



LIFE WITHOUT RAINE
By Michele R. Bardsley

Prologue

***THE PAST 11th
Century, England***

Connor Williams had to wait.. .had to stay coherent enough to say the word that would make her hate him.

As his hands memorized her body, he drank in these last moments of enjoyment with his wife. God knew he loved her. But if she stayed, she would fight by his side. Last night, he'd sought the witch's counsel; the old woman had given him little hope he could untangle himself from Solomon's wicked plot.

Her hands slid up his chest, her firm body writhing under his touch. He could not lose his beloved to death. This was the only way



to be sure she would leave—and live. She'd find another husband. The thought of her giving her body, her soul, to another man pained him so much that he stopped stroking her clit and cupped the most intimate part of her. She moaned and rubbed her slick flesh against his palm. She knew only ecstasy—not his anguish. Never would she know that.

Only this.

He trailed soft, slow kisses down the curve of her stomach; he paused at the thought she might carry his child. He pressed his lips against her belly and prayed to the goddess that his wife—and any child born from their love—would live long, happy lives.

Sweat dewed her pale skin; he licked the tiny droplets, drawing patterns on her pale flesh with his tongue before parting her trembling thighs so that he could taste her. Her swollen clit was as succulent as a ripe berry, and just as sweet. He tugged the morsel between his lips and suckled. She arced against his mouth, her restless hands plundering his hair.

"Please, Connor," she begged, pushing her honeyed cunt against his mouth.

He slid his hands under her ass and pulled her close, breathing in her woman's scent. It was as earthy and intoxicating as the scent of the forest after a long rain.

Yes. This was the scent of Raine.

He stroked her with his tongue, torturing her clit with tiny, brief suckles. She moved against his mouth, taking her pleasure with the same innocence and wonder as she'd done the first time she had lain with him.

Was it only a fortnight ago they had wed?



She stilled, arched, and cried out as she came, her juices coating his chin and cheeks. He soothed her cunt with long strokes, sipping from her woman's honey. Her hands were wrapped in his hair holding him hostage until she collapsed to the bed. He bent low and reluctantly rubbed his face against the coverlet. He loved her juices, loved the smell, the taste.. .but 'twas unseemly to kiss her with a pussy-wet chin.

She pulled at his shoulders, her smile one of feminine satisfaction.

"I am not done yet, my lord," she purred, drawing him up her body. He positioned himself above her and slowly entered. She was wet and ready and tight...he closed his eyes and moaned. He had no power to utter a word. Another stroke sent more pleasure rippling through him. She pulled him close, grasping with hungry little hands; her body arched against him and he thrust harder and faster, her breathy moans battered away at his control.

**One last gift for his
wife. One...last...gift...**

"Connor!"

The pulsations of her orgasm tugged at his cock and he savored every one. He slowed his movements. He did not deserve the completion he wanted. He did not deserve to sow his seed and leave her with a fatherless child.

She moved her hips, her hands sliding to grasp his buttocks. "More," she whispered in his ear, her breath feathering his lobe. "More."

It was time.

Despair knotted his throat, but he managed to whisper, "Loralee."



She stilled underneath him then her small hands pushed against his chest. He rolled off of her and, though it killed him to see the betrayal and hurt glittering in her blue eyes, he gave her a lazy smile. "Something wrong, my love?"

"Who is—who is Lorelee?"

"An acquaintance."

"Of the past?" Hope lighted the sheen of tears in her eyes.

"If you call the last two nights the past," he replied, looking down at the coverlet. His jaw clenched at her gasp. *Raine*, his soul cried out, *forgive me*.

"You were hunting with Solomon."

"I was hunting Lorelee. I visit her quite a bit, my love. Surely you didn't expect me to end other liaisons after our marriage?"

She pulled the coverlet up to her breasts. "I hoped I would be enough for you."

You are. He went up into flames every time he touched her. "I have a big appetite. I cannot eat at the same table every night and remain satisfied." He hoped she did not notice how his voice cracked on the lie.

She scrambled off the bed and hurriedly donned a shift. Candlelight flickered and he saw drops of light in the deep night of her hair. *Like a raven's wing*.

"I honor my marriage vows, my lord. I neither wished to marry you nor wanted to love you. However, I have done both. I will no longer warm your bed. Your mistresses will have to do."

"We will bed together, wife. It is your duty to bear my sons. In time, you will learn to accept my other women."



"I will not." Her expression tightened with anger. Relief at the return of her spirit flooded through him. He'd feared she would accept him sleeping with other women. No, the Raine that stood before him now was the proud, defiant beauty he'd found in the woods a lifetime ago, willing to fight him with only a dull knife and her keen wits. Pain clenched his heart. How would he live without her?

At least he had the comfort of knowing she would live. Of that, he'd made sure with his trip into the forest.

"Connor, I cannot stop loving you, but I will not sleep with you again."

"You will be mother to my children." He ran a hand through his hair. "'Twould be nothing to hold you prisoner long enough to do what 'twas necessary."

"I do not know you." Tears spilled down her cheeks and Connor wanted to take back all that he had said. He pressed his lips together and sent her an indifferent look.

"I am tired of your clinging ways, woman." He forced himself to yawn. "Our love play was fun, but now I am bored."

"And I am a fool."

Through hooded eyes he watched her leave. As the door shut behind her, he knew he had driven away his only happiness forever.

Chapter One

THE PRESENT
21st Century,
England

"Forbiddin' isn't it, Miss? Sure you want to stay here?"

Raine Sinclair looked at the taxi driver, a grizzled character with



greasy gray hair and faded blue eyes. "I've come too far to turn back now."

"I'll get your bags then."

Raine got out of the tiny cab, shut the door, and leaned against it. She clutched the invitation to her chest as she stared at the forbidding castle. Dark clouds hovered above it, threatening another storm. Rain had pummeled the cab most of the long drive. A chill wind swept across the craggy hillside, rattling the stiff grass; it surrounded Raine, stroking her face with cold fingers.

She shivered. What was she doing here?

She opened the invitation and read it again, though she'd long since memorized it. The strong scrawl on the thick cream paper seemed so familiar to her—even though she'd never received a handwritten note from Michael Connors before. They'd e-mailed each other over the past six months, ever since she found out she was the heir to this pile of rocks. He'd always been polite and impersonal—acting just the way a proper British barrister should. Then two days ago, a FedEx package arrived at her office, and to her surprise she found this handwritten note, plane tickets, and a map to the castle.

The note insisted she must arrive before the next full moon. He hadn't given her much time. The full moon would rise tomorrow night. She wondered if she'd be required to wear a wreath of exotic flowers and dance naked around a bonfire. She glanced at the castle. "I don't want you that much."

The wind howled as if giving voice to her distress. It whipped about her, loosening her hair from its clip. The strands tickled her neck and she swiped them away. Why had she followed his



instructions? She'd taken leave of her job—not to mention her senses—just to be here.

Her gaze caught the last line. *I will be waiting for you.*

And I for you, my love... Raine blinked. Where had that thought come from? She smiled. Maybe she'd harbored a tiny romantic fantasy of meeting some English duke. Her overactive imagination had plenty of fodder these last few months to create any number of scenarios. A mysterious inheritance. A rendezvous with a stranger. A woman facing her destiny. She shook her head and chuckled. She was as nutty as one of her Aunt Giselda's fruitcakes.

"All I need is sleep, food, and a good therapist."

"What's that, Miss?" The taxi driver sent her a curious look as he placed her suitcases near the faint edge of the path leading to the castle.

"Nothing."

"Miss, this place be haunted. You're sure, now, about stay in'?"

"I hope so."

The deep voice startled Raine. A tall man walked toward them from the direction of the castle.

"Where the hell did he come from?" muttered the cabbie.

Good question. Raine had been staring at the note more than the castle, so he could have been making his way down the hill, but surely she would have seen him before now. He had appeared out of nowhere.

This place be haunted.

His boots squelched against the wet ground. As he drew near, Raine's heart leapt in her chest. The man was gorgeous. Broad-



shouldered, well-muscled—all over, if the fit of his jeans were any indication—and definitely not the doddering old gentleman she'd envisioned.

He had a face blessed by the gods—chiseled good looks, like the male models in magazines she and her female co-workers oohed and aahed over at lunchtime. His eyes were gold, no, green...she couldn't really be sure. His expression was one of tenderness. How odd. He stopped in front her, his gaze filled with happiness and hunger and a hint of sadness. Her heart cried out in gladness; joy wrapped around her.

She knew him. Somehow, she knew this man she'd never met.

"Blessed be. It's you." The voice wasn't hers, but it came out of her mouth.

He caught a strand of hair and tucked it behind her ear. "I've waited a long time, my love."

Raine shuddered, then tried to shake away the strange feelings enveloping her. "Who are you? What's happening?"

She felt woozy and grabbed the hood of the cab to steady herself. The note fluttered to the ground and he picked it up. When he straightened, his face revealed none of the emotions she'd seen just seconds ago. Had she imagined his reactions to her?

"I'm Michael Connors, Ms. Sinclair. Let's get you inside. I'm sure the trip wearied you."

"The taxi driver—"

"Don't worry about it. The housekeeper has tea waiting for you."

A cup of coffee sounded better than tea, but all she wanted to do was collapse onto a bed and sleep. She started toward the stone Goliath that would be hers in forty-eight hours. An aching sorrow



crept through her. She stumbled, feeling an unaccountable desire to cry. Not just to cry, but to wail. Grief invaded her; her limbs felt weighed down, her heart filled with loss. She stopped climbing the hill and tried to calm herself.

Don't leave him again. He'll die.

The words made no sense. Leave whom again? She looked over her shoulder and watched Mr. Connors pay the taxi driver. The old man waved to her, then got into the car and drove away. Raine walked a few more steps, but the feelings of despair deepened. Her breath left her body in a whoosh as she dropped to her knees. Small rocks dug into her jeans; she sank into the cold mud. Tears scalded her cheeks.

What the hell was going on? She wiped away the tears and struggled to rise. Her legs trembled, but at least she was able to stand on her own two feet. Barely.

Keep close to him. Evil lurks nearby.

Raine turned and watched Mr. Connors maneuver her two small bags under one arm and then grab the big suitcase. As he started up the path, he noticed her. "Rai—Ms. Sinclair, is something wrong?" His gaze fell to her muddied jeans. "Did you fall? Are you okay?"

He put down the baggage and jogged to her. He brushed back her loose hair, then hesitated. "I'm sorry. I'm being too forward."

In his presence, everything seemed all right. The sorrow holding her hostage faded, overtaken by the peculiar joy she'd felt when he introduced himself. She leaned close, put a hand against his cheek, and smiled. "Are you now, my lord?"

"Raine."



"Aye." Raine blinked. She felt fuzzyheaded and weak. "What the—"

"It's okay, Ms. Sinclair. You fell and I was trying to help you."

"I don't feel well." Nausea roiled in her guts; she clutched her stomach.

"You need some sleep." He lifted her into his arms.

"Whoa! What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm taking you to the castle and putting you to bed. I'll come back for the luggage."

"Mr. Connors—"

"Michael."

"I'm perfectly capable of walking."

He looked at her. "Please?"

The soft plea melted her resistance. His eyes held that same tender look she'd seen lovers share. A look she'd never had cause to share with anyone in her whole twenty-seven years. She should feel very uncomfortable being hauled up the hill in a stranger's arms, but instead, she relaxed and, heaven help her, snuggled close, enjoying the warmth and strength of Michael's arms.

The whole thing seemed like it had happened before. Yes. He'd carried her this way many times. He liked holding her this way; liked the feel of her in his arms, the way she laughed and pretended to fight him as he hurried to their bedchamber. Exhaustion poured through her. She'd gone from the airport to the cab to the castle...she was so tired. Her eyes drifting shut, she laid her head against his chest and let the steady rhythm of his heart lull her to sleep.



* * * * *

The corridors hid untold dangers. She knew her life was in peril, but fear for her husband propelled her onwards. She wished she had a torch, but dared not risk being found by Solomon. No matter that the one she loved did not love her — she would not see him killed. Hurt still churned inside her, and the damnable love she could no more control than she could control the moon and the stars.

She made it to the door. Her heart pounded, her palms were slick with sweat. What if Lorelee or another wench slept next to him? Had it only been two days since he'd shredded her heart? Two days since she packed her belongings with every intention of leaving here the way she had arrived—under the cover of night. And here she was sneaking to his bedchamber instead of to the stables, but she couldn't leave without warning him. She entered the room and shut the door behind her. The light of the dying fire offered some visibility. No one but Connor occupied the bed. Relief weakened her knees.

Her husband slept on his stomach. The coverlet concealed him from the waist down, but she knew every battle scar, every muscle, every wicked line on his body. For a moment, she allowed herself the luxury of gazing at his backside. Then she realized something was wrong. Fear chilled her. Surely he breathed. She simply could not see...she rushed forward, caring not if she woke him and invoked his wrath. But he did not stir. She tugged on his shoulder—still he did not wake. Grabbing his arm, she managed to roll him over. His beautiful eyes stared unseeing at the ceiling, a gaping knife wound in his heart. Blood covered his chest, the furs, her hands.

No! No! No!



An ungodly wail echoed in the room.

"Connor!"

*** * * * ***

"Connor!" "I'm right here, love."

Michael rose to greet the woman entering his room. Raine fell into his arms, sobbing.

"He killed you. Oh my love! I am lost."

He scooped her up and sat down on his bed. Her keening cut him to shreds. In the throes of the nightmare that led her to him, she hadn't realized she was in his bed, curled in his arms like a frightened kitten. The fire in the hearth crackled, the flickering light shadowing her beautiful face, so much like... "Oh God, Raine. I never thought I'd find you."

He traced the curve of her jaw and smiled. Would she honor wedding vows spoken eight hundred years ago?

She clutched at him, still reliving the moment she'd found his body in this room in this castle so many centuries before.

Her lips sought his. Blind in her need, gripped by the memories of a life long past, she sought his comfort.

He could not resist the taste of her lips. Ah, how familiar the curve of her mouth, her sweetness just the same as he remembered.

Their last parting pained him still. Tonight, he would begin his apology to her. Seek her forgiveness. Show her his eternal love.

Her small hands fluttered around his shoulders as if unsure where to land. He clasped them and lowered her to the bed. Her hair fanned out over the pillows and he picked up a strand and



rubbed it between his fingers. Still as black and as soft as a raven's wing. He leaned forward and inhaled. It smelled of lavender and mint—the same scents she'd used so long ago.

She moaned, seeking him, her eyes closed, her mind lost in dreams and memories.

Tears trickled down her pale cheeks. He kissed away those remnants of sorrow then covered her mouth with his own. She returned his kisses with desperation that spoke of her need for him.

His heart rejoiced.

"Raine," he whispered against her lips.

"Love me, my lord." Her words were a soft plea.

"I cannot. You are..." he sought the right word "...unwell."

Her mouth curved into a luscious pout. "And what would you be knowin' about my health?" Her smile turned sly. "Have you inspected all of my body? Just to be sure?"

He laughed and the tension crowding his chest eased. How he'd missed her impertinence!

Stretching like a lithe cat, she wound her arms around his neck. "Love me," she said again, this time her words a demand.

"I will give you pleasure, beloved." He hesitated, because even though his wife asked him for lovemaking, the Raine in his bed was not his wife. Not yet. The witch had warned him that human souls were entities with no memories of the past. The present Raine and the past Raine had to merge together and become one...thus, the need for the potion and the ritual.

"My lord?"

He pushed away his doubts. Raine would not remember



anything that happened here this eve as real. She'd believe it a dream. He would not take her body; he would bring her to orgasm. Her pleasure would be his pleasure.

She wore a thin T-shirt and gray jogging shorts, easily breached barriers. His hand slid under her shirt until he felt the curve of her breast. His fingers trembled as he cupped the tender weight in his hand. Then, his breath shallow with excitement, he found the nipple and rolled it between his thumb and forefinger. It hardened, the tight bud an unbearable temptation.

He pushed up her shirt and stopped, his heart pounding. Sweat trickled down his neck. Eight hundred years of waiting had taken its toll. And now his love, his only love, lay before him, a feast for a starving man.

The deep coral of her areolas and the dusky tips of her nipples beckoned him. Cupping one breast, he leaned forward and swirled his tongue around the nipple, teasing it with licks until her soft moans begged him for more.

He took the taut peak into his mouth and suckled. She cried out, shoved her hands into his hair, and pressed him closer still. He moved to her other breast, kissing the underside before tasting the areola. His lips clamped her nipple and suckled it with the same intensity he'd devoted to the other.

His hard cock strained against his jeans. The rasp of the rough material against his flesh made his penis sensitive to Raine's squirming underneath him.

It had been too
long. He couldn't
stop...



He shuddered with desire, stalling the deep need to ravish her, to show her right now how much she meant to him.

Positioning Raine beneath him, his jeans-clad cock nestled between pussy lips protected only by the thin material of her shorts.

He moved.

Slowly.

Raine had no such compunction.

She grabbed his hips and writhed against him, her strokes short, frantic, and torturous.

"Connor," she cried, bucking against him, her hands fisting against his buttocks.

He felt the rise of his own pleasure, the bare edge of an orgasm threatening. He suckled her nipple, matching her strokes, and enjoyed his woman for the first time in eight centuries.

Her scream of completion came scant seconds before his orgasm claimed him. He cried out, his penis jerking hard and painfully against the confines of his jeans. Warm come coated his genitals.

He rolled to the side, tucked Raine into the crook of his arm, and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"Do you love her?"

Michael's breath lodged in his throat. Had Raine awakened from her unconscious state? How would he explain his actions? Then the question penetrated his sex-fogged brain and his stomach did a slow drop. "Love who?"

"Loralee."

"No." His voice broke. "Never."



His heart clenched. Raine had remembered his betrayal. But her love for him was stronger than her pride. Had she not put away her hurt and his betrayal to rescue him from Solomon? He'd been a fool to send her away. She was his muse, his light, his soul mate. Only together were they strong enough to face the challenges of life and love.

"You are my heart," she
said. "And you are mine."

She cried then, curling into his chest and giving voice to her despair. He held her, guilt spearing him relentlessly for using her, for hurting her, for taking the woman's body that was not yet hers.

Her sobs quieted and her grip relaxed. He wanted to heal her wounded spirit, but all he could do was stroke her back and murmur soothing nonsense. When her tears were spent and sleep claimed her, he kissed her brow and prayed to the goddess that she would be free of nightmares.

Tomorrow night, should the witch's potion work, she would remember all and love him as she once did.

Until then, he had to leave her be.

"Soon, my love, I will have all of you," he promised.
Chapter Two

Raine felt like she'd been on an all-night drunk. Her limbs trembled, her mouth felt like she'd swallowed a whole bag of cotton, and she had some serious blank spots when it came to remembering anything about last night. Michael had hauled her up the hill, then..
.nothing. She'd slept like the dead.

Now she felt like the dead.



One vague dream haunted her. In it, she and Michael were together in bed, exchanging words of love and acts of passion.

Been here one day and I'm already fantasizing about the gorgeous barrister.

She managed to walk outside her room, but the hallway tilted. She clutched the rough stone wall and rested her cheek against it, contemplating the idea of sleeping until the full moon rose tonight.

But no...Michael wanted to take her on a tour and tell her the rest of the conditions of the will. The housekeeper, Mrs. Welter, a dour-faced woman with graying blonde hair and a disinterested gaze woke her an hour ago with the message.

Not even a shower and the strong coffee—not tea, thank God—brought by Mrs. Welter made her feel better. Dressing had been a chore, too. She'd ditched undergarments altogether, slid into a cream-colored sundress with spaghetti straps and shoved her feet into a pair of heelless sandals. Forget make-up and fancy hair-dos, too. She'd barely had the energy to brush a single strand, much less wrestle her too-long hair into submission. Right now, she didn't care if she looked like the Swamp Monster on acid.

"Ms. Sinclair?"

Michael's resonant voice brought an instant smile to her face. She turned and found him leaning against the opposite wall studying her. He straightened and crossed the hall. He lifted his hand, presumably to touch her face, then stopped.

"Feeling rough?"

"Afraid so." His mouth was beautiful. Perfect. *Familiar*. She shook away the weird thoughts. "Please call me Raine."

"Raine."



He said her name in a way that sent shivers through her. She swallowed the nervous knot forming in her throat. Heavens! The way he affected her should terrify her to bits—she'd never felt this connected to another human being. Before she realized what she was doing, she stepped into his arms. His eyes reminded her of a tiger's—intelligent, predatory, hungry. He knew her heart. Saw into her soul. Offered her a promise of—what was she doing? She jumped back as if his skin had turned acidic. "I-I'm sorry. I don't know what's come over me."

"It's okay. I don't mind comforting a beautiful woman."

Her lips twitched. "How many beautiful women do you comfort, my lord?"

"Only you, beloved."

She tossed her hair over her shoulder then put a hand on her hip. "That better be so, Connor, or you'll be regrettin' the day you met me."

"Never."

"And when's the last time you saw to your wife's wanton needs?" She stepped into his embrace again and rubbed against him. Her nipples pebbled against his muscled chest, the sensitive tips demanding attention.

"It's been awhile, beloved."

"Touch me, Connor."

"It's not time. We must wait."

"Whatever for?" She grabbed his hand and dragged him down the hall. Twenty paces later, she found the small nook they'd taken advantage of many times. She pushed him inside, wondering at his



reluctance. Connor never turned down a chance to make love to her.

"Do you find me wanting, my lord?" Grasping his hands, she put them to her breasts. He brushed his thumbs over the taut, cloth-covered peaks.

"No." He choked on the word. "I find you irresistible."

He pushed down the top of her dress and gazed at her breasts. With infinite care he cupped them, tested their weight, then tasted one turgid nipple. The warmth and motion of his tongue made her flesh tingle. She reached for him, to touch him as he touched her, but he whispered, "Nay. This is for you and only you."

"Tisn't fair," she said, but leaned against the wall, her eyes closed, and allowed him to pleasure her.

His mouth encircled one nipple, teasing it with too brief suckles, before attending to the other in the same manner. His hands kneaded the mounds as he played his torturous game. Sensations rocketed through her, twirling and spinning and making her writhe with the joyous pain of anticipation. Heat coiled in her belly, spun down to her woman's core. Her cunt became slick with her desire.

"Connor," she moaned. "Please..."

His patient tending collapsed. His tongue lapped at her nipples, trading one for the other rapidly. She strained upward, her hips moving against his erection barred by their clothing. The roughness of his tongue, the quickness of his movements drove her mad.

He stopped and lifted his head to stare at her. "Touch yourself," he demanded, his voice thick with need.

Without question, she cupped her own breasts, pinching the turgid peaks to the point of pain. She gasped, squeezing her own



flesh, twisting her nipples.

She opened her eyes to view Connor's reaction. And smiled.

He looked as if he hadn't seen her in a hundred years—his gaze was filled with his love, his lust, his thin edge of control. How happy he made her. No man had ever wanted her this way. She, a witch, a woman no man dared to look upon, much less *marry*.

Then she had no time to think on Connor's strange reactions because he knelt, lifted her dress, and put his mouth against her clit.

She shuddered.

He grabbed her buttocks and drew her close, his tongue stroking her clit, pausing to drink from her, to lick her entrance, and even, the rogue, to stroke the bit of flesh between her anus and vagina.

Then he kissed her inner lips until he reached the swollen nub. One kiss, two.. .then he gathered her clit between his lips and sucked.

She felt the rise of her bliss. Connor knew it, too, because two of his fingers penetrated her and did the job meant for his cock. *Oh yes. Yes...*

His fingers stroked her, his mouth suckled her clit, and she pulled hard on her distended nipples.

"Connor...Connor!"

Her orgasm shattered and she cried out, bucking against Connor's mouth, the feel of his tongue stroking her almost painful now that her body trembled with release. Her legs felt weak as a newborn colt's, her nipples sore, and her mouth dry. She tried to



move away from his persistent fingers and tongue, but he would not be swayed.

"'Tis enough," she gasped, squirming.

He suckled her clit, hard, and inserted a third finger into her vagina and moved faster. She nearly swallowed her tongue from the fierce rise of another orgasm. Surely not...

She came again, the intensity of it tearing a scream from her throat.

Raine clutched the wall behind her, trying to find purchase, some way to cling to it so that her treacherous knees wouldn't buckle. Connor soothed her clit with his tongue, removing his fingers from her wet heat, moving his other hand from her buttock to her calf.

"No regrets now." Pure male satisfaction lit his gaze.

She felt too sated to knock him down a peg. Instead, as he rose, she threw her arms around him and laughed. "No regrets, my love. Never."

* * * * *

Raine blinked, stumbled, and stopped. Somehow she had managed to leave the hallway and start down the staircase without a clue how she'd done it. Michael held her arm as he stared at her. "Something wrong, Ms. Sinclair?"

"W-what?"

He pointed to the huge paintings on the wall as he escorted her down the huge steps. "Family history boring you to tears, I take it? You might be interested in Connor Williams. His mother was Scottish and his father English."



God, she felt fuzzyheaded. How had she gotten on the stairs? And why the hell did her nipples hurt? Her pussy ached, as if she'd had sex. *Great* sex. Had she somehow managed to cream herself between meeting Michael in the hallway and the short trip to the stairs?

Yep. As nutty as Aunt Giselda's fruitcake, all right. Or as horny as a sailor on dollar-whore night. Or both. She tried to gather her wits and concentrate on Michael's words. "Scottish and English? Didn't they hate each other?"

Michael laughed. "Not all or Connor wouldn't have been born. When Robert died, he named Connor his heir. He was Robert's oldest son, but really, giving his estates to his bastard was a way to show his love for Connor's mother." His expression grew somber. "But you're right. His half-brother, Solomon, resented Connor's presence. He plotted to kill him and his wife, Raine."

She stumbled on the stairs again and he steadied her.

"Raine?" "You didn't know you were named after an ancestor?"

"I didn't know I was an English heiress. My parents never told me much about the family."

"Probably didn't know much themselves. It took awhile to find you." His smile held a secret. She wondered about him—about his connection to this family. He seemed so much more than just a stuffy English lawyer.

They'd almost reached the end of the staircase. He let go of her arm and she felt a keen loss. She resisted the urge to grab onto his hand and hold it forever.

Instead, she took a steadying breath and focused on getting to



the ground floor without breaking her neck. She followed him into the dining room, where he seated her at the head of the long cherry wood table.

"What happened to them? To Connor and Raine?"

"Solomon killed Connor. Raine disappeared. History hasn't revealed her fate."

"Maybe Solomon hunted her down and killed her, too."

He stilled, his gaze intense. "Is that what happened? He killed you?"

"Me?" Raine made a sound of disbelief. Maybe Michael Connors was the one as fruity as one of Aunt Giselda's fruitcakes. "Are you kidding?"

"I meant Raine. Do you think he killed her, too?" "I just heard the story. How would I know?"

His expression blanked then a smile flitted across his lips. "Forgive me. It's just that you look a lot like her. I must admit I hold some fascination for Connor and Raine's story. It was such a tragedy—true love destroyed by betrayal."

"You're a romantic." "I wasn't always."

She accepted the coffee poured by Mrs. Welter. The old woman flashed a look at Michael, who had taken a seat to the left of Raine. She put the silver pot near Raine and left the room, the sound of her sturdy black shoes thudding against the floor in a way that suggested she wasn't too happy about their new guest.

"She reminds me of Mrs. Danvers."



Michael chuckled. "She's not a bad sort. Just set in her ways."

"Afraid the American will order tiger-striped cushions for all the chairs and paint the walls pink?"

His grin widened. "Something like that."

"I hadn't really thought about living here. It's strange. It's like I've been here before." She spread jam on her toast and nibbled on it.

"Maybe you have."

"I've never been to England before."

"Do you believe in reincarnation?"

She laughed, but stifled it when she saw the serious expression on his face. She shook her head. "No. I don't believe in fairies, the Loch Ness monster, or witches, either."

"Your ancestor was a witch."

Raine's stomach took a dive. She lost interest in finishing breakfast. She was beginning to lose interest in her inheritance. Michael studied her, his tiger eyes asking questions she didn't understand. "You mean that people thought she was a witch, right?"

"No. I mean she was a real witch. She lived with her grandmother, Mislá, a very powerful witch, in the woods near this castle. Connor hunted her down one night because he believed she was responsible for a sudden illness among the castle inhabitants. Solomon told him she'd cursed Connor and his people."

"Remove the curse, witch, or I'll remove your head."

Her heart leapt in fear, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction



of knowing how he terrified her. Mislá told her no one escaped fate. If hers was to die by this man's hand, then so be it.

"If I'd cursed you, Connor Williams, you wouldn't be standin' in front me swingin' about that fancy sword." She tossed back her hair and put a hand on her hip. "If you don't go now, I'll turn you into a frog."

"A frog?"

Raine turned to Michael. He looked amused. What had they'd been talking about? She needed time to gather her wits. Just for something to do, she refreshed her coffee and added a dollop of cream. She needed a big dose of caffeine. She felt tired, as if she hadn't slept at all last night. At the same time, a weird sense of satisfaction enveloped her.

Michael's left eyebrow quirked. "You just told me how you didn't believe in witches. How did you plan on turning me into a frog?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I never said I would turn you into a frog." Raine realized how silly she'd sound if she told him about imagining Connor and Raine's meeting. "So Raine and Connor had a beautiful, but tragic love story." She took a cautious sip of coffee.

"Yes. But they still have a chance for a happy ending."

Too hot. She put down the cup and licked her singed lips. "All right. I'll bite. How can they have a happy ending? They've been dead for centuries."

"A love like theirs is stronger than death."

Ah. She understood now. "They reunited in the afterlife. It's a nice thought."

He opened his mouth to speak then apparently changed his



mind. Instead, he shook his head, a rueful grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. He watched her nibble the toast with such a ravenous gaze, she had the distinct feeling he wanted to nibble her. She cleared her throat. "Uh, so, what's next, Michael?"

"I'll show you around the castle. What do you want to see first?" "Raine's portrait."

* * * * *

"My God." Raine put a hand against her throat and took a deep breath. "You weren't kidding. She's my twin."

Raine stared at the portrait. She...no, no the other Raine...lounged on a beautiful red chaise. Connor stood behind her with one hand on her shoulder. Both of their gazes held looks of joyful possession. She envied them. Envied the eternal love she had always felt denied her whole life. She touched the ornate frame. It was almost as if she could remember posing for it. Hadn't Connor teased her? Tickled her... trying to make her move when the artist insisted they remain still.

"It's amazin' we got a portrait finished with all your play." She looked at Connor through her lashes.

A flash of surprise lit his eyes and for a moment Raine saw the face of the man who looked like Connor, but was not. His face was somehow different, his clothes strange, their favorite room filled with items she didn't recognize.

She shivered against the odd sensations and felt the arms of her love surround her, protect her, add his strength to hers. And as always, the delicious buzz of need zipped through her. Their couplings satisfied her beyond her wildest expectations, but her



thirst for Connor was unquenchable, her appetite always insatiable when near him.

She turned in his arms and kissed him, mating her tongue with his, reveling in his groans of desire. "Take me," she whispered, hitching up her dress.

His hands covered hers and he lowered the cloth she grasped in her hands. She blinked up at him, confused. "What's wrong?"

"I can't, my love."

Her brows rose as she posed an impertinent question with her eyes, not daring to voice the thought aloud.

A dull flush rose from his neck to color his cheeks. "My sword will always be strong enough to impale you."

"If you say so, my lord." She flounced away, twitching her hips. Mere seconds passed before he caught her arm and whirled her around, his playful growl sending shivers to her very core.

Her hand dipped to his cock, but he captured her fingers and nibbled on them one at a time. He backed her toward the wall as she kissed the strong column of his neck, the rough line of his jaw, the dip in his chin. Breathing in his scent, she moaned.

"Connor." His name was desire, need, all that she was and ever wanted to be.. .Connor's lady, his wife, his love.

This time when she reached for his cock, he didn't stay her hand. Somehow, he'd already freed it from his trousers. She encircled the smooth, warm flesh then trailed her fingers from base to tip.

She grinned when his length jerked against her palm.

He tipped her chin so she would look at him. "I want you so much." She felt his sigh skittered across her cheek. "Are you sure of



our joining?"

Raine puzzled over his words, the urgency in his voice pricking her mind. *Something she was supposed to remember. Something that wasn't quite right. Something important that pulled her in two directions.*

She looked at him, the fire in his gaze, and knew nothing she'd forgotten would mean more than reassuring Connor she wanted him and only him. "I'm always sure about our joinings." She smiled at him, provocatively. "So, warrior, do you plan to impale me with that fancy sword or not?"

"Aye, my lady."

She closed her eyes as he lifted her and slid his cock into her pussy. He was so big and hard; he filled her, completed her. His arms hooked under her shoulders and he pressed her against the wall.

"Show me your breasts."

Lowering her top, she watched the hungry expression on his face as she revealed her breasts to him. With a groan, he clamped onto a nipple and suckled it. Bliss roiled through her and she encouraged his treatment of her breast, the way he licked and nipped the tender flesh.

As eager as he was to lavish affection on her breasts, his cock's movements were too slow, too careful. She rocked on him, wanting to feel him pump into her, wanting to feel the intense pleasure he always brought her.

"Harder, my love. Faster."

Her breath caught in her throat when he honored her requests. He abandoned her breasts and pounded into her, his



head cradled in the crook of her neck. Sweat rolled down her skin, but all she felt was the great need filling her belly, the spark ignited by his motions.

"Raine," he muttered. "My heart."

She shattered, a million sensations of light and sound and feeling. Still, he fucked her, as hard and as fast as before and another pleasurable sensation built and burst inside her.

"Connor..." She licked the sweat from his neck, nipping the flesh with her teeth. Her hands grasped his shoulders, her nails digging into his shirt to pierce to the skin underneath.

She gasped as another wave of nearly intolerable bliss overwhelmed her.

Then Connor found his pleasure, yelling her name, and speared her with his cock; she felt him emptying his seed into her.

He held onto her, shuddering. Only when he lifted his head and looked at her did she see the tears coursing down his cheeks and the utter desolation in his gaze.

* * * * *

Raine shook her head. Her thoughts had been scattered and fuzzy from the time she'd left the cab. Maybe it was jet lag. She felt that weird sense of satisfaction again and another blank spot.

"Did I space out again?" She cradled her head as a dull ache crept across her skull.

They were sitting in the portrait room on one of the modern sofas.

"Are you okay, Raine?" Michael's voice sounded strained. And...fearful? She lifted her head to look at him. Michael Connors didn't look like a man who feared. Yet, there, in his gaze, she saw



fear and the shadow of guilt.

"You should know that part of the will has some odd conditions." He looked away from her steady gaze, focusing on the portrait of Connor and Raine, then continued. "Nothing too strange, I assure you. Tonight is the full moon. At a glen not far from here, you must drink a special potion at midnight."

"What?" Raine couldn't hide her astonishment. "Why?"

"At dawn the next morning, all that you see here is yours—as well as a considerable fortune." He shrugged. "In order to receive your inheritance, you must perform this ritual."

"Oh jeez. Now, it's a
ritual?" "Raine—"

"Phone call, sir." The brittle voice of the housekeeper startled Raine. She wrapped her arms around herself and glanced at Mrs. Welter. The woman's cold, gray eyes chilled her. "Your office. Says it's urgent."

Raine nodded to him. "I'll stay here and wait for you."

The look in his eyes held tender regret and that strange tinge of guilt. She resisted an insane urge to reassure him, to kiss him, to place a hand against his cheek and murmur her love. Before she could act on any of the strange impulses, Michael hurried out of the room.

Raine ignored Mrs. Welter. She hoped one of the conditions of the will didn't include keeping the woman in her employment.

"Might I bring you some
tea?" "No, thank you."

The woman sniffed her disapproval. Raine refrained from



rolling her eyes. Instead, she pasted on a smile and met Mrs. Welter's gaze. "Please feel free to attend to your duties."

"Be assured, Miss. I always see to my duties." Her low tone made the statement sound more like a threat than a reassurance. Raine shivered and watched the woman stride toward the door. She stopped and looked over her shoulder. "My daughter's visitin' today. She and Mr. Connors are *quite* close."

With a swish of her gray dress, she disappeared through the door.

La-de-da. Raine gritted her teeth. The woman sure wasn't trying to warm up to her new employer. Hmph. She'd agree to dance naked under the full moon if it meant she could fire Mrs. Welter the next day. She'd be damned if she shared *her* castle with that old biddy.

Chapter Three

He entered the library, shut and locked the door, then turned and surveyed the room. The slightly parted curtains allowed sunlight to illuminate the white dust cloths covering the furniture. The rest of the library was shrouded in darkness. A room full of ghosts. But every room in this cursed place had ghosts.

"Are you here?" he whispered.

"Yes." A woman rose from one of the wingbacks positioned in front of the fireplace. The shadows hid the face he knew so well. She was the one he truly loved. And if things went well.. .she would be his and the castle would be theirs.

"She believes?"

"Almost."



"Will she perform the ritual?"

"I don't know yet."

"It's essential that she drinks the potion."

"I know, my love."

He walked to her and gathered her into his arms. Her arms slid around his neck; her lips grazed his chin. "Your waiting is almost over, my darling." She brought his hands to her breasts and arched as he cupped them. "I will be yours this night."

He pinched her nipples hard. Her low moan thickened the hot lust already claiming him. He unbuttoned her shirt and unsnapped the front-clasp bra, then licked the tender skin of her breast until his teeth found her turgid nipple. The light bite made her cry out.

"I want you now." He suckled her, grabbing her buttocks and pulling her close so he could rub his erection on her center.

"No." She broke free and stepped out of his reach.

"I weary of your games. I love you. I ache for you. What stops us from consummation?"

"You know the reasons." She snapped her bra and buttoned her shirt, then smoothed her hair. "Just a few hours more."

"It's an eternity."

She leaned forward and placed a chaste kiss on his mouth, but her hands, her wicked, wicked hands, unzipped his pants and stroked his hard-on. Pleasure clouded his mind, crowding out the anger and frustration.

She kneeled and took him into her mouth. Her tongue slid down his length until her hot mouth connected with his balls, licking them, wrapping eager fingers around his cock to stroke it as she



suckled and licked his testicles. Then her mouth and hand switched places. While her hand cupped and kneaded his balls, her mouth sucked the tip of his cock.

He felt the soft piercing of her tongue in the slit then she was taking all of him into her mouth, down her sleek, wet throat. He fucked her mouth with slow movements, reveling in the feel of her tongue, her lips, her hands on his ass urging him forward...

"I'm coming..." He never lasted against her skilled tongue. His orgasm rocked his entire body. His hands slipped into the fine silk of her hair to hold her still while he ejaculated fiercely into her mouth, shuddering as she drank all of him.

She rose regally; she was the queen and he was her subject. He felt as if he'd been the one kneeling to her. He zipped his pants and watched her wipe her mouth.

"You know what to do."

* * * * *

After half an hour, Raine grew restless. She'd looked at all the portraits in the room—twice—yet the only one that held her interest was Raine and Connor's. She wondered at the coincidence of Michael's last name being "Connors." And he bore a strange resemblance to the Connor in the portrait. A chill danced across her nape. Did he believe that they were the doomed lovers of centuries past? Surely not!

"Michael?" a female voice called hesitantly.

Raine turned and watched a small, perfect woman flit into the room. Blonde hair framed a heart-shaped face; wide blue eyes stared guilelessly at Raine. Who was this little pixie?



"He had to take a phone call."

The woman placed a hand against her chest and took in a breath. "You startled me." A smile flashed, revealing dimples. "Michael spends so much time in this room I just assumed he was in here. You must be Raine Sinclair. I'm Fiona Welter."

"The housekeeper's daughter?"

Laughter tinkled, but the woman's eyes narrowed a fraction. "Yes. But I don't work *here*. I'm Michael's assistant."

She purred it in a way that suggested she assisted Michael with all his needs. Raine extended her hand, shivering when Fiona's hand slipped into hers. The pixie's skin was as cold as ice on a winter day. "It's nice to meet you."

"And how do you find the castle? Besides drafty, old, and crumbling." Laughter tinkled again.

"I find it quite charming, although it needs a coat of paint." She made a show of perusing the walls. "Do you like pink?"

Fiona's jaw dropped.

"Pink?" "It's my favorite color."

"I-well, it's your castle." She regained her composure. "If you meet the conditions of the will, of course." Her catty smile suggested Raine would not.

She didn't like Fiona. Something about her cool perfection grated on her nerves. Or maybe it was the implication that the woman was sleeping with Michael. Heat filled her face and her vision blurred. "I have every intention of claimin' what's mine. And I won't abide a greedy little thief who thinks she's clever enough to take what belongs to me."



Fiona's brow furrowed and she took a step back. "I beg your pardon?"

"You better be beggin' more than my pardon, missy. You ain't any better than the dogs who fight over the bones after supper. But you don't want the scraps any more, do you?"

"Raine!"

Michael's voice filtered through her consciousness. She turned and saw him in the doorway, sporting an open shirt and kilt. At what point had he changed clothes? And why? Pain ripped through her and she clutched her stomach. The room began to spin. She saw Fiona's face, a look of satisfaction in her ice-blue eyes, then Connor was there, his strong arms enveloping her...then nothing but darkness and silence.

*** * * * ***

"That American is bloody insane," said Fiona as Michael handed her a gin and tonic. Her guileless gaze slid over him like an icy breeze. He returned to the bar and poured himself a brandy.

At what point had Fiona's presence begun to unsettle him? He'd known her since she was a young child, had given her a job when she finished college, and had, at one point, seen to her engagement to a young man of good family, though she'd broken the engagement several weeks ago. The Welters had worked for him for the last twenty-five years. Of course, they didn't know that their unseen benefactor was Michael Connors. They knew him only as dear Mr. Wallace's barrister. They'd tended to the castle as those had before them. For more than eight hundred years, he'd made sure the castle was cared for—just so he could bring home his bride once again.



"She's going to ruin this lovely old place. She said she wanted to paint the castle pink."

He laughed. "Said that, did she?"

"And sputtered some nonsense about *me* not wanting the scraps anymore." Michael stilled. "Tell me exactly what she said." "I don't remember," she hedged. "Her accent was quite good, though."

He crossed the room and grabbed the little idiot's arm. "Your recall is excellent, Fiona. Tell me what she said."

She yanked away her arm and sent him a hurt look. "Honestly, Michael—" She eyed him carefully, bit her lip then sighed. "She said, 'You ain't any better than the dogs who fight over the bones after supper. But you don't want the scraps any more, do you?'"

It was too coincidental. Why would Raine tell Fiona the same thing she'd told Lorelee?

He'd feared that his planning, his sacrifices had been futile. The witch's spell offered one new life every hundred years. Eight times had he grown to manhood, made his fortunes, and bought this castle. How many times had he repaired the damage incurred by those who'd managed to own it while he wasted time reliving a childhood?

He would not allow an echo from their former lives together to prevent their union. Solomon and Lorelee's betrayal belonged in the past. Happiness was their only future. They had earned it.

"Gone away again, Michael? I do wonder where your thoughts travel these days."

Michael glanced at Fiona's thin, pale hand on the cuff of his



jacket. She toyed with the button there, looking at him coyly.

He moved out of her range. "I'm exactly where I belong."

* * * * *

Raine awoke, her heart pounding, the word "Connor" frozen on her lips. Sweat beaded her brow, fear clogged her throat. Something felt wrong. Oppressive. Dark despair imprisoned her. She struggled out of the bed's heavy covers and pressed trembling hands to her temples.

Keep close to him. Evil lurks nearby.

She glanced at the window and saw the late afternoon light filtering through the butter-yellow curtains. Soon, it would be dusk. And in a few hours...midnight. Sliding to the floor, her legs wobbled, her knees buckled. She grabbed the nearest bedpost and clung to it. Nausea cramped her stomach. Fear clawed at her, a living thing shredding her guts with poisoned talons.

Keep close to him. Evil lurks nearby.

Raine let go of the bedpost and shuffled to the door, her insides on fire, her lungs laboring with the effort to breathe. She grabbed the doorknob and wrenched it open, stumbling into the hallway. Clinging to the wall, she felt the oppression lift suddenly as if someone had pulled off an iron blanket. She took several deep breaths and willed her heartbeat to slow its erratic pace.

"Something wrong, Miss?"

Raine turned to find Mrs. Welter contemplating her from the shadows of the hallway.

"I felt—" The unmistakable gleam of a gun drew her gaze to the old woman's hand. "What are you doing?"



Mrs. Welter's lips formed a nasty smile. "You don't belong here. Better dead, I say, than owning a castle that ain't yours."

*** * * * ***

Michael poured a glass of wine for his friend Margo, and looked at his watch. He'd checked on Raine several times over the past few hours. She'd been sleeping peacefully. Obviously, she been more affected by her previous-life memories than he'd believed possible. When she collapsed, he'd taken her to her room and tucked her under the covers, kissing her brow.

He didn't trust himself to stay long with her. The closer midnight approached, the more he longed to touch her, to feel her lips against his, to explore her soft skin.

And that's why he'd sent Mrs. Welter to wake her for dinner half an hour ago. He hadn't expected to entertain guests, especially on this night, when his fate—and Raine's—would be decided. But Margo never thought to call ahead. It was her nature to do as she pleased. Unfortunately, she decided dinner at the castle suited her this evening. Mrs. Welter had settled her in the library before Michael knew she'd arrived.

"Honestly," said Margo, fluffing her red hair with its flattering pageboy cut, "I can't wait to meet your American. You've looked at your watch a half dozen times. She must be much more interesting than I."

"Would I ever say such a thing?" "Say it, no. Imply it, yes."

"Margo!" Fiona exclaimed as she entered the library. "How



delightful to see you!"

Margo air kissed Fiona's cheeks. "Where's your darling Tommy?" "We broke off the engagement."

"You must be devastated." Margo's tone suggested otherwise. "The perfect couple, wouldn't you agree, Michael?"

"Retract your claws, m'dear. Why don't we sit down to dinner?" Michael gestured for the women to move ahead of him. They walked out of the library, through the great hall, and into the dining room. "I need to check on Raine. Mrs. Welter seems to have disappeared."

"You worry too much." Margo swept her hand toward a chair. "Sit down. Americans have terrible manners. She's probably all kinds of delighted about causing a delay."

Fiona's troubled gaze met his. "Really, Michael. You should stay."

Something was wrong. It snapped and sizzled around him, tinting the air with evil. "Please excuse me."

"Michael!"

He frowned and glanced at Fiona. She looked away, but not before he caught the glimpse of worry in her eyes. He crossed the room and took her elbow. "What is it?"

She looked at him, her eyes wide. "Mother wants the best for me."

Comprehension flooded Michael. His heart stuttered in his chest.

"Raine."

"She wouldn't harm her, I swear."

"Where are they?"

"I don't know."



"No!" Eight hundred years of searching, of waiting.. .was it all for naught?

"She's doing it for us, Michael."

"'Tis Raine I want and you've taken her from me. I canna forgive this treachery."

Fiona brought a hand to her throat, a shocked expression on her face. "What's wrong with you? Your voice?" She glanced around the room, seeking support from Margo, yet finding none. "You can't love the American! You just met her. She's nothing!"

"She is my heart, Fiona."

Michael felt as though he'd been dealt a mortal blow. His guts churned with hate, with hurt, with betrayal. *Raine!* Violence swirled through him, the taut strings of anger pulling at his control. Vengeance covered him like a cloak and he pulled it close, savoring the impulses of a warrior long dead.

"I suppose we should find her then." Margo rose from the table.

Michael nodded his assent and strode from the room, his friend following on his heels. Fiona remained, staring in disbelief at the empty doorway.

Chapter Four

Raine stumbled along the stone path, her hands tied with a rough-hewn rope. She had no idea how much time had passed or where they walked on the castle grounds. The purple shadows of dusk stretched into evening; stars dotted the darkening skyline. Mrs. Welter cared nothing for her weakened state and showed no expression at all when she fell to her knees. Raine looked up at the dour old woman then at the derringer pointed at her forehead.



Mrs. Welter's hand was as steady and cold as her stare. "Get up." She tugged on the rope, but Raine refused to rise. When Mrs. Welter tightened her grip on the rope to yank it, Raine jerked it down. The old woman stumbled forward. Raine swung her tied hands upward and connected with the arm that held the gun, but the old biddy managed to keep it in a tight grasp.

"That's enough!" A shadowy figure appeared on the path and beckoned them.

Mrs. Welter grabbed the rope and hauled her forward. The stone path ended just before a thicket of trees. Raine shuddered to think what the housekeeper had planned for her in those woods. Her arms ached and itched from the rope. Her legs felt like wet noodles and her breath rattled in her chest. Night sounds filtered around her—hoots of owls, chirping of crickets, the snapping of twigs. Her stomach clenched as fear swirled through her.

The figure stepped forward, a sneer on the full lips. Too late, Mrs. Welter realized the gun with its ugly black silencer was pointed at her. Two quick shots and she crumbled to the ground.

Raine's horrified gaze lifted to the murderer's emotionless stare, her heart beating like thunder.

A low laugh rumbled. "What's the matter, witch? Don't you know me?"

* * * * *

Michael met Margo in the dining room. Her gaze told him what he already knew.

Raine wasn't in the castle.

Fiona had disappeared, too. The spoiled brat had gone off to sulk, no doubt.



"Goddamn it." He pushed a hand through his hair and curbed his desire to pound his fists against the walls. Where had Mrs. Welter taken Raine?

"Do you have any torches?" asked Margo. "This damned old place is the only habitable thing for miles. Where else could they go, but outside?"

"The glen." Michael frowned. "But why go there? She knows we have to perform the ritual to..."

Margo's silence warned him he'd said too much.

"I'm afraid Miss Sinclair must fulfill some strange requirements in order to inherit. If she's not in the glen under the full moon at midnight to drink a potion, she won't get the money or the castle."

"So she drinks a concoction at midnight and *voila!* She's a rich woman who owns a castle. Does the handsome barrister come with the deal, too?" Margo looked at him, her gaze revealing more than curiosity.

"Yes." He could be honest about that, at least. "I appreciate your help, but I don't expect you to ruin your shoes helping me hunt for Raine outside." He walked toward the door, glancing back at Margo. "You should go home."

"Don't be ridiculous." She kicked off her

heels. "You'll ruin that lovely pant suit." "I

never liked this outfit much."

Michael found two flashlights in the kitchen pantry.

"We'll take the old path to the woods and check out the glen first."

They slipped out the kitchen door and hurried through the well-tended gardens, down the uneven stone path that led to the



woods. The two beams of light bounced through the darkness to the end of the path; their disjointed glares swept across the rocky trail and found Mrs. Welter. She lay on her side, her eyes wide and unseeing.

* * * * *

The slightly built blond man attached the leg chain and hammered the spike into the ground with surprising strength. Raine stood at the center of a circle of lit torches, a gag in her mouth, her hands bound, and now, her feet.

The man rose, his expression blank except for that awful, ugly smile.

Dark fear crept up her spine, spreading chill tendrils through her body. *He's going to hurt you just as he's done before. Run!* Bound as she was, she couldn't obey the voice in her head.

The man leaned into her face, his blue gaze gleaming with cruelty. "I'm hurt, Raine, m'love. After those good times we shared. "

She shook her head violently, unable to voice her denial.

"I followed Connor to the woods and heard his pleas to your grandmother. Immortality—of a sort—he gained that eve. For you. A common whore. *A witch.*"

His spittle landed on her cheek, but she was still as a stone. Horrible knowledge rose, battering her brain with images. *Running through the forest, blood on her hands, her keening entwined with the wild wind. A storm was coming and she wanted it. Needed it to escape. The thunder of horses' hooves, the wicked laughter of a woman scorned, the triumphant cries of..*

Solomon. Her eyes widened above her gag.



"Ah, so you remember." He patted her cheek. "We can only come back once every hundred years and we all come back together. The witch proclaimed that the circle must be broken before peace is found."

He circled around her, ensuring her bonds were secure. "The reason Connor could never find you is because I found you first. And killed you. The last time... Hmmm...eighteen seventy-six. A pretty six-year-old in her mother's sitting room all alone."

He'd been merciful that time, pressing the pillow to her face, smothering her into eternal sleep. He'd been her widowed mother's beau and pretended he'd found her there, limp and unresponsive. She'd floated away, watching her Earth mother cry as her tormentor comforted the poor woman. And all the time, her soul cried out for Connor.

Tears fell as memories that were not hers flooded her mind and she knew this man, Solomon, spoke the truth. Michael Connors was Connor Williams and she was Raine, *his* beloved Raine. She'd been searching for Connor for eight lifetimes. Her heart knew it.

"You have a potion to drink. Your sacrifice will end our suffering."

*** * * * ***

Michael and Margo came to the edge of the forest and paused. Their flashlights barely made a dent in the darkness between the trees. His hand shot out and pulled her to an abrupt halt. "You don't have come with me." He smiled wryly, letting go of her arm. "I wouldn't want your delicate feet to come into contact with any sort of filth."



Margo snorted and continued on. "How little you know me."

It wasn't far to the glen. As they rounded the final curve of the overgrown dirt path, they saw a circle of lit torches, and in the middle of flickering light stood Raine. Her arms were tied behind her back, a gag stuffed into her mouth, and her slim ankles fettered to a short chain. The chain was staked in the ground by a huge metal spike. She looked exhausted, but angry. Relief flooded through him. No one could tamp down that spirited nature of hers. Not even.. .Thomas? *What the hell was Fiona's ex-fiance doing here?*

His heart demanded that he march straight to Raine and rescue her, but rusty warrior instincts snapped into place. She was the morsel baiting the trap. He would incapacitate the hunter first.

He motioned for Margo to stay hidden as he walked clockwise around the sacred circle toward the altar of the goddess, where Thomas stood preparing the potion, muttering ancient prayers under his breath. He didn't hear Michael until the last second, but even as he attempted to whirl around, Michael wrapped an arm around his throat and pressed against the vulnerable bulge of his Adam's apple.

"Connor," Thomas rasped. "So good of you to join us."

Michael quelled the jolt of surprise at hearing his old name. He pressed harder and Thomas gurgled. He released the pressure a little and hissed, "Tell me why I shouldn't kill you."

"I'm your brother."

Shock was a lightning bolt to his gut. "Solomon."

"Aye. But we've learned family is not truly blood, haven't we? But soul mates..." He coughed, straining for a full breath. "There is



such a thing as that."

"There is such a thing as death, too." Ancient memories replayed in his mind. *Loralee's attempted seduction two nights after Raine left and her screams of outrage as he slammed the door in her face. Solomon waking him from deep sleep so that he could see Connor's anguish as the sword pierced his heart.*

"You cared nothing for your death. Only that your time with *her* was over. The only fear you ever showed was for her. You took my birthright. You took
Loralee. So I took the life of you and your beloved." Solomon sneered. "Eight times I took her life."

"Then tonight, I take
yours." "That's not a good
idea."

Mar go stepped into the sacred circle, her gaze steady... and devoid of all emotion.
Chapter Five

Margo stumbled forward as if pushed and Michael noticed her hands linked in front of her. What he mistook for lack of emotion was the cold fire of her fury, the deeply banked embers of anger he recognized. He'd harbored such anger against his betrayers since the eve they drove the sword into his mortal flesh.

"Eight hundred years and you choose her. Again, you choose her." Fiona entered the sacred circle, the gun she'd pointed at Margo now pointed at Raine's head. "I was your favorite until she bewitched you."

She gestured for Margo to stand next to Raine. Margo didn't



hesitate to obey, but her actions were unhurried as if she were out for a stroll instead of being threatened with imminent death. He silently cheered her on. His gaze sought Raine's. Her eyes glittered with tears of anger and helplessness and yet he saw her trying to convey strength to him. He attempted to do the same for her, even though the fear they would lose each other for another eternity constricted his chest.

"Stop looking at him!" Fiona brought the gun across Raine's cheek. The gag muffled her scream of pain, but he felt it reverberate through his soul.

He squeezed Thomas' neck. "Do not force my hand, Fiona." "Loralee," she corrected. "Let him go. Or I kill Margo."

He had no choice but to comply. Impotent fury lashed at him and he fisted his hands at his sides to keep himself from throttling the man and woman who'd brought them so much pain.

"Tie him to the tree behind the altar. I want him as far from the witch as possible, but where he can watch us." Fiona's smile curved in a cruel mockery of joy as she watched Solomon bind him to the tree, and suddenly the discomfort he'd felt around her made sense. His soul had recognized hers, but had given him no other information. Souls were tricky things, indeed.

Fiona smashed Margo's temple with the butt of the gun. The redhead slumped soundlessly to the ground. Fiona assessed the crumpled figure and frowned. "It's too bad; I really liked her. How unfortunate she stopped by this evening."

After a brief moment, she shrugged, then placed the gun on the



altar. "Solomon. It's time."

She shed her clothes and Solomon did the same. She stood in front of the altar, her hands on the rough stone as Solomon took his place behind her, his hands stroking her small hips.

"What do you plan to do?" Surreptitiously Michael tested his bonds.

"It's time to break the curse you placed upon us all when you bargained with the witch." Fiona's hips moved sinuously against the hands caressing her. "She told you that Raine merely had to drink the potion to remember your lives together so that you might complete the circle torn apart by betrayal."

She closed her eyes and moaned as Thomas kissed his way up her spine. One hand pinched the nipples on her breasts while the other slid between her thighs and thumbed her clit.

Michael realized he'd been a fool as he watched his brother's eager movements, his obeisance to the woman writhing in front of him, her gaze never leaving his. Lorelee had poisoned his brother's mind; it was *she* who sought revenge for his rejection.

"Yes, Solomon," she said in a silky voice, "keep stroking me. I'm so wet." "Please, Lorelee," he begged, "let me fuck you. I've waited so long."

"Yes, my lord, fuck me," she said, but the words were meant for Michael. He was sickened by the game she played with Solomon.

Her eyes glazed over with lust, but she didn't release Michael's gaze. He couldn't look away from the evil joy blazing in her eyes as Solomon bent her over the altar and penetrated her from behind.

He watched as she slid her hand between her thighs and rubbed her clit. Solomon pounded into her, his moans of joy making



Michael nauseous.

"We are soul mates," said Solomon through clenched teeth. His body was slick with sweat. "Loralee, my love, my love..."

"Slow now," she soothed as he pulled out from her. She took a large glass vial from the altar and knelt down. Solomon wrapped a hand around his penis and stroked it hard and fast.

"Loralee," he cried.

Fiona placed the mouth of the vial to the head of his cock as he came. After capturing a few jets of semen, she pulled the vial away, and took his cock into her mouth, suckling the round head with practiced lips. Thomas shuddered and moaned as she licked every inch of him. Then she rose, her smile victorious.

"She's only using you, brother. She doesn't love you." Michael's voice was thick with frustration.

"Shut up!" screeched Fiona. "You know nothing. Eight lifetimes he has served me. I earned his devotion. " She crawled onto the altar, turned, and opened her legs. Thomas followed, his penis still hard.

He leaned forward and sucked her tits as she rubbed her own clit with frantic fingers. "It's not enough," she gasped.

"I know what to do, my love." Thomas scooted her to the edge of the altar, licked his forefinger and slid it into her anus. She moaned and moved closer to him. She rubbed her pussy while he finger-fucked her ass with one hand and played with her breasts with the other.

"More," she demanded.

Thomas removed his finger, lifted her hips, and inserted the tip of his penis into her ass. Fiona lay back on the altar, put her legs on



Thomas' shoulders, and wiggled until his cock was fully sheathed within her.

"Fuck me," she shouted.

Thomas' arms wrapped around her thighs and he pounded into her, his eyes squeezed shut, his breath harsh.

"Loralee," he moaned. "You're going to make me come."

Fiona moaned and inserted two fingers into her pussy while her other hand rubbed her clit. She bucked, meeting Thomas stroke for stroke.

"Beloved!" cried Thomas. He stilled as he came, he hands convulsively clutching Fiona's thighs.

Fiona writhed, her moans turning to low cries of completion. Then she was arching, pushing her hands against her pussy and pressing her ass against Thomas, whose cock still filled her.

She screamed, "Connor!" as her orgasm overwhelmed her.

Michael stared at Thomas' face, saw his confused expression, and pitied this fool who'd once been his brother.

"Get as much of it as you can," she ordered. Thomas withdrew his penis, took the vial she handed to him that contained his semen, and collected her come. Then he handed it back to her, a besotted grin creasing his lips.

She looked at the items around her on the altar and smiled at Thomas. "You've done well, my love. Only one more thing is necessary." She gripped a small knife—Michael dimly recognized Mislá's offering knife—and slashed Thomas' throat.

"No!" Michael strained against his ropes, long-dead feelings of kinship for his sibling rising from some unknown corner of his



heart. The pain of watching

Thomas—Solomon—die made the fury burning through him as deep and fiery as hell.

Sliding carelessly off the altar Fiona wiped the knife on the grass next to the fallen man. She slashed her palm and bled into the vial containing their mixed come, then added some of Thomas' blood, still draining from the gaping wound in his throat.

"You cursed us all that night." Her voice sounded bitter. "Misla was crafty. And she loved her granddaughter. But she knew a soul group must travel together until all is resolved." Fiona mixed herbs with the blood and come, muttering magical words under her breath. "To be born with the knowledge that you are Connor, to have eternity to search for her, to trade her blood for yours.. .aye, we all felt the power of that spell."

"What do you mean, trade my blood?"

"Do you think I wanted you dead?" Fiona spit on Thomas' body. "He was in your room to kill *her*, not you. You were supposed to be gone that night, checking the borders of your land. Solomon was such a fool." She sighed. "After Raine found your body, she hoped to escape my wrath. But Solomon and I chased her into the forest and pierced her heart with the same sword that pierced yours."

"Misla did as you asked because she knew you would pay a blood price. And because you paid the blood price to bind us all on the same life path, Raine must pay the blood price to free us so we can begin anew."

She grinned girlishly as she held up the completed potion. "She will drink this and as she does, I will say the words to release your bond to her and bind you to me, then she will die a slow, painful



death."

"Do not do this, Fiona." Helplessness raged with his fear, his fury. "I will never love you. I will never bond with you. Soul mates cannot be rent asunder."

"I am your soul mate!" she screamed. "She is a witch who has convinced you that you do not love me anymore. She dies and you are free of the spell."

Michael watched Fiona stomp to the center of the circle and yank the blindfold from Raine's face. She tore the gag from her mouth and tossed the mangled cloth to the ground. Fear twisted his guts as he watched his betrayer once again threaten the life of his beloved. *It's not fair*, his soul raged, *this is not the way it should end*. He strained against the ropes, cursing Thomas' too-tight knots. He couldn't get free, damn it. Tears of helplessness gathered in his eyes. *No! No! No!*

Fiona grabbed Raine's hair and pulled it viciously. "Drink it!"

"He will not be yours, Lorelee." Raine's eyes blazed with impotent rage. "And I do not have to imbibe your poison to remember my love. Connor is my heart." She smiled. "Misla lied to him...and to you."

"The only liar is you." Though her words were firm, Fiona's expression hinted at her doubts. "I heard the witch tell Connor the blessing and the curse of his request. Her magic was great, her connection to the goddess strong. " She squared her shoulders, confidence returning. "We all traveled together these lifetimes past. We are bound by Misla's spell until you offer your life for Connor's."

Raine laughed, tossing her hair behind her shoulder in the sassy



way Connor remembered. Her spirit was beautiful, shining and bright and willful. She was as much a warrior as he. Their deaths were imminent, he knew, and his only wish was for Raine, to touch her, to kiss her, one last time.

"You've killed me eight times," said Raine. "You spilled my blood as a sacrifice time and again, but still we arrive at this place, this moment."

"Nay! I only wanted to keep you from him. It was only this lifetime the potion and spells were revealed to me." Fiona shoved the vial against Raine's lips. "Drink and free us!"

"You are bound, betrayers and lovers, until love mends broken trust and justice be served," chanted Raine, turning her head from the noxious mixture. Her lips curved in a grim smile. "I needed no potion, no spell, no ritual. I needed only to be near Connor on this night for my past and present to mend."

"This night?" Fiona's fingers clenched around the vial, her half-crazed glare switching between Raine and Connor.

"The anniversary of all that was set into motion when you and Solomon murdered us." Raine's gaze sought Connor's and his heart leapt in gladness at the recognition in her eyes. "That night you sent me away to save me."

"And you did not go, silly wench." Connor's voice was hoarse with emotion. "You returned to save *me*." He strained against his ropes, a seed of hope planted that they could yet survive.

Fiona's scream of rage rent the air. She dashed the vial to the ground, but it did not shatter. Her anger carried her to the altar where she picked up the ritual knife and turned toward Raine.

"I beg you," yelled Connor. "Don't do this, Lorelee."



She swung to face him and he flinched at the evil she projected; madness marred the once lovely face of Fiona Welter. In her cold blue eyes, he saw the tortured soul of Loralee and knew she would rather see him die than live to love her enemy.

"My heart belongs to Raine," he said. "To murder either one of us is for naught. Our souls will find each other again."

"We shall see." Fiona spun and ran, the knife raised and aimed at Raine's chest.

Raine turned to her side at the last second and the blade glanced off her shoulder, cutting through her thin T-shirt. A slash of red traveled her arm; her cry of pain ripped him to shreds. He could only watch as she sought to knock Fiona off balance, but the woman stayed just out of reach, twirling the dagger with a terrifying, practiced ease.

Fiona lunged once more, lethal intent blazing from her eyes.

"Nooooo!" yelled Connor as he watched the descent of the blade, made more horrific by the firelight dancing across its wicked edge.

Then, to his amazement, Fiona jerked like a puppet, her head yanked backwards, the knife plucked from her grasp.

He saw Margo behind her as she grabbed the blonde's hair and put the blade against her throat. "I've had just about enough of you." Margo dragged a resisting Fiona away from Raine. "Eight lifetimes of chasing Connor, you say. Eight lifetimes of killing Raine, too." Margo's laugh suggested Fiona was a silly twit instead of centuries-old soul seeking revenge.

Connor watched as Margo pulled Fiona's hair until her tender neck bent at a painful angle. "The potion, my dear."



Her gaze focused on Margo's face, Fiona grabbed the bottle next to her hip and held the offering to her captor with trembling fingers.

"Drink it." Margo's tone brooked no argument.

"No."

Margo crouched, the knife pressed against Fiona's jugular. "All these stories about what I said and what I did. Tsk. Tsk. Tsk. 'Tis true we are a soul group, Lorelee. 'Tis true the circle must be broken. 'Tis true, my lovely betrayer, that my spells are strong." She leaned close and her soft-spoken words traveled to Connor's ears. "But the potion...the potion has always been for you and Solomon."

"W-who..." Fiona's confused gaze sought Connor's.

"Misla," he confirmed.

Fiona paled, her eyes wide with fear. "It can't be."

"You hunted Raine. I hunted you. But fate is fate, child, and the Universe holds no notion of time. All that has been and all that will be unfolds as it should. The blood price was mine, not Connor's. You knew it not when you brought this very blade across my throat. My prayer to the goddess answered for us all, to remember our lives, to live again to reunite two souls rent asunder and to see justice served."

"No!" howled Fiona. "No!"

"Drink the potion," said Margo kindly. "It will release you from this world and break the chains you forged so long ago."

"Connor..." Fiona's tear-filled gaze begged him for mercy, for intervention, but his heart was cold to her pleas. He felt only pity that her hatred had created pain and suffering for them all for so many lifetimes. She saw his decision in his eyes and wailed.



Margo grabbed the vial and dumped the contents into Fiona's open mouth. The woman sputtered, gagged, clutched at her throat with desperate hands. She spasmed, twisting and turning in the sacred circle, the shadows created by the flickering flames dancing across her nude, dirt-streaked body. Then she stilled and gave a last, strangled gasp as death claimed her.

"Grandmother?"

"Aye." Margo knelt to free Raine. "The circle is broken. You and Connor can live this lifetime as you should, with love and longevity." Margo patted Raine's flat belly. "And strong, fine children."

As Margo tugged the shackles from her ankles, Raine surged forward, running to Connor. Her shaking hands undid the knots; the ropes loosened and Connor wrapped his arms around her. *Alive. In his arms. Forever.*

"You're squeezing the breath out of me," murmured Raine against his chest.

He laughed, unable to stop his tears of joy, and eased the pressure of his hug to look down on her beautiful face. Love shone in her eyes, her cocky smile belying the tender strokes of her fingers as she traced his tears.

"A warrior bawling like a babe," she teased. "Hardly the way to catch a girl's fancy."

"'Tis enough I caught you." He lowered his head to taste her lips.

Epilogue

"Are you sure a pregnant woman should be doing this?" asked Raine as Connor flipped her on her side. They had just finished making love the old-fashioned way in their large, comfy four-poster bed. Slick with sweat, sated beyond measure, they had been



snuggling...until Connor rose to his knees and scooted between her legs.

Again.

"You're only two months along," he said, his grin wicked. "I have other ways to make love to you when our babe makes your belly big and round."

"You're damned lucky you didn't say fat."

He put a hand to his heart in mock surprise. "Never would I call my wife overweight."

"You're a wise warrior."

Two months had passed since that terrible night in the forest when Raine regained her past life memories and Lorelee broke their cursed soul circle. Mislá insisted she preferred the name of Margo. Raine felt strange knowing her grandmother inhabited the body of a young woman.

"Don't you think it's weird I conceived on the anniversary of our deaths?"

"Nope." Connor assessed her cunt still slick with come from her minutes-ago orgasm. "It is the anniversary of rebirth—our lives, our hope, our love." He leaned down and patted her belly. "And our child."

He picked up her leg and placed it on his shoulder; his hand coasted over her calf and down her thigh. He placed her other leg between his knees then pulled her close. His cock teased the edge of her pussy.

"This isn't going to work," she said, though her voice was too breathy to be convincing.

He smiled at her, his heart thumping when he recognized the



familiar desire blazing in her eyes. Her hand traveled to the nest of curls and he sucked in a breath as he watched one slim finger stroke her clit.

"Raine..." "Yes,
my love?"

He entered her slowly, her pussy muscles clutching around his cock. Her cunt felt different at this angle, and the strange tightness turned him on so much, damned if he wasn't halfway to orgasm.

Looking down at her finger diddling her clit, he gritted his teeth. Raine was never afraid to show her love for him. She took her pleasure with him...and without him, while letting him watch, of course.

Her body always welcomed him, the same way her soul remained open and loving to him.

He pulled out slowly, stopped when her heated flesh covered only the head of his penis. Closing his eyes against the nearly intolerable sensation, he pushed inside her again, and shuddered.

Her moans were low, breathy, and dangerous to his self-control. She moved, urging him to take her, harder and faster. He knew if he looked down and saw her fingers sliding over her clit, through her pussy lips.. .he would lose it.

What was life without a little risk?

He sheathed himself inside her wet heat until his balls were pressed against her ass. Then he dared to look down.

Oh hell.

Her fingers worked against her clit, her cunt so juicy, his mouth watered with the desire to taste her. His cock was swollen,



tender, ready to explode.

"Come with me," said Raine. "I'm so close, my love."

Connor moved then, holding onto her leg as he pumped into her, watching her fingers rub the swollen nub.

"Raine." His gaze dropped to where his cock penetrating her. Watching his hard flesh enter her, watching her pleasure her clit, watching her face as orgasm overtook her.. .he came hard, jerking inside her wet, tight pussy until his seed was spent, and his insides a pile of trembling mush.

He lowered her leg, bent down and placed a kiss on her clit, then crawled next to her.

He pushed away the strands of hair clinging to her neck, kissing her collarbone, the underside of her jaw, then the sweet softness of her lips. "I will always love you."

She smiled against his mouth and he lifted to see her expression. The love in her tear-filled gaze took away his breath. She placed her hand against his chest where his heart beat with his need for her.

"I love you, too. For all eternity."

THE END

About the author:

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