering for attention. "It's not a bullock I want, but a wife!"

"You'll have her, I promise. But she's nearly as unreasonable as you."

The wail of a baby laid siege to any reply Logan might have made. The quality of the cry was unmistakable. Only hunger could give that earsplitting edge to a child's cry.

Yet another family of starvelings had reached Clon-muir. Forgetting Logan, Caitlin hurried to welcome them.

Magheen was already there, cradling the baby in the crook of one arm and motioning urgently with the other for someone to fetch milk. Worrying the brim of his caubeen with his fingers, a man approached Caitlin. "You are lady of the keep?"

No one ever mistook her for an underling. Wondering why, she said, "Yes," and smiled reassuringly. "Welcome to Clonmuir."

"Talk is, your hearth is open to such as us."

Caitlin nodded. Behind her, she heard the sounds of plates and utensils. The scenario had been repeated so many times that the servants needed no instructions. "Warm yourselves by the fire," she invited.

As the family trudged past, she looked into their nearly senseless eyes. In the hollowed depths she saw suffering beyond imagining, sorrow beyond bearing, horrors beyond believing.

And she knew, with a painful twist of her heart, that these wretches were the lucky ones.

The unlucky ones lay in ditches, prey for wolves or—aye, she'd heard it said—starving Irish.

Damn the English. The curse trembled silently through her. "Still taking in strays, are you?"

She turned to Logan. "And what would you have me do?"

"I'd have you meet my price, Caitlin MacBride, or the marriage is off for good." With that he strode out into the yard, whistled for his horse, and rode toward his home of Brocach, twenty miles to the north.

Caitlin rubbed her temples to soothe away a dull throb of pain. Unsuccessful, she went to see to the needs of her guests.

Ten minutes later a youthful voice called from the yard. "My lady!" Hoofbeats thudded on the soddy ground.

"Curran," she said, picking up the hem of her kirtle.

She rushed down the long length of the hall, past the women at their spinning, past her father, past a group of children playing at hoodman blind. Not one of them, she knew, felt the pounding sense of trepidation that hammered in her chest.

She felt it for them as she always had. They never feared news from Galway, even in these dangerous times. In every sense save the formal one she was the MacBride, chieftain of the sept, and she wore their fears like a postulant wears a hair shirt.

A fast ride and a sharp wind had whipped up color in Curran Healy's already swarthy face. He swung down from his tall, muscular pony and bowed slightly to Caitlin.

"What news, Curran?" she asked.

"I've been to the docks," Curran said in a strained tone. He was but fourteen and lived in dread of his voice breaking.

"Devil admire you, Curran Healy, I told you never to stray to the docks of Galway. Why, if a healthy lad like you fell into the hands of the English, they'd geld you like a spring foal."

He shuddered. "I swear not a soul marked my passing. I saw merchants—"

"Spanish ones?" she asked on a rush of air. Anticipation thrummed through her so sharply that it hurt. Months, it had been, since she had heard from him.

"English." He rummaged in his satchel. "My lady, and the great God forgive the sin upon my head, but I stole this."

She snatched the sealed parchment from his hand. "This is a bonded letter." She whacked the youth on the chest with the packet. "Great is the luck that is on you, Curran Healy, for I should have you flogged for endangering yourself."

He pulled at the pale sprouts of hair growing on his chin. "Ah, my lady, sure there's never been a flogging at Clonmuir."

Defeated by his logic and her own curiosity, Caitlin opened the letter. "It's from Captain Titus Hammersmith to." She bit her lip, then spoke the hated name. "To Oliver Cromwell."

"What's it say, my lady? I don't read English."

She scanned the letter. On feet of ice, apprehension tiptoed up her spine. *I shall extend every courtesy to your envoy who is coming to solve this great matter... The covenant of this mean tribe of Irish is with Death and Hell! By the grace of God and with the help of this excellent secret weapon, the Fianna shall be as dust beneath the bootheel of righteousness...*

"What's an envoy?" asked Curran.

Fear tugged at her stomach. She forced a smile. "It's something like a toad."

"Can't be. Legend is, that if you bring a snake or toad to Ireland by ship, the creature will flop over and die."

"No doubt Cromwell's toad will do just that."

"And if he—it—doesn't?"

She shook back her heavy mane of hair. There had not been time to plait it this morning. There was never time to behave like a lady. "Then the Fianna will have to ride again."

"What of this talk of a secret weapon?"

She laughed harshly. "And who—or what—on this blessed earth could possibly defeat the Fianna? We'll see that happen when the snakes return to Ireland!"

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